Now More Metropolitan: The Met's Beautiful, Flawed Painting Galleries

by Ruben C. Cordova | November 15, 2024

Installation shot of Gallery #620 with paintings by Orazio Gentileschi (c. 1620), Artemisia Gentileschi (c. 1620s), and Caravaggio (1597). The Pietra dure tabletop (late 16th or early 17th century) supports "Abduction of a Sabine Woman," cast by Susini after a c. 1579 model by Giambologna, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova. Orazio was one of Caravaggio's earliest followers. Though not noted on the label, the Orazio, which will be the museum's first painting by that artist, is a promised gift from television producer Dick Wolf, who has also promised a Botticelli and a Bronzino. Artemisia's "Esther before Ahasuerus," once in storage for 20 years at the museum, now takes center stage in the large Italian Baroque gallery. Artemisia's painting has a vacant center (where she painted out a black man with a dog). When viewed from the opposite side of the table, the sculpture seems to fill that space. The sculpture's subject also invokes Artemisia's biography: she was raped, and, at the ensuing trial, tortured.

Introduction

As a byproduct of a five-year, $150 million replacement of the skylights and the HVAC system in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's European Paintings galleries (#600-644), the department's staff has reconceptualized and reorganized its presentation of around 700 paintings from around 1300-1800. The goal, according to the press release linked above, is to "illuminate the interconnectedness of cultures, materials, and moments in the collection."

Rather than bifurcating Northern and Southern traditions and parameters, national schools, and individual artists, the new hang aims to provide a more

global, more chronological context, one that recognizes that art and artists alike traversed national, regional, and municipal borders. This new presentation also acknowledges a more diverse representation of artists, subjects, and genres. These relatively newfound priorities are part of the racial and cultural "reckoning" that many museums — even in Europe — have undertaken, particularly in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in 2020. (For this reckoning, see the last part of my 2021 article "Taking it to the Street: the Guerrilla Girls' Struggle for Diversity."

The Met's director Max Hollein issued this statement in 2020: "There is no doubt that the Met and its development is also connected with a logic of what is defined as white supremacy. Our ongoing efforts to not only diversify our collection but also our programs, narratives, contexts, and staff will be further accelerated and will benefit in urgency and impact from this time" (Robin Pogrebin, "Upheaval Over Race Reaches Met Museum After Curator's Instagram Post," *New York Times*, June 24, 2020). Not surprisingly, *The New Criterion* denounced these developments as manifestations of an "anti-civilizational impulse" ("The New Criterion *on art*," December, 2020) and decried Hollein's recognition that the Met has played a "role in perpetuating inequalities" (James Panero, "Unmaking The Met," December, 2020). For the publication's editors, the acknowledgement of the effects of racism is a threat to civilization as they know it.

First off, the new skylights (and artificial lights) are a resounding success. This is the best lighting (by day or night) that I have ever seen in a great museum's European paintings galleries. (For technical details, see *The Architect's Newspaper.)* The best Old Masters collections are in Europe, often inhabiting palatial settings, where artificial lighting is neither a strong suit nor a priority (it sometimes has the look of being jerry-rigged without enthusiasm or expertise). In the Met's new European galleries, the lighting is considerably better than that in the museum's Nineteenth Century galleries, especially at night.

Installation shot, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova. In this shot, a figure by Sebastiano del Piombo, traditionally identified as Cristopher Columbus, seems to look into the gallery with Spanish Baroque religious paintings. A crucifixion by Salvador Dalí hangs between a Valdes Leal and a Diego Velázquez. Through the doorway, one can see paintings by Jean Michelin and Antoine Le Nain, and, in the distance, by Peter Paul Rubens.

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Most of the walls in the new European Paintings galleries are painted with strong, vivid colors, and these colors effectively enhance the beauty of the collection. White walls and the "white cube" aesthetic are twentieth-century innovations, and they do not complement and enrich most paintings. The bulk of the pictures in these new galleries, of course, were made to be hung on colored walls (or they were elements of religious polyptychs), so it shouldn't be a surprise that they look good in this environment. The baseboards and door frames in all of the galleries are painted the same color. Consequently, they stand out against the colored walls. This prominent consistency serves to weave all the galleries together in a pleasing manner, reminiscent of the Yale Art Museum galleries. The stanchions and chords utilized in the past are gone, making for a clean, barrier-free look. The wood floors are polished and pristine.

These galleries are handsome, however spartan they may be in comparison to fancy museums such as London's National Gallery, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden, and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The Met's painted walls look better than the textiles (both fancy and plain) that have covered some of the museum's walls in previous decades. Moreover, it was always jarring to walk out of a fabric-covered gallery (replete with a bronze plaque honoring the donor of the gallery's refurbishment) into a plainly painted gallery housing what were self-evidently less-valued paintings.

William Wood, "Joanna de Silva," 1792, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova. Purchased in 2020, this painting is identified on a label as "an exceptionally rare independent likeness of an identifiable Indian woman by an eighteenth-century English artist." The label notes that de Silva was a native of Bengal and served as "a nursemaid in the family of an officer with the British East India Company. She later accompanied an orphaned daughter of the family to

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England…" Additionally, the Met recently purchased "Portrait of a Mughal Woman" by another British artist, Francesco Renaldi, which is not yet on view.

The exhibited paintings have never looked better at the Met. Many of them have been cleaned in recent years. Additionally, there are a good number of recent acquisitions and loans that expand the range of the collection and enable the museum to narrate new material.

This rehang is likely to constitute one of the most substantial reappraisals of an Old Master collection in the last century (as opposed to, for instance, expansions to the National Gallery in London or to the Prado in Madrid, which brought many great paintings out of storage that were hung in the traditional manner). Most of the greatest Old Master collections derive from royal collections, and they tend to be static, not growing or shrinking much in number, and not moving about physically.

Jean Michelin, "The Baker's Cart," 1656, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

It's hard to understand why this marvelous painting has languished in storage for decades. Long misattributed to the le Nain brothers, it is now in the happy company of a genuine le Nain donated in 2023. Additionally, the Met just purchased an excellent companion piece (not yet on view) by an artist known as Master of the Canesso Peddler.

I sympathize with the Met's efforts, intentions, and ambitions for this grand undertaking, even though I expected these efforts to fall flat in multiple galleries for structural reasons, if for no other reasons. I discuss these structural reasons in more detail below (the size of particular galleries, limitations imposed by the collection, the sheer logistics entailed in shoehorning the best combination of pictures into multiple new thematic galleries, etc.). Unfortunately, the most thoroughly reconceptualized galleries are flat-out disasters. I explain why in detail below.

Changes enable one to see works (and combinations of works) anew, and to correct long standing blind spots as well as collection and interpretive

weaknesses imposed by the prejudices and priorities that had long prevailed within the department and within museums in general. In this rehang, one sees: a new emphasis on gender and racial representation (works by women artists and depictions of women and people of color have been bought, borrowed, taken out of storage, or newly noted and described); on racial and class awareness (discussions of colonialism, slavery, and class have a new prominence on the labels); a relatively recent prioritization of still life painting. At times, only halting steps are taken in new directions, but one has to begin somewhere.

Nicolas de Largillierre, "Portrait of a Woman and an Enslaved Servant" (detail) 1696, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art

The enslaved servant is now noted in the title of the painting. The label points out the "staged hierarchical relationships" in such portraits, the "hinged metal slave collar," and that colonizing families were able to evade France's prohibitions on slavery. Also see the catalog entry on the website by David Pullins, dating from 2020.

A sizable gallery is even devoted to the museum's spanking new Latin American collection, which was jump-started by a gift of ten Spanish Colonial paintings from a Brazilian collector that was announced in 2019. Initially housed in the American Wing, they now hang between Spanish paintings and the exit to the American Wing.

Throughout the new galleries, more objects are borrowed from other departments than before, a tendency already evident in the 2020 rehang of half the galleries (some are evident in the video linked below). A New York Times newsletter put the total number of paintings in the current hang at 679, with 112 other miscellaneous works.

In keeping with recent tendencies at other museums, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings are exhibited in these galleries — far too many, in

my opinion, and often without much rationale. The Met's staff hasn't just reshuffled the deck, it has thoroughly shaken things out, with very mixed results.

In a recent video, Stephan Wolohojian, the chief curator of European paintings at the Met, declared: "We think of these galleries as experimental spaces, as playful spaces, places where you can tell multiple and sometimes conflicting stories. We wanted to signal that we are open to discussing new questions and themes, issues and concerns that traditionally haven't been addressed in this space. To explore the nuances, the more subtle questions, that allow visitors to get a much broader sense of what European paintings are, and how we might consider them today" (*Exhibition Tour–Look Again: European Paintings 1300-1800*, video, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2024). One takeaway from this video is that this is the youngest-looking group of curators I have ever seen at a major museum.

The new European Paintings galleries constitute a laboratory for aesthetic experimentation. For reasons adduced above and below, this new presentation is also a form of social and political experimentation.

The History of the Collection

Opening reception in the Met's picture gallery at 681 Fifth Avenue, February 20, 1872 (this was the first of two spaces the Met rented before constructing its first building in Central Park). Photo: wood-engraving published in Frank Leslie's Weekly, March 9, 1872

Founded in 1870, the Met's initial purchase of 174 European paintings took place in 1871. It was made by a trustee, William T. Blodgett, who ventured abroad and bought from dealers in Brussels (under the false impression that he was purchasing private collections). He offered the paintings to the museum at his cost ($116,180.27), an offer that was accepted. The Met has continuously winnowed its collection over the years, and almost two-thirds of the 1871 purchase has been sold off to fund other acquisitions (see: Katharine Baetjer, "Buying Pictures for New York: The Founding Purchase of 1871," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Journal*, 2004, vol. no. 39: 161-245)

Anthony van Dyck, "Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-stricken of Palermo" (detail of putti beneath St. Rosalie), 1624, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova. This van Dyck is one of the notable paintings from the 1871 founding purchase

In 1871, a far more important collection was sold: 119 paintings, mostly early Italian gold ground works, put together in Italy by James Jackson Jarves. Too "ahead of his time," he had failed to interest cultural brokers in Boston and New York in the 1860s, and he was forced to cede his collection to Yale University for $22,000 when he could not repay a loan for which the collection served as collateral. As Laurence Kanter notes, the city fathers who founded museums sought to "improve the morals of the general public and the quality (viz profitability) of local industry," goals reflected in the Met's charter: "encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of the arts to manufacture." Kanter concludes: the Jarves paintings "struck none of them [the civic leaders] as relevant to any of these pursuits" (Laurence Kanter, "Introduction," in Laurence Kanter and Pia Palladino, *Italian Paintings at the Yale University Art Gallery*, vol. I).

Expertise, and what we might call a modern, "informed" taste in painting took a considerable amount of time to develop. In many instances over the years, the conservative taste of Met trustees would prevent the acquisition of works that are regarded as highly important today and still have no counterpart in the museum's collection.

Roger Fry, the brilliant scholar and curator who survived only a brief period at the Met, sounded the clarion call for professional curation in the museum's *Bulletin* in 1906, the year he was hired. He favored a "scientific method" of ordering a collection, chronological by region within national schools, rather than an "aesthetic or merely practical" means of organization. He enumerated key artists the collection lacked, and lamented that, at the Met, "anything like a strict historical method is impossible since there is only one aspect of the art which is adequately represented and that is the sentimental and anecdotal side of nineteenth century painting" (Roger E. Fry, "Ideals of a Picture Gallery," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 1, N.o 4, 1906: 59).

Later in the twentieth-century, no kind of painting would fall further from favor than sentimental, moralizing nineteenth-century paintings. (A good number dramatically reemerged from storage in 1980, and they were met with a considerable amount of scholarly disapprobation.) Fry and his successors endeavored to broaden the collection, with the object of representing national schools, the latter serving as an organizing principle.

Met curators have guided many important purchases, sometimes of key works. But the most critical departmental building blocks have come to the museum in the form of donations, especially those of large and significant collections. I briefly discuss the most important of these many gifted collections (Henry Gurdon Marquand in 1889, 1890 and 1891; Benjamin Altman in 1913; Jules Bache in 1949; Robert Lehman in 1975) in an article devoted to Charles and Jayne Wrightsman, whose gifts concluded with a 2019 bequest (see my 2020 *Glasstire* article: "Oil Begets Oil: Wrightsman Gifts to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of European Paintings").

The Picture Galleries at the Top of the Stairs

Benjamin Altman's art-filled home on 5th Avenue. On the right, one can see a corner of his picture gallery. A portion of his extensive collection of Chinese ceramics is visible through the curtains. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art

European paintings have been displayed at the summit of the monumental staircase that leads from the Great Hall for over 140 years (some of the galleries pre-date that staircase). These picture galleries have been renovated multiple times, and all vestiges of Victorian and Beaux-Arts ornamentation have long been stripped away. For many years, collections in segregated galleries (due to donor restrictions that were to last for perpetuity) were on the left side, and the unrestricted galleries on the right. This arrangement greatly limited Fry's successor Bryson Burroughs, in his quest to "arrange the paintings in chronological and stylistic order" (Calvin Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, rev. ed. 1989, p. 206).

One by one, these donor-specific enclaves (which usually included decorative arts and sometimes Asian art in addition to European paintings) on the second floor have been dissolved. After most of the previously restricted collections

were integrated, Northern European paintings were on the left, and Southern European paintings on the right. The last restricted collection, that of Benjamin Altman, bequeathed to the museum in 1913, was whittled away over the course of many decades. Its final manifestation was a single room devoted to Dutch painting (his early Vermeer slipped away to join the others by that master in 2013), until it ceased to exist.

Today, two large donor-specific suites of galleries remain on the first floor, belonging to the Robert Lehman Collection and that of Jack and Belle Linsky (the Lehman has lent important works to the new galleries under review here). It is a scholarly and curatorial fantasy to one day combine all of the paintings at the Met without restriction. This would rationalize the collection. Paintings from the same altarpieces, for instance, could then be hung together permanently.

Diagram of the galleries devoted to European Paintings, 1250-1800 (#600-644), Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art website. In the map currently handed out to visitors, the listed time frame for these galleries is "1300-1800." Perhaps that is significant, given the current exclusion of so many early Italian paintings. The latter time frame is utilized in the video that accompanied the 2020 hang. The entrance to the galleries via the grand staircase is through gallery #600 in the lower center, and the discussions below take that gallery as a starting point.

Among the biggest structural make-overs of these galleries was that of 1972, which the *New York Times* described as "Giotto to Picasso." (See Holland Cotter's 2013 *New York Times* review that describes the 1972 reinstallation). Everett Fahy, who headed the department from 1970-73, also brought picture labels into conformity with the new, more sober attributions of scholars that included Federico Zeri (Emily Crockett and Lee Sorensen, "Fahy, Everett, Jr.," *Dictionary of Art Historians*).

John Pope-Hennessy headed the department from 1977 until his retirement in 1986. He took the helm in the tumultuous aftermath of Thomas Hoving's directorship. (See Grace Glueck, "Pope-Hennessy Joining Met Museum," *New York Times*, May 25, 1976)

Pope-Hennessy rehung the collection in a sparser manner, placing extra space around the most important paintings. He is credited with bringing a more scholarly approach to the department, including placing more art-historical content on picture labels. Pope-Hennessy also believed a number of the

department's early Italian paintings were over-attributed. (For an overview of his career, see Lee Sorensen, "Pope-Hennessy, John, Sir," *Dictionary of Art Historians*.)

Fahy did a second stint as department head from 1986-2009. Keith Christiansen, who would head the department from 2009 to 2021, was hired by Pope-Hennessy in 1977. They utilized a denser hang than Pope-Hennessy, and practiced a more expansive mode of attribution. Both styles of hanging pictures looked good. I favor a denser hang because I am always happy to see more paintings rather than fewer paintings. Curators have continuously fine-tuned the displays. Overall, the best "look" was achieved under Christiansen.

The 45 galleries in the above chart long served multiple duties: in addition to the Old Masters paintings, they housed 19th century paintings and sculptures, 20th century art, and, subsequently, special exhibitions galleries (on the left side). Eventually, this space in its entirety was given over to (pre-19th century) European Paintings.

The 19th-century European Paintings (an impressive collection that was always too large for its allotted space) took up residence in a new wing at the southern extremity of the museum in 1980, (See my 2021 *Glasstire* article, "Deaccessioning at the Met: From Scandal to Plein-Air Bonanza to Collection 'Care.'") The 20th-century paintings (a surprisingly small collection) journeyed to the same new wing in 1987, where it has grown exponentially. A special exhibitions space was opened in these second floor galleries in 1980.

Finally, in 2013, the special exhibitions space (which took up to almost a third of the galleries) was turned over to the Department of European Paintings. See "A Fresh Home for Familiar Paintings," *New York Times*, May 24, 2013, which features graphics (labeled "old" and "new") that show how the space was used before and after the move. According to the *Times*, "a few months ago, 450 paintings were on view; now there are more than 700."

The *Times*' "old" graphic shows how the galleries looked in the last days of the special exhibition galleries. The areas devoted to Dutch and Flemish, French, and Spanish painting were broken up into two chronological sections each, while Italian painting was broken up into four sections. German and British paintings were each allotted one very small gallery.

In the *Times'* "new" graphic, which reflects the change-over in 2013, Dutch and Flemish paintings are on the left-hand side (with two little galleries for German and British art). Italian painting takes over most of the center of the floor and a good portion of the right side as well. French painting is in the middle of the right-hand side, and Spanish painting is at the back. Two small galleries, devoted to early Flemish and Spanish paintings, are surrounded by Italian sections.

As Peter Schjeldahl noted in the *New Yorker*: "A frisky museum press release terms the leftward itinerary the Beer Tour and those on the right the Chianti, Frascati, Burgundy, and Rioja Tours." (I was unable to find this release on the museum's website, and I trust that it has recoiled from this kind of PR.)

Schjeldahl judges the installation "a marvelous feat of storytelling installation," one that is "just about perfectly right."

Holland Cotter praises the new galleries from a national school perspective. He notes the improved, recalibrated "geography of the galleries," in contrast to its "eccentric" predecessor: "Italy itself was all over the map. Judging from their Met locations, you might have thought that Caravaggio and Tiepolo came from opposite ends of Europe. To trace a coherent historical path, audio guides were useless; you needed GPS" ("Old Faces in New Places," *New York Times*, May 22, 2013).

In a 2013 press release, the Met's director Thomas P. Campbell credited head curator Keith Christiansen and his staff with "the first comprehensive rethinking of these holdings in over four decades." At the same time, it was a culmination of the continuous collection-building and fine-tuning by generations of curators.

Cotter wholeheartedly approved of these changes: "Now painting from northern Europe, excluding France, is laid out by date in the regained galleries. Italian painting is consolidated in a two-pronged format, with early work from Florence and Siena running in parallel streams that flow into Titian's Venice." Schjeldahl averred: "It will henceforth be possible, as it never was before, to close your eyes and picture, in your mind, a roughly accurate map of the layout's forty-four galleries."

A rationalized, national-school layout – Fry's dream more than a century earlier – was finally achieved in 2013. Despite the critical acclaim, it did not last long.

Mixing of national schools (referred to as "international conversation") took place in the 2020 hang directed by Christiansen titled "A New Look at Old Masters." (Christiansen retired in mid-2021 after 43 years at the Met, at which time Wolohojian took the helm.) In an accompanying video, Christiansen notes: "We've reopened 21 galleries with over 500 pictures. And we've arranged these pictures in ways that I think will astonish you because of the thematic grouping's dialogues across nations, prominence given to female artists, all sorts of questions that accompany the great moments of European painting from the 14th to the 19th century."

The 2020 hang was mounted when nearly half of the galleries were completed. Thus, with 21 galleries, "A New Look at Old Masters" had the entire collection at its disposal (since the other galleries were closed). It provided an easy opportunity to freely mix works that had generally been segregated into routes through the picture galleries that had bifurcated Northern and Southern painting traditions. Thus the 2020 hang served as a rough draft for the current one. In the video linked above, one can see some of the pairings in the current hang, as well as a similar thematic gallery composed of oil sketches.

The following discussion reflects my trek through the new galleries, with the attendant highs and lows. In a reshuffling of this magnitude, not all of the

galleries are going to come up aces. All of the deeply problematic galleries are at the beginning. Be forewarned that some are deeply, deeply problematic.

Starting with Tiepolo

Gallery #600, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two of the three Tiepolo paintings and three of the four objects are visible. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

For as long as I have been a regular visitor to the Met (I moved to New York City for the first time in 1980), the gallery at the top of the grand staircase (#600) in the center of the museum has been devoted to the Venetian painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. His tallest painting, *The Triumph of Marius*, one of three the museum owns that were painted for the Ca' Dolfin in Venice, extends almost 20 feet. In 1995, a dropped ceiling installed in the 1950s was removed, enabling the gallery to soar to 37 feet. See Michael Kimmelman's review of this gallery's refurbishment in the *New York Times*. In addition to the afore-mentioned Ca' Dolfin paintings, this gallery also had four allegorical figures from the Palazzo Valle Marchesini Sala in Vicenza, done in collaboration with Girolamo Mengozzi Colonna (an expert in illusionistic perspective), as well as other frescoes thought to have come from the same palace in Vicenza. It was a most impressive room at the Met, one that conveyed a sense of grand scale that is rarely experienced in the U.S.

Unfortunately, by stripping away the other Tiepolo frescoes from this high-ceiling gallery, the curators of the present hang ruined two galleries: #600 (which is strangely denuded of paintings) and #642 (where the newly relocated frescoes are too big for the room and overwhelm the other paintings in it). Tiepolo paintings dominate three galleries in the current hang: the two mentioned above, and #643. The latter has many of the artist's highly regarded oil sketches.

With all the recently acquired paintings, all the paintings brought out of storage, and the considerable number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings currently on display in the European Paintings galleries, space is at a much higher premium than ever before. For reasons of efficiency as well as

aesthetics, it would be preferable to have the Tieoplos concentrated in two galleries rather than three.

Gallery #600 never had objects in it before. Now it has more objects (four) than paintings. The former's purpose is to reference a globalized, transcultural world. Two of these objects are aesthetically significant and serve this purpose well. A lacquerware tray by José Manuel de la Cerda (c. 1764) shows both transatlantic and transpacific influences. Made in present-day Mexico by a Purépecha painter in an indigenous lacquer technique, it imitates Chinese lacquers and illustrates an episode from Virgil's *Aeneid.* A *Bust of a Bodhisattva* from Gandhara, another high quality object, shows Greco-Roman influences on a Buddhist sculpture from present-day Pakistan.

The remaining three Tiepolos seem incidental: they are not the point of the gallery, but simply white elephant-like monoliths too large to put anywhere else. Sad and forlorn, they hang like desiccated fossils of what was once a gallery dedicated to the grandeur of Tiepolo.

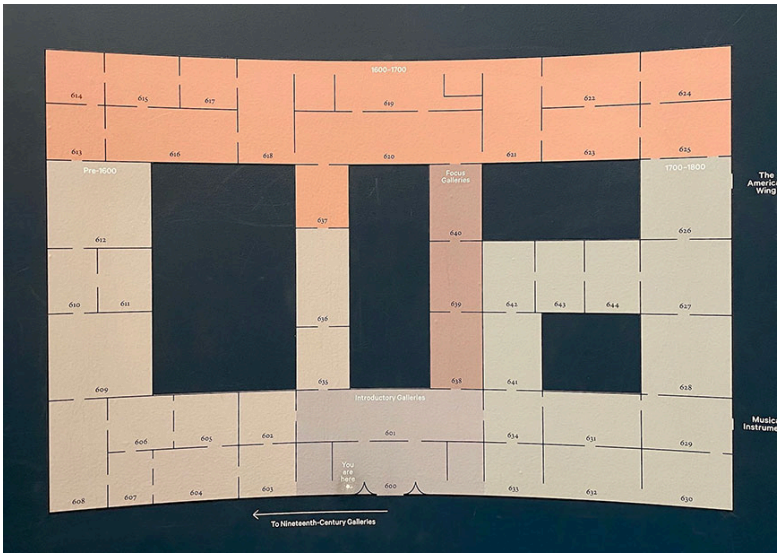


Diagram of present hang, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: taken in gallery #600

The above photograph was taken in the Tiepolo gallery. The west wall (at the bottom of the diagram) now has curved elements with copies of the diagram. However, it is hard to read in the too-dark gallery. The lights in the center illuminate the objects, but cast glare on the paintings.

Additionally, when viewing this diagram, one is facing away from the galleries. Thus, even if a visitor could remember the plan, the intrepid museum-goer would have to flip it mentally and turn around and head off in the opposite direction. Visitors would be better served by small handouts they could take with them, or with a QR code they could access on their phone. Additionally, some more basic information is desirable. Where, for instance, is Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, Caravaggio, or Velázquez? Somewhere in the suite of orange galleries numbered 613-637, but no clue is given in the diagram. Three focus galleries are listed, without a hint about the nature of their foci. This East-facing wall is squandered on diagrams with little utility.

A Large, Muddled, and Undeclared Renaissance Gallery

"Madonna and Child" by Berlinghiero (right, possibly 1230s) and Paolo di Giovanni Fei (left, c. 1370s), Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The very large second gallery (#601) is listed, along with #600, as an "Introductory Gallery." When I was about to enter #601, I assumed it was going to be a Renaissance gallery, even though one of the most prominent paintings is an enormous Max Beckmann triptych visible through the glass doors on the right (see the Tiepolo gallery photo reproduced above). Gallery #601 *is* a Renaissance gallery, more or less, though it avoids the term altogether. Named European Painting: A Starting Point, the gallery's wall text is too general to hold much explanatory value. This is the most useful passage: "The artworks here reflect the great variety of Christian religious imagery produced over the course of several centuries in Europe when painting took center stage, including multipanel altarpieces, processional banners, and works that suggest images could be divinely created." Evidently, the gallery's designation excuses its grab-bag, centuries-hopping nature and its failure to define the Renaissance or offer a chronological organization of pictures.

Why does this matter? Works created during the period broadly referred to as the Renaissance provided the foundation for most of the work in these new European Paintings galleries (even Caravaggio, who is sometimes viewed as the Renaissance's antagonist). The Renaissance is no longer understood as merely a "rebirth" of classical form as part of a teleological evolution from Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic styles towards "modernity." Perhaps the Met curators are avoiding or even backing away from this too-facile characterization. (Whatever their position is, I wish they had made it clearer.) It is too simple to call the Renaissance a style. Rather, understood in its broadest sense, it is a distinctive and crucial phase in the history of European culture, commerce, and art, characterized by technical, philosophical, and psychological innovation. This resulted in an escalation of artistic production across a range of media and in the development of numerous new genres.

Modernist works that fundamentally break with the basic modes of representation and world-making created during the Renaissance have their home in other wings at the Metropolitan. In an ambitious chronological survey

of the Met's European Paintings collection, this gallery is the place to set the stage.

The Berlinghiero illustrated above was made 60-70 years before the collection's new starting date of 1300. It is one of the rarest (one of only two firmly attributed to the master in the world) and most important early Italian paintings in the U.S. Given its singular importance, European Paintings no doubt does not want to transfer it to another department, such as Medieval Art and the Cloisters. But the department missed an opportunity to provide a context for the evolution from Berlinghiero's Italo-Byzantine masterpiece to one of its most heralded acquisitions in a very long time: the Duccio *Madonna and Child* (c. 1290-1300) purchased in 2004 for $45 million.

Duccio, "Madonna and Child," c. 1290-1300, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art

The department could have documented the progression of the Madonna and Child motif from Berlinghiero to Duccio – which resulted in a high degree of psychological as well as physical interaction between the two figures – with paintings in its collection. The museum owns three paintings of the Madonna and Child by the Master of the Magdalene (one of them a fragment) and one by the Master of Varlungo that feature intermediary degrees of interaction between the mother and child. (Click here for a chronological ordering of the department's paintings on the museum's website.) One of these four paintings is on view in another area of the museum, the others are in storage. I was dismayed to discover that scores of paintings that had been on view in years past had vanished to storage. These include a great many early Italian pictures, some by famous artists (including some Fry wished were in the collection in 1906), and some by less famous artists. Famous names include Fra Angelico, Mantegna, Signorelli, Crivelli, Titian, and Francia.

The Met's collection has enormous strengths and enormous weaknesses. The former include a few mind-boggling concentrations of work by some of Europe's greatest artists. Nonetheless, many big-name artists are altogether absent. Additionally, many of its most important early Italian paintings, by artists such as Giotto, Duccio, and Fra Angelico are rather small (the painted surface of the Duccio is only 9 ⅜ x 6 ½ inches). So gallery #601 (one of the two largest European Paintings galleries) is a very bad choice to stage an installation of the Met's early Italian collection. Perhaps that is why the curators did not make that attempt. Only a few museum collections, such as that of the Uffizi in Florence or the National Gallery in London, could present an impressive, chronological survey of early Italian art in a room that big. The Met's Duccio is in another room, and a Fra Angelico crucifixion in yet another (other works by Fra Angelico are not on view anywhere).

The earliest Italian paintings had always been hung in appropriately small galleries at the Met. I recall how these galleries were constantly refined, adjusted, and sometimes augmented over the years (especially by the purchase of the Duccio and a Lorenzetti Crucifixion. Finally, in 2008, I witnessed a rehanging that was so good that I complimented it in a letter to the director. Many of the fine, small paintings that I grew accustomed to seeing in the old galleries would look like flies on a wall in a large gallery such as #600.

Installation view, Gallery #601, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Gallery #601 is a fairly random room of mostly Italian pictures, into which the curators have introduced some other nationalities. A double-sided German painting c. 1510 by Hans Schäufelein (that side is not visible) and attributed to the Master of Engerda (visible side) is on the right in the above photograph. It balances a two-sided banner c. 1395-1400 painted by Spinello Aretino (visible in the distance on the right). The two works function as room dividers. On the left in the above photograph, the curators have placed a painting from 1480 attributed to the Circle of Nicolas Froment, a French artist. A triptych by the French artist Jean Bellegambe is next to the Beckmann triptych in the distance on the left, behind a large case in the center which holds the museum's small Giotto. Newly cleaned and removed from a very weathered frame, the Giotto looks fantastic. But by placing it in an oversized case within a cavernous room, the 17 ¾ x 17 ¼ inch painting looks smaller than ever. Even worse, by wrenching the painting from its chronological context, the painting's historical significance is lost. To fully appreciate this artist's importance, we should be able to see what came before him, and how he affected the work that

came after him. In this installation, a casual viewer might come away with the impression that the Giotto influenced Beckmann.

An anonymous Spanish painting from c. 1400 was behind me when I took the above photograph. These sundry paintings don't have much in common, and, to the degree they converse at all, it is likely in Italian. Ultimately, I would rather see a room of Venetian Renaissance paintings in #601, since that is one of the two best collections of large-scale paintings in the department. It would fill the room in an commanding fashion (as it has in the past), and it would follow logically from the Tiepolo gallery (hopefully restored to its former glory).

The small Italian paintings should return to their customary small galleries, where they could hang in happy abundance. Even after selling some of them off, the museum still has more than 20 paintings by Giovanni di Paolo, some of them are very small (some are in the Lehman Collection, and a few are currently on loan to the Lehman galleries from the European Paintings department). One of the unexhibited Fra Angelico paintings is a tiny roundel, only 5 ⅞ inches in diameter.

Beyond the Wall

Installation view, Gallery #635, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

In the new hang, the Met's Duccio materialized in a gallery titled Beyond the Wall, as did the Lorenzetti *Crucifixion*. (Both paintings have since been removed for the upcoming Siena exhibition.) The Duccio was paired with Ingres' *Virgin Adoring the Host* from 1852, a combination that puzzled many art historians. Since the two paintings don't have that much in common, a number of us felt it served to trivialize the Duccio. In the video *Exhibition Tour–Look Again: European Paintings 1300-1800* noted above, curator Wolohojian explains that the two paintings "bracket the chronological span" covered by the galleries. This point, if it needed to be made with paintings, would have been better-suited at the beginning of the installation, with a lesser painting than the Duccio pressed into service as a sign post.

The Beyond the Wall gallery's purpose is to display paintings not intended to be hung on a wall by not hanging them on a wall. But one can communicate the concept effectively without literally denuding the walls of paintings.

Moreover, the paintings that are laying nearly flat in the cases reflect an excessive amount of glare and cannot be viewed at close hand in a satisfactory manner (I reproduce a painting below from another gallery that demonstrates the severity of this problem). These cases are fine for exhibiting limoges, jewels, ivories, etc., but they should not be used to exhibit paintings.

Portraits Face-to-Face

Installation view of Gallery #602, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Gallery #602, named Faces of the Renaissance, is devoted to portraits. The wall text notes "The proliferation of painted portraits of individuals around the year 1450 aligned with a new emphasis on personal religious belief and self-commemoration…" But it does not say anything about what the Renaissance actually was, or when it began.

In the above photograph, one can see Italian Renaissance portraits on the left wall and Northern portraits on the right wall. Placing rows of relatively small portraits on long walls is a monotonous and boring way to show these works. It's like a row of postage stamps glued to the middle of a sheet of paper. The painted surface of the beautiful Hugo van der Goes portrait in the center of the right wall, with its miraculously rendered 5 o'clock shadow, is only 12 ½ x 10 ¼ inches. A small row of quality works is fine in a small gallery (the van Eycks in London's National Gallery look fantastic), but long line-ups aren't very attractive. These rogues' galleries of merchants, bankers, and their wives lack variety and the rhythmic interplay of works featured in some earlier hangs, where a portrait could be juxtaposed with a sizable religious painting, or where small paintings were placed close together in wall cases with a fabric backing to give them more heft.

Hugo van der Goes, "Portrait of a Man" (detail), c. 1475, oil on wood, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art

One corner of this gallery is arranged very artfully, with two paintings and two sculpted busts (all Italian) exhibited at different heights, causing the depicted subjects to exert humorously intersecting gazes.

I was grateful to see Fra Fillipo Lippi's double portrait (c. 1440) in good light in this gallery. Previously, it was almost always exhibited in a dark room, filled with a claustrophobically excessive amount of cassoni (wood chests, some of them painted). These circumstances were unfavorable for viewing the Lippi, which is the earliest surviving Italian double portrait, and the earliest Italian portrait to have a landscape view.

The curators must have cassoni fatigue, because almost none are currently on view. Proportionately, they are among the current hang's greatest casualties. This Lippi was bought by Marquand as a Masaccio in 1883, and various scholars subsequently misattributed it to Cosimo Rosselli, Uccello, close to Domenico Veneziano, and Botticelli (the latter studied with Lippi).

Installation case with anonymous Netherlandish portrait in Gallery #602, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The painting illustrated above is impossible to see when one is standing over it. In the daytime, the entire painting is covered with glare (as pictured above). At night, the lights above it reflect like tiny suns, seemingly burning holes through the little panel. This kind of low case should not be used in picture galleries, since the paintings need to stand at or near to a 90 degree angle to avoid glare (I encountered the same problem in the Beyond the Wall gallery, as noted above).

International Gothic Gallery

Installation view, Gallery #603, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

I was shocked to enter a gallery called International Gothic (hereafter abbreviated as IG). I have always found it to be a confusing and dubious term. Without having received a definition of the Renaissance, visitors on the proscribed path find themselves here. The curators, who note the IG's connection to European courts, situate it in "the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries," and observe that "the spatial settings in these paintings are often surreal, [an unfortunate word choice, especially when a Dalí is hanging in these galleries] focusing more on rich patterns and glittering gold backgrounds than rational architectural or natural settings."

In my view, IG is less a style than a somewhat arbitrary agglomeration of traits (gold, luxurious fabrics, graceful curving lines, non-rational space, stylistic inconsistencies). Every early Italian Renaissance artist, for instance, painted on gold backgrounds at least some of the time, including the greatest masters of perspective, anatomy, and monumental form, such as Masaccio, Uccello, and Piero della Francesca. Disjunctions in scale were necessary to fit donors into paintings, and the practice continued into the 1500s. Eclecticism and experimentation were the rule, rather than the exception.

I found that a number of online sources (museums and encyclopedias) still use the term International Gothic, as do a number of entries on the Met's online catalog. Many specialists, on the other hand, such as Stephen John Campbell and Michael Cole, in their *New History of Italian Renaissance Art* (London:

Thames and Hudson, 2017, rev. ed.) ditched the IG term long ago. Campbell and Cole also restricted the use of the term "Gothic" to architecture that employs rib vault and pointed arch construction.

Let us return to the conventional definition of IG. Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) is often utilized as a crowning, paradigmatic example of IG in Italy. But, notwithstanding the sumptuousness of some of his figures, it also features some foreshortenings, some dramatic, realistic anatomy, and some relatively rationalized spaces (and precious little gold backgrounds in the painted scenes).

Masaccio, with his severe figures and fully rationalized space (through the use of one-point perspective), is often viewed as the IG's antithetical Renaissance representative. But rather than a Big Bang theory of the Renaissance's creation (when Masaccio exploded on the scene in the 1420s), it is more fruitful to recognize it as the product of a long evolution, fed by numerous currents.

Italian painting has been a primary interest of many curators (including the last four chief curators) and collectors associated with the museum, so it is no surprise that there is very little non-Italian art in the IG room. Had the museum harbored a longstanding ambition to field an IG gallery, different acquisition choices could have been made over the years. It would certainly be more truly international.

Let us consider the suitability of some paintings that are in the gallery. Take the *Crucifixion* by Uccello (probably mid-1450s) in the left of the above photograph. The painting is outside of the chronological range of the IG, and the artist's emphasis is on monumental, expressive figures that are masterfully rendered. As noted on the museum's website, the bench in the upper right is correctly foreshortened.

The Met doesn't own a painting by Piero or Masaccio. The closest it comes to the latter's work is Fra Filippo Lippi, whose *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Two Angels* is near the corner in the above photograph. Dated c. 1440, it, too, is outside the IG's normal time period. In many respects, it is the antithesis of the IG (notwithstanding the virgin's luxurious throne). The figures are monumental and austere. The space is rationalized and continuous in the two side panels now in Turin (see link above for a photograph of the three paintings together).

Fra Filippo Lippi's *Saint Lawrence Enthroned with Saints and Donors*, hanging to the right of the Uccello, is also late for the IG designation, nor does it have pronounced IG characteristics. The Lippi and Uccello paintings are misplaced in this gallery. They are inappropriate here, and their absence in a relevant gallery means that their actual, very significant contribution to Italian art is lost to visitors.

The Met has other paintings that better fit IG criteria (in style, if not date) than do a number of paintings in this gallery, but they are generally very small. A notable exception, a large Giovanni di Paolo polyptych (though it is late in date), is utilized as a centerpiece of gallery #601.

Bohemian Painter, "Virgin and Child Enthroned," 1345-50, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Perhaps the acquisition of this superb Bohemian painting in 2020 served as the inspiration for an IG gallery, (The Cloisters also has a small Bohemian panel of Saints Procopius and Adalbert from c. 1340–50.) With it, the museum has one major non-Italian piece from an appropriate time frame. The gallery also has two small panels from a German altarpiece from c. 1400, but their stark, primitivizing character is at odds with the luxurious, courtly IG criteria.

The Bohemian *Virgin and Child* is unusually robust – more so than works typically categorized as IG. As Christiansen notes in the online catalog: "The Met's picture is incomparably more sophisticated in composition and treatment of space [than the artist to whom it was initially attributed] … There is an enhanced understanding of anatomy and the creation of an effect of physical presence, perhaps best evidenced in the drapery over the Virgin's lap, which is articulated with an almost sculptural sense of volume together with an elegance in the rhythmic cadences of the hemline comparable to the finest French ivories and illuminations or, indeed, the work of Simone Martini."

I really dislike the overly-large vitrines the museum has introduced in this hang. They dwarf the small paintings they encase, and they unnecessarily block sightlines in every gallery in which they are deployed. It's even worse when, as in this gallery, two paintings are put into the same case. The marvelous, sanguinary devotional image of a Dead Christ (sharing his three-dimensional stigmata with a tiny St. Francis) by Michele Giambono makes a strange bedfellow with the joyful, Bohemian jewel. The Giambono, too, is rather lacking in IG traits.

The Met actually owns a Gentile da Fabriano *Madonna and Child with Angels* from c. 1410. Due to its damaged state, the painting is rarely exhibited. The painting is sober and monumental. In the website catalog, Christiansen praises its "mastery of figural construction and an effect of monumentality achieved through simplicity in the silhouette of the Madonna and Child…"

The label copy on the website extolls the painting's naturalism: "Astonishing at this date — ca. 1410 — is the delicate naturalism of the child, the attentive description of the plants, and the rhythmic folds of the drapery, which confer an effect of incipient movement. No Venetian painter was untouched by these novelties."

Despite its condition, the Met's Gentile da Fabriano is so important that it should be on permanent view, whether there is an IG gallery or not. It is not a particularly good fit for the IG category, but a painting by the artist from about a decade later at the Getty is. This is further evidence that early Italian artists were eclectic experimenters. This is another reason I don't find the IG category to be very useful as a stylistic category: the same artist is IG, the opposite of IG, and halfway IG.

The Met only fields two paintings in its IG gallery that thoroughly fit the IG criteria, those by Niccolò di Pietro and Pietro di Domenico da Montepulciano.

Fry purchased both the Montepulciano and the Giambono, as well as a Giovanni da Milano (not currently on view). The latter was then misattributed to the "International Gothic" artist Starnina. Fry also bought di Paolo's *Paradise* (not on view when I visited the Met), which he described as "perhaps the artist's masterpiece" (for Fry's time at the Met, see Carol Elam, *Roger Fry and Italian Art*, London, Ad Ilissum and Burlington Magazine, 2019, pp. 25-56).

A more appropriate gallery (and a better fit for the museum's collection) would focus on the complexities of early Italian painting. Instead of an IG gallery, why not have a small gallery or two with a focus on the Virgin and Child motif from Berlinghiero to da Fabriano, and/or early crucifixions? The crucifixions could include the two by Fra Angelico (one currently not on view), the Lorenzetti, the Pietro di Rimini fragment (currently not on view), the one attributed to Ugolino da Siena, the Bernardo Daddi (currently not on view), the Master of the Orcagnesque Misericordia, the Stefano da Verona, which was a major purchase in 2018, on through to the Uccello treated above (just to mention some of the most significant examples). A few paintings even include both motifs, including one by the Master of the Magdalen and one by the Master of Monte Oliveto I want to emphasize that there is no lack of subjects that can be addressed in a sound manner.

Short Takes on Other Galleries

Gallery #604 is called The Home in Renaissance Italy, and the wall text discusses objects found in noble homes. Curiously, it does not define the Renaissance at all. I guess we are supposed to know what it is through osmosis, from having seen so much of it already. For a gallery with this title, it is still

rather painting-centric. Given the theme of the home, the Lippi altarpieces would not be appropriate here, either. Neither of these thematic galleries are a good fit for these important paintings. I suppose that is why they are in International Gothic.

Gallery #605, called Early Netherlandish Painting, is home to Jan van Eyck's *Crucifixion* and *Last Judgment* (c. 1436-8). Please do not miss the opportunity to zoom in on these marvelous little panels (also see the articles on technical studies at the bottom of the webpage). They are rare treasures that came from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg through the dealer Knoedler in 1933. One wishes the museum had been a more aggressive buyer during the Great Depression, when unprecedented collecting opportunities arose. I prefer them exhibited in a case (rather than on a wall), where one can get a much closer look at them.

Rogier van der Weyden, "Francesco d'Este" (detail), c. 1460, oil on wood, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art

I have always admired the sitter's angular nose and the compressed hands in the lower left corner of the painting. While the label states that the hammer and ring "may be jousting prizes," Christiansen's online catalog entry indicates that the two objects could be attributes of rank (similar hammers were utilized in officiating jousts), and that a ring like this could have been awarded as a jousting prize.

Powers of Portraiture

Installation shot of mostly Italian paintings in Gallery #612, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Problems of pictorial proportionality come to a head in a gallery called Powers of Portraiture. In the above photograph, the left and rear walls are hung with stellar, large-scale Italian portraits: Sarto, Bronzino, Salviati, Tintoretto, Titian, Veronese, Veronese, and, on the right wall, a borrowed painting by Sofonisba Anguissola. Several of these portraits are collection highlights. The Bronzino is one of the artist's greatest portraits; the Salviati, which was only recently properly attributed to the artist, is one of the Met's best recent acquisitions; the Titian is the Met's only imposing portrait by that magnificent artist; the first Veronese is one of that artist's finest portraits. To use a baseball term, this is a veritable murderer's row.

Installation shot with wall of Northern paintings in Gallery #612, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Aligned against these Italian masters, one finds a row of relatively small Northern portraits on the wall adjacent to the doorways (on the right, there is a view to the room with landscapes). On the whole, these Northern paintings do not match the quality, scale, condition, or importance of the Italian paintings in the same room.

The two traditions have been brought together, but any dialog they have is going to be one-sided. "Conversations" between them need to be guided with more texts (or recordings) than the museum has provided. In general, if the Met truly wants to achieve the objectives stated at the beginning of this review, it needs to provide a more significant interpretive component. Italian

portraits from Florence, Rome, Venice, and Northern Italy are in a room with Northern portraits from several countries. Yet only a single wall text is deployed to introduce them and provide an overview of the gallery. It cannot really be done adequately. A solution would be to have longer texts on the individual pictures.

If we return to the photo at the top of this section, the freestanding painting in the center of the gallery is *Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh: An Allegory of the Dinteville Family* (1537). Executed in France by an unknown Netherlandish or French hand, this mysterious painting is influenced by Italian painting, and it bears an inscription apparently referencing Hans Holbein (a member of the Dinteville family is depicted in Holbein's famous *Ambassadors* of 1533). The allegory is situated in this room because five Dinteville brothers are depicted in it. They look exactly alike. Clearly, portraiture was not this artist's forté.

Installation shot with wall of Northern paintings in Gallery #612, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The above photograph shows the other side of gallery, with a spectacular anonymous German triptych (c. 1573–82, formerly attributed to Ludger tom Ring the Younger) in the center. Highly individualized, the portraits also exhibit pronounced Germanic ethnicity and consanguinity. Both it and the Dinteville painting are virtually unique, and it is unfortunate that, since they are back-to-back, one cannot glance from one religious allegory/multiple portrait painting to the other. These large paintings also block the sight lines in the gallery (which are important for the large Italian paintings).

The anonymous German painting would look better in the center of the wall with the Northern portraits (where only the biggest and strongest of them could hope to stand up to it). Its horizontal bulk would help to balance that wall against the walls with the Italian pictures. The Dinteville painting could go on the wall with the Anguissola, and be balanced by a selection of mostly Italian paintings. One intriguing possibility is *Portrait of a Woman* (currently not on view), which has been attributed to Jacopo Zucchi. Other possibilities include another Salviati (currently not on view) and a Campi *Portrait of a Woman* (currently not on view). These latter three paintings, which have not seen much daylight in recent years, would complement the Mannerist qualities of the Dinteville painting. Moving these two large paintings would make the gallery better in every way.

Installation shot with Titian, Veronese, and Vittoria statuette in Gallery #612, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

In the Veronese painting, Alessandro Vittoria is depicted with his plaster model for his life-size statue of Saint Sebastian (carved in 1561–62 for San Francesco della Vigna in Venice). On the right, the curators have displayed Vittoria's stupendous statuette of *Saint Sebastian* (1566), which derives from the San Francisco statue. It is a great juxtaposition.

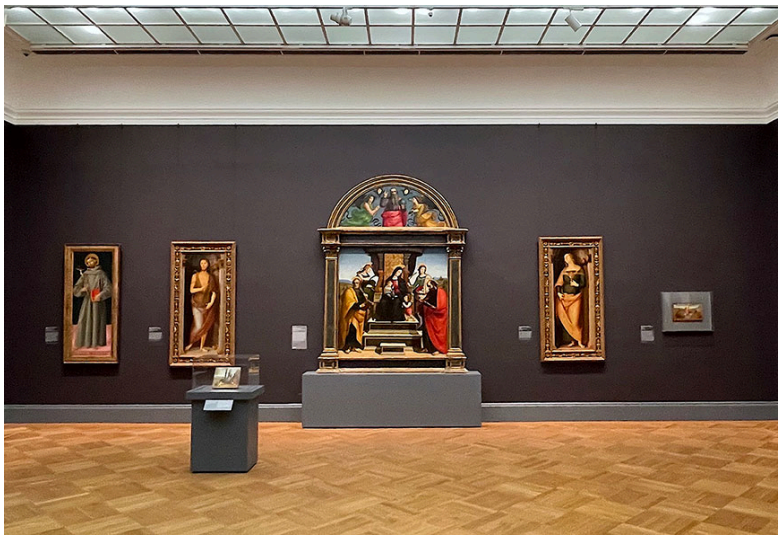
Installation shot with Lotto, Titian, Veronese, Titian, and bronze statuettes in Gallery #608, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Bronze statues proliferate – perhaps excessively – in Gallery #608, which is primarily devoted to Venetian mythological and religious scenes. I'm all for statuettes and other ancillary objects in these galleries, so long as they are of high quality and have a close and edifying connection to one or more paintings in the rooms they inhabit.

By combining the Northern Italian pictures now in Galleries #608 and #612, the Met could create a very impressive installation in Gallery #601. Some of the pictures could be double-hung, and a Tintoretto more than 13 feet long would make an excellent centerpiece (as it has in the past in that gallery).

While the curators of the new hang have relegated numerous small pictures to storage, they have also, paradoxically, failed to find a place for some of the department's largest paintings in the revamped galleries. Girolamo dai Libri's *Madonna and Child with Saints* is a 15-foot high altarpiece from c. 1520 that was lauded by Vasari. It is on loan to the Lehman Collection. So, too, is Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Saint Christopher and the Infant Christ*, a fresco over nine feet high. Francesco Botticini's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and Angels*, an altarpiece over nine feet high, is currently off view. For an Italian Renaissance collection that is heavy in small paintings and sadly lacking in large-scale pictures, their absence in the department's new galleries is folly. Moreover, the lack of variety in scale makes for monotonous galleries.

The Raphael Room



Installation shot of Gallery #609, with paintings by Antoniazzo Romano, Perugino, Raphael, Perugino, and Perugino, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Gallery #609 is called Sacred Images and the Viewer. Its theme is the gradual abandonment of the polyptych in favor of large, single panels, commencing around 1500. This is a very trivial focus for a gallery that covers periods generally referred to as the High Renaissance (c. 1500-1520s) and Mannerism (the immediately following period), and it constitutes a serious failure of interpretation.

The High Renaissance has long been a privileged period in art history, regarded as the one in which art – at least in Florence and Rome – was perfected and paintings were composed with peerless balance, harmony, and beauty, personified by the work of Raphael. During Roger Fry's time at the Met, artists before 1500 were known as "primitives" – i.e. before the perfection of art. (He bought artists from earlier periods than the Met had hitherto possessed, and he installed a gallery of "primitives" at the top of the stairs.) The High Renaissance was lauded as an incomparable but tragically short-lived era, brought to an end by the death of Raphael in 1520 and the Sack of Rome in 1528. The latter caused a genuine crisis of confidence. But artists also wanted to create something new, to find original, often deeply personal and expressive forms of beauty, even if they seemed artificial, bizarre, overly-complex,

emotionally ambivalent, or psychologically disturbed in comparison to their predecessors (which were sometimes their teachers). But even this simple explanation isn't really sound, since even Raphael and his contemporaries made paintings that display these characteristics, which are still called "mannerist" as a kind of placeholder term (from the Italian *maniera*, which means "style"). The problem for the Metropolitan is that it is very poor in both High Renaissance and Mannerist paintings, especially by their most famous practitioners. The former were always very hard to get (one of the greatest collector-cardinals of the Baroque had to steal his Raphael altarpiece from a church), and the museum didn't try hard enough to collect the latter when they were more readily available.

The gallery's centerpiece is the only Raphael altarpiece in the U.S. Painted for a Franciscan convent in Perugia, it is usually dated 1504–5. The main panel, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints,* is surmounted by a lunette of *God the Father with two Angels and two Seraphim*. One of the predella is visible on the left, in a case that, fortunately, is not excessively large. See the website for a complete reconstruction of the altarpiece.

Raphael, who became an independent master in 1500, fully absorbed the sweet style of his teacher Perugino, who habitually utilized mirroring figures. Here Raphael was additionally influenced by the monumentality of Fra Bartholomeo's paintings. Raphael had yet to deeply absorb the achievements of Leonardo, whose example enabled him to create works with considerably greater naturalism, complexity, and grace shortly thereafter. This is not a fully mature Raphael, but any museum would be happy to have it. J. P. Morgan paid a record price for it in 1901.

The Raphael is flanked by a pair of Peruginos, part of an ensemble of paintings for which he was contracted in 1505, following the death of Filippino Lippi in 1504, who held the original commission. All of Perugino's work on this commission was completed by 1507, so these two panels are fairly contemporary with the Raphael altarpiece (some even see Raphael's hand in one of the Perugino altarpieces from this project).

The Raphael and the flanking Peruginos have never looked better at the Met. The wall color sets them off perfectly. It is dark enough to bring out the bright colors, yet lighter than the backgrounds in the Peruginos and parts of the Raphael's frame, thus creating variety and maximum legibility. I am, however, perturbed by the placement of the tall Antoniazzo Romano (a single-panel, single figure altarpiece dating from c. 1480–81) on the left side of the wall and the small Perugino panel on the right. The latter fails to balance the former. If this gallery were a galley, it would immediately capsize.

This illustrates another problem endemic to thematic rooms (apart from the fact that the collection's paintings might not adequately illustrate the theme). This is a gallery of religious art. If secular portraits were exhibited in this room, any number of paintings (including some now in storage) could serve to better balance this wall.

Additionally, in a gallery of this size with so many relatively large paintings, small paintings would look better if they were double-hung. A balancing alternative would be to move the Antoniazzo Romano somewhere else and hang stacked pairs of small paintings in each corner of the wall with the Raphael.

Installation shot of wall in Gallery #609, opposite the Raphael. Paintings are by Perino del Vaga, Sarto, Santi di Tito, Bugiardini, Peter Candid, and Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Beginning on the left, *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1520), acquired in 2011, is an early and rare work by Perino del Vaga, who had trained with Raphael. Andrea del Sarto's *The Holy Family with the Young Saint John the Baptist* (1528) is one of the museum's most important paintings, and it deserves a place of greater prominence. The Sarto was often placed directly across from the Raphael, and I would return it to that position.

In the center, Giuliano Bugiardini's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist* (c. 1523) is a rather good painting by a fairly middling artist. Luckily, it retains its original frame.

Peter Candid's (a.k.a. Pieter de Witte, Pietro Candido) *Annunciation* (c. 1585) is an important addition to the collection's meager representation of the *bella maniera*. Candid worked with Vasari in Florence, and this painting dates from the last years of his Florentine period. The painting is remarkable for its fantastic colors as well as its monumentality. Astonishingly, it was purchased for a mere $80,000 by a dealer at auction in 2011, which shows that important paintings can sometimes sell at very reasonable prices, though it required a complex and lengthy restoration. See Alan M. Miller's 2016 blog on the museum's website.

The wall illustrated above is a textbook example of how not to hang a gallery. The two paintings on the left do not balance the Candid. Due to the energy of the angel and the fantastic cloud emanating from God the Father, the Candid would look good on the left side of the wall (where the Sarto is now), on a base similar to that of the Bugiardini. The Sarto would hold down the center brilliantly, and the Bugiardini would take the place presently occupied by the Candid. The Santo di Tito would take the place of the little Ghirlandaio on the right, which, because it is so small, should be double-hung with another small painting elsewhere in the gallery. This long wall (and the two wall segments

on either side of it) would then have excellent balance and equilibrium. Additionally, with two large altarpieces on painted bases, it would complement the wall with the Raphael in an interesting and pleasing manner through contrast rather than similarity.

These thematic galleries highlight collection weaknesses. Portraits are separated from altarpieces, and paintings that fit neither category are excluded altogether (though some of the paintings in this gallery were never parts of altarpieces). In its previous incarnation, what I will call the Renaissance/Mannerism Gallery had many works now in Gallery #609, as well as the Sarto portrait and the great Bronzino seen in Gallery #612. The museum now has three Salviati portraits (one of which is in storage). Were this not an altarpiece gallery, we could add an excellent little *Head of Christ* by Fernando Yáñez from c. 1506 (he had worked with Leonardo), and a small Girolamo da Carpi *Adoration of the Shepherds* from c. 1535-40 (which gives a taste of late Raphael/Giulio Romano, inflected with Ferrarese eccentricity). Several neither-fish-nor-fowl (neither portraits nor altarpieces) paintings of the *maniera* are now in storage, including: *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche,* originally a ceiling painting, by Schiavone (who had studied with Parmigianino); Bachiacca's *Eve with Cain and Abel*; Jacopino del Conte's *Holy Family* (the latter is virtually always in storage), and a splendid sketch for an altarpiece that was bought as a Parmigianino and is now given to his cousin Girolamo Mazzola Bedoli. It is presumably ranked downward on that basis and not because of its quality. The Met still doesn't have a painting by Parmigianino, or even one by Vasari or Giulio Romano.

Consequently, the Bedoli should always be on view, because it is a paradigmatic example of an important facet of Mannerism. This is a particularly dark annunciation scene, with an unusually unclothed angel, a bizarrely posed Virgin Mary, three putti above her head (two of them very difficult to make out). Strangest of all is the winged cherub or putto directly in front of the Virgin, which reads like a mysterious figure, but must be part of a lectern holding the book she is reading. It is relevant to my discussions below of the El Greco and Italian Baroque galleries, because this is the kind of painting the Catholic church did not want after the Council of Trent.

In his foreword to the *Summary Catalogue of European Paintings* published in 1995, then director Philippe de Montebello lamented the lack of a "signal High Renaissance or Mannerist altarpiece," as well as a painting by Pontormo. Why, with all the paintings that have passed through New York City, is the museum's collection so weak in certain areas? The Met started later than many great European museums, it did not have an outstanding founding collection, or a longstanding collector of genius on staff that was empowered to consistently buy the best works when great paintings were plentiful. Additionally, the Met collects in numerous areas, not just Old Master paintings, so its budget has always been split many different ways.

Finally, the art market, particularly for Italian paintings, was dominated by Samual H. Kress, his brothers, and his foundation for a period of decades. Kress began buying in the 1920s and continued into the 1950s, amassing over 3,000

works, with 1,300 Italian bronzes and 1,200 Italian paintings (considerably more paintings than the Met displays in its European Paintings galleries). Kress's favorite dealer early on created a plan for him to acquire a painting by every prominent Italian artist with a goal of comprehensiveness. Most of the choice Kress works went to the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (See Edgar Peters Bowron, "Samuel H. Kress and His Collection of Italian Renaissance Paintings," in Inge Reist, ed., *A Market for Merchant Princes: Collecting Italian Renaissance Paintings in America*, New York and University Park: The Frick Collection and The Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 106-115, 126.)

Deep-pocketed collectors and institutions have habitually been able to outbid the Met. These include Andrew Mellon, the founder of the National Gallery of Art, who bought 21 paintings from the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg in 1930-31, paying a record $1,166,400 for Raphael's *Alba Madonna*. Other major players in the picture market have included Peter and Joseph Widener (whose collection also went to the National Gallery), Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, Norton Simon, the Kimbell Art Museum, the Getty Museum, and the National Gallery of Art. Additionally, the tightening of export restrictions in the UK has affected the best source of great paintings still in private hands. Moreover, the Met received almost none of J. P. Morgan's best paintings, and other donors to the Met sometimes sold some of their best Old Masters (a number of them ended up at the National Gallery).

At times the Met fumbled unique opportunities. In 1958, it had the chance to buy a truly great Mannerist altarpiece, *The Dead Christ with Angels* by Rosso Fiorentino (c. 1524–27). But the Met trustees, who evidently thought Christ was too naked, passed on the painting. It was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston for $85,000. The Met still does not have a painting by Rosso or Pontromo. A number of Pontormos have come onto the market, the greatest of which was his *Portrait of a Halberdier* (c. 1529-30). It sold to the Getty in 1989 for a record $35.2 million.

Imagine, if you will, a secular museum altarpiece composed of this "Mannerist holy trinity": Rosso's *Dead Christ* framed by Pontormo's *Halberdier* on one side and the Met's Bronzino on the other. One could say a lot about the maniera with these three paintings. It is not my wish, however, to dwell on the Met's lost opportunities, but rather to emphasize that it should do the best possible job of exhibiting and interpreting the collection it possesses.

Landscape Gallery

Installation shot of landscape paintings in Gallery #613, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The Met curators have created a small gallery of Renaissance-to-Baroque landscapes. Two paintings by the always-charming Piero di Cosimo from around 1500 take center stage. This pair of hunting scenes, influenced by Lucretius, has been part of the collection since 1875. On its left, the Boschian *Christ's Descent into Hell* was purchased as a genuine Bosch in 1926. On the right, a bright landscape by Keuninck provides a day-to-night contrast with the hellish painting.

Two of the museum's most important paintings face one another: Bruegel's great *Harvesters* from 1565 is on the right wall, and Patinir's beautiful *The Penitence of Saint Jerome* from 1515 is on the opposite wall.

The other wall features another great rarity, Rubens' only completed landscape in the U.S., a deer hunting scene that continues the theme of the di Cosimo. The gallery also has a landscape by Jan Brueghel the Elder and a Brueghel/Rubens collaboration.

This is largely a Flemish gallery with a pair of paintings by an Italian interloper. The di Cosimos are as much mythological paintings as they are landscapes, and two of the other paintings are explicitly religious paintings. This gallery is somewhat limited by the collection's lack of national diversity – a limitation Fry wanted to correct – but it could certainly field Italian and Dutch paintings, as well as rarities such as El Greco's *View of Toledo*.

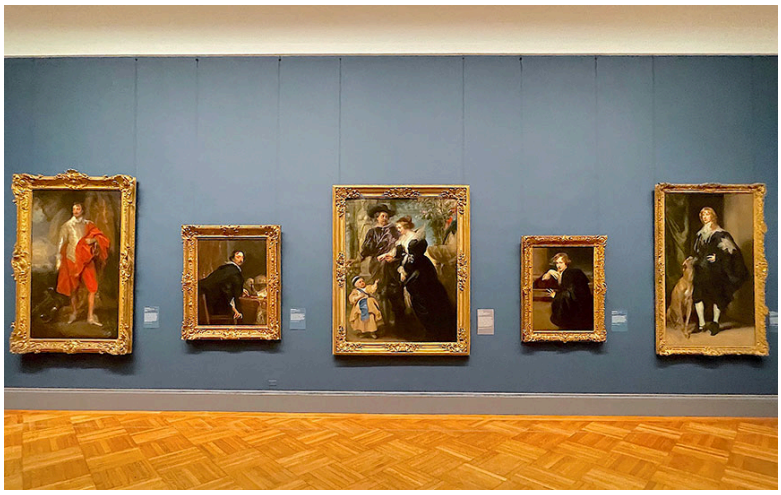
At the same time, the curators have virtually liquidated what had been a very large and impressive display of true landscape paintings by Dutch Baroque artists. About 47 landscape paintings (and a few other miscellaneous works) can be accessed with this link.

Many high quality Dutch landscape paintings (including works by Salomon and Jacob van Ruysdael, Philips Koninck, Jan van Goyen, Aelbert Cuyp, Aert van der Neer, and Meyndert Hobbema) are absent from the current hang. These works were formerly accorded a large gallery of their own (where Venetian religious and mythological paintings are now, if memory serves me correctly). This gallery served as a particularly peaceful and revivifying oasis within the museum.

Some notable Dutch landscapes are currently on view in Gallery #615, which is called The Patriotic Landscape. These include Frans Post's *Brazilian Landscape* (1650), a van der Neer, a Cuyp, and a Hobbema. When the Post was acquired in 1981, curator Walter A. Liedtke noted the appropriateness, when rounding out the museum's "outstanding" Dutch landscape collection, of acquiring a work by "the first landscapist of the New World" ("Frans Post," *Notable Acquisitions, 1981-1982*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 41).

The Robber Barons of yore loved to stare at their bucolic painted pastures, even as their industries devastated and polluted the actual landscape. Today's wealthy cognoscenti would rather just go to the Hamptons or Tuscany. Apparently, the majority of Dutch landscape paintings, like many early Italian paintings, are not regarded as sufficiently fashionable or interesting to be worthy of exhibition in the new hang, so they have been put to pasture. Vermeer, on the other hand, is currently very popular. I could not imagine the curators putting three or four out of five of his paintings in storage.

A Great Mixed-Up Baroque Gallery



Installation shot of Gallery #618, with a Rubens in between four van Dyck paintings, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

My favorite mixed-up gallery is #618, which is called Putting on a Show. I appreciate that Rubens' great family portrait of c. 1635 has been inserted amidst four stellar van Dycks, providing the older master with the opportunity to school his sometime pupil one more time. As fabulous as the van Dyck paintings are, he is, in comparison to Rubens, a great painter of surfaces and a supreme flatterer, but not his equal as a renderer of varied textures, psychology, or spatial depth. This I already knew, but it's always enjoyable to see these differences laid out in explicitly comparative fashion. Until Christiansen's last hang in 2020, the Rubens had always been surrounded by other paintings by his hand.

Peter Paul Rubens, "Rubens, Helena Fourment, and Their Son Frans" (detail), c. 1635, oil on wood, 80 ¼ x 62 ¼ inches, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, in honor of Sir John Pope-Hennessy, 1981, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Rubens-sandwiched between the van Dycks, as it is here, one is impressed by the psychological interplay between the three figures, the dramatic plasticity of the child's garments (and even of Rubens' own sash), and the overall sense of incipient movement. Helena Fourment, Rubens' young wife, has a very pronounced forward lean. She wears an enormous dress, which nevertheless binds her breasts tightly (her stressed cleavage evidently prevented the Frick from buying this panel), contrasting with the bare-breasted statue behind the artist's head, which perhaps serves as a three-dimensional thought bubble.

Charles Le Brun, "Everhard Jabach and His Family," c. 1660, oil on canvas, 110 ¼ x 129 ⅛ inches, Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, 2014; Françoise Girardon, "Louis of France, the Grand Dauphin," late 17th c., bronze, Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of George Blumenthal, 1941. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

I love the placement of the Le Brun across from the Rubens and the van Dycks. It looks much better than it did in its original location in a French gallery across from the Met's very solid collection of Poussin. The deliberately casual organization of the figures and objects in the big Le Brun (as a virtual painted snapshot) suffered in comparison to Poussin's compositional rigor, which extends even to his clouds. Rubens, in his family group, shares Le Brun's

naturalistic conceit, though his apparent naturalism was likely constructed more painstakingly than van Dyck's compositions. The latter specialized in aristocratic hauteur and preciously elongated fingers. Additionally, Le Brun is at his best as a still life painter in this group portrait: the floor, rug, and the objects on or near the floor are better painted than the figures. This surface facility relates well to the van Dycks.

Best of all is the manner in which a single sculpture – the Girardon – manages to balance the big painting (instead of a sculpture on each side of the big picture). Somehow, the Girardon makes a perfect circuit with the gilded Minerva in the Le Brun painting.

Installation shot of Gallery #618, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

In the above photograph, the far wall, with the Andrea Sacchi painting in the center, is unbalanced. To the left of the Sacchi, Giuliano Finelli's bust of Cardinal Scipione Borghese (in conjunction with its base) overpowers the Salvatore Rosa self-portrait on the right of the Sacchi. This lack of balance destabilizes the short wall.

Finelli, as a technically accomplished assistant in Gianlorenzo Bernini's shop, carved some of the most astonishing details of *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-25), a founding monument of Baroque sculpture and the star attraction of the Borghese Gallery in Rome. (Access my *Glasstire* article on this sculpture here.)

Previously attributed to Alessandro Algardi, recognition of Finelli's authorship of this bust, the significance of certain documents, and the work's originality are recent developments. Until I consulted the Met's online catalog for this sculpture, I had assumed it derived from two busts by Bernini from c. 1632, which were famous for capturing a "speaking likeness." There is good reason (based on payments) to think that Finelli's portrait was completed before Bernini commenced his portrait busts. Therefore, Finelli could well have influenced Bernini, rather than vice-versa. This would be a good point to make more emphatically on the object label.

Vermeer and Dutch Baroque

Installation shot of Gallery #614, with paintings by Vermeer and other Dutch genre paintings, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Only in recent years have all five of the museum's Vermeers hung in the same gallery, and only very recently have they hung on the same wall, as in the above photograph. This is something I had hoped would happen for decades. (Click here for the Vermeers.) I'm always happy to see all the Vermeers in the same room, whether on one wall or two.

Early in Pope-Hennessy's tenure, he noted the importance of honoring donor agreements. In retrospect, I realize that he must have been negotiating the Linsky gift, which was announced in 1982. The Benjamin Altman pictures (including his early Vermeer) and sculptures were exhibited in largely segregated, donor-specific galleries (with his Chinese porcelains nearby on the balcony surrounding the great staircase). These galleries were sometimes fudged (as donor-specific galleries had been since Fry's day) by placing Altman's pictures on one wall, and those from other collections on the opposite wall.

Altman gave several stellar Rembrandts to the museum, including a late *Self-Portrait*, *Man with a Magnifying Glass*, and *Lady with a Pink*. Among his other "Rembrandts" was a painting known as *The Auctioneer* that, in the current hang, is opposite *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* in Gallery #616, which is called Painters, Critics, and Rivals in the Age of Rembrandt. Oddly, the wall text emphasizes the conflict between Rembrandt and the painter/critic Gerard de Lairesse, then it refers the viewer to the Lehman wing to see Rembrandt's portrait of Lairesse. Why wasn't it in Gallery #616? Did the Lehman Collection decline to lend it to the department of European Paintings? Or did the latter not want to ask too much of the Lehman? The Lehman and Linsky collections have their own curators and trustees, and a high degree of independence from the Met's other departments.

Details of "The Auctioneer" (currently dated c.1658-62 by the museum), by a follower of Rembrandt; "Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer" (c. 1653), by Rembrandt, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: details combined from Metropolitan Museum of Art website

The two paintings illustrated above were the source of my first Old Master epiphany at the Met. Though they were both called Rembrandts on their respective labels at that time, I couldn't believe that the same artist could be responsible for both paintings, particularly because of the appallingly bad handling of the statue's head (behind the book) in the so-called *Auctioneer*. I thought such an inept cartoonish image could have been rendered by a child. (The entire background bothered me – I could not make heads or tails of it.) In the genuine Rembrandt, on the other hand, the head of Homer is nothing short of amazing. I marveled at it for hours.

The "auctioneer's" hand also troubled me (I was familiar with major collections of Rembrandt in Europe before I got to know the Met's collection). The hand was far too detailed, graceful, and thinly painted for late Rembrandt, who worked roughly and quickly, in broad strokes, never wasting time on hands. Hands, in fact, were a useful key for sorting the genuine Rembrandts from the pretenders in the Met's galleries at that time. The more I looked at the painting, the more it fell apart. The sickly color of the young man's skin disturbed me. It made me revere Rembrandt's internal, coloristic glow even more. Finally, the garments were not adequately described, impasto was lacking throughout, etc. Nonetheless, this ersatz Rembrandt enabled me to truly see what makes late Rembrandt great. Seeing these two paintings again brought back a rush of memories.

I'm surprised that the *Auctioneer*'s current label says "In the absence of documentation or conclusive evidence from technical analysis, the debate [on the picture's authorship] goes on." I consulted the Met's 1995 exhibition catalog *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt in The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Aspects of Connoisseurship* (which can be accessed here). Incidentally, it features details of *Aristotle* and the *Auctioneer* on the cover. I would hope that the photos, evidence, and arguments in that catalog are enough to convince any reader that the painter of the *Auctioneer* is not Rembrandt (see: Walter Liedtke, vol. 2, pp. 32, 115–17 and Hubert von Sonnenburg, vol. 1, pp. 6, 31, 49–50, 118, 130). Liedtke, the former curator of Dutch art, and von Sonnenburg, a former restorer at the Met, are both deceased. There appears to be little institutional memory at the museum. I doubt the authors of *Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt* would have agreed that a meaningful debate on the *Auctioneer*'s authorship is ongoing.

The museum also owns a fine little portrait of Lieven Willemsz van Coppenol that, though recognized as a Rembrandt, is almost never exhibited. I'd love to see it again!

Installation shot of Gallery #637, with paintings by Judith Leyster, Jan Steen, and Frans Hals, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The eleven paintings by Hals makes the Met's collection the biggest outside of the Netherlands. Less than the normal number were on view in the new hang, due to loans made to the traveling Hals retrospective in Europe. Two oils by Hals are visible on the right in the above photograph, along with a Steen and a borrowed Leyster.

The marvelous gilt leather wall hangings (previously used as a backdrop for decorative arts) make everything look better. On the other side of the gallery, which is called The Art of Everyday Life and is rife with sexual innuendo, Joachim Beuckelaer's *Fish Market* (an important, fairly recent acquisition) and Peter Wtewael's (Joachim's son) *Kitchen Scene* are on or near the other gilt leather piece. It's an inspired pairing, and I am delighted to see the Wtewael out of storage.

El Greco & Picasso

Pairing of two paintings in Gallery #619, with El Greco's "Christ Carrying the Cross" (detail), c. 1577–87 on the left, and Picasso's "Blind Man's Meal," 1903, on the right, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova; Metropolitan Museum of Art

Gallery #619 is dedicated almost exclusively to El Greco and early Picasso, who, under the spell of El Greco, created elongated figures in the early 1900s, most notably in his Blue Period. The wall text notes El Greco's initial training "in the production of tradition-bound Byzantine icons" prior to his move to Italy, where he "integrated into his work the contorted, elongated human bodies of Mannerist painting and the chalky, high-key palette and dynamic compositions of Venetian artists like Titian and Paolo Veronese." Tintoretto,

given his nervous, jagged contours, and his extreme elongations and bizarre foreshortenings, is even more relevant as a source for El Greco's late style. (Which is why El Grecos have often been mistaken for Tintorettos.)

The term Mannerist did not appear in the text panels devoted to Italian art, so it's good to have some definition of it here. When El Greco first went to Spain, he tried to win the patronage of King Philip II. But the painting he made to curry favor, the *Adoration of the Name of Jesus* (1578-79) did not meet with success. It was too Mannerist, in the sense that it was too complex, and its subject was insufficiently clear. After the Council of Trent, especially its final session in 1563, art was put in the service of the church. Painting was meant to be unambiguously clear, to evoke emotion, and to accord perfectly with scripture. Luckily for him, El Greco found other patronage in the city of Toledo.

The wall text cites a famous Roger Fry quip, his 1920 affirmation of El Greco as a stylistic prophet: "Here is an Old Master who is not merely modern, but actually appears a good many steps ahead of us, turning back to show us the way." All ten of the museum's El Grecos make a rare appearance in these galleries, interspersed with some of the Met's Picassos. (The ten El Grecos can be accessed here.) In comparison to El Greco, the exhibited Picassos appear conservative, sometimes dispirited and enervated as well. They were made before Picasso received a decisive emotive spark from African sculptures.

The El Greco/Picasso comparisons constitute a remarkable contrast in how the two artists treated the phenomenon of sight, exemplified by the pairing illustrated above. As Christ embraces his cross, he gazes heavenward with rapt attention, outfitted with large examples of El Greco's signature teary eyes. Picasso's humble subject – no literal son of God is he – is, on the other hand, completely sightless and earthbound. His blackened, sunken orbs are useless. Instead, his head tilts downward, for he must depend upon his sense of touch even to partake of his daily sustenance. He's forced into seeing with his hands rather than with his eyes. El Greco gives us sacred, ecstatic visions that are directed skyward, while Picasso's subjects are downcast, concerned with the terrestrial, and sometimes sight-impaired.

El Greco's *Christ Healing the Blind* (c. 1570) literally takes as its subject the miraculous restoration of sight. Cardinal Fernando Niño de Guevara was the Inquisitor General of the Spanish Inquisition when Greco did his portrait (c. 1600). Charged with rooting out heresy, and endowed with the power over life and death, it is little wonder that many have perceived qualities of zeal and menace in his bespectacled eyes. If anything, the figure in *Saint Jerome as Scholar* (c. 1610) has a substantially more intense, perhaps even ferocious gaze than the inquisitor. Jerome was famous for self-chastisement as a desert hermit (hence the long beard and the ascetically sunken cheeks). He was also designated a father of the church, which is why he wears a cardinal's robe. Sight was crucial for his greatest accomplishment, his translation of the bible from Greek to Latin, symbolized by the large book. His fervent look is presumably a product of his zealous and emotional faith.

In *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (c. 1605–10), the earliest of two versions of that subject at the Met, the shepherds are jubilant. In ecstasy at the sight of the messiah, the shepherd on the left is literally transported above the others, while, on the far right, a distant man raises his arms in wonder at the star that marks the savior's birth and location. In the later version (c. 1612-14), which features more dramatic chiaroscuro, even the ox raises its weary head from the stable floor in order to catch a glimpse of the Christ child. (Humorously, Rudolf Wittkower, unable to reconcile El Greco's originality with his repetitiousness, dubbed him "the Henry Ford of Toledo" in a 1957 article.)

Finally, in *The Vision of Saint John* (1608-14) several figures are on their knees as they await their heavenly garments that rain down from the sky. Unfinished at the artist's death in 1614 and later cut down, it illustrates the Book of Revelation (6:9–11) with its author, Saint John the Evangelist, on the left. He is presumably witnessing the breaking of the Fifth Seal (which would have been depicted in the upper section, now lost). This painting is not merely about sight, but about foresight, since it is a divination, a miraculous revelation of what takes place at the end of earthly time.

One short wall pairs *El Greco's Portrait of an Old Man* (c. 1595–1600) with Picasso's *Self Portrait* of 1906. The latter has a completely blackened left eye. Greco's old man, on the other hand, stares out directly at the spectator, which is why it was often identified as a self-portrait. Blackened or occluded eyes were common motifs while Picasso prepared for and worked on the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; note the blackened left eye of the Demoiselle in the upper right corner). Picasso continued this practice for several years thereafter (at the Met, see the drawing *Head of a Man*, the painting *Bust of a Man*, both 1908, and *Woman in an Armchair*, 1909-10). Even when Picasso's subjects were not blinded or otherwise vision impaired, they are often looking down, as in two other paintings in this gallery: *Harlequin* (1901) and *The Actor* (1904-5).

El Greco influenced Picasso in many ways, and future iterations of this gallery could address more complex, multicultural forms of influence. Picasso often synthesized diverse sources in subsequent works. I argue that his painting *Nude Woman with Raised Arms* (Goulandris collection, Athens, 1907), for instance, synthesizes aspects of El Greco's figure of Saint John the Evangelist with Kota reliquary figures. For that argument, see my *Glasstire* review "Beauty, Ugliness, and Power in African Art at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth."

Finally, the curators paired El Greco's *View of Toledo* (1599-1600) with Cézanne's *Rocks at Fontainebleau* (1890s). Both paintings possess thick contours surrounded by dark areas that Kurt Badt called "shadow paths" (*The Art of Cézanne*, trans. Sheila Ann Ogilvie. London: Faber & Faber, 1965). Had Cézanne been able to see this astonishing landscape, I'm certain he would have felt a deep kinship with it. As noted above, *View of Toledo* would be a very interesting visitor to the Met's landscape gallery.

Italian Baroque

Installation shot of Gallery #620, with Italian Baroque paintings by Caravaggio, Saraceni, and Guercino, among others, Metropolitan Museum of Art. The first photo in this review illustrates other paintings in this gallery. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Gallery #620's title, Italian Baroque: "To Destroy Painting," is inspired by a phrase the French Baroque painter Poussin utilized to criticize Caravaggio. The Baroque, according to the wall text, can be seen as "Bucking the staid stability of Renaissance compositions," and as "Emerging out of the expressive figure style of Mannerist painting." Consequently, it would have been a good idea to explain Renaissance stability and expressive Mannerist figures in Gallery #609 (the room with the Raphael) wall text, where the focus was the transition from polyptych to single panel altarpieces. More importantly, the Italian Baroque gallery wall text should explain *why* Baroque figures differed from Mannerist figures. It was less an evolution from Mannerism than a repudiation of it. The Italian Baroque style became dominant because it served the needs of the militant church during the Counter-Reformation. It received official sanction from the highest civil and religious authorities in the Catholic world because artworks made in this style served as useful tools to inform, excite, and inspire its audience. Most Mannerist paintings, by contrast, were ill-equipped to perform these functions.

The department's greatest collecting triumph of the last half-century is in the field of Italian Baroque painting. As Christiansen noted in the issue of the Met's *Bulletin* titled *Going for Baroque: Bringing 17th-Century Masters to the Met* (2005, vol. 62, no. 3, pp. 9, 13), three-quarters of the paintings then hanging in the seventeenth-century Italian galleries had been brought into the collection since 1970. That proportion is no doubt higher today, reflecting a serious attempt to collect in this field, the general availability of pictures, and the interests of donor-collectors.

Red is the perfect color on which to display these dark, dramatic paintings. The large Saraceni looks great in the center of the wall in the above photo (it had previously been hung in a too-small gallery). Important acquisitions in the last half-century include a good group of pictures by the Carracci brothers, and one of Caravaggio's last paintings. The museum has possessed an early Caravaggio since 1952 (visible in the first photograph in this review), and one wishes it had not passed up opportunities to buy other works by this most influential of masters. I also appreciate the big Caravaggesque Guercino (1619), as well as

the big classicizing Guercino (1650). It is unfortunate that the latter is not on view, since these two paintings demonstrate that art is not unidirectional.

Eleven Italian Baroque paintings came to the department through the Bequest of Errol M. Rudman in 2020. Ten of them are currently on view (the department prioritizes recent acquisitions), some in the Italian Baroque gallery, some in the Still Life gallery (#617), some in the Supports gallery (#640), and one in Musical Instruments. I'll discuss the still life paintings in Rudman's gift, one of which, Bartolomeo Cavarozzi's excellent *Basket of Fruit* (c. 1620), which hangs in the Italian Baroque gallery, is directly inspired by Caravaggio (see Christiansen's excellent discussion in the online catalog entry for this painting).

Still Life, Gallery #619

Historically, the Met has had an unimpressive representation of this genre, in large part because Theodore Rousseau, a paintings curator from 1946-1973, did not regard still life as art. (For some of Rousseau's other foibles, see my article "Deaccessioning at the Met.") Three paintings from Rudman's gift are on view in the Still Life gallery. Two are by Orsola Maddalena Caccia (both date from the 1630s), a little-known provincial nun who created strikingly original paintings with a slightly naive quality. The third, *Still Life of Grapes and Peaches,* by Panfilo Nuvolone (c. 1617), is an outstanding example of his work. It even includes a tiny self-portrait reflected in the base of the dish that holds the fruit.

The Met still retains ten or so still life paintings (depending on how you define still life) from its 1871 purchase. The finest of these is Margareta Haverman's *A Vase of Flowers* (1716), one of only two known paintings by the artist. It certainly holds its own with the other paintings in the gallery.

In 2020, the Met made perhaps its most significant purchases in the field of still life, *A Bouquet of Flowers* (c. 1616) by Clara Peeters. I have to admit that the textures of the objects in her painting are not as compelling as I hoped they would be.

The gallery's wall text is rather succinct. It could say more about the limited opportunities afforded to women in academies. Objects that are utilized in still life paintings are exhibited in this room, and I'd be happy to see even more of them.

Spanish Religious Art

Installation shot of Gallery #624, with Spanish Baroque works by Velázquez, Montañes, and two by Ribera, Metropolitan Museum of Art. The second photo in this review illustrates other paintings in this gallery. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

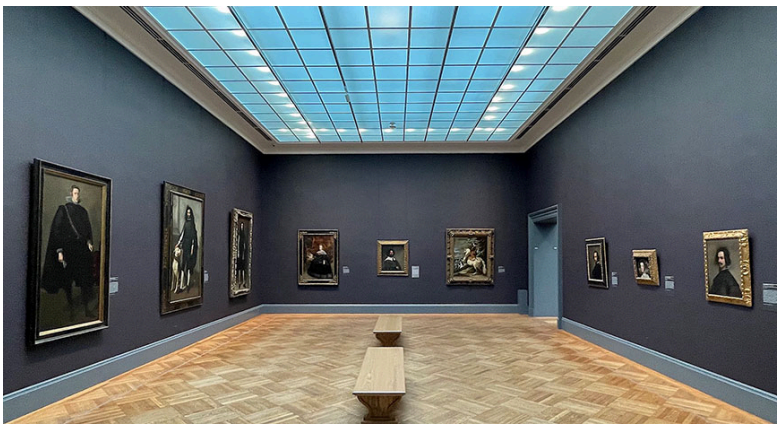
The Spanish religious art in Gallery #624 is often sober in comparison to Italian art from the same period, even in Velázquez's *The Supper at Emmaus* (1622-23), which is a response to Caravaggio's dramatic version now in London. All of the works in the above photograph share an interest in gesture.

In 1963, Juan Martínez Montañés' *Saint John the Baptist* came to the Met the easy way. This rare statue by the greatest Spanish Baroque sculptor was driven to the museum in a station wagon by a Florida couple. Having picked it up for a pittance in Ohio, they sold it to the Met for a song.

Jusepe de Ribera's *The Holy Family with Saints Anne and Catherine of Alexandria* (1648), a fine example of the artist's work, treats an unusually high range of skin textures and colors. Note how the holy figures appear much whiter than the background figures. An earlier Ribera, *The Tears of Saint Peter* (c. 1612-13), was purchased in 2012. The closer it is hung to the other Ribera, the worse it looks. I've tried hard to appreciate the latter painting, without any success whatsoever.

I took the above picture at an angle, because a large case with lusterware dishes blocked my sightline. I don't think they are particularly relevant to a gallery dedicated to religious art, and I'd rather see them in a nice cupboard in a decorative arts section of the museum.

Portraits and Power in Spain



Installation shot of Gallery #625, with paintings by Velázquez, Murillo, Murillo, Mazo, Velázquez, Murillo, and a wall with three by Velázquez. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

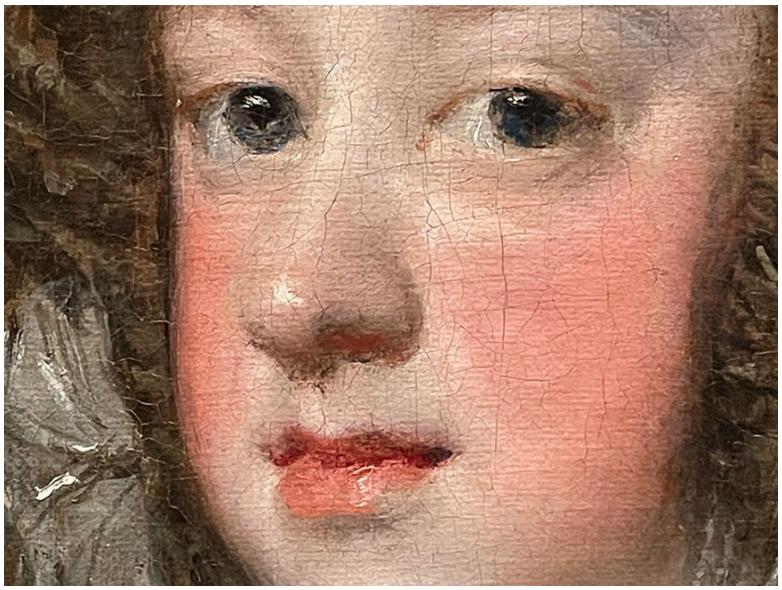
Gallery #625 surprised me with its stunning beauty and austerity, typified by sober dress (particularly for the men) and sober poses. The sparseness of the hang reminded me of those by Pope-Hennessey.

I had expected a more global perspective, rather than a very limited one. Mazo was Velázquez's assistant, and Murillo was also influenced by Velázquez. At the very least, I was certain I would see the Flemish artist Gaspar de Crayer's portrait of *Philip IV in Parade Armor*, but it was doing guard duty in the Arms and Armor department.

Installation shot in Arms and Armor gallery, with Gaspar de Crayer's "Philip IV in Parade Armor," 1628, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Velázquez's portrait of *Juan de Pareja* (in the center of the distant wall) has always been renowned for its naturalism, ever since it was shown in Italy in 1650 to great acclaim. One of the most important paintings in the U.S., it is a rare example of an artwork the Met purchased at the top of the market. The museum paid $5,544,000 at auction in London in 1970.

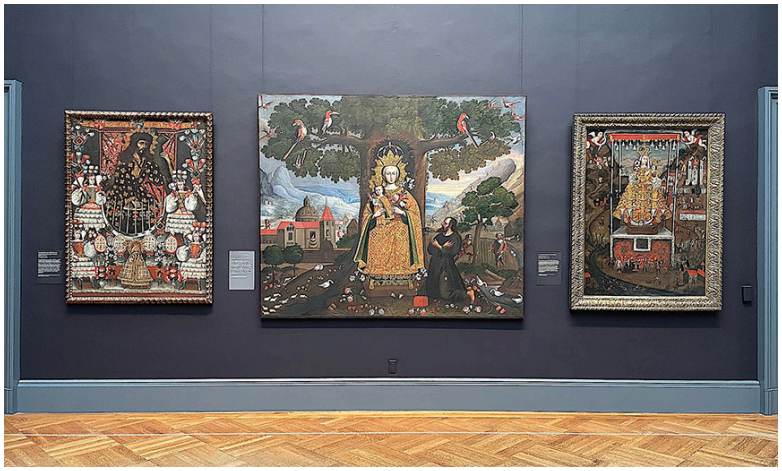
Pareja was Velázquez's enslaved assistant when he painted this portrait. After he was liberated, Pareja became a painter, and he was the subject of an exhibition at the Met in 2023.



Diego Velázquez, "María Teresa, Infanta of Spain" (detail), c. 1651-54, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Since the Juan de Pareja is so well-known, I have illustrated his slightly later portrait of the Infanta María Teresa, which is remarkable for its directness and spontaneity. It is no wonder that so many nineteenth-century artists who sought to escape from academic strictures revered Velázquez.

The Art of Spanish America, 1550–1820



Installation shot of Gallery #626, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Sometimes, merely announcing one's good intentions can pay off in a big way. In 2015, the Met announced its purchase of a signal, emerald-encrusted gold crown dubbed the "Crown of the Andes." It referred to this crown, fashioned in c. 1660 and c. 1770 to adorn a statue of the Virgin Mary in Popayán, Colombia, as "an anchor for the development of a new area of collection" (see *The Art Newspaper*).

In 2017, the São Paulo-based collector James Kung Wei Li learned of the museum's Latin American ambitions from his brother. He called the museum and offered to let it choose ten paintings from his collection, in gratitude for the educational opportunities he and his family had received from the U.S. Several of these paintings constitute highlights of the museum's fledgling

Latin American collection, including the three in the above photograph. (Click here for all ten gifted paintings on the museum website.)

In the center of the above photograph, *Our Lady of Valvanera*, by an unknown school of Cuzco painter c. 1770–80, depicts the miraculous discovery of a sacred Catholic sculpture that had been hidden since the Moorish conquest of Spain. It exemplifies how the Spanish imported their legends and iconographies, as well as their artistic techniques to the Americas. Conquests and colonialism are newly emergent topics in the museum's new hang.

Installation shot of Gallery #626, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

In the above picture, a woman is photographing the Crown of the Andes, while a man is exiting the gallery and entering the balcony of the American Wing. *A Monja Coronado* (Crowned Nun) portrait hangs behind the crown. It depicts a sixteen-year old woman when she entered the convent of Regina Coeli in Mexico City in 1797. Such portraits were commissioned to hang in the homes of the novitiates' parents, effectively taking their place in the household. In these portraits, the nuns wear painted badges over their hearts that depict the Virgin Mary and other holy figures.

Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez, c. 1710, "Nun's Badge with the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception," oil and gold on copper; tortoiseshell and silver frame. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

The above *Nun's Badge* is situated in front of the Monja portrait (the photographing woman's head obscures it in the installation shot I posted). These objects in the cases relate very directly to the paintings, serving as a constructive example of how to mix objects and paintings to edifying effect. Additionally, on the short, distant wall in my installation shot, five small paintings are grouped together, endowing them with the bulk that enables them to hold their own with the larger paintings in this gallery, and thus escaping the pitfall of dull rows of excessively small paintings (the postage stamp effect) that we have seen in galleries discussed above.

In the Met's video on the new galleries cited above, curator David Pullens segues from Velázquez's *Juan de Pareja* (1650) to Spanish colonial paintings "This is the first time that the museum is showing artworks from the viceroyalty of New Spain, New Granada and Peru together in one room [in the European paintings galleries], which really gives us the opportunity to have wider conversations about their relationship to European art, and their differences with these European canons. It also allows us to have a conversation of the development of the art of painting as a global phenomenon, rather than European one."

In early 2021 I wrote that I "couldn't imagine a major U.S. museum" doing a show like the 2013 exhibition *Mexique au Louvre*, which mixed Spanish colonial art with the Louvre's permanent collection of Spanish paintings ("Guillaume Kientz Leaves Fort Worth's Kimbell to Lead Rejuvenated Hispanic Society in New York," *Glasstire*, March 5, 2021). Such an installation is now a reality at the Met, and I could imagine something similar at any American museum. That's how much the cultural landscape has changed in such a short time.

Venetian Views

Installation shot of Gallery #644 with view paintings, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Ruben C. Cordova

Gallery #644, a relatively small room, is called Venetian Views. As the wall text notes, these painted souvenirs of Venice "functioned like luxurious snapshots that could transport their viewers and recall shared experiences on the grand tour." A fairly mediocre painting by Antonio Joli is on the left wall. The opposite wall has high quality works: seven Canalettos, a Francesco Guardi, and a Bernardo Bellotto, all acquired through the Wrightsmans (seven of which came in 2019). Two interior scenes by Guardi are on the right wall.

A trio of Guardi paintings called *Fantastic Landscapes* from the castle of Colloredo di Monte Albanone makes up one of my favorite ensembles at the Met. Unfortunately, this gallery is too small to show the three paintings all in a row, as they had been exhibited in the past. The two smallest ones face one another on the other side of the gallery. The longest of the three paintings (107 ½ inches vs. 74 ½ inches for the other two paintings), which is unfortunately in storage, can be seen here.

As the wall text notes, Guardi's "large decorative paintings take inspiration from the outskirts of Venice's marshy lagoon but include invented follies, or fanciful architecture. These additions suited a European fashion for asymmetry and ruins that became known as the 'picturesque.'" It's a pity that such an extraordinary example of the picturesque cannot be rendered whole in this small gallery.

This room was clearly designed to highlight the Wrightsman gifts (they were the most important donors to the department in the last half-century). Apart from the end walls, there is considerable wasted space in this gallery. Due to its function as a thematic gallery, other types of Venetian pictures are not placed in it, and space is wasted. This highlights the difficulty of shoe-horning large numbers of paintings into thematic galleries, which I alluded to in my introduction.

Reflections on Other Galleries

The wall text for Gallery #630, called Class Dynamics, notes changes in subject matter around 1650, "particularly in northern Europe, where Protestant

reforms encouraged artists to abandon religious art and its traditional patron, the church. Innovative contemporary scenes set in upscale townhouses and rural inns often focused on class divisions through the pointed representation of etiquette, social and family dynamics, clothing, and interior decoration." In this gallery, classes are segregated on individual walls.

Gallery #631, called Urban Luxuries, treats Rococo art as a response to changing lifestyles on the part of Parisian elites. The wall text notes: "Art patrons had left the court at Versailles for newly built urban townhouses where intimate rooms and informal entertainment reigned." An ensemble of paintings by Hubert Robert has been elevated from the limbo of period room corridors to the paradise of the permanent collection. Commissioned by the comte d'Artois, King Louis XVI's brother, they treat the theme of water, appropriate for their original location in a bathing room. It's good to see the Roberts in good light.

This is something I didn't expect, but the large Neoclassical paintings (especially the full-scale formal portraits) look cramped on the short walls several of them inhabit in Gallery #633, called Political Portraiture and Empire. Reacting against the preposterous and grandiloquent excesses found in paintings of the *ancien régime*, they are, by contrast, sober and restrained (relatively speaking, of course, since they are luxurious in their own, less ostentatious way). Nonetheless, they were created for grander spaces than these (even if these spaces were severe in their own way), and they definitely want more room to breathe and to "converse" with one another than they have here. These large Neoclassical portraits were much more advantageously installed in the larger Wrightsman Gallery, which was one of the best curated rooms in the old hang.

The final wall in the current hang, in Gallery #634, features Jacques Louis David's *Death of Socrates* (1787), which faces out to the second gallery (#601). (The David is visible through the doorway in my photograph of the second gallery.) It completes the chronological, roughly clockwise circuit through the galleries. Paintings by Ingres, David's student, are found in the nineteenth-century wing.

The grave moral lesson David seeks to impart in his *Death of Socrates* is undercut by the placement of two marble busts on either side of it. David evoked a classical frieze with antiquarian specificity. The figures themselves aspire to the state of statues. There is no painting in the museum that wants, needs, or abides framing by marble busts less than this one.

Conclusion

I have enjoyed the Met and the breadth of its collections for many years, during which time I have learned a great deal in its galleries, as have my students. Like many art lovers, I looked forward to the reopening of the European Paintings galleries with great anticipation (though I only recently had the chance to see them). The galleries and the lighting are wonderful. I sympathize with the museum's stated objectives that underlie this massive reorganization. However, there are many serious problems with the way in

which the individual galleries have been revamped. I critique them in a manner that is intended to be constructive and in sympathy with the museum's new goals.

The current hang represents the greatest rethinking of picture gallery organization in a long time. Unfortunately, the galleries that represent the greatest departures from prior practices have grievous deficiencies. These are the first two galleries, Beyond the Wall, and International Gothic. I hope they will be redone. The galleries that mix Northern and Southern portraits on separate walls don't really achieve much in the way of a dialogue between cultures. Nor do they look particularly good. These problems are compounded with vitrines that fail to perform their function in an efficient and non-intrusive manner, either by displaying paintings with glare, or by serving as eyesores by taking up unnecessary space.

The following galleries, European Painting: A Starting Point (the second gallery), International Gothic, and Sacred Images and the Viewer share a common defect, which I shall refer to as Renaissance-phobia. It is characterized by the curious avoidance of the word Renaissance and by the abject failure to analyze the most important developments in the relevant time frames covered by these galleries. These are periods of momentous significance, in art and in culture in general, and the museum, as an educational institution, owes it to its visitors to do a better job of interpretation.

A radical transformation of galleries on this order is an extremely rare thing, in and of itself. The unusualness – one might even say the uniqueness – of this transformation is compounded by the fact that it has been done by a relatively young and inexperienced curatorial team. Pope-Hennessy, for instance, was enormously credentialed, with a great amount of experience as both a curator and a scholar when he was hired. He had, for instance, been the only person to direct both the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Everett Fahy was likewise very experienced when he did his second stint as department chair (though he was inexperienced when he was first hired). Keith Christiansen worked in the department under Pope-Hennessy and Fahy for more than 30 years before he became its head. As CultureGrrl (Lee Rosenbaum) noted in her blog, she was surprised that she was not familiar with Stephan Wolohojian when he replaced Christiansen as the head of the department in 2021. She also noted his relative lack of experience. ("'Wolo' Who? Stephan Wolohojian Succeeds Keith Christiansen as Metropolitan Museum's Head of European Paintings," *ArtsJournal*, July 13, 2021). To his credit, Wolohojian was praised for his work at the Harvard Art Museums. He also won a prestigious prize in 2004 for his exhibition catalog, *A Private Passion: 19th-Century Paintings and Drawings from the Grenville L. Winthrop Collection, Harvard University.* See his interview (when he was still a curator at Harvard) with Kraig Binkowski in *Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* (2005, vol. 24, No. 1). Additionally, the recent Manet/Degas exhibition, which Wolohojian co-organized at the Metropolitan, met with universal acclaim. But any special exhibition pales in comparison to remaking 45

galleries with almost 800 objects from all over Europe (and beyond) in a time frame of 500 years.

In the interview linked above, Wolohojian identifies himself as a Renaissance specialist, which makes the pedagogical avoidance of the word “Renaissance” on wall texts stranger still. This reticence deprives several galleries of an adequate didactic component: visitors lack an adequate foundational narrative to understand these art works. Consequently, they also do not have a sufficient basis to proceed to subsequent historical periods. It won’t be simple, and it won’t be easy (due to current understanding of the inadequacies of earlier narratives) to provide this important information in a succinct, easily digestible format, but it needs to be done. Due to the failure to define them earlier, the terms Renaissance and Mannerism have to be explained in the El Greco and Italian Baroque wall texts, though this is done in minimal fashion.

In general, the non-Renaissance wall texts provide better information, though sometimes without grasping the big picture. The Italian Baroque gallery wall text, for instance, excessively focuses on Poussin’s criticism of Caravaggio. It loses sight of the role of art as a key component in the Counter-Reformation, which was ultimately far more important. Clarity, immediacy, emotion, and doctrinal accuracy were qualities that transmitted vital religio-political messages, which is why they were promoted by church and crown in Catholic regions.

Often, the best wall texts are those in galleries with a very limited number of artists, such as El Greco, Spanish portraiture, and Venetian view painting, since they provide context and also some discussion of individual artists. The wall text for the gallery called The Art of Spanish America, 1550–1820 covers an enormous amount of material in an exemplary manner.

In terms of representation of national schools, I’m dismayed that so many early Italian paintings have been left out of the current installation, as well as many significant Italian Renaissance paintings that were normally on view in the past. Dutch landscape painting has also taken a big hit. I trust many Italian Baroque paintings will resurface in rotations. There also appear to be fewer Italian Rococo paintings than in previous hangs, probably because there is a greater representation of artists from other countries.

It is not simply a matter of how to balance what had been exhibited in the past with new collecting priorities (art by women, art depicting women and people of color, still life paintings, nineteenth- and twentieth- and twenty-first-century paintings). After all, increasingly diverse holdings had been exhibited in prior hangs directed by Christiansen, and any new additions could easily have been inserted into the national school framework. The main problem is the excess of thematic galleries, many of which are not done well. Ultimately, I feel more has been lost than has been gained by the new conceptualization of the galleries.

One solution is greater efficiency, beginning with the first two galleries. I’ve suggested returning the Tiepolos to the first gallery, and packing large Venetian and Northern Italian paintings into the second one. Generally, I favor

a denser hang – especially with small paintings. Paintings could be hung a little closer together and still look good, and they can be double hung in a number of areas, as has been done beautifully and effectively in the big Italian Baroque gallery.

I don't see the point in exhibiting so many nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings in these galleries. This is especially problematic in the room devoted to the Artist in the Studio, where the vast majority of paintings and wall space are devoted to works that have their home in another wing at the museum. It is a very good exhibition of modern art and contemporary art. But it is also, in effect, sacrificing an important space that could be used to exhibit worthy paintings that the curators of the present hang have instead shunted into storage. New York is the modern art capital of the world. It abounds in modern museums and galleries. It doesn't need another modern art gallery in the midst of the Met's Old Master collection. Moreover, most Old Masters that are displaced by modern pictures will not have counterparts in New York museums, and likely few counterparts in the U.S.

Because El Greco was so important for modern art, he is an artist to which modern artists can be meaningfully juxtaposed in future rehangings of these galleries. Perhaps one of the focus galleries can be devoted to miscellanies, and used to examine special problems or issues, including pictures that have been little-exhibited in recent decades, due to changing taste, attribution, etc.

A few of the minor Italian Mannerist paintings have appeared but rarely and fleetingly over the decades, like dim and irregular comets. Spanish ground paintings have been even less in evidence. And there must be a way to show the biggest Italian paintings in the paintings galleries. Ultimately, an open storage area would be highly desirable.

The galleries themselves have never looked better. I look forward to future revisions of them with the hope that they will be significantly augmented with new works, and significantly improved on a conceptual level.

***

Credits: Stephan Wolohojian, chief curator of European paintings, oversaw the installation, with the assistance of Adam Eaker, David Pullins, Tiffany Racco, and Anna-Claire Stinebring. Staff from a number of other departments also made contributions, including: The American Wing, Arms and Armor, Asian Art, Drawings and Prints, Egyptian Art, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Greek and Roman Art, Medieval Art and The Cloisters, Modern and Contemporary Art, Musical Instruments, and Robert Lehman Collection.

***

Ruben C. Cordova is an art historian and curator. He has been a regular visitor to the Met for decades. Cordova has taught at five universities, including museum studies courses on the Met's history and collections.

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ROBERT GONZALEZ
November 19, 2024 - 19:23
REPLY

Wonderful article, amazing insights and just fun, Bravo!!!

RUBEN C. CORDOVA
November 20, 2024 - 01:51
REPLY

Thanks, Robert. I tried to give as much of a tour as possible, with enough pictures to give a sense of the galleries.

JOHANN SCAUFFEISSEN
November 20, 2024 - 09:03
REPLY

What an excellent walk-through this article is!
By a strange coincidence, the Met has a rare opportunity raising; As shown on Sothebys Old Masters exhibition last week, a Rosso Fiorentino is coming for sale now. Him being one of the drivers of Florentine Mannerism – it would be great to get this incorporated as this will lift that department of the Met.
https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2024/old-master-19th-century-paintings-evening-auction-l24036/the-virgin-and-child-with-the-infant-saint-john

RUBEN C. CORDOVA

REPLY

November 21, 2024 - 14:29

Thank you Johann. I had the very same thought, that the Rosso would be a superlative and badly-needed addition to the Met's collection. I really hope the museum will be able to acquire it. There is certain to be fierce competition from other museums and private collectors, so it will not be an easy task to bring it in.

JESSICA SCALE-THORNANDER

REPLY

November 21, 2024 - 23:21

What an amazing article! It is so learned, so well written – so very often witty and funny -, so intelligent! It is without doubt a piece at the level of the extraordinary reorganisation of this Met section.
I am not familiar with critical museography, and have rarely pondered on what museum curators achieve when I visit one. I barely note at my usual hangout, the Louvre, « Oh, they've changed this painting's place, okay. » Ruben Cordova, you have opened my mind to what a panoptical set of expertise this requires (and how some may fail sometimes). While acutely aware of the political choices (in Plato's meaning) in temporary exhibitions, I didn't apply it to museums. Yours is truly a life-changing article, I will never ever visit a museum without a thought for it.
Talking of the Louvre, its curators did a wonderful job drawing attention to the museographical choices and impacts on the collection for the recent Naples exhibition. What a treat it would be if I could read a more comprehensive and in-depth article by Ruben Cordova on, say, the Grande Galerie, or the Peintres du Nord section. Maybe one day?

RUBEN C. CORDOVA

REPLY

November 22, 2024 - 15:04

Thank you for your kind words, Jessica. My aim in this comprehensive review was to point out how every single curatorial choice has implications, for the individual gallery, and for the installation as a whole (this includes objects that are excluded, as well as those that are included). The current hang is, in some respects, a unique rethinking of European paintings galleries, and I wanted to place this analysis in the context of the national school curatorial model. I am grateful that the review has impacted how you will look at exhibits in the future, because that makes me feel that my efforts have been fruitful. I greatly enjoyed writing this review, and I hope to have the opportunity to write other ones in the future. In any case, I always reflect on these issues whenever I look at an exhibition or installation.

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