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Gustave Courbet

French, 1819–77

Deer in the Forest, 1868

Oil on canvas

Gift of James J. Hill 14.76

Any survey of celebrated 19th-century collectors inevitably places the name of St. Paul native James J. Hill near the top of the roster for the breadth of his interests and the acuity of his vision. His tremendous wealth, amassed largely through his enterprising railroad ventures, allowed him to purchase during the 1890s over 280 paintings, of which 83 remained in his estate at his death in 1916. Gustave Courbet was an artist Hill greatly admired, and the magnificent *Deer in the Forest* of 1868 was the first oil painting from Hill's collection to enter the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, donated shortly before the building opened in 1915. Over the decades, through the generosity of his descendents, 29 of Hill's paintings have found their way into the museum's permanent collection.

Gustave Courbet, the paragon of French Realism, was an inveterate hunter. During the 1860s he devoted considerable attention to a series of deer-hunting scenes and other categories of animal painting. What I find most compelling about this serene representation of a stag and doe in a forest is the manner in which it combines the realism of nature sharply observed by an experienced stalker and a tenderness that is unsentimental but nonetheless genuinely moving. I also admire the artist's refined technique in rendering the atmosphere and translucency of his grotto-like setting and the solidity of his unperturbed models.

Patrick Noon

Chair of the Paintings Department

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Cook Islands

Chief's stool, 1800–1825

Wood

The Frances M. Norbeck Fund 2001.2.3

In my years at the MIA, I have come to love the simple elegance of this object. Technically flawless and quietly beautiful, the chief's stool holds its own among much showier and more elaborate sculptures. Outsiders' appreciation of art from the Pacific Islands has varied greatly over time, reflecting cultural attitudes. The pattern can be traced through objects such as this stool from the Cook Islands. Made in the early 19th century as a high-status object for use by chiefs and treated as an heirloom, at some point it left the islands—either as a valuable gift meant to show esteem or as an item bartered or sold for its immediate worth. Removed from its place of origin, it no longer commanded the same respect. Oceanic objects from the 19th century were often collected as curiosities or souvenirs by travelers who lacked an understanding of their significance in the culture that produced them. The artistry of these items was seldom appreciated, and many were placed in museums of natural history, if saved at all.

It is only recently, as a global perspective has become more common, that works like this stool have been rediscovered as art. Their inherent quality has reemerged, in keeping with the intent of their creators and first owners. Now the grace and sophistication of these sculptures can be appreciated anew.

Molly Huber

Assistant Curator

African, Oceanic, and Native American Art



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Bella Coola (Nuxalk)

Northwest Coast region

Frontlet, c. 1850

Wood, pigments, abalone shell, copper, ermine, cotton, plant fibers, wool, buttons

The Robert J. Ulrich Works of Art Purchase Fund 2008.61

Tribes from the Northwest Coast region created frontlets in a carving style that had been established for generations. The Bella Coola man who made this one followed his tribe's rules of form and composition. Bella Coola frontlets usually have multiple figures, the largest placed in the center. Here, the top figure wears headgear in the form of an abstracted bird head. The lower one, with its arms and hands extending out from the surface, may represent a spirit being. In the center is a transforming figure, its upturned beak complemented by the angles of the ovoid eyes, eye sockets, and eyebrows.

This mask would have been worn for important occasions such as potlatches or welcoming notable guests. Placed on top of the wearer's head, it moved with him as he danced, its abalone shells shining and the sea lion whiskers (now missing) swaying to the music's beat. It would truly have been a sight to see.

To my eyes, this frontlet is a masterpiece. The complex composition of Bella Coola frontlets was greatly admired by neighboring tribes, and Bella Coola work in general inspired many other tribal styles, including the Kwakiutl.

Joe D. Horse Capture

Associate Curator

African, Oceanic, and Native American Art

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England

Saint John the Baptist, c. 1400–1450

Silk, metallic threads; embroidery

The Putnam Dana McMillan Fund 96.89

Historically, masterpieces were created at the behest of a great patron of the arts. During the late Middle Ages, when this embroidery was made, the Catholic Church was a major benefactor of aesthetic endeavors. The church considered it important to inspire worshipers with a glorious reflection of heaven and the rewards that awaited the faithful. This motivation informed many aspects of church activity, from the grand architecture of the Gothic cathedral to the vestments used in religious services.

Throughout much of the Middle Ages, English master embroiderers were acknowledged to be among the great artists of the time. Using fine silk thread instead of pigment, they created detailed imagery that was admired for its refinement and emotional effect.

Many commissions were ordered by the pope, as well as royalty and nobles, as gifts to the church. Centuries after their creation, even the fragments of these master embroideries are still highly valued objects in church treasuries and international museums. This image of Saint John the Baptist was a section of an awe-inspiring set of religious vestments.

Lotus Stack

Curator Emerita of Textiles

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William Blake

English, 1757–1827

Nebuchadnezzar, 1795

Color monotype in tempera, finished with pen, black ink, and watercolor on paper

The Miscellaneous Works of Art Purchase Fund, 1957 P.12,581

I favor works of art that sear impressions on my memory. Poet/painter William Blake's luminous portrayal of depravity does the job. But for me, masterpieces are not just about an initial impact; they also cause me to seek greater understanding of stories, personalities, creative processes, and other aspects of life well beyond the image.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had been warned by the prophet Daniel to mend his sinful ways or lose his kingdom and his humanity. When the king persisted in boasting of his might, "there fell a voice from heaven, saying, . . . The kingdom is departed from thee. . . . And he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws."

Blake explored the Sublime, the irrational realm of visceral, overwhelming emotion—the flip side of the Enlightenment. Constantly at odds with authority, he rejected the lessons of his teachers at the Royal Academy of Art. Though decidedly Christian, he was an ardent dissenter against the Church of England. Could *Nebuchadnezzar* be a veiled critique of the Crown and the Church of England?

Never satisfied with the ordinary, Blake invented his own ways of making prints, here combining drawing, painting, and printing.

Tom Rassieur

John E. Andrus III Curator of Prints and Drawings

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Ansel Adams

American, 1902–84

Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941

(printed 1961)

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Frederick B. Scheel 2007.35.301

Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941

(printed c. 1970s)

Gelatin silver print

Lent by Dr. Louis Sonstegard L81.227.2

Ansel Adams liked to compare his photographic negatives to musical scores and his prints to performances. He reportedly made at least 900 prints of *Moonrise*; these two have distinct and subtle differences that affect how connoisseurs regard them.

The photograph on the left, made in 1961, is considered more desirable for aesthetic reasons and because of its rarity. Its full range of tones, with very smooth middle grays, creates a contemplative mood. The other print, from the 1970s, has greater contrast and deeper shadow areas, resulting in an image of less subtlety. Early prints by Adams are usually preferred because he made fewer of them owing to the limited market for artistic photographs before the 1970s. Collectors also seek these prints because they believe that they best convey the maker's original intent.

I have long been attracted to this photograph, partly because of its lunar subject matter. As a college student in Milwaukee, I often went down to the shore of Lake Michigan to watch the moon rise out of the water. From those sightings I learned a fascinating astronomical fact: the full moon always rises at sunset. Adams made this photograph as the sun was setting behind him, and we can see that the moon is still waxing. A day or two later, the moon would have been full, and the image perhaps a little too perfect.

Christian A. Peterson

*Associate Curator**Photography and New Media*

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Probably Mexico

Chac mool, probably 20th century

Stone

The John R. Van Derlip Fund 47.2.48

Purchased by the museum from a well-respected dealer in 1947, this *chac mool* was believed to be a masterpiece of ancient Mesoamerican sculpture. As such, it was prominently displayed at the MIA for decades and gained international attention as well, traveling throughout Europe in an exhibition that visited seven prominent cities including Munich, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Rome in the late 1950s. Its true nature was only revealed in the mid-1970s, when research by the first curator of what was then called the Department of Primitive Art showed it to be a 20th-century fake, created with intent to deceive and likely modeled loosely after a *chac mool* from Chichen Itza in the collection of Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology.

Why did this information not come to light earlier? The biggest factor was the lack of a pre-Columbian expert on staff, someone who would have known not only that the style and materials are wrong, but also that, compared to authentic examples, the carving is clumsy and awkward. When I first saw this sculpture in storage many years ago, it seemed almost laughably bad, and now it's hard to believe so many were taken in by it for so long. The sculpture remains valuable, however, as an example of the importance of ongoing research to determine the authenticity of even well-respected artworks.

Molly Huber

Assistant Curator

African, Oceanic, and Native American Art

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Mexico (El Tajin, Veracruz)

Ballgame yoke, 600–900

Stone

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund 41.72

In contrast to the *chac mool* displayed nearby, this brilliantly executed stone ballgame yoke is a true masterpiece of pre-Columbian art, one whose authenticity has held up through repeated scholarly examinations. The Mesoamerican ballgame seems to have been particularly significant to the cultures of Veracruz, given the quantity and excellence of ballgame-related art found in that area. This yoke—an outstanding example—depicts a participant in the game, wearing an elaborate jaguar headdress. A ceremonial sash emerges from the headdress and is grasped in the two hands of the ballplayer, appearing along the yoke's sides. Other details represent aspects of his playing equipment. The ends terminate in two carved faces, likely portraying severed heads, a reminder of the game's sometimes lethal outcome.

Stone yokes such as this one probably were not worn to play the ballgame but instead were used as part of the ceremonies relating to it, perhaps as a trophy. They are symbolic of the padded fiber yokes players wore to help deflect the ball using their hips, hands not being permitted to touch it during play. To my mind, this yoke is more than a compelling work of art; it provides an entry to another world of information and experience.

Molly Huber

Assistant Curator

African, Oceanic, and Native American Art

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Bertel Thorvaldsen

Danish, 1770–1844

Ganymede and the Eagle, 1817–29

Marble

Gift of the Morse Foundation 66.9

Thorvaldsen's *Ganymede and the Eagle* was immediately recognized as a masterpiece by its original owner, the Earl Gower, later second Duke of Sutherland. In his letter of thanks to the sculptor, the earl called it a “chef-d’oeuvre de vos mains” (masterpiece by your hands).

In my view the sculpture's status as a masterpiece is evident from both a technical and a conceptual standpoint. One detail that displays an exceptional mastery of carving is the eagle's beak—deeply hollowed out, with the tip hovering just a fraction of an inch above the heavenly nectar in the bowl.

Conceptually, Thorvaldsen broke with the tradition of showing the god Jupiter, disguised as an eagle, abducting Ganymede by grasping the boy's body with his talons, in a scene full of stir and violence. Thorvaldsen's *Ganymede and the Eagle* is about contemplation rather than action. There is no active perpetrator or passive victim. In this intimate, symbolic, and meditative scene, defined by the figures' gazes, the boy and the bird are placed on the same level and given equal importance.

As a model for renewing contemporary art by carefully studying the remains of classical antiquity, and for freezing a scene into calm and meditative balance, Thorvaldsen's *Ganymede and the Eagle* is emblematic of Neoclassical art at large.

Eike D. Schmidt

*James Ford Bell Curator of Decorative Arts,
Textiles, and Sculpture*

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Mali (Djenné)

Djenné horseman, c. 1450

Wood

Gift of the Aimee Mott Butler Charitable Trust, Anne S. Dayton, Mr. and Mrs. Donald C. Dayton, Mr. and Mrs. William N. Driscoll, Clarence G. Frame, and Mr. and Mrs. Clinton Morrison 83.168

This sculpture fuses human dignity with animal strength. It comes from the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, a region where several kingdoms succeeded each other between the 9th and 16th centuries. Horses were introduced to West Africa from north of the Sahara around A.D. 1000 and soon became prestigious possessions, associated with political power and wealth. Representations of horse riders from ancient Mali have been made in clay and wood. Yet this one, in both style and age, is unlike any other, which is one reason I have chosen it.

Its uniqueness, however, has made this horseman subject to controversy, and therefore it has not always been recognized as the masterpiece that it is. Initially, some specialists questioned its authenticity. In 1980 X-ray testing and radiocarbon dating revealed that it was carved from a single piece of wood dating between 1250 and 1450, making it one of the oldest sub-Saharan sculptures known. What group the sculptor belonged to is not entirely clear, since in the past, several large-scale migrations took place in the Inner Niger Delta. In general, art historians and curators like to attach an ethnic label to an African work of art, but in this case, we identify the sculpture by the region's historical city of Djenné.

Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers

Curator of African, Oceanic, and Native American Art

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William Eggleston

American, born 1939

Memphis, c. 1970

Dye transfer print (printed 1976)

Kate and Hall J. Peterson Fund 79.34.1

I cannot help but smirk when looking at William Eggleston's *Memphis* with its giant tricycle, centrally framed as though it were some type of monument, perhaps to childhood. The tricycle's well-used handlebars, curvilinear frame, big black tires, and red, white, and blue American-flag colors all suggest pleasure. At the same time, the image is ominous and intimidating as Eggleston makes us all child-sized once again with a simple upward tilt of the camera.

Not many critics smirked some thirty years ago when *Memphis* was one of seventy-five color photographs exhibited in Eggleston's one-person retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and was featured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue, *William Eggleston's Guide* (1976). In fact, the picture and exhibition sparked a controversy, partly because Eggleston used color film and focused on scenes from everyday life. MoMA curator John Szarkowski celebrated this aesthetic as "perfect." Hilton Kramer, art critic for the *New York Times*, responded: "Perfect? Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly."

Today, the aesthetics of photography have been transformed, with *Memphis* as one of the landmarks in this evolution. Eggleston is now commonly cited as "the father of color photography," who inspired a whole new generation of young photographers. *Memphis* is a reminder that history is often a slowly evolving process, whose direction can be anticipated or changed by the makers of masterpieces.

David Little

Curator of Photography and New Media

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Jasper Johns

American, born 1930

Figure 2, 1963

Graphite wash, charcoal, and chalk

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 70.71

I've always found Jasper Johns's work compelling for its seamless fusion of intellectual vigor and lush physicality. The big and brawny drawing *Figure 2*, one of a series of solitary numbers, is an extraordinary example of Johns's early approach, in which he tackles such difficult questions as how meaning is constructed and how perception and context mediate our experience.

Here, Johns presents a mathematical symbol as a tangible object. In this context, the subject is effectively neutral, and like his flags, targets, alphabets, and other familiar motifs, allows the material surface of the drawing to assert itself. For Johns, the meaning is in the making. His drawings are consciously self-referential, the marks signifying the artist's physical actions and procedures over time. The ultimate meaning, however, is elusive and must be teased out by the viewer's careful reading. For me, each rereading of this drawing is a new and vivid experience.

Besides its conceptual complexity and aesthetic merits, this drawing also represents a seismic break with the past. Rejecting the emotionally charged gestural abstraction of the previous generation, it helped usher in a new era of pluralism in contemporary art, based on knowledge of the past and an expansive definition of what art can be. A radical departure, *Figure 2* is in my view a triumph of 20th-century art.

Dennis Michael Jon

Associate Curator

Prints and Drawings

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Francis Bacon

British, 1909–92

Study for Portrait VI, 1953

Oil on canvas

The Miscellaneous Works of Art Purchase Fund 58.35

The human figure, usually in a state of extreme anxiety, was Francis Bacon's principal subject of study throughout his career. This picture belongs to a series of paintings that began as a portrait of Bacon's friend and biographer David Sylvester but became, in the final project, eight separate studies that reinvented Diego Velázquez's iconic 17th-century *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. Inspired also by Eadweard Muybridge's sequential photos of the human body in movement, Bacon made his constricted figures more and more agitated until, in the final painting, the pope collapses in convulsive hysteria. Aside from its gripping illustration of postwar existential malaise, the genius of Bacon's series was his melding of the monumentality of great historical art with the modernity of the film strip.

Study for Portrait VI received its first public showing at an exhibition at the Walker Art Center in 1954. It next figured in the exhibition "Francis Bacon: 12 Paintings, 1947–1958" (1959), at Richard L. Feigen's Chicago gallery. Despite the intense interest in Bacon's work among Chicago artists, *Study for Portrait VI* was the only picture that Feigen sold. It was purchased by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and remains, without exception, one of the most audacious and prescient acquisitions of contemporary art in the museum's history, which is why I have elected to highlight it in this masterworks exhibition.

Patrick Noon

Chair of the Paintings Department

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Francisco de Goya

Spanish, 1746–1828

Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta, 1820

Oil on canvas

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund 52.14

Whenever possible, I travel the galleries via different routes. But I always visit this self-portrait of Goya with Dr. Arrieta. I find this painting profoundly enchanting and decided it would be the “director’s masterpiece pick” for this exhibition.

Goya painted this work in 1820 for his doctor. The inscription at the bottom reads, “Goya gives thanks to his friend Arrieta for the expert care with which he saved his life from an acute and dangerous illness which he suffered at the close of the year 1819 when he was seventy-three years old.” The work is thus a sort of ex-voto, or gift in gratitude for delivery from calamity.

In the painting Goya wears a nightshirt and dressing gown and clutches at the sheet as his head lolls back. Arrieta clasps him firmly, offering a beaker of medicine. I admire this painting’s soft focus and earthy colors, the gentle light falling across the men’s expressive faces, and the intriguing figures hovering in the darkness. Most of all, I am astonished by its intensely personal nature. How rare for an artist of this period to depict himself wearing a robe, with a deathly pallor, and completely helpless.

Goya has never dropped out of favor, and this painting has long been considered a masterpiece. For me, what really sets it apart is the sentiment that Dr. Arrieta cured the artist not through medicine but through love and compassion. What better example of a masterpiece’s ability to express what it means to be human?

Kaywin Feldman

Director and President

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Egon Schiele

Austrian, 1890–1918

Standing Girl, c. 1908–9

Charcoal and tempera

The John R. Van Derlip Fund and gift of funds from Dr. Otto Kallir 69.7

To me, she is the MIA's *Mona Lisa*—an ineffable beauty, anonymous and unforgettable.

In this monumental drawing, Egon Schiele casts a young woman, said to be his sister but perhaps not, in the role of innocent temptress. He strikes a calculated balance between corruption and purity, between her clawlike hands and her virginal downcast eyes. The drawing epitomizes the decadent eroticism and decorative patterning characteristic of early 20th-century Viennese art.

Standing Girl attests to Schiele's confident mastery of line and his unflinching examination of psychological complexities. He traced precise contours, created momentary confusion between bodily mass and empty space, and contrasted elegant grace and tense awkwardness—laying before us the mysterious relationship between inward and outward realities.

Given Schiele's current fame, it is surprising how completely his art was neglected in America and still is in some other art collecting centers. Not until 1954, when the McMillan Land Company gave his portrait of Paris von Gutersloh to the MIA, did the first Schiele painting enter an American museum collection. Even today, one is hard put to think of a major Schiele in any French or English museum.

Our *Mona Lisa* may not be Schiele's sister, but she is close kin to Salome and Circe. How fortunate we are that forty years ago she came to Minnesota to cast her spell on us.

Tom Rassieur

John E. Andrus III Curator of Prints and Drawings

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