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LINEAGE

French drawings from the nineteenth century.

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Lines from Life: French Drawings from the Diamond Collection," at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, is a pleasant show of forty-three drawings and a lithograph, largely middling studies for figure paintings, by thirty-three nineteenth-century French artists, some of whom were unfamiliar to me. I loved it! It proved to be just my speed as I return to savoring art in person after half a year's diet of digital gruel. (The pandemic has schooled us, by deprivation, in the indispensable materiality of art works as made things.) Thirty-two of the drawings, many of them gifts to the Clark, were collected by Herbert and Carol Diamond, who have a house near Williamstown and exercise generally conservative taste with catchy zeal. Styles in the show range from orthodox figure studies, favored by the École des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, and the Académie de France, in Rome, to examples of Realism and early onsets of Symbolism. There aren't many surprises in the works by the show's big names—Ingres, Géricault, Delacroix, Degas, Morisot, Millet, Redon, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cézanne—but one, by an artist who is little regarded now, Jean-François Raffaëlli, "Man in the City's Outskirts" (circa 1885), stands out. The energetic limning, in black chalk and pastels, of a rough workman feels poised at an eclectic intersection of Realism, Impressionism, and Symbolism, and hints at the raw expressiveness that Edvard Munch would unclench a few years later. In 1880 and 1881, Edgar Degas tried to induct Raffaëlli into the inner circle of the Impressionists, over grumbling from the group. An artist whom Claude

Monet disdained as a "dauber" here merits a consolatory star turn.

The show's charm, over all, resides in the purity of its preoccupations. The Diamonds aren't trophy hunters. They respond to personalities, cherishing the signature qualities, rather than the crowning feats, of artists who made



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nineteenth-century Paris the global epicenter of contemporary art, powered by one competitive, temporarily commanding manner after another. (All but one of the artists are men. Think of the selections as notes in bottles washed up from a land bygone, such as Atlantis.) I felt admitted to backstage company with both marquee thespians and cred-

itable troupers. During my visit, I spent only a little time with the Clark's terrific permanent collections—notably, in Impressionism and nineteenth-century American art—because I was in a mood less for Sunday punches than for the gentle touches of a show that suited a tranquil weekday afternoon. But I paid renewed reverence to the jewel in the Clark's crown, Piero della Francesca's "Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels" (circa 1460–70), the most consummate of Madonnas. Under Mary's gaze, the naked baby Jesus reaches toward a symbol of the Crucifixion, attended by hauntingly cognizant angels. By contrast, the drawings, as drawings will, let me pursue thoughts about

how art comes to be before it turns ceremonious.

To put it clumsily, I did connoisseurship—anyone can; it's calisthenics for sensitivity—which is always more fun with minor than with major art. (Masterpieces traffic in the inexplicable.) It avails best with drawings, which speak directly from the artist in pre- and mid-creation, hatching little big bangs of ideas that any finished work tends to diffuse. We can register the makers' period sensibilities, with resemblances to other art, and winkle out differences, the subtler the better. The Clark's show reinvigorates the old story of a sea change in French cultural fashion from Beaux-Arts artifice to modes of engagement with lived reality. Senses of space evinced this. I may never have got more of a kick from less to look at than I did with a sheet of undated, faint pencil sketches, "Women in the Garden," crudely outlined figures with fugitive indications of a background, that probably took Camille Pissarro about twenty seconds to dash off. I relished a break from the blank ground—the ide-

alist non-atmosphere—of images like the one by Alexandre Cabanel, "Study for Florentine Poet" (circa 1853), of a carefully posed prone figure. Pissarro immediately activates an entire surface, from edge to edge: the modern picture. The trifle is like a little pill that, dropped in the proper liquid, could exfoliate a world. I imagined glimpsing it among

other scraps on a studio visit to Pissarro—a fantasy spurred by the Diamonds’ spirit of infectious fandom.

Two minuscule mythological drawings, on a single sheet, by Théodore Géricault, of the rape of Antiope by Jupiter, riveted me. They date from roughly 1815–16, shortly before this supreme artist began work on “The Raft of the Medusa” (1819), his colossal canvas, a touchstone of the Louvre, that dramatizes desperation, death, and cannibalism among survivors of an 1816 shipwreck off the northwest coast of Africa. In the drawings, a god grapples with a vividly naked nymph. The clarities of mass in pictorial depth, achieved with sharply contrasting dark and light, that sculpturally define the convulsive action and turn its scale from tiny in the eye to monumental in the mind astonish. (Is the subject upsetting? Upset was Géricault’s flywheel.) I found myself aching anew at his death, in 1824, from a slew of maladies, at the age of thirty-two. With psychological acuity to match his vehemence, and ambition pitched to the skies, he seemed destined to reach the unexplored far shores of Romanticism—imagination flooded with subjectivity while addressing subjects of real-world importance (he had plans for an epic composition on the African slave trade)—and perhaps beyond, to something we will never know. Absent him, leadership in the movement fell to Eugène Delacroix, a virtuoso with paint who, except on inspired occasion, tended toward formulaic theatrics that needed critical boosterism from Charles Baudelaire to ennoble them. The show includes two Delacroix drawings, one of

which is an entertaining melee, like a mud wrestle, with motifs from Rubens.

There are lovely things, such as the portrait drawing (circa 1867) of a young woman by Degas, striking for the Ingresesque, crisp contour of the softly appealing face. That kind of decisive line had intoxicated artists of Ingres’s time, for good and for strange. Ingres famously said, “Drawing is the probity of art.” Bushwa. No one ever drew better, but to a befuddling effect that allowed him to get away with high-handed distortions of the human anatomy. (You must look long and skeptically at Ingres’s paintings to detect the weirdnesses.) But I understand the yen, reported to me by a friend who has seen the show, to steal and take home the artist’s “A Couple Embracing” (circa 1813–14), a tender subject seized upon with chilly efficiency. Ingres’s linear sorcery is addictive. Degas would integrate it into more spontaneous forms—again, modern pictures—with a pertinacity that is prophesied by a sheet of five overlapping studies, from 1856, of, presumably, his own left hand. (I’d filch that.) The most enjoyable of the show’s conservative works, made in 1867 by Jean-Léon Gérôme, perches Napoleon comfortably on camelback. Others rouse more scholarly than aesthetic interest, though with fealty to the Diamonds’ passion for facts, not retroactive opinions, of a century’s vogues in figuration.

Then there’s the always happy shock of Berthe Morisot, who is represented by a small pencil rendering, “Marthe Givaudan” (circa 1890–91), of a smartly dressed woman which is as economical in form as a calling card. Since seeing a Morisot retrospective at the Barnes

Foundation, in Philadelphia, in 2018, I’ve been in on a widely shared awakening to the singularity of the distaff Impressionist, who subliminally opposed her male peers, and their treatment of women as spectacle, with truths attesting to the inward as well as the outward poetics of female existence. Morisot’s perspicacity and unique liberties of brushwork deserve inclusion among the movement’s established stylistic repertoires. The sexism of the period had to have been merciless to marginalize her. Observe the impact in the Clark’s permanent collection of a Morisot painting, “The Bath” (1885–86), amid several girly Renoirs: it’s like a blast of vitality in a wax museum. Renoir’s rosy-fleshed models do arbitrarily fussy things with their hands. Morisot’s puts up her hair, anchoring in immediate experience the work’s lambent lyricism.

What makes anyone draw one line and then add another? How does the second affect the first and determine the character of a third and a fourth? Drawings are commonly understood as process rather than product: things aborning. Do we take a rooting interest in the efforts—binding us to artists as personal heroes of wit and skill, if only for an instant? Or does something rote or predictable in the decisions unfolding on the page bore us? (This, at least, affords us the wan joy of feeling smart.) Context enlivens. The concentration of a show, like the Clark’s, on the predilections of specific collectors, committed to specific categories, fosters a conversation that is already under way when we join it. Intimacy reigns: talents are unmasked, social distancing is forgotten. ♦