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The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston makes available to the American audience works of art from almost all periods in the history of art. Among the most impressive works that can be seen at the Museum, are the following eight examples which represent the work of different artists in different periods of human history. Each displays the characteristics of the style that flourished in the period and place of its creation.

Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist, Giuliano Bugiardini, 1510's, oil on panel.

Arranged in a triangular composition, the three figures seem to promenade in a field. A youthful Virgin Mary, dressed in a red dress and a blue mantle looks out of the picture towards the viewer, while holding in her arms a naked baby Christ. Next to them, another naked boy, Saint John the Baptist follows. As the figure of the Virgin stands at the top of an imaginary triangle, the rest of the figures seem to further the unity of the group. Saint John seems to point towards Jesus turning the viewer's gaze towards him. Jesus in his turn points towards the Virgin Mary. Bugiardini, lived in Italy during the high Renaissance and this work displays many of the qualities of the style. The theme, triangular arrangement of the figures and neutral background along with the youthful representation of the Virgin and the almost sculptural quality in the depiction of the bodies were particularly favored during the period and can be also found in works of famous Italian Renaissance masters like Leonardo, Rafael and Michelangelo to name just a few (Museum label for Giuliano Bugiardini Madonna and Child with St John the Baptist).

St Michael the Archangel, Claudio Coello, 1660's, oil on canvas

Dynamic and dramatic, the painting depicts a winged figure holding a sword and attacking a man lying on the floor and holding his head expecting the blow that will arrive the next moment. The painting belongs to the Baroque style that flourished during the 17th century in Europe. Following the style's ideals, the young man, who is St Michael, the Archangel is represented in action. His body is turned, gathering strength to give the final blow that will eventually defeat his opponent, Satan. The face, the position of the legs and the arms, the tension of the muscles and the position of a defeated Satan all contribute to a dramatic effect as if a stage play is about to begin. There is a sense of movement in the picture (the mantle of the Archangel seems to fly) and a representation of strong emotional drama, all highly favored qualities by the Baroque artists (Tansey and Kleiner 818). The story depicted, the Archangel ousting Satan from heaven was popular in Catholic countries during that period as a symbol of the defeat of the Protestant heresy by the Catholic Church (Museum label for Claudio Coello, St Michael the Archangel).

Italian Landscapes with Mountains and a River, Joseph Wright of Derby, c. 1790, oil on canvas

An English painter, Joseph Wright of Derby, travelled to Italy, a country that inspired him for the creation of this painting. The background is dominated by a big mountain the hillsides of which are filled with snow. The sky is clouded and only two patches of blue sky seem to throw light to the trees and landscape of the foreground. A lake seems to lie behind. The painting belongs to the Romantic tradition and embodies some of the basic ideals of

Romanticism. Nature is the protagonist in this work of art, light is used to convey emotion even in a scene where no humans are represented, while the background of mountains and a lake on a –most probably- chilly winter day stir imagination. All these are consistent with the romantic ideals of the period which aimed at differentiating from the ideas of the Enlightenment and proposed a new emphasis on emotion and imagination as opposed to reason favored by the philosophers and thinkers of Enlightenment (Galitz).

Empress Eugenie, Franz X. Winterhalter, 1854, oil on canvas

This is just one of the portraits of the Empress Eugenie painted by the German painter Franz Winterhalter. One of the most beautiful women of her time, Eugenie, originally a Spanish countess, married Napoleon III in 1853. This portrait was painted one year after the marriage and depicts a beautiful, young woman in profile, dressed in a white and purple voluptuous dress and reclining on a sofa in front of a window partly covered with a red curtain. The Empress chose to copy another French queen in terms of style, Marie Antoinette (Museum Label for Franz X. Winterhalter, Empress Eugenie), obviously choosing to ignore the latter's inglorious death at the guillotine after the French Revolution. The artist, on the other hand, is influenced by the Neoclassical tradition that flourished in France during that period. The posture of the sitter, the clear colors and lines he chooses to employ as well as the obvious idealization of his subject are reminiscent of the French Neoclassicist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres which in his turn found inspiration in the Classical and Neo Classical tradition of ancient Greek statues and Renaissance art (Tansey and Kleiner, 937).

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The Gust of Wind, Gustave Courbet, 1865, oil on canvas

An impressive and to a certain extent scary landscape is depicted in this painting. The sky, partly light blue and partly dark blue –almost black– announces the coming of a storm. On the foreground trees, rocks and what appears to be a small concentration of water are represented. In the distant background lies a mountain. Among the leading French realists, often considered the father of the style, Courbet remained loyal to it and its ideals until the end of his life, often provoking the wrath of critics (Tansey and Kleiner 968). Claiming that the “ art of painting can consist only in the representation of objects visible and tangible to the painter” (Tansey and Kleiner 966) he engaged in painting themes from his contemporary life choosing real people –often belonging to the working classes– and ordinary landscapes as his subjects (Tansey and Kleiner 967). True to this idea, this painting is most probably a representation of the Forest of Fontainebleau just outside Paris.

Children in a Garden (the Nurse), Mary Cassatt, 1878, oil on canvas

The painting depicts three figures in a blossomed garden: a nurse or nanny and two children, one playing next to her, the other sleeping in a stroller during what seems a sunny day in spring or summer. Although an American by birth, Mary Cassatt spent a great part of her life in France where she adopted the Impressionist style and worked alongside the greatest Impressionists eventually becoming one of them. Considered the first “ modern” style, Impressionism introduced subjects from the Parisian middle class life, as opposed to the religious, mythological or historical subjects

preferred by artists until then. The Impressionists rejected work in a studio aiming to capture the spontaneity of the moment and paid great attention to light and colors (Tansey and Kleiner 989). Cassatt followed these patterns in this painting giving us a unique view of upper middle class family life in the second part of the 19th century while at the same time creating a beautiful work of art.

The Turning Road, L'Estaque, Andre Derain, 1906, oil on canvas

Radically different than all the other works examined earlier, Derain's painting is full of color. It depicts a landscape, the small town of L'Estaque, but the motifs –trees, humans and buildings- are simplified and the emphasis is placed on the intense and unnatural coloring. The fauvist movement to which Derain belonged is considered the first artistic movement of the 20th century. The Fauves continued the earlier Impressionist and Post Impressionist traditions of distancing from the Renaissance tradition and even went several steps further. Color and not form became of utmost importance. Cezanne had proposed that the only way light could be conveyed in painting was through color. The Fauves took this suggestion to another level by using a series of impressive and vivid colors like red, blue, green and orange (Tansey and Kleiner 1033-1034). At the same time, as Derain's painting shows, the human figure and the objects represented are created with simple lines and motifs, perhaps influenced by non Western artistic motifs, as the Fauves were the first to look outside the European world for inspiration (Tansey and Kleiner 1033-1034).

Hercules Upholding Heaven, Paul Manship, 1918, bronze

At an impressive height of 10, 5 feet, this work of sculpture is certainly one of the most impressive in the museum. It depicts a young, semi-naked man kneeling and supporting with his back what appears to be a sphere. With one of his hands he holds the sphere, with the other a bat. This along with the lion skin with which he is partly dressed helps us identify him as the hero Hercules from ancient Greek mythology in the process of performing his eleventh labor (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston online). Interestingly, the sculpture is also a working sundial, the central arrow on the globe casting the necessary shadows (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston online). Manship is considered the father of Art Deco in America and he was widely influenced from Greek, Roman and even Indian art in order to create his works during a period where artists flirted with abstraction (Smithsonian American Art Museum online). This particular work is mostly influenced by Archaic Greek art (the art that flourished in Greece in c 600-480 BC, before the more famous Classical period) using the mixture of realism and stylized lines to portray the male body and face (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston online).

Spanning from the early 16th century to the beginnings of the 20th, these eight paintings represent some of the most important styles in Western art and are, each in its own right, great representatives of different eras in the history of human creation.

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