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VMFA Welcomes the Treasured Mellon Collection's Return to Richmond
French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Works, British Sporting Art and Schlumberger Jewelry
Are Revisited in Inspired Redux



Field of Poppies, Giverny 1885, Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926), oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Richmond, VA—The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) is delighted to announce the return of the Mellon Collection. After traveling nationally and internationally for four years while the Mellon Galleries were being renovated, the beloved collection of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works, Sporting art and Jean Schlumberger jewelry, gifted by Paul and Rachel Lambert Mellon to the museum, will be displayed once again at VMFA in Richmond beginning October 21, 2021.

“The renowned collection of European paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts generously given to VMFA by Paul and Rachel Lambert Mellon are an essential part of the museum’s identity,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s Director and CEO. “These collections are among VMFA’s greatest treasures, and we are excited to welcome visitors to rediscover these incredible works of art.”

The Mellon Galleries, located on the second and third floors of the museum’s West Wing, have been renovated and air-handling systems updated to ensure the best possible long-term environment for displaying

these collections. The galleries have been completely redesigned and refreshed with a dynamic new presentation conceived by Dr. Sylvain Cordier, VMFA's Paul Mellon Curator and Head of the Department of European Art.

Highlights of the Mellon Collection, including paintings, sculpture, and works on paper by Pierre Bonnard, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, Henri Rousseau and Vincent van Gogh, resonate against walls of carefully-selected complementary hues. Visitors to the new second-floor Mellon Galleries will now find these remarkable works organized by school and style including Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Nabis and Symbolism.

“Arranging the works this way allows viewers to see the artistic progression and innovations over time,” said Cordier. The evolution of French painting from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century is evident in the space of seven galleries where visitors will see how artists began working with greater immediacy and employing saturated color, some embedding their paintings with symbolism. “The works also present and contextualize social attitudes of the time and allow viewers to see them differently, reframing the overall narrative,” added Cordier.

Paintings and sculpture by Edgar Degas reveal his views on women and femininity, for example. His seemingly charming subjects, such as the ballet dancer in *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, model ca. 1880, cast in 1922, belie the objectification and obscurity many girls and women endured in the late 19th century.

Beyond the galleries of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works on the second floor, visitors will find the largest and most comprehensive public collection of magnificent jewelry and bejeweled art objects by the celebrated French designer Jean Schlumberger, who worked for Tiffany & Co. in New York. Rachel Lambert Mellon donated this exquisite collection to the museum, beginning in 1985.

Among the ornate and intricate works are *Jasmine*, ca. 1966, a stunning collar necklace featuring delicate star-shaped blossoms and flower buds suspended from a golden vine intertwined with diamond ribbons supporting sixteen colored sapphires and tapering to an elaborate floral clasp; and *Flower Pot* (French: *Pot de fleurs*), 1960, a brilliant objet d'art evoking a potted sunflower resplendent with amethyst, emeralds, diamonds, black garnet ore, terracotta, and 18-, 20- and 22-karat gold.

The third floor Mellon Galleries feature Paul Mellon's spirited collection of British, European and American Sporting art focusing on equestrian subjects with masterpieces of the genre by George Stubbs, Sir Francis Grant, John Frederick Herring, Benjamin Marshall, George Morland and Edgar Degas.

The equine works also document social class and race, which are important and inescapable subtexts of these works. Juxtaposed among the jaunty paintings of fox hunts and horse races are paintings of the enslaved men who groomed, trained and raced the animals. VMFA's exploration of the role of enslaved people in Sporting art reflects the museum's intent to tell the complete story of this collection. Horses were also a vehicle to freedom. *A Ride for Liberty - The Fugitive Slaves, March 2, 1862*, a powerful painting by Eastman Johnson, depicts a Black family escaping enslavement on horseback, an actual event that the artist witnessed and documented during the Civil War.

“The newly installed Mellon Collection reflects VMFA's profound commitment to representing and serving all of its diverse communities,” said Dr. Michael Taylor, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Art and Education. “The museum's strategic plan emphasis on EDIA has inspired all of the museum's curators to address issues of equity, diversity, inclusivity, accessibility, and racial and social justice in their collections and Sylvain Cordier's groundbreaking re-installation of the Mellon Collection transforms our understanding and appreciation of these works of art.”

“When giving these significant collections to VMFA, it was the intent of Mr. and Mrs. Mellon to make great works of art accessible to a broad range of audiences,” added Cordier. “It is my hope that, in addition to being exceptional and compelling, these works of art remain relevant and provide insight to all who view them.”

Admission to the Mellon Galleries is free. To learn more about the Mellon Collection and the motivations and principles that guided Cordier in this ambitious reconceptualization of the collection’s display see www.VMFA.museum.

About Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Paul Mellon (1907–1999) was the son of Andrew W. Mellon, American financier, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury and a noted collector of Old Master paintings who founded the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Rather than following his father in business, Paul Mellon devoted his life to collecting art and philanthropy. Educated at Choate Rosemary Hall school, Yale University and Cambridge University, his appreciation for English culture and thoroughbred horses is reflected in his collection of British and Sporting art. Paul Mellon, who lived in Upperville, Virginia, served VMFA as a trustee for 44 years. His second wife, Rachel Lambert Mellon (1910–2014), was also a longtime VMFA supporter and a patron of the arts and sciences. She contributed substantially to the museum through her donation of bespoke jewelry and decorative objects by French-born jeweler and designer Jean Schlumberger. Paul Mellon credited Rachel Lambert Mellon with inspiring his interest in French Impressionism, and together they donated important works from their collections to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA’s permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris and one of the nation’s finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art, British sporting art, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010 VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The museum has undertaken an exciting \$190 million expansion and renovation project, anticipated to be complete in late 2025. International firm SmithGroup is charged with designing a 107,000-square-foot wing for 21st century art, African art, photography, special exhibitions and events; a new 40,000-square-foot collections center to accommodate an expanded conservation department and collections storage; and 45,000 square feet of renovations to, among others, the museum’s existing galleries, education spaces, and Leslie Cheek Theater.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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