For as long as anyone can remember—until last month, that is—Giovanni Bellini’s St. Francis in the Desert (ca. 1480) has lived at a single New York address: One East Seventieth Street. In fact, just about continuously since Henry Clay Frick acquired the painting in 1915, the tempera-and-oil on panel has resided in one room, and one place in that room, known as the Living Hall. There, in the sanctum sanctorum of Frick’s former mansion on Fifth Avenue, it has kept communion with the other paintings, bronzes, porcelains, and furniture that Frick brought together in the final, fecund decade of his life.

For a few years, following the death of J. P. Morgan in 1913, Frick, the self-made Pittsburgh industrialist, became the world’s unrivaled collector of European art, able to acquire masterpieces such as St. Francis in the Desert against all others. Upon Frick’s own death in 1919, his New York mansion was transformed into the home of his collection. According to his wishes, yet against the odds, his domestic setting remained intact. By maintaining its private feel even as it has grown into a collecting institution, The Frick Collection has been able to speak to the acuity of its founder’s eye and the power of his purse. The assembly has also gone against every modern museum trend of pasteurized, homogenized, white-cube walls lined with supposedly blue-chip works.

The presentation of Frick’s genuine masterpieces and historical objects all together, and in such density, is what has made his collection the astonishing place it is: the Bellini flanked by the Titians; the Titians above the small mythological bronzes; the bronzes atop the French commodes; the Chinese figurines atop the French cabinets by the windows; the French writing table illuminated by the electrified Qing dynasty lamps; the scattering of chairs and couches that you could trip over; and, across the room, the two Holbein portraits, eternally glowering at one another, interceded only by El Greco’s Saint Jerome (ca. 1590–1600), who translates the scene from his place above the mantelpiece.

From the moment the Frick opened to the public, art-world nabobs have lodged their complaints
with the museum commission of weights and measures about this unbalanced display of fine art and decorative objects. At times, they just about showed up with their crowbars to pry the collection loose from Frick’s opulent setting—which still does not lend its objects, or admit children under ten years of age, or permit photography of any kind. Until quite recently, under the administration of its late founder, Helen Clay Frick, the adjoining Frick Art Reference Library even required jackets for men and skirts for women.

Decrying the Frick’s “sculptural bric-a-brac,” in The New Yorker of December 28, 1935, Lewis Mumford huffed that “The paintings are lost in the background.” “Converting a private mansion into a public museum” was a mistake, he continued: “That may have satisfied the tastes of Renaissance princes, or even that of American millionaires during the first part of the present century, but it no longer meets today’s standard of presentation.”

It was not just Frick’s mixing of business and pleasure, of life and art, that so offended Mumford’s standard. Frick failed to follow the protocols of serious scholarship that mandate one should divide art by geography, chronology, and material. By placing beauty and excellence above other concerns—and by honoring these priorities for a century after his death—The Frick Collection has long gone against the diktats of taxonomic Germanic academicism that make such deviations verboten, making The Frick Collection such a delight.

It goes without saying that a century of curators would have liked nothing more than to rehang The Frick Collection to “today’s standard.” Now, just such an opportunity has befallen the Frick’s current curatorial staff. As I wrote in these pages in March 2020 (see “Bird-brained at the Frick”), the Frick building is now undergoing an expansion that is more of an ill-advised intervention, squaring off John Russell Pope’s round edges and obscuring the light and lines of his Art Reference Library.

This rehang is explicitly temporary, not some “new Frick,” or so we are led to believe.
For the next two years, during the demolition and construction of this project, the Bellini, along with roughly half of its collection mates, has taken up temporary residence a few blocks north and one block east. It is a moment for broken leases in New York, but also for sublets of opportunity. The Frick has arranged a pop-up in the one time Met Breuer, formerly known as the Whitney Museum of American Art, now simply 945 Madison Avenue—for the period of the residency, to be called Frick Madison. And as might be expected with such a move, Frick Madison clears out the furniture. It cleans up the spaces. It whittles down and reorganizes the collection by geography, chronology, and material, as it austerely rehangs the work in Breuer’s brutalist building.

And yet, Frick Madison succeeds precisely because it adheres to the best traditions of that Germanic art history. It does not try to replace or recreate the Frick mansion with a facsimile installation. Rather it offers us an opportunity to have a direct engagement with art at a time when much more than the doors of One East Seventieth remain shuttered. And this rehang is explicitly temporary, not some “new Frick,” or so we are led to believe.

At its best—and in the hands of the director Ian Wardropper and the curators Xavier F. Salomon and Aimee Ng, this is often at its best—Frick Madison grants us the privilege of seeing these masterpieces in what amounts to a building-wide private viewing room. That’s certainly how you come across Frick’s collection here in this achingly spare, intimately thought-out presentation.

Take that Bellini: positioned now in an alcove of its own, illuminated by one of Marcel Breuer’s cockeyed trapezoidal windows, St. Francis in the Desert makes the most of its new light both natural and divine.

Bellini was a genius of framing. He could paint his figures as if they were sitting just inside a window display. He also knew what to leave out, or just beyond the painting’s edges. For all the details we see in St. Francis in the Desert—and we may never stop finding new details in this composition—it is the light, blazing onto the scene from beyond the left frame, that is most revelatory. While very much seen by the painting’s subjects, the source of the light is left unseen to us. We only sense it indirectly, through Francis’s stunned countenance and the shadow lines behind him. At Frick Madison, the light now entering from the ray-like window on the wall to the left of the painting, blinding when you first come across it in the otherwise dimmed gallery space, newly illuminates Bellini’s own startling dynamics by extending the lines of light and shadow both depicted and real.

For the first time, you can also take a seat by the Bellini. Be sure to leave enough time to do so. I may have spent an hour in front of this work, standing up, sitting down, trying to take in what is, ultimately, untakable. I wish I could have stayed longer. When this painting went up for sale over a century ago at Colnaghi, in London, Bernard Berenson described it as “the most beautiful Bellini in existence, the most profound and spiritual picture ever painted in the Renaissance.” The divine is in its details. “Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,” that mountain man Francis
wrote in his *Canticle of the Creatures*, “especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day, and you give light through him.”

Bellini devotedly rendered each plant and every animal of this verdant Italian agricultural scene in a newly proximate light. Out of his hermitage, Francis steps forward in such amazement that he has left behind his sandals, still tossed under the reading desk of his rustic dwelling. He holds his hands outstretched to receive the stigmata of Christ’s wounds as he is punctured by a light only hinted at by the rays streaking down in the upper left corner of the composition. That same light seems to liquefy the stone behind him, which melts like ice into a spring, feeding the kingfisher below. A heron, a donkey, and a rabbit occupy the middle ground, while a shepherd tends to his flock in the valley next to a river pooling by a low wooden dam. In his excellent audio commentary, Salomon suggests the surrounding figures are oblivious to Francis’s spiritual vision, but I wonder. From the donkey to the lambs, all seem to be alerted to something beyond themselves. Even the shepherd, far in the distance, looks up and turns his head back to us. The light may be incomprehensible, but it is also impossible to ignore.

There are many such moments here of new encounters with old friends. Spread across three upper floors, the collection is divided by geography and type: northern European painting and sculpture on Floor Two; Italian and Spanish painting and sculpture along with Indian carpets, porcelain, bronzes, enamels, and clocks on Three; and French and British painting, sculpture, and decorative arts on Four. The order has been dictated by the size of the floor-plates and the heights of the ceilings, which increase as you go up, accommodating the larger French paintings at top, but scaled down for the northern miniatures below. Wall labels are also gratefully non-existent, and instead a handsome sixty-page printed gallery guide is available free of charge by the entrance.
Sculpture introduces each floor. On Floor Two, Jean Barbet’s Angel (1475) points the way for new arrivals. In his commentary, Salomon describes the story for this immaculate work that survived the meltdown of the French Revolution, one that “dramatically underscores the importance of preserving remarkable works of art—one of the most important missions, if not the defining aim,
of any museum.” Amen to that.

Just around the bend, Holbein’s portraits of those undoubting Thomases, More and Cromwell, confront each other as though at the back of an alley, unmediated and raw, squinting at each other now at eye level. Past the Rembrandts, the Frick’s eight Van Dycks are united in one room for the first time. Just ahead, the three Vermeers now face one another like high-definition screens onto Dutch life, encouraging ready comparison.

There is some work here that is rarely seen, and even more that is often overlooked. Two of the Van Dycks do not usually appear in the Frick’s public galleries. The same goes for the Mughal carpets, which need special protection from light. The rooms dedicated solely to European and Asian porcelain may be most surprising, elevating these “background” objects as solitary works in conversation with one another and across continents. But even the Frick’s highlights seem startlingly fresh. Removed from their opulent walls, Fragonard’s Progress of Love series of 1771–72, the four canvases he painted for Madame du Barry, seem newly monumental, especially in the spare hanging that now divides them from the scenes he added two decades later.

The only oversight here may be the bust of Frick himself. Positioned rather uneasily by the lobby elevators, shouldn’t he get a painting of his own to admire? How about Gilbert Stuart’s George Washington, now off view? With only about half of the collection we usually see now available at Frick Madison, the omissions may be as interesting as the inclusions, calling out for a rehanging sometime during the run. But, mostly, Frick Madison calls us back to The Frick Collection, when it is collected together once again at One East Seventieth. After seeing this work in a new light, I look
forward, even more, to seeing it in the old.

James Panero is the Executive Editor of The New Criterion.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 39 Number 8, on page 55

Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com