



GREENWICH
Decorative Arts
SOCIETY

Happy Valentine's 2020

Americans began exchanging Valentines in the 1700s.

In the 1800s Esther Howland took it to a new level during the Civil War when Valentines were very popular. Families, friends and loved ones were separated and feared they would never see each other again.



Esther Howland popularized and mass-produced Valentine's Day cards like this one, using lace, ribbons and colorful paper. She had an all-women assembly line in Worcester, Massachusetts, which started in her bedroom in her family home and grew to have annual revenues of \$100,000. (substantial at that time).

This forgotten entrepreneur - Esther who? - was a classmate of Emily Dickinson at Mount Holyoke and named her booming business The New England Valentine Company.



People enjoyed sending tokens of affection, poems, pictures, locks of hair and simple homemade cards. Now they could purchase elaborate ones with hidden doors, gilded lace and artistic illustrations. The visionary Esther became known as "The Mother of the American Valentine." *(Courtesy American Antiquarian Society)*



I can't send you a three dimensional Valentine with accordion effects and a string which moves a bouquet of flowers to reveal a verse (Esther's innovation - still used today), but I am sending you some paintings evocative of the spirit of Valentine's Day. I am featuring American painters in our GDAS year of Americana.

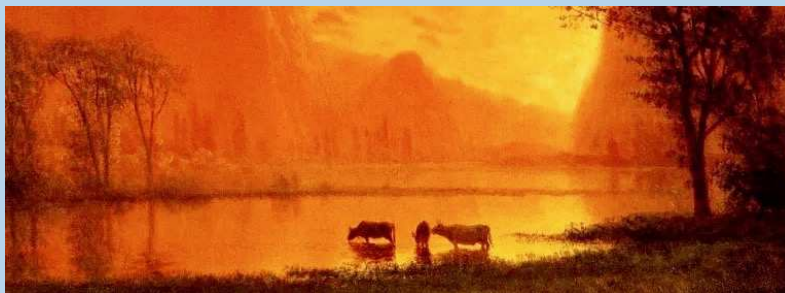


Sundown at Yosemite, Alfred Bierstadt, 1863

Romantic souls love sunsets. A recent survey showed most adults feel a sunset puts them in a romantic mood, even more than dinner by candlelight.

The German-American Alfred Bierstadt was at the peak of his career when he painted this on his first trip to Yosemite, his second trip out west. He camped for seven weeks and wrote to his friend John Hay that he had found the Garden of Eden in America.

This lustrous painting shows the setting sun casting a yellow-orange glow over the entire landscape. Bierstadt imbues the painting with the luminism art style through the soft, warm radiance of infusing light. The painting awed and astounded all who saw it.



The United States was in the midst of the Civil War, and in this dark time Bierstadt's luminous and gorgeous paintings inspired Americans to protect their natural landscapes. Epic landscapes like this engendered a new reverence for the land.

With full public support in 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill to protect Yosemite's natural beauty, preserving it as a natural park for the public. You might say a Valentine for future generations.





On the Stile, Winslow Homer, circa 1878

This sweet watercolor by Homer hangs in the National Gallery of Art. It was bought by his friend Lawson Valentine and his wife Lucy Valentine, who were great admirers of Homer's work.

Lawson Valentine was a great patron of Homer's works, before they began to be acquired. Isn't this different from the Homers you know? It was painted at Lawson's large farm in Mountainville, New York, near West Point, a summer retreat for family and friends. Homer visited it the first time in 1878 and returned many summers.

I selected this endearing painting as a Valentine for you before I learned it had been first bought by the Valentine family!





Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge, Mary Cassat, 1879

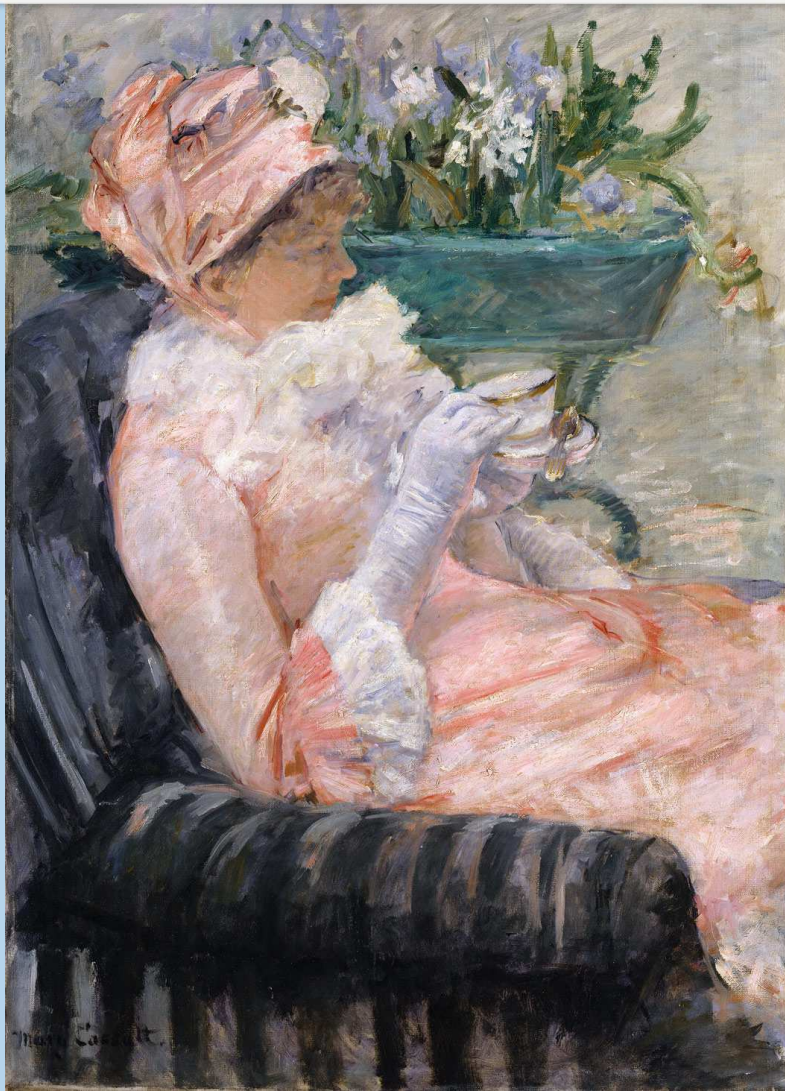
This lovely young woman looks like she could be at a Valentine Ball, with her delicate pink gown and pearls.

Something about her countenance is genuine, promising she would be a delightful companion or loyal friend. Cassat's portrayals of women were consistently done with dignity and the suggestions of a deeper, meaningful inner life.

The lighting and flesh tones in this portrait remind me of Tolstoy describing his beautiful women characters with "sculpted shoulders and unfailing elegance."

The woman, Cassat's sister Lydia with whom she was very close, is seated in front of a mirror with the balconies of the Paris Opera House behind her. Cassat's friend Degas had a lot of influence on her work, including this one, which received much praise at the fourth Impressionist Exhibition in 1879.

Cassat and Degas had studios close together and had a long period of collaboration. Degas loved her sensitive portraits of women and children. Historians and writers speculate on their relationship - were they lovers? They had a close, respectful, sometimes stormy and mutually admiring relationship.



The Cup of Tea, Marry Cassat, 1880

Here is Lydia again - she often posed as a model for her sister. Taking afternoon tea was a social ritual for many women. It was a time they could talk privately and share thoughts and news. Committed to portraying the ordinary events of everyday life, the artist made that fond ritual the subject of a series of works.



Her embrace of French Impressionism is signaled by her scintillating brushwork and contrasting complementary colors.



The Tea, Mary Cassatt, 1880

I had to include Cassatt's paintings about having tea in homage to our wonderful GDAS afternoon tea tradition. Cassatt became the only American artist to exhibit with Impressionists in Paris. Her new way of representing everyday women and children earned her international recognition.

Cassatt was an influential personality at a time when very few women were regarded as serious artists. Her paintings conveyed messages about the social reality of women in the 19th century in a way which elevated the concerns and rituals of their lives.





The Room of Flowers, Childe Hassam, 1894

Let's have a Valentine Party and let's have it in this room. I love this room! I am not a minimalist. I am comfortable with piles of books, an array of favorite *objets*, vases of flowers, beloved treasures.

I just see this room and I know I am with a kindred spirit. Look at all the vases scattered on tables, the paintings on the walls and the books! This room reflects a life richly lived. Rich in spirit.

This is poet and gardener Celia Thaxter's parlor.

Hassam recalled spending "the pleasantest summers" there and meeting in this room a "jolly, refined, interesting and artistic set of people - like one large family."

Like all of you, dear GDAS members.



Celia Thaxter's Garden, Isles of Shoals, Maine, Childe Hassam, 1890

Hassam made a series of paintings of Thaxter's garden, thriving on the rocky soil of Appledore Island, Maine. A successful and prolific poet, she lived out her life, running her father's inn and her garden with generosity and inspiration.



Celia Thaxter's Garden, Appledore, Isles of Shoals, 1890, Childe Hassam

Celia Thaxter wrote: "I am fully and intensely aware that plants are conscious of love and respond to it as they do to nothing else."





Mrs. Fiske Warren (Gretchen Osgood) and Her Daughter Rachel,
John Singer Sargent, 1903

This Sargent painting of mother and daughter conveys inexpressible complexity ~ and tenderness. The mother - so young! - is poised, composed and self-contained. The daughter, with her unfocused, indirect gaze into the distance, seems in a state of dreaminess and reverie. Her chin rests trustingly on her mother's shoulder.





Notice how the background subtly echoes the mother and daughter - to the left the statue of a woman - Madonna? - holding her child. To the right two candelabra - guarding or symbolizing this pair. The mother is in palest pink, the daughter in a stronger pink - what a touching valentine they make.



Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, John Singer Sargent, 1885 - 1886

Sargent's large 5' 9" x 5' 1" *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* was painted entirely out of doors at the magical twilight time of day and it's wonderfully complicated. From a boat on the river Thames, Sargent was deeply inspired when saw the girls - the daughters of friends - and the Chinese lanterns among the trees and lilies.

Sargent was obsessed with flowers. It conveys to the viewer a vivid sense of being present at a real event in which light - *light* - is a palpable presence. The lighting of the lanterns is beautiful and richly symbolic.



Sargent's early years in England were difficult from a professional point of view, but he was drawn into a new circle of friends of artists and writers in the village of Broadway.

Sargent's picture of *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* is expressive of the carefree joyfulness and happiness he experienced there. Many of his lifelong friends can be traced to the camaraderie of those days.

It's one of my favorite paintings ~ a luminescent and touching Valentine.





Music Pink and Blue, II, Georgia O'Keefe, 1918

Georgia O'Keefe was fascinated in translating the nonverbal sensations of music to something for the eye. She believed visual art, like music, could convey powerful emotions.

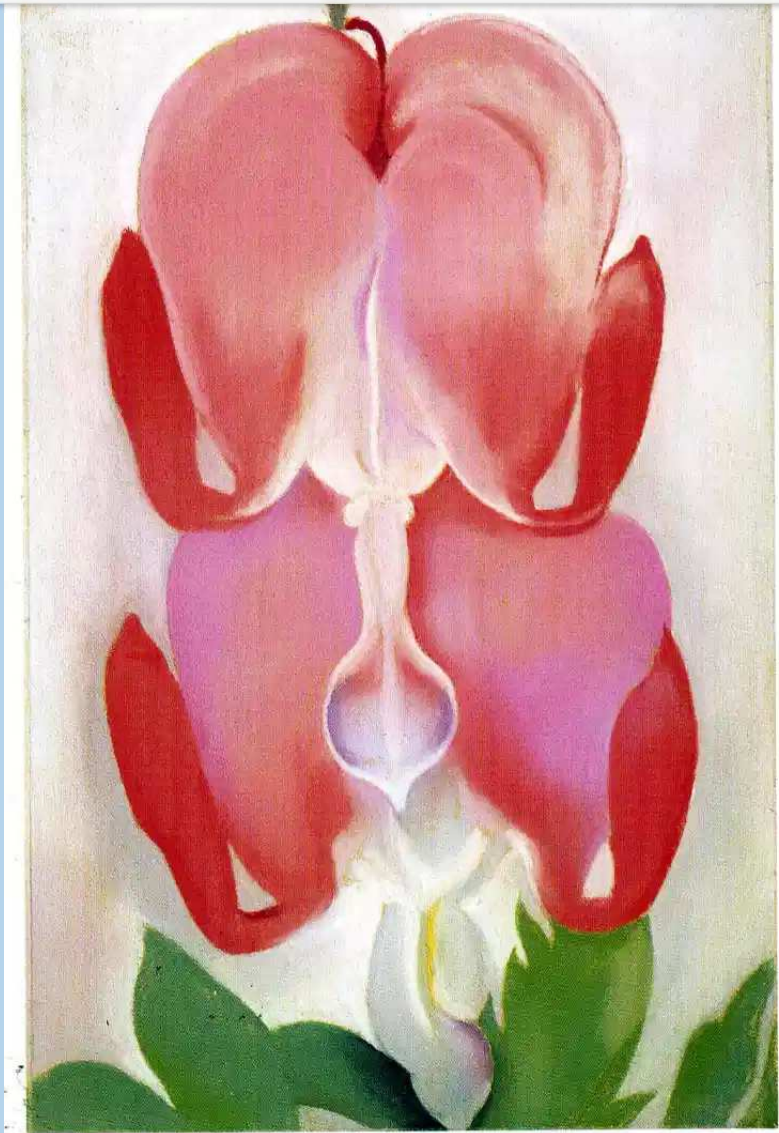
"I found that I could say things with colors and shapes," wrote O'Keefe, "that I couldn't say in any other way - things that I had no words for."



Light Iris, Georgia O'Keeffe, 1924

O'Keeffe's great flower paintings echo her childhood fascination with the miniature world of the dollhouse. It was there she learned of the magical transformation that occurred with a shift in focus.

"When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I wanted to give that world to someone else."



Bleeding Heart, Georgia O'Keefe, 1932

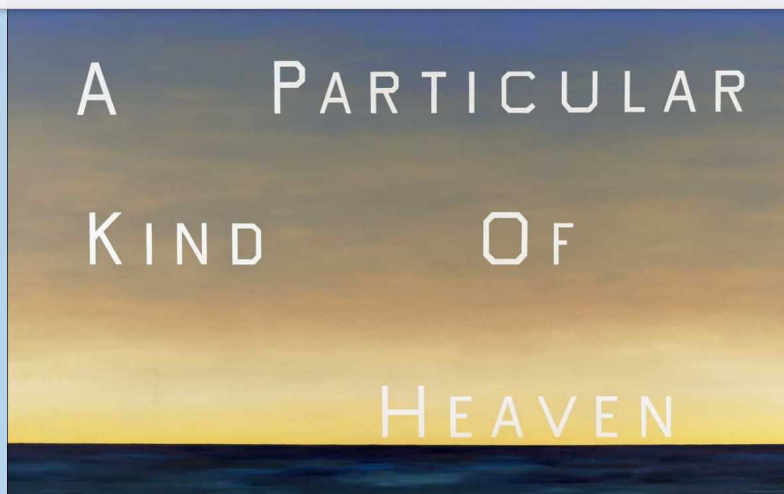
Her celebration of flowers was an expression of her feeling for the world around her, a reminder that there was something else other than speed, noise and machinery. Here was something else, ravishing and lovely. The heart of the flower was full of rapturous colors and was an astonishing discovery.

The sexuality of O'Keefe's flowers was at once declared, but for O'Keefe, much of the eros was in the eye of the beholder. She loved flowers and decided to make them big ~ " People will be startled - they'll *have* to look at them - and they did."

A valentine of flowers for you.

(Georgia O'Keefe: A Life, Roxanna Robinson)





A Particular Kind of Heaven, Ed Ruscha, 1983

A Particular Kind of Heaven is one in a series of related works Ruscha created in the mid-1980s in which he silhouetted words and phrases against a sky backdrop. Ruscha's westward-facing California sunset evokes symbolic associations of the American West, including the early perception of California as an earthly Eden.

The painting's large-scale, panoramic format and chromatic light relate to a long tradition of American landscape painting, represented by such Hudson River School artists as Albert Bierstadt, whose painting opened this newsletter.



The Sunset at Monterey Bay, the California Coast, Alfred Bierstadt, 1850

Ruscha's words, "A Particular Kind of Heaven," hover over the horizon like geometric skywriting and dominate the sunset. They also resemble the sign in the Hollywood Hills, near where this Los Angeles artist lives.

Ruscha notes: "All my artistic response comes from American things, and I guess I've always had a weakness for heroic imagery."

What is your idea of a "particular kind of heaven" ? Over one hundred years later our American art circles back to original themes. Ruscha was inspired by Bierstadt.



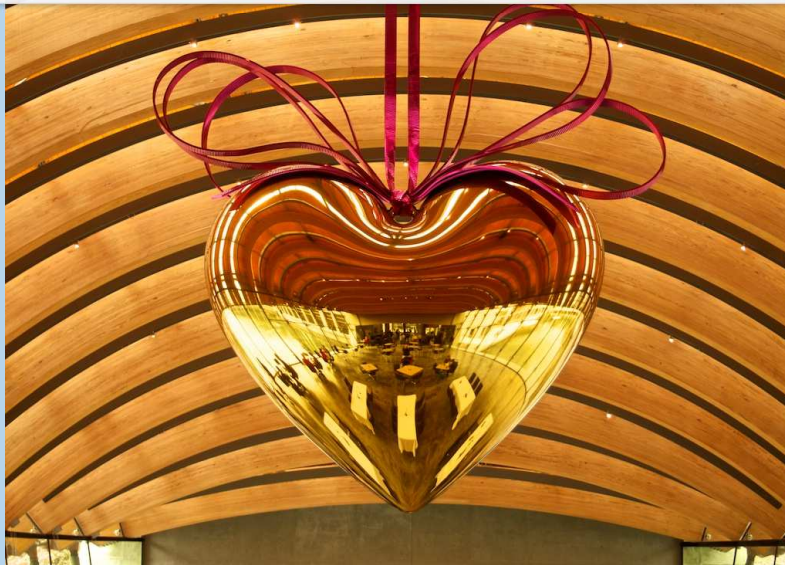
*A one-and-a-half ton metallic heart by Jeff Koons at
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas*

This gold-colored heart, made of highly polished stainless steel, is the heaviest indoor sculpture at the Crystal Bridges Museum, weighing in at 3,032 pounds.

Inspired by the enthusiasm of Deputy Director Sandra Edwards after her talk on Crystal Bridges at GDAS, members of the Program Committee Adele Raspe, Nancy Connors, Eleanor Sabo and I accepted her gracious invitation to visit. We sat for lunch in this elegant modern space under this heart.

We were impressed and engaged by this extraordinary museum and its commitment to increase access to outstanding American art to communities across the country.

Alice Walton believes that art is at the center of what it means to be human and that art, like the beauty of our natural world, should be accessible to everyone. Admission at the museum is free.



The museum has an annual Valentine's Dinner and this room has become a destination for marriage proposals. The museum is indeed a Valentine to the American people.



Deputy Director Sandy Edwards of Crystal Museum of American Art with Karen Handal at Adele Raspe's home

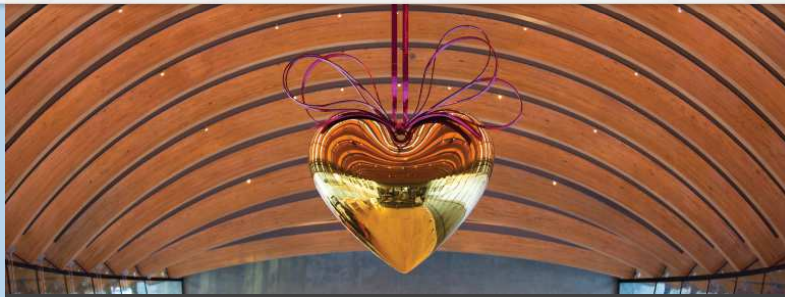


Helen Kippax, Karen Grund, Sandra Edwards, Karen Handal, Adele Raspe, Betty Johnson and Eileen August at a reception for Sandy hosted by Adele.



Adele Raspe, Eleanor Sabo, Karen Handal and Nancy Connors
with Koons's *Hanging Heart (Gold/Magenta)* at the
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

GDAS fosters friendship and camaraderie among our members and connections with our speakers and other art institutions. Learning is a lifelong adventure together.



A big golden heart valentine to all you enthusiastic and supportive members who make GDAS such a special society!



Thank you to Barbara Freeman for her gorgeous Valentine centerpiece of vintage dessert ornaments and roses at our February tea table.



See you all at our March 2 lecture on "Henry DuPont and the Entire History of the Winterthur Americana Collection" by Estate Historian Jeff Groff.

Happy Valentine's Week!
Karen Handal, President
Greenwich Decorative Arts Society



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