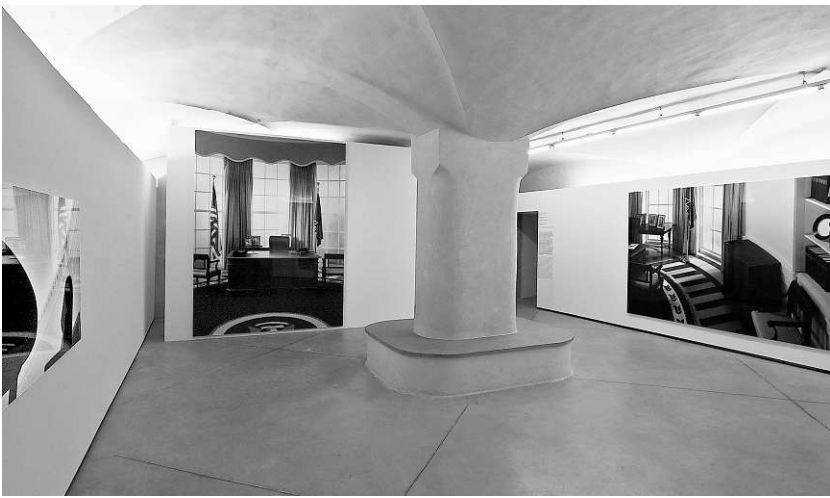


WEEKEND ARTS EXHIBITIONS AUCTIONS



Two views of the exhibition “Manipulating Reality” at the Palazzo Strozzi, above and top right. Top left, Michelangelo Pistoletto’s “Metrocubo d’infinito” (Square Meter Infinity Cube).

Up against the Renaissance

Scene in / Seen in ... Florence

RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

The bohemian artistic community in Florence in the early 16th century was almost certainly the first to stage regular absurdist “happenings.” The center of this activity was “La Sapienza,” an abandoned, half-built, never-to-be-completed university site, taken over by a group of like-minded artists as studios, and the venue for uproarious, avant-garde theatrical and musical performances and all-night parties. The inhabitants of this warehouse-style commune included Jacopo Sansovino, Ruperto di Filippino and Giovanfrancesco Rustici, who kept a pet eagle and porcupine. They held bizarre banquets enlivened by displays of elaborate mechanical contraptions and dishes served up in inventive forms — for instance, an edible octagonal church designed by Andrea del Sarto, with jelly for colored mosaic flooring, sausages for its porphyry columns, parmesan capitals, pastry cornices and a choir of stuffed birds. Fancy dress was de rigueur. At one feast the artists turned up as builders and laborers, at another as gods. Having virtually bankrupted themselves with the escalating costs of these events, the artists came to one of the last as tramps and beggars. The site of “La Sapienza” is now occupied by parts of Florence University on Piazza San Marco, next door to today’s Fine Arts Academy, and the Military Geographical Institute on via Cesare Battisti. Virtually all traces of its original buildings have disappeared. Florence’s contemporary art scene inevitably struggles to compete with the overwhelming physical presence of the city’s Renaissance past, but there are signs of change, of which the new Center for Contemporary Culture Strozziina at Palazzo Strozzi is both a symbol and a generator. As it happens, the pioneering

Galleria Biagiotti Arte Contemporanea is just a few minutes’ walk from Palazzo Strozzi. And this area, between the Strozzi and the Santa Maria Novella Station, shows signs of emerging as the city’s contemporary gallery district. The Galleria Biagiotti, at 39r via delle Belle Donne, was opened in 1997 in a former bicycle repair shop by the Arizona-born Carole Biagiotti, who came to Florence on a trip to Europe in the 1960s. Her bag came apart outside Mario Biagiotti’s leather store, he helped her fix it and before long they married. She now runs the gallery with their artist daughter, Caterina Biagiotti. “I get a thousand people at our openings,” she said, “but it’s still very diffi-



cult to sell contemporary art to the Florentines.” Consequently, she said, most of her clients are collectors in other parts of Italy and the United States. But undaunted, her next project is to hold a group show of street artists, which the staid Florentines are liable to find even more outré than the mostly young Italian artists she has already featured. Close by is Galleria Poggiali e Forconi, at 29/Ar-35/A via delle Scala, which, Lorenzo Poggiali said, began to specialize in exhibiting only living artists a decade ago. The current show in the gallery, which was remodeled and expanded last year, is of the Italian artist Luca Pignatelli. Galleria Alessandro Bagnai, 15r via del Sole, moved to this district six months ago. The gallery runs through

the block to a space on the other side, 36r via della Spada, where Mr. Bagnai’s wife, Antonella Villanova, shows contemporary designers. The latter street is also the home of the Marino Marini sculpture museum — which charmingly includes a collection of the 20th-century artist’s wife’s stylish hats. The proximity of Palazzo Strozzi and the Marino Marini Museum, where there also are shows of living artists, certainly made this location attractive, said Catalina Brenes at Galleria Bagnai. When the newly formed Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi took on the task of transforming this formidable Renaissance edifice into a modern cultural crossroads in 2007, the mission from the outset was to integrate its historical and contemporary art activities. The major 2009-10 show upstairs, “Art and Illusions: Masterpieces of Trompe l’Oeil,” was paralleled by “Manipulating Reality,” which brought the subject right up to the minute with its display of 21st-century digitally created realities at the Center for Contemporary Culture Strozziina downstairs. And the 2010-11 exhibition of Bronzino, portraitist of the Medici, ran in tangent with “Portraits and Power,” a stimulating take on image-making today. The exhibition space at the Center for Contemporary Culture Strozziina is in the vaulted former wine cellars of the palazzo. Its director is Franziska Nori, a dynamic young curator who was born in Rome of an Italian father and a German mother. “After researching the subject at length and talking to a lot of people, we decided to do thematic exhibitions with a number of artists in each one,” she said. “There are plenty of other venues doing monographic exhibitions of big name contemporary artists, so we set out to create a niche for ourselves by doing something different. “Above all,” she continued, “we wanted to create a debate in which everyone could take part. So for every exhibition we gather a group of advisers and decide together what to put in the show. We don’t push a thesis and try to tell the public what to think. We expect them to make up their own minds. And to help them we hold multiple events during the exhibition, with

talks, discussions and other activities related to the issues.” Palazzo Strozzi’s courtyard space, with a cafe and a bookstore/design shop, has given the city a new all-weather meeting place. Each exhibition here is given over to a single artist. The latest work to appear was Michelangelo Pistoletto’s “Metrocubo d’infinito” (Square Meter Infinity Cube), a ludic installation in which a cube of inward facing mirrors is placed in another large mirrored chamber, reproducing the image of the inner cube, and that of the viewer, reflected seemingly into infinity. The center’s “Open Studios” initiative, entering its third year, also gives people the opportunity of visiting studios to meet local artists and see their work: www.strozzina.org/open\_studios. Thirty artists have taken part in the program, which now also covers the Tuscan towns of Prato, Pistoia, Pisa and Siena. The visits are recorded for a video archive. A tour last week of the Florence studios of four of these artists revealed a wide variety of striking works in different media. Luciana Majoni began taking photographs while studying painting at the Fine Arts Academy here. Her powerful photographic still-lives and images of sculpture are usually in black and white, but her subtly modulated works in color are no less effective. Robert Pettena’s installations, objects, photos and videos are idiosyncratic and entertaining, and include a bramble- and bird-filled indoor aviary created especially for Open Studios visitors. Using digital 3-D imaging of mind-bending complexity, Giacomo Costa’s latest productions are of astonishing apocalyptic landscapes and futuristic images of ruined megalopolises being overtaken by nature, which are both disturbing and hauntingly beautiful. And visitors to the video and performance artist Olga Pavlenko, who divides her time between Florence and Ukraine, will be invited to meet not at her studio but at other locations, from which artistic mystery tours will begin.

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Excellent larks: The art of the modest auction

MELIKIAN, FROM PAGE 18 ing reflections is in the naturalist spirit of the mid-19th century. An exhibition label on the back shows that the landscape was displayed with works by several artists from the Moore family at the Corporation Art Gallery in the Northern English town of York in 1912. No bid came in as the auctioneer, Alan Montgomery, called out in vain “£1,700.” One more bid would have secured the Derbyshire view, and brought the price with the sale charge to a reasonable £2,166. When the next Bonhams no-frills sale of 19th-century paintings takes place on March 1, prices will probably be pretty much in the same range. At more upmarket auctions built around a theme, with an elegant display intended to stimulate buyers, prices remain modest for a whole range of decorative urban landscapes.

On Wednesday, in “The Gentleman’s Library Sale” at Bonhams’ New Bond Street rooms where important auctions are staged, two engravings by Thomas Morris after William Marlow published by John Curtis in 1795, brought together £960. Colored by hand in pastel tones, one is a “view of Ludgate Street representing the Grand West Front of St Paul’s Cathedral” and the other a “View of Fish Street Hill representing the Monument and the Church of St. Magnus.” They make one dream about the vistas of 18th-century London, when the capital had not been devastated by World War II bombings and was immune from the “Gherkin” and other scars on its skyline. Images of the bucolic approaches to the city were engraved by Daniel Lerpinière and published by John Boydell. The “North view of the cities of London

and Westminster with part of Highgate” dated 1780 and the “South view of the cities of London and Westminster taken from Denmark Hill near Camberwell” printed the year before are in an oval format that has long been out of fashion — and the prints are black and white. Very slight browning in one and minimal tears in the white margin of the other are barely noticeable in the framed engravings. Estimated to be worth £300 to £500 plus the 20 percent sale charge, these too fetched £960. The real gem of the week came a little later. The large architectural project in pale hues of blue and green wash sketched by C. Burton when it was decided to move the Crystal Palace from Hyde Park is one of several designs published in the journal “The Builder” between 1851 and 1852.

Burton’s revolutionary idea was to stack the iron frame upward to 50 stories. The proposed stepped structure of metal and glass would have been 1,000 feet high, anticipating by three decades the earliest U.S. plans for skyscrapers — a detail overlooked by American architectural historians debating just who should be credited for the earliest high rise. Retaining its Victorian-period mount and frame, the visionary project was expected to be knocked down between £800 and £1,200. It rose to £6,600, triple the £2,000 limit suggested above. But that was not much for a ravishing watercolor, important to architectural history. Whoever said that it takes millions to join the fun in the art market?

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ARTS GUIDE

Rome

GALLERIA BORGHESE | Cranach: L’Altro Rinascimento. www.mostracranach.it Court painter to Frederick the Wise of Saxony, heir to Flemish techniques but open to Italian influences, Lucas Cranach the Elder, a friend of Luther’s, could be the iconographer of the early Reformation and still be in high demand among loyal Catholics. The painter (1472-1553) headed an active studio in Wittenberg that produced biblical and mythological scenes, as well as innovative portraits and nudes. Cranach is one the first painters to have explored the theme of the deceptive woman (Eve excluded). About 45 paintings and 10 woodcuts, juxtaposed with works from the permanent collection, attest to his audacious virtuosity. (The Cranach exhibition, recently seen in Brussels, is due to open in Paris on Feb. 9.) Through Feb. 13.

Paris

CENTRE POMPIDOU | Mondrian/De Stijl. www.centrepompidou.fr Geometrical abstraction based on straight lines and primary colors was the concept underlying the works of the painters, architects and designers of the Dutch art movement De Stijl (1917-31). Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931) and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) were its main representatives. The exhibition opens with, and closes on, De Stijl, its sources, its development and its accomplishments. Paintings by Van Doesburg and others, architectural drawings, graphical investigations and urban projects illustrate the concept. In between, a display of Mondrian’s output from 1912 through 1938 showcases the evolution of his simplified idiom, marked by the use of primary colors, non-colors (black and white), black lines and lack of symmetry. In later years, white planes and black lines took over, pushing small planes of colors to the sides of the canvas, until color took over the lines, as exemplified in one of Mondrian’s New York paintings of 1942. Through March 21.

Prague

OBEČNÍ DŮM/MUNICIPAL HOUSE | Amedeo Modigliani. www.amedeo-modiglianiprague.com Modigliani’s (1884-1920) life and work are examined in the context of the Parisian avant-garde in the



early 20th century. Paintings, drawings and studies by the artist and his contemporaries, including Frantisek Kupka who exhibited at the same 1912 Paris Salon, are complemented by original photographs of the artists and of Modigliani’s model/mistress Jeanne Hébuterne (who took her life shortly after Modigliani’s death). Above, “Dr. François Brabander, 1918.” Through Feb. 28.

Tokyo

BUNKAMURA MUSEUM OF ART | Monet and the Artists of Giverny: The Beginning of American Impressionism. www.bunkamura.co.jp Giverny, where Monet settled in 1883, turned into an international artists’ colony — mostly American — at the beginning of World War I. The Impressionist painter sets the tone of the display with 30 paintings; they are complemented by about 50 similarly themed works by Theodore Robinson, John Leslie Breck and Willard Leroy Metcalf, among others. The juxtaposition proves, if need be, that Monet’s sensibility and technique are indeed hard to match. Through Feb. 17.

Amsterdam

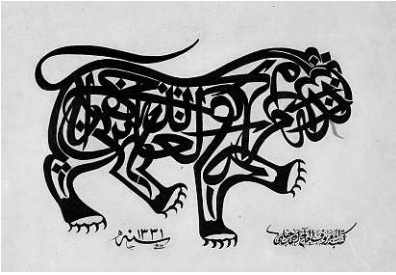
RIJKSMUSEUM | Gabriel Metsu: A Master Rediscovered. www.rijksmuseum.nl At the end of his relatively short life, Metsu (1629-67) was one of the most sought-after genre painters of the Dutch Golden Age. In the fol-



lowing century, paintings by Vermeer, then not quite as popular, would be sold under Metsu’s name. Vermeer, Gerrit Dou, Gerard ter Borch and Pieter de Hooch were obvious influences after Metsu moved to Amsterdam from Leiden in the mid-1650s. Metsu created religious scenes (in his early career), still lifes and portraits, often in the form of conversation pieces rich in anecdotal details. The 35 paintings in the display will travel to Washington (April 17 to July 24). Above, “A Baker Blowing his Horn, c. 1660-63.” Through March 21.

DE NIEUWE KERK | Passion for Perfection: Islamic Art From The Khalili Collections. www.nieuwekerk.nl

The Iranian-born collector Nasser David Khalili has been gathering thousands of artworks that he is happy to lend to museums worldwide until they find a home in mu-



seums specifically built for them. About 500 items — illuminated Korans, manuscripts, textiles, paintings, glassware, jewels — from China to Spain exemplify the diversity of religious as well as secular (representation of figures allowed) arts of Islam over the past 13 centuries. Above, a calligraphic composition by an Ottoman artist in the 1910s. The lion is an intricate arrangement of invocations to Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law, and his successor according to Shiites. Through April 17.

Melbourne

NGV AUSTRALIA | Gustave Moreau and the Eternal Feminine. www.ngv.vic.gov.au On loan from the eponymous museum in Paris, more than 110 paintings, watercolors and drawings. Obsessed by the female body, entranced by its beauty, the Symbolist artist (1826-98) painted “queens, goddesses and temptresses,” placing them in biblical, mythological and historical contexts that he infused with exoticism and eroticism, all scenes adequately served by the textural effects of impasto. The central section is devoted to Moreau’s depictions of Salomé, including the iconic “Apparition, 1874-76” of John the Baptist’s blood-dripping severed head during her dance. Through April 10.

London

ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS | Modern British Sculpture. www.royalacademy.org.uk The exhibition that purports to be “neither comprehensive nor definitive” explores the development of British sculpture (modern and contemporary), its links with its former Empire, and the influences



of non-Western techniques and sensibilities. Figurative and abstract works and installations are complemented by a selection of sculptures from around the world. Henry Moore, Anthony Caro and Damien Hirst, among others, figure in the show. Above, Philip King’s “Genghis Khan, 1963,” in painted plastic. Through April 7. COMPILED BY ELISABETH HOPKINS

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