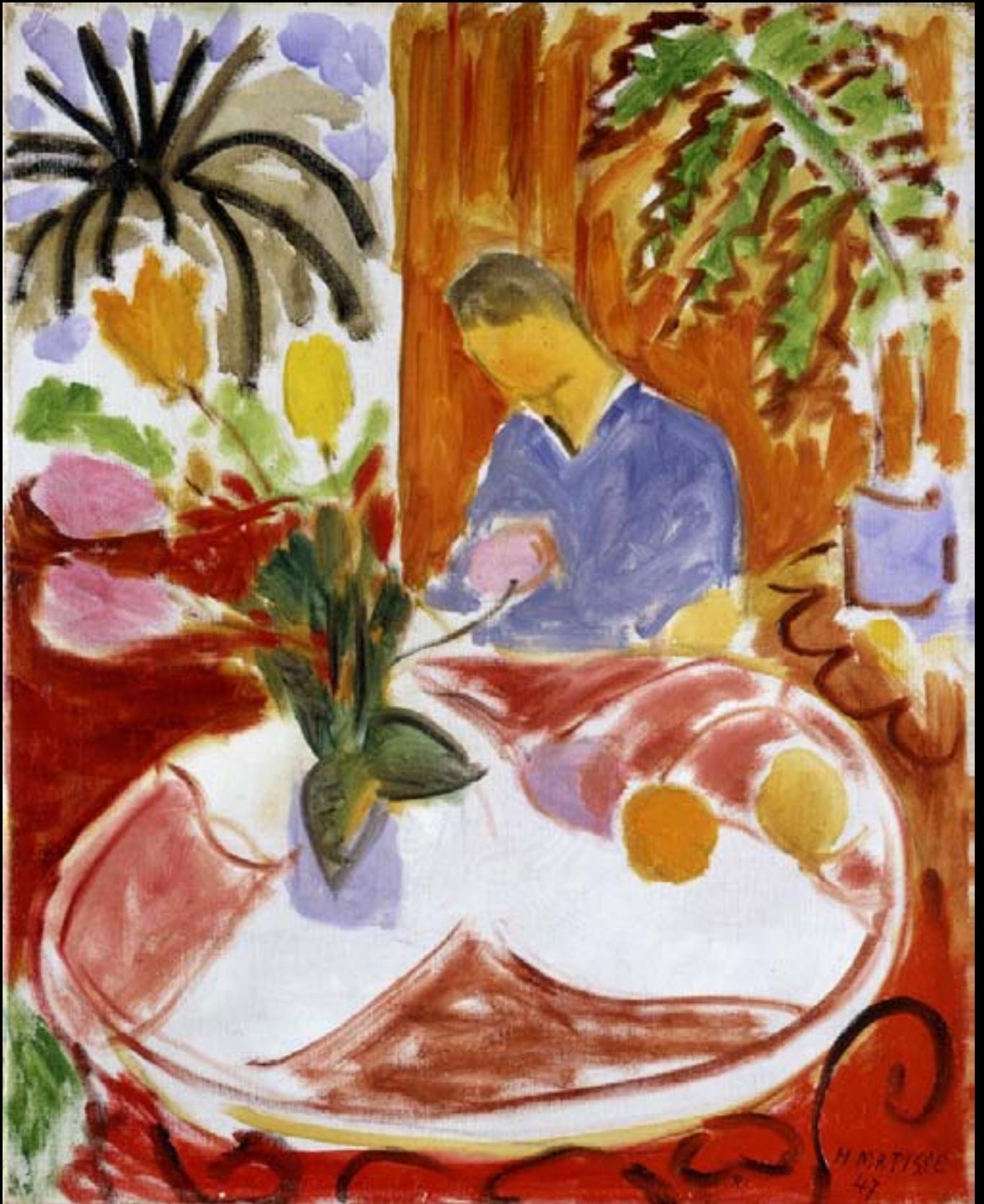


Frame by Frame

TREASURES TUCKED AWAY IN NEW ENGLAND MUSEUM COLLECTIONS



SEBASTIAN SMEE

The Boston Globe

Introduction

It seemed like a good idea at the time. It seems – and this is most unusual in my case – like an even better one now.

As art critic at The Boston Globe, my brief is to review exhibitions in New England’s art museums. Since I arrived at the Globe from Sydney, Australia, in 2008, I’ve been traveling to these shows as they open (or at least, in busy periods, before they shut!).

But a good museum is about more than just its temporary exhibits. And so, whether I am going to a show in Boston or farther afield, I always try to leave time to visit the permanent collections of these museums, some of which are college museums (and what an abundance of exceptional college art collections New England has!) while others are public museums with storied histories, such as the Peabody Essex Museum, the Boston Athenaeum, the Institute of Contemporary Art, or the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

After all, it’s the permanent collections that are, in almost every case, the great pride of these places, and of the communities they serve.

From the very beginning, what I saw, as I traveled from Connecticut and Rhode Island to Maine and New Hampshire, blew me away. Four years later, I continue to marvel.

The sheer range of art on display – from trumpeting masterpieces to small and whimsical improvisations – is stunning. And they’re all just waiting there, five, six, or seven days a week, in beautiful, spacious buildings that make it their business warmly to welcome the general public.

The idea to establish a column called “Frame by Frame,” which would focus on individual works in these permanent collections, came out of this excitement, an excitement that only grew after my first year at the Globe.

I have no particular love for “art,” if by that you mean a category of activity that needs defining and constant defending. Definitions bore me. They bring things down in the world.

What I do love are individual works of art. I love, in particular, coming upon something unexpected, something arresting – not necessarily because it is spectacular and novel, but because it carries the full force of conviction on the part of the person who made it.

What can beat that sensation of having hit upon something shockingly fresh, cheek-slappingly lucid, or caressingly tender – some mournful reminder, perhaps, of past lives, or an electrifying glimpse into the future?

Art can be about anything and everything; there’s no limit on what it can make you feel. So I have followed no guidelines, and there have been no parameters defining the choices I have made. The only criterion is that the work be on display in the permanent collection at the time of writing.

I hope these short pieces, which I have tried to keep as urgent in tone and as personal as possible (without entirely evading my journalistic duty to be informative), allow you to share some of the pleasure I have had in looking at the works themselves.

SEBASTIAN SMEE

In ‘The Warrior,’ dash and virtuosity



THE WARRIOR (FANTASY PORTRAIT)

By Jean-Honoré Fragonard

At: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown. 413-458-2303, www.clarkart.edu

New England is bursting at the seams with great art. A lot of it is hiding in plain sight – in the permanent collections of museums, whether city institutions like the Worcester Art Museum and Portland Museum of Art or college museums in Massachusetts and neighboring states. These venues are all open to the public and studded with surprises. The range of work – from contemporary installations to rare Old Masters and treasures from Asia, Africa, South America, and the Middle East – is extraordinary, part of what makes this part of the world so endlessly stimulating for art lovers.

In a regular series, I will focus on a single work in the permanent collection of one of these public museums. Ranging across cultures and periods, my only criteria will be personal: curiosity, pleasure, astonishment, admiration.

Contrary to the received wisdom, great portraits are not great because of what we learn about their subjects (that they were descended from shipping magnates, that they have their father’s

proud nose, or that they were about to be diagnosed with skin cancer). It's usually quite the opposite: They are great because they remind us how unfathomable people are. The apprehension can be tragic, sexy, sometimes even hilarious. And in the case of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's "The Warrior (Fantasy Portrait)," it can be all three.

Who is this actor strutting his stuff, with his swept-back hair, his oversized ruff, his fashionably slashed sleeve, and his gleaming, hilted sword? He's all dash, all bravado. And yet look at his ravaged face, his red nose, his collapsing cheeks! If this is a warrior, he has "failed exploits" written all over him.

Fragonard, who made the color yellow sprightlier and saucier than any other artist before or since, was a student of Chardin and then of Boucher in that most pastel-colored of centuries, the 18th. He did not live up to his potential, which is part of what we love about him (in those days, living up to one's potential meant painting grandiloquent myth-mongering set pieces of utter tedium). Instead, Fragonard painted delightful genre scenes, dashing portraits, and men looking up the skirts of young women on swings.

This portrait, which was acquired by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in 1964, is one of 14 so-called "fantasy portraits" painted by Fragonard (1732-1806) in the 1760s.

When it was bought, it was immediately described by art historians as "the finest single painting in the collection" and "the greatest acquisition that will be made by any American museum in 1964."

How Fragonard would have beamed. He was, after all, an incorrigible show-off. They say he knocked off each of the "fantasy portraits" in a matter of hours, just to prove his virtuosity. I don't believe it. But there is something undeniably headlong about the way "The Warrior" has been painted, which may be why people saw it as a forerunner of the styles of Courbet, Manet, and the Impressionists. It's one of New England's greatest pictures.

Photograph ©2012 Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown

A work of art - with an emphasis on work



PENNSYLVANIA EXCAVATION

By George Bellows

At: Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton. 413-585-2760, www.smith.edu/artmuseum

Oil painting and excavation seem to go hand in hand: It's something about the texture and viscosity of paint, a substance that wants not just to accumulate on canvas but to be dug up and pushed around, too.

No doubt that's why a lot of great painters (Cézanne, De Kooning, Auerbach) have a thing for quarries and building sites, and it's why I love this symphonically bleak painting by George Bellows, one of the leaders of the Ashcan School of American Realist painting.

"Pennsylvania Excavation" is in the permanent collection of the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton. Given to the museum by 1960 Smith graduate Mary Gordon Roberts, it's big, it's tough, and it helped launch the career of Bellows, one of America's most versatile, impressive, and underrated artists.

It shows us what that great transportation hub, New York's Pennsylvania Station, looked like in 1907 when it was still just a gash in the ground. Close up, you can see the energy with which Bellows has troweled on the paint. At its thickest and most viscous in those drifts of snow in the

foreground, it seems to have been poured on like cake icing, then scratched and scraped away with a variety of tools, from palette knives to brush handles.

The subject may be a great big gaping yawn, and the composition almost entirely devoid of color. But no part of this picture feels dull. Bellows makes the entire surface bubble and fume with energy. He punctuates the scene with two brilliant plumes of steam and smoke (one of the great subjects of modern painting: Has anyone ever organized a show on the theme?). And he frames it cunningly with two toiling men in the foreground and the tall buildings (not yet skyscrapers) of Manhattan behind. The precipitous perspective makes the eye dive down to the train before stretching out and back across the site toward the city.

Manhattan is usually associated with relentless elevation. Here, we get a different, possibly prescient, view: a city digging itself into a hole.

Photograph ©2012 Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton

From chaos, a suspended beauty



HANGING FIRE(SUSPECTED ARSON)

By Cornelia Parker

At: Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. 617-478-3100, www.icaboston.org

In the five-plus years since its painstaking installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art,

Cornelia Parker's "Hanging Fire (Suspected Arson)" has become one of the most popular pieces of contemporary art on view in this city.

Parker, an English artist in her 50s, salvaged these charred and desiccated pieces of wood from the scene of a suspicious fire at a woodshop on the outskirts of London. Burnt and brittle, they're evidence of disaster, wrong-doing, undoing. In the natural order of things we'd be seeing them collapsed in an abject pile on the ground, surrounded by rubble, awaiting the final chapter of their fate: dust, decay, dissolution.

But Parker proposes a different fate. From chaos, she creates order. From collapse, she creates effortless ascension. And from confusion (who did it, and how?), she creates transparency (I did it, and you can easily see how).

Cunningly, the work floats a few inches off the floor, echoing the beloved "reveal" of contemporary architects like Renzo Piano – a slight gap where walls and pedestals do not meet the floor, creating an illusion of zero gravity.

In defiance of another fundamental law, the piece seems to reverse time's arrow. Almost insouciantly, it restores the rectilinear elevation of the building that burned down. There's something cinematic about the result, like the frozen frame of a film played in reverse.

But the work's air of brainy calculation is really a cloak behind which primal urges pulse: the desire to be salvaged, to be weightless, to be restored to order.

Beauty from ugliness. Hope from defeat. Order from chaos: These are the things, when all is said and done, we yearn for, we're on our knees for. And yet, stubbornly, they elude us.

If religions are good at promising us what we'll never get, art performs the more modest task of reminding us what we don't have. And indeed, the irony of this particular work of art is that, even as it seems to defy gravity, it relies on it. And even as it suggests a phoenix rising from the ashes, there's really nothing supernatural in sight: just another dumb smattering of detritus rearranged into the form of a box.

Photograph by David L. Ryan/Globe Staff; used by permission of Institute of Contemporary Art

Finding the wit in 'Shopping for Furs'



SHOPPING FOR FURS

By Polly Thayer

At: Boston Athenaeum, Boston. 617-227-0270, www.bostonathenaeum.org

Some jokes are purely pictorial. They don't require cartoon captions. Explaining them in words would be like dousing a dancing flame.

This picture is just such a joke. It's also some kind of masterpiece.

Called "Shopping for Furs," it's by Polly Thayer, a Boston native who died at the age of 101 in 2006. It was acquired in 2010 by the Boston Athenaeum.

Just look at this marvelous dame! Thick-set but well-kept, she sits slumped in a brightly upholstered chair, her lemon top zinging in harmony with the chair's pink, mulberry-stain stripes.

She's never going to let herself go, this girl – you can tell as much from her fastidiously rouged cheeks, the jaunty placement of her hat, and her perfectly manicured nails. Also, the decorous way her right hand rests on her thigh.

But even as she announces her membership in society, her ability to meet and surpass the

expected standards, her body conveys a deep and ironic fatigue with the whole business of civilization. Beneath all the trappings – the shopping, the furs, the makeup, the stockings, the hat – there’s a bored animal twitching to cut loose.

She’s on the big side, this broad, no question – just look at the way the seat of her chair bends under the strain. But there’s something fantastically sensual about the way her body has come to rest in its temporary perch. It’s like Manet’s more famous “Repose – Portrait of Berthe Morisot” (Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art), but with an added dollop of indolence and two extra helpings of feminine disillusionment.

Actually, the bored, dispirited face of Thayer’s anonymous sitter is unlike anything I’ve ever seen in art: self-possession, deep exhaustion, and a longing for release all rolled into one. I like the way the tired, almost hooded eye on one side of her face is given a twist by the up-curling kick of her lips on the opposite side, completely upending the symmetry promised by her straight nose and neatly arched eyebrows. The jaunty hat and dangling left hand, meanwhile, communicate splendid insouciance.

The fur, with its striped markings, is brilliantly painted. And – further proof of Thayer’s visual wit – note the doubled outlines of the hat and shoulders, suggesting the presence of a mirror at her back. Also, the half-inch of bared skin between the top of her stockings and the hem of her skirt. What a surprising painting. It could be depressing, but in fact it’s full of joy and twinkling wit.

Photograph ©2012 Boston Athenaeum

Revelations of fragile youth, femininity



GIRL WITH PORTFOLIO

By Guillaume Guillon Lethière

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester. 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

Fashion designers like Vivienne Westwood and John Galliano get many of their best ideas from old master paintings. Is it the same with great hairdressers? I’ve often wondered. Certainly this do – and I’ve no idea how to describe it (who does one consult: a coiffographer? A coiffologist?) – is something special.

So is the portrait itself. “Girl With Portfolio” was painted in France around 1799 by Guillaume Guillon Lethière, and it hangs in the Worcester Art Museum. Lethière had made his name as a history painter by the time this girl agreed to pose for him. But even greater days were ahead of him: He accompanied Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon’s younger brother, to Spain and, after helping him finagle a terrific collection of Spanish pictures, was rewarded with the directorship of the French Academy in Rome.

Such success was not hindered, it seems, by the fact that Lethière was the bastard son of a white colonial official in Guadeloupe and a freed black slave called Marie- Françoise, or Pepeye.

If you want a visual incarnation of fragility – not just the fragility of youth or of femininity, but of an individual caught in the headlights of history – you need look no further than the porcelain face, exquisitely framed by curling tendrils of hair, of this attractive but not quite beautiful girl (an aspiring artist, it seems, because she holds an artist’s portfolio and a “porte-crayon,” or chalk holder, in her hands).

Just imagine how different she would appear if she’d been painted a few decades earlier by Boucher or Fragonard, those pleasure-loving stalwarts of the old regime: Pink cheeks, powdered hair, pastel colors – possibly a frolicking poodle, too. In Lethière’s picture, barely 10 years after the heady days of 1789, it’s clear that a whole new idea of portraiture has taken hold. A new idea of femininity, too.

The girl’s gaze is piercingly direct. Apart from her painter’s accessories, there’s nothing else in the picture to distract us. Until Lethière thought better of it and painted them out, she wore a red ribbon in her hair and hoop earrings. (The visible traces of red on her head were exposed by a later restoration).

The paint itself is smooth as glass. The colors are conspicuously sober – not a hint of pink or yellow. And she wears a fashionable spencer – a short, boyish jacket – that conjures up the romance of masculine austerity like a good, sharp cologne.

Despite all this, how vulnerable she seems!

Delicate-featured girls in boyish clothes are always somehow poignant – perhaps that’s part of it. The spreading spiderweb of background craquelure – a sign of the picture’s age – only heightens the impression of fragility.

But I’m bewitched, too, by the tension – which you find in so many of these neo-classical portraits from the French Revolutionary period – between the sobriety, composure, and lucidity of the picture itself and everything we know about the chaotic cut and thrust of political events at the time. Behind this girl’s delicate head you feel the silent, invisible roar of history.

Photograph ©2012 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

A scribble that speaks to the wild nature of art



UNTITLED

By Cy Twombly

At: Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence. 401-454-6500, www.risdmuseum.org

Cy Twombly made pictures – if you can call them that – that are dense with the humors and vapors of indolence. This gigantic scribble, “Untitled” (1967), feels like a secret communique with no specific message. It’s one of the most arresting works in the permanent collection of Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art.

Like so much of Twombly’s work, it’s right on the edge of being nothing: a desultory blackboard scrawl. Mere graffiti. An insult. A provocation. And yet, even in the context of RISD’s crowded and star-studded modern and contemporary displays, it has a tendency to still roving eyes.

To begin with, it’s large. Those looping marks in crayon are evidence of vigorous action, a pungent residue of some past frenzy. Something about them reminds me of the twitching muscles of a lion, spent and flyblown after a spectacular kill or a marathon copulation.

Moreover, the work has an unexpectedly satisfying design: Over a gray background of washy oil and erased doodles, Twombly has set a group of loosely ascending heart-shaped scribbles, drifting up and to the right, against a run of dripping gray splotches that descend from left to right.

Robert Motherwell, who met the young Twombly at Black Mountain College, remembered him as “a natural.” He had a “native temperamental affinity with the abandon, the brutality, and the irrational in avant-garde painting at the moment,” he wrote. Ten years before he painted this picture, Twombly moved to Rome, where he spent much of his time from then on. At one stage he had a studio opposite the Colosseum (ancient arena of lions!) And yet his incessant allusions to the classical world are always vague and incomplete, providing not so much content as a drenching background poetry. His allusions to the old masters and to poetry, similarly, provide no more than the scaffolding of an arena in which the astonishingly intimate and visceral drama of his works plays out.

The drowsy sense of expended effort in Twombly’s art is entirely unique to him. The French critic Roland Barthes likened his work to a pair of trousers – not the ideal pair hanging neatly on a rack, but a pair that has been discarded and left on the floor after wearing: “The essence of an object,” he wrote, “has something to do with the way it turns into trash.”

You can see them as nothing (many people do). But Twombly’s best works – and this is one of them – speak to me of something that is flying apart, never to be recovered, just as it reaches a point of maximum beauty and intensity.

Photograph ©2012 Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence

The fire in their eyes was dying



AUTOMEDON WITH THE HORSES OF ACHILLES

By Henri Regnault

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

Henri Regnault painted this astonishing picture in Rome in 1868 at the age of 25. It shows the two divine horses of Achilles, Xanthos and Balios, with Automedon, Achilles’s muscle-bound groom. Three years later, Regnault was dead.

Regarded by many as France’s most promising young painter, he was killed in battle during the last doomed attempt by Parisian troops to break out of their besieged city in the final days of the Franco-Prussian War. Edmond de Goncourt noted in his journal an “enormous crowd” at Regnault’s funeral (telling, because funerals were coming thick and fast in Paris at the time): “Over this young body of dead talent,” he wrote, “one wept for the interment of France.”

The painting was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts in 1890, by subscription, and for many years was one of the museum’s most popular. It fell out of fashion and was relegated to storage, until curator George Shackelford had it cleaned and put back on display in 1996.

It’s huge, a little more than 10 feet by 10 feet. You feel, in its presence, like nothing so much as a dust mote. Has any painting ever covered so much surface area with descriptions of sheer muscle? If the stirring subject matter (those rampant, glossy manes!) calls to mind the equine masterpieces of the Romantic painters Géricault and Delacroix, there is yet something sturdy and

neoclassical about the picture's lines of force.

Note the mirrored movements of horse and human leg near the center of the composition, the way the diagonal of the hillside at left rhymes with the twisting necks of both Automedon and the chestnut horse (Balios), and the powerful centrality of the rearing horse behind, depicted in perfect profile.

Regnault, like Géricault before him, was a fine horseman. He would have known that no ordinary horse could possibly have a neck so thick, so swollen with alarm, as Xanthos's. But remember: These horses are divine.

As such, they have the gift of foreknowledge. They know the disastrous fate that awaits their master (hence the portentous, stormy skies). They have already carried Patroclus to his death in battle, and now they must do the same for Achilles. Weepy and torpid in the period after Patroclus's disgrace, they now succumb to spasms of recoil.

Presumably, when he painted it, Regnault had no such foreknowledge of his own fate, or of France's. But something about his rendering of these horses – their wild and fearful eyes, their sheens of sweat, their froth-throwing mouths – convinces you that a sense of imminent tragedy was in the air.

Because Regnault's talents had won him a Prix de Rome bursary, he was exempt from military duty. But he was a patriot, so when war broke out in 1870, he volunteered. The upshot – for Paris, for France, and for Regnault – was ultimate debacle.

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A family portrait with distinct quirkiness



THE SAVAGE FAMILY

By Edward Savage

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester. 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

An odd little picture, this, to say the least. It was painted by Edward Savage, about three years after the Declaration of Independence was adopted by Congress in 1776.

Savage is familiar to us mainly through his widely reproduced portrait of George Washington and his family (National Gallery of Art). That picture, one of the best-known images of the first president, tries to tick all the boxes of formal portraiture: carefully balanced composition; stiff, authoritative poses; clear and uniform perspective; and a few bravura touches, such as the extravagant play of light on Martha Washington's satin dress.

Savage had to teach himself how to do all of that, since he had no training. Despite the stiffness in the figures' bodies and George and Martha's awkwardly mismatched gazes, he did a decent job of it.

But this earlier, and much less technically accomplished, family portrait – in this case, the artist's own family – is altogether far more endearing.

The composition is a delight. Instead of the usual triangular format favored by group portraitists – shorter people in the wings, taller people gathered near the center – Savage opts for the reverse, as if his family were a herd of elephants conspiring to protect its youngest members from

outside attack.

Pygmy elephants, of course, because they are all charmingly diminutive. It's hard to say if this was a pointer to Savage's future phase as a painter of miniature portraits, but it's certainly entertaining to see so many large and carefully rendered heads perched atop such pocket-size bodies. (My two favorite details: the hand of the seated old man holding his walking stick, and the twiggy forearm of the girl gazing determinedly off to her right).

Was the Savage family unusually rich in twins? It's hard to say. But the four children sitting at the oddly angled table do divide neatly into two pairs of striking similarity. The older boys hanging tough over on the right, meanwhile, rather confuse the line between close family resemblance and outright doppelgängers.

Savage, who was born and died in Princeton, was only 18 at the time he painted this picture. So we should forgive him his little array of technical inadequacies – including the lurching tiled floor. In fact, we might even choose to love him for them.

Something about this picture's odd discordances of scale, its confused perspective, and its odd composition reminds us of burgeoning 19th- and 20th-century attempts in art to favor naivete over virtuosity, awkwardness over polish.

Why this growing preference? Because reality is neither smooth nor polished, and it's hardly ever well composed. Nor, for that matter, are families.

Photograph ©2012 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

A sensual interlude with Manet



YOUNG WOMAN RECLINING IN SPANISH COSTUME

By Edouard Manet

At: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. 203-432-0600, www.artgallery.yale.edu

Edouard Manet's "Young Woman Reclining in Spanish Costume" is the sexiest painting in New England. Sexiness is subjective in most cases, I grant you. But not, surely, in this one.

Some people, it's true, may be perturbed by this young lady's plump thighs, her double chin, or her expressionless eyes. (She's no Gisele Bündchen, I hear at the back. Whatever.) But from the fingers sauntering along her scalp to her insouciantly crossed calves, her whole body expresses a slow, erotic heaviness and surreptitious mischief. Rendered with the full-blown sexual suavity of Manet's bravura brush, she is a turn-on, plain and simple. (The kitten mauling the orange simply seals it.)

Manet painted this picture in 1862-63. It was done at the height of his infatuation with all things Spanish, from guitarists and singers to old master painters such as Velazquez and Goya. It shows an unidentified woman with a "spit-curl señorita hair-do," as Manet scholar Françoise

Cachin catchily calls it, dressed in a Spanish man's outfit (a not unheard-of instance of cross-dressing in Second Empire France: Women could frequently be seen at balls dressed in breeches, spurred boots, and wide trousers).

Many believe this sleek and pale-skinned model was the mistress of the man known as Nadar. A friend of both Manet and Baudelaire, Nadar was the epoch's leading portrait photographer, a caricaturist, and a pioneering balloonist.

The strongest evidence for the identification is the dedication down in the corner below the kitten, "to my friend Nadar." The fact that Manet also painted Baudelaire's mistress the same year is a pleasing piece of circumstantial evidence. But in the end, no one's certain.

"Young Woman Reclining" was painted the year before "Olympia," Manet's immortal portrait of the model Victorine Meurent as a courtesan attended by a black maid and a jet-black cat. (Cats became Manet's mascots after the present picture, oranges a signature motif.) Just as "Olympia" was a cheeky homage to Titian's "Venus of Urbino," "Young Woman Reclining" is a twinkle-eyed tribute to Goya's clothed and naked "Majas," two paintings of a woman in more or less the same pose as the young woman here.

Manet's is much the superior picture. Indeed, painting rarely, if ever, gets better than this. You could say it's all to do with textures (plush velvet, satin, skin, orange rind, cat fur) and colors (black, white, plum, pink, orange). And it's true, all this is sensationally done.

But these things aren't so easily reduced. It's more, surely, to do with Manet's responsiveness – the freshness and freedom of his handling, the respect for things as they are, the delight in transformation, in witty transitions, in play-acting, in potentiality.

In front of this picture, you can't help but be swept up in the desire to travel back to the 19th century and be initiated into all the things they really got up to. It wasn't all top hats, twirling mustaches, and taking tea, that's obvious.

Time travel being at this point unfeasible, I'm left with this picture – and truth be told, it will do just fine.

Photograph ©2012 Yale University Art Gallery

In clay, a passage to India



A CALCUTTA BAZAAR

Attributed to Rakhhal Das Pal

At: Peabody Essex Museum, Salem. 978-745-9500, www.pem.org

Even in the delightfully dizzying art bazaar that is the Peabody Essex Museum, this highly detailed sculptural rendering of a bazaar in Calcutta leaps out at you. It has everything, from an assortment of fresh fish for sale to a visiting Chinese man. You can find a stall selling fruit, another selling spices, a dwarf, a dog, and some monkeys.

The attention to detail is extraordinary. Hanging out with the monkeys on the thatched roof, for instance, is a smattering of pigeons. One monkey nonchalantly peels a banana.

It's almost too much. But this piece, which was made in the late 19th century in Krishnanagar, 50 miles north of Calcutta, is weirdly mesmerizing.

Unfired clay is an ephemeral material. Its fragility, unfortunately, is one of the reasons it hasn't been esteemed and studied as much as it might have. But as Peabody Essex Museum curator Susan Bean has pointed out, some in India maintain that firing clay kills the life in it, ridding it of the sacred power of water.

No surprise, then, that unfired clay has long been used for devotional sculptures for festivals, temples, and wealthy patrons. The practice is sustained by a long tradition in India and particularly in the area around Krishnanagar, where families of artists pass on their skills through the generations and vie with one another for lucrative commissions.

The positive flipside of the medium's fragility is its tremendous vitality. And this re-creation of a teeming market is a perfect example. It adopts Western style conventions of naturalism to create a scene deliberately intended to appeal to an international audience. In fact, it was probably commissioned for one of the World's Fairs that were enjoying a golden age toward the end of the 19th century.

It may remind Western eyes of the kitsch of Christmas nativity scenes. But it also recalls similarly bustling models made by the ancient Egyptians and, indeed, the Chinese.

Of course, the really extraordinary thing here is the naturalism. Everything is fastidiously painted in carefully chosen colors – the fish, for instance, are all different species with different markings – and the figures' hair is threads of jute.

One thinks of the refinement of Madame Tussauds's wax models, or of the hyper-real sculptures by contemporary artists such as Ron Mueck or Duane Hanson. But this is clay, not wax, and the primal connections between clay and human flesh are somehow still in evidence beneath all the dizzying detail, giving this scene a life that is all its own.

Photograph ©2012 Peabody Essex Museum, Salem

'Checkout' holds a moment in balance



CHECKOUT TIME AT THE MARLBOROUGH-BLENHEIM

By Bradley Phillips

At: the Boston Athenaeum, Boston. 617-227-0270, www.bostonathenaeum.org

The Marlborough-Blenheim Hotel in Atlantic City was for a time after its construction in 1905-06 the largest reinforced concrete building in the world. Like the building itself, this large-scale pastel portrait by the little-known artist Bradley Phillips is classically balanced and carefully constructed. The artist spread his attention evenly across the entire surface, from the window ledge at the left to the beach, the pier, and the massed white clouds over to the right.

The whole thing could easily be stillborn, an earnestly conventional piece of academic portraiture. But there's surprising life in it, a sense of this highly refined and scrupulously detailed work being tethered to a very particular, unrepeatable moment. Something poignant escapes from it.

Pastel is not an easy medium. Here, Phillips gives it the scale, the finish, and the grandeur of oil paint while retaining the soft, powdery textures and the warm coloration of pastel. He was born in Buffalo, graduated from Harvard in 1951, and died at 62 in 1991. This picture may have been the best thing he ever made. It usually hangs in relative darkness in a fifth-floor kitchen at the Boston Athenaeum on Beacon Street. But it's part of the Athenaeum's permanent collection, and, happily, it has been moved from its top-floor hideaway to the Athenaeum's entrance-level circulation area as part of a broader reinstatement of the collection.

The subject, Alexander Hickson, is shown leaning toward the window of his hotel room, light-

ing a cigarette – or maybe a joint. It's 1978. He looks good in his tight white vest, overflowing burgundy cravat, and matching hat – a late-20th-century dandy. In front of him on the table are the tidy remains of his breakfast, while to his left we see his carefully packed, neatly zipped valise. It is, as the title confirms, checkout time.

What makes the picture so compelling?

It's all to do with time. Notice, for starters, the way the wind catches the curtains behind, adding life and a sense of instantaneity to the scene. Their movement echoes the sideways twist of Hickson's body, animating all those right angles. The lighted match similarly yanks us into the present.

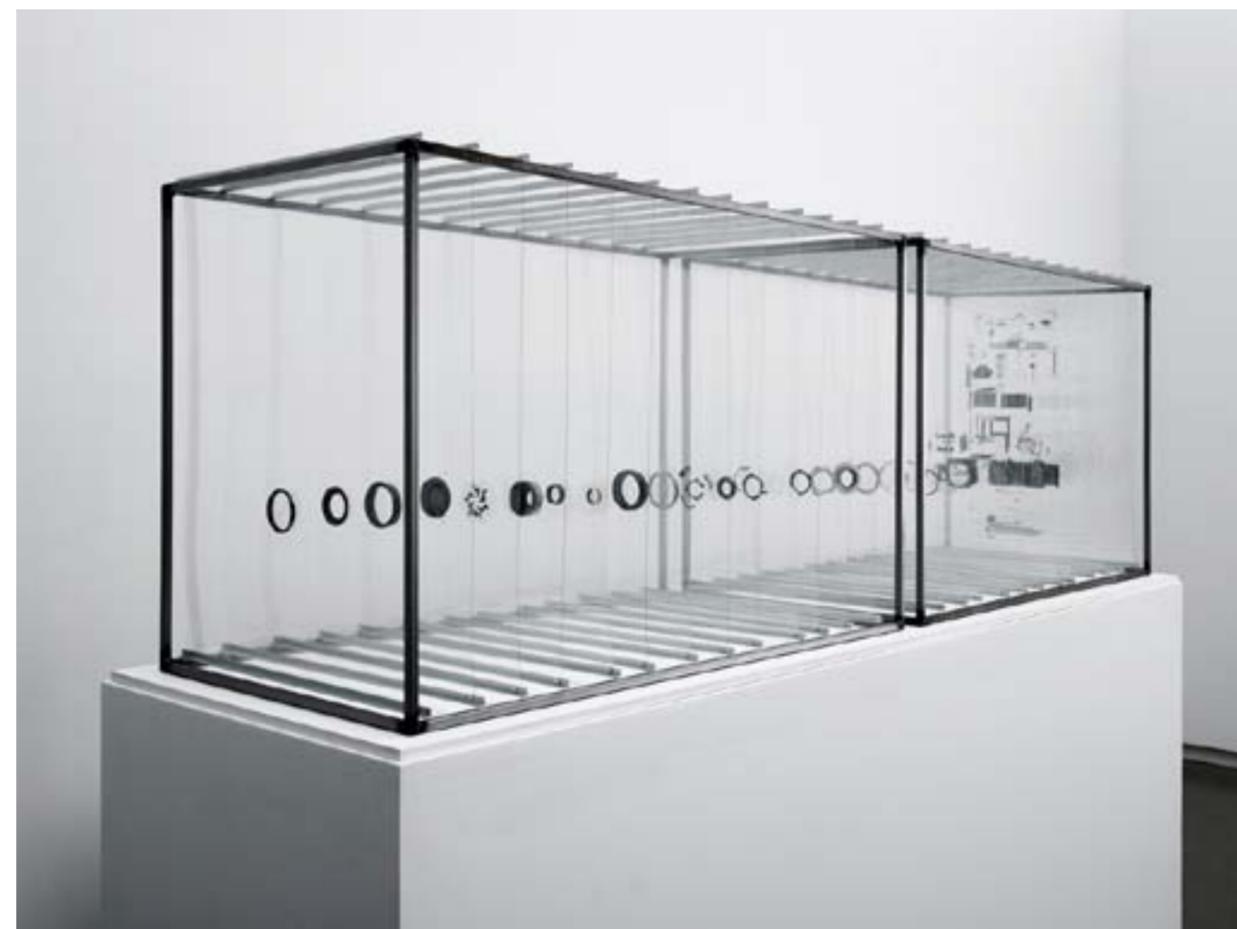
But what makes the picture haunting is the tension between the subject's air of casual disregard (it's checkout time, I'm ready to go, but what's the hurry?) and the lingering, focused, devastatingly frank way his eyes answer the scrutiny of the artist.

The scene, despite all its wealth of detail, feels strangely empty. Life, it reminds us, is never quite fully realized in hotels, no matter how appealing the artificial world they create (I'm reminded of what V.S. Naipaul said he liked about them: "the temporariness, the mercenary services, the absence of responsibility, the anonymity, the scope for complaint.") Sooner or later we have to check out and reenter the reality of real relationships, real life.

When we do, what will happen? There's a clue in this man's eyes, but I'm not sure how to interpret it.

Photograph ©2012 Boston Athenaeum

Now you see it, now you don't



OLYMPUS

Damián Ortega

At: Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. 617-478-3100, www.icaboston.org

Seven years after separating a discarded Volkswagen Beetle into all – and I mean all – its constituent parts and suspending them from a ceiling like a diagram transposed to three dimensions, Damián Ortega made this sculpture.

It's the same principle: Every part of this obsolescent 35mm Olympus camera has been pulled apart, the pieces held in position by 26 plastic sheets in two display cases spread out along a horizontal axis. The work came into the permanent collection of the Institute of Contemporary Art not long after Ortega was the subject of a show there.

The conceit makes marvelous use of the idea of the cross-section view, and of the assembly manual. Most of us might balk at the idea of putting together a camera from scratch. But Ortega's sculpture gives keen-eyed do-it-yourselfers at least the illusion that they, given the right parts, could make a decent go of it.

Democratizing the means of production? Ortega, who was born in Mexico City and now divides his time between his birthplace and Berlin, frequently addresses the inequities and alienation of global capitalism in his work. So that may be part of the general idea.

But as with all of his best work, there's more going on here than meets the eye.

In fact, just how much of anything “meets the eye” – either directly or through a camera or even in the brightly illuminated setting of a museum – is his real subject.

The camera is a device for seeing, for recording visual phenomena. But this one – made obsolete by technology and physically pulled apart – is clearly past the point of usefulness.

Its display looks like a careful exercise in transparency – every piece visible, every part’s relationship to every other part made legible. But in fact, when seen from an angle, the plastic sheets holding the parts blur vision. They’re translucent but not transparent. It’s impossible to get a detailed view of the whole camera.

Photographs, too, always show us the part, never the whole. And in society at large (Ortega is the kind of artist who is always asking us to think about society at large), the same thing goes: The political and economic mantra of the day may well be transparency, but the things that matter seem more obscured than ever.

What most beguiles me about this piece is the way the parts of the zoom lens extend so far from the camera’s body. Ortega loves toying with metaphors, and the obvious one here is that the extension of the parts of the lens matches the zoom’s telescopic potential. But perhaps it’s also a comment on our specialized and fragmented culture: The more we zoom in on any field, the more alienated from its neighboring parts that field can seem (investment bankers who trade mortgages don’t talk to homeowners; architects forget to consult builders). Of course, from the viewpoint of physics, it’s a reality: The more we home in on matter, the more we see that, at the subatomic level, matter is engulfed by space.

Photograph ©2012 Institute of Contemporary Art

Youth in a time of revolt



PORTRAIT OF A YOUTH

By Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson

At: Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton. 413-585-2760, www.smith.edu/artmuseum

Mortal candor in honor of divine assistance

What was early adolescence like in post-Revolutionary France? One associates the period in general with Rousseau's idealized vision of childhood. But it's easy to imagine that in the maelstrom of life during the Directory (1795-99), life for many youngsters was comparable to Berlin in the 1930s or, who knows, Baghdad in 2003: Youths, both rich and poor, taking full advantage of a wider social upheaval, imitating the violent pastimes of their elders, running in gangs, disrupting the patterns of a more settled social existence. Living by their wits.

This picture, my favorite anywhere in New England, was painted by Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson around 1796-1800. It evokes not just the tumult of Girodet's age, but the precarious, passionate intensity, the volatile sensuality of adolescence.

When the Smith College Museum of Art bought the painting in 1931, they thought it was by Theodore Géricault. In the absence of conclusive evidence, you can understand the confusion. Both artists straddled the post-Revolutionary era when the severe and frigid virility of the neo-classical style was giving way to the more provisional, agitated, and stormy outlook of Romanticism.

Full-blown Romanticism was a despairing reaction to the collapse of the Napoleonic enterprise. But when Girodet supposedly painted this portrait – an almost textbook case of Romanticism (compare it, for instance, to Delacroix's 1824 "Orphan Girl at the Cemetery" in the Louvre) – that enterprise had not even kicked off.

What does that tell us? Just that political history can never entirely explain shifts in mood and zeitgeist. Something was in the air, and Girodet had the antennae to pick it up.

Unlike the cool, level gazes of the subjects in the neoclassical portraits of Girodet's teacher, Jacques-Louis David, this young boy's liquid eyes are directed up and to the side. They register fear, but also a brooding resolve. You cannot say which of the two prevails. But either way, there's a degree of conscious awareness in this boy's expression that sears itself into your memory.

Note the white, open-collared shirt: A dazzling display of painting in itself, it does much to augment the absolute conviction behind Girodet's depiction. The boy's

Note the white, open-collared shirt: A dazzling display of painting in itself, it does much to augment the absolute conviction behind Girodet's depiction. The boy's

haircut, too, is worth commenting on – not just the insouciant cowlick at the back, but the long, tousled locks that have been brushed forward around his ears. The style, as the art historian Margaret A. Oppenheimer has noted, was popular in those post-Revolutionary days: It was known as "oreilles de chien" (dog's ears) because it called to mind the floppy ears of spaniels. The exposed neck was also chic – morbidly so in the wake of the Terror, when guillotines had seen so much use.

Attempts to identify the sitter have not borne fruit, although there's circumstantial evidence to suggest it may have been Pierre-Eugène Brouet, the stepson of the man who later adopted the adult Girodet. The boy died when he was 13.

But identifying him doesn't finally matter. People tend to overemphasize the importance of knowing the subjects of great portraits and who their relations were. Great portraits are no different, in this sense, from any other great painting. If you believe them – if they radiate conviction, specificity, intensity – it's enough. It's hard to imagine, anyway, that this boy really cared whose stepson or third cousin he may have been.

Photograph ©2012 Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton



PERES MALDONADO EX-VOTO

Unknown artist

At: Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley. 781-283-2051, www.davismuseum.wellesley.edu

This alarming, macabre, and swarmingly beautiful picture shows an upper-class Mexican woman undergoing breast cancer surgery in the late 18th century. She's cradled by a monk, attended to by a surgeon and his assistant, and surrounded by her household retinue. The room is elaborately furnished with lavish wallpaper, a patterned rug, a decorated folding screen affording privacy, and a private altar surrounded by an array of religious images.

The picture, acquired by the Davis Museum at Wellesley College in 2003, is an ex-voto – a devotional painting commemorating a miraculous incident in the life of the person who commissioned it (in this case, the woman). Ex-votos might memorialize a divinely assisted rescue from calamity, or a cured illness.

So many things about the picture astonish and intrigue. The subject matter, to begin with: Its candor is arresting. Surgery can't have been pleasant in the 18th century. This picture, with its waterfalls of blood and grotesquely severed tissue, makes that abundantly clear. In the days before anesthetic, not even wealth – which this woman evidently enjoyed – could protect you from

the agonies inflicted by the scalpel.

To have these horrors depicted in such a dizzyingly ornate and feminine setting is strange indeed. The disparate patterns on altar cloth, rug, wall, folding screen, bedspread, and dresses all compete for attention, like one of Matisse's hyperventilating Nice interiors. The picture's optical intensity is reinforced by the hypnotic color key: clashing reds and pinks of shifting character set off by cooler blues and white.

The picture's provenance is almost as interesting as its subject matter and style. It was acquired in Mexico in 1938 by André Breton, the French poet and leader of the Surrealists.

The communist Breton had traveled to Mexico to champion the cause of Surrealism and to meet with Leon Trotsky (who had been granted asylum by the Mexican government). He stayed, as did Trotsky, with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. (Trotsky had an affair with Kahlo.)

Breton praised Kahlo's work for its "innate" Surrealism. But then, Breton found Mexico itself innately Surrealist. And having collected on his trip folk art, Day of the Dead toys, photography, and other examples of native art, he returned to Paris and organized an exhibition, "Mexique."

That show, held in 1939, included this painting. It was intended to provide historical context for Kahlo's highly personal and psychologically disruptive work. In an article about Mexico published in the magazine "Minotaure" around the same time, Breton reproduced it alongside similarly dramatic works from the 19th century, reinforcing his tendentious take on Mexico as a bizarre and violent place. (Deplorable, unless you happen to have read the news lately.)

While Breton's interest in the painting is fascinating, he should not be allowed to have the final word. For the real story the picture tells is one of fear, piety, and mortality. The text framed by the lavish rococo border at the bottom of the painting describes gratitude on the part of woman for the successful removal of six cancerous tumors from her breast.

In smaller text, another caption was added a short time later: "Although the wound closed perfectly on the 26th July, 1777, other accidents befell her from which she died on Friday, the 5th of September, at 3 p.m."

Photograph ©2012 Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts

From an artful pitcher, a bitter sip of history



PITCHER

By Karl L.H. Müller, Union Porcelain Works

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

It was only on about my 13th visit to the new Art of the Americas Wing at the Museum of Fine Arts that I noticed this pitcher. It was made around 1876 and would have been used to serve beer in a bar. It's a funny old object, neither the most beautiful, the most coherent, nor, by modern standards, the most tasteful object in the museum. But it's a reminder of how art, literature, social history, and popular culture can all overlap in the strangest ways – and how the most unlikely object can reverberate with surprising intensity in the present.

The pitcher was designed by Karl L.H. Müller for the Union Porcelain Works, at a time when porcelain manufacturing in the United States was just beginning to boom. Its handle seems to

have been modeled into a polar bear and its spout into some kind of walrus.

On one side, in low relief, the vessel shows the figure of King Gambrinus, the mythical king of beer, introducing this wondrous amber fluid to Brother Jonathan, a symbol of America (a kind of early prototype of Uncle Sam).

It's all very jolly.

But the other side is perhaps more interesting. It illustrates the main episode from an 1870 poem by Bret Harte. Known (offensively to our ears) as "The Heathen Chinee," it was first published as "Plain Language From Truthful James." It became a sensation and made Harte the most celebrated writer in the country that year. It tells the story of a Chinese man, Ah Sin (very subtle), who was caught cheating at cards and received a violent comeuppance from the miner Bill Nye.

That's also what the pitcher illustrates: Nye prepares to go at Ah Sin with a knife, as cards spill from the latter's sleeve onto the floor.

It's hard, reading the poem today, to know what to make of it. The MFA states in its wall label that it was "a satire of the prejudice faced by Chinese immigrant laborers in the West." Unfortunately, Harte's satire backfired when the majority of the poem's early readers took it literally as a condemnation of Chinese treachery.

Harte later disowned the poem. He called it "the worst poem I ever wrote, possibly the worst poem anyone ever wrote."

It's doubtful whether this pitcher was in on the satire. Certainly, as is made clear in a fascinating essay by MFA curators Nonie Gadsden and Elliot Bostwick Davis in "A New World Imagined: Art of the Americas," it was made at a time when anti-Chinese racism was on the rise.

It was Chinese tea, of course, that Colonists dumped in Boston Harbor in 1773. So after achieving independence from Britain, Americans were eager to reach out to the Chinese as trading partners. A successful partnership was quickly established.

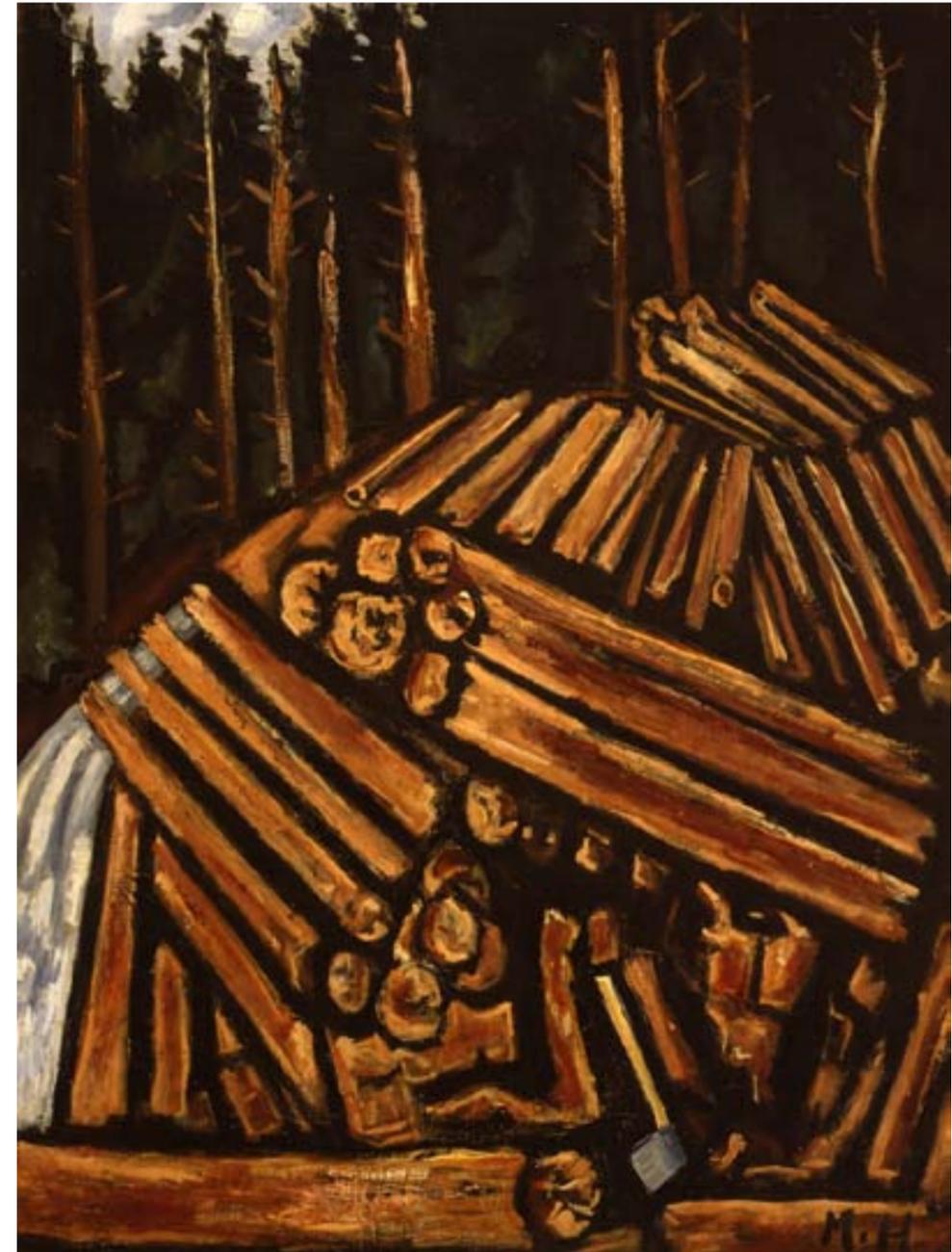
But a few decades down the track, the luxury goods with which China had until then been associated began to be replaced by cheap, expendable goods – trinkets, fans, and fireworks.

The Opium Wars and the influx of Chinese immigrants during the gold rush soured the relationship further, and suspicious, resentful attitudes began to prevail. Harte's poem, against his wishes, helped define and entrench those attitudes.

Those anti-immigrant sentiments seem to be making a comeback of late. The violence in Harte's poem is preceded by a description of Nye realizing he is being cheated: "And he rose with a sigh, / And said, 'Can this be? / We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor,' / And he went for that heathen Chinee."

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

There's much to 'Abundance'



ABUNDANCE

Marsden Hartley

At: Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, N.H. 603-669-6144, www.currier.org

If I intone the title of this great painting by Marsden Hartley on my tongue as I look at it – "Abundance, abundance, abundance" – I find it does funny things to my head. Hartley painted it in 1939-40, toward the end of his life, and really did mean it as an expression of abundance. He had returned to Maine two years previously after a peripatetic life spent in France, Germany, Mexico, and various parts of the United States. He wanted in these final years to become "the

painter of Maine.” He was struck – who could not be? – by the amplitude and beauty of the landscape.

During the summer of 1939, he stayed with his friends Claire Spencer and John Evans at Bagaduce Farm in West Brooksville, Maine. There, he saw and sketched felled timber waiting to be transported downstream. His studies were later built up into a series of paintings that were first shown in 1940 in the Hudson Walker Gallery in New York City.

I have never seen the others, but this one, which was acquired by the Currier Museum of Art in 1959, strikes me as a masterpiece. There’s something undeniably splendid about these huge towers of timber. Canted at jazzy angles and outlined in black so that they feel locked in place like a puzzle, they push up flat against the surface of the picture. If one log were moved, you feel, the whole thing could tumble out of the frame and into the gallery.

Off to the left are the gushing spurts of a waterfall. Crowded into the background is the dark plenitude of the forest; in the upper corner, a glimmer of moisture-laden sky. It’s a superb composition – the sort of fearless pictorial hit-and-run at which Hartley excelled.

Note the upside-down ax perched snugly in the lower foreground. Made mostly of wood, the tool feels like a poetic symbol, an enigmatic envoy between the abundance of nature and the utilitarian needs of man.

abundance of nature and the utilitarian needs of man.

From Hartley’s early days in the circle of Alfred Stieglitz, his modernist credentials were clearly established, his avant-garde status guaranteed. But like the Norwegian Edvard Munch, another loner who happened to paint superb pictures of timber and pine forests, he was a knotty figure who never slots neatly into art history’s dominant narratives.

His pictures benefit from this categorical slipperiness. They almost always feel like Hartleys before they feel like examples of this or that movement of modernism, this or that idea. What’s more, they never seem to have stable meanings.

That’s why, perhaps, when I look at “Abundance” with my 21st-century eyes jaded by decades of global deforestation, I see something different. I intone the word “abundance” and see a fiction, an idea – of endless natural resources – on the point of bursting out of its untenably cramped frame and smashing to the floor in front of me.

Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire. Museum Purchase: Currier Funds, 1959.2

Big screen, high definition



MARTYRDOM OF SAINT HIPPOLYTUS

Unidentified artist, Flemish, 15th century

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

Hippolytus was, according to legend, a Roman legionary who converted to Christianity and paid a heavy price.

How heavy? This picture gives a fairly clear idea. Since its acquisition by the Museum of Fine Arts, in 1963, it has been one of the most amazing paintings in the museum’s collection. But because we don’t know who the artist is, it tends to get overlooked.

The painting, which is almost a yard high, more than 9 feet long, and in superb condition for its age, was given a full-color, full-page spread in the Oct. 18, 1963, issue of *Time* magazine, and a similar treatment in the same week’s issue of *Life*.

Coming across it in the MFA’s marvelous northern European galleries today, you involuntarily step back. The effect is like looking up at a movie screen after half an hour fiddling away on an iPhone.

Usually, a triptych like this would have a separate picture on each panel. This artist’s decision to paint a continuous image across all three panels was very unusual – though not unprecedented.

Of course, the stylized idiom of the Flemish primitives (this work was probably painted between 1480 and 1494) can look naive to modern eyes. These horses, for instance, have a Tinker-toy stiffness – none of the subtle gradations and atmospheric realism of a Raphael or a Titian. But here, the boldness and unblinking violence of the overall composition overwhelm disbelief.

The conception is diabolical. On the one hand, we’re presented with a master class in pictorial propriety: the geometrical symmetry of the three tightly joined panels; the centered figure of the martyred saint; the balancing figures on either side, and the deep, deep perspective, suggesting a world of harmony and order.

On the other, a spiraling, anti-clockwise movement threatens to tear the picture asunder. This centrifugal force is established by the careful placement of the horses and reinforced by the gestures and gazes of key figures. One thinks, involuntarily, of Yeats’s falcon “turning and turning in the widening gyre” or, as *Time* put it, “a deadly carousel.”

The saint’s pale body, spread-eagled by taut ropes secured to the horses, floats weirdly above

the bramble-covered ground. He tilts toward us, as if already severed from his earthly existence. (“the centre cannot hold,” wrote Yeats. “The ceremony of innocence is drowned.”)

The effect is shocking. But the details are entrancing: Note the vivid contemporary costumes and individuated expressions, so typical of Flemish religious painting; as well, the small birds nesting in the brambles, one of them descending in the perfect shape of a cross; and the bulging veins in the torso and hind legs of the horse at far right.

We may not know the artist, but we know this triptych was commissioned by Hippolyte de Berthoz, a financial adviser at the court of Burgundy, who served under Charles the Bold, Margaret of York, and Philip the Fair. His and his wife’s joint coats-of-arms are visible on the outer wings of the triptych, and their patron saints, Hippolytus and Elizabeth of Hungary, have been depicted on the outer right wing.

Some scholars believe the painting was conceived by one artist and executed by an inferior talent. It hardly matters. The result is unforgettable.

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Rodin’s radical sculpture of Balzac



STUDY FOR THE MONUMENT TO BALZAC

By Auguste Rodin

At: Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence. 401-454-6500, www.risdmuseum.org

Auguste Rodin was one of the most radical artists in history. It’s easy to forget this because, although he was indisputably the first great modern sculptor, he also was the last great old master. Rightly or wrongly, there’s something benign and unthreatening about old masters.

To make it worse, Rodin’s sculptures are all but ubiquitous in major museums: In any given room of 19th-century paintings, it seems there’s about a one-in-three chance that the sculpture you back into to get a better look at the Monet will be a Rodin. And, of course, the Rodin Museum in Paris is everyone’s favorite – the most intimate, restful, and romantic museum in that city.

Why then, instead of lulling us, should Rodin make us nervous?

This magnificent beast of a sculpture is one reason why. You can find it in the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art. It’s a sculpture of the great writer Honoré de Balzac, and it was Rodin’s response to a commission for a Balzac statue that was to be installed in front of the

Théâtre Français, in Paris.

Were those who commissioned it expecting something along these lines?

Not a chance. The writer's nakedness was just one feature they weren't prepared for. His preposterous corpulence was another. Even more, his folded arms and clenched, scissoring legs combined to form a pose that was simply unprecedented in the history of art.

Balzac (1799-1850) had been dead 40 years. The sculpture was the upshot of seven years of research, during which Rodin immersed himself in Balzac's writings, staring at his daguerreotype portrait, measuring his clothing, and much more. He produced 22 studies for the head, and seven for the nude body.

None of this mattered. The work was rejected.

Rodin tried again, this time draping the full-length figure, with only slightly more decorousness, in a monk's robe – the equivalent of a dressing gown – which Balzac famously wore while writing.

This work, too, was rejected (although it was later installed at a major intersection in Paris). The double defeat left Rodin profoundly dejected, and reluctant to take on more public commissions.

This original attempt remains the boldest, the most electrifying, the best of all his treatments of the subject. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke described the head of the "Balzac" as "living at the summit of the figure like those balls that dance on jets of water."

Balzac's stance, as Leo Steinberg pointed out in his great essay on Rodin, is "profoundly unclassical": both legs planted far apart, toes at an angle to the body, awkward balance.

There's an aspect to the work that's quite openly funny (though not mocking). It reminds me of the Chinese tradition of depicting "luohan," enlightened disciples of the Buddha, with craggy, leering features, overgrown eyebrows and deformed skulls, or of the Zen tradition of depicting Bodhidharma as bug-eyed, big-bellied, bearded, and bald.

Respectability, in other words, is sterilizing. Greatness is promiscuous, provisional, indecorous, ugly. Forceful but rarely fluent.

Artists like Degas, Matisse, Henri Laurens, and Picasso, to name but a few, were profoundly indebted to Rodin's radicalism, his ability to find sculptural forms to express inward psychological states. "Rodin," as Steinberg wrote, "restored to inward experience what had been for at least a century a branch of public relations."

Photograph ©2012 Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence

Under history's spell



EMPEROR NAPOLEON I

By Jacques-Louis David

At: Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge. 617-495-9400, www.harvardartmuseums.org

This full-length portrait study came out of storage at Harvard in 2011. It's too stiffly sumptuous to qualify as great art. But as a historical document, it's hard to beat.

Europe's most charismatic leader painted at the height of his powers, in full imperial regalia, by his favorite painter, Jacques-Louis David: How can you not want to look?

David was the most accomplished, the most talented, the most influential painter of his day. He was also a strange cross between principled ideologue and shameless Machiavellian.

Caught up in the political tumult of his time, he certainly had to employ some fancy footwork. Before the French Revolution, he accepted commissions from the royal family. During the revolution, as a signed-up Jacobin, he voted for the king's execution. He was imprisoned after the downfall of Robespierre. But when, after his release, Napoleon came to power, he had no trouble switching his loyalties to the charismatic Corsican general.

His actions all look more wayward and contradictory than they probably were. It was a heady time, and the cult of personality counted for as much as abstract political convictions. Just as David had fallen under the spell of the magnetic Robespierre, so now he was dazzled by Bonaparte.

David's esteem was reciprocated. Although he and Napoleon's minions were forever haggling over money, the great man himself regularly visited David's studio, commissioned ambitious new

works, and sat for portraits, including this one, painted in 1807, probably as a model for a larger composition.

Encumbered by all the paraphernalia of power, Napoleon looks uneasy, and ever so slightly ridiculous. It's not just the scepter surmounted by the imperial eagle that he holds in one hand, and the shiny orb (reflecting his white-gloved fingers – a swashbuckling painterly touch) in the other. There's also a crown, a throne, a golden wreath, and an exhausting superabundance of heavy velvet and white fur.

To David and his ilk, Napoleon was to the French Revolution what Augustus was to the Roman Republic – a necessary next step, a historical inevitability. He was a great man destined to usher in an era of glorious expansion and domestic stability after a period of skittering chaos.

For a while he delivered. And then came the debacle in Russia.

The fictional Prince Andréi, in Tolstoy's "War and Peace," encountered Napoleon on the battlefield at Austerlitz, and years later, remembered his "satisfied and limited face."

"A good commander," he reflected, "not only does not need genius or any special qualities, but, on the contrary, he needs the absence of the best and highest human qualities – love, poetry, tenderness, a searching philosophical doubt. . . . God forbid he should be a human being and come to love or pity someone, or start thinking about what is just and what isn't."

David's Napoleon describes exactly the man Prince Andrei recalls: satisfied, limited, pitiless.

Photo ©2012 Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.228

Capturing an informal sitting



WELLESLEY GIRLS

Alice Neel

At: Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley. 781-283-2051, www.davismuseum.wellesley.edu

"Wellesley Girls" hangs, fittingly, in the Davis Museum at Wellesley College. Intensely awkward yet almost casually virtuosic, it's one of those rare portraits that creates a real psychological itch, one that can be satisfied only by more looking.

It was painted in New York in 1967 by Alice Neel, the bohemian artist who pushed on through decades of art world neglect, as well as shattering tumult in her personal life (departed lovers, a baby's death, mental breakdown, domestic strife – the works, really) to end up one of the most celebrated painters of her time. She died in 1984 at 84.

This picture shows, on the right, Nancy Selvage, who retired not long ago as director of the

ceramics program at Harvard University, and her friend Kiki Djos (now Martin).

“My friend Kiki and I had gone to New York for the weekend and stayed with Alice,” Selvage wrote me when I got in touch to ask about the experience. “After we ran around to museums on Saturday, Alice decided to paint us late that night under some dreary fluorescent light.”

Selvage was spending a lot of time with Neel then, because Neel’s son Hartley was her boyfriend. (Her Wellesley roommate would later marry Hartley. Ah, college!)

“Being painted by Alice was always a spontaneous experience,” Selvage remembers. “None of the sittings were commissioned or scheduled. All of a sudden she would zero in on a gesture or emotional state that she ‘needed’ to capture.”

You can tell from the way, in “Wellesley Girls,” she lavishes attention on Selvage’s face and upright form that Neel felt strongly about her. It’s a sense that is underlined by Neel’s discreet, but unignorable, snubbing of Martin. It’s not that Martin’s presence is uninteresting. How can you not love her outfit – the worn, translucent knees of her stockings, the polka-dot pattern, inverted on one side, of her jacket? But her face has an unfinished, slipshod quality that is the antithesis of Selvage’s composed, focused features.

Note, in particular, the telling shadow hooking under the inside of Selvage’s glistening right eye; the eyes’ slight asymmetry; the lush green shadow between her

Note, in particular, the telling shadow hooking under the inside of Selvage’s glistening right eye; the eyes’ slight asymmetry; the lush green shadow between her

eyebrows; and the dark hair lolling sensuously on her shoulders. She’s a girl vexed by, and not yet ready for, her own beauty.

Neel plays up the contrast between the squat, mannish pose of Martin (shades of Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein) and the sinuous, elongated shape of Selvage. The crown of Selvage’s head almost touches the upper edge of the painting; her smartly shoed foot kisses the canvas’s bottom edge.

According to Selvage, who stayed in touch with Neel until the painter’s death, Neel had no “room of her own”: She worked at the easel in the living room, or wherever else it pleased her to paint. The girls sat for a relatively short time on Saturday night, and then again on Sunday morning – the living room now in sunlight – before they drove back to Boston.

© The Estate of Alice Neel Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

A landscape whose particulars delight



MILL ON A RIVER

Claude Lorraine

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300. www.mfa.org

This is a painting I like to go to when I’m in an agitated state, when my eyes have been darting senselessly from screen to screen for far too much of the day, when the world feels hectic, harried, over-illuminated, decrepit.

It’s not that Claude’s luminous painting at the Museum of Fine Arts is entirely serene. It may look, from a distance, like a scene of unassailable placidity, but in fact it’s remarkably busy. An active water mill, dozens of goats and other farm animals, a painter, Roman ruins, two boats, three buildings – what more do you want?

This is a painting of industry, history, culture, technology, and agriculture all rolled into one. It reminds us that, in revolutionizing the genre of landscape painting in the 17th century, Claude meant business. He infused the once lowly category of landscape with qualities nobody previously had seen fit to give it, aligning it with notions of nobility, grandeur, equilibrium, and of course, antiquity in ways that painters not only in Europe but also in America imitated for centuries to come.

But to be honest, none of that has much to do with why I like to seek this painting out (its location is the upstairs rotunda, near the MFA’s State Street entrance).

Sure, I am impressed by Claude's almost effortless ability to structure his pictures – by the way he created depth not by laboriously following all the rules of linear perspective, but by his exquisite control of atmospheric light. Also, by the way he leads the eye in a zigzagging line from right front (the boat's prow) to left (the tall, backlighted trees) and then left back to right, taking us further and further into the distance, away from the vicissitudes of human striving and closer to an ethereal, empty, perhaps even spiritual realm.

But all this, described thus, feels formulaic. And of course, over time, Claude's approach to landscape did indeed become one of Western art's biggest clichés.

Instead, it's the particulars in Claude's "Mill on a River" that I find so entrancing. Not the human figures (which Claude showed little interest in, and may even have had others paint for him), but the discrete pockets of intent observation, each with its own particular mood, all of them held in perfect balance.

Those trees, for instance – so dark, proud, and inviolate. And then the buildings of the mill itself, small portions of their stone exteriors still absorbing the low, beneficent sun.

Perhaps most moving of all, the long pulley rope that connects the trees at left and the buildings at right. Its upper edge catches the light. Even as it holds two worlds together – the sun-kissed right bank and the shadowy left – it hits my eyes almost as a thin tear in the whole illusion, like one of Barnett Newman's "zips" or a Lucio Fontana knife slit. There's something faintly ominous about it, isn't there?

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Precise geometry, diffuse emotion



DUCHESSA DI MONTEJASI WITH HER DAUGHTERS, ELENA AND CAMILLA

By Edgar Degas

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

Twenty years before he painted this electrifying family portrait, which the Museum of Fine Arts bought for \$20 million in 2003, Edgar Degas jotted a little note in his diary. "The people you love the most," he wrote, "are the people you could hate the most."

It's an observation you can imagine almost any sensitive man in his early 20s (as Degas was then) committing to a private notebook. But could any other artist have given the insight such devastating pictorial form?

The picture shows Degas's Aunt Fanny (Stefanina) and her two daughters, Elena and Camilla.

It's the last of his family portraits, and it feels significant that it was painted in the same location – Naples – and in the same color key – inky blacks against a blue-green background – as his first great family portrait, "The Bellelli Family."

Art historians believe Degas (1834-1917) painted the picture in 1876. He was visiting Naples with his brother Achille in a desperate attempt to raise money from creditors.

It was a fraught time for the family. Degas's father, Auguste, had been dead for two years, and his uncle, also called Achille, had died the previous year. Both events left the Degas family in mourning, and in a serious financial mess.

Look at the composition. It has a "caught-on-the-fly" look, which Degas, inspired in part by photography, in part by Japanese prints, was fond of contriving.

And yet in fact it's very sturdily composed. The head of the duchessa, whose weary, unimpressed gaze absolutely dominates the image, is at the top of a black pyramid, which is itself in the center of a square that takes up two-thirds of the image. The ratio of the left portion to this larger right side is the same as that of the right side to the whole.

In other words, this most modern and spontaneous looking of portraits is actually based on the ancient geometric principle of the "golden section."

But that was evidently too tidy for Degas, who adds complications by having the duchessa recede in space and tilt ever so slightly to her left. The result is a dislodged feeling, almost a latent violence, that anticipates 20th-century portraits by the likes of Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud.

The daughters, blurry and blank-faced over on the left, seem to be at the piano. Degas was interested in the psychology of listening to music, and in the way emotions aroused by music might be reflected in the face. (This picture usually hangs near an earlier Degas portrait of his father listening to Lorenzo Pagans playing the guitar).

But you don't get a sense of any direct correlation between music and emotion from this picture. Instead, the act of listening to music has dissolved all social and familial niceties, all pretense.

It would be false to suggest that Degas shows us his aunt's true thoughts. She's too in control, too much of a matriarch for that. What we get instead is a sense of fatigue, isolation, pressure, mortal dread – all feelings that can exist even within the most loving of families.

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

When an art critic is the art



HENRY MCBRIDE, ART CRITIC

By Florine Stettheimer

At: Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton. 413-585-2760, www.smith.edu/artmuseum

Robert Hughes once compared being an art critic to "being the piano player in a whorehouse; you don't have any control over the action going on upstairs." While there are plenty of other, even less flattering descriptions of art critics going around – most of them coined (and fair enough) by artists – I think Hughes's has always been my favorite.

My favorite visual description of an art critic is rather more generous, but it captures some of the deep-set oddity of the role. It's this portrait by Florine Stettheimer, a painter and society hostess, who lived in Europe for much of her youth. It depicts Stettheimer's friend, the art critic Henry McBride, and it hangs in the Smith College Museum of Art.

Art critics are frequently as perplexed by new art as the rest of the public. When McBride first saw work by Henri Matisse, for instance, he didn't know whether to take it as a "a joke or as a serious attempt at something beautiful." But he came around, and eventually befriended Matisse and wrote an appreciative book about him.

It's worth keeping this in mind, because when Stettheimer first showed her work, in 1916, nothing sold and the reviews were pretty discouraging. She never showed her work publicly again.

She nevertheless was one of the most interesting figures in American modernism. During her time in Europe she encountered the likes of Gustav Klimt, Ferdinand Hodler, and Franz von Stuck, and she was an ardent fan of the Ballets Russes.

Upon returning to America, she established herself at the center of a circle that included Marcel Duchamp, Marsden Hartley, Man Ray, and Alfred Stieglitz. It was to these intimates that she showed the work she continued to make in private.

Her pictures were eccentric and frankly decorative, marked by boldly conceived designs, looping lines that convey a folksy decadence, and all kinds of fidgety, humorous details. Her colors were high-keyed, leaning toward the red and yellow end of the spectrum, and she liked to play with drastic contrasts in scale, inserting miniature details into flattened, often monumentalized compositions.

Here McBride (who was, by the way, a terrific critic) is shown seated on an odd, triple-decker rocking chair against a tile floor that has been converted, whimsically, to tennis courts. Through a window, we see a backdrop of leaning palms, skyscrapers, a rainbow, and the sun.

McBride's outline creates an impression of effete connoisseurship, and his black coat, white pants, and sockless shoes suggest the rarefied world of the fashion-conscious dandy.

He's holding a scorecard and pencil (he was a big sports fan, apparently, but Stettheimer may also be alluding to his role as a judge of art), and all around him are witty allusions to literature, art, and McBride's various other interests.

Stettheimer's salon – a modern version of the great 18th-century salons run by French women such as the Marquise de Rambouillet and Madame de Staël – encouraged an atmosphere of intimacy and wit that its members obviously cherished. I can't imagine McBride being anything other than pleased with the result of this particular exchange.

When Stettheimer's sister, Ettie, gave this picture to Smith College, she wrote: "I also asked Henry McB. whether he thought he would be happy among your hundreds of young ladies and he thought he would, so I am very glad to present him to you."

Indeed, who could not be pleased with such a fate?

Photograph ©2012 Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton

A scene to awaken sensation, or memory



EARLY MORNING

By Max Pechstein

At: Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine. 207-775-6148, www.portlandmuseum.org

Max Pechstein's "Early Morning" is Expressionism at its most lyrical and suave. It hits the eye like freshly squeezed grapefruit juice on a furry morning tongue. It is sweet and tasty, but tart – there's just enough acid in it to rinse off the stale accretions of night.

The picture is quite large (32 1/4-by-39 3/4 inches). It hangs, on long-term loan from Leslie B. Otten, in the Portland Museum of Art, where it's surrounded by jewels of Post-Impressionist and early Modern art, many from the collection of Scott Black.

But the Pechstein is one of those pictures that stops you in your tracks, like some piercingly lovely aroma. On the face of it, it's fairly unremarkable: just a pleasant image describing a pleasant, somewhat generic view. A man crosses a charming little bridge over a canal somewhere in Europe (Pechstein [1881-1955] was born in Germany, and spent time in Italy and France). There are three small boats, a generous spray of foliage, bright sunlight.

But "Early Morning" is one of those paintings that is so much more than the sum of its parts.

It has enough detail and idiosyncrasy to make you think of a specific place, a specific moment. But it's also like the Platonic idea of a perfect summer morning.

You could unpack it into its various constituent parts: vital drawing, strong tone and color contrasts, deft composition. But to do so would be to sidestep the picture's actual effect, which is an effortless conjuring of memory and atmosphere, a drenching sensation of freshness.

German Expressionism often overdid the acid: Think of Kirchner's shrieky greens and sulky mauves. In some ways, these brash experiments in color were an advance on the formulaic harmonies used by the likes of Derain and Vlaminck during the heyday of Fauvism (a movement without which Expressionism is impossible to imagine). But they can grate, like too much raw onion in an otherwise scrumptious salad.

Pechstein may not have been as great or as original as Kirchner, and he certainly doesn't rate with Max Beckmann (with whom he shares a taste for strong black outlines). But he strikes me as underrated. His best works, like this one, vibrate with promise.

Photograph ©2012 Portland Museum of Art, Portland

A jolly good rendering



THE JOLLY WASHERWOMAN

By Lilly Martin Spencer

At: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. 603-646-2808, www.hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu

An extraordinary picture, this. And it really is a picture. Everything about it, like a carefully coordinated joke, smacks of self-consciousness, from the pose of the subject – archly interrupting her work to turn toward the viewer – to the elaborate framing device at the top of the picture, which acts like quotation marks around the whole scene. And then, too, the attention to detail, which is so over-the-top it's like being regaled with one of those hilariously protracted camp-fire jokes: It started like this, and then that happened, and that, too; but, oh, where did I put the punch line?

The painting is by Lilly Martin Spencer (1822-1902). It was painted in 1851, and it hangs in the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. Spencer had 13 children and a husband. Unbelievably, she managed – just – to support them all with her painting.

Evidently, and quite fantastically, she also managed to keep her sense of humor.

“The Jolly Washerwoman,” as this picture is called, shows Spencer’s servant doing the washing. It’s safe to say that a man is unlikely to have known or noticed enough to have painted anything like it.

As if wanting to drive the point home, Spencer goes out of her way to get everything down: The clothes washed in the basin (lights first, followed by the colors with dyes that might run). The crumpled clothes yet to be washed. Suds bucket. Washboard. Clothespins for drying.

This is how it works, we feel Spencer saying. Look how it’s done. Women’s work.

Compared with, for instance, Degas’s moodier yet coolly detached laundresses, painted a few decades later, Spencer’s work is almost like a how-to-diagram.

But it’s hardly artless. Spencer could paint. Note the thin sheen of sweat on the woman’s arms, her wet, ruddy, muscular hands, and the superb rendering of all the different fabrics, both wet and dry, as well as the various textures and sheens of all the woods and metals on display. That pile of folded wet clothes in the tub is a tour- de-force.

But of course, the most striking thing about the whole painting is the jolly washerwoman’s really quite sensationally jolly face. Her teeth are yellow, her smile reveals an uncomfortable amount of gum, and she has a double chin. But how warm and unguarded her expression is!

I love those little wrinkles between her nose and her eyes – the wrinkles that transform a cat’s face when it snarls – and her eyes watering with mirth. The whole effect is not beautiful. It’s something better.

Academics tend to swoop down on paintings like this (not surprisingly: They are rare) and spin out elaborate theses about domestic drudgery and female oppression. But what draws my attention is Spencer’s unmistakable warmth toward her subject.

I know she wanted us to see what hard work washing clothes was. But that’s something I could just as easily, and perhaps more convincingly, learn about in a book. What I think Spencer wanted even more to show us is how much she liked this jolly washerwoman. And perhaps even how much she, Spencer – a mother of 13 who, against all the odds, managed to carve out a viable career doing something she had a real talent for – was liked in return.

Photograph ©2012 Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover

A surreal remembrance, taut with grief



MOURNING PICTURE

By Edwin Romanzo Elmer

At: Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton. 413-585-2760, www.smith.edu/artmuseum

This is one of the more remarkable pictures in the superb collection of Smith College Museum of Art. It’s also the most upsetting.

It was painted by the little known Edwin Romanzo Elmer in 1890, and it shows the artist, his wife, and their 9-year-old daughter, Effie. They are shown in front of the house that Elmer and his brother built in Western Massachusetts, not far from Smith College, around 1875.

The catch is that when Elmer painted it, Effie was dead. Hence the picture’s title – given much later by others – “Mourning Picture.”

Elmer was the youngest of 12 children. He and his wife, Mary, had just one child: Effie. For a time, the family of three lived in the house together with his parents and his brother’s family. Over time the others moved away.

Then Effie, at the age of 9, died of appendicitis. The force of the loss overwhelmed Mary. Intent on abandoning the house, the couple packed up Effie’s toys and gave away her pets.

Presumably, they were trying to forget – or at least to escape the clutch of the memories the house and Effie’s belongings all held. But before they left, Elmer felt he needed also to remember.

(The lurching human soul forever contradicting itself!) So he painted this strange, haunted picture, which seems stretched so tight that it might crumble at the slightest touch.

The painting looks at first like a summer reverie painted by the hand of an untrained but talented artist with a meticulous eye for detail, all of which Elmer was. Note the flowers at Effie's feet, the delineated blades of grass, the trees' individuated leaves, the crisp shadows: The whole effect is hallucinatory. It's reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites, yes, but it points forward, too – to the “stuck” dream-lucidity of Surrealists like Magritte, de Chirico, and Dalí.

The figures seem to occupy different planes of existence, all vivid but none quite real. The parents, in black clothes, look up from newspaper and knitting with cheerless expressions (observe the vivid light on their chairs!). Effie herself, meanwhile, has the sluggish, artificial air of someone posing for a photograph – which makes sense, because Elmer based his rendering on a portrait photograph of her.

She holds her pet lamb by a collar, while the lamb looks down upon her small kitten – a triumvirate of adored, adoring, and adorable things with its own internal hierarchy. It's almost as if Elmer were attempting his own domestic version of one of the Quaker Edward Hicks's “Peaceable Kingdom” paintings.

Perhaps the strangest effect in the painting is the craquelure, or spider-web-like cracking, in the clouds. This came about by accident, of course, over time, the result of the white paint drying faster since it contained less oil. But it only increases the picture's trembling atmosphere of extreme fragility and splintering grief.

Photograph ©2012 Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton

Out on a limb with ‘Discovery of Honey’



THE DISCOVERY OF HONEY BY BACCHUS

By Piero di Cosimo

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

Piero di Cosimo, who painted this enchanting picture, doesn't quite fit into the parade of Renaissance greats like Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo, or Raphael.

Granted, they all had their eccentricities. But Piero, if we are to believe the Renaissance biographer Giorgio Vasari, was a genuine oddball. He disliked hot food and lived on hard-boiled eggs, which he cooked in large batches then stored in a cupboard. His studio was a shambles. He let his garden run wild and wouldn't even pick the fruit from his trees because he hated to “interfere with nature.”

A bachelor until his death at 60 in 1521, he took long walks by himself while building, in Vasari's words, “his castles in the air,” and he loved everything in nature that seemed strange and idiosyncratic. (One feels sure, from such descriptions, as much as from the evidence of his pictures, that he would have loved the 19th-century Jesuit poet and author of “Pied Beauty,” Gerard Manley Hopkins.)

This painting at the Worcester Art Museum is related to a similar, unfinished-looking work in the Harvard Art Museums called “The Misfortunes of Silenus.” Both pictures, and probably some others, were painted by Piero for the Vespucci family at the very end of the 15th century and displayed in a house formerly owned by the Medici family.

The painting shows an adult and baby satyr on the main branch of a gnarled old tree and another satyr below, all making a loud din with household utensils in order to encourage bees to settle in the tree. The story, which culminates in the discovery of honey, derives from Ovid's

poem “The Fasti.”

On either side of the central tree (it’s matched by a similar tree in the Harvard picture) we see a crowd of couples and revelers: On the right, there’s the tubby old Silenus smiling atop his donkey (he is more the center of attention in the Harvard picture), and in the foreground the handsome Bacchus with his arm around the goddess Ariadne.

The purpose of Ovid’s original poem, as Erwin Panofsky explained in the first serious interpretation of the painting, is to account for the origins of Roman holidays and customs. Bacchus is in the picture for a simple reason: After his followers made a noise that attracted the bees, it was he who trapped them in a hollow tree. Honey was his prize, and that is why, according to Ovid, the rites of the Feast of Bacchus include the eating of sweet cakes known as “liba” (their name derives from Bacchus’s Latin name, “Liber.”)

The story illustrates an episode in the evolution of man. It’s given a dramatic frame by two background details: on the left, a serene hilltop town, symbolizing civilization; and on the right, a higher rocky outcrop, with threatening weather, symbolizing wild and threatening nature.

Clearly a lover of nature, Piero was allegedly terrified of lightning but loved heavy rains.

Photograph ©2012 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

The blinking heart of the city



CITGO SIGN

At: Kenmore Square, Boston.

It’s hardly a hidden treasure. Nor is it exactly in a frame. But I wanted Boston’s Citgo sign to feature in this series because, for all its fame, it’s rarely discussed as a piece of public art.

Should it be? It is, after all, an advertisement. And for a dirty great oil company owned by the Venezuelan government, too.

And yet, over 47 years, the Citgo sign has become a Boston landmark – an icon, even – and it’s easy to see why. Double-sided and measuring 60 feet by 60 feet, the sign commands attention like nothing else in the city. A signpost to drivers, a lure to Red Sox sluggers, a 20-mile marker in the Boston Marathon, and reportedly even an aid in timing contractions for laboring women in nearby Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, it has also inspired generations of art students.

What do they find so compelling about it? I drove from Somerville the other night to get a closer look. The approach was instructive. The views are good from both the Boston University and Massachusetts Avenue bridges. Seeing the sign from afar, you notice how vivid, simple, and symmetrical it is. Also, that it has almost no competition from other elevated signs. (Put the Citgo sign in Times Square, and it’s doubtful it would register. In Kenmore Square, it’s nothing if not conspicuous.)

But it’s only up close, and at night, that the sign, which was overhauled in 2010, becomes truly captivating. Each night, its 218,000 colored LED lights perform a seamless, computer-generated choreography, as the white horizontal stripes go out one by one, in descending order, then on

again, ascending.

The red lights forming the central triangle, which is designed to suggest three-dimensionality, then do a similar disappearing trick, from outside to in. If you're feeling susceptible, the effect is ominous – like an implacable nightmare, a message in binary code threatening extinction . . . then (phew!) they reappear, with the same metronomic regularity. Finally, the whole image snaps back into place. The satisfaction is palpable, as when a zipper is successfully closed on an overstuffed suitcase. Keep watching, and this repeating choreography of colored light drugs the mind.

Staring at it for over 10 minutes, I felt as I do when treading water in the ocean, staring at the infinitely undulating waves as they take on an implacable, almost digital quality. The mind surrenders control, it has no choice.

Combining simplicity and scale with coolly shifting patterns of colored light, the Citgo sign has a force and presence that even the likes of abstract and minimalist superstars like Frank Stella, Dan Flavin, and Sol LeWitt must envy.

Photograph by Essdras M Suarez/Globe Staff

A woman who makes us stop and wonder



AFRICAN VENUS

By Charles Cordier

At: Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence. 401-454-6500, www.risdmuseum.org

What should we think of this sculpture?

It's an ugly question: Obligations to think anything are exactly what we go to art to escape. Still, works like this have their knots, and it's interesting to untangle them.

Cast in bronze and plated in silver, it's a polychrome sculpture by a brilliant Frenchman named Charles Cordier. It was modeled after a French woman from Guadeloupe who had been

enslaved as a child.

The sculpture's title, "African Venus," was not Cordier's. He called it simply "Bust of an African Woman." Rather, it was applied by Théophile Gautier, the art critic and all-around giant of French letters best known today for coining the slogan "art for art's sake."

Cordier, who was born in Cambrai, north of Paris, in 1827, subscribed to something a bit different from art for art's sake. While still a student, he had emerged as one of the earliest practitioners of ethnographic art.

Anthropology was a new field at the time. Under its influence, and inspired by French egalitarianism, Cordier wanted his art to bring back accurate news of a world beyond Europe.

He had already achieved acclaim at the 1848 Salon for a related bust of a Sudanese man, "Saïd Abdallah of the Darfour Tribe."

He had already achieved acclaim at the 1848 Salon for a related bust of a Sudanese man, "Saïd Abdallah of the Darfour Tribe."

Of course, both that work and "African Venus," completed three years later, were influenced by the Orientalist craze sparked by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and Eugène Delacroix's trips to North Africa.

But Delacroix was a Romantic; he saw Africa through the prism of literature. In Cordier's work, an unmistakable note of scientific objectivity has entered in.

The same year he created "African Venus," Cordier was made ethnographic sculptor to the Natural History Museum in Paris, a post he held for 15 years. During that period, while traveling abroad, he conceived a project to sculpt a series of ethnic types.

His vision – and his ability to execute it in rich and culturally evocative materials (red and ochre marble from Greece, onyx from Algeria) – made him a favorite of colonists, from Napoleon III to Queen Victoria.

Today, we are rightly suspicious of the idea of a gallery of "ethnic types." We are taught to be mindful, too, of what Lionel Trilling called "some paradox of our nature [that] leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion."

And yet . . . could we just return for a moment to the comforting illusion of art for art's sake?

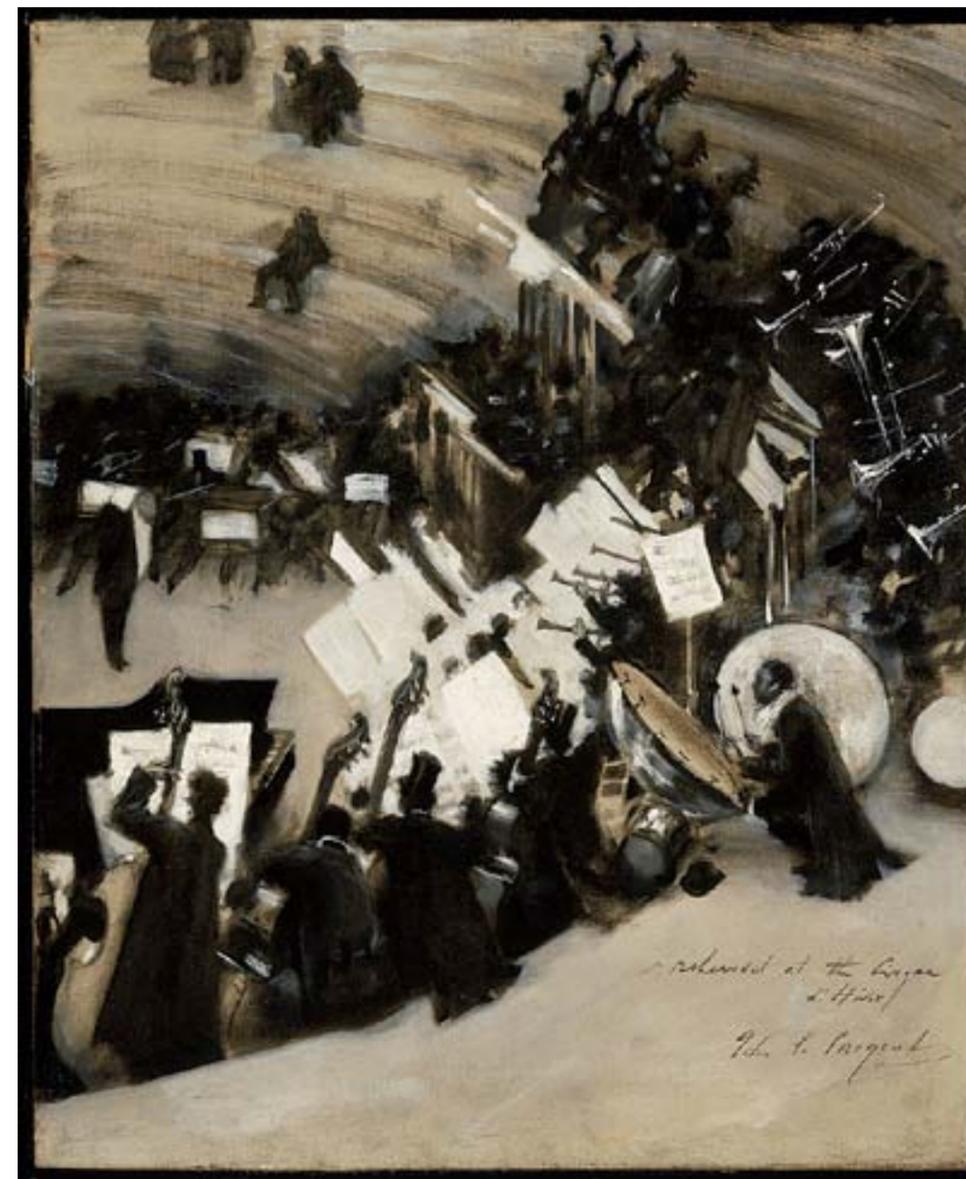
This woman, after all, has presence. Cordier has caught her in a moment of transition. Her head tilts to one side, as if she were recoiling from something. And yet her expression conveys control and reserve – perhaps even a hint of contempt.

It's this combination of guardedness and self-assurance, trepidation and superiority, that has made people apply terms like "noble" and "dignified" to her.

But those are big words, laden with condescension. I prefer "observed." I prefer "respected." I prefer – because isn't it necessary? Isn't it art's special prerogative? – "imagined."

Photograph ©2012 Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence

Another wonder of the circus



REHEARSAL OF THE PASDELOUP ORCHESTRA AT THE CIRQUE D'HIVER

By John Singer Sargent

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

Nothing can really compare to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's "El Jaleo" or the Museum of Fine Arts' "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit," but when I'm asked to name my favorite picture by John Singer Sargent, I often nominate this one.

It's a great picture – but, I freely admit, it's also personal. My wife, a violinist, ran off to Paris to join the circus, and it so happened she chose the Cirque d'Hiver. She was kind enough to bring me with her, and so I spent a lot of time in the steeply sweeping, circular interior depicted here by Sargent.

One usually associates circuses with tents. But this building, an octagonal structure designed

by Jacques Ignace Hittorf with a frieze of Amazons wrapped around its façade, is very solid. It was erected in the Paris of Napoleon III, a ruler with an unswerving faith in the political benefits of investing in public entertainments. It worked – until the Prussians arrived with their canons.

At first it was called, in his honor, the Cirque Napoleon. But 10 years after it opened, it became a venue for popular concerts performed by the orchestra of Jules Etienne Padeloup, who over the next 20 years promoted a distinctively French taste in classical music.

It is Padeloup's orchestra that Sargent depicts here in a monochromatic sketch (the Art Institute of Chicago has a more colorful version) remarkable for its immediacy.

Looking at it, you instantly feel you are there, watching on from an oblique angle as the musicians get on with their jobs. There's a slight feeling of anarchy in the air: sheet music haphazardly arranged on stands, scattered bystanders who may or may not be part of the action.

This, you feel, is how creative work gets done; there will be time for more formal presentations later on.

Was Sargent's own, breezy style an acknowledgment of this – a frank admission that first stabs are more interesting than finishing touches?

The Cirque d'Hiver continued to inspire artists after Sargent. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was a regular visitor, and based many pictures on what he saw there. Richard Avedon took his most famous fashion photograph, "Dovima With Elephants, Evening Dress by Dior" at the Cirque d'Hiver.

The 1956 film "Trapeze," starring Gina Lollobrigida, was set there, and Fellini filmed parts of "I Clowns" there. The great circus-lover recorded interviews with members of the Bouglione family who took over the circus in 1934, and were still running things when my wife took her job there seven decades later.

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Ease belies the effort in Matisse



PETIT INTERIEUR A L'ATOLE DE MARBRE RONDE, PALMIER ET PERSONNAGE

By Henri Matisse

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester. 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

There's a great big metaphysical joke at the core of the genius that was Henri Matisse, and it has to do with the idea of work, of labor, of effort.

Matisse, in his full-throated maturity, represents the opposite of these things. His work stands for ease and effortless beauty, and for an almost total absence of pressure – the pressure of careful outlines and fastidiously filled-in paint and, by extension, of life itself, with its repressed desires, irreconcilable demands, and emotional heavy-lifting.

Nowhere in New England is there a better example of what I'm talking about than this Matisse

painting, which is on display – alongside two other fine Matisses – at the Worcester Art Museum.

It's called "Petit Interieur a la Table de Marbre Ronde, Palmier et Personnage," and it was painted in 1947 – seven years before the great man's death. It is not what you'd call a masterpiece: Its breezy execution seems incompatible with the very notion.

But it is typical of the mature Matisse at his bewitching best. The colors hum. The brush strokes, loose and relaxed, create a sense of airy plenitude. One cannot say where drawing ends and painting begins.

Descriptions of observed phenomena – a palm tree, a flower, a head – become simplified signs, and these signs become rhyming and complementary components in an overall decoration. The seated figure's head, for instance, is roughly the same size, color, and shape as the flowers and fruit. Serpentine lines on the table rhyme with the stalks of the flowers, reinforcing the sense of flourishing growth evoked elsewhere in the picture.

Patterned lines – the sprouting palm, the plant's jagged leaves – punctuate the picture, like faster rhythms amid more leisurely, spaced-out ones, so that the picture seems to expand and contract, like the breath of a relaxed lover.

The blue pot on the right breaks open that side of the picture, echoing both the blue seen through the large window and another blue pot on the table. The touch is so

The blue pot on the right breaks open that side of the picture, echoing both the blue seen through the large window and another blue pot on the table. The touch is so light in parts that the oil paint functions like watercolor.

The painting is about conferring balance and proportion on rapturous sensuality – dizzying beauty with no diminution on either side.

Matisse was in fact one of history's great pressurized personalities. Habituated to harsh criticism and to countering such criticism with feats of the most strenuous concentration, he was prone to panic attacks, insomnia, nosebleeds, chronic anxiety, illness.

It cost him a lifetime of unstinting strain to get to the point where he could turn out pictures like this.

Photograph ©2012 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

It's all about the dress



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG NOBLEWOMAN WITH THE INITIALS LVSS (OR IVSS)

School of Madrid

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester. 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

Vivienne Westwood once said "You have a much better life if you wear impressive clothes." It's an attractive formulation, not least because it reverses a prejudice we might otherwise bring

to the matter – the assumption, that is, that you get to wear impressive clothes only if you have a much better life.

This painting, in the collection of the Worcester Art Museum, has something similarly subversive about it. We don't know who painted it, but we do know that whoever did was good. (At least one proposed attribution has been rejected on the grounds that this picture is too fine to be by the same hand).

It shows a young, unknown and meltingly beautiful Spanish noblewoman. Her face – unlike her dress, which is stiff and stylized to the point of abstraction – is sensitively modeled: It is pale and bright, but with just enough shadow encroaching on one side to set off a high cheekbone and dramatize her dark, self-possessed but vulnerable-looking eyes.

But soulful eyes be damned: This picture is, let's face it, all about the dress. I can't think of a single painting with a more beautiful and audacious dress, more scintillating colors, anywhere.

The picture itself – like any good party gown – is an exercise in artifice. The artifice (which is reinforced by its sturdy decorative frame) is there in the clean lines, the strong symmetries, and the evenly applied colors that stylize rather than describe (in optically faithful terms) the dress's watered silk fabric in blushing rose, its wide swaths of trimmed gold braid.

We are not, in other words, looking at Velázquez (a painter who was hitting his stride in the same city – Madrid – at the same time).

Yet something about the picture convinces you instantly. And the credit must surely go to the dress's dominant color harmony of rich rose and burnt-caramel gold. It's astonishing.

Note, too, when your eyes adjust to this onslaught of pleasure, the sliver of green on the table cover and the charcoal grey of the lady's ruff and cuffs: Both colors help rein in the vibrant hum of the two warmer hues.

rein in the vibrant hum of the two warmer hues.

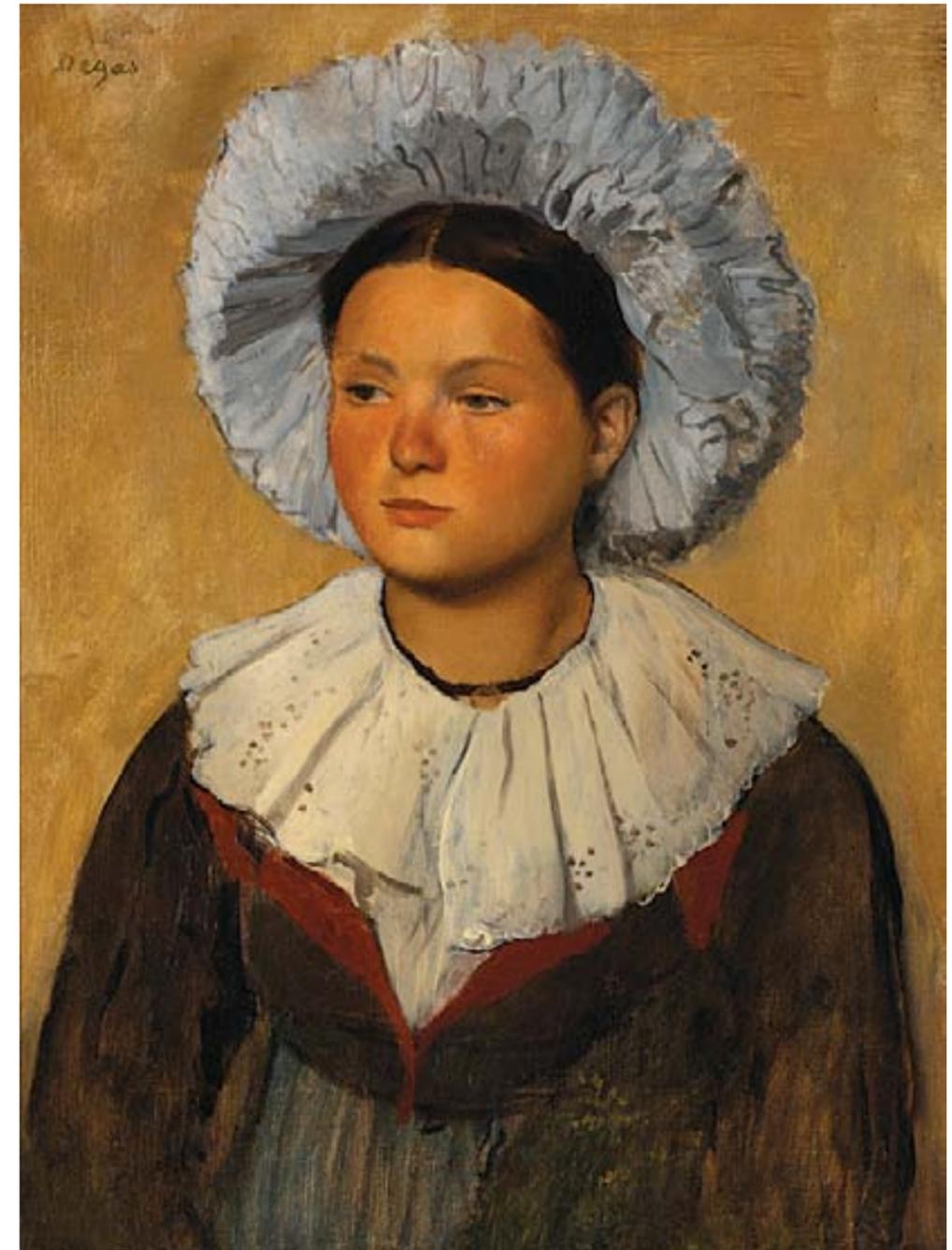
There's also an exciting tension between the geometric patterns of the dress's gold braid (did Frank Stella ever see this picture?) and the looping curves and arcs that recur elsewhere.

One fun thing to know (passed on to me by WAM's former director Jim Welu): This picture was once owned by Rita Lydig, the New York socialite who was painted by Giovanni Boldini and John Singer Sargent, photographed by Edward Steichen, admired by Isabella Stewart Gardner, and friendly with Tolstoy, Rodin, Debussy, and Bernhardt.

Lydig's collection of very impressive clothes became the basis for the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Photograph ©2012 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

Simple, original, virtuosic Degas



LA SAVOISIENNE

By Edgar Degas

At: Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence. 401-454-6400, www.risdmuseum.org

Visitors to “Degas and the Nude” at the Museum of Fine Arts might be reassured to learn that Degas was interested not just in women's bodies, but in their faces, too. In fact, he left behind a large number of remarkably fine portraits of women. They range from the severe-looking Laura Bellelli in his early masterpiece, “The Bellelli Family,” to Ellen Andrée acting the part of a de-

jected denizen of a Paris cafe in “The Absinthe Drinker.” There are dozens of other portraits of female friends and family that were both sympathetic and penetrating.

This picture, “La Savoisienne,” in the collection of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art in Providence, is one of Degas’s earliest depictions of women. It is rarely reproduced in the Degas literature, but it’s one of his freshest and best.

Scholars can’t be sure, but they believe he painted it around 1860, after returning to Paris from three years in Italy. These Italian years were critical for Degas (1834- 1917). He spent them studying the art of the Florentine Renaissance, painting family members, moping (for which he had a pronounced talent), and struggling to find a painterly style and worthy subject matter – in short, a reason to recognize in himself the makings of a real artist, not just a devilishly talented imitator.

So, now, look at this girl. Look at the delicacy of the shading around her chin and jaw line; her calm, dark eyes and sunburned nose; the way the subtle finish of the face is set off by the looser rendering of her picturesque outfit and the brushy background. The rendering is simple but virtuosic.

The girl, we infer from the title, is from the mountainous Savoy region, on the border between Italy and France, the two countries to which Degas felt the deepest attachment. Round-faced and tanned, she is seen close-up and magnified.

This gives her face an unprotected, touchingly vulnerable appearance. But (and this intimate-detached dynamic is characteristic of Degas’s later work) she also has a distant, watchful look. She seems both self-possessed and distracted – the way a confident older sister might look as she simultaneously watches over her siblings and fends off suitors.

Pictures of female peasants in exotic costumes were common fare in 19th-century art. In most instances (Corot was an exception), you feel the artists’ interest in their subjects’ inner lives was negligible, or nonexistent. Degas, who never painted another woman in regional costume, contributed something strikingly original to the genre, before moving swiftly on.

Photograph ©2012 Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence

What is unspoken by such a fool?



ALLEGORY OF FOLLY

By Quinten Metsys

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester. 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

In his incomparable memoir, Giacomo Casanova made an excellent distinction between stupid people and fools. Stupid people, he wrote, were easy to like, and “in the nature of their stupidity [even] had a kind of intelligence.” (Phew! Aren’t we all, after all, richly endowed with stupidity?)

Fools, on the other hand, the great lover could not abide: “Fools are insolent,” he spat out,

“and their presumptions insult the mind.”

Casanova’s problem with fools was simply that they are so well defended. In their minds, their own folly does not even register as a possibility, so that, communicating with them, you almost have no choice but to join them on their level. As Casanova puts it: “I feel like a fool whenever I find myself in their company.”

This picture, by the 16th-century Antwerp painter Quinten Metsys (also called Massys, or Matsys) is unmistakably of a fool. That smile could not be more splendidly idiotic.

Might he also, however, signify something more?

The painting, which was owned by the late art historian Julius Held, has been hanging in the Worcester Art Museum’s galleries on long-term loan since the mid-1980s. It is called “Allegory of Folly,” and it was painted around 1510, just as Metsys was emerging as the leading painter in Antwerp.

Much of Metsys’s work reveals Italianate influences. There’s good evidence to suggest that he was familiar with the work of Leonardo da Vinci, so Leonardo’s grotesque heads may be one source for the fool here. The fantastical, moralizing inventions of Hieronymus Bosch were surely another.

But Metsys was also friendly with the great scholar Erasmus, whose “In Praise of Folly” was published around this time. Foolishness in general, it seems, was a hot topic.

Metsys’s hunched and small-eyed figure wears the traditional costume of the fool: a cowl with ass’s ears and a cock’s head. The outfit reminds us that fools were commonly retained by royal courts. They were not there only to be laughed at. As with Shakespeare’s jesters and fools, the guise of foolishness was often employed to arrive at secret wisdom.

What’s more, our friend here makes a gesture of silence with one finger, and the words by his mouth – “Mondeken toe” – mean “Keep your mouth shut.” Since silence had long been considered an attribute of wisdom, it feels we’re getting close to the point where we must conclude that this donkey-eared dunce is actually a sage.

But no! We’re saved by the cock emerging from his head. It’s clearly cackling away, signaling our fickle friend’s inability to remain silent. He is a jabberer, a pedant, a Polonius. The stone of folly embedded in his forehead and the marotte – the long stick with the indecent figure emerging from one end – seal the business: This detestable figure is an out-and-out fool, by whom we need not be detained any longer.

Why then, do I love him so much, and anxiously seek out his company?

Photograph ©2012 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

Bruce Connor’s flickering spirit, a bold precursor



EVE-RAY-FOREVER

By Bruce Conner

At: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham. 781-736-3434, www.brandeis.edu/rose

“EVE-RAY-FOREVER” is a montage of flickering black and white film that’s played on a loop. More accurately, it’s three such films playing side by side.

Although the work, which is dated 1965/2006, has a complicated history, it’s essentially very simple. And it’s diabolically effective. It’s one of those rare cases in art of a bold innovation that prefigures a whole genre (the multiscreen video installation) and, rather than looking like a primitive precursor, actually looks sharper and more sophisticated than most of what came in its wake. (As I fell under its spell, I thought of the novelist Angela Carter’s little aphorism: “I like anything that flickers.”)

The work, at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, is the product of the fecund creative imagination of Bruce Conner (1933-2008), one of the most interesting and underrated spirits in American art over the past half century.

Conner is credited by some with making the first music video. That work, set to the music of a song by Ray Charles, was originally titled “COSMIC RAY” and comprises the central “RAY” part of this triptych – though without the sound. The “EVE” and “FOREVER” parts that flank it use snippets from “RAY” spliced with other footage.

As well as being a filmmaker, Conner was a sculptor – specializing in assemblages of found objects, from broken dolls to bicycle wheels – a photographer, a painter, and an all-around whiz when it came to coughing up compelling imagery.

“EVE-RAY-FOREVER” has an astonishingly crisp beauty. In just a few minutes, it does to your head what a long, late-night ramble through city streets does to the state of your soul: makes it tremble and blur, even as its racing, leapfrogging perceptions come to seem more fragile and friable by the minute.

It combines footage of a beautiful young woman dancing and posing seductively with abstract black-and-white patterns, excerpts from advertisements, footage of war, animated cartoons, diagrams, random words, and countdown leader, all of it passing before your eyes with almost subliminal speed in a dance of disclosure and concealment.

Each part of the triptych is of a different duration, so the films are never in synch. The work was first shown in a Conner exhibition put on by the Rose in 1965. It was one of three works from the show that the Rose bought for its collection at the time, paying \$150 for the cartridges of 8mm film.

But film disintegrates, and by 2001, the cartridges were in such poor condition that the piece could not easily be re-created. Conner, who often professed an anti-technology stance, embraced the idea of his art’s natural obsolescence. So when the museum asked for his permission to exhibit his films as video projection, he was initially resistant, asking: “Would you exhibit a hologram of a sculpture?”

But Conner was eventually persuaded to let the fragile film be transferred to high quality digital video files. He worked with film editor Michelle Silva on the task, transforming the whole work in the process. We can be thankful, because “EVE-RAY-FOREVER” deserves to flicker on into the future.

Photograph ©2012 Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham

Egyptian power couple



KING MENKAURA (MYCERINUS) AND QUEEN

Egyptian, Old Kingdom

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

This sculpture of the Egyptian Old Kingdom ruler Menkaura, or Mycerinus, and his wife is one of the finest objects in the Museum of Fine Arts, and one of the greatest examples of Egyptian sculpture anywhere in the world.

It was discovered in 1910 in the Valley Temple of Menkaura’s pyramid complex at Giza by the

American archeologist George Reisner, leading a team from Harvard University and the MFA.

In many ways, it's a mysterious sculpture – at once specific and abstracted, emphatically present yet poignantly aloof. But one thing about it is clear: it absolutely exudes self-confident power.

With no end of examples to draw on, we're in the habit today of associating authoritarian rule with grizzled old potentates with dissolute private lives. But here, Menkaura is shown in the prime of his life. He represents not just a king but a whole culture at its precocious peak.

He has the broad shoulders and perfect physique of an Olympic swimmer. His face, framed by those markers of kingship – the artificial beard and the nemes, or headscarf – is handsome, it's beautifully carved, it's realistic.

Yet, crucially, it doesn't come even remotely close to expressing anything. Instead, the king gazes calmly beyond us, as if into a philosophical world. That's fitting, because the sculpture's essential function was to help preserve life into the next world.

Menkaura's queen, thought to be Kamerernebtj II, is almost as tall as he is. She, too, represents simultaneously a real woman and a suave ideal – in this case of feminine beauty. She's wearing a form-clinging dress – so tight that you can see the soft contours of her kneecaps – and she has on a luxuriant-looking wig.

What's interesting, when you get close up, is that you can still see the fringe of her real hair poking through beneath the wig. It's as if the artist wanted to show up, or emphasize, the wig's artifice, as a way of signaling luxury, unlimited means.

A masterpiece of world art it may be, but it seems the sculpture was rushed into place in the valley temple before it was finished.

The base and the background have been left rough. Unusually, there's no inscription. Her wig and his kilt, which would ordinarily have been pleated with parallel incisions, have been left smooth. And lastly, he has toenails, but she is missing hers.

This lack of finish matches what we know about Menkaura's pyramid. It was supposed to be grandiose, but was completed using inferior materials. It's by far the smallest of the three great pyramids at Giza. His temples, too, begun in stone, were finished in mud brick.

It all suggests unseemly haste. And sure enough, it has led historians to conclude that Menkaura died young, probably after just 18 years on the throne.

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Glimmers of real life put to striking use



COAL BREAKER

By Robert Henri

At: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine. 207-725-3275, www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum

The American artist Robert Henri painted this moody, penumbral image in his New York studio in 1902, the day after a train he was on had stopped beside a coal processing plant in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. It is called "Coal Breaker," and it's on display at Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

There was a major coal strike in Pennsylvania that year. It had begun two months before Henri stopped at Wilkes-Barre, and continued on for another three months.

Workers were asking for higher pay, fewer hours. The owners were loath to negotiate with them. In fact, they welcomed the strike: Prices had been depressed because of an oversupply of coal, and a strike would reduce supply and therefore increase prices again.

Eventually, faced with the prospect of thousands of people freezing through winter, President Theodore Roosevelt intervened, a deal was struck, and work went on. Henri must have been conscious of all this when he passed through Wilkes-Barre. The strike may even have played a part in

his decision to make the painting.

But strikes are short and art is long, and what forces our interest about the picture today is its crepuscular mood. The gloaming here meets pure gloom. Working quickly and with a loaded brush, Henri shows us these utilitarian, asymmetrical, oddly fragile structures, poignantly silhouetted against a dying sky – half luminous, half sooty – and looming over a verdant landscape.

Henri, who was the leading figure of America's Ashcan School, was interested in life. "Paint what you feel," he implored. "Paint what you see. Paint what is real to you."

In the midst of the strike, in one of those irksome utterances guaranteed to galvanize opposition, George Baer, a lawyer who was a spokesman for the owners, revealed his own tenuous connection to life when he wrote that the "rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for – not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country."

The rhetoric of the strikers may well have been equally divorced from life as it is lived. The point is that politics, at least as it takes place in public discourse, contains nothing like the quota of reality Henri (1865-1929) routinely stuffed into his heartfelt paintings.

What Henri shows here is grittily real, and on intimate terms with life. Those gauche and gangly structures bend and bow; they strain under the pressures of actual existence. The drab scene over which they tower is perforated by human presences, pinpricks of color, evening susurrations

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Photograph ©2012 Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine

At the scene of slaughter, a visual triumph



BUTCHER SHOP

By David Teniers the Younger

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

It's always good, I find, after spending a bit of time with the lovely but intermittently lulling arrangement of pastoral Monets, pleasant Pissarros, and fluffy Renoirs at the Museum of Fine Arts, to go and spend time in front of this picture, in the Dutch and Flemish gallery. It's called "Butcher Shop," and it was painted by David Teniers the Younger in 1642.

Magnificent, isn't it? Have you already noticed the dog licking the blood that has dripped from the flayed carcass into the shallow bowl below?

And how about the ox's head over there on the left, tiny rivulets of blood snaking down its snowy surface as it contemplates, with palpable dismay, its present predicament and imminent fate? Sausages. Steaks. Stock. And so forth. The cycle of life. Sobering stuff.

That fate is in the hands, it would seem, of the woman over to the right, who bends awkwardly over a chopping block, cleaver in hand. She has a real job ahead of her, starting with the lungs and liver – but just the right temperament for it.

Meanwhile, the creature's luxuriant hide with its two proud horns languishes on the floor below its bloodied head. All this once fitted together, you can see the beast thinking as it takes it all in: If only I could manage to gather up all my pieces, I could conceivably get back to my old life. . . . It was just this morning, but already it seems so long ago!

The aproned woman with her cleaver seems vaguely intrigued by these animadversions (she turns around, I like to think, having heard some bovine muttering). But the friendly folk at the back of the room are utterly oblivious. One of them – the butcher, I presume – stands with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. He’s having a tippie as he chats to an industrious-looking woman, who holds a ceramic jug, and seems eager to be done with him. But it’s warm there by the fire. Another man is halfway out the door. All excellent people.

Teniers (1610-90) did a few of these slaughter scenes. You can see them in Vienna’s Kunsthistorische Museum, Stockholm’s National Gallery, and the Uffizi in Florence; but the MFA picture is the first of its kind – and what an excellent job he did.

Everything is lovingly described, from the blood pooling and drying beneath the ox’s whiskery nose to the nicks and chalk marks on the timber column behind. The carcass itself is a triumph of visual description – the brushwork loose and fleshy but not so loose as to come untethered.

Scholars like to connect these kinds of pictures with deeper meanings. Is it a memento mori? A symbol of the Crucifixion? Possibly. But it doesn’t look like a metaphor to me. It looks like a butcher shop.

Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Vengeance in a fragment of concentrated violence



PRINCE ARIKANKHARER SLAYING HIS ENEMIES

Meroitic, AD 25-41

At: Worcester Art Museum, Worcester. 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org

Every time I set eyes on this small sandstone sculpture in the Worcester Art Museum, my eyes are drawn to what is going on in the lower left quadrant. I don’t quite know what to make of it. But one thing I can say for sure: It’s shatteringly violent.

The sculpture, which is called “Prince Arikankharer Slaying His Enemies,” is from the land of Kush, in what is now Sudan. It was made around 25-41 AD, by an artist from Meroë, a pyramid-strewn city on the Nile, just north of that river’s division into the White and Blue Niles.

Arikankharer was a prince in the black royal house of Kush, a dynasty that traded with Egypt, Rome, Greece, and the Near East. Developing out of the 25th dynasty of the Egyptians, it grew into a civilization of its own, a major exporter, and proved itself a military match for the might of Imperial Rome, with which it eventually entered into an advantageous peace treaty.

Arikankharer died young, before he could take the reins of power. But here he is, silencing anyone who would doubt his status as a warrior of the first order – a ghastly grim reaper, a slicer and dicer of superhuman strength.

Armed to the teeth, and with a female Winged Victory flush by his side, he stands in what art historians like to call the “smiting pose.” Between his sandaled feet, a dog – ears pinned back, eyes ablaze, and forelegs horrendously clenched – mauls the face of a hapless victim.

The fragment, which measures only 8 1/2 by 10 inches, is marked by pinkish remnants of red paint. It’s an accident of history – but inevitably it evokes blood, enhancing the work’s aura of concentrated violence.

And over there on the left, stacked one on top of the other, like playing cards in a game of solitaire, are the prince’s victims. The artist suggests their plurality simply by multiplying their limbs and heads in an orderly, symmetrical, outwardly-expanding fashion.

The effect is reminiscent of Albert Uderzo’s renderings of Obelix and Asterix on the warpath, dispatching Roman legionaries with murderous virtuosity. It also, of course, suggests the pictorial methods of the Italian Futurists – artists such as Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla, who suggested movement and dynamism with repeating contours, as if captured in the same frame by a stop-motion camera.

Here, I think, we’re supposed to read quantity rather than movement. And yet, even as the work celebrates the prince’s deeds, the effect does powerfully evoke the shuddering consequences, the splintering reverberations, of any act of shocking violence.

Photograph ©2012 Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

Picabia’s mischievous postcard view of Nice



MIDI (Promenade des Anglais)

By Francis Picabia

At: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. 203-432-0630, www.artgallery.yale.edu

Francis Picabia, one of the originators of Dada, made this picture, called “Midi (Promenade des Anglais)” sometime between 1923 and 1926. It’s on show at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, where it leapt out at me largely because I’m a sucker and I like palm trees and blue sky and Nice (where you will find the Promenade des Anglais), but also because I like macaroni, I’m tickled by feathers, and I’m intrigued by the texture of snakeskin.

The latter are hard to make out at first. Look closely, though, and you see that the trunks of Picabia’s palms are in fact pieces of tubular pasta joined end to end, and the fronds of his palms are feathers – presumably from a domestic duster.

The frame, meanwhile, is in snakeskin. It was designed by Pierre Legrain, a furniture designer who also achieved renown as a bookbinder.

Legrain made a number of frames for Picabia around this time – the heyday of Art Deco. He also collaborated with Marcel Duchamp and was a mentor to Duchamp’s lover Mary Reynolds, herself a notable bookbinder. (Legrain’s work will be the subject of an upcoming show at Yale University Art Gallery).

Picabia (1879-1953) had split publicly from the other members of Dada a year or two before making this work. He felt that the iconoclastic movement was in danger of creating a “taste”: “I was suffocating among them. . . . I was getting terribly bored,” he complained.

As these attitudes suggest, Picabia was irremediably naughty – and therein lies the source of his art’s appeal.

Questions left unanswered

“The sea, the sky, the trees, the sun, the flowers bore me,” he wrote in a 1920 letter to Tristan Tzara. It’s hard to imagine Henri Matisse saying such a thing, which is partly why it’s amusing to think that this absurdist postcard view of Nice was made just as Matisse was settling into his own airy, Manet-influenced Nice phase. Both painters’ works seem to say: “Relax, everyone” – but in completely different tones.

Charming and egotistical, Picabia first achieved real fame as an avant-garde provocateur in New York, where he spent much of the First World War. He cherished self-contradiction. “Our heads are round so that our thoughts can change direction,” he said.

“The man was, in friendship, as in love, fickle,” wrote Michel Sanouillet, a historian of Dada.

If Duchamp’s spirit presides (unwillingly, I like to think) over today’s most boring, academic art – the endless conveyor belt of found objects, space-sapping installations, and interminable wall texts – it is Picabia whose less cerebral sensibility lurks behind recent art’s most mischievous figures – painters such as Kai Althoff, John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton, the late Martin Kippenberger, and the late Sigmar Polke.

Much of Picabia’s iconoclasm (and in this he was like Duchamp) was directed at painting. (“Why oil paint?” this picture challenges us to answer. “Why not pasta?”) But unlike Duchamp, he kept on at painting.

And it’s for that reason that his scathing, kitsch-embracing spirit has proved so influential – and so strangely heartening – for today’s liveliest painters. Picabia’s endless clowning, his macaroni madness, has proved perversely liberating, and a marvelous corrective to modern art’s parade of dogmatic movements and cultish manifestos.

Photograph ©2012 Yale University Art Gallery



BOY WITH A HAT

By Michael Sweerts

At: Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. 860-278-2670, www.thewadsworth.org

Remarkable how much you can tell – and can’t tell – from a face. This picture of a young boy in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum was painted by Michael Sweerts, a Flemish artist.

Sweerts enjoyed in his lifetime about as much acclaim as an artist could hope for, but he eventually chose religion over art, and was plunged into obscurity from the time of his early death, in the 1660s, until the late 20th century.

There are only about 40 extant paintings by Sweerts. And if all this – the long period of obscu-

rity, the early death, the small number of surviving works, above all the picture itself – is creating an itch in your mind that can be satisfied only with the name “Johannes Vermeer,” you’re not alone.

Links have long been drawn between Sweerts and Vermeer. And in this portrait, which instantly calls to mind the latter’s “Girl With a Pearl Earring” (shortly to make a rare trip from its home in the Hague to the Frick Collection in New York) they’re especially strong.

It’s more likely, say scholars, that Vermeer was influenced by Sweerts than the other way around. Both paintings are what the Dutch called “tronies.” They functioned more as exercises in expressiveness and painterly panache than as portraits of specific, identifiable individuals.

To our eyes, of course, that’s what makes the best of them so spellbinding: There’s a question that hovers over them – very simply, “Who was this?” – that can never be answered, liberating the fact-checking part of our brains, charging the space between us and the subject with congested unknowns.

Vermeer’s “Girl With a Pearl Earring” turns to her left to look out at the viewer. Sweerts’s “Boy With a Hat,” by contrast, turns to his right to look off at something else, revealing the whites of his glistening eyes and, again, animating our speculative capacities. What is it that has his attention? How is it that a child’s face – notwithstanding the tattered hat and gray garb that frames it – can seem so perfect, so inviolate, so unassailable?

the tattered hat and gray garb that frames it – can seem so perfect, so inviolate, so unassailable?

Sweerts (1618-64) was a fascinating, elusive character. He lived in Rome for almost 10 years, where he was influenced by the religious paintings of Caravaggio and intrigued by Roman street life. He was favored by the pope and enjoyed great honors, but he chose to return to Brussels to set up a drawing academy. A few years later he was in Amsterdam.

His religious devotion deepened, he took to fasting, praying, and giving away his possessions, and then he joined a mission, led by Bishop Francois Pallu, to Persia.

However, he was not, according to one report, “the master of his own mind,” and in Isfahan, he was dismissed from the mission. He continued alone from Iran to India, and died, in the company of Portuguese Jesuits, in Goa.

Photograph ©2012 Allen Phillips/ Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford

Marisol is coming into her own



RUTH

By Marisol

At: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham. 781-736-3434, www.brandeis.edu/rose

Marisol Escobar, known as Marisol, is the most interesting postwar artist you’ve probably never heard of. Within a few years, trust me, that will change: She will be the subject of retrospectives at major museums (one is already being planned for 2014 by the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Tennessee; bigger shows will follow); her works, most of them still privately owned, will come to auction and fetch millions; her name will become as familiar as those of male counterparts such as Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Motherwell, Claes Oldenburg, and Jasper Johns.

A Cubist take on an icon of the 1800s

Marisol was born in 1930 in France to Venezuelan parents, and came to the United States in 1950, studying for three years with the legendary teacher Hans Hofmann before discovering Pre-Columbian and American folk art and switching from painting to sculpture.

She made this sculpture, called “Ruth,” in the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, when she was at the height of her early renown, in 1962. It’s a gem – one of the sneakiest, funniest, most sprightly portraits to have emerged from the whole Pop era.

With her five crudely carved but swishily painted heads (plus one pink hat), 10 small breasts made from sections of wooden fruit, come-hither hand gestures, and nine shapely legs supporting a crude wooden barrel painted yellow, gray, pink, and blue, she’s a seductress of the first order, the artistic love child of Picasso, Brancusi, and Andy Warhol, with a good dose of farmhouse folk art thrown in.

“Ruth,” suggest the museum’s records, is Ruth Kligman, the artist and model who was the only survivor of the car crash that killed Jackson Pollock and Kligman’s young friend Edith Metzger in 1956.

Kligman had a reputation as a femme fatale (the poet Frank O’Hara indelibly referred to her as “death car girl”) romantically infatuated with creative genius. She later became Willem de Kooning’s girlfriend (he named a painting, “Ruth’s Zowie,” after her) and later still a muse and friend to Irving Penn, Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe,

Johns, and Franz Kline.

Johns, and Franz Kline.

She is described by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan in their biography of de Kooning as “made for the gossips.” Resembling movie stars of the era such as Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor, she wore, they write, “clingy dresses, and a sultry, ‘Kiss me, you fool’ expression, and her voice was throaty and seductive, as if it were made for sharing secrets.”

Women would allegedly go out to buy new dresses if she were coming to a party. Elaine de Kooning called her “pink mink.” And de Kooning himself liked to say, “She really puts lead in my pencil.”

Zowie indeed. Marisol, who described Ruth as a “friend of mine,” is surely playing off her reputation here more than her reality. But perhaps she is having a bit of fun with both? Reputation, seduction, desire – all these things we try to embody and love to encounter – are in the end jerry-built, like a gussied-up barrel, a block of raw wood with some lipstick and eyeliner attached.

Art © Marisol/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham



BAUDELAIRE

By Raymond Duchamp-Villon

At: Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley. 781-283-2051, www.davismuseum.wellesley.edu

Raymond Duchamp-Villon sculpted this terra cotta head of the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, in 1911. Baudelaire had been dead 44 years, but what a long shadow he cast – and continues to cast.

Here, with his smooth and swollen dome, his ruthless nose, his terrifyingly thin lips, and those dead, unseeing, angled eyes with ogee eyebrows, he combines ancient severity (one thinks of Roman or French Gothic sculpted heads) with diabolical, you-will-not-be-spared modernity.

Duchamp-Villon was the brother of artist Marcel Duchamp, the 20th century’s table-turning

trickster-in-chief. He was 34 at the time he made this work. Five years later he contracted typhoid fever while stationed with the French Army at Champagne. He died less than a month before the end of the First World War.

Duchamp-Villon was trained in medicine at the Sorbonne, but took up sculpting after an earlier bout of illness. He was an early champion – and practitioner – of Cubism. His most famous work is a Cubist sculpture of daunting, mechanistic rigidities called “The Large Horse.”

Why Duchamp-Villon chose to sculpt the long-dead Baudelaire, as opposed to, say, his contemporary Guillaume Apollinaire, an avant-garde poet-critic, in this ultramodern style is hard to say, but he was probably riffing on a head by Auguste Rodin, long believed to be of Baudelaire.

At any rate, one feels Baudelaire himself – if he could recover from the surprise of seeing himself so conceived – would have approved.

Baudelaire may have been prescient; he was certainly some kind of genius. But he was not really as monstrously unswerving as he appears here: He was an anguished, self-destructive, and sickly loafer with a bad temper. (You can see how haggard and irritable he had become near the end of his life in a famous photograph by Nadar.)

But he was constitutionally made for passionate belief, in an age that had fewer and fewer uses for faith of any kind (except, perhaps, faith in pleasure). “To glorify the cult of images,” he once jotted (dismally?) in his diary – “my single, great, original passion.”

He may have been one of the last of the Romantics. But in many ways Baudelaire’s achievement was to redefine Romanticism – by then a dwindling style, a jumble of literary and historical allusions – as whatever forms of beauty were most up-to-date, and most privately compelling.

By 1911, “up-to-date” and “compelling” meant Cubism. It meant the severe planes and mask-like simplifications of Matisse’s portraits of his wife and Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein. And it also meant this astounding portrait of the most compelling art critic and one of the finest poets who ever lived, a man Gustave Flaubert called “as unyielding as marble, as penetrating as an English mist.”

Photograph ©2012 Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts

Shaping color as a tantalizingly private affair



HUSBAND AND WIFE

By Milton Avery

At: Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. 860-278-2670, www.thewadsworth.org

Milton Avery was one of America’s finest mid-century artists, and the one who learned most from Henri Matisse.

From that scissor-wielding sage of sensuality, he learned that when it comes to color, size does matter. Or, as Matisse put it: “One square centimeter of blue is not as blue as a square meter of the same blue.”

Avery quickly saw the ramifications of this for drawing, which thus became as much about shaping color as defining form. And for modeling in space, which, by modulating color, tends to compromise its intensity.

What did Avery do with all this?

Just what he felt like. Avery’s sense of color was completely unlike Matisse’s. It could be tangier. It could be more subdued. But in either case, his harmonies were endlessly surprising.

Avery (1885-1965) made picture-making a tantalizingly private affair. He matched his soft-pedaled feeling for the fine line between harmony and discord with an uncanny feeling for the strangeness, the volatility, at the heart of human intimacy.

He could be painting a landscape, a nude, or – as in this marvelous 1945 painting at the Wad-

sworth Atheneum in Hartford – a husband and wife at rest in a living room. But in every case, you feel a kind of spiritual shiver, a lack of completion, something short of the full-throatedness of a true hedonist.

Here, is it the way the husband and wife seem alarmingly untethered, threatening to float away from each other to left and to right?

Or is it her defensively crossed arms, and the angle of her head, which seems to respond to an invisible pressure exerted by the two leaves of the limp-looking plant?

Things to note about the colors: There are six, maybe seven kinds of blue. There are three hues in the pink-to-purple range. There are two yellows – one yolky, one pale and acidic. There is one tremendous, anchoring black at center. And the man is clothed in two different hues of brown. (Another puddle of brown leaks out from under the couch.)

Many of these colors, especially the mauve and lighter brown, feel harmonious but hesitant – not quite one thing or another. Classic Avery.

But these hesitant hues make the bright red of the man's face almost shocking. It's certainly the most active ingredient in the whole composition, and it matches the man's active, pompous, pipe-smoking pose.

Is he holding forth? Trying to be shocking, while his demure wife maintains her uncomfortable silence? Who knows? Perhaps he had an unusually ruddy face. Or was it simply that Avery thought: "A patch of flaming red would be perfect right here"?

I can't say. But I think it's a masterpiece.

Photograph ©2012 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford

Spanning realms of awareness, the party goes on



BARN INTERIOR WITH PEASANTS PLAYING CARDS, DRINKING, AND SMOKING

By Hendrick Sorgh

At: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley. 413-538-2085, www.mtholyoke.edu/artmuseum

The excellent little museum at Mount Holyoke bought this Dutch painting by Hendrick Sorgh (1606/11-1670) just a few weeks ago. It went on display at the museum for the first time last week.

It shows, as the title helpfully explains, a bunch of peasants making merry in a barn. Some are playing cards. Others are looking on as they drink or smoke. One – really the hero of the picture, to my way of thinking – is falling asleep.

What's he thinking about?

Embarrassingly, I look at the picture and can't stop playing back in my head a song by U2: "We ate the food. We drank the wine. Everybody having a good time. Except you. You were talking about the end of the world."

Admittedly, that skittish, anorexic, very 1990s sentiment – call it "world's-endism" – really has nothing to do with this picture. Or with our sleeping hero.

After all, there's a faint smile on his 17th-century lips. He's probably nicely drunk, physically exhausted, his thoughts blurred and sweetly haloed, his world reassuringly unchanged. Unlikely to change.

A telling portrait of Christ

You try to enter into his thoughts, his dreams, and time drags and billows. It's elastic.

But in Sorgh's picture, there's a distinct contrast between him and his companion, also in the foreground, who leans back on his chair and seems to occupy a much tighter, sharper, more fleeting pocket of time. There's a precariousness about him: the foot on the low table, his awkward hold on his full glass of beer, the fleeting expression on his face as he blows out smoke.

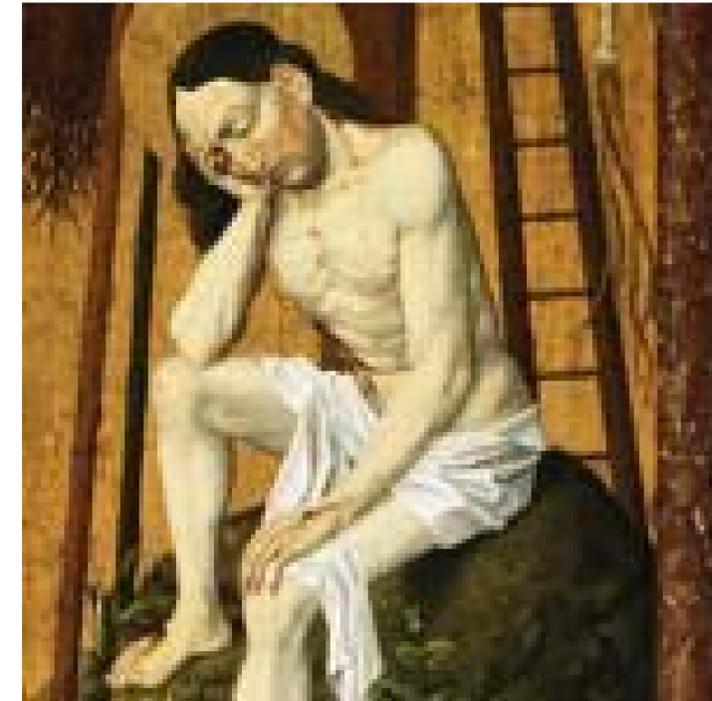
He represents a sharpened consciousness that some associate with the act of smoking and that finds its equivalents across the whole foreground of the picture: in the dagger that dangles from his belt, and in extraordinary details like the air bubble in the glass that holds his beer, the chip in the ceramic bowl that holds the hot coals that warm his feet, and the exquisitely fine textures of the straw hat and the wicker basket over on the right.

His dozing friend, by contrast, has a looser, dream-slow quality about him that finds its equivalent in the sketchy, monochromatic rendering of the background. So these two different visual registers – one precise, exquisitely colored, and detailed; the other sketchy, blurred, brown – suggest two modes of being.

For some reason, as I said, I identify most easily with the man falling asleep. But what I find incredible, and poignant, is that three and a half centuries later, the card game, the party, goes on – as it must – even with half the deck missing, the cards scattered wantonly on the floor.

The end of the world no closer perhaps (or is it?). Everybody having a good time.

Photograph ©2012 Mount Holyoke College Art Museum



CHRIST AS THE MAN OF SORROWS

Unidentified Alsatian artist

At: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

In the entire Museum of Fine Arts, there cannot be many pictures more compelling than this. It's an unusual version of an old standby of Christian iconography, "Christ as the Man of Sorrows." Everything about it forces your attention.

It is, to begin with, shockingly graphic: There are at least nine separate streams of blood flowing from Christ's forehead alone. His muscular torso is a gruesome mess. And notice the way the blood coming from the wounds on his left arm seems to trickle upwards, against gravity: It's a device to remind us of Christ's recent agony; it suggests he has only recently been taken down from the cross.

There is a characteristic 15th-century German stiffness to Christ's pose here. But the details are electrifying: Note, in particular, his incredibly vivid left hand, and the vein protruding from beneath the skin of his right forearm. And then, too, the exquisite rendering of the plants on the hill; scholars have even been able to identify them: lilies of the valley, columbine, and plantain.

We don't know who was responsible for this small and magical panel – just that it was painted by an Alsatian artist around 1470. Scholars believe it may be the first extant painting to combine two traditions of Christian iconography: Christ as the Man of Sorrows (that is, the son of god, post-crucifixion, depicted as both living and dead, man and god, arousing deep empathy) and also the so-called Pensive Christ (traditionally, an image of Jesus just before his crucifixion, reflecting sorrowfully on his betrayal and desertion, and the all-around corruption and venality of humankind).

Still, to me, despite all this metaphysical business, the picture feels hauntingly psychological. I'm arrested in particular by the way Christ is made to occupy the same space as the instruments used to torture him: a birch reed, a flagellum, the crown of thorns, the nails, a pole with a vinegar sponge, and a lance.

Since the whole picture is so heavily symbolic, these things seem to occupy not so much Christ's physical space as an indeterminate mental space — perhaps his own, perhaps ours.

So these instruments of torture become, strange to say, like the attributes of a mind, just as, in Albrecht Dürer's most famous print, "Melencolia I," the unused tools of architecture and geometry, the magic square, the hourglass, the purse and keys, and the rainbow conjure the mental state of the similarly hunched female figure.

Is it, in this case, a mind of infinite love and sacrifice? Of course.

But also, perhaps, the self-sabotaging, haunted-by-demons, divided-against-itself mind of a martyr. Photograph ©2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Chinese ivory gone berserk



CONCENTRIC SPHERES

By unidentified artist, Guangzhou, China, late 19th century.

At: Peabody Essex Museum, Salem. 866-745-1876, www.pem.org

Occasionally, as an art critic, you come across an object so marvelous it seems utterly berserk. When it happens, quite often you look around and realize that you are in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem.

Case in point: this single ball of ivory carved into 15 concentric spheres.

Fifteen. Try to get your head around that. I have been trying ever since I first saw it perched

atop a carved wooden stand inside a glass vitrine – without luck.

I have read a description of how it was made, kindly provided to me by PEM curator Karina Corrigan. And yet I still can't shake this feeling of head-scratching, eye-rubbing dismay.

The piece was made in Guangzhou, China, in the late 19th century. It was almost certainly made for foreign patrons, either on commission or speculatively. There had been a market for this kind of stuff (stuff?! I ask you!) among Europe's monarchs and aristocrats for centuries. The carving of spheres within spheres in China itself goes back to the 14th century, if not before.

In this example, the outside layer – so lusciously carved with abundant floral motifs – is by far the thickest of the 15 spheres. The surfaces of the interior layers have been pierced to create various intricate geometric patterns.

But really: How?

It's what we all want to know. But frankly, my brain just stops at a certain point.

Still, if you're dying for an explanation I can refer you to the Rev. William C. Milne, who went to China, saw similar objects being carved, and described the process in a book, "Life in China," published in 1857:

"A piece of ivory, made perfectly round, has several conical holes worked into it, so that their several apices meet at the centre of the globular mass. The workman then commences to detach the innermost sphere of all. This is done by inserting a tool into each hole, with a point bent and very sharp. That instrument is so arranged as to cut away or scrape the ivory through each hole, at equi-distances from the surface. The implement works away at the bottom of each conical hole successively, until the incisions meet. In this way, the innermost ball is separated; and to smooth, carve and ornament it, its various faces are, one after the other, brought opposite one of the largest holes. The other balls, larger as they near the outer surface, are each cut, wrought and polished precisely in the same manner. The outermost ball of course is done last of all."done last of all."

Of course. Have another coffee. Read it again. It helps.

Photograph ©2012 Walter Silver/ Peabody Essex Museum, Salem