

An impressive
painting of an
impressive historical
figure: joan of arc by
bastien...

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In the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City the painting “Joan of Arc” by Jules Bastien-Lepage hangs in the B. Gerald Cantor Sculpture Gallery. This piece is rather large and was done with oil paint on canvas, its dimensions being approximately eight feet tall with a width of ten feet. When walking toward Bastien-Lepage’s painting, its size and realism grab one’s attention, and then hold it while this scene of Joan of Arc seems to take place right before one’s eyes.

The corridor where the painting is displayed is part of the museum’s permanent collection. The gallery is composed of many sculptures with paintings placed between them; almost all of the work is French and done sometime in the 1800’s. This long and wide corridor has Ionic styled pillars at each end, and all together the subtle architecture goes nicely with all the different art work displayed. Bastien-Lepage’s painting is placed third from the end of this corridor and fits there nicely, although one might expect it to see it somewhere else for the amount of attention it receives.

To the right of the painting is the wall sign that states the artist’s life span, which was 1848 to 1884, along with the following brief history:

“After the Province of Lorraine was lost to Germany following the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the French saw in Joan of Arc a new and powerful symbol. In 1875 Bastien-Lepage, a native of Lorraine, began to make studies for a picture of her. In the present painting, exhibited in the salon of 1880, Joan is shown receiving her revelation in her parents’ garden. Behind her are Saint Michael, Margaret, and Catherine.”

Joan appears to be the focus of the painting as she stands in the foreground and to the right. Her image is almost life size, and, along with an enormous amount of detail that has been used, she appears very lifelike. Joan stands with her head and shoulder leaning slightly against a tree and her eyes looking upward. Her left arm is stretched out away from her body and holding the end branch of a young flexible tree, while her right arm is at her side with her hand cupped against her dress. The smoothness in the contours of her skin and the ways the textures are represented on her clothing, with the folding and shadowing, are all done well. The use of the different shades of color for the skin tones, clothing, and their shading show Bastien-Lepage's skill in capturing this naturalistic image.

Behind Joan, in the upper left of the painting, the three saints are hovering above the ground. St. Michael is positioned perfectly upright with a majestic look as he is holding a sword away from his body horizontally with both hands. His body is covered with a golden body suit of armor except for his head, which is turned toward Joan and has a full halo behind it. Margaret and Catherine are both wearing white silky and flowing veils on their heads. There are white flowers in their hair, and both have golden circles over their heads as halos. Their dresses are also flowing and painted with light pink and blue. Margaret is positioned upright, her hands clasped by her chest, and her head to the side looking towards Joan, while Catherine is bent over with her head facing down and both hands over her face.

Bastien-Lepage showed his ability for capturing the naturalistic look of Joan, but he did not use this ability to its full extent with the saints. The colors

used on the saints are not quite as vivid as with Joan. Michael's golden body armor and silver sword are not really shining at all, and all three halos seem to be placed there without any real signs of glowing. The shadowing and detail work in their clothing and skin are also not quite as life like as Joan. All together the three images of these saints appear to be somewhat hazy.

The rest of the painting is a landscape of Joan's garden with the back wall of her house in the distance, and in front of the saints is a stool and wooden frame that thread is being wound around. The garden is filled with trees, shrubs, grass and only a few flowers. There is an abundance of green shades in this painting, but the gentle use of them in the leaves, grass, and shrubs are done well. To not overpower the picture on a whole, the greens are broken up with three different elements. One, being the light shades of brown used in the trees, the ground, the wooden stool, and the frame. The other two, being the gray stone wall of the house and the small patches of blue sky showing through tree branches. Bastien-Lepage used his skills to create this background landscape that shows plenty of detail and realism but still holds back some of the naturalism that he shows in Joan.

In this painting, Bastien-Lepage is trying to get across the feelings of Joan after receiving a revelation from heaven in her parents' garden. Joan had been working in the garden sitting on a stool and weaving something on a frame when the heavenly images appeared right in front of her. At that moment, Joan must have had feelings of surprise and fear, as the stool is shown knocked over on its side. After receiving the revelation with Saint Michael holding out a sword for her, Joan walks away and leans her head and

shoulder against a tree in the foreground. There she stands, looking upward and off the painting to the heavens, with an enormous feeling that bleeds off the painting and into one's heart. The saints are then left in the background looking upon Joan with hope of her understanding in what has to be done. Most humans may never have a heavenly experience quite like this, but can certainly imagine the way one might feel, as the artist has portrayed it well.

This story is depicted well, but it is only understood after really looking into the painting, since the focus is on Joan. As stated earlier, the amount of naturalism that is shown in Joan is done very well, but the rest of the painting lacks a part of this and just becomes a background for her at first glance. This seems to be intentionally done by the artist so the person viewing it will immediately be consumed by this young woman's state of wonder and awe. The viewer then wanders into the background of the painting to piece together the story that will ultimately explain and enhance the feelings given off by Joan's image.

Joan's naturalistic image is surely one of shock, amazement, wonder, and awe all in one. The average Joe (or Joan) may not be able to relate exactly to Joan's heavenly experience, but the image she portrays definitely rings clear in most everyone from human experiences in life. One can then imagine and have compassion for Joan in her situation that appears to be happening right before one's eyes with such realism.

At the other end, and to the right of the corridor where this painting is located, is an opening into other oil painting galleries. Looking into the other galleries through this opening and on through the next, there is a large

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painting aligned with these openings and centered in such a view that grabs one with its beauty from afar. It is a painting of a mountainous region with an aqueduct spanning a body of water and arriving in a city. Like the former painting, a Frenchman also did this piece in the 1800's. His name was Jean-Andre Theodore Gericault and the title is " Evening Landscape with an Aqueduct." This painting is only slightly smaller than " Joan of Arc" and is approximately six feet wide by eight feet tall.

When looking at Gericault's painting from a distance, it is almost like looking out a window into a far away land, and its position in the museum seems to have been well thought out. Unfortunately, this painting loses some of its grandeur when one gets up close. The only real detail work that is put into this piece that looks great up close is ironically the one element that can not be seen from a distance, which is a group of men at the bottom bathing in the waters.

While this piece can be positioned on this wall so that it receives its first attention from afar, a piece like Bastien-Lepage's would not be completely at home in this location. When passing by Joan in her present location, at about a distance of 6 feet as the flow of the room so works, the feeling of being right there with her is exemplified. Then as one moves away to the wall opposite the painting at a distance of about fifteen feet, the furthest distance that the room allows, the beauty of the whole painting is taken in with nothing being lost. After taking in every detail up close and then stepping back to let the painting consume the viewer on a whole, Jules Bastien-Lepage's painting of Joan of Arc shows the artist's fine tuned skills in

capturing the essence of realism while also conveying a deep humanistic compassion.