

700 Paintings, 45 Galleries: A Guide to the Met's New European Wing

After a five-year renovation, some of the museum's grandest galleries have reopened. Our critic frames six artworks you cannot miss.



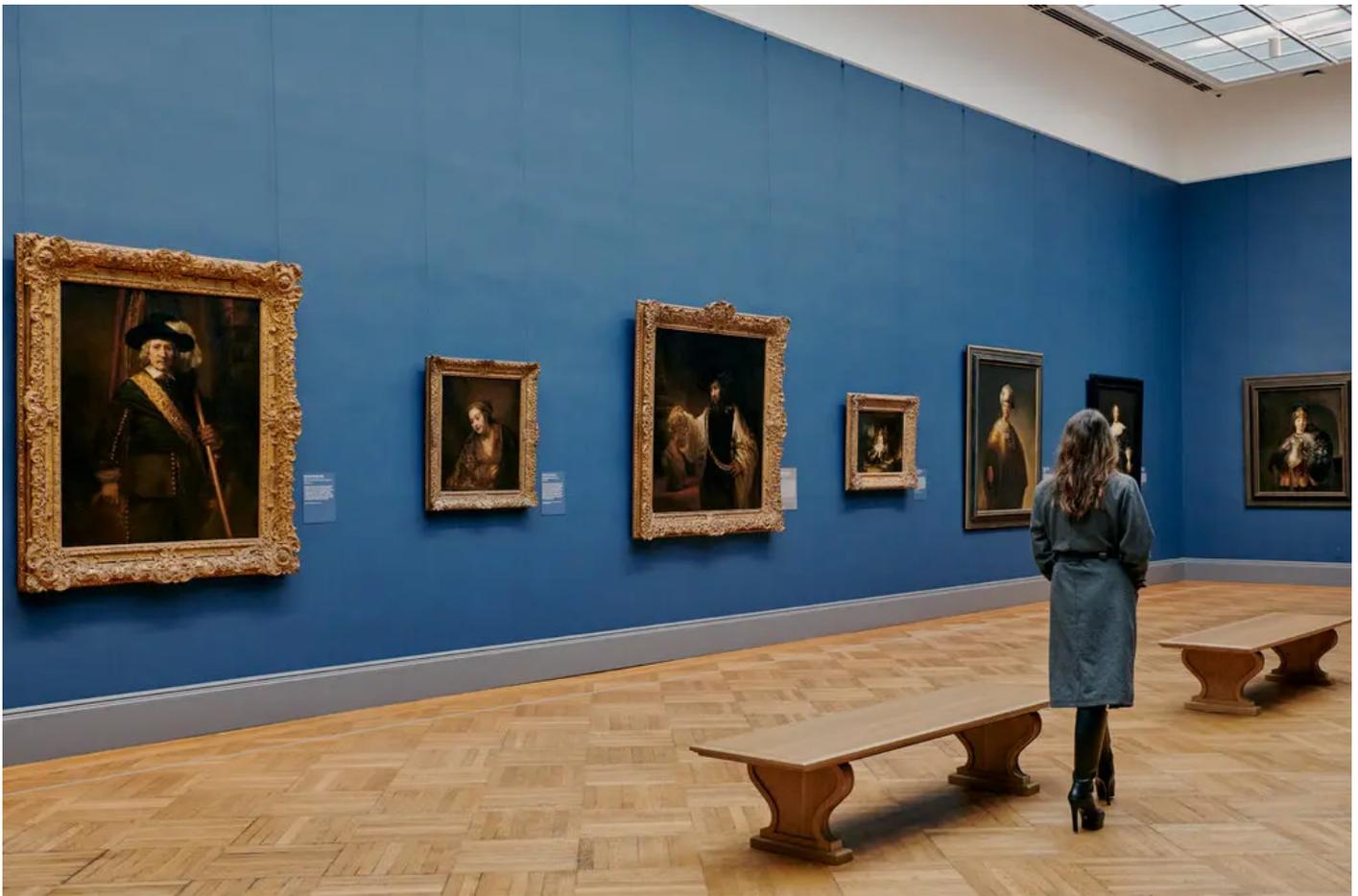
By Jason Farago

Nov. 24, 2023

Let the light in. Five years after the Metropolitan Museum of Art set off on a major renovation of its galleries for European painting, the super-prime real estate at the top of its grand staircase is open again. Up in the attic, the architects Beyer Blinder Belle have replaced 30,000 square feet of skylights for the first time since the Truman administration. Down in the galleries, the Met's designers have widened the rooms, rearranged the sightlines, shellacked the walls purple and blue. The curators have reassembled the whole painting collection for the first time since 2018, shuffled across 45 new galleries and bathed in beautifully tempered light.

The work was done in two phases, so visitors got a taste of the even, shadowless lighting when the Met presented an abbreviated showcase in a fraction of these galleries in 2020. (When it comes to light, this New Amsterdam institution definitely leans more Dutch than Italian.) Turns out, the new efforts at illumination are not only above your head. For more than a century, the Met had organized these paintings by national school, with all the Italian pictures on one side, all the Dutch ones on the other. Come now, and you'll encounter the whole continent's art along a single chronological pathway, starting from the early Renaissance in central Italy and ending about 500 years later in France and Spain.

This new display wanders back and forth across the Alps, zigzags off-piste, and in a few places jumps into the modern age. A Bacon, a Beckmann and a Kerry James Marshall are hiding in here. Duccio's break-the-bank Madonna and Child, painted in Tuscany around 1300, now shares a case with Ingres's painting of the same subject from 1852. You'll see new acquisitions, not least by women of the 17th and 18th centuries, and freshly cleaned favorites, above all Rembrandt's "Aristotle With a Bust of Homer," gleaming through melancholy.



Rembrandt's "Aristotle With a Bust of Homer" (center) in Gallery 616. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

As with the reinstallation of the Museum of Modern Art in 2019, these ruptures in chronology often feel safe, even redundant, and lack the serendipity you'd want in a timeline-breaking move. (Picasso sits alongside the elongated ectoplasms of El Greco, perhaps his most explicit old master influence. Why not try Giacometti, or Lynda Benglis?) A little more wit, a little more strategic wrongness might reveal more than these matchy-matchy anachronisms, but in years to come I'm sure the paintings here will get to mingle with Asian, African and American friends, as well as the decorative arts.

By and large, though, this new hang is a sharpshooter, with cunning arguments and refreshed regards on geography, religion and medium. Recent debuts, such as a phenomenal Virgin and Child from 14th-century Bohemia, start to push the early Renaissance beyond Italy and Flanders. Unapologetically ornate devotional pictures from what are now Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador reveal the colonial transformation of "European" (for which read "Catholic") art. And as lesser museums have offered self-flagellation as their only answer to the ills of the past, the Met is actually *thinking* about how its European paintings reflect, distort, or contest the virtues and vices one continent loosed across the globe. Its curators, led by the department chief Stephan Wolohojian, don't hector, but they also don't skip a fight; their display speaks to adults.



A visitor views “Rocks at Fontainebleau” by Cézanne (left) and “View of Toledo” by El Greco in Gallery 619 in the reinstalled European Paintings wing. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

With some 700 pictures, it may be hard to know where to start. My suggestion is to zero in on six faces here: male and female, human and divine, European and otherwise. The face is the central focus of Western painting, and its central challenge. (For centuries, an artist who signed his name to a canvas might have only painted the faces and hands; assistants could be called in to execute the rest.) Put these six together, stare into their 12 eyes, and you can just about map the European cultural enterprise that has become a global inheritance.

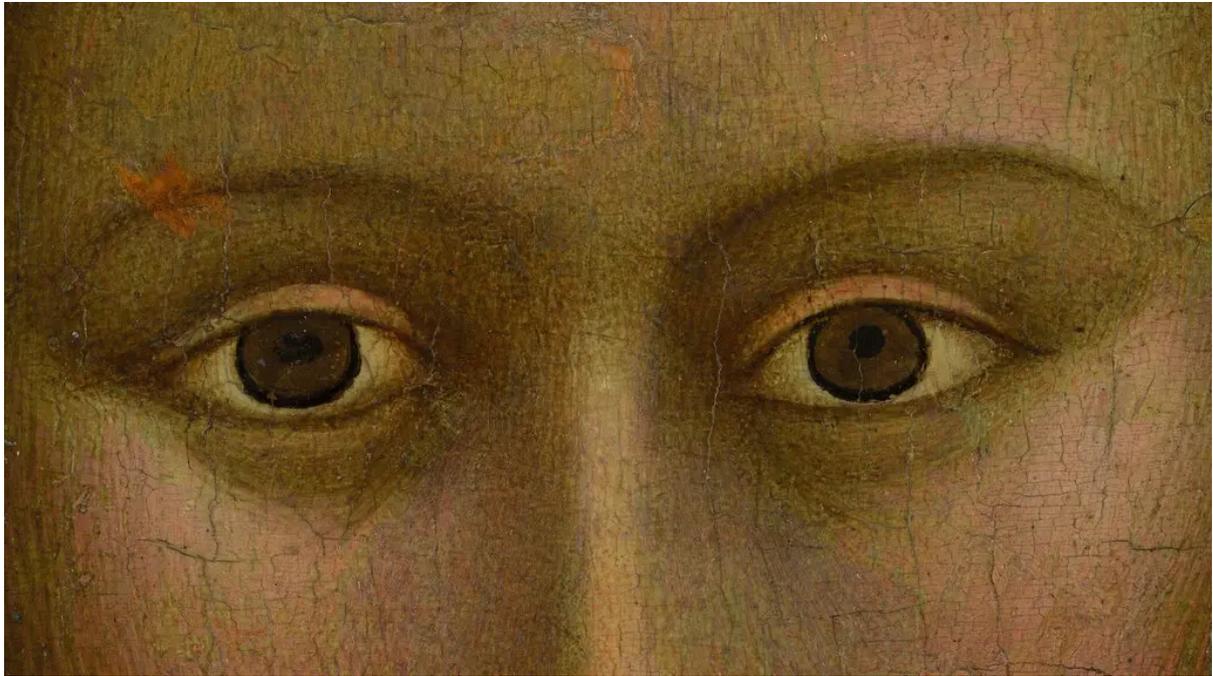
Gallery 601: In Search of the True Image



Follower of Orcagna, "Head of Christ," tempera on wood, gold ground. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Start in gallery 601 with a very familiar face on a little rectangle of wood, painted in Italy between 1350 and 1370. The Son of God looks directly out at us with big, sad eyes, framed by a large forehead and hair of russet brown. Small lips. Elongated nose. Some dashes of a mustache. A sharp triangle where two muscles meet the chin.

Christ's face occupies just the bottom half of the panel, and around his head the gold ground has been stippled with punchwork tools to suggest a halo. Above are two angels, so similar and symmetrical they might as well be cut and pasted, who hold between them a large cloth, one like the veil that Veronica pressed to the face of Jesus on the Via Dolorosa.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

We're in a time when the image, so fraught in Christian theology, was becoming a central component of worship. And the painter, once content to illustrate books or cover walls with frescos, is now working on free-standing panels of wood.

So whoever painted this panel — he may have been Niccolò di Tommaso; in any case it was a follower of Orcagna, the leading artist of 14th-century Florence — aimed to produce more than a representation. This was a tangible instance of the Word made flesh, and therefore not a violation of the Second Commandment. (The curators note that this panel has no hinge marks on the back, suggesting it might have been passed and kissed during the liturgy.)

Gallery 605: Inventing the Individual

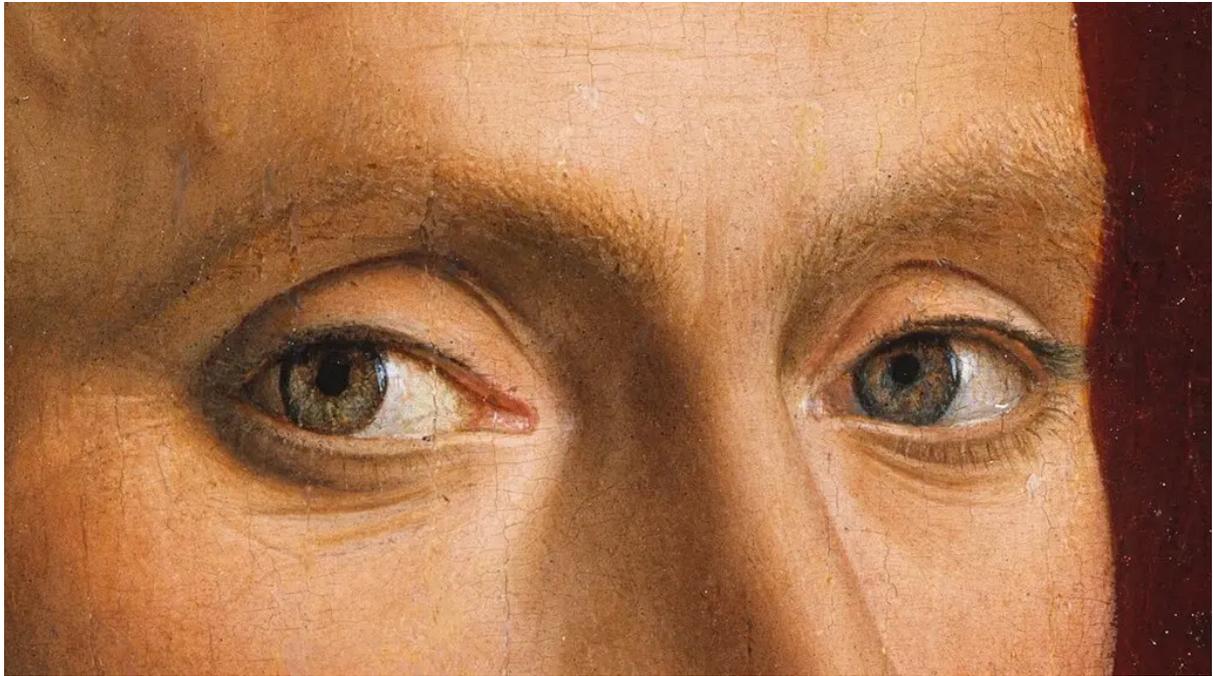


Petrus Christus, "Portrait of a Carthusian," from 1446 in Gallery 605. A new individualism. A new naturalism. Hallmarks of the Renaissance. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

And then, in Italy and the Low Countries in the years after 1350, the rumbles begin. Architects and artists begin to study their predecessors from Greece and Rome. Scholars and theologians start to take a new approach to philosophical inquiry, less scholastic, more rational. The word for this is "Renaissance," and here at the Met you cannot miss the step change. A new naturalism. A new individualism. From this point on man (and woman too, on rarer occasions) is sufficient in himself.

It's 1446 now. In booming Bruges, then Europe's biggest port, a Carthusian monk sits

for a portrait by Petrus Christus, a licensed member of the local painters' guild. Light casts soft shadows from the monk's bushy beard onto his smoke-colored robe. Look next to his lips, to the delicately rendered bump of his right cheek (on the left in the picture). At the forehead: it has delicate wrinkles, a raised vein. He isn't praying. He's just looking at us, in three-quarter profile, with eyes of watery gray-green.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

What you have seen, passing from the flatness of the Florentine Christ to the layered tones of the Netherlandish monk, is among the biggest new-media revolutions in Western art history. That new medium was oil paint: a Flemish technological breakthrough that makes San Francisco's flatscreens and algorithms look like child's play.

Unlike the fast-drying egg-based pigment used for the head of Christ, slow-drying oil paint allowed artists like Christus to render watery irises, bristly facial hair, reflective marble, gleaming jewels. Applied thickly or thinly, mixed wet-on-wet, oil paint would become almost the chemical expression of Renaissance humanism. At the bottom of the painting, perched on a fictitious frame, Christus even painted a fly: a show-off reminder that the man depicted was not some eternal symbol, but a human being with one passing life.

Gallery 612: For the Love of Money



Francesco Salviati, "Bindo Altoviti," from 1545, in Gallery 612 of the European Paintings galleries that just reopened at the Met. A banker swaddled in fur and velvet. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

If "Europe" counts for something special in the context of a global art museum, here it is: an unprecedented engagement, from 1400 onward, with the particulars of the individual person. You have arrived in a trans-Alpine showcase of 16th-century portraits, depicting nobles, scholars, and nouveaux riches. Germans such as Hans Holbein and Lucas Cranach the Elder get to mingle with Tintoretto, Veronese and other Italians. The sitters pose in fine fabrics, show off fancy intellectual props.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The newest acquisition, donated just last year, is a portrait of the Italian banker and arts patron Bindo Altoviti. The Mannerist Francesco Salviati painted it in 1545, not on canvas or wood but on a block of inch-thick marble. Spend time looking at the furrowed brow and the somewhat wizened hands, records of the political headaches that come from providing credit to popes and princes.

Crazy opulence: a coat lined with fur as thick as his beard, and everywhere you look more velvet. The story of art, then and now, is also a story of banking — and remember, usury was still a mortal sin. Two centuries after the “true image” of Christ, these paintings of Renaissance financiers pull off a different kind of transubstantiation: of vain luxuries into high culture.

Gallery 637: Market Days



Frans Hals, "The Smoker," in Gallery 637. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

And yet European painting never gave up on *unspecific* faces, on faces as types: saints and symbols, specimens of social classes, and (later) representatives of the "races" Europe would invent. We come now to 17th-century Holland, a new Protestant republic, where artists painted on spec in a brand-new commercial art market.

In Gallery 637 you'll find "The Smoker," which Frans Hals painted around 1625 on an octagonal piece of wood. A young man with a mop of chestnut hair is carousing in a pub. He's got a filthy little smirk. A woman in a lace collar has wrapped her arms around his neck, and both the brushwork and the morals are getting very loose. (Did

you clock the waitress and drinking vessel at right?)



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Yet there's nothing careless in this coarseness. Have a look at the mix of white and tan strokes that constitute the smoker's slashed doublet. And what's in the pipe? Tobacco, of course. Not just a vice but a fashion: a new luxury hauled to Haarlem by the fleet of the Dutch East India Company.

Gallery 642: Venetian Souvenirs



Rosalba Carriera, "Gustavus Hamilton, Second Viscount Boyne, in Masquerade Costume" on display in Gallery 642 of the European Paintings galleries, in the newly fashionable medium of pastel. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Who qualifies as a full person, and who remains only a type? That matter took on new urgency in the 18th century, as philosophers such as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft and Condorcet debated the rights of women — and as royal academies of art made way, sometimes begrudgingly, for female painters.

In 1730 or '31, an Irish peer sailed to Venice to party at Carnival. While on vacation he got his portrait done by an international star: Rosalba Carriera, a Venetian artist and woman of letters with her own studio. She worked on paper (easier for collectors to

take home) in the newly fashionable medium of pastel. Look at his powdery cheek, his shadowed double chin: here like ice milk, there like wood ash. That modulation, only possible through greater and lesser pressure of the pastel stick, is what made Carriera one of the finest painters of the Rococo.

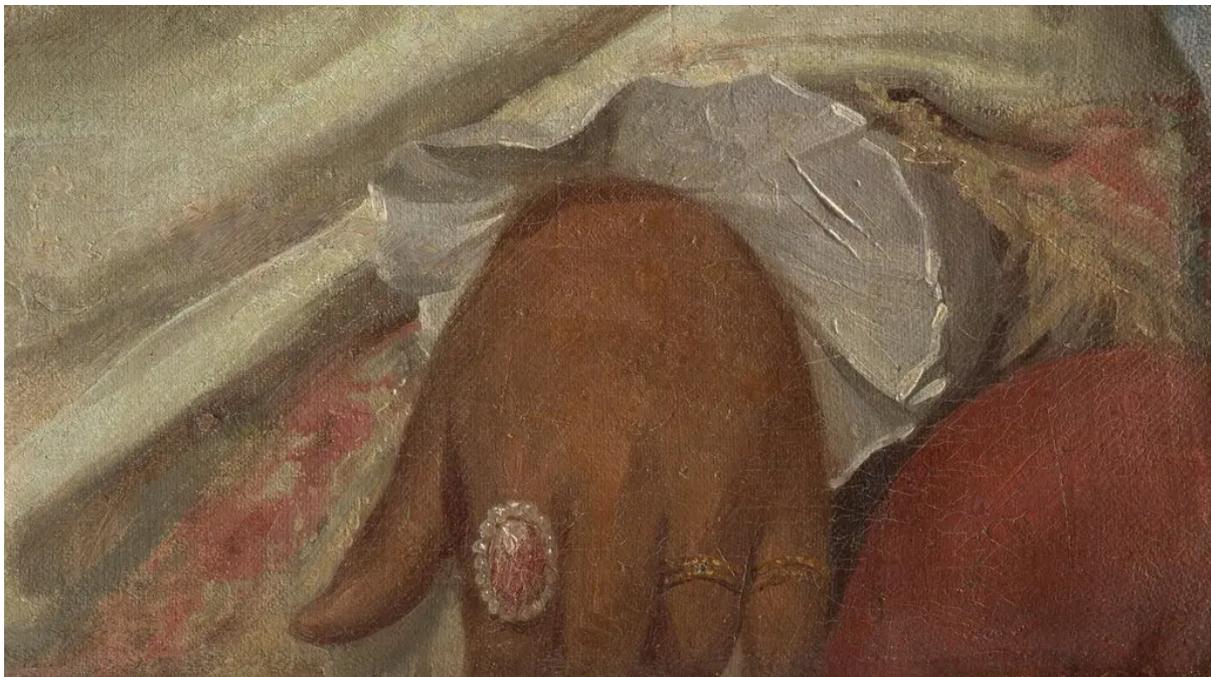
Gallery 628: The Empire Strikes Back



William Wood, "Joanna de Silva," a woman from Bengal, on display in Gallery 628 in the European Paintings wing. Newly acquired, this portrait from 1792 is a rare depiction of a servant as an independent individual. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

So, then, the 18th century arrives: enlightenment, exploration, extraction, enslavement. As we enter the modern age the Met's galleries really start to globalize. The paintings now contain Asian fauna and American flora; Europeans are posing in Chinese and Indian fabrics. Gallery 628, devoted to Georgian Britain, has your usual aristocratic suspects, pale and rich and titled — but also a woman from Bengal, named Joanna de Silva, who sat for her own portrait in 1792.

In Calcutta she worked as an ayah (or nursemaid) for a British officer's family, and when he and his wife both died, de Silva and their orphaned child traveled to Britain. There, probably to commemorate the crossing, the British portraitist William Wood depicted her staring out into the middle distance. Jewels in her hair, her right ear, more still around her neck and on her ring finger. She's wearing Indian fabrics that Brits then saw as the height of foreign fashion.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A painting of a servant as an independent individual is rare enough. The extraordinary thing about Joanna de Silva, who entered the Met in 2020, is her piercing gaze up and to the right. Examine that stare into the distance, and see how the continent that elected itself as the summit of human achievement — and reduced other persons to the level of things — also furnished to all of us, everywhere, universally, the tools of its own critique. In those eyes the painter has vindicated one 18th-century European inheritance we can never give up: the principle that all humans are created equal. De Silva has the same self-possession as Petrus Christus's monk or Hals's smoker centuries earlier, but her eyes are searching further; her eyes are looking east.

Jason Farago, a critic at large for The Times, writes about art and culture in the U.S. and abroad.