

The Best Art of 2015: At Play in the Landscape of Art; The year's best exhibitions introduced visitors to Mughals, migration and Renaissance masterpieces

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The year's most noteworthy exhibitions began, in February, with "Sculpture in the Age of Donatello: Renaissance Masterpieces From Florence Cathedral," an extraordinary group of works by Donatello and his contemporaries, made in the first half of the 15th century for the Duomo of Florence, that were shown at New York's now-defunct Museum of Biblical Art. The title was not hyperbole. The show included such masterworks as Donatello's "Prophet (possibly Habbakkuk), known as lo Zuccone" (1435-36), a paradigm of early quattrocento aesthetic values--the prophet as a "portrait" of a powerful individual, an intense, bald man whose posture suggests imminent motion and vitality. The exhibition's other, sometimes less celebrated works were equally fine. And the opportunity to study these marvelous sculptures close up, at eye level and in good light, was a gift.

At the National Gallery, Washington, two impeccably chosen, scholarly surveys, "Piero di Cosimo: The Poetry of Painting in Renaissance Florence" and "Pleasure and Piety: The Art of Joachim Wtewael," enriched our knowledge of Italian and Netherlandish art made by oddball painters. Born a century apart, Piero (1462-1522) and Wtewael (1566-1638)--that's approximately "OO tuh vahl"--were esteemed in their lifetimes. Yet they are largely unfamiliar today, perhaps because of their eccentricity. We associate Piero mainly with idiosyncratic mythological scenes packed with agile figures and animals, but the exhibition revealed that he was also an accomplished painter of portraits, altarpieces and decorative panels, and a master of observed detail. Wtewael, too, worked in diverse modes: biblical and mythological scenes, portraits, and fantasies. The star of the Wtewael show was a large voluptuous, nude Andromeda, in a complicated seaside landscape, about to be rescued by Perseus. But the small, intimate paintings on copper, filled with nudes, animals and landscape elements, in jewel-like color, were equally compelling. We entered both shows curious about their subjects; we left admiring two artists with great imaginative powers and impressive range who deserve to be better known.

"Castiglione: Lost Genius. Masterworks on Paper From the Royal Collection" (through Feb. 14, 2016), at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, provided another surprise from Italy. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609-1664) was an unmemorable painter, but he turns out to have been a dazzling draftsman, a stunning printmaker, and the inventor of the monotype. His improvisatory drawings, made with reddish oil paint on paper, are miracles of varied tones achieved with a remarkable vocabulary of brushmarks, lines and washes. Biblical and allegorical scenes alike dissolve into flickering expanses of light and dark, full of emotion and drama. And the monotypes, their whites energetically wiped out of darkness, could have been made in the 20th century. Who knew?

Further insight into the 17th-century Netherlands could be had at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in "Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer" (through Jan. 18, 2016), an impressive gathering of portraits, genre scenes and occasional landscapes forming a collective portrait of Golden Age society. It's hardly news that art reveals the values and mores of its time, but "Class Distinctions" sharpened our eye for that kind of information. And it was so full of splendid paintings that we could ignore sociology. The Boston MFA's own life-size portraits of a minister and his wife, by Rembrandt, flanked his stunning, deceptively casual double portrait known as "The Shipbuilder and His Wife" (1633), from the collection of Queen Elizabeth II. All three are triumphs of subtle, varied paint-handling, conjuring up everything from fine linen to silky hair and aging, healthy flesh. And there were two glorious Vermeers, among other first-rate works by just about every significant Dutch artist of the time. We could even learn something about Golden Age society.

"Sultans of Deccan India, 1500-1700: Opulence and Fantasy," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, portrayed a very different society--that of the fabulously wealthy central Indian plateau during its golden age, before Mughal conquest. The region's cultivated sultans were patrons of the arts, as the exhibition's magnificent paintings, textiles, metalwork, jewelry and calligraphy revealed. The Deccani courts had strong connections to the Middle East, Africa and Europe, resulting in cross-fertilization visible in everything on view. The richly hued, inventive paintings were a high point, especially when we began to recognize depictions of exhibited objects, but the entire show was a brilliant introduction to a vanished, seductive world.

At the Museum of Modern Art, "One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North" reunited and contextualized the distinguished African-American painter's 60 bold, spatially adventurous, luminously hued panels. Completed in 1941, when Lawrence was 23, the series encapsulates the entire history of the movement north of Southern black Americans seeking work and better living conditions, beginning about 1915. Lawrence's economical images and explanatory captions distill complex events and abstract ideas into an expressive Cubist-inflected language of his own. It was exciting to see these eloquent works, normally divided between MoMA and the Phillips Collection, as a continuous narrative, just as Lawrence intended.

The paintings of friends, family and familiar places in "Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s," at the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, are no longer brand-new--they were made more than a half-century ago, when Katz was, at most, in his early 30s--but they're still terrific. Then, when Abstract Expressionism dominated, their figuration seemed transgressive. Now, what's most striking is the lively evidence of Mr. Katz's hand. The personality and vigor of these youthful pictures made us reconsider the deadpan images that sustain Mr. Katz's reputation today.

"Frank Stella: A Retrospective" (through Feb. 7, 2016), at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and "Jackson Pollock: Blind Spots" (through March 20, 2016), at the Dallas Museum of Art--both superlative-- closed the year. Mr. Stella's retrospective fills the Whitney's fifth floor with authoritative, large, inventive works spanning six decades, from evenhanded, monochrome Stripes, made in his early 20s, to recent, often brilliantly hued, multilevel projecting constructions. The selection and nonchronological installation, both supervised by Mr. Stella, make clear the long, strikingly varied evolution of his compelling abstract spatial language. "Blind Spots" focuses on Pollock's Black Paintings, usually regarded as problematic since their first exhibition, in 1951, because of both their unlikeness to the poured paintings and their ambiguous imagery. A wonderful selection of works convinces us that these unstable black-and-white pictures, with their elusive masks and figures pulsing through expanses of scribbles and stains, point toward a new fusion of allusion and abstraction. If only Pollock had lived longer.

All this, and the brilliant "Discovering the Impressionists: Paul Durand-Ruel and the New Painting," at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the story of the Parisian dealer who established the reputations of the Impressionist painters, told through a spectacular selection of both well-known and unexpected works.

Ms. Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.

Credit: By Karen Wilkin

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