

n. Some People Are Idiots.

up to the parking lot Merriam Peak, Eric gas tank is on empty a if we will be able to the end of the day. We el in Bishop and as a arting an hour later p, around 7 a.m.

of Bob's group as we e stay on the trail too a the peak from the 't blame Bob for this ng late and we're still m the bottom of Mer-climb a smaller peak ne much closer to us. at the climbing is en-pleasant 10-hour day Bob's Web site, our "NF," for Did Not Fin-which we are becoming

le to catch up on our until 9 a.m. Then we



Challenge: Junction Peak.

del. The clouds rising rapidly from the west look threatening and most of the group at the pass decide not to risk summiting in a storm. Eric and I plunge onward toward Mendel. We climb separate routes up a ridge toward what looks like the top. It actually turns out to be the first of a series of towers. Ninety minutes later I'm standing on the last tower before the summit, only a few feet lower, but a long down climb, traverse and climb from the mountain's apex. It's 1 p.m., our turn-around time. Eric's nowhere in sight! I turn around.

Day 5: More espresso. I notice that Bishop has a hand and foot spa.

Day 6: Since we've been on the Challenge for almost a week without actually bagging any of the marquee peaks, we figure that maybe what we need is more of a challenge. So Eric and I decide to try to get up today's peak, Isosceles, by one of its harder routes, a moderate technical climb that will involve lugging rope and gear. We start an hour before the main group and are sitting by a lake when they race past at 9 a.m. We're sitting at the lake because it wasn't until we got to the base of the peak that we realized there are two summits, the higher east one that Bob and his group are heading up, and the west one that Eric and I were supposed to climb. Will Bob give us credit if we don't climb the same summit?

Eventually we head up the southwest buttress, which turns out to be easy climbing, no need for the rope or any of the gear we've hauled for seven miles. When

we get to the summit we see that Bob and some of his group have already climbed the ridge to the even higher bonus peak.

Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague

By Tom L. Freudenheim

Worcester, Mass.

Confession: The Worcester Art Museum has made me rethink my approach to exhibitions. I generally just like the direct experience of visually feasting on a show, eschewing the various gallery assists—audio systems that have migrated to iPod mode, free brochures in large type for the visually impaired, jazzy designer text panels of a size and force to compete with the art on view, impairing my vision of whatever they are explaining. So I was bound to have some misgivings about Worcester's "Hope and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500-1800."

With 37 Baroque paintings by artists who worked in Italy, this turns into a brief art tour from Milan and Venice to Rome, Naples and Palermo, while also suggesting the interactions between recurring bouts of bubonic plague and attempts to cope with disasters that often decimated as much as half of a city's population. An added bonus is the opportunity to view masterpieces by Canaletto, Bellotto, Van Dyck and painters who often receive less attention, such as Strozzi, Regnier and Sweerts.

Traditional art historians have trained us to believe that the most significant and memorable art is disconnected from the grubby realities the rest of us face every day, and thus to address art with regard to the interface of movements, focusing on developmental and formal issues that explicate art history. Recent approaches to deciphering meaning in art have often gone to the other ex-

HOPE AND HEALING

Worcester Art Museum  
Worcester, Mass.  
Through Sept. 25

treme—asserting that everything can and therefore must be viewed through social and/or political lenses. And the culture-



Canaletto's Venetian painting 'Entrance to the Grand Canal' (1730) features the Santa Maria della Salute, a church built in hopes that God would end the 1630 plague.

text, as does Venice's wondrous Scuola di S. Rocco (without which we can't begin to understand Tintoretto, but that's a different subject). In the Bassano and Luini paintings, St. Roch and St. Sebastian are even paired, perhaps for emphasis on their potential curative power.

Biblical references are enriched in the plague context as well. Angelo Caroselli's rich "Plague at Ashdod" (1630, National Gallery, London), a copy after Poussin, graphically shows the dead and dying and the anticipatory fright of those looking on; the gorgeous formal qualities of the painting don't diminish the gruesome realities of the scene depicted. Moses and the brazen serpent, here seen in a painting by Gian Domenico Ferretti (1736, Collection Mary Jane Harris), demonstrate how the recurrent horror of the plague is understood in the context of biblical tradition: those who gazed on the serpent would be cured.

gested that AIDS is divine retribution for a sinful world, and remembering South African President Thabe Umbeke's skitishness in addressing the impact of the AIDS pandemic on his country, these plague-related paintings start to exert odd new force. Seeking aid from divine intervention seems less bizarre when seen in our context of believing that in a world of amazing scientific advances and sometimes risky trial therapies, we begin to believe that miracles may, indeed, be possible.

Yet a surprisingly large proportion of these paintings are satisfying just as paintings. Van Dyck's two (of four original) emotive St. Rosalie paintings—her Magdalene look also shares a touch of Rubens's Marie de Medici—have probably not been seen together since the 17th century. Bellotto's view of the Tiber combines the painter's unique clarity of light (think: sharp-focus photography) with an eerie darkness—perhaps the miasma (dirty air) that was thought to be a cause

gear we've hauled seven miles. When we see that Bob and I have already climbed the higher bonus peak, they beat us back to the

rows a barbeque at ives us credit for our e for six. And the

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ch incrementalism work. Writing in the recent issue of the Journal, John Merri- and David Salisbury the current education n a "gold-plated di- that competition re- east, low regulatory r new schools, swift for poor schools and ools to specialize if

Chris Whittle wouldn't o drastic. He writes s Stockholm syn- e to a Swedish inci- ges sided with their s that "all of us are n childhood experi- fashioned school we ideal. But Mr. Whit- syndrome is some- Both "Crash Course" ory show that he has blic-education estab- s revolutionary zeal. of visionary infallibil- ating.

a fellow at the Ameri- tute and the host of .com.

treme—asserting that everything can and therefore must be viewed through social and/or political lenses. And the culture-war skirmishes of our day have probably made curators even more skittish about assertive engagement in such issues.

Happily, this exhibition can't really be seen as a balancing act between those common positions, but rather as a carefully focused means of addressing a long-ago crisis that tends to be at the margins of our consciousness, even if we commonly use it as a convenient frame of reference (e.g., "avoid like the plague"). History books (and guidebooks) give us information, but prior to the invention of photography and the expansion of the mass media, painting was probably the most potent tool for psychological and visceral immersion in tragic events. As a new, if grim, means of touring the Italian peninsula, this exhibition reminds us that signs of the plague's impact were and are all around us; this becomes an opportunity to reconsider what we had taken as comfortable and familiar.

In Venice, Longhena's majestic Church of Santa Maria della Salute seen in Canaletto's painting of the "Entrance to the Grand Canal" (1730, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) is no longer simply part of the artist's (and our) romance with the most view-worthy of cities, but now understood in relation to why it was built: as a supplication to God for relief from the plague of 1630. This idea recurs in Luca Carlevarij's "The Feast of S. Maria della Salute" (1720, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford), depicting Venice's annual remembrance of past plagues.

Hadrian's Tomb, a tourist favorite among Rome's ancient monuments (and a music lover's favorite as the place from which Tosca jumps in the eponymous opera's finale), was renamed as the Castel Sant' Angelo after the archangel St. Michael appeared at the top of the monument at the approach of Pope Gregory the Great's penitential procession during a particularly severe sixth century plague; it remains Rome's most important monument to the plague, of which we are reminded in Bellotto's view of the Tiber (1742-44, Toledo Museum of Art). Giovanni Andrea Sirani's theatrical "Saint Michael the Archangel Overcoming Satan" (late 1630s, Bob Jones University Museum and Gallery), a copy of Guido Reni's celebrated altarpiece—in which the saint's foot on Satan's head might have been choreographed by Balanchine—is the exhibition's most monumental work.

Memorable images take on new meaning throughout the exhibition. Because the plague was imagined as arrows from God, the survival of the Roman martyr St. Sebastian after being pierced by arrows became a common plague-related image, thus recasting the familiar depiction for us, as he appears in paintings by Jacopo Bassano, Bernardino Luini and Nicholas Regnier. St. Roch, a cult figure (of questionable historical authenticity) associated with healing, recognizably pointing to his thigh (probably a polite way of calling attention to his groin, where the plague's buboes often developed), gains new meaning in this con-

is understood in the context of biblical tradition: those who gazed on the serpent would be cured.

While works have been lent by many of the major collections—a seminal Marcantonio Raimondi engraving after Raphael from the National Gallery in Washington, a luminous Crespi canvas from the Getty, a Van Dyck from the Metropolitan Museum of Art—many of the works are gathered from collections only a diligent museumgoer would have visited—and on those visits one might not have noticed Italian Baroque paintings while looking for the better-touted masterworks. This is a tribute to the project's team of imaginative scholars—Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Pamela M. Jones, Franco Mormando, Thomas W. Worcester, Sheila C. Barker, James Clifton and Andrew Hopkins—and the Worcester Art Museum's local academic partners, Worcester's Clark University and College of the Holy Cross, resulting in a useful catalog that helps us understand the medical, geopolitical and religious issues; will we ever see the map of Italy in the same old way?

Maybe our world in general can be seen differently as well: a world of West Nile virus and avian flu, and uncertainties about how to avoid them. Considering that some religious leaders have sug-

bins the painter's unique clarity of light (think: sharp-focus photography) with an eerie darkness—perhaps the miasma (dirty air) that was thought to be a cause of the plague. Sweerts's "Burying the Dead" (1646-52) is one of several works that remind us how powerful was the hold of Michelangelo (especially the writhing figures of "Deluge" in the Sistine Chapel) and Raphael (not only in his own image of the plague, but also in the great Vatican room paintings) on the painters who followed them.

And many intriguing vignettes abound. I was struck especially by the variety of arrow images—from the wizened old lady ever so delicately removing the arrow from St. Sebastian's chest in Regnier's painting (1626) to the Roman-wreathed Sebastian triumphantly holding his own arrow aloft in the lower left corner of Domenico Antonio Vaccaro's 1730 work. What is most surprisingly evident as one roams the Worcester Art Museum's exhibition, which none of our many other museums was clever enough to join in showing, is how a seemingly arcane subject, breaking new scholarly ground, is demystified and made intensely engaging and accessible to museum visitors.

Mr. Freudenheim is the former assistant secretary for museums at the Smithsonian Institution.

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