

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

OPINION | COMMENTARY | CULTURAL COMMENTARY

The Best Art of 2017: Mining the Beauty of the Past

From Michelangelo's sketches for the Sistine Ceiling to the competition and dialogue between Dutch Golden Age painters, the year's best exhibitions looked behind the curtain of art history.

By Karen Wilkin

Dec. 11, 2017 3:05 p.m. ET

2 COMMENTS

Most spectacular exhibition of 2017? “[Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer](#),” at the Met Fifth Avenue (through Feb. 12, 2018). Carmen C. Bambach, the Met’s drawings curator, has assembled an astonishing group of works—studies of limbs, agitated figures from a Resurrection, urgent drawings for the Sistine Chapel, an exquisite portrait of a beloved boy, and much more—that follows the Florentine master’s evolution from precociously talented student to mature virtuoso. A stunning selection, from searching, early drawings after Masaccio’s St. Peter in Santa Maria del Carmine to fiercely articulated, muscular nude studies for a late fresco in the Vatican, makes Michelangelo come vividly alive. It’s almost overwhelming.



Michelangelo's 'Archers Shooting at a Herm' (1530-33) PHOTO: ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST/HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II 2017

Equally exciting, albeit quieter, is “[Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry](#),” at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the first study of cross-fertilization among the leading painters of 17th-century Holland. The show’s 10 glorious Vermeer s are revealed in new ways through proximity to paintings with similar subjects and compositions by such contemporaries as De Hooch, Metsu, Steen, and Ter Borch (the most senior and, it turns out, most inventive of the group). Through Jan. 21, 2018, we can slowly discover evidence of fruitful exchanges and challenges, enriching and transforming our understanding of the Dutch Golden Age.



Johannes Vermeer's 'The Astronomer' (1668) PHOTO: MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS



Andrea della Robbia's 'Prudence' (c. 1475)
 PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF
 ART/JOSEPH PULITZER BEQUEST, 1921

“ Della Robbia: Sculpting With Color in Renaissance Florence ,” at the National Gallery earlier this year, combined charm and scholarship. The beautifully installed show examined the work of three generations of the Tuscan family who invented a new kind of glazed polychrome terra cotta in the 15th century and became international superstars. The gleaming white figures against rich blue backgrounds, amid colorful garlands of leaves and fruit, were irresistible, but these visual delights were also fascinating revelations of the range

and significance of the Della Robbias ’ works, contrasted with the competition’s efforts. We’ll never take those delectable reliefs for granted again.

“ Seurat’s Circus Sideshow, ” at the Met Fifth Avenue, showcased the artist’s eerie night scene, with its flaring gaslights and stylized performers, conjured up by drifts of dots beginning in 1887, four years before the artist’s death at age 31. The sharply focused show explored the painting’s origins through Seurat’s preparatory drawings and related works, contextualized by vernacular images that might have inspired him and circus paintings by his contemporaries, plus works by later artists, from Bonnard to Picasso. We began to see how “Circus Sideshow” evolved and how radical it must have seemed when first shown in 1888, a startling combination of timelessness, up-to-date subject matter, and unprecedented painting methods.



Georges Seurat's 'Circus Sideshow' (1887-88) PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



Medardo Rosso's 'Ecce puer (Behold the Child)' (1906) PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION/ROBERT PETTUS

At the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, “**Medardo Rosso:**

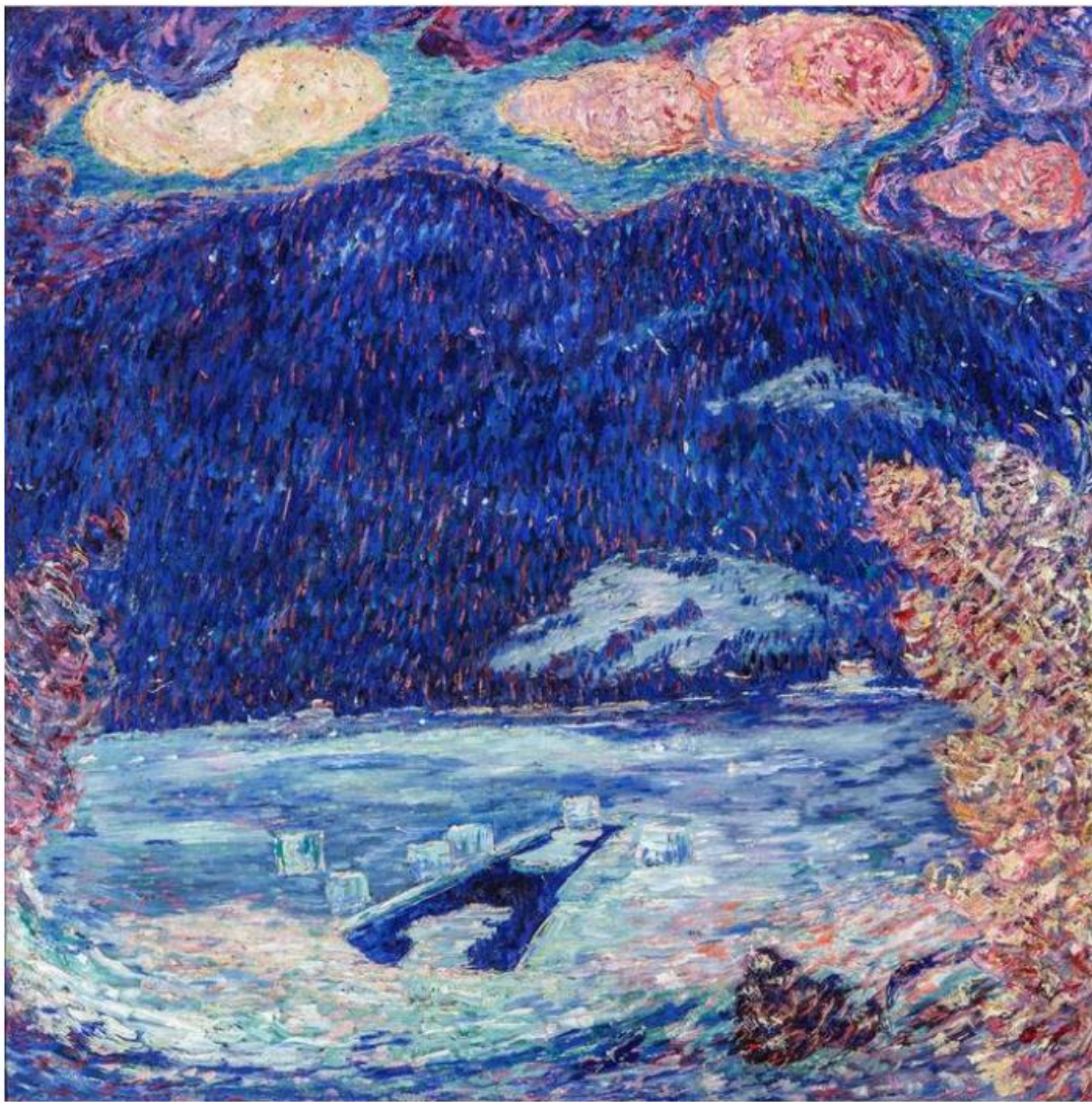
Experiments in Light and Form ”

surveyed the career of the maverick Italian sculptor (Seurat’s much-longer-lived contemporary), with an emphasis on his Paris years. A fine selection of Rosso’s mysterious, blurred heads and figures, along with drawings and photographs (like his friend and neighbor Degas, he was an early enthusiast of the new medium), presented the idiosyncratic modernist whole and underscored his lifelong experimentation with varied materials and techniques.

Overshadowed in his day by his admirer Rodin, Rosso is still little known. Let’s hope this fine

retrospective corrects that.

An American maverick was the subject of “[Marsden Hartley’s Maine](#),” at the Met Breuer, an inquiry into the resonance of the peripatetic artist’s native state, from youthful plein-air studies to later, deeply felt images of hunky male bathers and economical views of Mount Katahdin. Hartley’s admiration for Albert Pinkham Ryder and Winslow Homer was evident in his waves and woodpiles, but so was his habit of aggressively front-facing composition and taste for saturated color. It was impossible not to feel the absence of Hartley’s works made in Germany; Gloucester, Mass.; or Nova Scotia, Canada. But the thematically limited selection provided a welcome portrait of a great, underrated American original.



Marsden Hartley's 'The Ice Hole, Maine' (1908-09) PHOTO: NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART

The powerful effect of non-Western art on Pablo Picasso, after he visited the Ethnographic Museum of the Trocadéro, in Paris, in 1907, is a fundamental assumption of the history of modern art. At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo., through April 8, 2018, “ [Through the Eyes of Picasso](#) ” showcases some of the artifacts he encountered at the museum and in friends’ collections, and many of the more than 100 African, Oceanic and Meso-American works he collected and lived with, set among paintings, drawings and sculptures he made in response. The informative combination replaces speculation with hard evidence, clarifying our perceptions of Picasso’s innovations.



'Masque,' Otomi, Mexico, State of Hidalgo, San Bartolo Tutotepec, Piedra Ancha, 1900s, left. Picasso's 'Large Still Life on a Pedestal Table,' 1931, right PHOTO: MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY/JACQUES CHIRAC; MUSÉE NATIONAL PICASSO, PARIS



Francois Boucher's 'Juno Asking Aeolus to Release the Winds' (1769) PHOTO: KIMBELL ART MUSEUM, FORT WORTH

Most delicious show of the year?
“**Casanova: The Seduction of Europe,**” a whirlwind tour of the arts and culture of 18th-century Europe, as experienced and commented on by the Venetian-born rake Giacomo Casanova in his autobiography. Not just a paradigmatic libertine, he was, among many other things, a brilliant conversationalist who knew everyone from Benjamin Franklin to the librettist of “Don Giovanni.” As installed at the Kimbell Art Museum, in Fort Worth, Texas, through Dec. 31, a dazzling selection of paintings, drawings, furniture, decorative arts and costumes evokes Casanova’s restless travels across Europe, as well as his amorous adventures, imprisonment and escape. And yes,

there is an X-rated section.

—*Ms. Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.*

Appeared in the December 12, 2017, print edition as 'Mining the Beauty of the Past.'