There must be a hundred reasons why no sculpture similar to Noguchi’s cube could have been commissioned, made, and erected before 1960. They include the technological skills required in the production and the willingness of large corporations to invest in works of art. But the primary reason is the change of public taste. Seldom before has originality been the prime criterion of artistic merit. For the first time a cube is accepted as proper subject matter for sculpture. The fact that it is balanced on one corner is a source of delight, the apparent defiance of the law of gravity producing a pleasing tension. We do not object to the fact that no human hand made this object – we have accepted the idea that machines can produce art. And we are particularly fascinated by the way in which Noguchi’s box relates to the forms surrounding it: the functional office boxes enhancing the effect of the irreverent sculptured one.

Sculpture by Isamu Noguchi in front of the Marine Midland Grace Trust Company Building at 140 Broadway, New York
Director’s Choice

THOMAS P. F. HOVING

This article is adapted from a recorded tour available for rent at the Metropolitan Museum

Don’t be misled by the title “Director’s Choice”: it doesn’t imply that I will attempt the impossible task of selecting a handful of favorites from the three million works of art in the Metropolitan Museum. What I want to do is to point out sixteen islands in that limitless sea of visual cultural history, sixteen land bridges between one area of knowledge and another, without feeding you information collected on catalogue cards and labels or footnoted in art history books. My objective is to persuade you to look in a way that perhaps you might not ordinarily undertake.

Now, the first work I would like you to look at deeply is an imposing piece in our Greek and Roman collection: a large standing figure of a nude youth, or kouros. We know little about this sculpture, simply that it was supposedly found in Attica and that it came to the Museum in 1932. A superb example of archaic Greek art, it dates from the late seventh century B.C. and is the earliest known kouros that has ever come to the United States, and the earliest marble sculpture in our collection—indeed, one of the earliest in Greek art as such, pre-dating the building of the Parthenon.

But let’s not dwell on dates: I’d like you to turn your mind to the artistic achievements incorporated in this image of young manhood. Notice the clearly defined musculature, the kneecaps done almost as if they were the heads of bulls, with two horns coming off at each side, the feet with the suggestion of insteps. These are indications of a growing awareness of human anatomy, breaking from the severe Egyptian depictions of pharaohs or high officials locked into the stone from which they were carved, and entering an era of relative freedom, of the beginning of movement and organic proportions.

This is not a particularly pleasing image, but it’s real: a young man presenting himself to the gods. Throughout Greek art (and, indeed, even in reflecting waves) you get this emphasis upon the naked human figure—the clear delineation of beauty with nothing to hide.
From the epitaph inscribed on the base of this grave stele, we know that it was erected by grieving parents for their son, the young man represented in relief on the shaft. The inscription reads: “To dear Melakles on his death, his father and his dear mother set [me] up as a monument.” These are very poignant words: a sentiment any parents might express.

The monument is from Attica, the Greek artistic center, and is both the largest and the earliest piece of this sort to come out of Greece. But, as Gisela Richter (Curator of Greek and Roman Art here a number of years ago) said, the boy’s face is “as fresh as when it left the sculptor’s hands.” The beautiful boy stands with a young girl, probably his sister. In his left hand he is holding a pomegranate, associated with Hades and Persephone, rulers of the underworld, and on his wrist hangs a flask containing oil, used by athletes to anoint themselves before competition.

To me this is a wonderful thing: it’s serene and yet vigorous. Look at the chest and arms of this athlete, look at the confidence he has. And notice the difference between him and the kouros: just the lines of the chest, the muscles, the thigh. The relationship between the nipple and the chest here shows that in a period of less than one hundred years, anatomy has really burst through the old tradition and is lending an almost unbelievable animation to works of stone.

*Grave stele of a youth and a girl. Greek (Attica), about 540-530 B.C. Marble, height 13 feet 10 13/16 inches. Hewitt, Rogers, and Munsey Funds and anonymous gift, 11.185*

*Photograph: Michael Fredericks, Jr.*

*Kouros. Greek, late VII century B.C. Marble, height with plinth 6 feet 4 inches. Fletcher Fund, 32.11.1*
These are three of many paintings unearthed at Boscoreale, a small suburb of Pompeii, and they are the greatest such paintings to be seen outside of the museum in Naples, which has a large percentage of the treasures found at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Archaeologists and art historians, who are sometimes overly involved with a tendency to categorize things, have given Roman wall paintings a series of stylistic designations: the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Styles. These are excellent examples of the Second Style, but I wouldn't worry too much about the classifications, because deep in graduate school neither I nor my professor (who finally admitted it) knew exactly what each one of them meant. The important thing is that here we have the flower of Roman art, direct from the great Hellenistic influence—superb figural painting, little of which has survived to our day.

Nobody really knows who these people are, but we have, on the left, a woman seated upon a graceful chair, playing a kithara, with a little girl standing behind—an extraordinarily vivid impression of two human beings, perhaps mother and daughter. In the center there is a man sitting on a throne, and next to him a woman in a rather pensive mood. And, at the right, a woman holds a shield, perhaps bearing armor for someone who had to go to fight the Trojan War.

The background is done in the true fresco technique: that is, paint applied to fresh plaster, sinking in and becoming almost impervious to the elements. When the background had dried, the figures were then added over it in tempera. The sense of observation and the deftness of handling in these frescoes are as good as in any done at the height of the Italian Renaissance.

The villa from which these paintings came was probably a gentleman farmer's retreat from the city—but it wasn't far enough from Pompeii to escape the great eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. that buried the area. The villa was unearthed in 1900, and three years later its wall paintings were sold at auction in Paris, when the Metropolitan acquired most of them. In addition to these frescoes, we also have an entire room, the cubiculum or small bedchamber illustrated in the preceding article.

*Three paintings from a villa at Boscoreale. Roman, third quarter of the 1 century B.C. Fresco, average height 74 inches. Rogers Fund, 03.145, 6, 7*
This sarcophagus dates to around 220-230 and is in the Severan style, named for the Emperor Septimius Severus (reigned 193-211). It is one of the loveliest examples of that very delicate, intricately undercut style favored for sarcophagi by the most influential and richest families of the time.

What it shows is Dionysus (or Bacchus, to use his Roman name), the god of wine, on the back of a panther, surrounded by all the creatures of his court: attendants, satyrs, and half-satyrs, with goats and dogs and other animals bounding about in the landscape. Among the forty figures, human and animal, are also representations of the Four Seasons.

The pedestal and the dark spheres that look so much like bowling balls are eighteenth-century mounts designed for the sarcophagus by William Kent when it was installed in Badminton House in Gloucestershire, England. You see, shortly after its discovery in Rome it was purchased by the young Duke of Beaufort, to whom it was sold as the Emperor Augustus’s bathtub—which, unfortunately, it is not.

But it is a splendid example of Roman work of the third century, just before the classical style evolved into the drier and more spiritual aspect popular in the time of Constantine (reigned 324-337) and early Christianity.

*Sarcophagus. Roman, around A.D. 220-230. Marble, length 7 feet 3¾ inches. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 55.115*
These six plates with figural compositions are among the greatest triumphs of early Byzantine and early Christian art that exist anywhere in the world. They were found about 1913 in a treasure-trove on Cyprus, and three more plates of the same series remain in the museum at Nicosia, on Cyprus.

They illustrate the story of David’s rise to kingship, as told in the First Book of Samuel. I think the great fight plate (the largest of them) is the one to focus your attention on. It is done in three registers: at the top, David meeting Goliath in the middle of the night; in the center, David beginning to wind up the slingshot as Goliath lurches toward him; and in the lower register, David cutting off Goliath’s head.
There are control marks on the back (what you might call “silver stamps”), indicating that the plates were made in the royal workshop of Emperor Heraclius between 610 and 614. The legend goes that Heraclius ordered the story of David to be depicted since he, having killed his predecessor and usurped the throne, wanted to equate himself with David, and his bitter enemy, Chosroes the Persian, with Goliath. Heraclius also had his court panegyrist compose a series of poems advancing this same parallel.

Now, most people think of the style prevalent in seventh-century Byzantium as being dry, forced, stiff – but there were actually two artistic styles coexisting there: one, the hieratic style reserved for figures of Christ and the Virgin; the other, a far more juicy, lively style employed for hunting scenes or for things like the depiction of a favorite story, as on these plates. The fight plate, in the magnificence of its repoussé relief, symbolizes not only the indomitability of Christianity but also the indomitability of the Emperor Heraclius himself.

*Six plates with scenes from the story of David. Constantinople, VII century. Silver, diameter of fight plate 19½ inches, diameters of others 10½ and 5½ inches. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.4-9*
These four enamels represent the champlevé technique, which consists of taking a piece of copper, digging parts out as though you were making a woodcut, gilding it and putting in powdered enamels, and then firing it until the enamels become translucent against the gilded copper.

The panels depict the Baptism of Christ, the Crucifixion, the Three Marys at the Sepulcher (which has been partially destroyed, perhaps by fire, permitting us to see the depth of the undercutting in which the wet enamel was placed before firing), and the Pentecost.

Notice the strength of the eyes and noses, and the way the hands of the Virgin in the Crucifixion scene are clasped in genuine grief. These are the hallmarks of the Mosan school—the group of artists who worked in the valley of the Meuse River, in what is now eastern Belgium—and particularly of Godefroid de Claire, the famous twelfth-century craftsman in whose workshop they were made.

At one point these plaques were thought to have been part of the magnificent cross commissioned by Abbot Suger for the choir of St. Denis, the royal church. But if their past is not completely certain, their future seems assured: the colors are shining and will never fade, for they are as hard as if they were made out of precious stones.

If you read Latin of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, you will not need my translation of the inscription on the right side of the bench upon which the Virgin sits in this perfectly magnificent Madonna and Child. It is a quote from the “Little Chapter” of the Office of Our Lady, in the Book of Hours, and it reads: “From the beginning and before the ages, was I created. Even unto the age to come I shall not cease to be. In the holy habitation have I ministered before him.” In a sense, that emphatic statement is exactly what this powerful sculpture is all about. Because there the Virgin sits with her child: monumental, weighty, and, in a funny sense, even overwhelming—a perfect example of the new style of humanism to come out of the Burgundian kingdom in France about the middle of the fifteenth century. The sculpture is supposed to have come from a small church in Poligny, in the center of Burgundy, but there is no real reason to say that this is true. The only thing that can be said about the connection of this Madonna and Child to the town of Poligny is that in a church there, there are other sculptures that seem to have been made by the same artist.

Look at this work carefully, first at the Madonna’s face. Notice the sensitivity, the flesh under the chin, the lips, the intensity of her gaze. She is a loving mother, conveying something that in medieval art a century earlier—certainly two centuries earlier—would have been impossible, because then the Virgin was dogma. And look at the Child, a real baby, his lips tightened at the edges as a little laugh issues forth spontaneously. I hope that, to you, this masterpiece is becoming less of a medieval statue than a glorious young and very beautiful woman with her vigorous and, indeed, somewhat difficult child—with his foot jammed beneath the book, about to flip it off.

Everywhere you’ll find details interpreted freshly and with scrupulous attention to reality (don’t be afraid to look all over a piece of sculpture, which embraces, after all, 360 degrees). Even at the back, where it was set into the wall, the Virgin’s hair is carefully delineated; the book’s little leather fasteners are caught in the pages; the Child’s curls are tousled; two buttons on the Virgin’s cuff are shown unfastened. Even twenty years earlier, the artist wouldn’t have taken such liberties of observation to make his piece come alive. That is what they were searching for in France around the middle of the fifteenth century. As the century progressed, art, unfortunately, became stylized. But here, captured in stone, is an isolated moment in reality, in sensitivity, in humanization.

_Madonna and Child. French (Burgundy), mid-xv century, Painted and gilded limestone, height 53\frac{1}{4} inches. Rogers Fund, 33.23_

_Photograph: Michael Fredericks, Jr._
Being a medievalist, I'm far from expert on Oriental art, but this standing Buddha of the Wei dynasty is the equal of any sculpture done in any culture. Trying to put it into my own limited perspective of medieval art, I think that perhaps only the statue of St. Peter in the Vatican could possibly come close to this work, which was probably done around the same time. As the monumental Virgin and Child discussed earlier sums up an entire religion, so does this powerful sculpture. Of the fifth century, it is made of gilded bronze; it's unusually large for its early date, of great artistic quality, and offers some aesthetic surprises to many of us.

Look, for instance, at the way the cloak encircles the neck and the upper part of the chest. This is a totally different way of showing drapery than any we've seen so far: it doesn't cover the body, it doesn't reveal the body. It is there as a separate ornament but perfectly in keeping with the rest of the figure, a highly stylized and nonhuman—or superhuman—element suddenly becoming very human because of its suitability to the overall design. Look, too, at the series of v-shaped folds that reach upward like the wings of birds in flight, gradually rounding out into circles at the chest and neckline, as if they were ripples in a pool.

The Buddha stands on an enormous lotus flower. The right hand is held in a variant mudra, or gesture, of assurance ("do not fear"), the left hand in a variant mudra of charity (the dispensing of gifts). What a wonderful image of a religion!
Possibly you know that one of the Metropolitan Museum’s strongest points is that it collects not only period rooms, but tries to furnish them to show the full environment of a particular age. One of these is a room that served as a chapel of a French château owned by one of the oldest families in France. The man for whom it was made, Claude d’Urfé, was attached in his youth to the household of Francis I, and held, among other important posts, that of ambassador to the Council of Trent. When the Council was meeting in Bologna, he met an extraordinary artist in woodwork, especially inlaid woodwork, Fra Damiano of Bergamo, whom he commissioned to create the wainscoting you see here. The panels were executed between 1547 and 1548, and remained in the château until 1874. Each panel has a different subject: there are architectural views, ornamental patterns, landscapes, and still lifes, and interwoven in every one of them are various meanings—some obvious, some containing subtleties of symbolism. One panel represents the tools of writing: the ink, the quill pen, the knife to trim the quill (the knife’s handle is made of wood but of mother-of-pearl). Another is a figurative scene showing St. Jerome removing the thorn from the paw of the lion—a rather naïve rendering compared to the still life. Over the altar is a representation of the Last Supper designed by Jacopo da Vignola and executed, signed, and dated by Fra Damiano of Bergamo himself. It is the culmination of all the other things we’ve seen in the smaller panels, for it combines architecture, landscape, still life, and human figures.

The stained glass in the windows was done by Valentin Bousch in 1531-1532 and is typical of glassmaking of the Renaissance in France. The marble sculpture on the altar, The Virgin and Child with the Infant St. John, was made in France, near Tours, around the middle of the sixteenth century, and shows a mixture of Italian and French influences, just as the wainscoting does. The exceptional relief on the front of the altar is a Descent from the Cross carved about 1550-1560 in the studio of Jean Goujon, the famous French sculptor, and, like the other elements of this room, it relates to the general environment because of its blending of Mediterranean and French influences.
Speaking of period rooms and architecture, nothing in the main building of our museum is more glorious than this patio from a castle on a hill above the mountain village of Vélez Blanco in Spain. The patio dates from 1506 to 1515 and represents the early Renaissance, not only in Spain but also in Italy. Indeed, it was made by Italian craftsmen who were brought to Spain by Pedro Fajardo, the Marqués of Vélez, a cultivated and ambitious Spaniard born in 1478. Although his castle was planned by a Spanish architect who was largely influenced by the Gothic and Moorish styles, the carving reflects Renaissance motifs. Look, for example, at those capitals holding up the arcade. Every one of them shows a very emphatic Italian influence in its foliage, the delicacy of its volutes, and the little heads and vases that are incorporated into the decoration.

Originally, of course, the whole patio was open at the top, but we had to enclose it for preservation. Even without the benefit of warm Spanish sunshine, however, you can envision the musicians appearing on that high balcony and filling the air with music. Continue looking up, and see the gutters decorated with waterspouts in the form of winged beasts. Look at the deftness of the carving everywhere, the way the foliage and the monsters and the birds really come to life. The whole place is a triumph of carving and a delight in its proportions—even to the upstairs balustrade, which borders a loggia where we show our prints and drawings.

The Vélez Blanco patio was bequeathed to the Museum by George Blumenthal, one-time president of the Metropolitan. He had used it as a salon in his house at Park Avenue and Seventieth Street. Upon Mr. Blumenthal’s death, his house was torn down, the patio disassembled, and its two thousand marble stones carefully numbered and stored—but fortunately the Metropolitan did not give in to the temptation of disposing of it, even though at the time the Museum did not have a suitable place to install the patio. It was reconstructed here in 1964, and it acts as an imposing vestibule for the Thomas J. Watson Library, as a gallery for our Western European Arts Department, and, from time to time, as a sumptuous setting for special exhibitions.

*The patio from Vélez Blanco, Spain. 1506-1515, Bequest of George Blumenthal, 41.190.482. Erected in 1964 with the Ann and George Blumenthal Fund*
I would like to apologize for limiting to six the number of paintings I talk about here. But even in such a collection as ours, one must be able to isolate a few that reach a pinnacle of quality and fascination—pictures you could look at for the rest of your life and continue finding things you had never seen before, pictures that constantly refresh you. For me, one of these is The Meditation on the Passion by Vittore Carpaccio.

This painting shows the dead Christ in the center, St. Jerome on the left, and Job on the right, the epitome of patience. Just behind St. Jerome, beyond the fragmented stone, you can see his symbol, the lion. But to appreciate the meticulous nature of Carpaccio's virtuosity you must look far back into this extraordinary landscape—beyond the beautiful red parrot to the panther running after a stag, on to the water and the bridge passing over it, to the men and women talking in the village square of an Italian hill town. Look beyond the village up to the olive groves and vineyards, and back to the mountains, where a storm is brewing. Few people in the Renaissance had such a sense of observation as Carpaccio, the Venetian. For many years, though, this work was attributed to Mantegna, and, indeed, it bore a large Mantegna signature, but in 1945 infrared studies revealed Carpaccio's signature underneath. This picture is an icon: something for continued and intense contemplation, something you can come back to again and again.

*The Meditation on the Passion, by Vittore Carpaccio (about 1455–1523-1526), Italian (Venice). Tempera on wood, 27¾ x 34¾ inches. Kennedy Fund, 11.118*
Only the very fortunate have been in the Bruegel room of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. It's a gallery that has fifteen or twenty paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, unquestionably one of the greatest painters who ever lived. This magnificent picture, The Harvesters, can, in a sense, sum up that room.

It was painted in 1565, toward the end of his career. This landscape captures the very spirit of a hot midsummer's day, when they're bringing in the first growth of wheat. And nothing could be more summery or hot for it is immediately after a big lunch, at least for the man in the foreground, who is stretched out in an extraordinarily loose manner in the deepest sort of slumber - you can almost hear him wheezing with every exhalation from that limp mouth. He's probably enjoyed some of the strong Northern wine that you can see another harvester tippling now. Others are still cutting and gathering and binding the wheat. But a reward in the form of another wine vessel is carefully hidden in the wheat to keep it cool until quitting time, and a boy is carrying wine, or perhaps water, through a new-cut passage. The view goes from the golden, almost throat-clogging richness of the wheat right down to the verdancy of the valley where the hay wagon is carrying away the crop. I think you can just make out, in the left center of the picture, some people swimming in a little waterhole in the middle of the village and others playing games in a field nearby. Other interesting figures and animals continue all the way back to the ships anchored in the harbor; it's two or three miles away and makes you want to put on binoculars to see who's working on the vessels.

A beautiful picture and, again, one of those things you could live with forever.

*The Harvesters, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (active by 1551 - 1569), Flemish. Oil on wood, 46¼ x 63¼ inches. Rogers Fund, 19.164*
We have many Rembrandts in the collection (over thirty) and although I love The Noble Slav and the Aristotle, A Man with a Magnifying Glass and A Lady with a Pink have meant more to me than any others, because they are really human beings, people painted from life. Nobody, so far as we know, ever captured man in quite this way: on the surface and underneath. A Lady with a Pink is the painting I'd like you to concentrate on.

The flower usually stands for betrothal – probably not her first, considering her age and the mysterious fact that x-rays reveal that the head of a child, near her knee, was painted out, presumably by Rembrandt himself. What is important about this picture, however, is not its symbolism but the way this woman has been presented as an individual. We've all known people like her, who have the same look that she does: with eyes that are entirely alive, with a mouth that's about to speak (rather gently, I think). Rembrandt has penetrated right into the brain substance itself in showing us this glance and this spontaneity.

Look at the way the paint has been put on, not only in the flower, which he has used as a focus, but in ever-increasing circles beyond that. Observe the shading: the drapery, for instance, seems almost like monumental red cliffs. See how the details are handled: the pearls with a touch of the leaden color they sometimes get, the gold glinting in that curious greasy way it looks by candlelight, the suggestion of a picture in the background, which is not allowed to intrude upon the human being that is the total subject of the painting. Rembrandt at his very best.

*A Lady with a Pink, by Rembrandt Harmensz. van Ryn (1606-1669), Dutch. Oil on canvas, 36½ x 29¾ inches. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.622*
When I was younger, Watteau was a complete mystery and almost a complete bore to me. I couldn’t really stand the fragility he seemed to impart to his pictures. But the older I got (and I hope the more knowledgeable and perhaps the more sophisticated I got), the more the delicacy of his colors and, as with Rembrandt, the humanity with which he painted began to surge forward. And this picture, portraying Mezzetin, a character from the Italian commedia dell’arte, is one of the supreme examples of Watteau’s work. Painted at the very end of Watteau’s brief career as an artist, Mezzetin combines stage reality with life’s reality, highlighting the poignancy of the figure alone in a stage set, playing his guitar and singing a song. Is this a comedy character playacting, or is it a man not only acting but feeling real emotions? Is the melancholy that Mezzetin exudes part of the play, or part of the man? The glory is in the extraordinary enigma. And yet it flashes back and forth from enigma to reality. There’s an eternal mystery about it, aided by the female statue with her back turned to Mezzetin: a very subtle allusion.

The painting was purchased from the museum in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) in 1934, when Russia was trying to raise funds for the young Bolshevik regime. It has long been one of the five or six top pictures in the Metropolitan’s collection.

`Mezzetin, by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), French. Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 17 inches. Munsey Fund, 34.138`

I think it’s becoming more apparent every year that one of the greatest painters in the entire pantheon of artists was Claude Monet. He was a person gifted with an acute perception of nature, who (sometimes highly successfully, sometimes not) conveyed that observation of atmosphere, of changing light. Very early in his career, he began to experiment with somewhat dark landscapes in the style of the Barbizon painters, but in the summer of 1867 he worked at his aunt’s home in Sainte-Adresse, a little resort town on the estuary of the Seine near Le Havre, and this picture is the proof of his full awakening: a landscape done completely out of doors, in the sun. What we have here is a breath of air, wonderfully clear, rather warm, a day with a breeze whipping up, flags fluttering, a regatta starting off at the left, a little boat...
darting near the shore. Everything is bathed in the fullness of August sunlight, and if you take a deep breath, you can almost smell the sea.

When you stand about twenty feet away from the picture, everything seems to work: the shadows at the left, the boats, the water, the splendid harsh contrasts of light and dark on the standing woman’s dress. But when you get very close to it, it breaks up into fragments: the shadow is an ugly purple, parts of the dress look muddy, the gray is unconvincing and the white seems haphazardly applied, the grass at the right-hand corner sits there like a random diagonal, the flags look way out of kilter, and the boats in the distance seem to be lumps of brown-gray. But if you step back again, it is all transformed into a stunning reality. You see, Monet learned that you have to mix colors optically: not in the old way, by adding a little black or gray, but by combining colors so they would bounce off each other— for example, the shadow of something red has, perhaps, a little bit of green in it when it’s near green grass. But although this was the first successful, totally outdoors, landscape attempt in the history of painting, it was roasted by the critics. In despair, Monet destroyed many of his early canvases and tried to commit suicide. For years he was unable to paint large works such as this, and only very much later in his life did he achieve the self-confidence that he richly deserved after this triumph.

*Terrace at Sainte-Adresse, by Claude Monet (1840-1926), French. Oil on canvas, 38 3/8 x 51 1/8 inches. Purchased with special contributions and purchase funds given or bequeathed by friends of the Museum, 67.241*
The work of Edgar Degas is beautifully represented in this painting from the Havemeyer collection entitled A Woman with Chrysanthemums, one of the most penetrating portraits in art history—even though, curiously enough, it didn’t start out to be a portrait. Indeed, it was a still life of the chrysanthemums and the pitcher of water on the table, and then later, as x-rays have shown us, Degas added the woman. Very happily, because this creature represents an extraordinary study of someone in thought. This, combined with the sheer glory of technique in the flowers, makes this painting one of the greatest in the Museum’s collection.

Degas has really overloaded that vase, but he has been able to carry it off; in the hands of anybody else, the flowers would be a confused muddle. The textures and colors are marvelously subtle: certain areas reveal paint that may have been thrown on as if in a watercolor. You see, Degas thinned his paint very severely with turpentine, and on the cut-glass pitcher he has applied some colors as if they were part of a series of washes.

But one returns, invariably, to the woman, with hand to cheek, glancing out of the picture as if caught by a snapshot (Degas was very much interested in photographs and sometimes worked from them): this revealing search of human nature is as penetrating in its way as A Lady with a Pink by Rembrandt.

This is the last work to be discussed here, and at this point you may well be wondering how I could have neglected Sassetta, Botticelli, Vermeer—or El Greco or Van Gogh. And why didn’t I include masterworks from our collections of ceramics, glass, or silver, or from our Costume Institute, to give just a few examples? Well, I hope my choices (and omissions) will pique your interest, so you’ll come to the Metropolitan often and select your own special islands.