

The New Criterion

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Week in review

by Jane Coombs

Recent links of note:

“Franz Kafka drawings reveal ‘sunny’ side to bleak Bohemian novelist”

Philip Oltermann, *The Guardian*

Before his death from tuberculosis at the age of forty-one, Franz Kafka instructed his friend and eventual literary executor Max Brod to burn all of his manuscripts, which included a large number of whimsical drawings—a request Brod ignored, of course. As well as publishing his friend’s novels, short stories, and diaries in the 1920s, Brod made public forty drawings, which included such motifs as the gloomy stick men often printed on Kafka book covers. The rest were stuffed in a Swiss bank vault by Brod’s secretary after his death in 1968, where they remained until 2019. Transferred recently to the National Library of Israel, this cache contained a rather more cheerful sample of drawings representing, for example, “long-limbed clowns doing silly walks, Chaplin-like men with bowler hats, and slapstick horse-riding accidents,” reports Philip Oltermann in *The Guardian*. The digitized drawings can now be viewed on the National Library of Israel’s [website](#), and they are also the subject of *Frans Kafka: The Drawings*, edited by the German literature professor Andreas Kilcher, which will be published in the United States by Yale University Press next year.

“Dostoevsky’s distrust of the West ran deep—but so did his love of the Old Masters”

Rosamund Bartlett, *Apollo*

Kafka is not the only literary giant to have dabbled in visual art. Dostoevsky’s surviving handwritten manuscripts are filled with scribbled faces and architectural details that were never intended for public consumption, though the author was a trained draftsman as a graduate of the Imperial Engineering Academy. Rosamund Bartlett, writing in *Apollo*, describes the profound appreciation the Russian novelist had for the Old Masters at a time when his ideological adversaries, the utilitarians, were denigrating painting. Having fled Russia for Dresden in 1867 to escape creditors, Dostoevsky sought out the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in order to see Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (1512), which Bartlett argues represented the “supreme expression of

Dostoevsky’s spiritual and aesthetic ideal.” He was so fascinated by the face of this Madonna—a character sketch found in his notebooks may even have been inspired by it—that he would apparently spend hours in front of the painting, sometimes standing on a chair to get a closer look.

“How a Master Made the Page Leap to Life”

Keith Christiansen, *The Wall Street Journal*

Keith Christiansen, a curator emeritus at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has written this week’s “Masterpiece” column in *The Wall Street Journal* on the only drawing that can be securely attributed to the early fifteenth-century Flemish painter Jan Van Eyck. *Portrait of an Older Man* (ca. 1435–40), which depicts the head and shoulders of an old man at a three-quarter angle, is currently the centerpiece of an exhibition at the The Morgan Library of drawings from the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden. Christiansen describes how the artist used both silverpoint and goldpoint to endow his preparatory drawing with an “extraordinary tonal quality” that was eventually translated into an oil painting now hanging in Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Other details shed light on the artist’s working process: written on the left side of the drawing is a list of colors, ranging from reddish-brown to whitish-purple, which the artist needed to transform the study into a painted portrait.

Podcast:

“Music for a While #53: Songs and memories.” Jay Nordlinger, *The New Criterion’s music critic, talks music—but, more important, plays music.*

Dispatch:

“Prices are no help at all” by Julia Friedman. *On confusion surrounding the value of beauty.*

Jane Coombs was the ninth Hilton Kramer Fellow at *The New Criterion*.