

La Muse

Docent Meetings

**All meetings
cancelled until fur-
ther notice**

September 25

Graduation and
Service Recognition
Ceremony

*Aaron Morse, Philo-
sophical Creatures,
2015, a watercolor and
gouache on paper.
(Full caption on p 3.)
Submitted by Ricki.*



Dearest Friends,

The Board met via zoom last Wednesday and approved several important measures so please keep reading.

The Board approved a motion "to allow Docents to stay on Active status during the 2020-2021 service year and not join a touring team if they are concerned about coronavirus." This means that you do not have to take a Leave of Absence or become a Sustainer if you are uncomfortable with the thought of touring next year. You can stay Active and serve on the Board or a committee but not be required to tour. The decision to stay Active and not tour would not preclude you from signing up for touring positions that may open during the year. It only means that when the Preference sheets do come out this summer, you do not need to sign up for a team in order to retain your status as an Active Docent.

The Board also approved a motion "to set aside the requirement that an Active Docent must give eight tours per service year to receive service credit for the year when the Museum remodel, Museum closure, or natural disaster has impacted the docent's ability to fulfill this requirement. This motion is retroactive



Molora Vadnais, Docent
Council President

back to service year 2013-2014 and will continue until the Museum is no longer under construction." This motion is intended to formalize the Board's practice. Many Docents have signed up for touring teams in the summer only to have their touring team or number of tours be eliminated or reduced because of the remodel or recently, the pandemic. Since the renovation began, the Board has actually been giving the required eight-tour service credit to every Docent who signed up for a touring team but was unable to complete the assignment. Some Docents have worried that they would not receive credit toward their service awards and therefore, the Board has now formalized the practice.

The Board also voted to cancel the June double Board meeting during which the outgoing Board turns over responsibility to the incoming Board. Instead, **authority will automatically transition to the incoming Board on June 1.** Individual Board members who are leaving will do the best they can remotely this next month to prepare their incoming replacement officers and in true Docent fashion, will be available in the fall to help the new Board maintain continuity as needed.

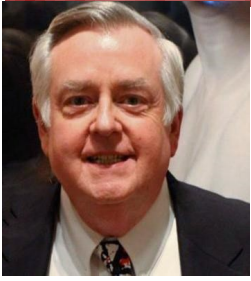
Thanks to all of you who voted on the bylaws revision. Of the 55 Active Docents, 53 voted to approve the revision, one voted against approval, and 1 did not respond. Therefore, the revision is approved. Be patient as it may take us a little time to get the bylaws updated on the website.

Molora



A Big Welcome to
Rachel Heidenry
Our New Docent Program Manager

From our Provisional Co-Chairs



Ralph Wilson

Dear Colleagues,

Greetings to everyone from the Provisional Class, all of whom are healthy and enthusiastic as we continue meeting via Zoom during this topsy-turvy time. After a break of several weeks, we decided that our work could continue online, and despite a few technological challenges, we have been meeting weekly with all 19 provisionals in attendance.

Patty and I have the goal of getting each provisional to complete a highlights tour and present it via Zoom to the class. We will record the tour so

that each person will be able review the recording in preparation for touring once the museum reopens. Because we can only guess at what might be on display when we all resume giving tours, Patty and I are presenting the class with significant pieces taken from the checklists distributed for the Ludington, Thayer, and Ridley-Tree galleries.

Thus far the class has learned about major pieces from the collections of Greco-Roman and other Mediterranean cultures, Renaissance contributions to art, 19th century European art, American art from the “Scenery, Story, Spirit” exhibition of 2012, and the Siqueiros mural. Some of the class have chosen to continue using pieces that were in the galleries when the museum closed, while others will be using selected pieces we anticipate will be on display sometime in the near future.

Their virtual tours will be evaluated, and once they have passed, they will have completed all of the provisional classroom requirements. When the museum reopens, Patty and I will meet with the Education Department to plan how the class members can get gallery practice for those presentation skills that they need before touring.

Ralph and Patty



Patty Santiago



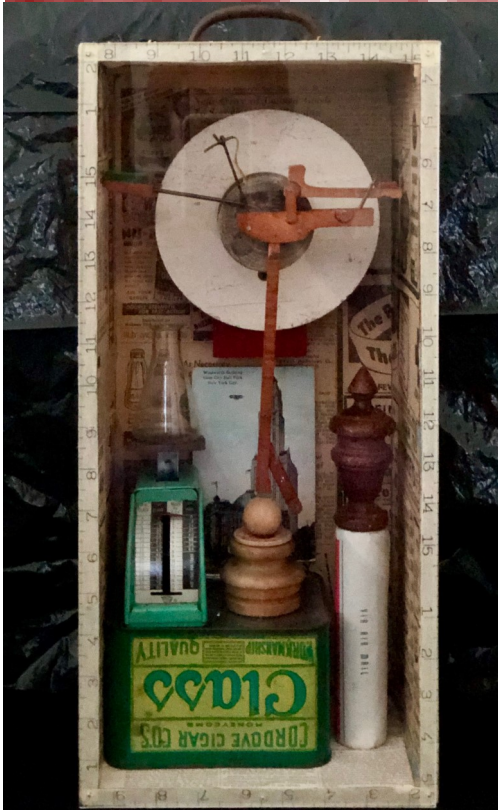
Front Page Image Caption

Submitted by Ricki

In reviewing recent Museum acquisitions, I became fascinated with Aaron Morse. We have three of his paintings; the most recently acquired is *Philosophical Creatures*, 2015, a

watercolor and gouache on paper. Originally from Tuscon, Aaron Morse (b. 1974) has become an iconic Los Angeles artist, exploring the psychedelic/surreal realm of visual imagination in arrestingly vivid, almost billboard detail. Christopher Knight writes in the *LA Times*, “Morse paints a kind of equilibrium. He mixes acrylic, watercolor and oil paint, which don’t always chemically blend; subtle iridescence arises from colors reminiscent of an oil slick or a solar burn, and brush strokes pile up. Everything sits on the surface — interlocking shapes, mottled colors, painted daubs.” He adds, “The image overload that these paintings describe is less a flashy and seductive spectacle than an inescapable reality with intimidating overtones.” Certainly Morse grabs our attention, which is richly rewarded as we spend time with the work.

Congrats to Rosemarie Gebhart!



Rosemarie Gebhart, *Invisible City*, Assemblage with found objects, plexiglass. 20x9x6. 2018. \$650.00 <https://www.westmont.edu/time-memory>

TIME & MEMORY

VIRTUAL TRI-COUNTY JURIED EXHIBITION



Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art

May 14 - June 20, 2020

Juried by Christopher Miles, Professor, School of Art, California State University, Long Beach

This exhibition is exclusively online and not in the museum gallery.

<https://www.westmont.edu/time-memory>

Santa Barbara Landmarks 'Light it Blue in Support of Workers on Front Lines of COVID-19 Pandemic

Noozhawk May 15, 2020



Mortality and the Old Masters

Peter Schjeldahl, *New Yorker*, April 13, 2020

Submitted by Josie Martin



Confidence teeters precariously in Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas"

"Once we are again free to wander museums, the objects won't have altered, but we will have, and the casualties of the coronavirus will accompany us spectrally. Peter Schjeldahl " We will have so much to say to one another when the coronavirus crisis is over: distillations from solitude, in cases like mine. At seventy-eight, with bad lungs, I'm holed up with my wife at our country place until a vaccine is developed and becomes available. It's boring. (Remember when we lamented the distracting speed of cotemporary life?) On the scale of current human ordeals, as the pandemic destroys lives and livelihoods, mere isolation hardly ranks as a woe. It's an ambivalent condition that, among other things, affords time to think long thoughts. One of mine turns to the art in the world's now shuttered museums: inoperative without the physical presence of attentive viewers.



Madonna and Child, by Giovanni Bellini, circa 1470.

Online "virtual tours" add insult to injury, in my view, as strictly spectacular, amorphous disembodiments of aesthetic experience. Inaccessible, the works conjure in the imagination a significance that we have taken for granted. Purely by existing they stir associations and precipitate meanings that may resonate in this plague time.

Why does the art of what we term the Old Masters have so much more soulful heft than that of most moderns and nearly all of our contemporaries? (I place the cutoff between the murderous scourges of war that were witnessed by Francisco Goya and those that Édouard Manet, say, read about in newspapers.) I think the reason is a routine consciousness of mortality. Pandemic diseases and innumerable other causes of early death haunted day-to-day life, even for those creators who were committed to entertainment. Consider the heaps of bodies that accumulate in Shakespeare's tragedies: catharses of universal fear. The persistence of religion in art that was increasingly given to secular motives—Bible stories alternate with spiritually charged themes of Greek and Roman mythology—bespeaks this preoccupation. Deaths of children were a perpetual bane. Paintings of the Madonna and Child, most grippingly those by Giovanni Bellini, secrete Mary's foreknowledge of her son's terrible fate. The idea that God assumed flesh, suffered, and died was a stubborn consolation—Mary's to know and ours to take on faith or, if we're atheists, at least to marvel at as mythic poetry.

An ineffably sacramental nuance in paintings from the Dutch seventeenth century, which luxuriate in the ordinary existence of ordinary people, evokes the impermanence of human contentment. Never mind the



"Self-Portrait," by Rembrandt, from 1658.

explicitness of that time's memento mori, all the skulls and guttering candles. I am talking about an awareness that's invisible, but palpable, in Rembrandt's nights—his fatalistic self-portrait in the Frick Collection comes to mind—and in Vermeer's mornings, when a young wife might open a window and be immersed in delicate, practically animate sunlight. The peculiarly intense insouciance of a Boucher or a Fragonard—the sensuous frolics of France's ancien régime, immune to concern about absolutely anything disagreeable, including, God forbid, social unrest—protests, in favor of life, rather too much. (Young folk dallying at court provide the sole but turbulent drama in Fragonard's "The Progress of Love," a marvellous suite of paintings that is also at the Frick.) Only as the nineteenth century unfolds, with improvements in sanitation and other living conditions (for the rising middle classes, at least), does mortal insecurity wane—barring such episodic ravages as tuberculosis and syphilis, which, like AIDS a century later, could seem to the unaffected to be selective of their victims—and death start to become an inconvenience in the lives of other people.

Now, in our world of effective treatments for almost anything, death obtains at the extremes of the statistical and the anecdotal, apart from those we love, of course. People slip away, perhaps with the ripple of an obituary: celebrity news items. What with the dementias attendant on our remorselessly lengthened lives, many slip away before the fact. Cancer is an archipelago of hospital medicine, normalized across the land. (I have cancer, but with fading awareness of it as immunotherapy gives me an unexpected lease on continued life.) The twentieth century shifted our sense of mass death to the political: war, genocide, and other numerical measures of evil, lately focussed on terrorism, opiates, and guns. Our mourners are respected—and lavished with optimistic therapy, as an aspect of a zeal for mental hygiene that clears away each night's corpses before every workaday morning. We may well return to shallow complacency when the present emergency passes. (There's the baffling precedent of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, which killed as many as a hundred million people, largely young, and left so little cultural trace.) But right now we have all convened under a viral thundercloud, and everything seems different. There's a change, for example, in my memory of Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas" (1656), which is the best painting by the best of all painters.

In December, I spent most of two days studying "Las Meninas" during a visit to Madrid, when I believed that my end was near. I had set myself the task of ignoring all received theories about this voluminously analyzed masterpiece and, on the spot, figuring out its maddening ambiguities. It's big: more than ten feet high by about nine feet wide. Its hanging in the Prado allows for close inspection. (The picture's illusion of a space that is continuous with the one that you occupy can make you feel invited to walk into it.) The work's conundrums orbit the question of who—situated where in space and when in time—is be-

holding this placid scene in a large room at the court of the Hapsburg king (and Velázquez's employer) Philip IV which captures life-size presences with the instantaneity of a snapshot. The painter? But he's in the picture, at work on a canvas, with its back to us, that can only be "Las Meninas." Some characters, mildly startled, lock eyes with ours; others remain oblivious of us. (But who are we?) There's the riddle of a distant mirror that doesn't show what you would assume it shows.

Presuming to grasp the whole is like hazarding a unified theory of relativity and quantum physics. Despite ending as I had started—mystified—I congratulated myself on parsing evidence of the artist's chief ingenuity: a perspectival scheme that resolves at a viewing point not centered but offset to the right, face to face with a jowly dwarf and opposite Velázquez's rendered position to the left. (Speculations that he must have painted the scene with the aid of a large mirror requires one to believe, implausibly, that he and a number of other visibly right-handed characters were southpaws.) I was in aesthete heaven. But, three months on, marooned by fear of the virus, I'm interested by an abrupt shift in my attitude toward the painting: from lingering exhilaration to vertiginous melancholy. "Las Meninas" is tragic, as an apotheosis of confidence and happy expectation that teeters precariously—a situation that Velázquez couldn't have known at the time but which somehow, subliminally, he wove into his vision.

At the lower middle of the painting stands the stunningly pretty five-year-old Infanta Margarita Teresa, coolly self-possessed and attended by two maids. She is a vessel of dynastic hope, which proved not to be entirely misplaced. Unlike three other children of Philip IV and his queen (and niece), Maria Anna, she survived childhood, and, unlike her remaining sibling, a younger brother, she seems to have escaped the genetic toll of Hapsburg inbreeding. (When her brother ascended the throne, as Charles II, his ruinous disabilities, impotence among them, ended the dynasty in Spain, amid the country's steep decline as a European power.) Margarita Teresa lived to the ripe age of twenty-one, married off for diplomatic reasons, at the age of fifteen, to become the Empress of the Holy Roman Empire and to bear four children, only one of whom outlasted infancy. Her reputed charms did not include her vicious anti-Semitism. (She encouraged her husband, Leopold I, to expel Jews from Vienna and to convert the city's main synagogue into a church.) But the glory of her promise in "Las Meninas" suddenly casts, for me, a shadow of ambient and forthcoming death and disaster. There would never be another moment in the Spanish court so radiant—or a painting, anywhere, so good. It's the second to last of Velázquez's greatest works. He all but discontinued painting, in favor of taking on more prestigious court duties, and died in 1660, at sixty-one. Philip IV survived him by five years.

This sort of reëvaluation can happen when events disrupt your life's habitual ways and means. You may be taken not only out of yourself—the boon of successful work in every art form, when you're in the mood for it—but out of your time, relocated to a particular past that seems to dispel, in a flash of undeniable reality, everything that you thought you knew. It's not like going back to anything. It's like finding yourself anticipated as an incidental upshot of fully realized, unchanging truths. The impression passes quickly, but it leaves a mark that's indistinguishable from a wound. Here's a prediction of our experience when we are again free to wander museums: Everything in them will be other than what we remember. The objects won't have altered, but we will have, in some ratio of good and ill. The casualties of the coronavirus will accompany us spectrally. Until, inevitably, we begin to forget, for a while we will have been reminded of our oneness throughout the world and across time with all the living and the dead. The works await us as expressions of individuals and of entire cultures that have been—and vividly remain—light-years ahead of what passes for our understanding. Things that are better than other things, they may even induce us to consider, however briefly, becoming a bit better, too. © ■

Spring in NYC, Flowers by Lewis Miller

Submitted by both Karen Brill and Tracey Miller

In the past few months, Lewis Miller and his team have been secretly creating what they call "Flower Flash", a flower arrangement in Manhattan trash cans and street corners, which aims to honor the medical staff and other first responders to bring joy to New Yorkers who commute on a daily basis, and let in the spring during the pandemic. "This April spring feels different: there is still beauty under the shadow of the virus. But the whole world is shrouded in a shadow of uncertainty and death. The normally bustling New York is now quiet and empty, full of inexplicable desolation and loneliness. It turns out that the flowers are still blooming under the haze of the pandemic. It turns out that even though life is so fragile, it is still so beautiful! Therefore, you cannot help being filled with confidence, because you believe the pandemic will pass and the world will be better." *Lewis Miller*



Flowers in seemingly random locals were a surprise that Lewis and his team presented to Manhattan each morning. Works were all started at 5:45am, and completed by sunrise.

