Week in review

by Jane Coombs

Recent links of note:

“Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Pre-Raphaelite paintings go on show in his refurbished historic London theatre”
Gareth Harris, The Art Newspaper

For a large part of the twentieth century, much Victorian art was devalued and derided by critics. Perhaps that is why some of the best pieces are held now by rebellious performing artists, who purchased them out of love rather than as an investment. Brian May of Queen, for example, who has been collecting since his earliest days in the band, has amassed over 100,000 examples of Victorian stereoscopic 3d photography. His Holland Park neighbor, Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, is also rumored to have a significant collection of Victorian art, having loaned large tapestries by Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris to the Tate in 2012. Since 1972 he has even lived in Tower House, the Gothic revival home of the late Victorian “art architect” William Burges, stocked with original decorative art. But Andrew Lloyd Webber’s collection might be the most impressive. First purchasing a drawing by Rossetti as a teenager, he has since acquired hundreds of works by Burne-Jones, Millais, Waterhouse, and other nineteenth-century artists, which he has promised to the United Kingdom upon his death. In the meantime, the public will be able to enjoy a few of these paintings on display at the historic Theatre Royal Drury Lane in London, recently refurbished by Lloyd Webber. Gareth Harris in The Art Newspaper interviews the lighting designer Andrew Molyneux, who assisted with the renovation.

“Is the digital age costing us our ability to wander?”
Alejandro Chacoff, The New Yorker

“And no, you are not, not, NOT to look at your Baedeker. Give it to me; I shan’t let you carry it. We will simply drift,” said the indomitable Miss Lavish to a bewildered Lucy in A Room with a View. The women were lost on holiday in Florence; Lucy, soon abandoned by the nosey novelist in the Santa Croce, by chance finds herself in a tête-à-tête with the young George Emerson. Would such an episode happen today? It is certainly easier to disconnect when your only distraction is a dense leather guidebook instead of a seductive smartphone, a fact Alejandro Chacoff laments in The New Yorker. Reviewing a newly translated novel by the Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina, To Walk Alone in the Crowd
Chacoff mulls over the idea of the flâneur as a “half-belonging creature” who, in the words of Walter Benjamin, “seeks refuge in a crowd.” In his criticism of Molina’s work of fiction, whose narrator “embodies the detachment of the flâneur but not his capacity for empathy,” Chacoff gives a delightful history of the urban wanderer as portrayed in the writings of Virginia Woolf, Edgar Allen Poe, and Charles Baudelaire.

“Restoration of Vermeer Painting in Germany Reveals Hidden Image of Cupid”
Tessa Solomon, ARTnews

Vermeer’s *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (ca. 1657–59) has a new look. Back in 1979, X-ray scans revealed that beneath a then-empty white wall hung a large painting of Cupid and his bow, peeping out from behind the still-visible green curtain. It was assumed Vermeer himself had altered the composition until 2017, when researchers found that the Cupid had in fact been covered over in the eighteenth century, well after Vermeer’s death. In the last two years, conservators removed layers of yellowed glazing applied in the nineteenth century as well as the overpaint, restoring the composition to the way they believe Vermeer intended it. Given the prominent place of the Cupid, who stamps on a mask (an object representing deception) as a symbol of fidelity, researchers surmise that the young woman is reading a message from a lover. The woman, nearing the end of the letter, forms no expression with her lips, but her eyebrows appear slightly raised—is she stunned by an outpouring of affection or bracing herself for heartbreak? The painting will hang alongside nine others by the artist in “Johannes Vermeer: On Reflection,” opening at Dresden’s Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister on September 10.

Podcasts:

“Music for a While #50: Pieces from all over.” *Jay Nordlinger,* The New Criterion’s music critic, talks music—but, more important, plays music.

Dispatch:


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