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Museums in Rome Finally Reopen: “In the Eyes of the Beholders” at Palazzo Barberini

Sadly, for now museums are accessible only for those in Lazio. This exhibit plays with the gaze, first we are spectators and then voyeurs

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



Giandomenico Tiepolo: "The New World". Ufficio Stampa Maria Bonmassar

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The aim of the exhibition, made clear in an entryway introductory section, "The Audience's Expectation", is for the visitor to participate in the painting; metaphorically-speaking to enter its canvas, to be part of the action, not just an observer. This point is made clear immediately by two antique mirrors at the entrance where the visitor is both the observer and the observed....

Thank goodness! After two months of a second cultural lockdown the museums in Rome reopened on February 1. However, sadly, they're accessible only to visitors who are in the Lazio region because not even inter-regional travel in Italy is yet permitted– much less

international tourism.



Nonetheless, luckily for me, at Palazzo Barberini I recently saw one of the most unusual temporary exhibitions of paintings I've ever seen. Otherwise, unless there is a miraculous breakthrough in the next six weeks, only other Italian-speakers will be able to enjoy this temporary exhibition by ordering its catalog from its publisher, Campisano Editore, for 40 euros at campisano.editore@tiscali.it.

Here's what I saw. On at the Palazzo Barberini until April 5 is "*L'ora dello Spettatore. Come le immagini ci Usano*" or "*The Hour of the Beholder: How Images Use Us.*" The brainstorm of masterful curator Michele Di Monte, its 25 paintings are divided into six sections: "The Threshold", "The Passion of the Gaze", "The Appeal", "The Indiscreet", "The Accomplice", and "The Voyeur".

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This point is made clear immediately by two antique mirrors at the entrance where the visitor is both the observer and the observed and from its only painting, "Il Mondo Novo" (1765). On loan from the Prado in Madrid, it's by Giandomenico Tiepolo, the son of his much more famous father Giambattista. Both artists are depicted in the painting, Giambattista in a red coat followed immediately behind by Giandomenico holding a kind of monocle.



Simon Vouet: "The Fortune Teller". Ufficio Stampa Maria Bonmassar

The painting is of a crowd waiting its turn to look through a kind of "magic lantern", not visible in the painting, which is said to project imaginary scenes of exotic unknown places. All but one person have their backs to you, the visitor. Thus, you too become part of the crowd. Everyone here is waiting patiently to see a new invention, just as we are today for the vaccines to end the pandemic. Hence, Del Monte's choice of this painting!

Of the 25 paintings on display, eight belong to the Palazzo Barberini's permanent collection: Ottomar Elliger II's "Young Lady in the Window", Bartolomeo Passerotti's "Butcher Shop", Jusepe de Ribera's "St. Gregory the Great", Simone Vouet's "The Fortune Teller", Guido Reni's "Salomé", Giovanni Lanfranco's "Venus Playing the Harp", Jacopo Zucchi's "Bathsheba at the Baths" and Pierre Subleyras's "Nude".



Rembrandt: "The Girl in the Frame". Uffizio
Stampa Maria Bonmassar

Several of the others are on loan from the National Gallery in London, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Royal Castle in Warsaw, the Capodimonte in Naples, the Uffizi in Florence, and the Galleria Sabauda in Turin. Del Monte told our small, tenfold socially-distanced group of journalists at a press preview that there are, "Outside of Europe, in the United States and in Australia...other important paintings with this same intent of making the observer a participant...but sadly the uncertainty of the pandemic made their loans impossible. It also has prevented the exhibition from travelling elsewhere after April 5."

In the first section, "The Threshold", windows, curtains, and frames invite the viewer to cross the separations between our real world and that of the painting. For example, Rembrandt's "The Girl in a Frame", probably the exhibition's most famous painting on loan from Warsaw, is not a formal portrait. She is gripping an inner frame, a kind of windowsill,

which is part of the painting. Thus, she seems to be looking out and ready to talk to us through a window.

Likewise, in the section "Appeal," in his portrait by Sofonisba Anguissola the poet Giovanni Battista Caselli, from Cremona like the artist, is pointing at a painting of the Madonna, baby Jesus, and St. John the Baptist; presumably to let us know he's a religious man. The butchers in Passerotti's "Butcher Shop" also seem to be demanding our attention to buy their meats.



Bartolomeo Passerotti: "The Butcher Shop". Ufficio Stampa Maria Bonmassar

Instead, the only painting in the interim section, "The Passion of the Gaze" is "The Passion" (1471) by Flemish Hans Memling for his wealthy sponsors Maria and Tommaso Portinari, head of the Florentine Medici Bank's branch in Bruges, each of whom is painted in the painting's two lower corners. Meant for private devotion, it's a sort of *speculum* or mirror, a kaleidoscope of the *Via Crucis* of Holy Week from Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in the upper left hand corner, to his crucifixion in the upper right. The eye has to go "on a journey and follow in the footsteps of Christ along the tormented pathway of the 23

stations of his Passion,” relates its wall panel.

In the next section, “Indiscreet” we become nosey-parkers. We peek over St. Gregory’s shoulder as he writes, without his consent or realization, and we do the same to the two young painters, who seem to look out of the canvas annoyed by our presence, in Van Oost’s “In Front of the Easel”. Another scene we should not be witnessing is Simon Vouet’s Caravaggesque “Fortune Teller” who with an accomplice, is robbing her all too innocent unaware client.

In “The Accomplice”, the section with the most religious paintings, we are witnesses to many Biblical scenes: “Salomé” by Guido Reni, Mattia Preti’s “Christ and the Adulteress”, and Andrea Sacchi’s “Drunken Noah”.

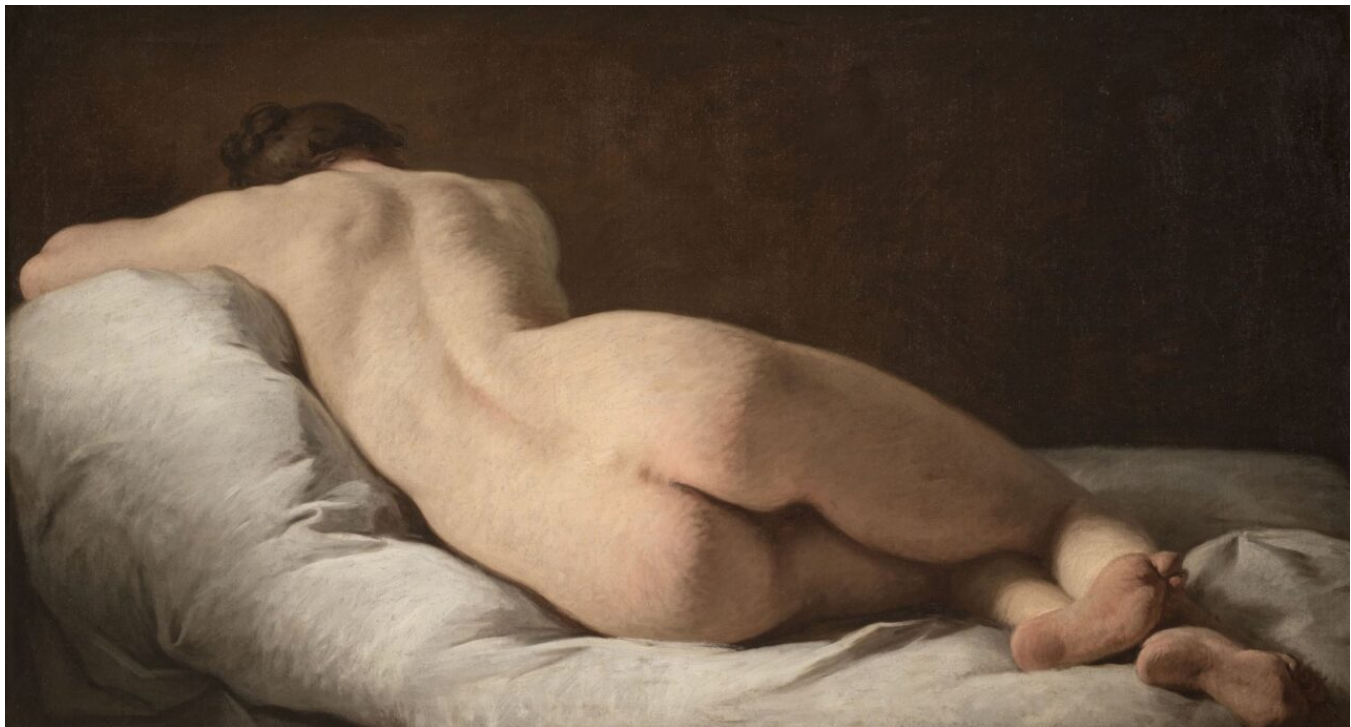


Johann Liss: "Judith and Holofernes". Ufficio
Stampa Maria Bonmassar

Very horrific is Johan Liss’s “Judith Beheading Holofernes”, now in the National Gallery in

London. Of the many depictions of this scene, one of Caravaggio's favorite subjects, Liss's version is unique. Judith has already beheaded Holofernes whose head is on a plate held by a servant, both barely visible in the nearly dark background. Judith with a horrified expression is looking at us over her shoulder as she holds Holofernes's corpse whose neck in the foreground is spurting blood directly at us. Our presence was certainly unexpected. A shock to Judith and to us!

In the final section, "The Voyeur" in Van der Neer's, "The Wife of King Candaule", we are twice voyeurs: of the Libyan king's naked wife, but also of his soldier hiding behind the bed whom Candaule had invited to show off his wife's beauty-in short to be a voyeur. Instead in Lavinia Fontana's "Venus and Mars" an Mars, intensely in love, is admiring the beauty of his beloved Venus. He's awaiting the perfect moment; so is a voyeur. She, instead of looking dreamily into his eyes, is looking provocatively over her shoulder at us. As her other voyeurs, we're waiting anxiously for her to climb on the bed beside Mars and consummate their romantic union.



Pierre Subleyras: "The Back of a Naked Woman". Ufficio Stampa Maria Bonmassar

Also in "The Voyeur" is "The Back of a Naked Lady" (1740) by Pierre Subleyras. The son of a mediocre painter, in 1726 Subleyras moved from Paris to Rome, the winner of the "Prix de Rome" at the French Academy in Villa Medici at the top of the Spanish Steps. In 1739 he

married Maria Felice Tibaldi, the daughter of the violinist from Modena, Giovanni Battista Tibaldi. She was also a painter in her own right, but often the model for her husband including for this painting on display. Considered one of the most innovative of female nudes in the history of art, it's the precursor for Manet's "Olympia".

Thus with this painting the exhibition comes full circle. It begins with a crowd with its back to the viewer and ends with a nude with her back to the viewer.

[Lucy Gordan](#)

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