

**A** **TIME**  
**CRI**  
**OF**  
**SIS**

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART BULLETIN **FALL 2020**



# A TIME OF CRISIS

This special issue of the *Bulletin* reflects on some of the crises gripping our world in the present moment, including the catastrophic impact of a pandemic and the continuing tragedy of racial injustice. In the pages that follow, our Metropolitan Museum colleagues present their personal perspectives on issues and challenges facing us all.



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

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# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

It has been a year upended by crises the world over. At The Met, preparations for a full calendar of celebrations to commemorate our 150th anniversary had been underway since before I began my tenure as Director. We were just one month short of that landmark date when we closed on March 13 in response to the outbreak of COVID-19. For nearly half the year, our buildings and collections remained shuttered to the public, something that had not happened for more than a few days since 1880, when the Museum packed up to move to its permanent site in Central Park.

The world around us abruptly became unrecognizable as people began sheltering in place to stem the spread of the virus and refocused their attention on aiding those in distress. As most of our staff began adjusting to working from home, teams of essential workers kept watch over our collection and facilities, even the koi in the Astor Court pond. Conservation and curatorial staff coordinated the donation of personal protective equipment (PPE)—nitrile gloves, Tyvek suits, surgical booties, aprons, goggles, N95 masks—from the Museum's labs and work areas to New York City medical centers in need. At the same time, textile conservators spearheaded an effort to sew cloth masks for healthcare workers.

In previous times of crisis, the Museum served as a place of refuge for New Yorkers seeking solace or inspiration. Our closure challenged us to reach out to a global audience, grounded at home, by broadcasting more of our offerings online. In the face of adversity, these “restrictions” stimulated the creativity of our staff and fostered a sense of shared experience that will continue to push us forward to explore the digital realm and extend our connections with followers worldwide.

As an unusually chilly spring gave way to summer heat, streets around the Museum and across the country sprung from silence into sudden activity. Protesters marched past our plaza calling for justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black Americans whose lives have been brutally cut short by racial violence. Heated discourse surged through virtual platforms about how The Met and other institutions have contributed to a culture of injustice and can instead become agents of positive change. As a first step, we responded with a series of antiracism commitments

covering all the Museum's activities. We will do everything we can to be an arena for thoughtful communication and expression for all as well as a provider of education about racial equality. We recognize, moreover, that diversity of background, thought, and skills is an essential goal for our community and our staff across the entire institution, and we will further increase our efforts there.

The crises of this year have undoubtedly altered how we see the world. This issue of the *Bulletin* is itself a disruption from our biennial feature of recent acquisitions, now postponed until 2021. In its place we have collected essays from a variety of staff members sharing new perspectives—filtered through the lens of 2020—on our Museum and collection. They offer historical context as well as deeply personal insights on the significance of works of art and how we at The Met can channel the lessons of this year to bring new meaning to our work and new relevance to our presentation of art to the public.

We are profoundly grateful to our Trustees, friends, donors, Members, and visitors who stepped forward to offer emergency support to the Museum in the darkest of times. Likewise, we remain indebted to our dedicated essential staff who monitored the empty building and to the teams who assiduously prepared the galleries to welcome visitors back with enhanced safety precautions to keep them safe during their visits to The Met.

There is no doubt that this is a difficult chapter for The Met, New York City, the nation, and the world. We rest our hope in the knowledge that together we are stronger and that in this time of suffering we can learn from and support each other. Although we have not marked our 150th anniversary as planned, the occasion serves as a reminder of the Museum's resilience and ongoing commitment to sharing art and serving our public, staying true to our mission while evolving with the times. Whether you have been able to revisit us on Fifth Avenue or at the Cloisters or remain engaged from afar, I am grateful to count you as part of The Met community, from 1870 through 2020 and into a hopeful future.

**MAX HOLLEIN**

Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

# A BUNDLE OF EMOTIONS: RELATING TO A PANDEMIC

SHANAY JHAVERI Assistant Curator, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art

Shortly after The Met temporarily closed to the public on March 13 in response to the spread of COVID-19—the same day America shuttered its borders to the European Union—I decided to fly home to Mumbai to be with my family. Always a long flight, the journey this time felt particularly endless, fraught with anxiety and paranoia. After landing and finding myself back in my childhood bedroom, in the company of my parents, I felt reassured, but it was also unclear to me what to expect from the next few weeks. How would India’s chronically understaffed and poorly resourced healthcare system fare in the face of a pandemic? Unfortunately, history provided a bleak foreshadowing.

From 1896 to 1897, India faced an outbreak of bubonic plague that ultimately killed nearly ten million people. The disease arrived via fleas carried by rodents on trading ships traveling from Hong Kong to Mumbai (then Bombay), a densely populated city with inadequate civic facilities. The expressed desire of the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth century had been to fashion Mumbai as *Urbs Prima*—the “first city” of India—prompting three decades of rapid industrialization and the arrival of migrant workers from across the country, who were employed in the expanding city’s mills and docks. Hastily, and with scant regulations, *chawls* (a type of tenement housing) were constructed for workers, but these slipshod buildings lacked adequate light and ventilation and were rife with other conditions that made them particularly vulnerable to the spread of disease. As the plague took hold, the British government reacted with harsh measures geared primarily toward the working classes and poor, such as removing people from their homes against their will and relocating them to hospitals or “plague camps.” Many workers were driven from Mumbai, leading to a decline in the city’s population and a halt to trade. These dire circumstances and the callous response by the authorities were documented by Shivshanker Narayen—one of India’s first

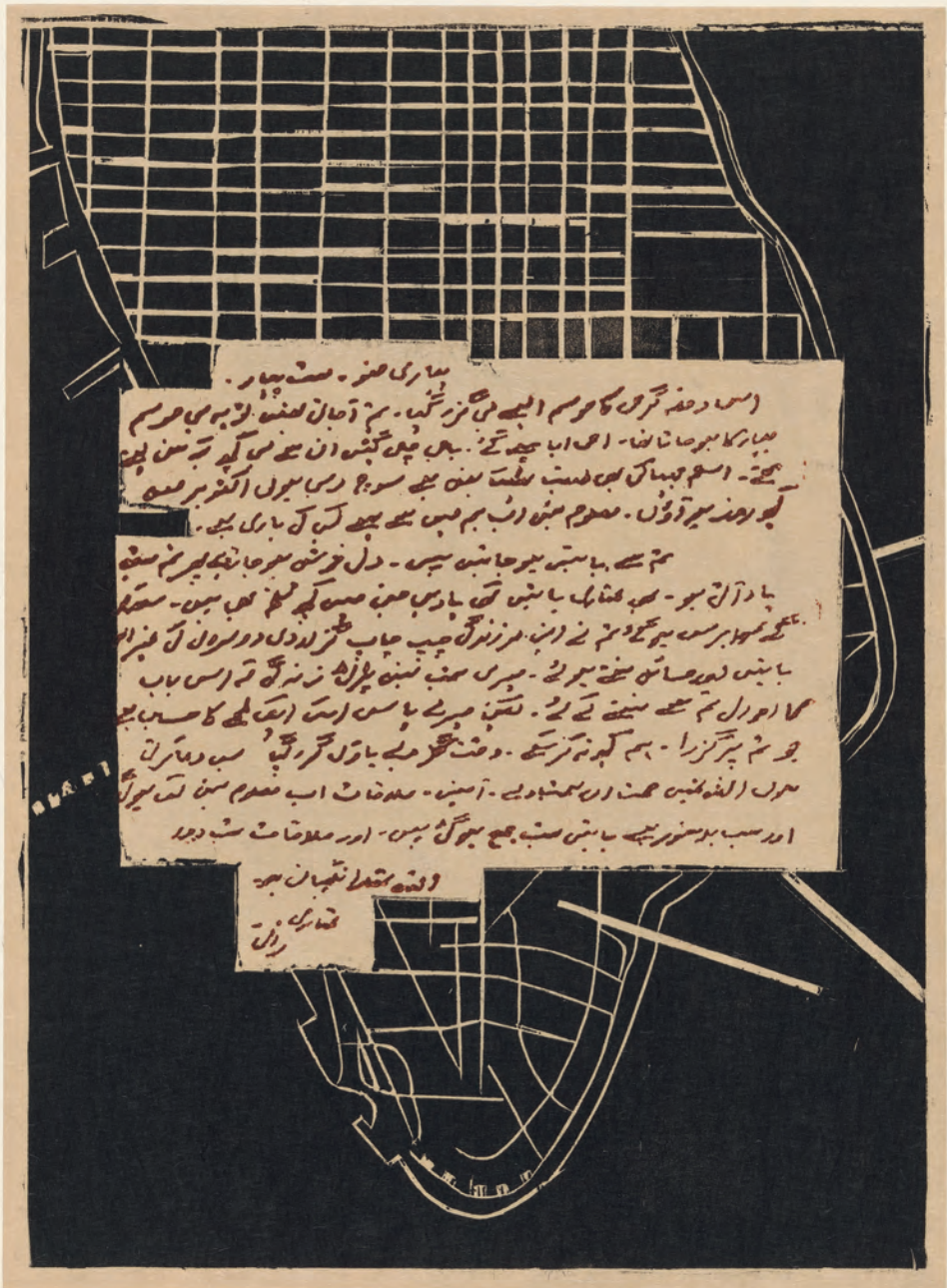
professional photographers, still under-recognized—in his folio *Scenes of the Plague in Bombay, 1896–97, and the Indian Famine, 1899–1900* (fig. 1).

In 2020, 122 years later, we might assume that such a catastrophe might play out differently, but history, unnervingly, mostly repeated itself, as Mumbai became the worst affected city in India, its slums hotspots for the spread of the virus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on March 24 at 8 P.M. that within four hours the entire country would be subject to a severe national

1. Shivshanker Narayen (Indian, active 1860s–90s). *Scenes of the Plague in Bombay, 1896–97, and the Indian Famine, 1899–1900, 1896–1900*. Albumen silver prints from glass negatives and gelatin silver prints, 10 7/8 × 14 3/8 in. (27.7 × 36.3 cm). Joyce F. Menschel Photography Library Fund, 2006 (2006.216.1 [1–30])

2. Zarina (American, born Aligarh, India, 1937–2020). *Letters from Home, 2004*. Portfolio of woodcut chine collé and metalcut chine collé on paper, image 12 × 9 in. (30.5 × 22.9 cm). Gift of the artist, in honor of her sister, Kishwar Chishti, 2013 (2013.578a–k)





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3. *Seated Figure*. Mali, Inland Niger Delta region, 13th century. Terracotta, H. 10 in. (25.4 cm). Purchase, Buckeye Trust and Mr. and Mrs. Milton F. Rosenthal Gifts, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest and Harris Brisbane Dick and Rogers Funds, 1981 (1981.218)

lockdown. All economic activity was curtailed, and domestic transport was suspended entirely. This punitive approach, enacted by the Indian government with almost no notice, left millions of daily wage workers stranded in major metropolises. Many had no choice but to walk thousands of kilometers to return to their native towns, occasioning the largest internal mass migration since partition, in 1947. Images of these laborers attempting to cross the country — at times beaten by police or accidentally run over by trains — shocked and stunned the world, but they also served as an acute reminder that such disenfranchisement had not happened overnight and was, instead, the result of a systematic dismantling of labor protections and regulations over decades. In the wake of the pandemic, India's wealthy and privileged were shaken from their apathetic stupor and forced into an uncomfortable confrontation with the country's devastatingly extreme social and structural inequities.

With no recourse and facing possible starvation, these migrant workers were aware that they could potentially carry the virus with them back to their villages, but

many persisted, seeking not merely refuge but the comfort of being with their families. These humblest of human impulses — to be at home, the longing for it, the need to return to it — preoccupied the Indian artist Zarina, whose moving *Letters from Home* is based on a series of unsent letters to her in Urdu from her sister Rani, who was writing from Pakistan. Rani recounts the death of their parents, the sale of her home, the moving away of her daughter, and everything else that had transpired during Zarina's absence (fig. 2). Spare and monochromatic, the suite comprises eight woodblock and metal-cut prints. Onto the Urdu script of the letters Zarina overlaid floor plans, outlines of houses, and cartographic city maps to evoke her sense of displacement. Although the artist never actually resided in Pakistan — she lived a peripatetic life before settling in New York — Zarina chose the portfolio's title because, for her, "home is not a place. It is wherever the people you care about most are waiting for you."<sup>1</sup> Zarina died on April 25, in the midst of the lockdown.

The Pakistani artist Anwar Jalal Shemza likewise evolved a distinctive aesthetic idiom for himself when contending with his own feelings of dislocation as a South Asian artist residing in Britain. In the elegant *Love Letter 1* (2013.263), semicircular and quadrilateral elements resembling the letters B and D float within an elaborate lattice of black lines reminiscent of a *jali*, or intricately carved stone screen, a common feature in Islamic architecture. Typically ornamented with geometric patterns, *jali* also serve a practical function by diffusing light and thus moderating temperatures. Shemza gamely draws on Western modernism and Arabic calligraphy to build an abstract visual vocabulary that transcends time, geography, and culture. Rather than words to discern, there is a lexicon of motifs to ponder.

Both Zarina and Shemza invoked what is now a mostly bygone, epistolary pace of communication, attesting to a time when agonizing personal reconciliations had to be made in private, with patience, while waiting to feel connected. These works exist in a state of suspended remoteness that contemporary electronic modes of exchange — the constant drone of text messages, WhatsApp, and emails we face on a daily basis, all delivered with great immediacy — aim to dispel and yet somehow fail. As I plodded through the lockdown, responding with alacrity to friends and colleagues alike,





4. *The Sorrow of Radha*, folio from the Tehri Garhwal series of the *Gita Govinda*, ca. 1775–80. India, Punjab Hills, kingdom of Kangra or Guler. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, image  $9\frac{7}{8} \times 5\frac{7}{8}$  in. (25.1 × 14.9 cm). Promised Gift of Steven Kossak, The Kronos Collections, 2015 (L.2018.44.24)

I found the “right” words elusive. As the days became weeks and then months, my reaction to the pandemic and the inevitable fallout changed constantly from anticipatory grief and despair to hopefulness and then back again to frustration, despondency, and, above all else, exhaustion.

As the world endeavors to move forward and, somehow, to cohabit with the virus, how will this experience of the lockdown stay with me? Left to my own musings, I recalled a singular sculpture that I walked by every day as I entered and left the Museum: a terracotta figure from the Inland Niger Delta region of present-day Mali that dates from the thirteenth century (fig. 3). Bent over, huddled, and cradling one leg, he rests his head on one knee; on his back are parallel columns of circles and bumps, possibly tangible marks of disease or metaphorical allusions to wounds or scars carried within. Seemingly distilled into this sublime form are vicissitudes of feeling, from sadness and anguish to quietude and calmness: what my colleague Yaëlle Biro has described

as “a bundle of emotions,”<sup>2</sup> a wholly apt description, and part of what makes this work so relatable during these times of crisis. It also brings to my mind *The Sorrow of Radha*, a Kangra miniature painting from about 1775–80 in which the figure of Radha is seen similarly crouching, bent over, all by herself, mourning the departure of or, rather, her desertion by the Lord Krishna (fig. 4). Radha, heartbroken, has collapsed into herself, contemplating her grief in isolation, and yet if we step back and consider the entire picture, she is in a landscape of total natural beauty. Radha’s intense inward loneliness is balanced by the serene surroundings. This diminutive painting poignantly illustrates a personal crisis of faith, but reciprocally it also recognizes the passing of time and the possibility of renewal and regeneration. Despite Radha’s loneliness, the world does not fade away. Behind her is a tree, cut to a stump, whose branches have managed to grow out and flower once again.

1. Zarina Hashmi, “Letters from Home,” in *Devi Art Foundation* (Gurugram, Haryana, India, 2004); <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/letters-from-home-zarina-hashmi/NQFxiKJlCpzEQ?hl=en>.

2. Yaëlle Biro, “Seated Figure (Djenné Peoples),” in *The Met: Art, Explained* (New York, [2015]); <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/west-africa/mali/v/bundle-of-emotions>.

# REFLECTIONS

KEITH PREWITT Chief Security Officer



I grew up in the city of Memphis during the height of the civil rights movement. As a young man, I participated in marches and demonstrations calling for racial equality, and I witnessed firsthand the indignation of my Black community as protestors filled the streets following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Today, I look around with such a heaviness in my heart knowing that this country is still fighting these same fights—that we still have so much work to do to ensure that our own fellow Americans are treated with the equality, dignity, and respect that all human beings deserve.

New York City has been home to many protests over the last few months, and there will surely be more in the future as people of color and their allies join together to demand justice. In fact, a group of protestors gathered on the plaza at The Met Fifth Avenue on a weekend in June. Our approach was, as always, to welcome those who wish to express their First Amendment rights. The Met is an iconic and high-visibility institution, and we are an important place of gathering for the community, even during our closure. We want to continue to serve as that symbol for all New Yorkers.

Given all of this, I wish to reiterate the commitment of our Security team to protecting our buildings, collections, and, most importantly, our community. We have a group of dedicated professionals who have been onsite day in and day out during and after the closure to safeguard our museums and our fellow essential staff members. These same individuals demonstrated exemplary service to their fellow New Yorkers by handling protests peacefully and in a non-adversarial manner. In the future, we will continue upholding these standards. As we aimed toward reopening the Museum, we offered training and guidance so that all of us who work for The Met abide by the values of awareness, vigilance, and partnership.

Many of you know that I have had a long career in law enforcement—over forty years—beginning as a beat cop in Memphis and all the way up to my role as Deputy Director of the Secret Service. What you may not know is that my desire to serve in this field stemmed directly from my experience during the protests after Dr. King's assassination (fig. 5). I, a young Black man, along with two of my friends, was caught outside in my neighborhood after a government-mandated curfew. The officer who stopped us was white, and at this moment of unprecedented racial tension, I thought we were going to get arrested—or worse. Instead, the officer demonstrated the true meaning of civil service. He did not see us as threats because of the color of our skin; he saw us as young men and human beings who deserved the chance to go home instead of to jail.

From that day forward, I was passionate about what it meant to truly serve one's community. The officer I encountered on that eventful night in Memphis became one of my dearest mentors and advocates for my career. Despite our different backgrounds, we always strove to support, listen to, and foster understanding with each other and with all the people we have served since then. I have now passed these same values to my sons, who proudly followed in my footsteps to their own careers in law enforcement.

But this is just one person's story, and I know that there are countless other stories of how this same system has failed so many Americans. My friends and I had a peaceful encounter that fateful night, but I worry for all those who one day may not be as lucky. I stand with all of you who are calling for change, and I hope that we can mirror these values as we find a path forward. Together we can write a better story, one in which everyone in America is finally treated with the equality, respect, and dignity they deserve.

**5.** Demonstrators march in protest soon after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Memphis, April 1968 (photo by Robert Abbott Sengstacke/Getty Images)



# WALLS

IRIA CANDELA Estrellita B. Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art,  
Department of Modern and Contemporary Art

Walls have become defining symbols of our times. They demarcate national borders, plots of land, private property, and other constructs of advanced capitalism. Furthermore, mental walls, those that shape personal beliefs or public opinion, can be even more imposing and rigid. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made apparent that the major challenges facing humanity today—health care, systemic racism, rampant unemployment, climate change—are globally shared. Yet privilege and prejudice continue to nurture and reinforce the structures that divide society—walls (either physical or virtual) unceasingly built to separate or to hide.

As we know, The Metropolitan Museum of Art safeguards five thousand years of cultural achievement in galleries sheltered from the outer world. The Museum's masterworks remain shielded from variations in weather, the passing of seasons, and the social and urban landscape rapidly evolving beyond its defensive walls. The Met's only outdoor space for the display of art is the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden, where this year's artistic commission confronts visitors with a rough brick wall as they emerge for fresh air in their itinerary.

Héctor Zamora's imposing, curvilinear structure of terracotta bricks, measuring over 101 feet long and 11 feet high, stands right in the middle of the space (fig. 6). Its presence intercedes in an otherwise open rectangular plan clear of obstacles. The artist's radical intervention seems disconcerting, for his work intrudes on or, even better, interferes in the natural way of things. To reinforce this effect, the materials he used are alien to North American architecture: orange-hued bricks transported from Monterrey, Mexico, and turned to their sides as lattice bricks (*celosías*), a remainder of the architecture of the South.

The title of Zamora's work, *Lattice Detour*, refers to a new kind of circulation being activated on the site, one

more complicated and sinuous that compels visitors to navigate the roof garden in a novel way. The Met's architecture—and by extension, the surrounding city—becomes a site for self-reflection. While *Lattice Detour* seems to block the majestic view of Manhattan, the visitor comes to realize that the cityscape remains visible thanks to the perforated nature of the lattice wall, which becomes a sort of mesh or veil. Meshes reverberating with shadows act as filters of the spatial experience, destabilizing a unified and harmonious idea of New York as a cohesive city. From the top of the Museum, the mystifying image of the city produced by the eye obliterates New York's everyday life at street level, with all its tensions and contradictions. That image has ideological ramifications, and Zamora's project succeeds in reclaiming the site of the roof garden as a social space, repositioning and reinserting the Museum and its artistic treasures within the broader urban landscape.

Disruption, obstruction, and interference are common denominators of Zamora's spatial interventions, intended to convey the complex stories inscribed in the built environment. The artist's critique of the naturalization of urbanism springs from a history of public art that is critical of the very notion of public space. Whether or not Zamora's project ultimately alludes to the controversial wall currently being erected on the Mexican-American border, the artist realizes that "amid the current pandemic, differences, divisions, and walls are increasing, and regulations, bureaucracy, and the whole system are becoming even more rigid. Protests against the same old problems continue to proliferate throughout the world. That makes this work current inasmuch as it invites us to reflect on those basic problems that remain unresolved even when humankind has been pushed to the limit."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Email from Héctor Zamora to the author, June 6, 2020.

6. Héctor Zamora (Mexican, b. 1974). *Lattice Detour*, 2020. Terracotta bricks, approx. L. 101 ft. (30.8 m), H. 11 ft. (3.4 m). Courtesy of the artist

# ON PAUSE AND POLYPHONY: MARTIN WONG'S ATTORNEY STREET

IAN ALTEVEER Aaron I. Fleischman Curator, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art

This March, as New York paused in a desperate, necessary attempt to curtail the spread of COVID-19, the city started to empty out. Where I live, at the edge of Manhattan's Chinatown, the streets had already grown quieter for some weeks; tourism had begun to trail off, and some were avoiding restaurants and stores in the area for deeply xenophobic reasons. In my newfound isolation, my mounting anxiety and anguish about the virus's deadly progress were joined by melancholic thoughts of the works from The Met collection that my colleague Kelly Baum and I were so eager to hang in an April installation, among them many new acquisitions with exciting, fresh perspectives on the city in which we live and work.

My mind especially kept returning to a painting by Martin Wong, *Attorney Street* (fig. 7), from the 1980s, which had been in the collection for some time (it was most recently on view in the Bronx Museum's luminous 2015 exhibition *Martin Wong: Human Instamatic* and in Kelly's brilliant *Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason* at The Met Breuer in 2017). The work and its resonant, biographical poem by Wong's dear friend and erstwhile lover Miguel Piñero (1946–1988) tells cacophonous, meaningful stories about a neighborhood in the city not far from my own.

Born to Chinese American parents in San Francisco, Wong was involved in local radical queer performance troupes such as the Cockettes and the Angels of Light before he moved to New York in the late 1970s. While pursuing creative endeavors, he worked for a spell in The Met's bookstore. By the time he met Piñero—a talented playwright, former convict, actor, and cofounder of the famous Nuyorican Poets Cafe—at the opening for an exhibition called *Crime* at the gallery ABC No Rio in

1982, he was living in a walkup apartment on Ridge Street on the Lower East Side. Not far away was a handball court that doubled as a canvas for a number of talented local taggers, and Piñero asked Wong to commemorate the newest addition, freshly painted by a handsome young friend, to its palimpsest of a wall. Piñero composed a new poem expressly for the work, and Wong faithfully transcribed it before adding his own responsive epitaph at bottom, translated into his signature interpretation of American Sign Language's finger-signed alphabet. Although the scene is devoid of people, the layers of language reverberate with the vibrancy of Loisaida—the Nuyorican name for the Lower East Side, Wong's newly adopted home.

When The Met purchased Wong's painting soon after its completion in 1984, a different devastating epidemic was unfolding, along with an attendant, odious plague of anti-gay bias and discrimination, as LGBTQ people were scapegoated for a disease they neither invented nor controlled. Wong himself was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 1994 and left his beloved Ridge Street to return to his parents' care in San Francisco, where he died in 1999. As I write this in the summer of 2020, what haunts me most about Wong's painting is not only how much I miss the noise of that street—how quiet that handball court has once again become in the face of a virus that, like so many, has disproportionately affected the vulnerable and the marginalized—but also the terrible potential of such a crisis to silence so many important voices for good. In the face of that muffling stillness, I welcomed the shout of protest and the clangor of a resounding call for justice that soon after rang through our streets, as I am certain that Wong and Piñero would have.



7. Martin Wong (American, 1946–1999). *Attorney Street (Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero)*, 1982–84. Oil on canvas, 35½ × 48 in. (90.2 × 121.9 cm). Edith C. Blum Fund, 1984 (1984.110)



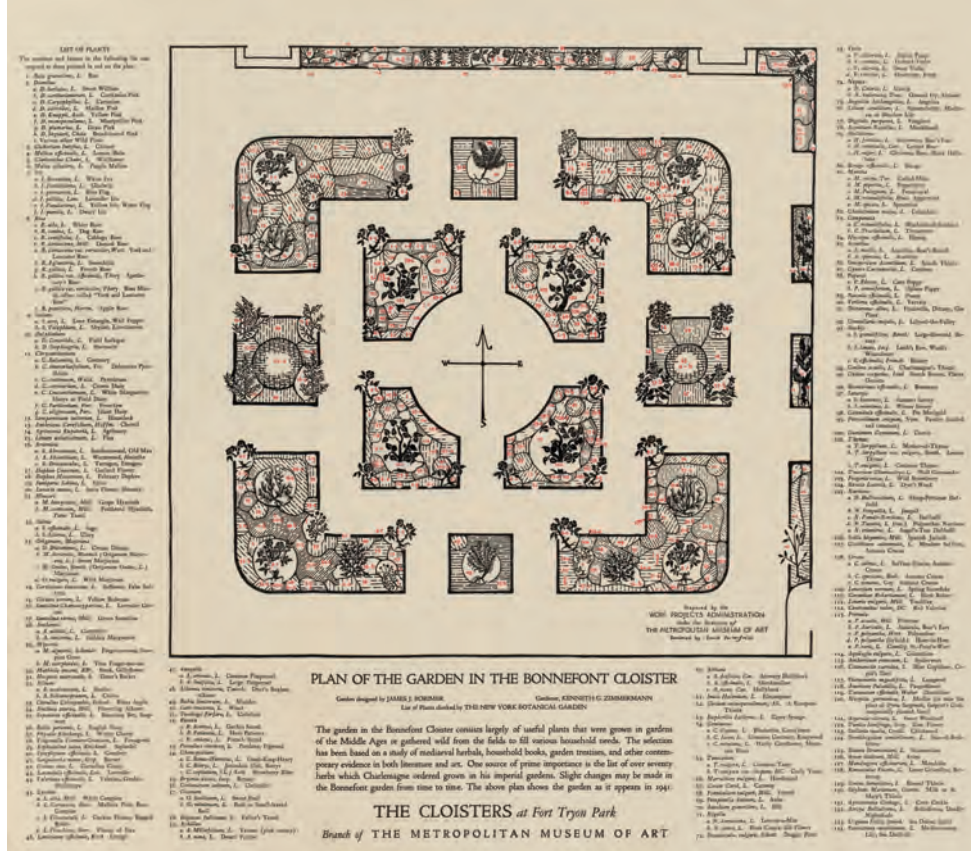
# THE MET AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

**JAMES MOSKE** Managing Archivist, Museum Archives

Following the temporary closure of the Metropolitan Museum in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff in Museum Archives began researching how The Met had responded to other global crises that had taken place during its 150-year history. Staggering unemployment figures and the bleak economic outlook for 2020 and beyond soon invited immediate comparisons with the Great Depression of the 1930s, when The Met faced the most difficult fiscal challenge in its history. In April 1932, the director of the Museum, Herbert Winlock, reported that a “very serious financial situation is presenting itself to us and stringent economies will have to be put into effect immediately.” Winlock implemented such cost-saving measures as a freeze on new hiring, pay cuts, reductions in building maintenance, and curtailment of object photography. Attendance at the Museum’s main building declined from just under 1.3 million visitors in 1930 to 886,000 a decade later.

Remarkably, however, this was also a time of bold innovation as the Museum’s staff worked creatively in the new economic and social environment to engage and inspire the public. With support from the federal government and private donors, the Museum reached out to audiences across New York City, and even opened a new building, the Cloisters. An important resource was the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a New Deal government agency that employed millions of Americans who carried out public works and community service projects. While many WPA workers built roads, bridges, and other infrastructure, some of its divisions assigned people to work in arts, culture, and related organizations, including museums. Several dozen WPA staff served at The Met from 1934 to 1942. They prepared maps and charts on art history themes for classroom and gallery instruction, photographed and drew objects for use as illustrations in publications,





8. Neighborhood Circulating Exhibition on view at a public school in the Bronx, 1939

9. Plan for the Bonnefont Cloister garden prepared by the Works Progress Administration, 1941

guarded objects, presented lectures, installed exhibitions, and conserved the plaster cast collection.

WPA workers also supported a unique Met initiative of the Great Depression known as Neighborhood Circulating Exhibitions (fig. 8). A series of ten thematic installations composed of artworks from the Museum collection traveled to public libraries, community centers, schools, and municipal buildings across New York City. More than two million people viewed these exhibitions, which featured Egyptian and Greek antiquities, arms and armor, Japanese and Chinese art, and textiles from around the world. Soon after the Museum reopened in 2020, a special exhibition in the Antonio Ratti Textile Center, *Art for the Community*, highlighted this groundbreaking effort to present Met objects in public spaces outside the Museum walls.

Another impressive achievement of the 1930s was the publication of a revised and enlarged edition of the Museum’s *Guide to the Collections*. Acknowledging that “the Museum has become too vast for a single visit,” the new *Guide* appeared in two volumes during 1934–35. Earlier versions were mostly text and led visitors along a linear path following the floor plan of the building. The new *Guide* was instead arranged thematically and

introduced collection highlights in a copiously illustrated handbook format. “A page for every gallery and a picture on every page,” announced The Met proudly in the *Bulletin* (January 1934), “this is the scheme that makes the new *Guide to the Collections* . . . the indispensable companion for travelers in the Museum.”

Perhaps the most remarkable accomplishment of the 1930s was the design, construction, installation, and opening of the Cloisters, conceived during the 1920s as a museum dedicated to European medieval art. Ground was broken in 1934 for the Cloisters, the Museum’s first satellite location, in today’s Fort Tryon Park. The massive effort, which included a reconfiguration of the surrounding landscape as well as the construction of a new building, was a source of much-needed income for the many laborers it employed (fig. 9). Financier and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. funded the project, gave millions of dollars to purchase works for its galleries, and established an endowment that continues to support acquisitions today. The Cloisters opened to the public on May 10, 1938, providing a beautiful new venue for art appreciation, learning, and inspiration as the nation continued to struggle through the last years of the Great Depression.

# THE BLACK MOUNTED RIDERS

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On June 9, 2020, a *New York Times* article, “Evoking History, Black Cowboys Take to the Streets,” highlighted the history of African American cowboys and how their presence “challenged the traditional idea of what a horse rider could look like.” An integral presence in the Black Lives Matter protests from Compton to Houston, the riders reclaimed “the traditional role of mounted riders in demonstrations in urban communities.”<sup>1</sup> Just as these cowboys draw attention to the presence of Black cowboys in American history, the recent social upheavals have prompted museums to share narratives of Black peoples that are present in their collections.

In The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection, we have a depiction of Black mounted riders on a tapestry-woven textile from the late antique period in Egypt (fig. 10). These mounted riders, woven in black wool, appear to race across the textile with their hunting dogs. Nude and harnessed, the men hold stones and bows. A sloping Phrygian cap, associated with the Near East, rests on each rider’s head. Hunting in such images was a popular theme in late antique art and appears across the Mediterranean in a wide range of media. Aristocrats flaunted excess through the slaughter of animals for sport. To Christians, men on horseback also gained an eschatological meaning, a hope of an ultimate victory soon to be won. Men on horseback have traditionally represented symbols of political, military, or religious power.

The other figures in the textile, winged women and an additional rider, were sewn with pink and white threads. Accompanied by depictions of auspicious baskets of fruit, floral bands, and roundels of plumped-cheeked ladies, these images are depictions of victory, success, and prosperity. The textile itself shows signs of wear with both ancient and modern repairs. Although we do not know exactly where it was found, it was likely excavated from an Egyptian cemetery in the early twentieth century. Textiles like these were wrapped around deceased bodies and were preserved by Egypt’s dry climate. The weight of the fabric and the motifs suggests the textile was a wall hanging for a domestic context.

It is almost impossible to know what messages the Black figures would have conveyed to late antique viewers. The people living in Egypt during this period belonged to a multicultural society. Evidence of Egypt’s multiple cultural spheres can be found both in the visual arts and in texts. For example, interactions between Nubians and Egyptians can be detected in the presence of Nubian-style pots in the Western Desert of Egypt and the Nile Valley (fig. 11). The geometric decoration on these bowls appears on pottery from Nubia, which points to the flow of visual ideas from up and down the Nile Valley. Multiculturalism is also evident in the numerous languages spoken and written in the late antique and medieval periods. Latin, Greek, Coptic, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Old Nubian are found on written materials from the region.

In late antique texts, authors noted skin color when describing people. The literature discusses the otherness of blackness, the negativity of blackness. In *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, prejudice was a means to humiliate a Black monk, Abba Moses, in a monastery in Egypt: “Another day when a council was being held in Scetis, the Fathers treated Moses with contempt in order to test him, saying, ‘Why does this black man come among us?’ When he heard this he kept silent. When the council was dismissed, they said to him, ‘Abba, did that not grieve you at all?’ He said to them, ‘I was grieved, but I kept silence.’”<sup>2</sup>

According to tradition, Abba Moses was a reformed robber who lived in the monastic community of Nitria. He eventually became one of the leaders of this community and a revered martyr in the Coptic Church. While ascetic humility was a valued component of monasticism, the color prejudice used to impart this lesson is telling. The short parable suggests the possible otherness of Black bodies in private, late antique Egyptian spaces—

**10.** *Fragment from a Coptic Hanging*. Egypt, 5th century. Linen, wool; plain weave, tapestry-weave, 41 × 24<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (1041 × 63 cm). Gift of George F. Baker, 1890 (90.5.905)





**11.** *Bowl with Interior Geometric Decoration.* Coptic, Kharga Oasis, Byzantine Egypt, 4th–7th century. Earthenware, slip decoration, 5 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 11 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (13.2 × 28.6 cm). Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.20.177)

in this case, an elite home—and offers insights into the reception of the mounted riders, with their foreign dress and skin tone, on The Met’s textile. To date, scholarship has not addressed the presence of figures with multiple ethnicities on the textile. Without knowing more about its original context and purpose, it is difficult to say anything more about how the original maker and viewer would have understood the textile. However, given the prominent and deliberate inclusion of figures with different skin tones, we should take a moment to reflect on why it mattered to make these distinctions.

The recent focus on racial justice has prompted art historians and museums to reexamine our assumptions about our collective history and culture. This urgent call to correct narratives provides an opportunity to address

not only the multiculturalism in Mediterranean societies, such as Egypt, but also to recognize the different experiences Black communities had during the period. Like our modern Black cowboys, the presence of the Black mounted riders on the textile forces us to acknowledge a part of history that is little known and waiting to be told.

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1. Article by Walter Thompson-Hernández, with photographs by Kayla Reefer.  
2. Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, rev. ed. (1975; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984), p. 139.

# “A VANISHED LIFE”: MORTON SCHAMBERG AND CHARLES SHEELER

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The so-called Spanish flu of 1918 led to the death of more than fifty million people worldwide, more than twice the estimated number of fatalities of World War I. One victim of the pandemic was Morton Schamberg, a pioneering yet still obscure American painter and photographer. He took ill on October 10, 1918, and died three days later—a severe shock to his family and community, but especially to Charles Sheeler, his closest friend, artistic ally, and studio partner (fig. 12).<sup>1</sup> The two artists met while studying painting with William Merritt Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) in Philadelphia, and they remained companions in American avant-garde circles until Schamberg’s untimely death.

A brief survey of an artist whose career was cut short by a global pandemic seems especially meaningful in light of the coronavirus crisis of 2020. In particular, Schamberg’s unique gelatin silver print *View of Rooftops* (fig. 13), an early modernist masterpiece, offers a resonant entry point for understanding the artist, his work, and what was lost. A closely related photograph by Sheeler, *Doylestown House—The Stove* (fig. 14), from the same year highlights the parallels and divergences of the artists’ paths in the war years.

Born in Philadelphia, Schamberg was a quick master of multiple artistic genres, earning a degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania in 1903 and another in painting at PAFA in 1906. While at the academy, he and Sheeler spent their summers in Europe with Chase studying old and new masters and learning about trends in contemporary art firsthand from the likes of Cézanne, Picasso, Braque, and Matisse. By 1908 the former classmates were sharing a studio in Philadelphia and a weekend house in nearby Doylestown, where they both produced groundbreaking work in a variety of



12. Morton Schamberg (American, 1881–1918). *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1912. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Jean Loeb Whitehill, 1973 (1973.664.18)



**13.** Morton Schamberg (American, 1881–1918). *View of Rooftops*, 1917. Gelatin silver print, 9<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (23.7 × 19 cm). Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John. C. Waddell, 1987 (1987.1100.116)

media. Searching for a viable means to make a living, they even taught themselves photography. Schamberg would make studio portraits and Sheeler art reproductions for other artists, galleries, and their clients. As emerging artists in the 1910s with a thorough understanding of the lessons of international contemporary art, each presented their newest paintings in the New York Armory Show, the landmark survey of European and American modernism that opened in February 1913 and featured some 1,300 works by 300 artists.

Although Schamberg showed a suite of Fauve-inspired portraits in the Armory Show, as soon as

pictures of the devastation in war-torn Europe began to haunt American newspapers in summer 1914, the pacifist artist moved away from figuration to an intense and radical form of abstraction that established him as an early American Dadaist. The basic elements in Schamberg's late drawings, paintings, and sculptures are fragmented industrial parts (bookbinding machines, telephones, plumbing hardware) rendered with studied precision. He continued to pursue photography, but shifted his focus from portraiture to urban subjects and geometries. In March 1917, seven months before his death, he had his first exhibition of photographs, alongside Sheeler and the New York photographer Paul Strand at the Modern Gallery in New York.<sup>2</sup>

Shamberg made *View of Rooftops* either while preparing this show in Philadelphia or while attending its opening in New York. Formerly owned by Sheeler, the photograph presents a detailed rendering of the built

environment, but its formal composition—strong diagonal lines and a compression of pure shapes—reveals a well-crafted Cubist sensibility. The work carefully denies what is typically expected from a rooftop view—a glimpse of the street below. Instead, it offers more and more rooftops in a kind of endless repetition that suggests Surrealist techniques long before their time.

*Doylestown House—The Stove* is Sheeler's equally novel study of domestic details inside the eighteenth-century fieldstone house that he shared with Schamberg. Sheeler also left behind the Impressionist methods taught by Chase and adopted a rigorous formalism, but before turning to the industrial subjects favored by Schamberg, he first focused his attention on vernacular elements in their farmhouse and nearby barns. Here, the artist constructs a rather eerie scene by choosing to depict the room at night, likely using a kerosene lamp hidden behind the stove to illuminate the whitewashed back wall and help draw the stove's powerful silhouette. The pictorial effect is dramatic, paradoxically both intensely real and wholly artificial. Reducing the room's otherwise romantic elements to pure form and technology—a heating stove, its chimney, a twelve-pane window, a door, and a pair of latches—Sheeler built a photograph as taut and precise in its composition as *View of Rooftops*. Like his roommate's urban view, Sheeler's experimental house study earns its authority by denying expectations: the window is not transparent, but as opaque as the black stove; the light source seems to come from the floor; and what in another artist's hands might have been a picture celebrating the region's endless nostalgia for colonial Americana, in Sheeler's becomes one as modern and contemporary as a new Ford Model T.<sup>3</sup>

A year after Schamberg's death from the flu, Sheeler moved to New York. Devastated by his friend's passing, which he described as "an overwhelming blow," he visited the Doylestown farmhouse less and less until he finally gave up the lease in 1926.<sup>4</sup> The innovative photographs Sheeler produced there, however, continued to inspire him for the rest of his life, serving as critical source material for works in other media, including remarkably precise copies. In 1932, for example, the artist remade *Doylestown House—The Stove* as an oversize drawing in conté crayon.<sup>5</sup> Sheeler described this recapitulation of his earlier work as a kind of homage to Schamberg, "A vanished life that is part of me."<sup>6</sup>



14. Charles Sheeler (American, 1883–1965). *Doylestown House—The Stove*, 1917. Gelatin silver print, 9 1/8 × 6 7/16 in. (23.1 × 16.3 cm). Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1933 (33.43.259)

1. Henry Schamberg, the artist's father with whom he was living, also died during the pandemic.

2. "Photographs by Sheeler, Strand, and Schamberg" ran from March 29 to April 9, 1917, and was the first public showing of photographs by Sheeler and Schamberg. For more on the exhibition, see Theodore E. Stebbins and Norman Keyes, *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs*, exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987).

3. The photograph entered The Met in 1933 as one of some five hundred icons of early twentieth-century photography, a landmark gift from the New York artist and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz.

4. Charles Sheeler interview by Martin Friedman, June 18, 1959, Archives of American Art, Tape 2, pp. 17–18.

5. See National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2000.181.1). See also The Met's conté crayon drawing, *The Open Door*, 1932 (1992.24.7), an exact copy of his 1917 photograph, a gelatin silver print of which is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

6. See *New York Times*, book review section, September 1, 1957, p. 1, quoted in Karen Lucic, *Charles Sheeler in Doylestown: American Modernism and the Pennsylvania Tradition*, exh. cat. (Allentown, Pa.: Allentown Art Museum, 1997), p. 108.

# ANTHEM TO THE MASK IN FOUR DIMENSIONS

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At its most basic level, a mask is defined as “a covering for the face, worn either as a disguise or for protection.”<sup>1</sup> In the worldwide response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the wearing of a mask has become a necessity in allowing us to emerge from isolation and socially reengage. In this context, the mask shields us from exposure to contagion while also safeguarding the health and safety of others.

In the broader cultural realm, masks have long featured in explorations of the human condition, from ancient Greek tragedy and the *commedia dell'arte* to a plethora of traditions developed across sub-Saharan Africa. Among the earliest examples of the latter are a series of sixth-century terracotta helmet masks from the southern African site of Lydenburg, which may have been worn in ceremonial performances related to initiation. In the ancient Yoruba city-state of Ife, the leader Obalufon II—traditionally credited with the introduction of bronze casting—is immortalized by an arresting lifesize mask of pure copper that has been kept on a palace altar since its creation in the twelfth century.

This legacy is reflected in the appropriation of the mask as a literary metaphor for existential states ranging from repression to liberation. In his poem “We Wear the Mask,” Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) speaks to the experience of Black Americans who present a joyous face to the world in order to conceal profound suffering: “We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries/To thee from tortured souls arise./We sing, but oh the clay is vile/Beneath our feet, and long the mile;/But let the world dream otherwise,/We wear the mask!”<sup>2</sup>

Following the banishment of colonialism in West Africa, Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001)—a poet who was the leader of the Négritude literary movement and Senegal’s first head of state—called out to the plurality of mask forms in his “Prayer to Masks,” advocating for their revival and continuing role as ancestral guard-

ians: “Masks! Oh Masks/ . . . we are the men of the dance whose feet only gain power when they beat the hard soil.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, the wood face mask has become the quintessential artifact associated with Africa’s artistic and cultural heritage. Both Dunbar and Senghor may have had in mind a genre of mask carved by Baule sculptors in Côte d’Ivoire as a visual point of reference for their generalized commentaries. The stylized elegance of one such idealized female face is unmarked by wrinkles or the passage of time (fig. 15). Its highly polished, jet-black surface reflects its handling by Western collectors, who favored monochromatic works or those stripped of the pigments that originally enlivened them in performance. An example in The Met collection figures notably in the earliest of many European avant-garde publications and exhibitions that sought to define an aesthetic of African art removed and isolated from any cultural context.<sup>4</sup>

Masks, at least as we experience them in museums, are for the most part static and silent artifacts, admired for their inventiveness as works of sculpture. Many distinct genres were produced, each adapted to evolving social circumstances. While historical mask forms that failed to remain socially relevant were abandoned over time, new ones continue to be introduced. Their public display in dynamic performances foregrounds both the talents of the author of a mask and those of the dancer. Donning a mask often conferred upon its wearer additional layers of social identity, moreover, such as induction into an association or as the virtuoso master of complex and thrilling choreography. The fleeting experiences and excitement of past performances, which ranged from entertainments to rites of passage, are elusive to us now. Instead, we are left with the fixed materiality of the sculptural element as an abiding testament to those traditions.





**15.** Portrait mask (*Gba gba*). Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples, before 1913. Wood, H. 10 in. (24 cm). Bequest of Adrienne Minassian, 1994 (1997.277)



**16.** Portrait mask (*Mblo*). Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples, late 19th – early 20th century. Wood and pigment, H. 16 1/2 in. (41.9 cm). Purchase, Rogers Fund and Daniel and Marian Malcolm Gift, 2004 (2004.445)

The Baule operatic entertainment known as Mblo comprises a hierarchical succession of masquerades personifying different elements of the community, from lowly domestic animals to its most accomplished citizenry, who were celebrated with portrait masks conceived to be their artistic doubles. These depictions sometimes translate the visages and achievements of specific individuals into an idealized portrayal with fantastic metaphorical features, such as the refined physiognomy of the bearded male elder crowned with three prong-like horns as attributes of strength (fig. 16). A synthesis of delicacy and bold force, his facial expression is serenely introspective. After one of the horns was damaged through use, an indigenous intervention extended the mask's life through careful recarving.

Across central and southern Africa, adolescent boys undergo circumcision and, during a period of seclusion, are given instruction in the qualities expected of them as men. The return of initiates at the close of these rites, called *mukanda*, is marked by mask performances. Among the most imposing is the major cultural archetype known as Sachihongo, an ancestral hunter

armed with bow and arrow. The Mbunda artist responsible for one such commanding evocation captured ideas of metamorphosis and transformation through the mask's intense red hue, the crescent-shaped eyes, which are engulfed in ever-widening concentric ripples, and the cavernous aperture of the mouth framed by carefully defined teeth (fig. 17).

Sculptors across Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia have carved countless examples of oval face masks featuring convex foreheads and sharply narrowed chins (fig. 18). Their relatively homogenous appearance belies the singularity of the circumstances that informed their patronage and usage across regional cultures. Among the Dan, for example, powerful but immaterial nature spirits were said to visit a carver through dreams as a catalyst for the mask's creation. That force was believed to inhere in the mask and authorize an individual to wear it in performance. In the Mano and Gio communities of north-east Liberia, a warrior recognized for his success in military contests or a mother of many children might inspire a formally similar living mask, or *ge*. Endowed with divine attributes, these singular creations took



**17.** *Sachihongo mask*. Zambia, Mbunda peoples, 19th – early 20th century. Wood, H. 17 in. (43.2 cm). Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Anonymous, Dr. and Mrs. Sidney G. Clyman, The Katcher Family Foundation Inc., Steven Kossak, and Holly and David Ross Gifts, 2016 (2016.106)



**18.** *Face mask (Gunya Ge)*. Côte d'Ivoire, Dan peoples, 19th – 20th century. Wood, pigment, and kaolin, H. 9 1/4 in. (23.5 cm). Gift of Lillian and Sidney Lichter, 1985 (1985.420.2)

on varied functions, from entertainment to becoming sites where prayers and sacrificial offerings for ancestral intervention were directed.

Over successive generations, Dan, Mano, and Gio masks accrued potency, sometimes becoming emblematic for a sector of the community. Given the multiplicity of successive or overlapping roles for such works and their changing usage over time, in the absence of documentation of a mask's "life history" it is often impossible to determine which of these it formerly enacted, rendering the mask ineffectual or even potentially dangerous. Medical missionary and anthropologist George Harley recorded the complex biographies of specific masks, including one belonging to Nya, the supreme judge of his clan. As high priest, Nya was the keeper of a *Go ge*, or god spirit mask, produced for his father in 1870.<sup>5</sup> The mask figured centrally in the deliberations of a council of elders, over which Nya presided, as the group sought ancestral approval. With his appointment as the secular chief for the Liberian state government, Nya retired his mask. Following his death, his son, who was unequipped to care for it and concerned about its potency, elected to deposit it in a museum. Senghor both extolled and

lamented the poignant beauty and mute stillness of such disembodied sculptural elements in his poem "Masque Nègre," which he dedicated to his contemporary Pablo Picasso: "Face of mask, closed to the ephemeral, without eyes, without matter."<sup>6</sup> As his ode makes evident, these dormant masks endure as the physical relics of their past performative lives.

1. *OED Online*, s.v. "mask," Oxford University Press, July 2020; <http://www.oed.com>.

2. *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1913), p. 71.

3. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Prayer to Masks," in *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 49–50.

4. These include the pioneering 1913 display at Galerie Levesque, Paris, which presented it as fine art in relation to Asian, Egyptian, and Precolumbian antiquities and Western works. Appreciation of this work entirely in terms of its formal qualities is also evident in the 1915 African art survey *Negerplastik* by Carl Einstein.

5. George W. Harley, *Masks as Agents of Social Control in Northeast Liberia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 1950), pp. 14–15.

6. Léopold Sédar Senghor and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948).

# ONE LAST LOOK

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A picture held in the hand is different from one hanging on a wall. Physical contact with an image makes it an extension of the body and layers touch with sight. In the early sixteenth century, European painters began to produce portraits so small they could fit in the palm or hang in a locket around the neck. In one such portrait, Hans Holbein the Younger depicted Margaret Roper, daughter of the humanist and martyr Sir Thomas More (fig. 19). Praised across Europe for her learning, Roper appears with her thumb tucked inside a book, her shoulders hunched, and her gaze lost in the distance. The inscription, giving her age as thirty, reveals that Holbein painted Roper in the same year that her father was beheaded.

A treasure of The Met collection of European paintings, Holbein's miniature is almost never on view. Few works of art resist display in the museum as determinedly as portrait miniatures. Painted with thin strokes of watercolor on ivory wafers or sheets of vellum, miniatures will fade into invisibility if exposed to light for too long. Their scale precludes simultaneous viewing by more than one person. When exhibited in a vitrine, the crystal covering the painted surface flickers with glares and reflections. Often the lockets that have housed them for centuries are too fragile to be prised apart for photography or scientific analysis.

As the curator at The Met responsible for our collection of European portrait miniatures, I have the privilege of unusual intimacy with these objects. Until very recently, whenever I wanted, I could request the key to the storage cabinet that houses them, where they rest in archival boxes, individually wrapped in non-acidic paper (fig. 20). I could hold the miniatures in my gloved hand, feeling their heft in the same way their intended viewers would have in the sixteenth century.

As objects invented to address geographic distance and physical separation, miniatures resonate particularly during this period of quarantine. In fact, historians believe that some of the very first miniatures, dating to the late 1520s, depicted two sons of François I, King of France, who were then being held hostage in Madrid.

Commissioned by the princes' aunt, these portraits were meant to awaken sympathy for their plight in distant beholders. Miniature portraits soon became fashionable gifts among monarchs and between aristocratic lovers. Elizabethan courtiers wore miniatures on their bodies, discreetly tucked under a shirt or hanging from a belt for others to see. Another miniature in The Met collection, by the English artist Nicholas Hilliard, conveys the function of miniatures as love tokens, depicting a beautiful young man, his head haloed in curls (fig. 21). Most scholars identify Hilliard's sitter as Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, the ill-fated favorite of Elizabeth I, who kept her miniatures in a small cabinet in the most private room of her palace.

19. Hans Holbein the Younger (German, Augsburg 1497/98 – 1543 London). *Margaret Roper (Margaret More, 1505 – 1544), 1535 – 36*. Vellum laid on playing card, Diam. 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (4.5 cm). Rogers Fund, 1950 (50.69.2)





Miniature portraits may seem a quaint relic, but in the twenty-first century we are all again compulsively familiar with the handheld image. In my Brooklyn apartment, I rely on my phone to look at photos of my distant loved ones in their separate quarantines. Elizabethan poets fantasized that their lovers' portraits might speak back to them; now FaceTime allows images to do just that. The turned ivory boxes that housed some portrait miniatures would have warmed to the touch. For our part, we swipe across screens and feel the heat of over-worked batteries.

As an art historian of early modern Europe, I have felt an uncanny recognition during these pandemic months. The events of earlier plagues have repeated themselves, with the theaters closing, the rich fleeing town, and the most vulnerable in society treated as scapegoats. Holbein himself died of the plague in his mid-forties. Those of us who until recently felt insulated by modern medicine from the experience of pandemic illness are now learning the grim lessons of plague-time. As I have kept track of friends and colleagues in the hospital, the fear of being unable to say good-bye, to take one last look at those dear to me, has been as constant as the sirens outside my window. Such fear connects us across the centuries, perennial.

In the same year she sat for her portrait by Holbein, Margaret Roper's need to see her father one last time before his execution spurred her to an act of defiance. As her husband, William, recorded, "desirous to see her father, whom she thought she should never see in this world after," Margaret waited by "the Tower Wharf, where she knew he should pass by." As "soon as she saw him . . . she . . . hastily ran to him, and there openly in the sight of them all, embraced him, took him about the neck, and kissed him." Having received his blessing and said good-bye, Margaret, "not satisfied . . . and like one that had forgotten herself . . . having respect neither to herself, nor to the press of the people and multitude that were about him, suddenly turned back again, ran to him as before, took him about the neck, and divers times together most lovingly kissed him."<sup>1</sup> With touch proscribed and travel perilous, we are all learning something Margaret Roper knew perfectly well: images are not enough.



20. Portrait miniatures in the Department of European Paintings

21. Nicholas Hilliard (English, Exeter ca. 1547–1619 London). *Portrait of a Young Man, Probably Robert Devereux (1566–1601), Second Earl of Essex*, 1588. Vellum laid on card, 1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (4 × 3.3 cm). Fletcher Fund, 1935 (35.89.4)

1. George Sampson, ed., *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More: Ralph Robinson's Translation with Roper's Life of More, and Some of His Letters* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1910), pp. 267–68 (spelling modernized by the author).

# ARMOR, THE ORIGINAL PPE

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Our bodies present a fascinating and dichotomous mix of strength and weakness. The human spirit is famously indomitable, but our physical state leaves us susceptible to all manner of harm. For thousands of years, body armor was one of the principal ways that people sought to overcome the relative frailty of flesh and bone in conflict situations; it is in a certain sense the original personal protective equipment (PPE). As early as the fifth century B.C., armor was fashioned in bronze not only to protect a warrior's body but also to enhance and adorn it (fig. 22). Many cultures developed their own distinctive forms, typically utilizing the best materials and most advanced craftsmanship available in a given place and time. In Europe, for example, armor made of steel achieved technical and aesthetic perfection in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Ironically, it was during the same period that firearms technology began to spread around the globe. While armor was an effective defense against earlier weapons, it could not withstand gunfire without being made of plates that were too thick and heavy for practical wear. As a result, wherever and whenever firearms became prevalent, armor subsequently became obsolete, in the case of Europe by about the mid-seventeenth century.

**22.** *Helmet and Cuirass.* Etruscan, probably Vulci, late 5th–4th century B.C. Bronze and silver; H. of helmet 13 in. (33 cm), H. of cuirass 20 1/2 in. (52.1 cm). Purchase, Louis V. Bell, Harris Brisbane Dick, Fletcher, and Rogers Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest and Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Mr. and Mrs. Ronald S. Lauder, Friends of Arms and Armor and Malcolm Hewitt Wiener Foundation Gifts, 2017 (2017.228a–c)

**23.** *American Helmet Model No. 5.* Designed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art by Bashford Dean (American, 1867–1928). Hale and Kilburn Company, Philadelphia, 1918. Steel, paint, leather, textile, and string, H. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm). Purchase, Gift of Bashford Dean, by exchange, 2013 (2013.582)

**24.** *Helmet (rmog).* Mongolian, 15th–17th century. Iron, gold, silver, and copper, H. 7 5/8 in. (19.5 cm). Purchase, Gift of William H. Riggs, by exchange, 1999 (1999.120)

However, in the early twentieth century the conditions of large-scale mechanized warfare made steel helmets a vital necessity once again. In 1915, during World War I, for the first time in nearly three hundred years steel helmets became standard equipment—initially for French troops, and soon for all participants in that conflict. They remained the norm in every significant military conflagration in the following fifty years (fig. 23). From the 1950s onward, progressive developments in lightweight, bullet-resistant alternatives to steel, such as ballistic fabrics, ceramics, and plastics, have again made body armor a practical, effective, and widespread form of personal protection.

In many preindustrial societies it was also believed that armor could protect against other factors in addition to the usual perils of physical assault, such as moral and spiritual danger or accidental death. This type of defense is invoked through images, symbols, and words incorporated into the decoration of armor. On an Islamic example there might be a phrase from the Qur'an rendered in ornate calligraphy; on a European armor a biblical quotation or the image of a saint. One extraordinary Mongolian helmet, made for a follower of Tibetan Buddhism, is completely covered with images of guardian deities, sacred symbols, and a series of phrases requesting specific protection against ghosts, demons, and weapons (fig. 24). Some of the same imagery, stemming from the same concepts and beliefs, can be seen on distinctive amulet boxes called *ga'u*, an ancient type of PPE still worn by some travelers, pilgrims, and others in areas that are culturally Tibetan to guard against injury, illness, or misfortune of any kind.

As these few examples suggest, although the concept of what constitutes PPE continues to change and evolve in different cultures at different times, our need for it remains.

# STICKIES ART SCHOOL

MIA FINEMAN Curator, Department of Photographs

Nina Katchadourian (American, b. 1968) is an interdisciplinary artist with a disarming ability to make something out of nothing. She works in a wide variety of media, approaching each project with curiosity, humor, and a rigorous kind of playfulness. In recent years, she has created concrete poetry from the spines of stacked books, recorded a museum audio guide about dust, and constructed a miniature theater for the observation of eye floaters. She is perhaps best known for *Seat Assignment*, an ongoing series of photographs and videos created on airplanes using only an iPhone and materials

close at hand: books and magazines, in-flight snacks, items of clothing, and bathroom paper products, which she used to create a suite of *Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style*. Represented in The Met's collection by five photographs and a print portfolio, *Seat Assignment* is a powerful demonstration of Katchadourian's belief that art can happen anywhere, even within the cramped confines of a commercial airline seat.

For the past year, Katchadourian has been using the app My Talking Pet to animate still photographs of her black-and-white tuxedo cat Stickies (fig. 25). She posts the brief videos on Facebook and Instagram. Although the animation is crude—only the cat's head and mouth move—Stickies is a vivid character: grouchy and disaffected, endearingly vulnerable, and often very funny. In one photograph, he lounges like a centerfold on vibrantly colored cushions in front of a groovy-looking blue-striped background. “The Burt Reynolds of cats” is how one Facebook friend described him.

When the COVID-19 crisis struck, Katchadourian quickly enlisted Stickies to help school-aged children and their parents, including myself, endure the boredom and confinement of quarantine. On March 16, 2020, the day New York City's massive public-school system shut down, Katchadourian posted a video of Stickies on Facebook, inviting kids around the world to enroll in the tuition-free Stickies Art School. Every few weeks, there would be a new assignment, and students could post their work in the comments section below the video. Stickies promised to critique each submission but warned, “This is just for kids. No grown-ups, okay? Stay away!”

For the first assignment, Stickies asked for a drawing of himself “in a special transportation vehicle.” About thirty kids, ranging in age from four to thirteen, responded with drawings of Stickies in race cars, trains, boats, submarines, and spaceships of various shapes



25. Still from Stickies Art School video animation on Facebook



and sizes, including one with yellow wings submitted by my six-year-old daughter (fig. 26). Subsequent assignments asked students to design a costume for Stickies (fig. 27), to envision various elements of the school (buildings, uniforms, lunchroom, playground, etc.), and to compose a Stickies Art School anthem.

Several weeks after each assignment was completed, Stickies would respond with a lengthy video critiquing the students' work, in age order from youngest to oldest. Katchadourian, who teaches art at New York University's Gallatin School for Individualized Study, has an abiding interest in the pedagogical dynamics of the "group crit,"

an emotionally arduous ritual notorious for reducing students to tears. In spite of his grumpiness, Stickies's comments were consistently warm and appreciative. At the end of each critique, he invited kids to mail him their drawings, in care of Katchadourian, who has been waiting out the pandemic with her husband in Berlin. In exchange for each work received, Stickies sent back a tiny hand-sewn pillowcase printed with the SAS logo (fig. 28). My daughter's, tucked into her doll's bed by the window, serves as a small reminder that boredom can be a catalyst for creativity and that art is a gift that keeps on giving.



**26.** Stickies in His Flying Saucer, by Sylvie Smith, age 6

**27.** Stickies as Big Foot, by Sasha Marks, age 7

**28.** Stickies Art School Pillowcase, by Nina Katchadourian, age 52





# THE MIRROR OF HISTORY: BLACK ARTISTS AS ANTIRACIST ACTIVISTS

**DENISE MURRELL** Associate Curator, Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Art

When I joined The Met in January, I was elated in anticipation of an initial period of reflection, a time to get to know my new colleagues while pursuing research for my first Met exhibition. I was especially eager to continue my career-long exploration of the trans-Atlantic axis of modernist art in which African American and African diasporan artists and culture gained international acclaim in the late nineteenth century and then in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to 1940s. This was the first African American-led modern art movement, and it was rooted in the eponymous historic neighborhood just thirty blocks north of The Met.

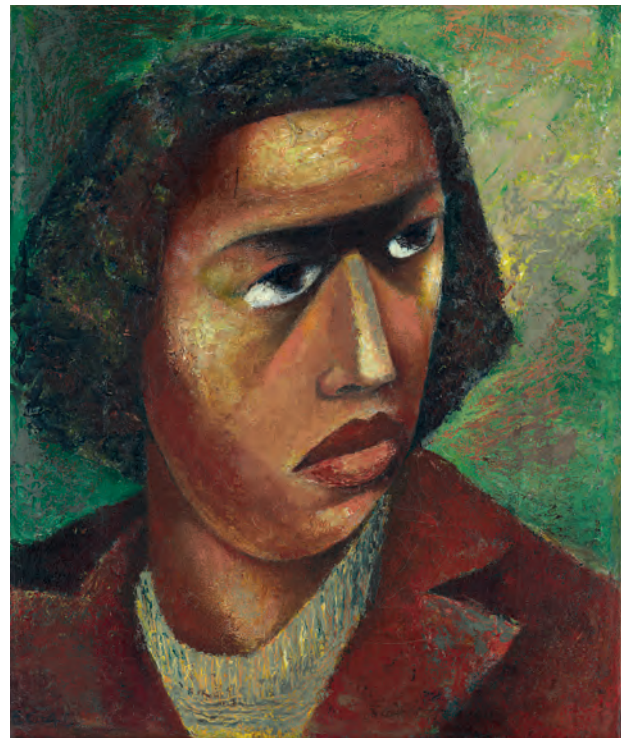
I could not have known in January the extent to which my reimmersion in the art of the Harlem Renaissance would evolve into a meditation on aspects of its legacy during the pandemic-driven quarantine, which for me began with The Met's temporary closure in mid-March. As the city settled into a quietude unlike anything I've ever experienced, I spent my days staring alternately at the completely deserted streets outside my windows, at the TV news reports of the horrific COVID-19 mortality rates that cast a pall over the city, and at the various devices I now relied on for Zoom meetings during office hours and for virtual visits with family and friends into the evening. I felt simultaneously fortunate that my loved ones were safe and well, and that we were able to work comfortably from home, yet anxious with an ever-

present awareness of the risk of infection, seemingly every time I opened my door.

In that context, getting reacquainted with the ideas and artistic practices of the Harlem Renaissance, and of early modern Europe—like my regular walks through Central Park—became a balm, an escape into other realms. My disrupted schedule of travel to visit collections and archives morphed into flights of curiosity and exploration, transported by books and, increasingly, via The Met's online collections. Thanks to the Museum website's system of cross-indexing, I was constantly intrigued to see, while researching the artists I knew well, the

**29.** Samuel Joseph Brown, Jr. (American, 1907–1994). *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1941. Watercolor, charcoal, and graphite on paper, 20<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (51.4 × 39.1 cm). Gift of Pennsylvania Work Projects Administration, 1943 (43.46.4)

**30.** Elizabeth Catlett (American and Mexican, 1915–2012). *Head of a Woman*, 1942–44. Oil on canvas, 12 × 10 in. (30.5 × 25.4 cm). Purchase, Bequest of Gioconda King, by exchange, 2018 (2018.157)





31. Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917–2000). *The Photographer*, 1942. Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, 22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 30<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (56.2 × 77.5 cm). Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001 (2001.205)

names of many others who were new to me, their works parked in storage, often for decades. I could never resist going down those rabbit holes and stepping into small wonderlands of (re)discovery. These ventures ultimately became acts of the retrieval of lost histories, forgotten artists, and centuries-old social and aesthetic philosophies that proved to have compelling relevance for the unfolding events of the current day.

I was riveted when Samuel Joseph Brown's *Self-Portrait* (fig. 29) popped onto my screen unsummoned, a byproduct of my intended review of the Museum's holdings by Elizabeth Catlett, an artist of the same period. While Catlett is venerated today for her portraits bestowing dignity to the maids, cooks, and union organizers she encountered while teaching at a Harlem community school, I had never heard of Samuel Brown. But the mood he set of pensive self-contemplation as he gazed into a mirror, enclosed by the deep blue tonalities of an indistinct interior, resonated with my own sense of confinement in an uncertain new world.

Brown's self-portrait is one of very few works by a Black early modern artist that The Met acquired, as a gift, the year after it was made. Brown, who received an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania, was the first African American to be accepted into the Depression-era WPA relief program for artists, and his work gained international prominence when paintings by him appeared in a 1939 group show at the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>1</sup> Despite this acclaim, his self-portrait has been exhibited only three times (while on loan in 1976 and 1988 and in 2003).

Catlett's small but compelling *Head of a Woman* (fig. 30), a rare panel painting from her work of this period, imbues her sitter with a similarly reflective mood, if with a palpable sense of exhaustion. Catlett deploys the sharp strokes of a palette knife to eschew the seeming effortlessness of a smoother surface, making manifest her own careful work.

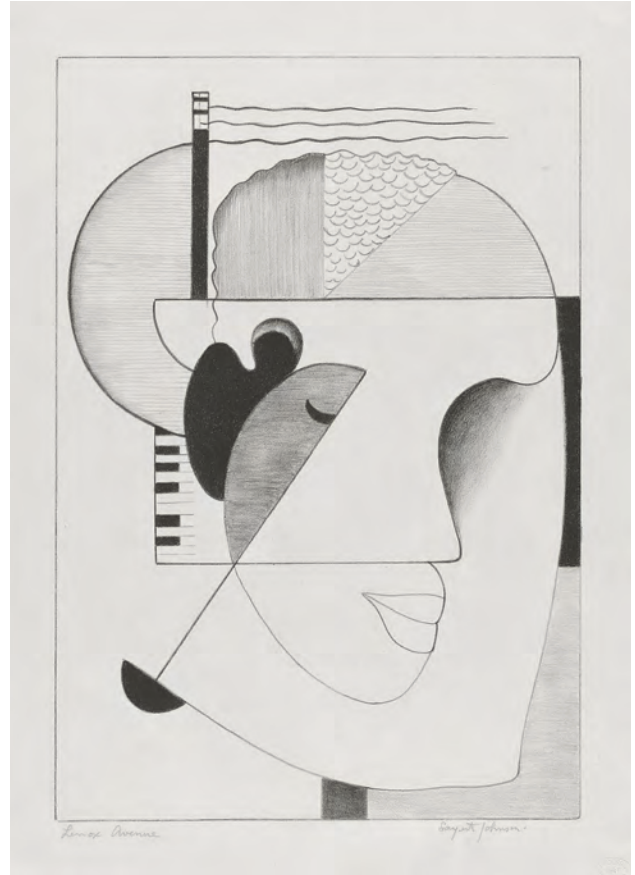
Despite the differing compositional styles of these two artists, one famous, the other now obscure, I was struck by the resonances between their work and the artistic tenets of the Harlem Renaissance. Both used portraiture, for example, to convey dignity to ordinary African American subjects, as seen in a handful of small

prints by each artist still held by The Met, and both articulated an artistic vision based on a commitment to issues of social justice. This informed their repeated choices to portray mainly working-class subjects with the ennobling aesthetics usually reserved for elites. They saw no contradiction in building overt activism into their artistic endeavors.

In their socially conscious practice, Catlett and Brown were not unique among African American artists of their generation. Jacob Lawrence, like Catlett, chose to portray everyday life in Harlem but did so in a more panoramic vein with works such as *The Photographer* (fig. 31), in which he populated a busy Harlem street scene with sharply angular figures from all walks of life — from two suited businessmen to a manhole worker — while denoting the rapidly modernizing city by juxtaposing a horse-drawn furniture wagon and a green truck with shiny red wheels. The theme of modernity likewise informed Harlem artists' wide-ranging methodologies, from Sargent Johnson's schematic thinking head in *Lenox Avenue* (fig. 32) to James Van Der Zee's photographic portraits, including *Twin Sisters* (fig. 33), which depicts the cosmopolitan elegance of the expanding Black middle class.

This shared commitment to portraying modern Black city life, despite divergent visual styles, was central to the vision of the New Negro artist, as articulated by Alain Locke, the founding philosopher of the Harlem Renaissance, in opposition to prevalent stereotypes. He urged African American artists to formulate a modern mode of portraying the urbane, stylish residents of the new Black cities taking shape in Harlem, South Side Chicago, and elsewhere nationwide during the Great Migration, as African Americans were driven out of the rural South by racism, poverty, and the Jim Crow system of legal segregation that denied them basic human rights.

My contemplation of this activist artistic philosophy intensified a few months into quarantine, when, owing to a searing turn in national events, the streets outside my windows were suddenly the opposite of empty. In the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd, a present-day enactment of the thousands of lynchings that were a direct cause of the Great Migration, thousands of New Yorkers emerged from pandemic confinement in citywide protest marches that now often passed my building. The Met, in an expression of solidarity



**32.** Sargent Claude Johnson (American, 1888–1967). *Lenox Avenue*, 1938. Lithograph, 12 1/2 × 8 1/2 in. (31.8 × 21.6 cm); sheet: 15 × 10 1/2 in. (38.1 × 26.7 cm). Gift of the Work Projects Administration, Allocation Unit, Chicago, 1943 (43.47.174)

with the protestors' demands for a new national agenda of social justice, distributed a list of antiracist literature, which supplemented my own library, and announced an open day for introspection so that we could individually consider the role each of us might play in the Museum's publicly stated commitment to a policy of antiracism.

As I dived into the recent literature of antiracism, I was struck by the continuity of the ideas of some of the defining African American writers and philosophers of the Harlem Renaissance. This is manifest in the very definition of antiracism, the idea that, as expressed by the historian and scholar Ibram X. Kendi, "you cannot be neutral about racism—if you are not racist, then you must be actively antiracist by choosing to dismantle racism at individual and structural levels."<sup>2</sup> In 1925, Alain Locke wrote that "Art must discover and reveal the

beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid. And all vital art discovers beauty and opens our eyes to that which previously we could not see.”<sup>3</sup>

While contemplating Samuel Brown’s *Self-Portrait*, I recalled W. E. B. Du Bois’s comments, two decades before Locke, about the African American psyche: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”<sup>4</sup> Might Brown have chosen to depict himself as an embodiment of Du Bois’s widely read observations? As Kendi wrote more than a century later, “What Du Bois termed double-consciousness may be more precisely defined *dueling* consciousness . . . These dueling ideas . . . [remain] today . . . between antiracist ideas and assimilationist ideas.”<sup>5</sup>

What does this still-evolving discourse, among others, mean for me? How do I relate antiracist principles to my curatorial practice? How do I become a proactive factor for some of the change that will enable The Met to fulfill its stated commitment to antiracism? The self-reflection imposed by quarantine became a frame for

renewing my determination to help reshape the broad narratives of art history to include the forgotten, marginalized, and obliterated communities rendered invisible even while in plain view. Working collaboratively with willing colleagues of disparate perspectives, I believe that we can give voice to a new, more inclusive art history that reflects the many facets of the societies it represents. By setting aside the hierarchies and exclusions of the past, we can re-present the Museum as, in perception and fact, a space that is for all of us.

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1. Lisa Mintz Messinger, Lisa Gail Collins, and Rachel Mustalish, *African-American Artists, 1929–1945: Prints, Drawings, and Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), p. 33.

2. Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, Random House, 2019), p. 13.

3. Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), p. 264.

4. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903), p. 3.

5. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, p. 29.

**33.** James Van Der Zee (American, 1886–1983). *Identical Twins*, 1924. Gelatin silver print, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (18.7 × 23.8 cm). Gift of James Van DerZee Institute, 1970 (1970.539.2)



# MISSING THE MET

KEITH CHRISTIANSEN John Pope-Hennessy Chairman, Department of European Paintings

I often work at home in the evenings, after dinner, as well as on weekends when I have a project in hand. Perhaps it is an acquisition. Or the rehang of a gallery. Or an exhibition project. Or perhaps an article. Never, however, have I sat at my makeshift desk at home seven days a week, over a period of so many months. Gone are my morning walks to the Museum through Central Park (I live on the Upper West Side): a walk that, under normal circumstances and weather permitting, I look forward to each weekday morning, especially with the arrival of fall and the quiet that descends on the route I take, giving me the occasion to resolve in my mind what I will try to accomplish that day. I exit the park on Eighty-Fourth Street and make my way to the stairs of the Museum on Fifth Avenue, then pass through the main door and into Richard Morris Hunt's Great Hall.

On sunny days the morning light streams through the Roman-inspired thermal windows, enhancing the sense of awe engendered by the vast emptiness. I glance left and right—south, toward the sunlit corridor of the Greek and Roman galleries, and north, toward the contrasting darkness of the Mastaba Tomb of Perneb. Then I mount the grand staircase, its marble-faced walls inset with plaques commemorating those who, through their contributions, have made this the extraordinary institution that it is. My eyes are invariably directed toward the summit, where, viewed through Hunt's arch, which was reopened in 1995, Tiepolo's monumental canvas depicting the Triumph of Marius comes into view. As I look up at it, I can see the young Tiepolo, who inserted his self-portrait midway up on the left, returning my admiring gaze.

En route to my office, I pass through an enfilade of galleries and have the extraordinary privilege of seeing, in quick succession, one painting after another that, cumulatively and over the years, have embedded themselves in my imagination and now form part of my emotional as well as intellectual world—that life of the spirit that provides a centering of sorts as we face the unpredictability of everyday life. I am confident that

however privileged my morning, before-opening experience seems, it is shared in some form by thousands of visitors. I know this from the intense looking and engaged conversations among those I see in the galleries of this sprawling complex. The Met provides an enriching experience for countless people: a place that offers the potential to each of us, regardless of our background, to set out on a journey of the imagination beyond the contingencies of our individual lives. It offers the possibility of connecting in some way with the vast and often turbulent river of human history extending back more than five thousand years. One of the privileges of living in New York, under normal circumstances, is the daily access we have to this extraordinary Palace of Memory.

It is this daily activity of renewed engagement that lingers in my mind as I work from home, without the daily contact with the great works of art that have been at the center of my life for over forty years. So let me make three imaginary stops as I attempt to recapture the pleasures of my morning arrival.

Passing through the Tiepolo gallery and turning to my left, I have often found myself pausing in spellbound wonder before Berlinghiero's icon of the Madonna and Child (fig. 34). Painted in Tuscany in the 1230s, it is an image in which the Virgin Mary's foreknowledge of the future suffering and death of her son as well as her awe at his divinity—life's tragedies and its exaltations—have been distilled into a system of gestures and formalized facial expressions as mesmerizing as an ancient incantation and as hauntingly otherworldly as the harmonics of Olivier Messiaen's *O sacrum convivium*. One does not have to be religious to sense that we have been given a window into a world of ritualized belief that brought consolation to thousands.

On other mornings, I feel the need for a different kind of picture—something from the other end of the spectrum. What I desire is a painting evocative of everyday life as experienced four or five hundred years ago—an affirmation of the lived-in experience we all share. One possible destination would be the entrancing painting



**34.** Berlinghiero (Italian, Lucca, active by 1228 – died by 1236). *Madonna and Child*, possibly 1230s. Tempera on wood, gold ground, 31<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 21<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (80.3 × 53.7 cm). Gift of Irma N. Straus, 1960 (60.173)

of harvesters taking their lunch break that Pieter Bruegel the Elder made in 1565 as part of a series celebrating the cycles of nature by evoking the labors of *Everyman*: a Netherlandish, populist version of Virgil's *Georgics* created for the suburban home of a leading Antwerp merchant, Nicolaes Jongelinck.

But this morning I want something even earthier, and for that there is a painting of special resonance for me: Joachim Beuckelaer's 1568 depiction of a fish market (fig. 35). I love fish markets. When I travel, I take enormous pleasure visiting open-air markets (I find the fish market in Venice as visually exciting and full of surprises as the interior of a Baroque church). In New York, I make a point of frequenting a vendor at the local farmers' markets on the Upper West Side. Where does this fascination with fish come from? Was it from my childhood in Seattle, accompanying my father on salmon

trips in the Strait of Juan de Fuca? Or simply the beauty of freshly caught fish displayed at open markets, their colored scales glinting in the light? Beuckelaer — an innovator in what was a newly established genre in European art — takes us into the gossipy, working-class world of a market in Antwerp, on the edge of town, with an open arch in the city wall giving a view of the busy harbor. While one woman on the far right of the composition concentrates on her examination of the carp and pike still wriggling in a water-filled tub, an older woman silently rebuffs what contemporaries would have recognized as the amorous advances of the bearded fishmonger by resolutely crossing her hands over the opening of a terracotta pot. Perhaps she has been eyeing those richly colored Atlantic salmon steaks or a piece of freshly cut cod, but she will have nothing to do with the fishmonger's shenanigans. Why give those two women approaching the stand something further to gossip about? The story — with its eternally comedic character of a person of advanced age making unsolicited and inappropriate advances, possibly employing salty language —



is told by means of a charade of gesture and expression that is utterly different from the ritualized ones employed by Berlinghiero, but no less informed by local conventions. It still seems to me amazing that this brilliant smile of a picture—the perfect complement to Bruegel's virtually contemporary *Harvesters*—should have become available in 2015 and that The Met was able to acquire it. It is one of my daily markers.

And then, a few galleries on and after numerous glances around at changes in the hanging and the consequentially different conversations among the pictures, I find myself stopping—in this mental walk to my office—before one of the greatest masterpieces in the collection and, indeed, in America: Jacques Louis David's sublime *Death of Socrates* (fig. 36). What is it about this extraordinary picture that is so compelling? Is it the incomparable finality of the choreography of the figures and the way—once again—a highly evolved system of gesture is used both to characterize the individual disciples of Socrates and to link one to the other in a pantomime of anguished grief, with a space left open so as to give prominence to the condemned philoso-

pher? Sitting on his bed, his torso bared, his lyre set aside, unfettered by his chains, Socrates holds one hand hovering eternally above the fatal cup of hemlock offered him by his weeping follower—a moment held in timeless and mesmerizing suspension—while with the other he resolutely points upward, affirming his belief in the immortality of the soul. The five disciples at the far right form a Greek chorus of lament, while in the background, viewed down a long, vaulted corridor, the darkness of which is relieved by a shaft of light, the family of Socrates casts sorrowful, farewell glances backwards.

The bearded figure seated silently at the foot of the bed, his head bent, lost in thought, his hands solemnly folded on his lap, his scroll and writing implements lying discarded on the stone pavement, is Plato, who was not present at Socrates's death but whose writings are

**35.** Joachim Beuckelaer (Netherlandish, Antwerp 1533–1575 Antwerp). *Fish Market*, 1568. Oil on Baltic oak, 50<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 68<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (128.6 × 174.9 cm). Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift and Bequest of George Blumenthal, by exchange, 2015 (2015.146)





**36.** Jacques Louis David (French, Paris 1748 – 1825 Brussels). *The Death of Socrates*, 1787. Oil on canvas, 51 × 77<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (129.5 × 196.2 cm). Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931 (31.45)

our primary source for knowledge of Socrates's ideas as well as the scene David evokes with the sort of psychological tension we expect from a director such as Fritz Lang. Not surprisingly, it has been suggested that David took inspiration from contemporary theater practice. I like very much the idea that David has re-created the scene as though reconstructed in the mind of Plato writing at a later stage of his life. As such, the picture begs comparison between the re-creative power of Plato's writing and the genius of the artist's brush to give those words visual presence.

The scene David chose to depict is one of high moral as well as ethical conviction, and it reminds us of what I like to think of as the moral imperative that is so central to Western art and that we so often find lacking in our everyday lives. David certainly did not live up to in the high ideals his art aspired to embrace. As is the case with so many of us, his life was one of compromises as he responded in a self-interested fashion to the defining

and brutal crises of his time. This disconnect is itself a reminder of our inherent weakness as well.

As for so many visitors, The Met has become my memory palace. Its collection of great works of European painting ranging from Berlinghiero and Duccio to Van Gogh and Monet and beyond are a constant source of pleasure and nourishment. There are days when I have been reading or thinking about a particular work or have returned from a vacation or perhaps a visit to another museum and find that an idea or latent interest has been sparked. I walk through the galleries in search of a work of art that will help me to bring these disparate thoughts into focus. The day may be interrupted by the practical issues of everyday life, but there remains a sense of the possibility of discovery or of deepening my understanding of the world I live in and that I—like everyone—share with past as well as future generations. I doubt I realized just how privileged I was until my daily routine at The Met was denied me.

# THE ART OF THE CURE

BARBARA DRAKE BOEHM Paul and Jill Ruddock Senior Curator for The Met Cloisters

As I write, scientists around the globe are racing to develop a vaccine against the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. In televised interviews, they speak with authority and conviction of their prospects for success, while images of their sleek, sterile labs reinforce the message. The trappings of the pharmaceutical industry—the test tubes, the lab coats, the hard metal surfaces and clinical whiteness of that universe—are all part of the brand, convincing us to believe in their work. In time, it says, science will prevail, health will return, and society will be free of this mortal threat. Yet amid such surroundings and the cold chemistry of this pandemic, I believe it bears remembering something essential from humanity's long history of battling disease that might other-

wise be forgotten: the curative capacity of the garden and the art of the pharmacy that championed it.

Quarantined at home, I found myself aching for the simple beauty of the gardens at the Cloisters. The bed of medicinal plants cultivated there since 1938 serves as a reminder that horticulture was and still is both an art and a science (fig. 37). More than seventy thousand plants worldwide are thought to be of medicinal value.<sup>1</sup> Even at the dawn of this century, 11 percent of the 252 drugs considered basic and essential by the World Health Organization derive exclusively from flowering plants. Moreover, some 80 percent of plant-derived drugs serve the same time-honored purpose historically ascribed to them by a given culture.

37. Medicinal plants grown in the garden of Bonnefont Cloister





38. Fresco of a medieval apothecary, Castello di Issogne, Italy

The late medieval *Grete Herball* spoke of “green herbs of the garden and weeds of the fields” intended to “Heal and cure all manner of diseases and sicknesses . . . .”<sup>2</sup> By the time of Charlemagne, a medicinal garden was already recognized as an essential feature of monasteries. Women of the Church such as Trota of Salerno and Hildegard of Bingen spelled out the medicinal uses of plants; their writings and others’ were embraced by monks and nuns laboring in gardens across Europe. Over time, these conventual efforts reached beyond the walls and grew into a profitable ministry. The Dominican friars of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, for example, were selling medications by 1381.<sup>3</sup> Nuns, too, actively engaged as pharmacists serving the public, offering specialty soaps among their other wares.

Like the garden, the late medieval and Renaissance pharmacy became a beautifully curated space, chock-full of curing powders and elixirs (fig. 38). In the seventh century, the drug cabinet of Isidore, archbishop of Seville, contained “little jars fashioned from fragile clay” to hold

drugs,<sup>4</sup> and by at least the fourteenth century the utilitarian pharmacy jar had become a vessel for artistic expression. Medicines in the pharmacy of the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, were kept in jars marked with their simple, signature badge in the form of a ladder. The distinctive badge of Santa Maria Nuova, Florence, was a crutch, painted on the jar’s handle, leaving the swelling surface of the pot to be embellished with lively beasts. The hospital pharmacy obtained nearly a thousand such containers from a local ceramist, Giunta di Tugio, in 1431. When the pharmacy was inspected by Florentine authorities a century later, in 1562, it was found to be well supplied “with a rare orderliness and ministration.” Theirs was a thriving industry. The monks even sold surplus plant stock, including rhubarb, to apothecaries in town.<sup>5</sup>

By the late twelfth century, townspeople from London to Montpellier were serving as apothecaries, but those in Italy left the strongest record. Among the most celebrated merchant-owned pharmacies was the



**39.** Apothecary jar (*orciuolo*). Italian (Castelli), ca. 1520. Maiolica (tin-glazed earthenware), H. 10 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (25.9 cm). Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.1047)

Florentine “apothecary at the Lily,” whose 1504 inventory included forty-six meters of shelving, fine furnishings, an image of the Virgin Mary, and more than two hundred pharmacy (or apothecary) jars, vessels so exquisite that they were sometimes adapted as flower vases for the home.<sup>6</sup> Why were such utilitarian objects invested with such attention to beauty? Quite simply, their exuberant decoration helped proclaim the preciousness of their contents, taking the lush color and beauty of the garden as a point of departure (fig. 39). More than mere “branding,” this ostentation reflected the apothecary’s professional pride and, perhaps more significant, conveyed the financial success derived from such expertise and trustworthiness. Even so, skeptics sometimes criticized “those jugs, those jars and boxes with large capital letters, which tell of a thousand unguents or confections or precious aromatics—but they are empty inside, carrying these ridiculous inscriptions outside.”<sup>7</sup>

The labels carefully inscribed in the bodies of ceramic pharmacy jars in The Met collection reveal an astonishing array of common plants—including basil, crocus, hops, lettuce, poppy, and violets—many of which grace present-day home gardens and the Cloisters garden alike. Although the presence of poppies should come as no surprise—their benefits and risks having been recognized for millennia—items such as violet honey and violet syrup may be less familiar. And yet violets have long been believed to serve a multitude of healthful purposes, from relieving headaches (an inebriated person was instructed to smell violets or place them over the head) to bathing or treating acne. The pharmacy nuns at Santa Caterina, Florence, needed such massive quantities of violets that they turned to outside vendors, including the brothers at San Marco, home to Fra Angelico. Even today, candied violets are said to be beneficial for chest disorders.

The benefits ascribed to the violet are a good example of beliefs that today we may find naive—probably benign, but also a bit silly. After all, in the modern medical establishment, measures are standardized, distribution is monitored, and quality is controlled. In a better world, charlatans promoting bogus cures would surely be a thing of the past. But the reality is that in recent weeks in the United States, grown men and women seeking cures or a protection against infection have report-

edly bathed in bleach or ingested fish food. Far better for us to appreciate “the common plants that grow in our meadows,” as our forebears who survived plague and pestilence once did,<sup>8</sup> and turn our gaze to the art of the pharmacy. As we wait for an elusive cure, these elegant works provide a tonic all their own.

1. For the use of plants in modern medicine, see Shiyu Li et al., “Pharmaceutical Crops: An Overview,” *Pharmaceutical Crops* 1, no. 1 (August 2010), p. 8; Niharika Sahoo, Padmavati Manchikanti, and Satyahari Dey, “Herbal Drugs: Standards and Regulation,” *Fitoterapia* 81, no. 6 (February 2010), pp. 462–71; Daniel S. Fabricant and Norman R. Farnsworth, “The Value of Plants Used in Traditional Medicine for Drug Discovery,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 109, suppl. 1 (March 2001), pp. 69–75; and Ciddi Veeresham, “Natural Products Derived from Plants as a Source of Drugs,” *Journal of Advanced Pharmaceutical Technology & Research* 3, no. 4 (October–December 2012), pp. 200–201. Li et al., “Pharmaceutical Crops,” p. 10, analyzes opium, including its molecular structure. On violets in particular, see Alice Furlaud, “Candied Violets: How Very French,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 1986, sec. C, p. 3; as a practice in the Renaissance, see Diane Julien-David and Christophe Marcic, “Food, Nutrition and Health in France,” in *Nutritional and Health Aspects of Food in Western Europe*, by Susanne Braun et al. (London: Elsevier/Academic Press, 2020), p. 111.

2. *The Grete Herball* (London: Peter Treveris, 1526), sig \*2r.

3. Sharon T. Strocchia, “The Nun Apothecaries of Renaissance Florence: Marketing Medicines in the Convent,” *Renaissance Studies* 25, no. 5 (November 2011), p. 629. For pharmacies in medieval Europe, see also Nicholas Everett, “The Manuscript Evidence for Pharmacy in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Writing the Early Medieval West: Studies in Honour of Rosamond McKitterick*, by Elina Screen et al. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 115–30; James Shaw and Evelyn Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence*, The Wellcome Series in the History of Medicine (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2011), p. 65; Evelyn Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400–1600* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); and a blog, “Fugitive Leaves,” by Chrissie Perella, about Macer Floridus’s *De virtutibus herbarum* on the website of the Historical Medical Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia; [histmed.collegeofphysicians.org/medieval-Monday-13/](http://histmed.collegeofphysicians.org/medieval-Monday-13/).

4. Everett, “Manuscript Evidence for Pharmacy,” p. 124.

5. Strocchia, “Nun Apothecaries of Renaissance Florence,” p. 644; Shaw and Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence*, pp. 65–66.

6. Shaw and Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence*, p. 58. Examples of The Met’s important collection of pharmacy jars are available at [metmuseum.org](http://metmuseum.org), including 16.154.4 and 1975.1.1061. One jar also appears in the Cloisters’ *Annunciation Triptych* (*Merode Altarpiece*) (56.70), where it holds a Madonna lily.

7. Shaw and Welch, *Making and Marketing Medicine in Renaissance Florence*, p. 68.

8. Everett, “Manuscript Evidence for Pharmacy,” p. 124.

# THE GLOBE IN A HANDSCROLL

ANDREW SOLOMON Trustee

The tragedy of my parents' otherwise excellent marriage was that my father had hawked librettos as a teenager so he could get standing room at the opera five nights a week, but my mother was tone-deaf; and my mother had been a passionate art history major, but my father was color-blind. The result of this aesthetic mismatch was that my father wanted company for performances and first took me to the Metropolitan Opera when I was six, while my mother wanted to give us the joy of visual art and started taking me to the Metropolitan Museum when I was still in a stroller. Her great passions were the Northern Renaissance, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism, and her gentle, eager voice helped me imagine the rooms just out of view in a Pieter de Hooch painting or the luxuriance of Monet's gardens.

My grandmother, also deeply fond of the Museum, was left to show me through Arms and Armor, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and all of Asia. I had a precocious penchant for the "exotic"—whether that meant, in my juvenile experience, dinner at Trader Vic's or a peculiar appreciation for my great aunt's pagoda-festooned china—and I engaged with the galleries of Chinese art most of all. I cannot pretend that I then had much insight into the fine points of Song dynasty brushwork, but I liked how different what was portrayed seemed from anything else I knew. I could readily imagine my way into Giverny, but to place myself in these landscapes required a spirit of adventure.

The two Mets seemed reassuringly permanent to me. I never countenanced the idea that they would both be shuttered (which they are as I am writing). I took children's classes at the Museum and had my first job there—as the unicorn at the Medieval Festival at the Cloisters—when I was fifteen. In the summer of 1981, when I was a high school intern in The Met's Editorial Department, I was asked to proofread the galleys for Wen Fong and Maxwell K. Hearn's *Silent Poetry: Chinese Paintings in the Douglas Dillon Galleries*, an issue of the *Bulletin*. I was captured by the vivid prose and even more by the paintings themselves, to which I now turned my

attention not because they were exotic but because they were exquisitely loaded with pertinent meaning. The following summer, I was fortunate enough to travel with my family to China. Although Western tourists were mostly sequestered from the local population at that time, Wen Fong had kindly placed a few calls from New York and arranged for us to break away from our tour group and visit Suzhou, then largely closed to foreign visitors. The following semester in college, I studied Chinese painting with Richard Barnhart. I later worked at, wrote about, and eventually became a trustee of the Museum, and in 2013 I joined the visiting committee of the Department of Asian Art.

In its monumentality, the Museum has always seemed both to contain and to transcend the works it houses. All my life, whenever I encountered an unfor-giving world, there was The Met to revive me, comfort and safety to be found in its multifarious riches. When The Met's great doors swung closed on March 12, we were all locked out of a place of escape and contemplation. But that place was hardly forgotten. Art was a comfort even when I couldn't go and visit it. I could view representations of some paintings online and in my collection of catalogues; other works inhabited my inward eye, and I took comfort from it. As the reality of the quarantine slowly set in, I began to ponder what would reward months of solitary examination.

Isolation, so novel to most of us now, was a regular feature of life in dynastic China, where literati painters were often banished from court or chose to avoid its scandals and dangers. At a remove from the fray, they produced albums, hanging scrolls, and handscrolls, forms of art intended not for permanent display but rather for perusal at appointed leisure. From The Met's spectacular collection I'd borrow Shen Zhou's *Joint Landscape* (fig. 40), completed by his student Wen Zhengming, which is more than fifty-six feet long. Shen lived in the fifteenth century in Suzhou. Named by historians as one of the "Four Masters of the Ming," he is noted for the distinctive mixture of restraint, mysticism, subtlety,



**40.** Shen Zhou (Chinese, 1427–1509) and Wen Zhengming (Chinese, 1470–1559). *Joint Landscape* (detail), Ming dynasty (1368–1644), ca. 1509 and 1546. Handscroll; ink on paper, image 14 1/2 in. × 56 ft. 8 7/8 in. (36.8 × 1729.3 cm). Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1990 (1990.54)

and warmth that underlies his work. Shen chose to forego the life of a Ming official, living in retreat, as some of us find ourselves doing now. His scroll explores themes that preoccupied many Ming scholars: the private pleasures of secluded dwellings tucked into mountain valleys. It is dotted with tiny figures, pleasingly dwarfed by the magnificent topography that surrounds them. It is impossible to take in the totality of such a scroll in a single viewing.

Shen's handscroll is intended to be savored over many days, like a leisurely sojourn in the mountains. Looking at it is like reading a long-form poem or a





meditative work of fiction. Like a novel, it evinces a cogent monumentality yet is also sequential, meant to unfold as slowly as life does. Such a handscroll would originally have been viewed one arm's span at a time, an impossible practice in a museum display case; our compromise for viewing such work is antithetical to the intended intimacy and immediacy. Taking inspiration from his forebears, Shen deliberately harked back to Yuan and early Ming painters to create a body of work that is of its time but also transcends time. I like finding myself small in his world, reading each vital, calligraphic indication like a promise that splendor endures despite

chaos and conflict. Shen expressed in an outer landscape much of what has unfolded in my inner landscape. Nature is vast, and we are no more than a few brushstrokes and a dot of ink. In professing Confucian inadequacies, Shen achieved a specific gorgeousness: humble, spectacular, at once simple (a gesture here, another there) and infinitely complex.

As the days of quarantine wore on, we found ourselves in a double trauma: of COVID-19 and an escalation in the long-simmering crisis of police brutality toward people of color. The cruel majesty with which nature seems to have chastened us suddenly coincided with the implacable smallness of humankind. If these twin crises seem novel, look to Shen Zhou to find evidence of how such truths have coexisted for civilization's portion of eternity. It becomes clear that this is an ever-green juxtaposition: the scholar's life of deliberate seclusion acknowledges an antithetical pettiness and barbarity that played out in the fifteenth-century imperial court much as it does in the United States today. Racist acts here against people of Asian ancestry have escalated since the phrase "Chinese virus" began to proliferate under the instruction of our president. Unleashed into scapegoating, vicious elements in our society who might reasonably profane the appalling Chinese leadership have gone on the attack against innocent people, trying to place blame on them for what they never could or would have done. It is easy to see why one might flee to Jiangsu province and take up the brush.

COVID-19 in New York has necessitated a closing down of nonessential services, and cultural institutions sit high on the official list of nonessentials. Yet art offers a different redemption from that of medicine. The urgency of social-distancing regulations cannot be breached, but let us not suppose that museums are only pleasing distractions. Objects are repositories of insight; learning their truths is a medicine of its own. Dostoevsky said, "Beauty, though, will save the world." If he was right, and on my better days I am sure he was, there is an armory's worth of salvation locked up on Eighty-Second Street. Superb items such as this long handscroll speak to how others have understood, endured, and even subsumed privations and disruptions. They constitute a beacon of hope that we will not only survive our current punishments, but perhaps even be ennobled by them.

# THE MET 150

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