

Journal from the visit to the California Palace of the Legion of Honor (04/17/03)

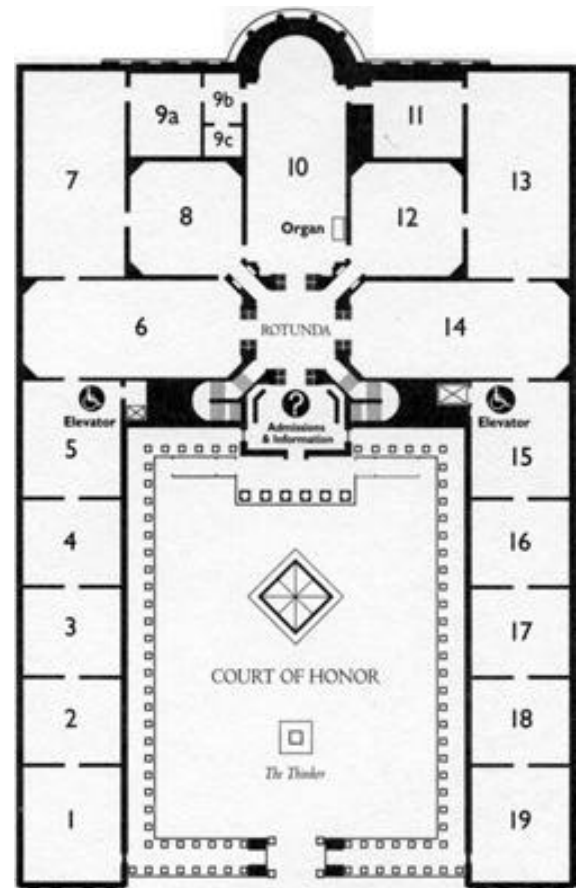
I made it to the museum around 3 PM on a Friday afternoon. I was a bit worried whether I would have enough time till closing time at 5 PM but managed to rush through all the rooms in just about two hours. I entered the building as prescribed for ticket buyers on the left (as opposed to members who stepped in on the right.) But both entrance lead to the same room with the ticketing desks.

The first gallery I saw was room #6 mostly filled with 17th century French and Italian paintings. The vast majority of them were portraits and group portraits with a few landscape thrown in. A painting by “The Candlelight Master” titled “Young boy singing” made the biggest impression on me. This relatively small oil painting had an interesting chiaroscuro affect: as the boy was reading a parchment, the candle transpired it shedding light on his face. I wouldn’t have expected such modern looking composition from 1650.

The next slightly smaller room (#5) had paintings and objects from High Renaissance. The most exciting one for me was a large walnut cabinet. The reliefs on its doors and drawers composed one single, big image, a landscape. There were also some small objects whose function I couldn’t figure out. They were beautiful portraits made with enamel on copper with the color deep blue dominating them. I would have loved to hold them in my hand, but that was forbidden of course.

I didn’t care much for the next room (#4) with its early Italian Renaissance pieces. But right after it (#3) was different partly because the lights were much dimmer. Its ceiling was replaced with that of a church. Design-wise it looked like Moorish mosque’s roof, but it had a few shields that looked more like Christian’s nobleman’s. Therefore I am not sure which religion’s house of worship the top of the room belonged to. In the middle of the room an altar cover was spread out at length. It was made of red silk and velvet and embroidered heavily with saints and religious symbols. Even in this museum setting it seemed sacred.

The next room had a different style again. It contained a temporary exhibition by Henry Moore. I knew mostly his big, abstract sculptures, so was surprised to see how sensible his etchings and prints were. At least half of them were from his “Sheep book” and as the title suggests depicting sheeps. Using short lines as hatching and cross-hatching, he created rather realistic pictures. The other part of the room had more of his artwork where I could follow step by step how he transforms a figurative idea to a nonfigurative one. He was using the same female model and picture composition for a series of ideas artwork that ranged from the realistic to the abstract. Looking just at this later one I couldn’t have recognize the female form at all, had I not seen the whole series beforehand.



In the last room of this corridor (#1), there were about a dozen big prints. Not much more would have fit there, because they were indeed big. The title of the exhibition explicitly said so: “Big prints: Contemporary American Graphic Art, 1967-2000.” As expected at such variety where each artwork is different from the other, there were a few I personally liked and some that I didn’t. John Buck’s “The Language of the Times” definitely belonged to the former group. The schematic, black Tower of Babel in the front and the lots of small symbols in the background with red touched something in me. It was as complex as our post-modern life is, made up from dozens of smaller pieces that co-exist at the same time and space in us.

After walking back through the same 5 rooms, I reached the unseen #7 one. There were lots of French and Italian paintings here from the 17th and 18th century, but what grabbed my attention was a “beechwood and silk tapestry canapé.” A whole jungle was sewn into it, complete with a lion king with its crown, gazelles, and elephants. Just as I was fascinated with it, I am sure that the original owners a couple of hundred years ago were with these exotic animals.

Room number nine was lifted from Château in France from Louis XV’s times (1715-1774). The walls were covered with dark wood panels, the fire place was of heavy marble, and the chandelier had lots of small pieces of glass, so the candle’s light would be reflected and strengthened by them. Attached to this room was a small foyer with hundred of glass goblets and cups in cabinets and an even smaller closet size room that had a reconstructed 18th century court dress standing in its middle. I enjoyed reading the brochure explaining how the dress was reconstructed, but have to admit there were several archaic words in it that I didn’t understand.

Coming out of these tiny rooms, I entered the central room of the building that had Rodin sculptures in it. The one at the most prominent part of the hall (“The Three Shades”) was supposed to be the crowning element of the “Gates of Hell,” a project Rodin never finished. Maybe it is better because these figures in themselves already show a lot of pain and tension. The composition was nicely positioned in the semicircular end of the hall.

After going through the next little room (#11), which was a Salon from a French Hôtel from the end of the 18th century, decorated with lots of little small gold objects, like snuffboxes, I felt that something is different (room #13). The atmosphere changed, it was less flamboyant, more subdued, dignified, and formal. It took me a while till I found the plaque on the wall describing what’s in the room. But when I did, I knew the main reason for the change: here we had British artworks from the 18th and 19th century. The first painting I noticed was an early Gainsborough portrait which was quite cold. But in the other end of the room, I finally found something that was more magical: John Anster Christian Fitzgerald’s “Fairies in a Nest” oil painting. The painting was small and similar to Bosch’s dreams/nightmares. But it had a type of frame I never saw: literally made of twigs that created the illusion that the nest of the picture is extended to our space. As I said, I found it magical.

The next room (#14) was dedicated to one artist and his 5 decade career: Frank Lobdell. His figurative drawing from the 60’s proved for me that he has the skill to create representation works, so his later more abstract paintings didn’t disturb me as much. But I felt that he is somewhat of a copycat because almost all of his large paintings reminded me so much of other artists, mostly Miró. This feeling never abandoned me, so I moved on fast.

The next room (#16) was a bit boring (or I was getting tired), but the one after that (#17) had something majestic in it. One of the walls was practically covered with a single painting: Konstantin Makovsky's "The Russian Bride's Attire." Its content was full of contrasts: the whole scene was decadent, rich, full of expensive and heavy clothes and jewelry. But at the same time, the room's floor and walls were plain wood (and not marble as I'd expect of scenes from other parts of Europe of the same period.) Every woman on the scene, including the half dozen bridesmaids, had pompous and colorful dresses on, but the bride herself was in plain white. The others were envious of her, while she was visibly sad. I enjoyed exploring every inch of the picture; it was so content rich.

The last two rooms (#18-19) further invigorated me because it had works of such modern artists as Van Gogh, Monet, Cezanne, Degas ... This was the first time, I could explore closely one of George Seurat's pointillist paintings from close. (It was the one showing the Eiffel Tower before its construction was over.) I was surprised that the points that made up the picture are larger than I thought they would be based on the reproductions in our textbook. But they still blended together in my eyes as I moved away from it.

I had to rest a little bit before I could attack the lower level where Leonardo da Vinci waited for me. After I refreshed myself, I was ready for more. But I was not ready for the crowd that awaited me. The title of the exhibition was Leonardo da Vinci and the Splendor of Poland. I assume the well-known name of the artist drew the waves of people there. But to see his painting, first I, like everyone else, had to go through 5 rooms full of Polish paintings. The rooms were so crowded that I could barely move. There were only two paintings where I waited the necessary 1-3 minutes, so I could have a closer look. I found the exhibition organizer's combination unfortunate because these Polish paintings would deserve more. But I couldn't enjoy them under these circumstances. I also thought that the title was slightly misleading because there was only one Leonardo da Vinci piece displayed: Lady with an Ermine. It was worth the wait though. Both she and the painting are beautiful.

Having explored the whole museum I went back and chose a picture to sketch, analyze and write about: Renoir's Mother and Child, see below. This course gave me the opportunity to explore a museum I've never been despite having live in Santa Cruz for 8 years. It was a great experience, thank you. I shall return there in the future for other exhibitions.

Analysis of one picture

Title: Mother and Child

Artist: Pierre-Auguste Renoir

Date: c.1895

Medium: Oil on Canvas

The **subject matter** of this blissful picture is a small family, a mother, a child and a cat. The child is probably Renoir's own. Jean was born in 1894 and this picture is from the next year, so it is possible.

The **composition** is asymmetrical and triangular. At the top of the main triangle is the head of the mother, the bottom left corner is marked by the cat's head and the bottom right corner by the woman's feet. This composition seems so stable that it would be impossible to throw the subjects out of balance. The only sign of conventional physical space is the vertical line behind the back of the mother indicating the corner where two walls of a room supposedly meet. Otherwise this scene could be inside or outside, we wouldn't know. The child is looking at the cat, the mother's gaze is somewhere between the child and the cat, while the cat is turning toward them. If the cat would turn to the same direction where the humans are turning to that would mean that the picture is not contained. We'd need to go/think outside its frame, which would decrease its calmness.



If we look at the values of the **colors** on the picture, we find balance again. The woman's dark blue skirt on the right is counterbalanced with the dark brown spot of the cat on the left. While in the middle, we see the light flesh tones of the child and the mother. Furthermore, both of them have white shirt/blouse. The background all around them is sketched with colors that have very similar values, although they range from green to orange.

The whole image has a fluid **quality**. Nothing is painted with realistic preciosity, more like trying to capture the impression the scene made on the artist. The sharpest is the boy's fascinated facial expression, followed by the woman's and the cats. These, the boy's body then the other two figures are emphasized in this order of importance. The rest of the picture is subordinate.

The most exciting aspect of the picture for me was that everything has an "aura." It is visible not just around the figures, but the walls and the chair all have it too. It gives me the impression that everything is alive.