The New Criterion

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The Critic’s Notebook

by The Editors

This week: brickwork, Bryant Park, French statesmen & more.


Nonfiction:
Napoleon and de Gaulle: Heroes and History, by Patrice Gueniffey, translated by Steven Rendall (Belknap Press): “Heroes and History”—how radical! The academic theories du jour tell us that the arc of history is long, but it bends toward class conflict, or racial conflict, or some other irreducible dialectic. Patrice Gueniffey, a historian and the director of the Raymond Aron Center for Sociological and Political Studies in Paris, thinks otherwise. His latest work, Napoleon and de Gaulle,
offers parallel portraits of the legendary French leaders: their ambitions, their impacts on France at two deeply distressed moments in her past, and their political legacies which have carried down to the present day. Amid so much contemporary ideological infighting, it’s worth reminding ourselves of “the outsized role that individual will and charisma can play in shaping the world.”

—RE

Art:


Digital facsimiles from the Morgan Library & Museum: In last week’s Critic’s Notebook, we flagged one department of the New York Public Library’s digital archives, its extensive collection of old menus from various New York restaurants and clubs. In a similar vein is the treasure trove of digital facsimiles from the Morgan Library & Museum, which has been sharing its unrivaled resources online for years. On the Morgan’s website one may find high-resolution scans of John Ruskin’s sketchbook, a beautiful medieval illuminated manuscript by the Frenchman Gaston Phoebus, Le Livre de la chasse (the Book of the Hunt), Vincent Van Gogh’s illustrated letters to Émile Bernard, and much, much more. —AS

Architecture:
Historic Brickwork: A Design Resource, with Calder Loth, via the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art: What to do with all that time that would have been spent commuting? Perhaps it’s time to delve into the arcana of brickwork. Though we are surrounded by brick construction, the workaday nature of the material ensures its obscurity. But there is wonder in those blocks, as Calder Loth demonstrates in an illustrated lecture on the various types of bonds used for both functional and decorative effect in architecture. You will walk away knowing the difference between a header and a stretcher, how to tell English bond from Flemish bond, and just what diapering is. —BR

Other:
One of my favorite winter getaways is at the very center of Manhattan. It’s the ice rink in Bryant Park, part of a Winter Village of tempting food vendors and gift kiosks and that is constructed each season in this urban oasis between Fortieth and Forty-second Streets and Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Best of all, the rink is free, like many of the offerings that enliven this park.
filling out the back of the New York Public Library. Given its many successes, it is all the more remarkable to consider that Bryant was once a “needle park,” another degradation along the stretch of Forty-second Street known as “The Deuce.” The story of its turnaround is now told by Andrew M. Manshel in Learning from Bryant Park: Revitalizing Cities, Towns, and Public Spaces. As cities in quarantine now face down a new form of disruption, Bryant Park’s lessons of revival are more vital than ever before. Look for a full consideration of the book, by Aaron M. Renn, in an upcoming issue of The New Criterion. —JP

Podcasts:

“Roger Kimball introduces the May issue.” The Editor and Publisher of The New Criterion discusses the latest issue and reads from its opening pages.

From the archive:

“Carlyle the wise,” by Barton Swaim (February 2010). On the political thought of Thomas Carlyle.

Dispatch:

“Daring the gods,” by James Bowman. On adherence to double standards.

Each week the editors of The New Criterion offer recommendations on what to read, see, and hear in the world of culture in the weekly Critic’s Notebook. To get it first, subscribe to the free Critic’s Notebook email by clicking here.