Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries

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The last exhibition of the Metropolitan Museum’s Centennial sets the theme for its activities in its second hundred years. Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries presents works of art of the finest quality in chronological order from the earliest times to the present. This has never been done before by any museum; indeed, only the Metropolitan could assemble such an exhibit from its own collections because it is unique in sheltering under one roof the art of practically every significant culture known to man. The Museum’s first century has been devoted to gathering great works of art. This period is now ending. The time has come to concentrate on using the collections, to make them significant in the fullest sense, for the enjoyment and instruction of every visitor.

Art has always been an essential part of man’s life. Ever since he painted the animals he hunted for food on the walls of caves or carved decorations on the weapons he used to kill them, artistic creation has been a fundamental impulse. Today it has become more important than ever before. Never have there been so many artists, so many art schools and museums, such an active market, and such broad public interest.

Technical developments peculiar to our times have given us visual appetites that never existed before. The invention of photography and improvements in methods of reproducing images have made it possible to lay the whole history of art before the eyes of anyone who is interested. It has also increased immeasurably the number of images that pass daily before us. From packaging to television, pictures are everywhere. They have replaced the written word as the principal means of conveying ideas. The great majority of them are advertisements, commercial propaganda intended to make us act without further thought. They urge us to buy this, go there, eat, drink, smoke, think in a certain way. Given no time for reflection, we are expected to react almost automatically — the image shocks and the spectator must play a passive role.

The museum is also concerned with images. Indeed, it is a treasure house of images. But these are works of art and their effect is fundamentally different from the stupefying sort with which we are constantly assailed. The work of art asks us to respond rather than submit to it, and in responding we find an antidote to the unquestioning acceptance demanded by the other images that are constantly thrust upon us.

From the museum we can get something that is fast becoming lost in modern life. It is a place where we can exercise our power of choice and appreciation according to our own will and at our own tempo. To serve its public successfully, a museum should be a center of recreation that offers every member of our society education of the richest kind. It should present works of art in such a way that each visitor can enjoy the extremely personal experience they have to offer. This means using all the techniques at its disposal to help the visitor use his eyes and judgment, to see truly, to feel beauty, and to understand the deepest meaning of a work of art.
The exhibition Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries is an attempt to teach this lesson — the enjoyment of art — through outstanding objects from all the Metropolitan's departments. Each statue, painting, jewel is a step in the development of art during five thousand years, and at the same time each is a world in itself, commanding the power to interest and move anyone who is willing to devote time to it. The objects have been arranged chronologically to show what was being done within one period in different parts of the world — an artistic panorama heretofore possible only with books or photographs. The arrangement brings out artistic differences, of course, but it also makes apparent the extraordinary similarities in ideas and feelings of peoples thousands of miles separate from each other, in civilizations thousands of years apart.

This exhibition has been designed to be more than a kind of visual banquet or an art history course sumptuously brought to life. It can be enjoyed as such, but we have tried to encourage you to go further and experience these beautiful things on deeper, less familiar levels. Today we are constantly exposed to artistic fads, and in one way this is an asset: it has bred an open-mindedness to the unfamiliar that stands in contrast to the disdain, even fear, with which new or foreign art has generally been greeted in the past. In another way it is a drawback: we find it difficult to take art seriously, to respect it as something that can stand up to time and passing fancies. Surrounded as we are by reproductions and vast quantities of identical, factory-made objects, we are too numb to feel the magic that a work of art must have conveyed when images were rare. The bison painted on the wall of a cave once made the hunter believe he had power over the animals he sought for food; models of servants at their daily tasks in Egyptian tombs were expected to come to life and serve their master in the afterworld; representations of deity have been worshiped as if they were deity itself. Works of art must then have seemed very much alive, but now this sense of each object as something exceptional and unique must be regained — and it may be your hardest task in going through Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries. But contact with individual works of art is the most exciting experience offered by the exhibition. To enjoy them fully means giving each one complete attention, concentrating on it so that what the eye sees awakens all the other sensitivities. One's initial sensuous feelings then grow into emotions, for a work of art can inspire joy, sadness, awe, the whole gamut of reaction of heart and mind. These emotions are aroused by form, line, color, and texture; how this happens can be perceived but cannot be described with words. Each element has an infinitely subtle quality of its own, different from all others, that contributes to creating the work of art — something new, entirely exceptional, that can never be exactly duplicated. Feeling this through the eyes is living a unique moment with each object. Try to see how this effect has been achieved, how these elements are combined in harmonious relationships so that the object has structure and unity and its individual personality. The way in which this has been done will show the mastery of the artist over his materials and the degree to which he knows how to express himself through them. This is art — the way in which the artist's hand molds his materials so they communicate his ideas and his feelings. This is how an artist can transform horror, despair, fright, even death, into beauty.
Through the chronological arrangement of each gallery, the visitor will see generations of artists grappling with problems of representing “reality.” Early works of art, for instance, tend to feature significant details. Gradually an interest grows in reproducing exact appearance and suggesting existence in space. Artists take pride in showing more and more: they render surfaces with loving precision, and model the roundness of form with a real sense of the underlying structure. Then comes an interest in the evanescent aspects of the world: the way light transforms what it shines on, the way movement, like an electric current, can charge a work with energy.

Certain fundamental qualities recurring over centuries will also become apparent. A people’s original way of life has a decisive effect on the character of its art. An agricultural society is sedentary. Its life is attached to the land: fields are measured out, crops are planted and harvested according to the seasons. Calculation and foresight are vital. It is no wonder that the inhabitants of the fertile valleys of Mesopotamia and the Nile were the first mathematicians. Their art reflects this — it is solid and well constructed, it has unity and permanence. Nomadic or seafaring peoples, on the other hand, are acutely aware of the changing, erratic elements in nature that constantly affect their lives. Fire, dreaded by urban populations, was a source of power to the migratory tribes of Central Asia, who were the first to discover the fusion of metals. To these people movement was a way of life; their art is full of restless vitality. Their inspiration is taken from waves, clouds, and the animals on which they depended for food and transportation.

For thousands of years these fundamentally different ways of conceiving artistic form mark the work of the descendants of the original communities. Thus the Mediterranean countries, heirs to the great agrarian empires, create architecture, painting, and sculpture that tend to be balanced and monumental. The countries of northern Europe, invaded and settled by roving bands from Central Asia, emphasize the transient and the fluid.
Jar. Iranian, about 3500 B.C. Terracotta, height 20 7/8 inches. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 59.52

Spouted jar with stirrup handles. Mycenaean, about 1200-1125 B.C. Terracotta, height 10 1/4 inches. Louisa Eldridge McBurney Gift Fund, 53.11.6

Beaker. Scythian(?), Greco-Thracian(?), Danubian region, about IV century B.C. Silver, height 11 inches. Rogers Fund, 47.100.88

Venus and the Lute Player, by Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) (about 1488-1576), Italian. Oil on canvas, 65 x 82 1/2 inches. Munsey Fund, 36.29

Venus and Adonis, by Petrus Paulus Rubens (1577-1640), Flemish. Oil on canvas, 77 1/2 x 94 3/8 inches. Gift of Harry Payne Bingham, 37.162
ABOVE

Temperance (detail), by Giovanni Caccini (1556-1612), Italian. Marble, total height 72 inches.
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 67.208

Lady playing a kithara (detail). Roman, 1 century B.C. Wall painting, total height 6 feet 1 1/2 inches.
Rogers Fund, 03.14.5

RIGHT

Tritoness holding Eros, one of a pair of armlets. Greek, III century B.C. Gold, height of figure 2 7/8 inches. Rogers Fund, 56.11.6

Parade burgonet by Filippo de Negroli (about 1500-1561), Italian. Steel and gold, greatest width 7 5/16 inches. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.1720
The art of certain cultures has a power of attraction so strong that it results in a transformation of the styles of people who come into contact with it. The most influential of all Western art has been that of Greece of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Inherited by the Romans, it was carried by conquering armies to the ends of their empire—as far as the north of India, where Apollo became the model for the representation of Gautama Buddha, a truly astonishing metamorphosis considering the different natures of the two deities. During the next two thousand years, the Greek style, in spite of its condemnation as pagan, was revived again and again in Europe to serve the most varied purposes. The way in which it was interpreted is a key to the character of the period; it ranges from mannered copies of gestures and poses to a deep understanding of its true spirit.

Other evidences of strong artistic influences will be visible in the show. They are easy to see when they characterize our own Western culture: the spread of the Renaissance and rococo styles or the deep imprint of impressionism. In these cases historical records confirm the visual evidence, but when similarities are noticed between the art of areas not completely studied or lacking in documentary records, all we have to go by is the work of art. For example, many favorite motifs of Chinese art—the dragon, the mask or flattened-out face, the dispassionate concept of the nude, so different from that of the West—are shared by pre-Conquest art of Central and South America. Works from the east coast of Central America show similarities to African art. Is all this simply fortuitous, the result of elemental affinities between peoples who never came into contact, or were there exchanges through the medium of migration or trade? The objects are the only evidence we have, and we must study them and draw our own conclusions. Indeed, written records are often distorted, consciously or unconsciously, and works of art may be the truest witnesses of a time, a people, a place.
Perhaps the exhibition will suggest even broader generalizations, such as a fundamental difference in artistic approach between East and West. The West, especially Europe since the influence of Greek civilization, has created works of art to express ideas. These ideas and the form of their expression have usually been clearly thought out. Art's sensuous and emotional appeal is, of course, recognized, but it is conceived of as something that can be analyzed and explained. In the East, sensitivity has always been more important than logic. Man's personality is thought of as being made up of instincts and passions inherited from the most distant past that linger on, waiting to be aroused. The work of art plays a much more personal role: less of a dogmatic statement, it is the means through which the artist communicates his own feelings about a particular subject. The West's basic means of communication is the standardized printed word; in China and Japan calligraphy is an art, expressing an individual's spirit as well as his thought. Further, the Chinese and Japanese enjoy the beauty of fortuitous reactions of matter — of ink splashed on paper, of glaze slipping over clay — as much as the quality it acquires from the skill of the artist's hand.

Of course there have been moments in the West when sensitivity and emotion were important. Religious art, especially during the Middle Ages and Counter Reformation, was used not only to embody religious concepts but also to inspire exaltation in the faithful. The dominance of either intellect or feeling divides artists and cultures all over the world, although today they coexist — with critics often searching for reason where the artist has expressed emotion alone.

As he moves through the exhibition, the visitor will notice how the artist's personality becomes more and more apparent. In the earliest periods each piece seems to represent the style of a whole people or country — partly because so few objects or records remain, partly because the concept of an individual's freedom and importance developed gradually. The way an artist expresses himself through his work, however, can be one of its most fascinating aspects. It can be seen in his choice of subject matter, in what he emphasizes, in what he leaves out. He reveals himself by his way of representing man and woman, though perhaps we come closest to him when he deals with animals or plants, because, less inhibited by the rules of the society around him, he can express himself more freely. Artists, like all men, are attracted to either of two aspects of the world: to the physical, to what they can see and touch; or to the spiritual, to emotions, dreams, intuition. This will be apparent in many subtly different ways: in one portrait we will be struck by the physical appearance of the sitter, another will make us wonder what he is thinking. Some artists want the subject to speak for itself; others are more concerned with technique, from the most painstaking to the most dashing. Virtuosity of execution has always delighted artists and art lovers. Pliny tells how the Greek artists Apelles and Protogenes competed by each painting a single line on the same panel. This panel was treasured since by the simplest means the painters expressed themselves so completely that their authorship could be immediately recognized.

In the last analysis each work of art is the mirror of a human personality. Its physical character may reflect the time and place in which it was made, but it is the creation of a man who, through it, communicates with the man who looks at it. To enjoy it fully is never easy, but we hope the visitor to Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries will take the time to respond to these works of art and to the artists who created them. We hope he will gain from them a new understanding of other peoples and cultures, and of the artists working today. Maybe he will conclude that there is no "ancient" art, no "modern" art, but simply the same human feelings, constantly recurring, constantly reinterpreted. A sense of human communication and sympathy is the most important experience any exhibition could offer today, to a world that is so quickly becoming smaller and, perhaps, less human.
Tommaso Portinari (detail), by Hans Memling (active about 1465–died 1494), Flemish. Tempera and oil on wood, 14 3/8 x 13 3/4 inches overall. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.626

Standing male figure (detail). Sumerian, about 2600 B.C. White gypsum, total height 11 7/16 inches. Fletcher Fund, 40.156

Head of Sesostris III. Egyptian, XII Dynasty, about 1850 B.C. Red quartzite, height 6 1/2 inches. Carnarvon Collection, Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 26.7.1394

Guillaume Budé (detail), by Jean Clouet (active by 1516–died 1540), French. Tempera and oil on wood, 15 3/8 x 13 1/2 inches overall. Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 46.68