

The New Criterion

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Tracing emotion

by David Platzer

Emotion runs through art, but this original exhibition seems to focus less on the emotion in art itself than the theatrical and changing ways emotion has been portrayed in art's subjects from the late Middle Ages to the present.¹

In this context, the exhibition's curators, Dominique Lobstein and Georges Vigarello, the latter a historian who has co-written a recent trilogy of books on the subject, have included works from a range of periods and in a variety of media. Visitors will find Cesare Ripa's sixteenth-century *Iconologia* and Charles Le Brun's work on the expression of passions in painting. Also included are nineteenth-century photographs and studies by Dr. Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne, who asserted that his photographs, featuring grotesque persons expressing joy, fear, and other emotions, were more accurate than anything an artist could capture in a painting or a drawing. He had not looked closely enough at works of the great masters.

The exhibition opens with two of the show's highlights, contrasts in style and opposites in time, the workshop of the Master of the Magdalen Legend's *The Magdalen Weeping* (ca. 1525) and Picasso's *The Suppliant* (1937), from the same moment as *Guernica*. The figure Picasso paints is so deformed and ugly as to attain beauty. In the earlier painting, Mary Magdalene is elegant and dressed as a court lady as she delicately dabs at her eye with a handkerchief. The picture is a delight in itself though not entirely convincing as a portrayal of its subject.

One of the exhibition's points is that in the Middle Ages, emotion was expressed by rings and flowers rather than by facial expressions. We see wonderful ivories from 1325–50, one of the siege of the Castle of Love, the other of its taking. Say what you will: the Middle Ages sometimes had a better emotional awareness than we do in the hi-tech present day. There is a marvelous portrait from an anonymous painter of the German school depicting a beautiful, careworn woman with an impressive headdress, *Portrait of a Lady Wearing the Order of the Swan* (ca. 1490). Presumably, the object in her hand magnifies the feelings hinted by the expression in her elegant face. Lucas van Leyden's *The Fiancés* (ca. 1525) is a subtle portrayal of love, at once deep and diffident. To my mind, the same feeling can be found several centuries later when we turn to Émile Friant's late-nineteenth-century painting *The Lovers* (1888).

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Renaissance had spread to the whole of Europe. The exhibition even has a copy of the world's most famous painting, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503). Since it is only a copy, one has a chance to see *La Gioconda* in the exhibition without crowds of tourists blocking the way. What makes the subject fascinating is that her smile belies whatever may be taking place behind it.

We then turn to François Clouet. King François I was Leonardo's last patron and protector, and Clouet's exquisite portrait of the King on his horse in 1540, painted twenty-one years after Leonardo's death, is less a picture of emotion than of majesty. Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) is a masterpiece in which the moping angel's wings are clipped by his gloomy thoughts.

More than a century after Dürer's engraving, Robert Burton's book *The Anatomy of Melancholy* appeared in 1621. It was widely read in its time, but the exhibition has selected vanity as the keystone of the seventeenth century, picking several arresting pictures including Philippe de Champaigne's *Vanity, or Allegory of Human Life* (ca. 1645), a painting of a skull flanked by a tulip and an hourglass. Another gem in the same vein is Guido Cagnacci's *Allegory of Vanity and Penitence* (ca. 1640), which shows a ravishing beauty with her small but exquisite breasts, bearing a pink rose in one hand and a skull in her other.



Guido Cagnacci, Allegory of Vanity and Penitence, ca. 1640, Oil on canvas, Musée de Picardie Collection, Amiens, France. © Marc Jeanneteau/Musée de Picardie.

Few painters captured emotion so completely as Rembrandt. The exhibition includes a painting from his school in *Meditating Warrior: Allegory of Vanity* (ca. 1640). Even if only from the hand of a follower of Rembrandt, the picture's earthy, restrained tones and contrasting lighting are typical of the master. Mary Magdalene appears again, this time as a young girl who seems to have been annoyed by something while leaning on a skull in Johannes Moreelse's *Penitent Mary Magdalene* (ca. 1630).

It was the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century that developed the portrayal of emotions in the way we think of now. Fragonard is most often remembered for his scenes depicting libertine themes, but his *Head of an Old Man* (ca. 1767) shows he also had a genius for capturing character. His famous *The Lock* (1777) verges on a scene of rape, as it is unclear whether the woman is resisting or yielding gladly to her youthful ravisher.

Children during the eighteenth century's "Age of Sensibility" were portrayed in a way they had not been in previous periods, and an anonymous artist, possibly Nicolas Bernard Lépicié, captured this feeling with charm in *Six Heads of Little Boys and Flowers*. Less successful is Simon-Bernard Lenoir's *Madame Vestris in the Role of Electra* (1778), since the actress appears unbelievable in her part, though it may have been different when she was on stage. The French Revolution fully revealed the capacity for evil in human nature, especially when it is justified by state power that claims to be working with the "best" intentions towards creating a "better" world. The Chevalier Féréol de Bonnemaïson's *Young Woman Overtaken by a Storm* (ca. 1799) illustrates the fear that must still have been fresh to many after the Terror of 1793–94; this young woman's dread is obvious.



Chevalier Féréol de Bonnemaizon, Young Woman Overtaken by a Storm, ca. 1799, Oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum, gift of Louis Thomas © Photo: Brooklyn Museum.

Romanticism emphasized the interior life even if masters of previous centuries had explored it thoroughly, with a particular emphasis on dreams as shown in Charles Chaplin's *The Dream* (1857). Tears fall unconcealed when a young, nameless woman gets bad news of a lover or husband fallen while fighting for Napoleon in Claude-Marie Dubufe's *Letter from Wagram* (1827). Despite the darkest moments of the Terror, artists began to portray gestures in a comical way in the later years of the eighteenth century as in Joseph Ducreux's *Self-Portrait of the Artist in the Guise of a Mocker* (ca. 1793). Ducreux focuses on gestures more than emotion. The same can be said of the examples of Louis-Léopold Boilly, whose name the Musée Marmottan Monet's street bears and who was the recent subject of a delightful exhibition at the Musée Cognacq-Jay. One of the dangers of Romanticism was kitsch, as is exemplified to grotesque effect in Jeanne-Élisabeth Chaudet's *Young Girl Mourning the Death of her Pigeon* (1805). Just as Boilly's expressions, like Ducreux's, seem to be gestural and comical rather than emotional, Honoré Daumier's lithographs from 1834 and 1835 seem satirical. By the turn of the nineteenth century, we see a decreasing focus on the expression of beauty in art as compared to previous centuries.

Works such as Munch's *The Scream* (1893) are typical of how anguish over the development of modern life came to command emotional expression in art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. That anguish is explored in the exhibition's last sections with less of a focus on fear than on a pursuit of drunkenness or drug-induced euphoria as in Émilie Charmy's *Woman in an Armchair* (ca. 1900), which while beautiful itself becomes more disquieting when its other title *The Morphinimane* is used. Nowadays, she might be seen clutching a smartphone rather than a dooper's apparatus. André Devambez's triptych *Thinking of the Absent* (1927) shows the horror of the First World War, European civilization's suicide, and the sorrow of the women left behind.



André Devambez, Thinking of the Absent, 1927, Oil on canvas (center), Oil on cardboard (side panels), Musée Antoine Lecuyer, Saint-Quentin, France. © Musée des Beaux-Arts Antoine Lecuyer, Saint-Quentin (Aisne). Photo: Gérard Dufrene .

This challenging and rewarding exhibition leaves the viewer with more questions about emotion in art than answers. It also shows us some interesting, lesser-known artists.

1. _ “Le théâtre des émotions” opened at the Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris, on April 13, 2022, and remains on view through August 21, 2022.

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