



GREENWICH
Decorative Arts
SOCIETY

Happy Valentine Week
February, 2019

Dear Members,

Our successful return to the Bruce Museum created a buzz of enthusiasm. We had a large turnout and speaker Elizabeth Kornhauser, MET Curator of American Sculpture and Paintings, enthralled us with her lecture on Thomas Cole and his legacy.

We learned how Thomas Cole drew on influences on both sides of the Atlantic and celebrated the wilderness while mourning its loss to the encroaching order of civilization.

Program Committee member Eleanor Sabo, who introduced Dr. Kornhauser to us, sat with her on the train from NYC to Greenwich - she said the train trip had never gone so fast, so immersed was she in fascinating conversation with Betsy.



View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains (Sunny Morning on the Hudson) by Thomas Cole, oil on panel, 1827.

“The most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of

“American scenery is its wildness,” wrote the painter Thomas Cole (1801–48) in an 1836 essay. “It is the most distinctive because in civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified.”

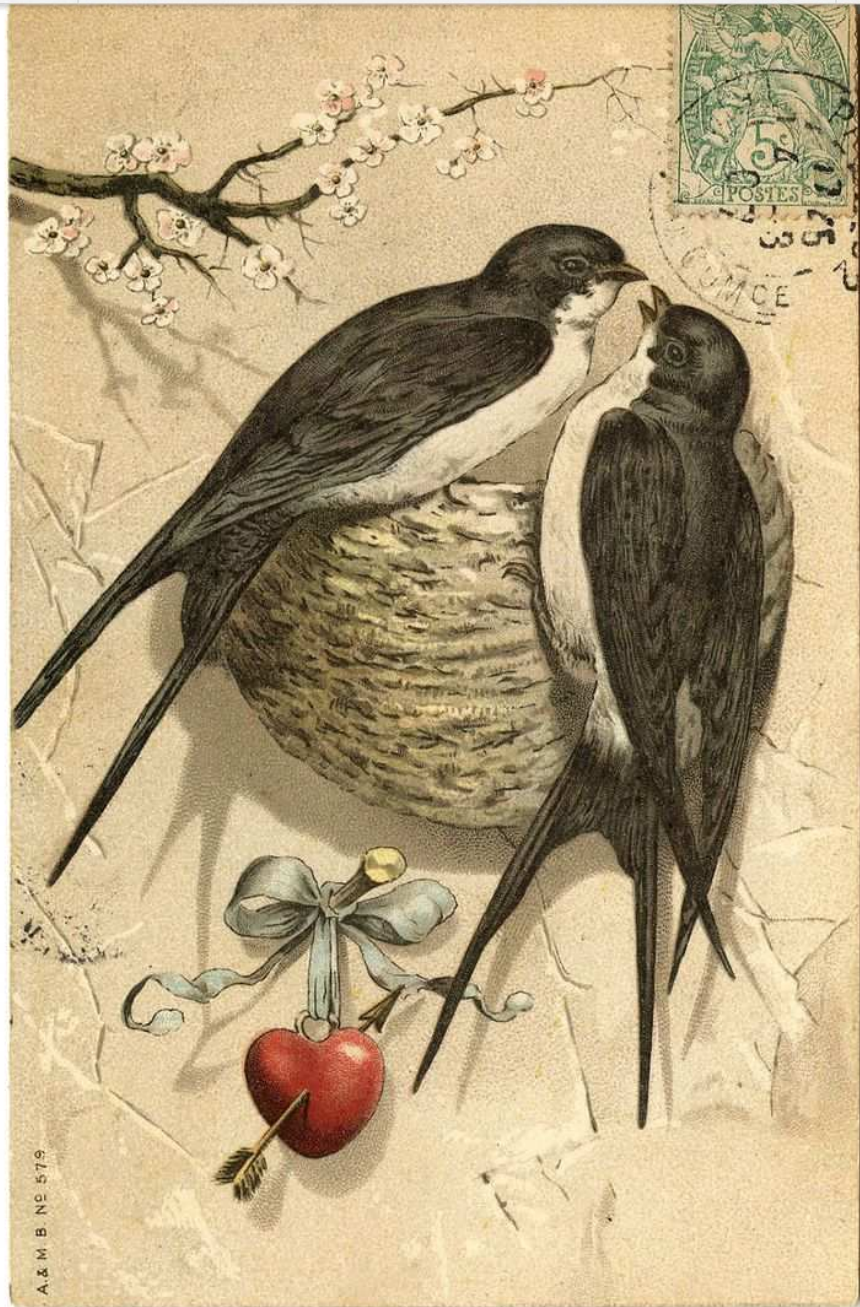


View From Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm –
The Oxbow by Thomas Cole, oil on canvas, 1836
(Several members told me they would have happily listened to Dr. Kornhauser's
two hour lecture on The Oxbow painting!)

Scott Smith, Director of Marketing and Communications, and Kirsten Reinhardt, Registrar, welcomed us personally, and Justine Matteis was happy to see us back in the gift shop! Managing Director Suzanne Lio and Development and Donor Manager Becky Conelias had met with Betty Johnson and myself to discuss the timing of our return.

I want to thank all of you for your patience and flexibility as we deal with the exigencies of the Bruce's plans for expansion. It's not over yet but we will be positive!

As I noted in my opening remarks, we are proud of our museum whose history goes back to 1853. “Genuine intellectual curiosity” was part of the museum’s founding creed and that is indeed a quality we share today - something that makes this society very special.



A Very Happy Valentine's Day to You!

I would like to share three paintings evocative of Valentine's Day, which, however familiar, always merit revisiting. Three Valentines for you.



Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (mid 1480's), a beloved and iconic work of the Italian Renaissance, is full of allegorical and philosophical meanings ~ and it's about the birth of love and spiritual beauty.

When I saw it for the first time in the Uffizi in Florence, it took my breath away. In the usually crowded gallery, on a wintry day, my husband Don and I were the only persons there. What a rarity. In the intimate dusk we shared the experience with due reverence.

It was my first time in Italy. Botticelli all to ourselves. Ah, the power of love and art! As Henry James said of experiencing art in Florence "it still works spells and almost miracles."



The painting is almost 6 feet by 9 feet. Its scale and sweet power cause a visceral reaction when seen in person. Reproductions cannot capture the illuminative quality nor the spiritual or mystical effect. I don't exaggerate the physical impact!

Recently the *Daily Mail* [reported](#) that the beauty of the Botticelli was actually heart-stopping for one man who suffered a heart attack while taking in *Birth of Venus*. As for a cause, doctors diagnosed it as a non-scientific condition that is

...to as Stendhal's Syndrome, which is "defined as dizziness, fainting, hallucinations, and even heart palpitations when seeing something of 'great beauty,'" as the paper put it.

Hopefully you will not have any life-threatening reactions to such sublime beauty! (The Italian viewer made a full recovery.)



First trained as a goldsmith, Botticelli highlighted Venus' long blond tresses with gold, and the leaves and tree trunks are etched in gold. As she lifts her foot off of her gilded shell, the winds shower her with roses (according to mythology the rose flowered for the first time when Venus was born).

Hora of Spring stands by to envelope her with a cloak richly decorated in flowers, as is Hora's dress.

Did you know that it miraculously survived the monk Savaranola's "Bonfire of the Vanities"? His virulent four year campaign against what he saw as heretical and frivolous destroyed thousands of art works.

Scholars surmise that Botticelli may even have been so convinced by the fanatical friar that he threw some of his own works on the fire. But perhaps he hid his most glorious paintings, including the *Birth of Venus*.

If you would like to learn a little more about this monumental masterpiece, go to this [Sotheby's anatomy](#) of the painting.

You can read many interpretations of this painting but you can see that we are looking at a celebration of beauty and love, perfect for Valentine's Day.



What is your immediate response to this painting?

Our First Vice President Cyndy Anderson and I made a pilgrimage to see it four years ago when the Frick had it on loan.

Cyndy is always an inspiring companion on art quests; she also urged me to see Leighton House, one of London's hidden gems, a spectacular Moorish fantasy and a delicious destination for Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasts and those interested in late Victorian art. (And one of the only places other than the Frick and the Tate where this painting has been rarely loaned.)

Fredrick Leighton's (1830 - 1896) classic Victorian painting has joined the iconic masterpieces which have tapped a zeitgeist.

Have a cup of tea and a Valentine cookie while I tell you a little of the history of *Flaming June*.



The painting *Flaming June* by Frederic Leighton on display at the Frick Collection in 2015, in the Frick's Oval Room flanked by the stunning ribbed columns which echo the fluted Ionic pilasters of the original frame. (Courtesy The Frick Collection)

Influenced by 17th century French and Italian Masters, Leighton not only contributed greatly to the tradition of English figurative painting, he also developed an exceptional sense of color.

Flaming June was completed by the artist at the top of his form, despite the fact that he was dying from heart disease. Leighton had a well developed technique and had been composing the work in his mind over many years. He showed off his painting in his studio on April 7, 1895, a year before his death.

(*Biography of Lord Frederick Leighton*, Paul Ripley)



Leighton based her pose on Michelangelo's sculpture "Night" and on a copy of his lost painting "Leda and the Swan," both of which feature similarly bent legs with powerful thighs. (Ken Johnson, NYTimes)



Thomas for £1,000, who featured it on the front of his magazine, "The Graphic," Christmas 1886.

It was then sold to a wealthy widow who lent it to the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford.

And then...who knows? Maybe it was returned to Leighton's house, but the trail is lost and it disappeared without a trace for over three decades.

In 1962 a builder removed a panel over a chimney in a house on Clapham Common, London, and found the artwork perfectly preserved. He sold it to a junk shop in London for the price of its substantial gold gilt tabernacle frame, £60.

Modernism and pop art were all the rage and no one was interested in Victorian art. (To say the least: in 1962 Andy Warhol was painting Campbell Soup cans.)

The painting languished.

In a strange turn of events, the composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, whose own collecting helped revive serious interest in Victorian art, saw it for sale in a shop on the Kings Road. He never forgave his grandmother for refusing to lend him £50 to buy it. "I will not have Victorian junk in my flat," she told him.

(*Guardian*, June 6, 2016)



Eventually a part-time hairdresser/artdealer bought it and sold it to another art dealer who loved Victorian art, Jeremy Maas, for less than £1000. But still no one would buy the painting.

Maas finally sold it to a Latin-American industrialist, Luis A. Ferré, who wanted to set up a new museum, the Museo de Arte de Ponce, in Puerto Rico.

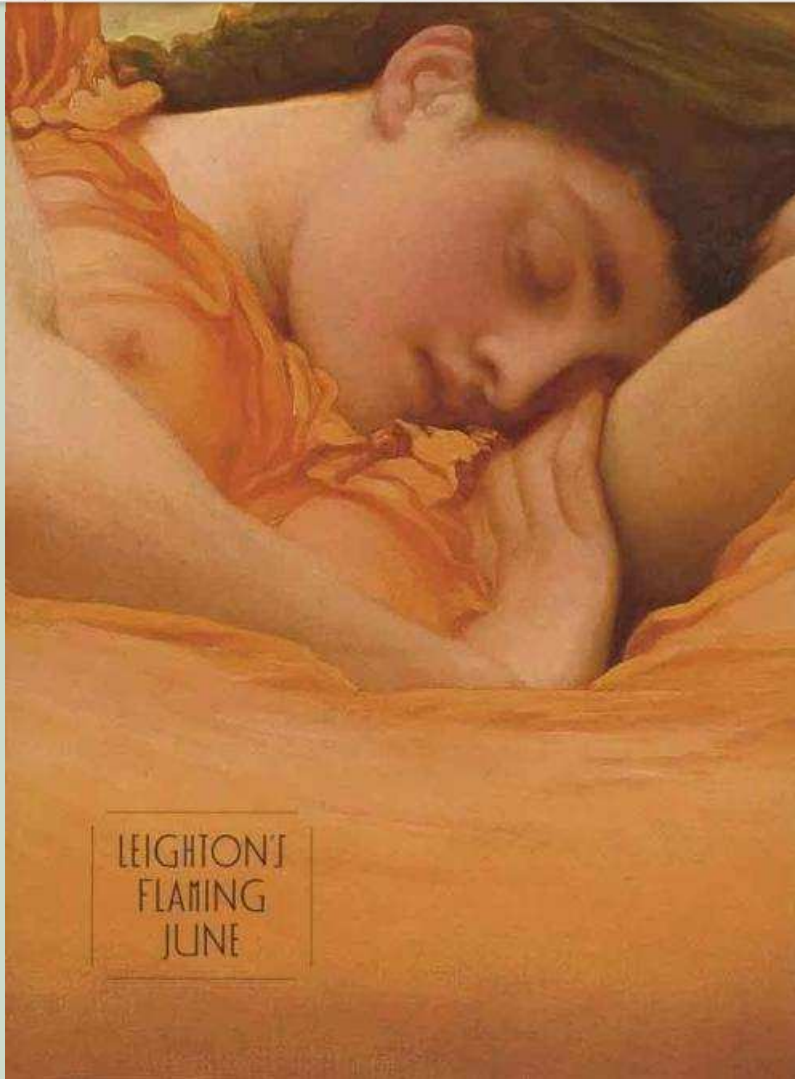
When Ferré saw the painting, it was love at first sight!

He was utterly mesmerized.

Ferré's son said that his father could not even sleep in the final stages of the transaction, for fear the deal would not be completed. For just £2000 Ferré bought the painting and shipped it off to Puerto Rico.

Flaming June went on to gain superstar status, an unquestioned masterpiece which is the most widely reproduced painting of the Victorian era.

Today it is known as the "*Mona Lisa* of the Southern Hemisphere."



It's a perfect Valentine. It's luscious, it's romantic, it's a tantalizing confection. It's mysterious.

(Has someone left her flowers? Is that oleander blossoming behind her head? Oleander is a fragrant, profuse and seductive flower but also poisonous.)

What is she dreaming?

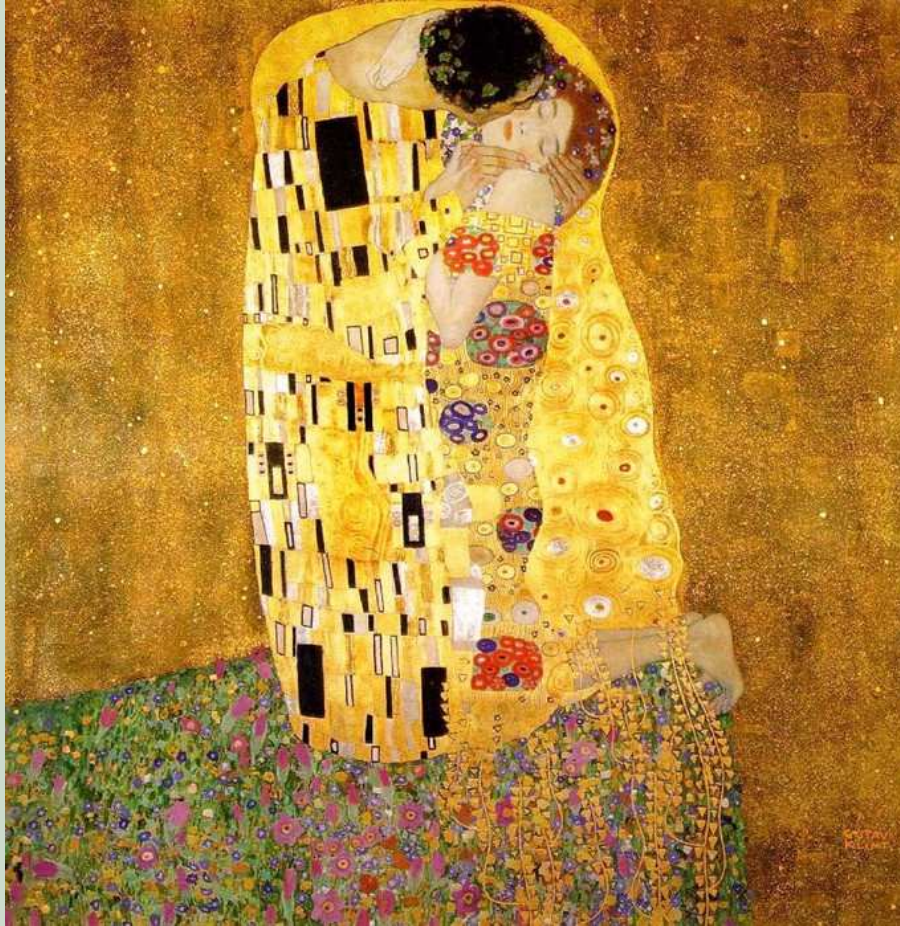
It's also subtly erotic - heavens, the Victorians must have taken to the fainting couch what with that translucent gauze revealing breast and thigh.

And who couldn't love that vibrant apricot orange?

Senior Curator of the Frick, Susan Grace Galassi, notes that “her body is in a very complex pose... It forms a circle and the drapery fills out the circle. If you go from the top of the head, you see how it steps down to the elbows and around... The form suggests energy in repose. She's asleep but the body is still very energized,”

and promise.

An elusive and enticing Valentine dream for you.



Gustav Klimt died on February 6, 1918 at the untimely age of 55 - 101 years ago to the day on which I am writing this letter.

I was debating about my third Valentine, *The Kiss*, and this coincidental detail sealed it. The enigmatic and controversial painter's favorite themes were flowers, women and the ever-changing seasons. At least 14 of Klimt's dazzling paintings were burned in 1945 by an SS unit; how fortunate some are preserved for posterity.

Alas, *The Kiss*, arguably one of the most popular college dorm posters ever, has been over-exposed and it may be hard to resurrect your original viewing.

Klimt's paintings are among the most expensive in the world yet he was neglected for most of the 20th century. They became wildly popular and adorn everything from mugs to tea towels, so you must make a conscious effort to "resee" them in an exploratory way.

Painted between 1907 and 1908, *The Kiss* is perfectly square, about six by six feet, not rectangular as the reproductions infer. It is a grand scale and

Try to see the painting anew as you gaze at the deceptively simple portrait.



The couple kneels on a grassy patch of wildflowers.



The man cradles the woman's face with tenderness as he leans in to kiss her.
She wraps her arms around his neck; her eyes are peacefully closed.



Her hands gently and lovingly touch his.



His robe has geometrical shapes contrasting with her colorful patterned dress with bright floral motifs. She wears flowers in her hair.



According to expert Dr. Alfred Weidinger, Klimt followed the works of Charles Darwin and the latest findings in the field of biology and embryology. He was fascinated how a single cell – a human egg, is fertilized and develops into a fetus and then, through various stages into an infant. He often adorned his paintings with biological symbols.



The delicate detailing is made of gold leaf. (Like Botticelli, Klimt, the son of an engraver, mingled gold with his oils.) Inspired by Byzantine mosaics, this gilding gives each piece a glimmering appearance that accentuates the ethereal nature of Klimt's subject matter.



The shimmering symbolist painting holds your gaze and offers a glimpse into an intimate relationship with an embrace of timeless quality.

The Kiss hangs in the Belvedere in Vienna, but if you have a yearning for Klimt and *fin de siècle* Vienna, take yourself to the Neue Galerie during February. In case you haven't been, it's located in the grand Louis XIII/Beaux-Arts house located at 86th and Fifth conveniently close to the MET.



The stunning painting *Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (1907), the final and most fully representative work of Klimt's golden phase (commemorated in the 2015 film *Woman in Gold*) is on permanent display as part of the museum's current exhibition. Worth the trip alone!



And what could be more fitting than lunch or coffee and cake in the Café Sabarsky, on the ground floor and inspired by the great Viennese cafés that served as important centers of intellectual and artistic life at the turn of the century?

I love the torts and strudels arrayed on a marble shelf, the period objects, including lighting fixtures, furniture and cozy banquettes upholstered with a 1912 Otto Wagner fabric. A fine place for a Valentine week celebration!

Meanwhile, go to the [Greenwich Decorative Arts](#) website and look at our upcoming programs!



March 4

The Herter Brothers and Gilded Age Interior: The William H. Vanderbilt House

Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, Anthony W. and Lulu C. Wang Curator of American Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



April 1

[The Well-Dressed Window: Window Treatments at Winterthur](#)

***Sandra Brown**, Winterthur Design Associates, Winterthur Museum*



May 6

Chippendale: The Man and the Myth

Brock Jobe, Professor Emeritus of American Decorative Arts, Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library

NB: In honor of Chippendale's 300th anniversary, this lecture will take an entirely different focus than the fall lecture. Recounting the remarkable story of Chippendale himself, it will take us on an armchair journey of the grand estates of England and Scotland from which engaging scholar Brock Jobe just returned. Not to be missed!



June 3

[Folly or Fantastic: Garden Art and Architecture from the Sublime to the Absurd](#)

Lucinda Brockway, Program Director for Cultural Resources at the Trustees of Reservations, Massachusetts

Change of venue to the First Congregational Church in Old Greenwich, for this lecture only: more details to follow.

The Greenwich Decorative Arts Society is a robust and welcoming society with many new members.

We also have some members who have been with us a long time. One such member is Babs White, who has been a member since 1989! She came to the first meeting the society held at the Bruce Museum (it started at the Women's Club).



Society. Don and I went to her recent amazing shows, "Treasures of the Costume Collection, 1740 - 1930" and "Mannequins on the Runway, Haute Couture and Contemporary Designs of the Twentieth Century." Babs is working on her eighth Costume Show for the Darien Historical Society.



One of the treasures she showed was a complete bridal collection from 1883.

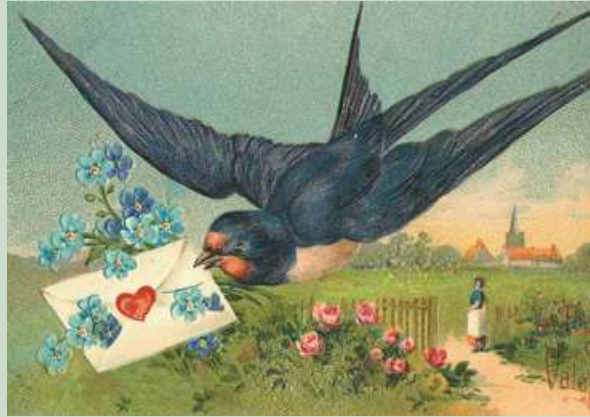


Babs has a wide and impressive knowledge of fashion history and is a fount of information from historical artifacts to haute couture to ready-to-wear, from fabrics to styles and trends.

She has won many awards including the YWCA Distinguished Service Award. Thank you, Babs, for your support and commitment to our society!

We are looking forward to our 35th anniversary and we honor our members of longstanding and welcome our new members.

...you at the Bruce on March 4th for a look at the most sumptuous house in
America of its time and some recent yet unpublished discoveries!



A Fond Happy Valentine's to All Our Members!
Karen Handal, President
Greenwich Decorative Arts Society

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