

# Baron's collection tops them all

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(F9C)

By ERIC PETERS

Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, whose private collection of old masters is second only to the Queen of England's, has sent 57 works on his first American tour.

The show, which began at the National Gallery of Washington, D.C., is on display at the Detroit Institute of Arts until May 11. It will make a two-year, nine-city circuit, ending at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The incredibly high quality of the exhibit is stunning. A partial listing of the artists represented reads like an index for the history of art — Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, Duccio, Goya, Watteau, El Greco, Fragonard, Eyck, Steen and Tintoretto.

Yet, these samples are from a huge accumulation of art treasures including 340 masterworks housed in a museum wing of the Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza's 17th Century Tuscan Patricia villa on Lake Lugano, Switzerland. That these are all possessions of a single man is amazing.

**OBJECTS D'ART ARE** not the only property of the Baron. His international holdings in business, finance, industry and commerce run into many hundreds of millions of dollars.

Grandfather August Thyssen, who began the empire with iron and steel works, came to be known as the German Andrew Carnegie. His son, Hans Heinrich, assumed the title first when he married the lovely but poor daughter of a Hungarian aristocrat and an American beauty.

Forced to flee his newly adopted homeland during the Hungarian revolution, the man of property settled in Holland, where he began acquiring art. His son, the present Baron, was born there in 1921, a place that continues to hold such affection for him that he refuses to bid against Dutch museums at public auction.

In 1933, the family was moved to Villa Favorita, Casagnola, Switzerland. At his death in 1947, the items in the collection were divided among his four children, but the second Baron decided that, as a memorial to his father, he would buy back as many of the originals as possible.

**THE REUNITED WORKS** now account for two-thirds of the total art collection. Soon, he was adding to it himself — filling gaps, starting new collections, including Impressionist and modern paintings (not represented

here) as well as most of the Italian, French and Spanish works in the show.

The Baron has also been active in the preservation of art and is known for his generous donations to Florence after the terrible flood.

Paintings are displayed in four rooms chronologically from early 14th to early 19th Century, and include Greek, Flemish, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, and French master painters. The earliest is a rare 1310 Duccio and the last, an 1820 Goya.

Spanning them is an enchanted stroll through a tiny, rich museum all in its own. Some of the works are so sumptuous that one returns to them again and again, turning away only with the greatest reluctance.

Two outstanding aids to viewing the exhibit are the accurate guide and the fully illustrated catalogue, written by Allen Rosenbaum.

**UPON ENTERING** the gallery, the eyes are at once arrested by Hans Memling's "Portrait of a Young Man," 1490. It was chosen for the catalogue cover.

The small, compact picture sums up the corporeal and spiritual attitude of an age of courtly manners. The handsome, meticulously groomed, worshipful young man appears both manly and gentle, intent yet calm, the worldly wise in pious supplication to a divine spirit.

His hands come lightly together in prayer with barely touching fingertips. The beautifully detailed clothing, a manicured garden just beyond a marble column indicated a very stylish, comfortable life of wealth and ease.

The open, pensive face, framed by a billowy drape of hair, is lit by a source of light away from the window, probably a missing panel of the Virgin Mary.

On the reverse of the panel is one of the earliest known still life rendering. It is a vase of flowers having symbolic religious meaning, indicating that the panel was probably part of an altar-piece or a matrimonial triptych.

The white lily is to signify the purity of the Virgin Mary. The purple iris indicated her royalty as Queen of Heaven, the blue columbine represents the Holy Ghost.

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There are some odd perspectives such as the hands being too large for the head, the peacock seemingly perched upon the helmet of the horseman, and a falcon dropping into a heron in a two-dimensional plane. These things add interest, wonder and charm.

To quote Allen Rosenbaum, who researched the collection and wrote the excellent catalogue: "The effect is of a most splendidly appointed diorama." It is also

artist is best known, show how radically the artist's technique had changed.

**TWO VERY DIFFERENT** kinds of faces are painted by Titan and Rembrandt. The former is a portrait of the Doge Francesco Venier, a frail old man of position, ugly but dignified.

The latter is a "Man Before an Archway," which has all the candid immediacy of a busy man stopped in the street, giving his somewhat grudging attention to yet another matter of business.

Precious for their vivid images or significant for their subjects are a number of memorable paintings.

The grinning self-portrait of Jan Steen strutting a lute is famous. Jacob van Ruisdael's frozen winter landscape with a glowering sky, a fallen skater and a frosted tree is an important item as one of the early northern European winterscapes.

**THE FINAL GAL-** LERY is dominated by a sharp contrast of subject and the notable absence of brilliant color.

Smokey skin tones make the most intriguing work in the exhibit is Vittore Carpaccio's "Young Knight in a Landscape," 1510. It is the earliest life-sized, full-length portrait painted in Italy.

But it is more than an historical innovation, it is laden with a profusion of interesting details and symbols that identify the subject by name and title as Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino.

**THE LATIN MOTTO:** "Die painfully rather than be sullied," and the impress of the ermine refer to the order of knighthood of which the young duke's grandfather was a founding member. The gold and black checkered heraldry on the knight's shoes and scabbard that match the livery of his squire are the Duke of Urbino's colors.

The oak trees refer to the family name, Rovere, which means oak in Italian. His birthday on the Feast of the Annunciation, and middle name Maria are indicated by a source of light in the flowers of the Virgin Mary, for whom he is named.

**GIOVANNI BELLINI** learned the use of oils instead of the common tempera from Antonello di Messina and, with the new medium, became one of the greatest of Venice's major paint artists. The ambitious richness of color in "Nunc Dimittis," an unusual Biblical subject, seems to have a life of its own, like the sleek and glowing colors of bright enamel.

(My only disappointment in this particularly radiant picture wasn't reproduced in color.)

The "Cardplayers" of Lucas van Leyden is an interesting study as well as a precursor to many gambling subjects popular in the next century. There is speculation that this game may be an historical conceit — a power game on the field of France (a cloth of fleur-de-lis) between Charles V and England's Cardinal Wolsey or perhaps the Bishop of Lige.

Titian's "Toilette of Venus" was the direct subject for Ruben's treatment, which is here in the show. But the substitution of a Flemish peasant woman with her robust body makes it a very much earlier version.

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