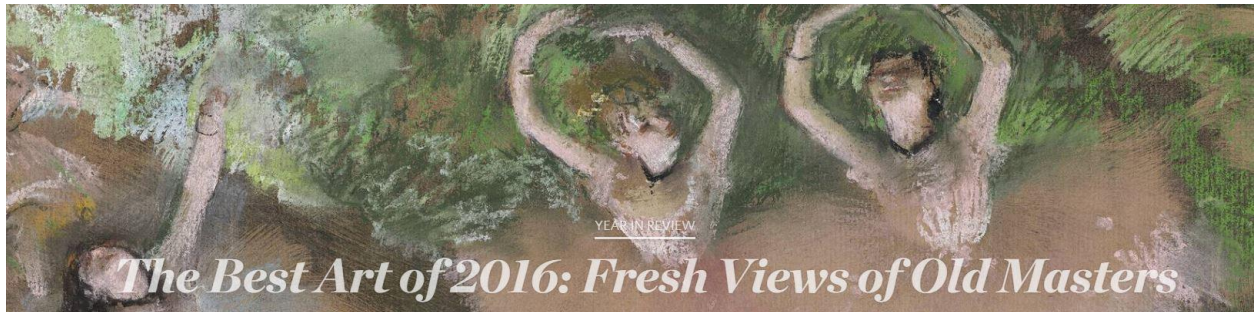


# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



Anthony van Dyck, Edgar Degas and Kerry James Marshall were just some of the standouts in the year's museum exhibitions.

*By Karen Wilkin*

**Many memorable** exhibitions of 2016, several still on view, dealt with the unfamiliar, including “**Valentin de Boulogne : Beyond Caravaggio,**” now at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, a showcase for a painter beloved of art historians but otherwise little known. Cardsharps, gypsies, musicians and biblical dramas, expressively staged and dramatically lighted, reveal that Valentin, like many foreigners in 17th-century Rome, took Caravaggio’s “cinematic” realism as his model. But he was no mere follower. Witness his haunting, wholly original, troubled David, leaning toward us over the severed head of Goliath.

“**The Brothers Le Nain : Painters of Seventeenth-Century France,**” at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, anatomized three other favorites of 17th-century specialists: Antoine, Louis and Mathieu—“the first artists’ collective”—who signed everything simply “Le Nain.” We discovered that, though best known for eerie images of peasants, they also painted ambitious religious scenes, portraits, charming children and Caravaggio-inspired ne’er-do-wells. We even learned to see what distinguished each brother’s manner, despite their collaboration.

At the Frick Collection in New York, “**Van Dyck : The Anatomy of Portraiture**” allowed us to savor the Flemish master’s virtuosity with paint, from his precocious teens to his years as England’s Court Painter, through gorgeously dressed aristocrats, self-portraits, a magnificent churchman, and more. “**Watteau’s Soldiers: Scenes of Military Life in Eighteenth-Century France**” showed us an unexpected side of the painter of amorous couples. Both exhibitions were rich in wonderful drawings that revealed the artists’ working methods. The Van Dycks, from minimal sketches to highly finished studies, let us imagine we were watching him think. The Watteaus gave us his acute observations of the uneventful side of warfare: soldiers at rest, bored, exhausted, or flirting with camp followers. In both shows, drawings upstaged the paintings, good as they were.

“**Drawings for Paintings in the Age of Rembrandt,**” now at the National Gallery, Washington, further enlarges our understanding of how 17th-century artists worked. Examples of the three preparatory approaches used by Dutch painters of the time—studies from life, memory and imagination—are accompanied by related paintings constructed, with various methods, using drawings as starting points. We’ll never think about Dutch realism the same way again. And the drawings, and paintings by a wide range of masters, including Rembrandt himself, are all terrific.

“**Edgar Degas: A Strange New Beauty,**” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, introduced this enigmatic painter’s love affair with monotypes through dazzling images of café singers, ballet dancers, crowds on Paris’s new boulevards, brothel scenes, bathers and uncannily modern landscapes, all created by wiping, scraping and scratching lines in the viscous ink. Degas’s way of erasing darkness with energetic sweeps, to evoke firelight, gaslight, glaring footlights, and that new phenomenon, electric light, made these late 19th- and early 20th-century works startlingly contemporary. The astonishing colored landscapes verged on abstraction.

There are fine works by Degas in **“Icons of Modern Art: The Shchukin Collection,”** at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, reunited with a selection of stellar Cézannes, Gauguins, Matisse, Picassos and other delights acquired by the Moscow textile merchant between about 1900 and 1914. The show is a tribute to Shchukin’s adventurous, exacting eye.

At the Kimbell, **“Monet : The Early Years”** offers testimony to this celebrated painter’s prodigious gifts, from the start. An impeccable selection of broadly brushed landscapes, seascapes, still-lives and figure paintings, made mainly when he was in his 20s, attests to his faultless eye for tone and matchless ability to suggest light and atmosphere.

**“Stuart Davis : In Full Swing,”** now at the National Gallery (and seen earlier at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art), and **“Kerry James Marshall : Mastry,”** at New York’s Met Breuer, both ravish us with full-throttle color, restless compositions and brash content. Davis’s canvases, with their syncopated planes, quirky floating shapes and odd-ball lettering, are like the jazz he loved—freewheeling, made-in-U.S.A. renditions of Cubist tunes. Marshall makes contemporary urban African-American experience the stuff of magisterial paintings, often as packed and layered (literally and figuratively) as Davis’s, but to very different, politically charged effect. The color black, for Marshall, is not descriptive but metaphorical. Unmodulated, it turns both figures and their surroundings into almost unseeable presences.

**“Splendor, Myth, and Vision: Nudes From the Prado,”** at the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.—an impressive assembly of works from the great Spanish museum, most never before seen in America—focused on Philip II as Titian’s patron, and Philip IV as Rubens’s. There were also magnificent paintings by Velázquez, Tintoretto and Guercino. We also learned how, over the years, nudes were regarded in intensely Catholic Spain. Prized by the 16th- and 17th-century monarchs who commissioned them, they were threatened with destruction, as dangerous to morality, by an 18th-century king. Luckily, he was persuaded to lend them to the royal academy of art, as models less problematic than real naked women.

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