

LOAN EXHIBITION

'In the Company of Women'
A Selection of Paintings from
The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston

Curator:

Edgar Peters Bowron

The Audrey Jones Beck Curator of European Art

One of the highlights at The International Fine Art Fair in New York is the presentation of a loan exhibition showing distinguished works of art not normally on public view. This year's exhibition, called *In the Company of Women* focuses on a group of six Old Master, 19th- and 20th- century paintings from The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, whose European and American collections are presently in storage during the expansion and refurbishment of its facilities.

At the center of this expansion program is a 200,000 square-foot building that will provide for new installations of the museum's collections and a variety of expanded educational services for its visitors. Designed by the Spanish architect, Rafael Moneo, winner of the 1996 Pritzker Prize, The Audrey Jones Beck Building is now under construction adjacent to the museum's present building. Noteworthy features of the new limestone and glass building include a vast sweep of exhibition galleries, a lighting system incorporating the dramatic use of natural light, expanded education facilities, a full-service restaurant, updated visitor information services, and a covered driveway entrance.

The Beck Building will become the central repository for the museum's collections of art from antiquity

to the early 20th century, including Renaissance and Baroque art from the collections of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation and the John and Audrey Jones Beck Collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Paintings. The new construction will add more than 100,000 square feet of exhibition space, more than doubling present capacity and elevating The Museum of Fine Arts to sixth among the nation's art museums in terms of footage available for the display of art.

The opening of The Beck Building on March 25, 2000, will at last permit the museum's burgeoning collections to be shown in their entirety. The Museum of Fine Arts, founded in 1900 as the 'Houston Public School Art League' was the first art museum in Texas. During the past seventy-five years it has grown to more than 35,000 works of art – the largest 'encyclopedic' art collection in the Southwest. The collection

Figure 1
FERDINAND BOL
Dutch, 1616-1680
Personification of Vanity, c.1645
Oil on canvas, 50½ x 38¾ inches (128.4 x 91.7cm)
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Gift of Mrs Harry C. Hanszen





Figure 2 (Previous page left)
 PHILIPPE DE CHAMPAIGNE
 French, 1602-1674.
The Penitent Magdalen, 1648
 Oil on canvas, 45½ x 35 inches (115.9 x 88.9cm)
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
 Purchased with funds provided by the
 Agnes Cullen Arnold Endowment Fund

Figure 3 (Previous page right)
 PAUL CEZANNE
 French, 1839-1906
Portrait of Madame Cézanne, 1888-90
 Oil on canvas, 29¾ x 24 inches (74.1 x 60.9cm)
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
 The Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection,
 gift of Sarah Campbell Blaffer

consists of European and American painting and sculpture; European and American decorative arts; 20th century art; photography; prints and drawings; Asian art; the art of Africa, Oceania and the Americas; textiles and costumes; and film and video.

In recent years, very few of the museum's greatest possessions have been shown to its more than 1,000,000 annual visitors, and each time the museum hosts a major loan exhibition, even more of the permanent collection must be removed temporarily to storage – a problem that will be alleviated in the new building with the creation of galleries designed specifically for loan exhibitions.

The opening of The Beck Building will be the capstone of a long-range program under the direction of Peter C. Marzio, director, and the Board of Trustees to bring The Museum of Fine Arts to the fore of American art museums. The museum's fortunes, since the original building designed by William Ward Watkin opened its doors in 1924, have mirrored the legendary boom-and-bust cycles of Houston itself during the past seventy-five years. But what has been constant is the extraordinary generosity of Houstonians on behalf of the museum, and its recent phenomenal growth underscores their belief in the importance of art and art museums for the local community.

The institution has been fortunate, too, to have benefited from strong professional leadership and directors with pronounced talents and personalities such as James Johnson Sweeney and Philippe de Montebello. Peter Marzio's fifteen-year tenure has brought about a ten-fold increase in the museum's endowment, from \$26 million to nearly \$300 million, and the successful conclusion of a \$100 million capital campaign that is believed to be the largest ever for a museum expansion outside of New York City.

In the end, what distinguishes a museum, of course, is not its endowment nor its facilities nor the enthusiasm of its supporters, but the quality, beauty, and significance of its holdings. The Museum of Fine Arts may not possess the dazzling concentration of masterpieces per square foot of, say, its famous neighbor to the north, The Kimbell Art Museum, but when its collections are at last unveiled in The Beck Building and reinstalled, as envisaged by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in his 1958 and 1974 additions to the original building, The Museum of Fine Arts will deliver more than a few surprises for those who believe they know its collections.

For the pleasure of visitors to this year's International Fine Art Fair we have assembled a small selection of paintings from the museum's collections – anticipating their permanent display in the museum's expanded facilities.

In the Company of Women opens with a *Personification of Vanity* (fig. 1) by Ferdinand Bol, who at an early age became a pupil, associate, and friend of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). This portrait of a richly-dressed young woman admiring herself in a mirror reflects not only the style and handling of the great Dutch master – for many years it was thought that the sitter was Saskia van Uylenborch, Rembrandt's wife. In fact, the sumptuous costume, mirror, and jewels on the dressing table are standard features of 'vanitas' pictures, images whose underlying purpose was to remind the viewer of the transitory nature of earthly life and that, in the words of the Preacher, 'all is vanity' (Ecclesiastes, 12:8).

A contemporary observer of Bol's painting would have understood the moral rectitude of Philippe de Champaigne's affecting image of *Saint Mary Magdalene in Prayer* (fig. 2). The artist's religious paintings evoke a world of piety and private devotion and remind us that he himself was an extremely devout man of fierce integrity. Although he enjoyed some of the most remarkable patronage of his age, including the support of Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIII, Anne of Austria and Louis XIV, his devotional pictures and portraits for the convent of Port Royal, a center of ascetic Jansenist thought, take us to the core of his own powerful spirituality.

The Penitent Magdalen was executed for the Parisian convent of the Dames-du-Saint-Sacrament in 1648, and among its prototypes numbers a famous composition by Titian (1477-1576), although Champaigne's crisp drawing, somber color, and porcelain-like surfaces could not be more different from the handling of the great Venetian master. Champaigne's ability to create dignified and poignant



Figure 4
 EDGAR DEGAS
 French, 1834-1917
Woman drying Herself, c.1905
 Charcoal and pastel on tracing paper, mounted on wove paper,
 31 x 31 inches (78.7 x 78.7cm)
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
 The Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection,
 gift of Sarah Campbell Blaffer



Figure 5 (Previous page left)

JOHN SINGER SARGENT

American (active in England), 1856-1925

Sarah Choate Sears, 1899

Oil on canvas, 58 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (147.6 x 96.8cm)

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Museum purchase with funds provided by George R. Brown in honor of his wife, Alice Pratt Brown

Figure 6 (Previous page right)

GEORGE BELLOWS

American, 1882-1925

Portrait of Florence Pierce, 1914

Oil on canvas, 38 x 30 inches (96.6 x 76.2cm)

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Gift of Mr and Mrs Meredith Long in memory of Mrs Agnes Cullen Arnold

religious images and invest these with the directness and sincerity of his own spiritual strength make this work one of the museum's most memorable Old Master paintings.

Paul Cézanne's portrait of his wife, Hortense (*fig. 3*), is far different in conception and sensibility than the Magdalen of his French predecessor, yet it too is permeated with deep and ponderous emotions. Cézanne was a prolific portrait painter, and of Marie-Hortense Fiquet, his mistress of sixteen years, whom he married in 1886, he made forty-four paintings and numerous drawings. His portraits of her reveal a remarkable range of characterization; here, she appears remarkably plain. Cézanne's seemingly simple constructions are rife with subtlety, however, and as one observer noted recently of the painting, 'only gradually does one realize that Hortense's head is actually an island of stability and stillness within a tremendously complex and animated construct'. The composition is built of a myriad of shapes, colors, tones and textures – even the opposition of the two sides of the canvas is accentuated by the tonal contrast of browns and pale blues – all held in check by the rectitude of her straight-backed posture.

Each of the foregoing paintings is characterized by deliberation, and the creators of each would inevitably have agreed with Degas' assertion that 'nothing in art must seem an accident'. Painstaking and analytical even to the end of his life, Degas also remained the most accomplished draftsman of the Impressionists. *Woman drying Herself* (*fig. 4*) is among the artist's last, most masterful works. It is one of two hundred pastels, oil paintings, lithographs, sculptures and drawings Degas made of bathers in the last two decades of his working life. Compared with others from the series, this charcoal and pastel drawing is

only lightly finished, the sinuous charcoal line reading forcefully against the bare background. Deftly varying the weight and texture of his charcoal and pastel strokes, hatching and repeating his lines, Degas described the laboring, bending posture of his bather with meticulous care. Gesture and expression are refined and abstracted, made eternal, as the ageing Degas strove to perfect, through drawing, what he called 'a way of seeing form'.

Although born in Florence, trained in Paris, and active in England, John Singer Sargent is claimed by Americans as one of their own, and why not. He possessed a remarkable keenness of eye and facility of hand, and he could set down what he saw with all the force of a first impression and then proceed to elaborate his ideas on a large scale without stifling the freshness of his conception.

Sargent probably met Sarah Choate Sears (*fig. 5*), an accomplished watercolorist and photographer (he allowed her to record him at work in Isabella Stewart Gardner's home, Fenway Court), on one of his tours to America, where he was greeted as a celebrity and overwhelmed with portrait commissions. For this portrait, however, she sat to Sargent in his London studio. His treatment of her white dress, glowing before a dark background, displays a vitality of handling that even at this relatively late date remains indebted to his French teacher, Emile Carolus-Duran (1837-1917). When Sargent painted this portrait he was at the height of his fame, the leading society portrait painter on both sides of the Atlantic, the 'van Dyck of our times' as Auguste Rodin called him.

An Ohio native, George Bellows developed an energetic style of broad, visceral brushwork that brought him immediate praise and recognition as one of the foremost American realists of his time. At the age of twenty-seven, in fact, he was elected one of the youngest associates in the history of the National Academy of Design. Bellows is best known for his paintings of prizefighting, *Stag at Sharkey's* (1909; The Cleveland Museum of Art) and *Dempsey and Firpo* (1924; Whitney Museum of American Art), but this intimate portrait of Florence Pierce (*fig. 6*) confirms his all-round talent as a painter. The sitter was painted in August 1914, during a summer Bellows spent at Monhegan Island off the coast of Maine, where he had joined an artist's colony. The dramatic lighting and loose handling of paint, notable particularly in the passages that define the sitter's foreshortened arm and hand draped over the chair back, are typical of the powerful, realistic portraits that Bellows painted throughout his career.