

# Art books make good holiday gifts, but don't neglect the art museums

by Nora Hamerman

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## **Paintings from the Frick Collection**

by Charles Ryskamp, Bernice Davidson, Edgar Munhall, and Nadia Tscherny  
Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1990  
149 pages, hardbound, \$39.95

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## **Fifty Old Master Paintings from the Walters Art Gallery**

by Eric M. Zafran  
Baltimore, Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery,  
1988  
128 pages, paperbound, \$15

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## **Resplendence of the Spanish Monarchy: Renaissance Tapestries and Armor from the Patrimonio Nacional**

by Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Concha Herrera Carretero, and José A. Godoy  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1991  
172 pages hardbound, \$49.50

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## **Greek Sculpture**

by Andrew Stewart  
Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1990  
380 pages text, 881 plates, two volumes,  
hardbound (boxed), \$95

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## **Zurbarán**

by Jonathan Brown  
Harry P. Abrams, New York, 1991  
128 pages, hardbound, \$22

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The first two volumes listed are recent “coffee table” books, good acquisitions for one’s own library or as gifts. The folio-sized Frick *Paintings* is the first comprehensive volume on the pictures in The Frick Collection, and contains many large-scale reproductions and details, and very short written entries. The smaller Walters *50 Old Master Paintings* has no details, but each painting is reproduced in an excellent color plate, and the catalogue entries strike a nice balance between information for the general public and for scholars.

While recommending both books, I enter a strong plea to readers to actually visit the two modest-sized museums which are illustrated here.

The Frick Collection is located in New York City, and the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. Thus both are in two of the largest metropolitan areas of the United States, within an hour’s drive of millions of people who have probably never entered their doors. Anyone seriously interested in his or her own mind, within that radius, should go there, often enough, even at the sacrifice of “free time” otherwise spent in passive leisure activities.

It is important not to get lulled into thinking that fine reproductions, like those in the two volumes here reviewed, are as good as the masters’ own work.

As in the case of the recording industry, modern advances in photography and four color printing are a mixed blessing. They have made facsimiles of beautiful art accessible to millions of people. Yet, electronic reproduction of concerts “flattens out” the breathing sense of the *work* of performing music—especially today, when classical recordings are as much the work of the sound engineer as of the performing artist. As for great paintings, reproductions are seductive, but they lack the subtlety and three-dimensionality of original paintings, and above all, they invariably homogenize the differences in scale, which may range from tiny miniatures to vast murals.

## **What’s in the Frick**

The Frick Collection is unique, because almost every work in it is a masterpiece. Even *one* of the great paintings is worth the pilgrimage: for example, Rembrandt’s late, monumental self-portrait in a chair, or his *Polish Rider*; the poignant Velázquez portrait of Philip IV of Spain dressed in red and silver; Goya’s *Forge*; Giovanni Bellini’s *St. Francis in the Desert*, possibly the most famous painting in the Frick;

Holbein's portrait of St. Thomas More; three (!) Vermeers; the Paolo Veneziano *Coronation of the Virgin* of 1358, in which the musician angels representing the "harmony of the spheres" give a remarkably realistic image of vocal and instrumental technique of that period; the rare pictures by Piero della Francesca and Van Eyck—the list goes on and on.

For uniqueness among these treasures the prize may go to Claude Lorrain's large *Sermon on the Mount* (1656). The subject from the New Testament in which Christ sets forth the Beatitudes is rare in classical painting. The artist, the first great landscape painter who specialized in that genre, chose to express this theme by creating an imaginary panorama of the entire Holy Land, with Christ and the Apostles seated atop the wooded summit of Mount Tabor. The crowds whom the evangelist Matthew described as "astounded at his teaching" are gathered below, gesticulating with a marvelous innocence in the luminous landscape which seems to exude the beneficent effects of divine grace through man's activities in nature. The blown-up details of Claude Lorrain's picture in the book are delicious, but no reproduction can approximate this painting, because the scale itself is part of the impact. (It is more or less the same as if one performed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with only one instrument per part, and only one voice per choral part.)

### What's in the Walters

The Walters Art Gallery has one of the broadest arrays of Italian Renaissance and European medieval art of any museum in the United States, and compared to the Frick, gives the impression that the collector who assembled it had more of a personality of his own, complete with a few quirks. The rooms were carefully designed with high ceilings and textile wall coverings to imitate a Renaissance palace, and this atmosphere was kept when the gallery was renovated from top to bottom about a decade ago. Tranquility pervades the museum. Much "friendlier" than the Frick (whose guards seem instructed to snap at any visitor who comes even moderately close to a picture and take an extremely dim view of children, even teenagers, as visitors), the Walters also includes a broader variety of kinds of art, and many pedagogical helps to the visitor.

The book reviewed here only deals with the history of the collection, and with 50 of the best paintings. These include one of the very few intact altarpieces of the early 15th century, complete with its original frame and *predella* (the row of small narrative scenes below the main subject).

There is also the *Madonna of the Candelabra* by Raphael, the famous perspective *View of a City* by a 15th-century artist in Piero della Francesca's orbit (which figures in the great "Circa 1492" exhibit in Washington as an example of the mastery of perspective), Bellini's unusual *Madonna Enthroned with Saints and Donors*, painted for a Venetian administrative office, and the Hugo van der Goes *Donor Portrait with St. John the Baptist*, a masterpiece which would merit a visit to the gallery all by itself. One of the joys of the



*The Earth, showing Africa and the East Indies, detail from the tapestry series The Spheres, designed before 1543.*

©The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Walters is the number of surprises—pictures by less known or even anonymous artists which treat traditional themes in a highly original and beautiful way, like the Burgundian *Madonna of the Inkpot*, or a little Flemish panel with its gripping scene of a burial during the Black Death.

Both the works in the Walters Art Gallery and The Frick Collection were amassed by American financiers starting at the end of the last century. There are picaresque, and sometimes lurid, tales, of how these millionaires came to acquire their treasures from Europe, which I will deal with in a future article. After the deaths of Henry Clay Frick (1919) and of Henry Walters (1931), their collections were eventually opened to the public by the terms of the two patrons' wills.

Frick's mansion on Fifth Avenue in New York was erected in 1913-14 in a kind of neo-Renaissance style, with the idea that it would eventually become a public gallery. The Walters building, constructed in 1909 and fully renovated in the 1980s, was also conceived as a Renaissance palace as if the owner were some kind of Florentine prince of the 15th century. Although there was a yawning chasm between these American financiers—heavily influenced as they were by the British world-outlook which was innately hostile to the Renaissance conception of every human being as the "living image of God"—and the Florentine Medici, maybe this does not matter so much to the modern visitor. Ironically, the American oligarchs did make these works of human creative genius accessible to the public, and the public would do itself a great service by using the art as it was originally intended—to develop the individual and shed the oligarchs.

## Spanish 'Resplendence'

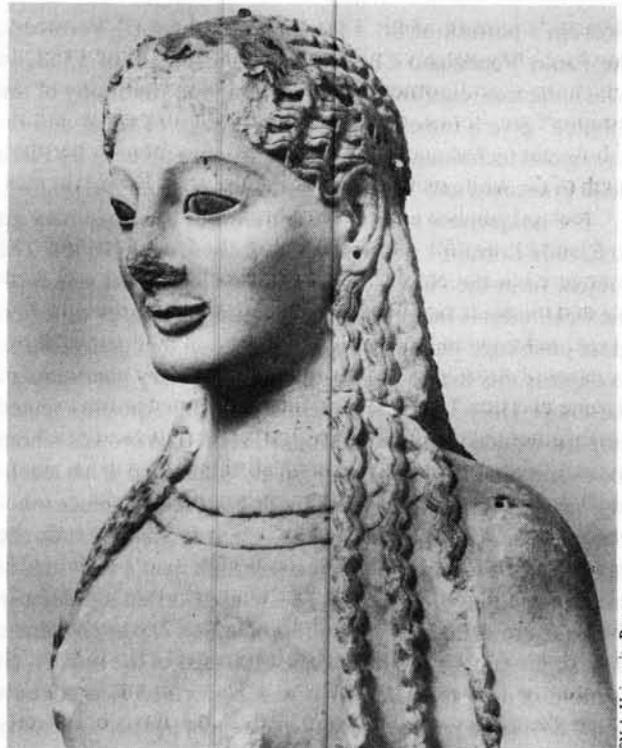
In honor of the Quincentenary of Christopher Columbus, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has an exhibit which will be on view a few more weeks, until Jan. 5, 1992. "Resplendence of the Spanish Monarchy" displays tapestries and armor from Spain's National Patrimony. The catalogue, of course, can't capture the exhibit, especially the tapestries, many of which average 30 feet in length and are reproduced on a scale about 30 centimeters in length! It's a beautiful show to take children to, as they will get a great charge out of these giant wall hangings and the full size models of horsemen all decked out in the fanciest armor imaginable.

Nevertheless, the book is excellent. It includes a most informative essay about the lives and policies of the Spanish Hapsburg rulers Charles V, born in 1500, and his son Philip II, who died in 1598, who thus between them span the entire 16th century. There are numerous enlargements of figures in the tapestries and scenes which are cast and engraved on the armor, which allow one to appreciate how these "minor arts" came close to the fine arts of painting and sculpture, and indeed surpassed by far the fine arts of many other nations and eras.

Why should one bother to look at the so-called decorative arts? This show provides a tacit answer to that question, because in the armor and tapestries not only do we glimpse a level of international collaboration which is a lot less obvious in paintings, but also the gap between the "idea" or "design" side of art, and practical implementation in technology and industry, is bridged in such objects. Flanders—what is now northern France and Belgium—was the unquestioned world center for tapestry weaving. But the fine wool that went into the tapestries was merino wool from Spain, a heritage of the Muslims who had long ruled the Iberian peninsula.

The thematic programs of the tapestries originated in the courts, and, frequently, the artists who designed them were either Italian, or Flemish-born artists trained in Italy. The most amazing set of tapestries in the exhibit is Bernard van Orley's three tapestries *The Spheres*. They were commissioned by King John III of Portugal and likely came into the Spanish royal collection in 1543. They exalt the exploits of the Portuguese navigators who had begun the voyages of discovery in the early 1400s. Woven in Brussels, probably on the design of an Italian-influenced Flemish painter Bernard van Orley, the set of three "spheres" (the celestial sphere, the armillary sphere, and the Earth) originated before 1543, when Copernicus made known the heliocentric system of astronomy to the world. One of the tapestries shows the Earth, with a very accurate map of Africa on it (see illustration).

The textile industry was the major heavy industry of the day and the backbone of economic ties between Spain and Flanders, which underpinned the dynastic ties between the Castilian monarchy, the Portuguese ruling house of Aviz, and the Dukes of Burgundy who ruled Flanders. Intermarriages among these families produced Charles V. The achievement of the tapestry weavers is mind-boggling. As often was the



Head and shoulders of the "Peplos" kore from the Athenian Akropolis, ca. 530 B.C..

© Yale University Press

case in engravings and woodcuts, the tapestries involved a separation between designer and executor. The weaver worked from a full-scale pattern called a cartoon, which they executed in reverse on a loom using gold, wool, silk, and silver threads. They could not see their final work as they were doing it. The resulting three-dimensionality, as optical effects and perspective are rendered in the cloth almost as credibly as in much more malleable media such as paint, is truly a tribute to the level of economic development.

Similarly, what was then the heavy industry of the future, metalworking, is celebrated in the armor, swords, and helmets, which the development of artillery was rapidly making into a merely ceremonial costume. Again we see a marriage of Italianate design and northern European, especially German (Nuremberg) technique, in these suits of armor gorgeously adorned with Old Testament and ancient history heroic scenes.

## Making Greek sculpture boring

It seems almost impossible to do, but Andrew Stewart has produced an unreadable book about one of the most fascinating areas in the history of art, monumental Greek sculpture. The book is handsome, and punctilious about detail. In the second volume the statues are illustrated with fine black and white photographs. In this era of color photography this was a rather daring move in a way, and of course a good black and white photo cannot be surpassed. But it must be remembered that ancient Greece looked more like modern

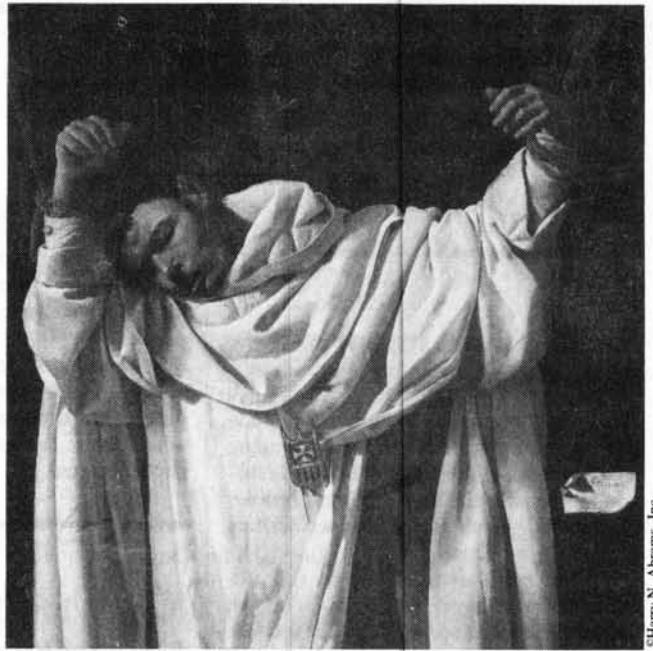
Mexico than most people's pristine idea of the white marble temples. They were vividly colored. Traces of the original polychromy and sometimes, the inlaid eyeballs made of semiprecious stones, occasionally survive to give us a hint of how gaudy the sculpture once was. Also remember that much of the white marble "Greek" sculpture is Roman copies of Greek originals which were of bronze.

Over the last 50 years, archeology and scholarship have discovered that ancient Greek art and society were hardly the isolated miracle once believed. The tremendous influence of Egypt, acknowledged in Plato's *Timaeus*, and the ancient societies of Asia Minor contributed to the flowering of what became classical Greek art and the heroic conception of man which emerged in the *kouros* and *kore* statues. Professor Stewart seems quite oblivious of all this, and writes about Greek art in a very insular way, piling on one detail after another with a thoroughness which fails to convince us, in the end, of its accuracy. With the typical narrow vision of the professional art historian, he maintains that cemeteries were among the principal locations of Greek social activity—why, you may ask? Well, because a good deal of monumental sculpture was found in them, and since monumental sculpture is the subject of the book, they must have been very important places.

Stewart has lost the spark of excitement that infected, for example, Furtwängler's writings about Greek sculpture a century ago, yet has not counterbalanced that loss with any greater breadth. After surviving several years of graduate training in art history in an extremely stuffy environment, I consider myself almost immune to the narcotic effect of orthodox art historical prose, and yet I still fell asleep repeatedly over Volume I of *Greek Sculpture*, and so did several colleagues who are experts in Greek culture. So I can only conclude the obvious—the book was not meant to be read. Rather, it is to be owned, like an encyclopedia to look up what should be the most up to date and complete information on the Greek sculptors and their work. The complete lists of each artist and all works attributed to them, including lost ones, will be very useful for scholars. The book is obviously needed for libraries. But don't buy it for your home unless you are the sort of person who only likes to look at pictures and does not read.

## Zurbarán

I'd say just about the opposite of Jonathan Brown's volume on the 17th-century Spanish painter Zurbarán, part of the Abrams "Masters of Art" series, which is coming out as there is increasing interest in Spanish art due to the Quincentenary celebrations. About a year ago there was a major exhibit of Zurbarán at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Brown tells us nearly all we want to know, as interested laymen, about this unique artist, who most appeals to modern viewers with his full-length paintings of female saints in the "modern dress" of his own era, and through his few, but transcendent, still-life pictures. He was known as a "monastic"



Zurbarán's *St. Serapion* (1628), Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.

artist because of his special skill in portraying in a direct, unaffected way unusual scenes from the lives of figures in the religious orders who were most of his patrons. Zurbarán made up for his defects in training (inadequate understanding of both anatomy and perspective) by his bold color and light and forceful and sincere approach to religious themes. He is responsible for narrative pictures of some great moments in history—like the intervention of St. Bonaventure at the Council of Lyons, where he led the fight against usury together with St. Thomas Aquinas—which have otherwise not been painted by any major artist. In addition, Zurbarán was perhaps the only artist of any stature to record the life of the founder of the Mercedarian Order, St. Peter Nolasco, and leading figures in that order. The Mercedarians, begun in the early 14th century as a military order to ransom Christian slaves from their Arab Muslim captors, played a key, little recognized role in the evangelization of America and in the great works of architecture in the New World. Several of Zurbarán's "Mercedarian" pictures are illustrated in the Abrams book.

Zurbarán is well represented in U.S. museums. One of his greatest pictures, *St. Serapion*, is a very restrained image of a martyred Mercedarian saint in the Wadsworth Atheneum of Hartford, Connecticut. Peter Serapion had gone to North Africa in 1240 to pledge himself to the enemy in return for the release of Christian prisoners. While he waited for his order to ransom his freedom, he sought to preach Christianity to the Moors, for which he was put to death in a particularly gruesome way. Zurbarán completely omits the gruesome details to give a powerful image of the heroic courage of the dying saint, almost like an updated form of Renaissance classicism (see illustration).