Three centuries of portraits by the Masters opens at the Clark

Weekend

Williamstown, Mass. -- The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute invites people to come "Eye to Eye" with the "Old Masters" of European portrait painting.

Opening Jan. 23, and running through March, an exhibition of portraits featuring works by master artists from the late fifteenth century through the early nineteenth century -- including the likes of Rubens and Van Dyck -- will be on view in "Eye to Eye: European Portraits 1450-1850."

"Eye to Eye" is organized by Richard Rand, senior curator and curator of paintings and sculpture, and Kathleen Morris, director of exhibitions and collections and curator of decorative arts, both at the Clark.

"For centuries, portraiture has captured the imagination of artists and viewers," said Rand. "But what makes a portrait successful? Is it an accurate likeness? An indication of the sitter's character or social status? A fabulous mastery of the formal possibilities of art-making? "Eye to Eye" explores these questions through close examination of a fascinating group of masterworks."

Representing the range of styles and themes in portraiture as practiced in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Spain, England, and France, the 29 paintings and one sculpture in the exhibition include remarkable works by Memling, Cranach, Parmigianino, Ribera, Greuze, and David, as well as other extraordinary works by lesser-known painters.

This exhibition is the first opportunity for the public to see many of these works, which have been lent exclusively to the Clark from a private collection.

"The Clark was founded by a great private art collector," said Michael Conforti, Clark director, "and we continue to value the insights and discernment represented by a passionate collector's discriminating eye. Each work on view is exceptional in itself, and together the collection constitutes a brief but rich survey of Old Master portraiture."

The exhibition is highlighted by a number of rarely known paintings, including "Portrait of a Man" by the brilliant Mannerist artist Parmigianino, painted around 1530 in Bologna. The glamorous and arresting "Portrait of a Young Woman" by Giovanni Battista Moroni -- a sixteenth-century portrait specialist famous for his penetrating depictions, and widely considered one of the most talented portrait painters of all time -- will be shown publicly for the first time. Among the early nineteenth-century works are a pair of portraits of a husband and wife painted by Jacques-Louis David while in exile in Brussels, and a portrayal of a dashing young cavalry officer in Napoleon's army by David's great follower Baron Antoine-Jean Gros.

One of the most famous works will be "Portrait of a Young Man," by the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens around 1610-15, and two canvases by the great Spanish painter Jose de Ribera. The paintings in the exhibition are complemented by an extraordinary sculptural relief portrait attributed to Baccio Bandinelli, a sixteenth-century Italian artist deeply influenced by Michelangelo.

In the Clark's exhibition catalogue essay, David E. Kessler, head of the Department of History of Art and Film at the University of Leicester and a Trustee of the National Gallery in London, points out that the tradition of portraiture was dominant in Europe for approximately 1,000 years after the end of the Roman era.

"Only scattered and occasional attempts were made to represent the features of notable individuals realistically, most successfully in sculpture," he writes. "In consequence, and perhaps rather unexpectedly, we have a perfectly clear sense of what King Jaiavarnam VII, who ruled Cambodia from 1181 to around 1215, looked like, but are infinitely less certain about the appearance of his European contemporaries."

European portraiture came into its own, he notes, only in the fifteenth century -- when "Eye to Eye" begins. The Clark is located at 225 South St. The galleries are open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free November through May. For more information call 413-458-2303 or visit clarkart.edu.