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By Karen Wilkin

Dec. 5, 2024 12:38 pm *ET*

Arts in Review

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Duccio’s ‘The Temptation of Christ on the Temple’ (c. 1308-11). Foto Studio Lensini Siena

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The most spectacular exhibition of the year is unquestionably **“Siena: The Rise of Painting, 1300-1350,”** at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (through Jan. 26, 2025). Focusing on Siena’s pre-eminent painters of the 14th century, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Simone Martini, Pietro Lorenzetti and his brother Ambrogio, the show reassembles and contextualizes long-separated, important works, including panels detached from Duccio’s masterpiece, the “Maestá”—an enormous altarpiece with scenes from the life of Christ. We can savor Duccio’s originality, noting the tender exchange between Mother and Child in all his Madonnas, and ponder his formation, thanks to a rigid Byzantine icon and a fluid little ivory Madonna, made in France, and brought to Siena by pilgrims. We can feast on biblical stories enacted by agile figures against gold grounds and stylized architecture. (Don’t miss Simone’s distraught Magdalen, in red, in the reunited sections of his Orsini polyptych.) And much, much more. The never-to-be-repeated assembly of stellar works expands our knowledge of early Renaissance painting and the world in which it was made. Repeat visits required.

Installation view of ‘Siena: The Rise of Painting, 1300-1350.’ Photo: Eileen Travell/The Met

Almost equally sumptuous was **“Giorgio Morandi: Time Suspended Part II,”** a pop-up retrospective organized in New York by the Rome-based Mattia De Luca gallery. (Part I was held in Rome in 2022.) Still lifes, landscapes, flower paintings, drawings and etchings began with Cubist-inflected still lifes from 1914 and 1915, when Morandi (1890-1964) was discovering his language. It ended, *crescendo*, with a loosely brushed 1963 painting of rural buildings and a quirky near-monochrome 1964 still life, both teetering on the edge of abstraction. In between, subtle dramas were enacted by close-pressed bottles, boxes and pitchers, deployed like a repertory company. Radiant still lifes from the 1940s and ’50s, celebrating pale, unnamable hues, made Morandi’s tabletop an entire universe. His Metaphysical paintings and views of the courtyard of his apartment building were absent, but the rest compensated.

At the Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice, the wonderfully selected **“Willem de Kooning and Italy”** examined his responses to Italian art and to visits to Italy, and allowed comparisons among works made before, during and after a brief stay in 1959, extended sojourns in 1960 and 1969, and a short visit in 1972. Most revealing were the small, improvisatory bronze figures, De Kooning’s first sculptures, made when, while visiting Rome, he ran into an old friend who had a small foundry there. The exhibition traced the relationship between the animated little bronzes and De Kooning’s sensuous, boisterous bather paintings, as well as their connection to later, larger sculptures. Paintings informed by both Italian and Long Island light, collages made in Rome, and explosive drawings made during the Festival of Two Worlds in the Umbrian hill town Spoleto enlarged the conversation and sharpened our perceptions.

‘Bathers With a Turtle’ (1907-08), by Henri Mattise. Photo: Succession H. Matisse / ARS, N.Y.

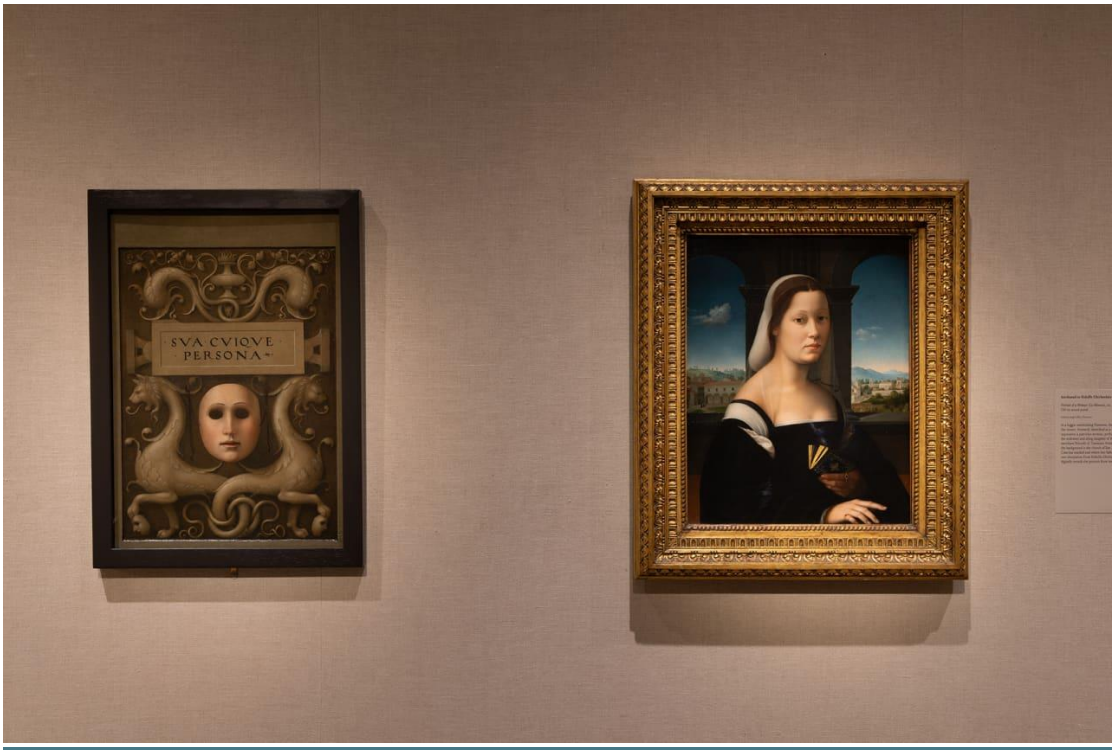
“Matisse and the Sea” at the Saint Louis Art Museum centered on the museum’s superb “Bathers With a Turtle” (1907-08), originally painted with a background of the fishing port Collioure, where Matisse and André Derain invented Fauvism. (Last year, an informative exhibition at the Met explored their collaboration.) Representative works documented Matisse’s sojourns by the sea, including in Collioure, along with paintings done in his seaside hotel room in Nice. The sinuous seaweed and marine shapes in the late cut-outs were persuasively tied to Matisse’s trip to Tahiti. Even more persuasive was the notion that the blue color of the seated bathers in the late cutouts signals that they have become the sea. Matisse, it turns out, was an enthusiastic swimmer and oarsman.

Guillaume Lethière’s ‘Brutus Condemning His Sons to Death’ (1788). Photo: Clark Art Institute

Most fascinating history? **“Guillaume Lethière”** at the Clark Institute, Williamstown, Mass. In 1760, a boy was born, enslaved, to a mixed-race enslaved mother and a French planter, in Guadeloupe. Brought to France as a teenager and freed by his father, he became a leading academic painter, survived the Revolution, became a favorite of Napoleon and his family, and head of the French Academy in Rome, and remained admired and successful even after Napoleon’s fall. Yet following his death in 1832, his chilly Neo-Classicism was eclipsed by Romanticism. The Clark’s excellent survey lacked Lethière’s most celebrated, enormous scenes from Roman history—which first cemented his reputation—but studies and smaller versions of those canvases, plus other major works, including portraits, attested to his command of firm structure, elegant drawing, suave surfaces and expressive narrative. Paintings by Lethière’s students and colleagues made clear his influence and the esteem in which he was held.

‘Impression, Sunrise’ (1872), by Claude Monet. Photo: National Gallery of Art

We’ll never fully understand how startling the work of Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and their colleagues appeared when it was first seen, but **“Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment,”** at the National Gallery, Washington (through Jan. 19, 2025), helps to intensify our perceptions. The show combines paintings, some now very celebrated, from the first Impressionist exhibition, held in 1874 in the studio of the photographer Nadar, with works shown at the official Salon of that year, which opened a few weeks later. The selection underscores the differences between the Impressionists’ energetically painted themes of contemporary life—say, Manet’s woman and child seated near a railway line in Paris—and the Academicians’ mythological, historical or religious subjects, such as a nude, androgynous, teenage Cupid, life-size, in marzipan colors. There are also surprising inclusions in both categories, works by less adventurous colleagues of the Impressionists and surprisingly convincing Academic paintings, but mainly “Paris 1874” confirms and clarifies our conceptions with some wonderful modernist works—Morisot looked terrific—and some delightfully silly Academic paintings.



Installation view of ‘Hidden Faces: Covered Portraits of the Renaissance.’ Photo: Eileen Travell/The Met

Surprise was the foundation of **“Hidden Faces: Covered Portraits of the Renaissance”** at the Metropolitan Museum. Who knew that paintings we knew well, hung flat on the wall, were meant to be seen only on removal of cover panels with allegorical images relating to the sitter, or that they had coats of arms or symbolic conceits on their backs? Few complete portraits and covers have survived, but “Hidden Faces” reunited separated panels and presented compelling reasons for considering now-independent, often enigmatic compositions as once intimately related to portraits. Works in different media, in different sizes, attested to the wide range of the practice. Sometimes, the related image—a ravishingly painted still life of flowers with religious meanings, for example—was more engaging than the actual portrait, but everything rewarded attention. We left knowing we’ll never look at certain paintings the same way again.

Orit Hofshi’s ‘Time . . . thou ceaseless lackey to eternity’ (2017). Photo: National Gallery of Art, Washington

A different kind of surprise was offered by **“The Anxious Eye: German Expressionism and Its Legacy”** at the National Gallery, Washington. Unfamiliar images, sometimes by unfamiliar artists, drawn largely from the museum’s own holdings, made us consider freshly a well-explored moment in the history of modernism. A gallery of contemporary artists—some printmakers, all responding to the mood and affect of the German works on view—spoke to the currency of those concerns.