SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

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The first Annual Report of the association of Trustees of The Metropolitan Museum of Art covered the year ending May 1, 1871. The main feature of this document was its announcement to the Members that a momentous purchase had been consummated on March 28 of that year. This first important acquisition by the Trustees, a collection of one hundred and seventy-four paintings, was paid for by public subscription solicited over a period of several months. The paintings, said to have been shaken loose from two French collections by the impact of the Franco-Prussian War, were bought by John Taylor Johnston, the Museum’s first president, and William Tilden Blodgett, one of its most active founders. By these two gentlemen the paintings were “offered to the Trustees at cost with guarantees of the genuineness of each and every picture.” This positive declaration was made possible by the feeling of unstinted confidence with which Mr. Blodgett had been filled by the vendors, Étienne Le Roy and Léon Gauchez.

As yet there was no gallery in which to exhibit the new acquisitions, but with startling promptitude a lease was taken on a building at 681 Fifth Avenue which had been a dancing academy and contained a large and suitable room. This gallery was immediately put to use and in the first two months attracted some fifty-five hundred visitors, this despite the fact that it was not open on Sundays—Sunday openings were not to begin until 1891. Before the temporary exhibition space was taken the Legislature had already provided funds for the erection, by the City, of the first unit of a museum in Central Park. The upper story of that first museum unit, later to be known as Wing A, is still in use by the Museum and, because of a persistent shortage of funds for remodeling, the visitor of today finds the general appearance of the first two galleries (A 11 and A 12) at the head of the present main stairway to be very much what it must have been at the start. These galleries are therefore the natural place in which to exhibit first a selection from the purchase of 1871, just seventy-five years after their first showing, and second a cloud of witnesses to the somewhat more popular taste of the same eighteen-seventies.

Considering the general state of American connoisseurship in the arts in 1871, the Museum’s bold purchase of that year seems to judges in the present generation to hold up remarkably well; for it should be borne in mind that students in the seventies lacked the vast files of photographs available for comparison nowadays and most of the books on art history had still to be written.

Such being the situation, the Museum’s early Trustees and likewise its subsequent visitors are to be congratulated upon the acquisition in 1871 of a number of paintings of fine and enduring quality. Foremost among them is Frans Hals’s picaresque portrait of Malle Babbe (Crazy Barbara), the Witch of Haarlem, which is illustrated in color on the cover. Splendid also is the Visit of Saint John to the Infant Jesus, by Jordaens, a work executed in two distinct periods of the artist’s career. Marten van Heemskerck’s severe portrait of his father, painted in 1532, is one of this artist’s key works. The portrait of a man in half-armour is a fine, blunt work by Aert de Gelder, while the Quay at Leyden, by Jan van der Heyden, is one of the most sensitive paintings by that happy recorder of minutiae. Other enjoyable and admirable North European pictures which the first purchase brought together are Tilborgh’s Visit of a Landlord to His Tenant, Ostade’s Old Fiddler, a sturdy pair of still lifes by Jan Fyt, and the recherché Mendicants from the workshop of the Le Nains. Still other French paintings of distinction are Poussin’s Midas Washing at the River Pactolus and the sprightly pair of animal scenes by Oudry.
Mendicants, by a follower of Louis Le Nain. French, xvii century. Purchase, 1871. This picture and those on pages 203-213 are in the exhibition illustrating the Taste of the Seventies, which is currently on view in Galleries A 11 and 12 at the head of the main stairway.

There are fine Italian pictures also in the group, pictures too fine to have kept long out of sight during these seventy-five years. One of these, Tiepolo’s brilliant Investiture of Bishop Harold, is a study for the famous mural painting in the Würzburg Palace. Also familiar to Museum visitors is the pair of lovely Venetian views by Guardi, in his nacreous early manner. Less familiar perhaps is Recco’s startling still life with dead fish and a thieving cat.

Returning for a moment to a consideration of the guarantees in 1871 of the “genuineness of each and every picture,” one is by no means surprised to note that it is the most ambitious of the attributions that most often fail to survive. Thus present-day students realize that the Descent from the Cross attributed in 1871 to Rogier van der Weyden is in fact a mere copy of the beautiful painting by Rogier in the Mauritshuis, The Hague. The Triumph of Bacchus ascribed to Jordaens is a copy of his picture in the Cassel gallery; the Comical March, by Pater, also is a copy, the original being in the Frick Collection; and the Gamblers Quarreling was painted by the mediocre younger Pieter Bruegel, not by his marvelous father. The immense Return of the Holy Family given to Rubens appears to modern eyes as a crude workshop product in miserable condition. Nowadays students no longer attribute paintings to Gerard van der Meire, for he cannot be connected with any known works, but
the Adoration of the Magi bought in 1871 is an admirable work of the period, probably a copy of a lost picture by Van der Meere's contemporary, Hugo van der Goes. Likewise the Fête of the Tunny Fishers at Marseilles must be by Loutherbourg, not by the brother miniaturists Blarenberghie—in either case it is a charming picture. For two generations Museum authorities accepted the original attribution of the Crowning with Thorns to Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, until the signature of his assistant Guarana was uncovered. On the other hand, the Sacrifice of Abraham has been returned to the oeuvre of the young Domenico Tiepolo as the vendors had originally claimed, though for a generation or more it had been exhibited in the Museum as a work of his father, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. The raffish picture of the Old Rat has come back to Jan Steen at last, the attribution it had at the start, though specialists had assigned it for some years to Roestrauten.

But such considerations, interesting though they may be to close students, are merely the negative aspects of the purchase of 1871. On the positive side are the works previously mentioned; there are also many genuine and refreshing minor Dutch and Flemish paintings in good condition and bearing the genuine signatures of such artists as Jan van Kessel (the view in Amsterdam in this group is considered one of his outstanding works), Jan Both, David Ryckaert III, Jan van Goyen, Salomon van Ruysdael, Adam Frans van der Meulen, Abraham de Vries, Willem Kalf, Dirck Hals, David Teniers, Matthys Naiveu, Leonard Defrance, and Jan Weenix.

Thus the paintings from the purchase of 1871 remind us that at that time there was a rather well informed taste, which prompted patrons of the Museum to bring to America what they could of European paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But there were also collectors here who went in for the painting of their own day, both European and American. The walls of Gallery A 12, painted in an old-fashioned lees of wine color, are piled high with the contemporary pictures which wealthy New Yorkers cherished in the seventies. Many visitors in 1946 will have nostalgic sighs upon being reminded of Sunday afternoons long ago when these fair visions first entered into their impressionable consciousness.

The place of honor on the long west wall of the gallery is given to Rosa Bonheur's resounding Horse Fair. Few if any of the Museum's paintings have had such wide popularity together with such solid claims to the respect of connoisseurs. The broad rhythm of the composition and the sustained vigor of the rendition over so large an area lose nothing of their power to astonish if one recalls that the work was executed by a diminutive lady of slightly over thirty years. Other key pictures in the exhibition, notable for their subjects as well as for their sound painting, are the portraits of John Taylor Johnston, by Bonnat, and the full length, by Cabanel, of Miss Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, whose luxurious bequest of 1887 brought the Museum a large proportion of the European paintings shown on the present occasion. The menacing beauty of Cabanel's Shulamite and the buoyant sinuousness of the Birth of Venus by the same artist are images seen in youth and not easily forgotten. Among the other dreams of fair women that old New Yorkers will find familiar are Winterhalter's expertly organized group of Florinda and her lightly draped friends, Pierre Cot's Storm, Merle's Falling Leaves, and LeFebvre's Grazieilla, the Girl of Capri. No less familiar and perhaps no less popular is the visionary Joan of Arc by Bastien-Lepage, which has not been exhibited lately.

In addition to their appreciation of lovely womanhood, which has in any case never lapsed for long, people of the seventies found in cows an important addition to the picturesqueness of landscape. As Aelbert Cuyp and Adriaen van der Velde played up the cow in the seventeenth century so did Troyon and Van Marcke in the nineteenth. Many American collectors bought paintings direct from these artists, and such an important bovine work as Van Marcke's Mill, which was painted to order, must have brought the artist as much as eighty thousand dollars according to the prices he usually got.

A series of accomplished period pieces which have not appeared above stairs in many a year
is the set of Muses, by Fagnani, portraying in a suave and becomingly Delsartean manner nine lovely ladies of the fashionable world of New York and elsewhere. Sully's Mother and Son and his sketch of the young, comely Queen Victoria are shown as pictures which, although painted a generation earlier, might well have kept their popularity into the seventies. Two of the outstanding works of the time are the immense and poetic Heart of the Andes and the glowing Parthenon, both by Frederick E. Church. Mercy's Dream, a swooping figment of the imagination of Daniel Huntington, looks not inappropriate hanging at a high level, while closer to the eye hang Meissonier's brilliant Friedland and Eastman Johnson's engaging and detailed document of 1871, the Hatch Family, in which three generations are seen congregated in the handsome crimson parlor of their house at Park Avenue and 37th Street.
A Quay at Leyden, by Jan van der Heyden. Dutch, 1637-1712. Purchase, 1871
The Visit of a Landlord to His Tenant, by Gillis van Tilborgh. Flemish, 1625 to about 1678. Purchase, 1871
The Investiture of Bishop Harold as Duke of Franconia in 1168, by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Italian, 1696-1770. Purchase, 1871
Midas Washing at the River Pactolus, by Nicolas Poussin. French, 1593-1665. Purchase, 1871
ABOVE: John Taylor Johnston, first President of the Metropolitan Museum, by Léon Bonnat. French, 1833-1922. Gift of the Trustees, 1880. Mr. Johnston was elected on May 9, 1870. He served as President until 1889 and as Honorary President from 1890 until his death in 1893.

OPPOSITE: Miss Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, by Alexandre Cabanel. French, 1823-1889. Bequest of Miss Wolfe, 1887

Bequest of Miss Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, 1887