The word "standard" has two very different and diametrically opposed meanings. In commerce and manufacture it means that the things to which it is applied are so much alike that it makes no difference which one of a particular kind you have. In a word, the thing that has been standardized has become an interchangeable part devoid of personality. In art, to the contrary, the standard objects, e.g. the Nike of Samothrace, the cathedral at Chartres, the Sistine Madonna, the Christ Presented to the People, are the things that nothing else is like. In art the standards are the things for which there are no equivalents and no just-as-goods. This is known to all the world, but the world very rarely follows the idea through to its logical and inescapable implications.

There is much talk about the inspiration to be derived from the great works of art and, if possible, even more talk about their cultural values. Many a teacher brings classes to the museums and many a professor and museum official writes essays on the theory that the objects in the collections of the museums are demonstrations not only of beauty but of the ways in which things should be done if they are to be beautiful. There is, all but invariably, an implication that the things in the museums are standards that should be imitated or, if not imitated, then emulated. It is submitted that this is as wrong as wrong can be. Only in legislatures can the hands of the clock be turned back, and when they are it is by a fiction which means that the session is in its closing hours.

The objects in the collections of a museum are really the representatives of lost causes, of ideas about which the only remaining discussion is of the kind that is called learned. They exist, not as exemplars to be followed or imitated, but as warnings that certain things have been done, definitively and for good and all, and that any attempt to do them again will result not only in loss of time and energy but in a deadening of the spirit. They are signs that tell us which roads have dead ends—and by so doing they free us for fruitful adventure. Were this not true those collections, instead of being inspirations to hope, would be ground for the blackest scepticism about the present and the future. This scepticism is the basic evil that invalidates all forms of backward-looking academic thought. Eclecticism, no matter how pretty or tasteful its results, is tarred with the same brush. The great function of the collections of the museums is to tell us what to avoid in our own striving, what not to do.

The equity judge, when he issues an injunction, never phrases it as a command to do certain things, but always as a command not to do certain things. He can tell us what not to do, and he can punish us if we fail to obey his command. But he cannot tell us what to do, because that is something that nobody knows or can know. The what-to-do is our freedom and our opportunity. The objects in the museums are the injunctions that the past has laid upon us. They are there to warn us off, to save us from loss of time and wasted effort, from the frustra-
ABOVE: Christ Presented to the People, a drypoint by Rembrandt. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 1941. BELOW: The Battle of Naked Men, an engraving by Antonio Pollaiuollo. Pulitzer Bequest, 1917
The Giant, an aquatint by Goya. Dick Fund, 1935. This print and those on the opposite page are shown in the current exhibition Masterpieces from the Department of Prints in Gallery A 22 on the second floor.
tion and stultification that come from the repetition of the treadmill.

A group of unrelated objects of different kinds does not bring this out. The only thing that does bring it out and make it obvious is an interrelated series of objects arranged in a developmental sequence of the sort one finds in some of the great museums. The masterpiece in isolation proves nothing, teaches nothing, but the masterpiece shown along with the swift ascent of accomplishment that climbs up to it and the gradual descent of frustration that leads away from it, proves everything. It demonstrates not only that it is a masterpiece, but that the road which it marks has ceased to be a high road and has become a blind alley.

The periods of ascent to the masterpieces have been periods in which men, having discovered new materials, new ideas, and new techniques, were busy discovering and exploring the unknown content of those things. Between the slow exhaustion of that content and the explosive discovery of still other ideas and techniques there intervenes a period in which the standardized skill of the known and the familiar is dominant. The history of art shows many such periods. The century preceding the Hellenistic development, the end of the Middle Ages, the eighteenth century, are familiar examples. It is in these periods, when the old has been exhausted and lost its novelty and the new has not been discovered, that the world is settled and academicism flourishes. Artists instead of being intellectual adventurers are erudite in dead practice. Their subjects and techniques are reduced to routine formulas, their work exhibits the easy skill of the oft repeated and empty gesture, and they justify themselves by talking about the Golden Mean—the smuggest of all the Aristotelian excuses for calculating mediocrity and lack of enthusiasm. The Golden Mean—nothing too much, nothing odd, balance, proportion, harmony—is the meanest of all the legacies bequeathed to us by Greece. It is the final behest of worldly-wise, penny-counting, risk-hedging scepticism. The heady adventure of great art, great poetry, great science, is incompatible with the accepted “safety factors,” the clinging to averages, of a settled world.

For a long time in such a world there are men who dissent, who ask uncomfortable questions, and who are willing to take risks. But the world beats them down and swamps them under its sticky, obscuring mediocrity. If they are artists their work is called unskillful and incompetent; they are laughed at, pitied, and forgotten. When what appears to be an explosion of new ideas and new techniques comes about it is not really an explosion, it is merely that the smug world, the sceptical, well-mannered, routine world, has lost its power to drown the growing volume of dissent. But the nice people, the cultured people, the backward-looking people, have no love for the results of their loss of control. They withdraw to their ancestral homes and talk shrilly about vulgarity, taste, and eternal verities. When they finally realize that the game has been irretrievably lost they become scholars. In an exploring, expanding world the scholar is the only man who can turn his back on today and tomorrow and maintain the respect of society. The great artists, the great poets, the great scientists, have their minds on new things, things that are not known and not done. For them the past exists as the things that have been known, and have been done. For the creators that perfect tense is both the interest of the past and its danger. They study the past, not to conform to it, not to acquire taste, but to discover loopholes for escape from its dead hand. In the most literal sense every great artist comes out of a long tradition. This is the reason that the greater an artist is the more devastating a critic he is of that tradition. Those who do not recognize this relation between the great artist and his tradition understand neither.