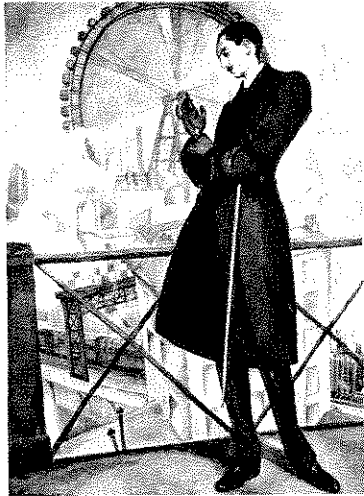


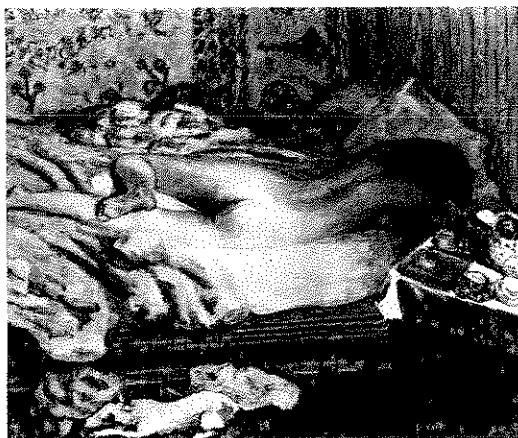
CURRENT MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS: OLD OPTIONS AND NEW APPROACHES; THE CUBIST RIVERA, THE LATE BONNARD, THE FOLDING IMAGE, AND THE ORIENTALISTS



GAIL LEVIN

Of different kinds, four current exhibitions explore the options of museum practice and brilliant painting.

Diego Rivera, Portrait of Adolfo Best Maugard, 1913. *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Museo Nacional de Arte.*



Pierre Bonnard, Siesta, 1900. *Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1949.*

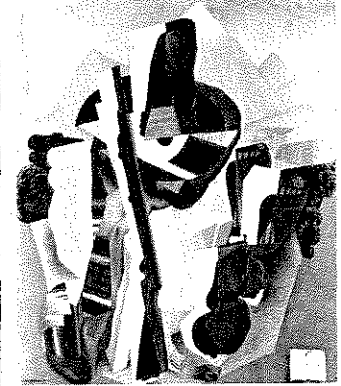
In examining some of the best of current museum exhibitions, there is much to be learned from both their content and their method of presentation. Before considering specific shows, it is worthwhile to question what makes an exhibition successful. Visitors view a presentation which either pleases or offends, elucidates or confuses. Curators who produce museum exhibitions presumably hope to communicate ideas about their chosen subject matter in a meaningful way. Yet museums take few chances, often preferring to show exhibitions safely based on precedent, the tried and tested formula.

The simplest approach is the monographic exhibition which concentrates on one established artist. Variations on this theme include the full retrospective, a focus on one period of an artist's achievement, or on one particular medium within the artist's oeuvre (such as a painter's drawings or prints). Few artists stand up well under the intense scrutiny of a complete retrospective.

Another obvious exhibition topic is any historically defined style such as Impressionism or Cubism. These stylistic areas can be narrowed by geographic or nationalistic criteria such as German Expressionism or American Pop Art. Other limitations can be imposed, for example, a consideration of the early or late development of such a style, as in "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years."

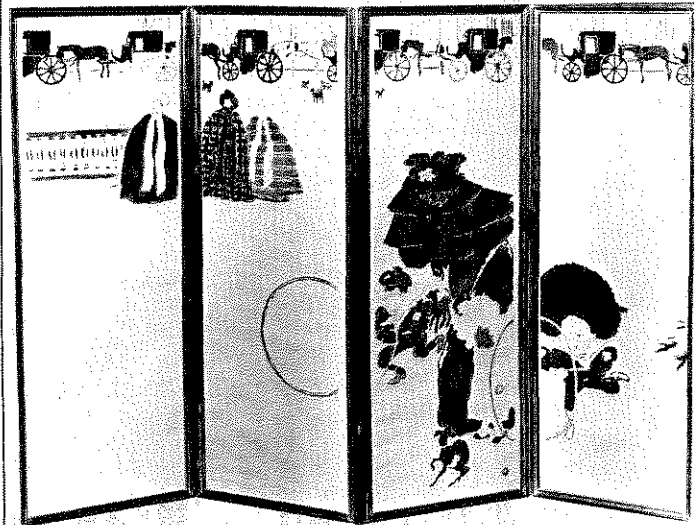
Exhibitions can feature a particular period in history as in the turn of the century or art between the wars (World War I and II). It is common procedure to choose one decade, such as art of the Thirties, as if events really happen with such neat attention to order.

Diego Rivera, Young Man with a Stylograph, 1914. *Private Collection.*



Diego Rivera, Zapatista Landscape, 1915. *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.*

Pierre Bonnard, Promenade des nourrices, frise des fiacres, 1896. *Color lithograph on paper, 59 x 78 1/2". Private Collection, Houston, Texas. Courtesy National Gallery of Art.*



ample, ceramic sculpture or monotypes. There are also large surveys of a medium in a particular period, place, or style: Dada collage or Russian Constructivist posters. One type of object might be surveyed across a wider expanse of time: figurative sculpture, artist-designed jewelry, or artist-illustrated letters.

Private or public collections, available for exhibitions, offer the museum visitor an opportunity to see special collections without traveling or privileged access to the private patron. The value of these exhibitions varies greatly depending on the quality of the collection and its historical or stylistic coherence, among other factors. Often, too, even the specialist sees works of art in an entirely new context once they have been removed from their usual setting.

The broadest possibilities for exhibitions are thematic: a kind of traditional subject matter category such as landscape, history, still life, portrait, or genre, but also shows based on historic exhibitions, events (political, social, or scientific), personalities (dealers, collectors, teachers, poets, and publishers, etc.) or places (art schools, summer colonies, expatriate havens). Among the thematic ap-

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"The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876-1976" and her current exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, "Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century." This kind of exhibition not only requires that the curator have a fresh concept but also assumes mastery of a broad area and the time, ability, and energy to conduct extensive original research.

Pressured by fund-raising demands, too few American museums sponsor innovative exhibitions and prefer to take the safer, more traveled routes, such as retrospectives of major artists. Yet talented curators who possess the creativity to organize such conceptual exhibitions on new topics can communicate a wide range of ideas to the public. In selecting theme shows, a curator should be like an artist—as original as possible.

While corporations have made an enormous contribution to major exhibitions in this country, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have often made possible exhibitions too esoteric to appeal to a corporate sponsor. Funding, based on peer review, is provided by a system which, despite its drawbacks, seems exceptionally fair. The Humanities Endowment requires a very demanding application and that the exhibition communicate ideas, not just exhibit art for art's sake. This usually results in didactic wall labels as well as in audio-visual presentations which, at best, enhance the context of the works of art shown. Some institutions, claiming to show only masterpieces, prefer to avoid such educational installations and forgo sponsorship from NEH. Such programs are viewed as detracting from the quality of the art works themselves. In this age of traveling exhibitions, changes in presentation, from one institution to the next, of the same works of art, may greatly alter the impact.

Recently, there have been a number of fine examples of monographic, medium, and theme exhibitions. All of these are major efforts which will or have been seen in several different museums.

"Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years, 1913-1917," organized by James K. Ballinger at the Phoenix Art Museum, is the achievement of guest curator Ramón Favela, a scholar who is preparing a catalogue raisonné of the European works of Diego Rivera. The exhibition of more than seventy paintings was shown in Phoenix, then in New York at the IBM Gallery of Science and Art, and is now on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until November 11, 1984, before its final showing at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. The IBM Corporation, which together with the National Endowment for the Arts sponsored this exhibition, also deserves plaudits for bringing this important show to New York where it otherwise would not have been seen. The New York installation included a very informative bilingual orientation gallery.

While some of the works were familiar from American, European, and Mexican museum collections, and even exhibitions like "The Cubist Epoch" (1970), the exhibition was a revelation. The topic, narrow and closely focused, allows for a thorough investigation. Rivera, the muralist, has now been properly placed in the context of his early romance with modernism. In his excellent catalogue, filled with interesting connections, Favela traces Rivera's development of a Cubist style beginning with his initial study of El Greco's proto-modernist space during a stay in Spain in 1912.

Rivera's friendships in Paris with an international community of expatriate artists are important not only for his own career but also for the light they shed on the period as a whole. His encounter in 1913 with Piet Mondrian, his neighbor at 26 rue du Départ, resulted in Rivera's borrowing from the Dutchman's early Cubist style. Rivera was also influenced by the Russian contingent in Paris; at the time he was married to the Russian painter Angeline Beloff. By the autumn of 1913, Rivera was associated with the coterie of Riccioto Canudo, the Italian founder of the avant-garde journal *Montjoie!*, including Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, Morgan Russell, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Marc Cha-

gall, Michail Larionov, and Natalia Gontcharova.

Favela points out that Rivera's interest in native Mexican motifs was encouraged by a fascination among the Paris avant-garde with Russian folk art, as featured in the Salon d'Automne of 1913. Rivera's 1914 *Portrait of Jacques Lipchitz*, for example, includes the decorative patterns of a Mexican serape for both its Mexican identity and its visual pleasure. Rivera's inclusion of folk motifs evolved to his most important use in *Zapatista Landscape* in 1915. His friend, the Mexican artist Adolfo Best Maugard, was also one of the most enthusiastic promoters of the use of folk art motifs. Their friendship is documented by Rivera's portraits of Maugard in 1913 and 1914. While the former has a background with a Ferris wheel and appears to owe a debt to Robert Delaunay, the latter uses sand with paint and reveals the influence of another friend, the Spaniard Juan Gris.

Rivera's recollection of his meeting with Picasso reflects the internationalism of Paris in 1914. He recalled that when a Chilean painter was sent by Picasso to invite him, he brought along two Japanese artists, Fujita and Kawashima, friends who were then posing for him. Picasso then returned the visit to Rivera's studio. Rivera remained in awe of Picasso; his Cubist production continued to reveal the Spaniard's influence even after their personal break.

The beginning of the war in August 1914 meant dislocation and chaos for the Parisian artistic milieu. Rivera temporarily moved to Madrid where other exiles included Lipchitz, the Delaunays, and Marie Laurencin. Rivera also came into contact with Mexican exiles from the Revolution and this encouraged him to invent political iconography.

Zapatista Landscape of 1915 includes a felt Zapatista hat, rifle, serape, cartridge belts, and Mexican gourd canteens set before the volcanic landscape of Mexico. It is a colorful spiritual tribute to Rivera's roots and to the political struggles then underway in his homeland. *Zapatista Landscape* represents Rivera's highest achievement as an original proponent of the Cubist aesthetic.

In wartime Paris, Rivera went on to become a close friend of Gino Severini with whom he explored popular scientific theories of the mathematician-physicist, Henri Poincaré. Rivera shared the same dealer, Léonce Rosenberg, with Severini, Metzinger, Gris, Lipchitz, and others. By 1917, however, Rivera, searching for an alternative to Cubism, had already produced a series of Ingresque portraits. He broke with his dealer and, by January 1918, rejected Cubism altogether. But by working as a Cubist for five years, Rivera had found his way back to his Mexican heritage.

"Pierre Bonnard: The Late Paintings," organized jointly by the Phillips Collection, the Musée National d'Art Moderne, and the Dallas Museum of Art, has been shown in Paris, then in Washington, and is now on view in Dallas through November 11, 1984. Like the Rivera exhibition, the Bonnard show has been sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the IBM Corporation. "Late," which has been defined as extending from 1900, when Bonnard was only thirty-three, until the artist's death in 1947, is actually employed to indicate his work after the Nabis period. The Nabis, a group choosing their name after the Hebrew word for prophet, had come together to pursue ideas drawn from Gauguin, Cézanne, Redon, and Oriental sources, among others. This exhibition omits Bonnard's earliest work which he began while studying law at the insistence of his father. Since Bonnard's career as a painter only began in earnest in the 1890s, this exhibition might just as well have been a full retrospective, offering the complete story of the artist's development.

The paintings themselves looked splendid, particularly in the small-scale galleries of the Phillips Collection which are entirely compatible with Bonnard's enduring domesticity. Duncan Phillips collected sixteen works by Bonnard and the artist's languid sensuality seemed perfectly at home in rooms which usually display works ranging from Impressionism to early twentieth-century abstraction. Bonnard's love of pattern and filled compositions, which evolved logically from his Nabis period, is much in evidence in the more painterly "late" works.

It is instructive to compare *La Sieste* (1900) with another nude in

an interior, *La Toilette* (1931), painted more than three decades later. While the palette of *La Sieste* is dark and sonorous, in contrast to the warm airy light of *La Toilette*, both canvases feature a nude woman seen from behind, voyeuristically, as if the subject is unaware of being observed. In *La Sieste* the subject sleeps, but in *La Toilette*, she is merely self-absorbed in her own reflected image in her mirror. The artist's perspective in each is from above: in *La Sieste* we look down in the bed and the carpet, while in *La Toilette* we also view the tilted table top and floor from an elevated point of view. Beyond the compelling eroticism of these works, the most striking consistency is Bonnard's use of pattern, his *horror vacui*, compelling him to fill his compositions with flat ornament. *La Sieste* includes flowered and striped wallpapers, mattress ticking, flowered carpet, a cluttered table top, and rumpled bed sheets. *La Toilette* superimposes pattern on pattern in a more diffuse manner, but includes an ornamental window grate, carpets, objects on a table top, and contrasting wall and fabric tones and textures. Bonnard typically created his composition by dividing his space into such pattern-defined fragments, unifying the whole through a repeated diversification. As Sasha M. Newman, the editor of this catalogue, notes in her entry for *La Sieste*, Bonnard's source for this nude's pose was a Roman copy of a Hellenistic statue of a *Hermaphrodite* that he must have seen in the Louvre. The woman in *La Toilette* is his aging wife, Marthe, who does not look appreciably different than in Bonnard's earlier depictions of her.

Bonnard, who is at his best in painting the figure in a domestic interior, also produced landscapes (some with figures), still lifes, exterior views seen from interiors, haunting self-portraits, and seascapes. His seascapes include *Bathers at the End of the Day* (1945), painted less than two years before his death. This canvas is so abstract that it prefigures the later work of Rothko who shared Bonnard's taste for luminous and intense color. In his catalogue essay, Jean Clair argues that Bonnard's late work foreshadows "the principles of a certain type of abstraction, seen in the work of Sam Francis, Morris Louis, and Jules Olitski."

The catalogue of this exhibition is an elaborate compendium of essays and documents. It also contains an extensive chronology, exhibition history, and bibliography and is certain, therefore, to remain an important resource on the artist. Of particular interest are Antoine Terrasse's (trustee of the Bonnard estate) brief essay and publication of Bonnard's notes, a sketchbook executed on a calendar. Sasha Newman discusses Bonnard's use of ancient statuary as sources and links this to his acquaintance with the work of De Chirico exhibited in Paris from 1912-1914. Steven A. Nash examines Bonnard's sources in Impressionism, Matisse, and even Titian. Among the other essays is Jean-François Chevrier's essay, "Bonnard and Photography," which presents many previously unknown examples of the artist's work in this medium. The achievement of Bonnard and of this exhibition's organizers is impressive and a pleasure to behold.

"The Folding Image: Screens by Western Artists of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," organized by Virginia Fabbri Butera and Michael Komanecky, after opening at the National Gallery of Art, will be at the Yale University Art Gallery from October 11 through January 6, 1985. This is an excellent example of an innovative exhibition based on medium, actually a type of object, surveyed across two centuries and covering many styles and countries. The folding screen originated in China, but the Japanese adapted the idea and popularized screens in the West by exporting them to Europe beginning in the 1860s. This exhibition is about the adaptation of the screen format by Western artists. It is inevitably also about Japonisme, the influence of Japanese style in the West. This is particularly apparent in the screens from around the turn of the century by some of the Nabis artists in France such as Armand Seguin, Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard, and Bonnard.

Architects who designed screens are well represented, including Antonio Gaudi's magnificent pair of five-paneled screens made of

for Thomas Wilmer Dewing's screen, *Morning Glories* (1900). Josef Hoffmann's screen represents the Vienna Secessionist style with graceful curving oval arches and incised leather panels.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this exhibition is its variety—the range of ideas brought to bear upon screen design. The screens range from painted panels by artists as unexpected as Paul Klee, whose 1900 landscape of the Aare River derives from illustrations from the journal *Jugend*, to Tiffany's glass screen of about 1900 with its cascading floral and grape vines as decorative motifs.

The early modernists were attracted to screen designs, often for use in their own homes. Franz Marc's 1913 screen is shown in this exhibition for the first time since the three panels entered separate collections in the late 1950s. Marc's imagery, an abstract landscape with animal forms, is unified across three panels by a brilliant rainbow arcing across the top of the composition. Vanessa Bell, a co-director of the Omega Workshop in London, is represented by a screen depicting abstracted *Bathers in a Landscape* (1913), reflecting her interest in Cézanne's work. Italian Futurist Giacomo Balla produced a number of screens including an example in this exhibition from about 1918. Double sided and of an eccentric, irregular shape, Balla's dynamic abstract design communicates the simultaneous movement in time and space that he described as his concept of landscape in his 1915 manifesto.

American modernists also experimented with screens. Charles Prendergast found inspiration in sources as diverse as Persian miniatures and American folk art (Pennsylvania-German). Thomas Hart Benton, who briefly espoused the abstract art of Synchronism, created a nearly abstract screen with an ocean motif as part of an entire decorative scheme for a sportsman's den in 1925. Jay Van Everen placed his abstract paintings in the carved frame of an Oriental screen.

Surrealists, too, attempted screens. Yves Tanguy's *Four Panel Screen* (1928) conveys all the magic of the biomorphic shapes and fantasy landscapes in his canvases. Man Ray's screen (1935), representing his response to a poem, "La Rose publique," that his friend Paul Eluard had dedicated to him, depicts a woman undressing before watchful, disembodied eyes.

Yet the greatest diversity of screen designs are those by contemporary artists. These include Ansel Adams' photographic panoramas, Ellsworth Kelly's painting on wood, *La Combe II* (1950-51), Bruce Connor's *Partition* (1961-64) constructed of a complicated three-dimensional assemblage of mixed media, Lucas Samaras' painted wood screen of elaborate jigsaw cutouts, and Kenneth Armitage's *Folded Arms* on an unmovable screen of cast and plate aluminum.

Although beautifully arranged at the National Gallery, the installation lacked a logical chronology and was therefore confusing. A colleague complained that there was no indication of the general history of screens and how they derived from the Japanese. There were almost no didactic labels and no orientation gallery. The hefty catalogue, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, offers a wonderful essay by Janet W. Adams which focuses on the history of the screen from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. The other essays and the catalogue entries by Komanecky and Butera are both interesting and informative. "The Folded Image" offers both visual splendor and a thorough investigation of its engaging subject.

"The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse," at the National Gallery of Art through October 28, 1984, was organized by MaryAnne Stevens at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, where a smaller version of this exhibition premiered. In one sense this intriguing thematic topic is part of a larger subject, now under extensive art historical investigation—the fascination of Western artists with the aesthetics and context of exotic cultures. During the 1970s, several exhibitions considered Japonisme, and the major exhibition, "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," is now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York through January 15, 1985. In-

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, "Orientalism"—the taste for and depiction of the Near East and North Africa—was in vogue. This includes not only those seeking the Islamic Near East, but also artists like James Tissot and William Holman Hunt who were searching for the Christian Holy Land with almost an archaeologist's zeal. Not every artist in this exhibition traveled to North Africa or the Near East. Gros and Ingres are included "because their particular visions of these regions profoundly marked Europe's expectations and interpretations of the Orient."

In her essay, Stevens explains that although Ingres never went further south or east than Italy, he preferred accurate settings for his figures including his odalisques. He found his sources in eighteenth-century illustrations and writings. Often the *fête galante* was simply transposed into a *turquerie*. Thus, one can appreciate Ingres' *Odalisque and Slave* (1842) for its diversity of sources including Persian miniatures. The harem theme also provided the artist with a morally irreproachable vehicle for the expression of eroticism.

Among the artists who actually traveled to the Near East and North Africa, the most interesting are those who found more than just subject matter. The light and color he found in North Africa helped Delacroix intensify his tonal range and inspired some of his most memorable subjects. Regrettably the Louvre did not lend his masterpiece *Les Femmes d'Alger* to this exhibition. A smaller, later version of his monumental *Death of Sardanapalus* is on view, as well as *Combat between the Giaour and the Pasha*, both inspired by the poetry of Lord Byron rather than by specific observations made in the course of traveling.

This exhibition is hung salon style which is particularly appropriate to the many paintings by obscure academic artists. Indeed, as late as 1894, Orientalist painters in France organized an annual salon devoted to works of such themes. The overall effect is engaging as a visual experience, although focusing on the individual exam-

ples of some of the minor participants (for example, Ludwig Deutsch, Théodore Frère, or Robert Scott Lauder) has its tedious aspects.

In the view of these artists, the "Orient" is clean and glamorous, like a stage set for a Hollywood movie. The rich colors and textures and exotic settings offer a romantic picture scarcely believable: exotic costumes, glamorous pale women, endless bric-a-brac, dancers, jumbled architectural pastiches. Nowhere evident are the poverty and filth one reads about in the literature of the period or observes still in visits today.

The modernist artists' romance with the Orient provided new perceptions of color and light, or at least support for their earlier innovations in these directions. Renoir's two trips to Algeria, however, took place in 1881 and 1882, years after he had painted his *Femme d'Alger* or *Odalisque* (1870) and copied Delacroix's *The Jewish Wedding* (1875). His *Arab Festival, Algiers: The Casbah* (1881) was apparently inspired by direct observation and was actually painted in Algeria.

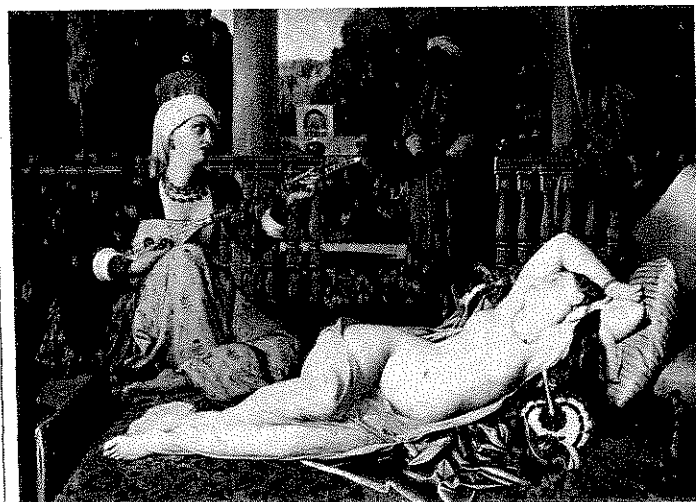
Matisse's three visits to Morocco (1906 and twice in 1912) initially resulted in his purchase of local pottery and textiles, which became elements in his still lifes and finally in his depiction of Moroccan figures and landscapes. One of the highlights of this show is the beautiful triptych representing the garden of the Villa Bronx, Tangier, Morocco, now separated into three different collections. *Moroccan Landscape*, painted during Matisse's 1912 spring trip, has a dominantly blue palette in contrast to the red tones of the other two panels executed later that fall. One regrets the exclusion of so many of Matisse's marvelous Moroccan subjects, most of which are in the collections of Russian museums.

The examples of Kandinsky's work in this show are more problematic. Although he traveled in North Africa between 1904 and 1908, neither *Improvisation 6 (African)* nor *Oriental* were the artist's original titles and the former evidently represents a Christian subject. Much more to the point would have been some of the small oil studies or sketches actually executed in North Africa. (Works on paper would have enriched this exhibition.) The omission of work by Paul Klee, Louis Moilliet, and Auguste Macke, who traveled together to Tunisia in 1914, is a pity, especially given the numbers of minor nineteenth-century British academic artists who were included.

The few American artists in the exhibition—Sanford Robinson Gifford, Frederic Edwin Church, and Elihu Vedder—seem like something of an afterthought and, evidently, were added for the American showing. The absence of didactic wall labels for such an esoteric theme show is a detraction for some viewers. The catalogue, however, contains informative essays by several additional scholars (Robert Irwin, Caroline Bugler, and Malcolm Warner). Useful entries for each painting were written by a long list of authors. Stevens has produced an interesting exhibition that broadens our knowledge on an issue crucial to understanding the development of modern art.



Franz Marc, *Three-Panel Screen (recto)*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 45 3/4 x 65-13/16". Private Collection, Switzerland; Städtisches Museum, Mülheim an der Ruhr, West Germany; Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Monchen-Gladbach, West Germany. Courtesy National Gallery of Art.



Henri Matisse, *Palm Leaf, Tangier*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 46 3/4 x 32 3/4". National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Fund, 1978.



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque and Slave*, 1842. Oil on canvas, 50 x 41 1/2". Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. Courtesy National Gallery of Art.