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ART REVIEW

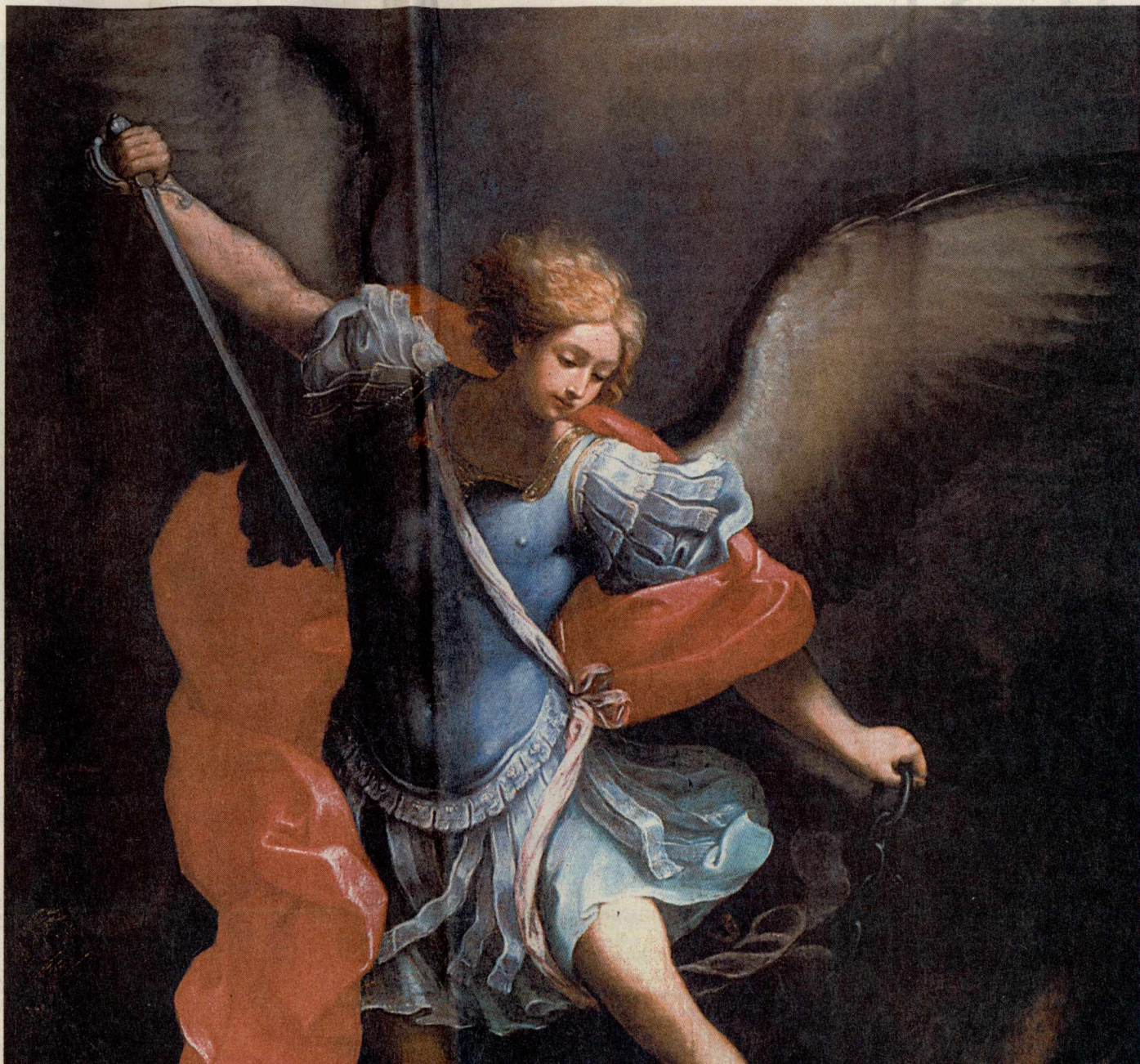
Desperately Painting The Plague

By HOLLAND COTTER

WORCESTER, MASS.

SOME of us thought the end of a world had come when AIDS started picking off friends and lovers in the 1980's, and in a sense it had. A certain world really did end. Yet even that experience left us unequipped to imagine the kind of despair today blanketing parts of Africa, where the disease has spread monstrously, reducing whole communities to less than a memory, to nothing.

Pandemics of one kind or another have always terrorized human history. And where science has been helpless and politics mute, religion and art have responded. That response is the subject of "Hope and Healing:



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Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500-1800," at the Worcester Art Museum, a small, penumbral, single-minded exhibition that does at least one thing museum shows almost never do.

It presents mainstream Christian "high art," church art, in terms of function rather than form. The 35 paintings included are considered as devotional icons rather than as old master monuments. They are viewed from an existential rather than a doctrinal or sociopolitical perspective; through the eyes of a believer for whom a picture of the Virgin is a moral lesson and an emotional encounter before it is a Tiepolo or a Tintoretto.

Although Americans have relatively little trouble seeing African or Indian sculpture — art that isn't really "us" — in this light, Judeo-Christian religious art is another story. It's as if we are afraid of what it once was, or embarrassed by it, or simply unaware of its



Photographs courtesy of Worcester Art Museum

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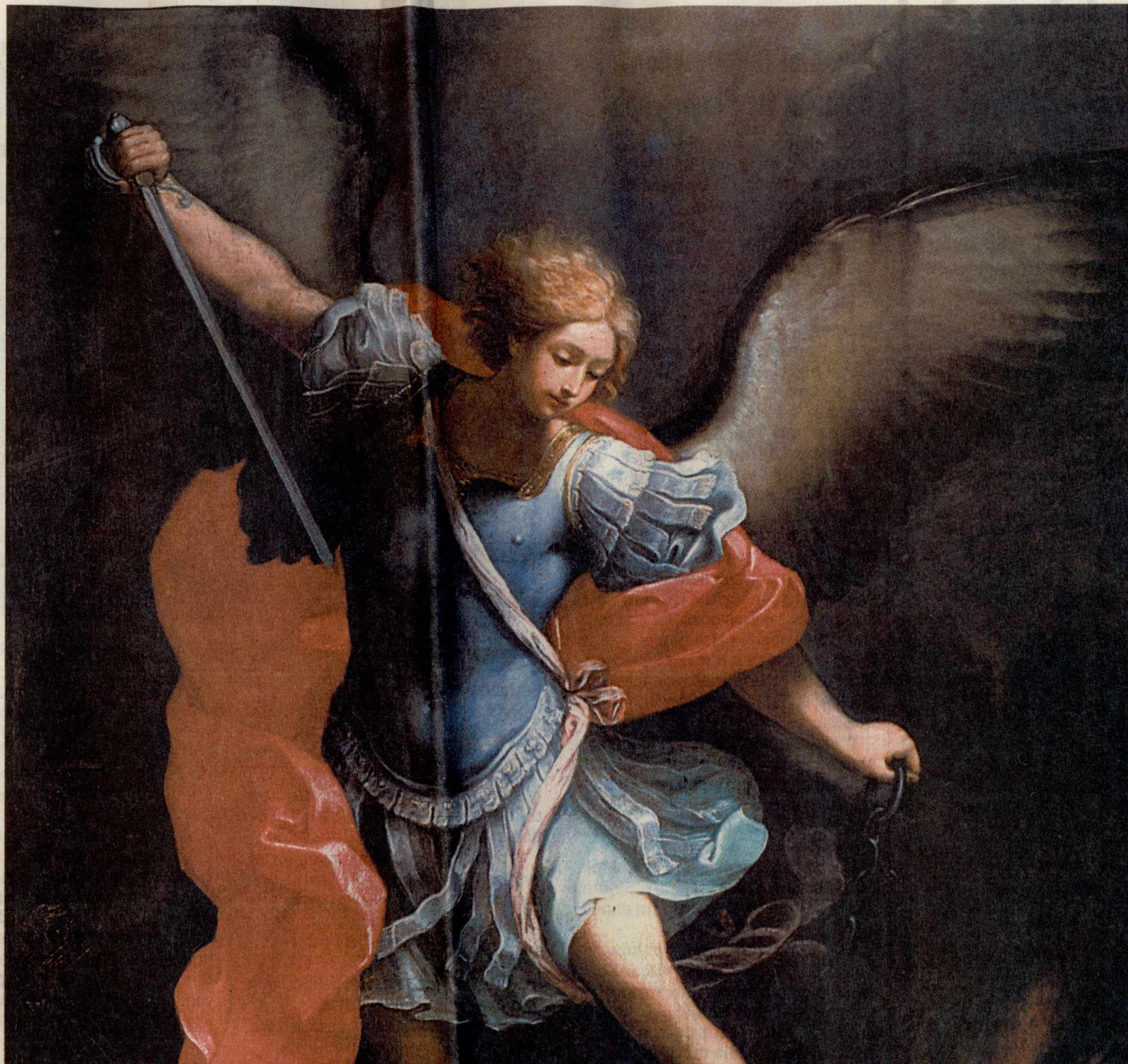
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WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE

The New York Times



In Worcester: Sirani's "Michael the Archangel Overcoming Satan," left; Van Dyck's "Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-Stricken of Palermo," far left; and Grammatica's "St. Charles Borromeo and Two Angels," below.



very specific power to answer, in the case of the paintings gathered here, a culture's cry of pain.

Pain in the form of pestilence is taken as a divine rebuke to human sin in the Old Testament, a directive telling us to shape up, now: admit our guilt, change our ways, humble ourselves. And sometimes contrition worked.

When a shattering plague struck Rome in 590, Pope Gregory the Great led the citizens in a penitential procession through the city streets, petitioning heaven for relief. Legend has it that as he approached the papal fortress that was once the tomb of the emperor Hadrian, he saw the archangel Michael perched on its summit, sheathing his sword. Soon afterward, the crisis lifted.

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adopted as a talisman against disease, to be appealed to when needed. And the need was frequent.

For centuries, one part of Europe or another was either recovering from a plague, embroiled in one or anticipating a recurrence. Cholera and typhus probably accounted for some of these calamities, but the most famous killer was the bubonic plague, the Black Death.

Transmitted by flea-infested rats, it probably arrived in Italy in the 14th century on trading ships from Asia. It spread fast in congested cities, and its primary symptoms were unmistakable and grotesque. They included agonizing swellings at the neck, under the arms and in the groin, and subcutaneous bleeding that turned parts of the body a bruise-like black.

The only sure cure was avoidance. The rich hightailed it to the countryside. Inside the towns, quarantine went into effect, with the sick isolated in prisonlike infirmaries called lazarettos. Named for the man Jesus raised from the dead in the Gospels, they were often hopeless places, crowded and filthy. Confinement could be a death sentence.

Or so say reports from the 16th century

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Painting the Great Plagues, Hoping for Some Miracles

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onward, by people who witnessed epidemics in Rome, Naples, Venice and elsewhere. In each city, holy images were marshaled as a first line of defense. Some were old and time-tested, others whipped up on the spot. Still others were produced as tokens of thanks once danger had passed, as was the case with Guido Reni's towering painting of St. Michael trouncing Satan, a copy of which, by Giovanni Andrea Sirani, is in the show.

Many saints in addition to Michael were enlisted in the cause. St. Sebastian was a standby. A young soldier sentenced to death in ancient Rome for his religious beliefs, he had been tied to a tree, shot with arrows, then nursed back to health by fellow Christians. Both the method of his punishment — the arrow was an ancient plague symbol — and the fact of his recovery made him a natural as a protector.

He appears several times in the exhibition. And in a deftly sketched oil painting by Jacopo Bassano, probably intended as a ceremonial banner, he is accompanied by a fellow disease-fighter, St. Roch.

Roch was actually a product of plague-panic. He first turns up in popular culture in the 14th century, with a reputation for having cared for and cured victims in Italy before catching the disease himself. Thanks to the miraculous ministrations of a pet dog, he regained his health. But he never forgot his ordeal: he is traditionally depicted pointing to a plague swelling or sore on his thigh.

Some hero-saints were historical near-contemporaries of artists who painted them. St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), the aristocratic archbishop of Milan, was one. He tended to the sick during the pestilence of 1576-77 and walked the streets barefoot, car-

"Hope and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500-1800" remains at the Worcester Art Museum, 55 Salisbury Street, Worcester, Mass., (508) 799-4406, through Sept. 25.

rying a large cross. He is the subject of numerous pictures, including some, like one done by Antiveduto Grammatica around 1619, that have the immediacy of portraiture.

And then there are the icons, like Anthony Van Dyck's paintings of the Sicilian St. Rosalie, clearly spun from the air. Rosalie was an obscure figure even by provincial standards. But when her remains were fortuitously "discovered" near Palermo in 1624, the year the city was hit by plague, she was elevated to official intercessor on behalf of the city.

Van Dyck, who was in Palermo at the time, was asked to create an image of her, and he cooked up a shrewd all-purpose pastiche. He gave her a Franciscan-brown robe and the long, tangled hair of a Magdalene, but also a healthy peaches-and-cream complexion and a look of self-assured bliss as she soared heavenward.

The concept was a big hit. The enterprising artist spun out several variations on it, and two are in the show, which has been organized by an impressive quartet of scholars: Gauvin Alexander Bailey of Clark University; Pamela M. Jones of the University of Massachusetts, Boston; Franco Mormando of Boston College; and Thomas W. Worcester of the College of the Holy Cross.

Devotion alone, however, wasn't always enough. You said your prayers, and the plague raged on. So some people pursued the more proactive, practical option of pious deeds. And no deeds were more usefully humane than the so-called corporal acts of mercy.

The church defined seven such acts. They included feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and burying the dead, and art served as an instruction manual in how they should be handled. Burial was especially crucial during epidemics, when corpses might increase the spread of infection. And the Flemish painter Michael Sweerts contributes a sanitized, promotional image of charitable interment to the exhibition.

A few artists, though, went for something stronger, an in-the-trenches realism usually



Worcester Art Museum

Jacopo Bassano's "Saints Sebastian and Roch," an oil on canvas from about 1551.

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ed on a double-sided screen in the middle of

a gallery, "Psycho" acquires a monumental-
ity that seems commensurate with its place
in the popular imagination.

The most emotionally powerful work in
the show is Pierre Huyghe's 1998 "L'El-
lipse," a triple projection that is also the
only one to add to an existing film. Mr.
Huyghe has created a scene that was never
actually part of Wim Wenders's 1977 movie
"The American Friend," but was merely im-
plied by that directorial staple of pacing and
economy, a jump cut. The omitted scene is a
10-minute walk that would have been taken
by Jonathan, played by Bruno Ganz, from
his room in a Paris hotel, across the Seine,

continuation, the 1977 fiction is extended in
real 1998 time, when Mr. Ganz's own life is
two decades further along, and undoubtedly
more shadowed by the prospect of death.

Despite the literalness of its title, this
show is not entirely faithful to its premises.
Mr. Fast's CNN images are taken from tele-
vision, while "Horror Chase," another work
by the McCoys, is appropriation-free. Made
from scratch but relying heavily on movie
convention, it shows a terrified man, pur-
sued by an unseen monster, hurtling end-
lessly through the rooms of a movie-set
house, because the film repeatedly changes
direction, running backward and forward.

Such fissures highlight the absence of

clarity to an expanding genre that is chal-
lenging to survey. The catalog provides an
expansive backdrop by flanking Mr. Ba-
silico's lucid discussion of the works with es-
says by Rob Yeo, on the history of film ap-
propriation in underground film (starting
with Joseph Cornell), and by Lawrence Les-
sig, on the creative chill that recent changes
in copyright law are bringing to the arts.

You come away from this show with a
new sense of film as a found object; as an
immense reservoir of untapped form and
feeling; and as a highly charged raw ma-
terial by which artists can celebrate, exam-
ine and stave off the deluge of images bear-
ing down on us from all sides.



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to be on an entirely different conceptual
tack: it's an old-fashioned allegory, as didactic
as a medieval sermon. But it, too, carries a
shock of real life. Three young dandies sit-
ting down to a bounteous meal register
alarmed distaste at the sight of a skeletal
visitor. But a young woman in the center of
the picture reacts right from the gut, gasp-
ing in horror. She knows this is the end.

In some other show, this painting might
slip into ready art-historical categories: it's
vaguely Caravaggiesque, it embodies peri-
od attitudes, and so on. But in "Hope and
Healing," it has a peculiarly visceral im-
pact, because a context has been set up that
allows for that, one that accepts the idea of a
religious image as, first and foremost, a
trigger of feelings, an agent of interior
change.

I am far from suggesting that this is the
only valid approach to take to Renaissance
and Baroque religious art. But it is an ab-
sorbing and instructive one, a way to estab-
lish direct connections to lives and experi-
ences in the past that have links to the
present.

This approach also prompts an encourag-
ing thought. Maybe someday in the future,
when we are not here, a few bright scholars
will re-examine art produced in response to
AIDS in the United States in the late 20th
century, and in Africa at the beginning of
the 21st century. And maybe those scholars
will choose to focus not on the comparative
quality of objects or styles, but on intangible
elements that science tends to be shy of:
how art provokes emotion and conveys be-
lief, and how a certain kind of art, at a cer-
tain time, gave certain people who felt the
earth had been swept away beneath them a
place to stand.