

Docent Meetings

**ALL MEETINGS
CANCELLED Un-
til Further Notice**

September 25

Graduation and
Service Recognition
Ceremony



Elizabeth Jaeger, NYC sculptor, born 1988, who is leading a program which invites artists to contribute original art works for installation in the break rooms of care givers around the world, in cooperation with the Whitney Museum of American Art's shop. (Images from the Whitney website). This untitled Jaeger sculpture eludes analysis, but has an inescapable, visceral impact on the viewer. Thoughts that come to mind are "anonymous watchers." "intense presence," "silent awareness." The work certainly invites our participation. *Submitted by Ricki*

Dearest Friends,

A belated Happy Mother's Day to all of you! I hope that you were able to connect in some way with your children, grandchildren, mothers, and other people in your life who you mothered or who mothered you.

This strange time of forced separation has been a lesson in what it means to be a community, a family, a friend, and a mother or father. For me, the coronavirus hit home this week as my sister and brother-in-law tested positive for the virus. My brother-in-law, a commercial plumber, was called in last month to rehab an old abandoned hospital needed for coronavirus patients in Louisiana. He worked 7 days a week for 12 hours a day for over a month before he and a half-dozen of his co-workers became too sick to work. He is now home and recovering as is my sister who also became ill. I am grateful that they are doing well and have each other.



This virus not only spreads serious disease, it also spreads fear, helplessness, and anger.

Molora Vadnais, Docent
Council President

The only antidote I know to combatting these side effects is to actively practice compassion for each other and for ourselves. Now onto business.

Some of you have voiced concerns about the mention of Gallery Guides and the introduction of iPads and audio-guides in the letter that Larry Feinberg sent to the Museum's members last week. The Student Intern Gallery Guides are university students, most of them first generation and Spanish speakers, enrolled in a class that Patsy has been teaching for several years. As part of their class, these students learn about the art on view and the Museum programs, and act as a welcoming presence for families at Studio Sundays, family first Thursdays and other similar events as well as assisting Museum teaching artists in various outreach and other programs. This is an educational program and is not intended to, or able to, replace the docent program.

The Museum's use of electronics is also not new. iPads have been used in some exhibitions in the past to augment the experience. iPads are the modern enhanced equivalent of the laminated paper gallery guides that used to be available in Ludington Court. Similarly, audio-guide systems in the form of audio by cellphone have been used for certain exhibitions in the past. For example, I once produced a short audio clip about a photograph I had researched. Will the Museum at some future point produce a full-scale audio-guide tour of the permanent collection? Probably. But that does not mean an end to the docent program. Most major museums offer both audio-guides and docent-led tours. These are seen as alternative access points and enhance the visitors' experience. As long as we docents continue to provide an authentic and insightful introduction to SBMA's galleries and exhibitions, we will remain an integral part the Museum.

Sincerely
Molora

A Message from Patsy



Dear Colleagues,

During this unusual period, I am finding that time can at once seem to be both slow and fast. In that mode, just as last week I wrote to tell you with mixed emotions (both joy for her in her new dream job and sorrow to say goodbye to our marvelous colleague, Michelle West,) this week I write with delight about a new colleague joining us. I am excited to share the wonderful news that Rachel Heidenry, Curatorial Assistant to Contemporary Curator Julie Joyce and subsequently, James Glisson, will be joining us in the Education Department beginning May 18, 2020 as Manager of Docent and Academic programs.

Rachel brings vast experience and a rich array of skills to her new position.

Before coming to SBMA, she held positions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Santa Barbara; Slought Foundation, Philadelphia; and was Manager of Public Programs in the Education Department at the American Folk Art Museum, New York. From 2011-2012, she was a Fulbright research scholar based in San Salvador, El Salvador.

She holds a MA in Modern & Contemporary Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU and a BA in Art History and Human Rights from Bard College. Equally gifted as a curator, art writer, and educa-

tor, Rachel is no doubt familiar to many of you from her excellent Docent lectures on Mexican Art and Kehinde Wiley, as well as from the brochure and didactic material produced for both those exhibitions. She is proficient in Spanish, led a recent Museum tour to Mexico, and has worked with the Education Department to offer Spanish language tours for families and students. A talented writer, she has been a contributor to several arts publications including *Public Art Dialogue*, *Art21 Magazine*, *The Architect's Newspaper* and *hyperallergic* and has also written extensively for the *SB Independent*. A savvy user of social media, a natural teacher, and an incredibly hard working, productive and positive advocate for artists and art education, Rachel brings much to our already strong team. We look forward to welcoming her virtually for now and later at the Museum and McCormick House.

Patsy

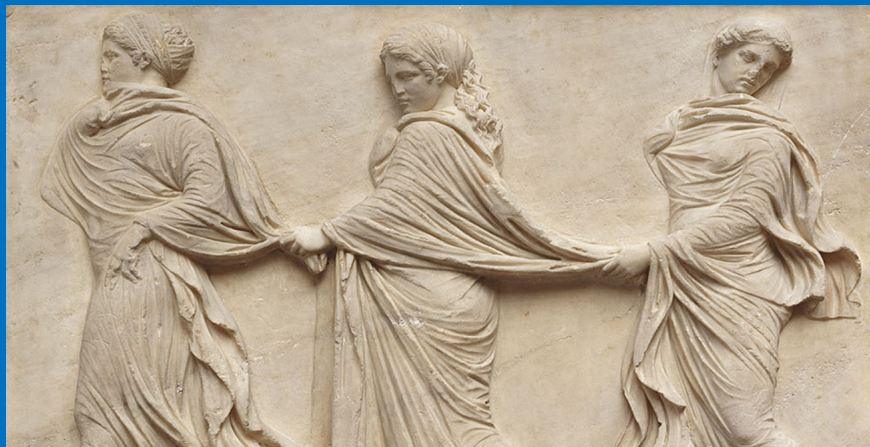


You might enjoy reading her recent article in hyperallergic

[https://hyperallergic.com/560734/during-pandemic-artist-parents-reflect-and-get-creative-with-their-kids/?](https://hyperallergic.com/560734/during-pandemic-artist-parents-reflect-and-get-creative-with-their-kids/?fbclid=IwAR2O1CzYw3hccvMVGkC0bMdREilhImbd9rz1s_ijOdD3MfGMV6IWDx9BfGg)

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How cool is this? Zoom backgrounds from SBMA!



Relief of three dancing Nymphs (detail), 1st century CE. Marble. SBMA, Gift of Frank Perls.

Bubonic plague in Europe changed art history.

Why coronavirus could do the same

By Christopher Knight, Art Critic, LA Times, March 5, 2020

Reprinted with permission from Mr. Knight



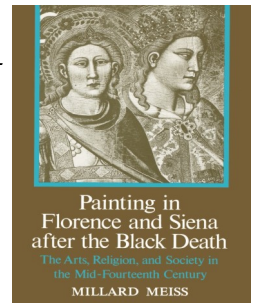
Christine Holland

Guariento di Arpo, "Madonna of Humility," about 1345–1350, tempera and gold leaf on panel.

Plagues have a way of focusing the mind. Just ask Millard Meiss. I admit, that's a guy I haven't thought of in ages. Meiss (pronounced Meese) was a celebrated art historian, one of the best in a generation of mid-20th century Americans who followed European innovators in the field. He stood apart because he changed the way we think about Western art of the previous 600 years.

Meiss didn't do it alone, of course, but he was a leader of the pack. His inspiration was a pandemic — an epic tragedy that many regard as the single greatest natural disaster in the history of Europe. To analyze art made in the wake of a devastating plague, Meiss brought politics, economics, social relations and their tangled interactions into the very center of the study of art history. The approach was novel.

The title of his first book, a now-classic text published in 1951, is sobering — especially now, as [COVID-19](#) continues its relentless global sweep. "Painting in Florence and Siena



After the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century" takes on Italian art in the aftermath of the bubonic plague. The calamity upended Europe beginning in 1347. Having already laid waste in Egypt, Syria, Persia, India and parts of China, the pestilence wiped out at least a third of Europe's population over the next five years. No one was spared — not peasant, aristocrat or cleric. No person was exempt from the ravages to themselves or their families.

Meiss, a historian of medieval art, wondered about the catastrophe's gruesome impact, considering issues beyond the lives of artists and the nature of art objects that were earlier art historians' usual focus. Countless artists died during the Black Death, casualties among the millions who succumbed — 25 million, 40 million, no one really knows how many. The artistic loss was huge. But what about the living? How deeply was the entire culture shaken?

When it came to the directions that art would take, especially in Italy, the effect of the Black Death on survivors and their descendants was less often considered. Meiss took a deep look.

Before the pandemic, everyone knew that Giotto di Bondone, widely revered among fellow artists, was the single most inventive, even groundbreaking painter working in Florence in the first part of the century. His paintings were famous all across northern Italy. Giotto had infused the conventional stories of Christian redemption with dramatic tension, pushing aside the formulaic stylization of so much medieval art. In 1337, Giotto died. The painter, 70, left behind some students, a couple of talented studio assistants and plenty of wannabe admirers. He had teed up a revolution in painting for the second half of the 14th century. But it never

Art historian Millard Meiss published his book on medieval Italian art and the bubonic plague in 1951. It became an instant classic.

came. Two paintings in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum can help explain what happened.

One is a large, lovely, three-panel painting (previous page) by Bernardo Daddi. It features the Virgin Mary in the center, flanked by Saints Thomas Aquinas to her right and Paul to her left. Its arched Gothic frame, the Virgin's almond-shaped eyes, the luxurious patterning of her garments and other flattened decorative elements are old-fashioned — as Byzantine and medieval as can be. But the figures also display something relatively new to Italian art — a lively fullness and spatial volume. Some is created just through savvy juxtapositions of brilliant color.

Those elements don't speak the language of medieval art — of Constantinople, gateway to and from the Middle East and a hallmark for the standard style of Europe's Middle Ages. No, those come straight from the fertile mind of Giotto, influential local boy made good — and likely Daddi's teacher.

Mary even bursts the two-dimensional picture plane. Her left hand clutches a sacred book held close to her womb, as if to signal the New Testament's maternal source. By contrast, her graceful right hand reaches out beyond the marble railing just below her waist, a miraculous helping hand offered to any pious spectator gaping in wonder from the other side of the painted stone fence.

Daddi's painting is dated around 1335, maybe two years before Giotto's death. Daddi himself died in the fateful year 1347 — commonly presumed to have been felled by the rampaging plague. A direct, supremely gifted link to the post-Giotto future of Florentine painting died with him.

His paintings, though, did not go away. Nor did Giotto's, nor those made by his admirers. That's the thing about art: Paintings stick around, still speaking their precise visual language and available for future influence.

Yet the profound, Giotto-inspired transformation underway in traditional medieval art prior to the plague withered. The artistic revolution one might expect in his wake ground to a halt. It skipped a bunch of generations. A renaissance didn't erupt in Florence for another hundred years.

How to explain the gap? Another Getty painting (above) — a small, 19-inch devotional painting — gives a clue. Guariento di Arpo was based in Padua, famous site of Giotto's heartbreaking fresco-cycle in the Arena Chapel. (Pasadena's Norton Simon Museum also has a large, imposing altarpiece by Guariento.) He knew Giotto's supreme masterpiece well.

But you wouldn't know it from the little Getty panel, dating from the late 1340s, when the plague was at its disastrous peak. With death all around, the painting shows a Madonna of Humility — a brand new type of religious image, one so radical that Meiss' book devotes an entire chapter to it.



Incised lines radiate outward, centered on a sun medallion at Mary's throat, in this detail of Guariento di Arpo's "Madonna of Humility."

In a field of burnished gold, Mary nurses the burbling Christ Child. Rather than enthroned, she sits on the ground like a poor peasant. The pose is unprecedented for the Mother of God, except at the Nativity, but one that underscores humility.

Yet, unassuming Mary also wears a magnificent crown; she's the regal Queen of Heaven now come down to Earth, ready to comfort humanity after death. A golden sunburst made from incised lines radiates outward around her body, emanating from a medallion of the sun affixed to her chest.

Imagine the dazzle the luxurious little painting's owner privately beheld by candlelight! Mary transforms from humble mom into apocalyptic spectacle, a vision of eternal power at the end of the world. She's a mystical triple threat — a flash of luminosity at light's grand finale. If you're wondering how this densely compacted little extravaganza of supernaturalism advances Giotto's revolutionary humanism — well, it doesn't. Almost none of Giotto's decisive assertion of homely Christian "people power" inscribed across the walls of that church in Padua is present. How and why such a U-turn happened is a key question Meiss' book set out to answer.

The historian, steeped in ethereal Gothic art of the Middle Ages, knew the second half of the 14th century was tagged as a period of artistic decline — or at least a backtrack to the comfort of established visual norms, as in Guariento's otherwise inventive mystical panel. He wanted to know how and why it happened.

Yes, a pandemic had transpired. Brilliant talents like Bernardo Daddi died, putting a severe crimp in things. But Meiss reasoned that the plague also changed the cultural mind-set of the larger society that survived.

The unfolding social, moral and cultural crisis could not be fully understood just by analyzing artistic style or scrutinizing a painting's symbols. Those tools were necessary, but not enough. To a degree that hadn't happened before, his study focused on the larger Sieneese and Florentine experience.

Meiss joined the who, what, where and when of art to the how and why of the age in which it was made. Traditional art history merged with social history. As he wrote of the millions who survived the cataclysmic Black Death, "their fear, their sense of guilt and the varieties of their religious response" shaped the next century of Italian art.

The book's relative brevity — just 165 pages of densely observed text, including copious footnotes, in my paperback copy — belies the head-turning impact it had when first published in 1951. That Meiss wrote it in the immediate aftermath of World War II is probably instructive.

He had lived through another epic human tragedy, one that saw 70 million die. (Meiss' teacher, the great German-Jewish scholar Erwin Panofsky, had fled the Nazis.) A century already disfigured by the unspeakable horror of World War I, bereft from the calamitous 1918 influenza epidemic and battered by the grinding global trauma of the Great Depression came to a head — all capped by the nuclear specter of global annihilation.

War and plague have been the two primary engines of mass carnage for millennia. Now COVID-19 is drastically changing our lives. Fear, guilt and spiritual upheaval await.

In our time, few artists have had the luxury of working full time making art. With demands for social distancing and sheltering at home meeting losses of jobs, however, many suddenly find themselves with more studio time than they've ever had before. Society will change with this pandemic, and art will too — in ways we can only begin to guess. ■

Snippet from Lori Mohr's 2007 Interview with
SBMA Patron Winifred Vedder

Mr. and Mrs. Dwight Vedder gifted more than a dozen paintings to the Museum. Following her husband's death, Winifred Vedder agreed to let me interview her in her new home at Casa Dorinda.

Mrs. Vedder: "We always chose the paintings together. One day Dwight came home – he'd frequently drop into this gallery on Rodeo Drive near his tailor. He would tell me about the paintings, most by well known artists. So this one day he's all excited, tells me there's a painting he really likes and thinks we should buy. He insisted I go look at it with him. When we got to the gallery, I looked at the painting, then turned to him and said, 'Why would I want to buy a painting of waterlilies?' [Throws her head back, laughing]. When he said it was a Monet I about fainted! But back then I could not for the life of me understand how somebody could pay that much for a painting. And in the 1960s it was nothing compared with prices today! He had the last laugh on that one."

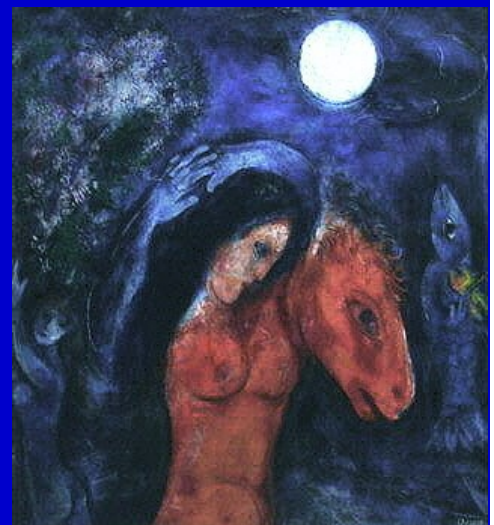


Gifts from Dwight & Winifred Vedder.

Left: Renoir, *Woman in a White Chemise*, 1900.

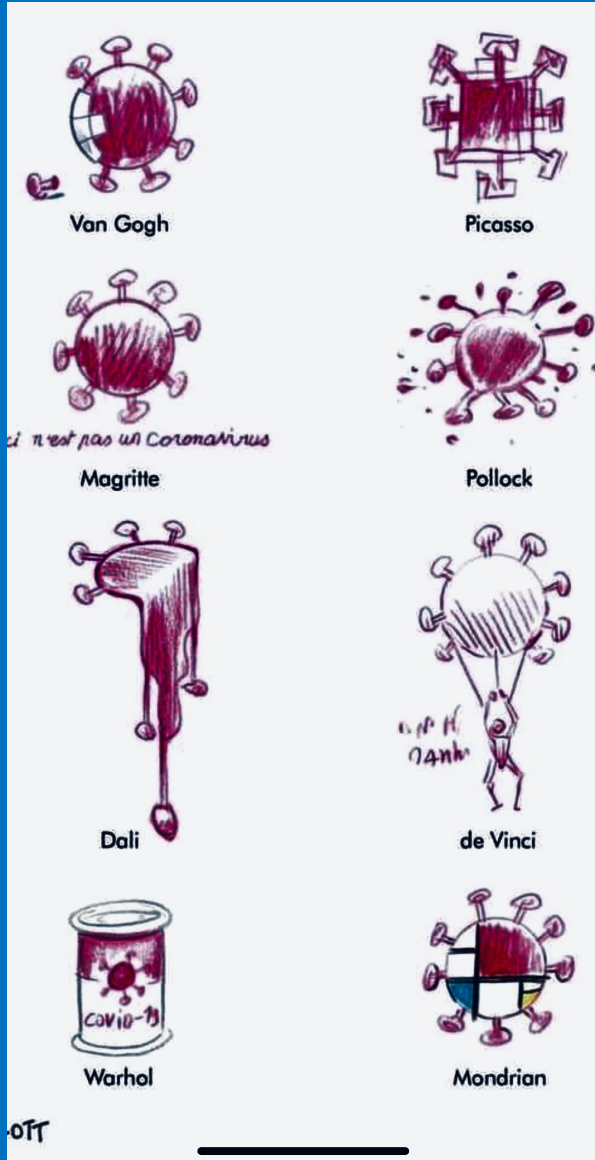
Above: Berthe Morisot, *Portrait of Marthe Giovaudon*, 1892.

Right: Marc Chagall, Russian 1887-1985 (active in U.S. and France). *Horse Woman*, 1949.



A Guaranteed Smile

From Shirley Waxman



From Vikki. Courtesy of Realism Today, here are some Tussenkunst images I hadn't seen: <https://realismtoday.com/11-reenacted-paintings-that-will-make-you-smile/>



Ballerinas from all over the world created a mesmerizing video to raise money for other dancers' coronavirus relief. By Alaa Elassar, CNN

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/09/us/ballerinas-coronavirus-relief-trnd/index.html>



Dorothea Lange's Humanist Vision

Ela Bittencourt April 2020, Hyperallergic



In Lange's photography, human ingenuity and grace triumph over the unspeakable blows of the Great Depression and other social oppression, even when hope is in short supply.

In the midst of the Great Depression, the American photographer [Dorothea Lange](#) (click here for article) crossed the street from her San Francisco studio to photograph unemployed men in a breadline. Lange's instinct not to shrink from misery but to embrace it evidenced her profound sense of empathy.

If we've grown a bit immune to it these days, the havoc wreaked on American life — on global life — by the COVID-19 crisis lends Lange's humanist vision renewed relevance. This spirit is behind the Museum of Modern Art's current exhibition, [Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures](#). The show, which spans Lange's entire career and is her first

major museum survey of her work in 50 years, stresses the social context in which she produced her images.

The most famous of these date from the New Deal period (1933-36), when the government hired artists to document poverty and unemployment affecting millions of Americans. Lange started at home: In "White Angel Breadline, San Francisco" (1933), a cluster of men huddle with their backs to us, while a lone man in the foreground faces us, his hat pulled over his eyes, his shoulders slouched and arms resting on a wood beam. Lange focuses on his empty cup and ravaged hands, clutched in front of him.



Above: "White Angel Bread Line, San Francisco" (1933), gelatin silver print. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Left: "Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona" (November 1940), gelatin silver print, 19 15/16 × 23 13/16 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

THE LAST PAGE

*Happy days will come again...
The Council will be one again
We will have our docent world again
Happy times will come again.*

