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ART REVIEW

The Decade in Art: Expanded Voices, Consolidated Markets

While commercial worth has replaced aesthetic value for much of the art world, museums are still mounting impressive shows and under-recognized artists are beginning to get their due.



Valentin de Boulogne's 'David With the Head of Goliath and Two Soldiers' (c. 1620-22), which was included in 'Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art PHOTO: MUSEO THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA, MADRID

By Karen Wilkin

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Let's deal with the unpleasantness first. Since 2010, commercial worth has replaced aesthetic value for a much publicized sector of the art world. In large centers, wealthy mega-galleries have taken over real estate and inflated sometimes questionable reputations, although, happily, splendid artists, such as Thomas Nozkowski and Martin Puryear, among others, have also benefited from their attention. Midrange galleries, however, have succumbed to the pressures of unreasonable rents, leaving accomplished artists without representation. The idea that museums are entertainment centers has escalated, making concentrated looking at works of art increasingly difficult—and that's not to mention the bane of compulsive cellphone photo taking.

But museums are (mostly) still doing their job. The past decade brought exhilarating overviews, such as the amazing "The Life of Animals in Japanese Art" at the National Gallery, Washington, or the revealing study of the pioneer supporters of modernism, "The Steins Collect," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. There were focused, intimate shows, such as the Museum of Modern Art's survey of Edgar Degas's monotypes. The Met's brilliant assembly of Paul Cézanne's portraits of his wife and the Fort Worth Kimbell Art Museum's exploration of Claude Monet's early work made us think freshly about well-known figures, while the Met's Valentin de Boulogne retrospective illuminated an exciting, less familiar 17th-century Caravaggesque painter. There were celebrations of master sculptors including Anthony Caro at Tate Britain and the Museo Correr, Venice, and Andrea Verrocchio at Washington's National Gallery—and more.



Claude Monet's 'On the Bank of the Seine, Bennecourt' (1868), which was included in 'Monet: The Early Years' at the Kimbell Art Museum PHOTO: THE FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO/THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



Edgar Degas's 'Three Ballet Dancers (Trois danseuses)' (c. 1878-80), which was included in 'Edgar Degas: A Strange New Beauty' at the Museum of Modern Art. PHOTO: STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE

Rethinking the wide-ranging, overlapping, sometimes conflicting histories of recent art has been reflected, often admirably, in many museum programs, although today's emphasis on "diversity" has also resulted in tokenism and the elevation of less than stellar artists to fulfill a perceived need for inclusiveness. Yet we must applaud the impressive survey shows (and sometimes impressive auction prices) for innovators such as Kerry James Marshall, Robert Colescott, Charles White, Henry Taylor, Jacob Lawrence and Alma Thomas. And such self-taught marvels as Thornton Dial, Bill Traylor and James Castle are no longer relegated to a separate category but exhibited with their peers.

Similarly, artists who are female are definitely more visible. Witness the Met's 2016 trifecta of shows of Diane Arbus, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun and Nasreen Mohamedi ; this year's Vija Celmins retrospective (organized with SFMoMA); and the Williamstown, Mass., Clark Art Institute's recent focus on Helen Frankenthaler's prints, Jessica Steinkamp's videos, a Janet Cardiff sound sculpture, and a flawed but interesting survey of women who studied in Paris, among many more examples. But isn't it time to stop referring to "women artists"—or to start specifying "men artists" in future?

Museums have been expanding, sometimes with fine results, such as Stephen Holl's addition to the Nelson-Atkins, in Kansas City, Mo., or the Clark's expanded campus and Tadao Ando buildings. MoMA has the unique distinction of expanding twice within a single decade, to problematic effect. Private museums, such as the Broad, in Los Angeles, and the expanded Glenstone, near Washington, have proliferated, their buildings often architecturally and ecologically ambitious, their collections often demonstrations of trend, their very existence usually a monument to ego and disposable income. See "replacing aesthetic value with commercial worth."



Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun's 'Baronne de Crussol Florensac' (1785), which was included in 'Vigée Le Brun: Woman Artist in Revolutionary France' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art PHOTO: MUSEE DES AUGUSTINS, TOULOUSE

Ms. Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.

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