

## **M.LiT Tour by Payton Reed**

**TOUR TITLE:** Beauty and Vanity in Relation to Artists Inspirations

**DESCRIPTION:** Learn how beauty and vanity drive artists to be inspired by their wives and how they express this through art.

**LOCATION:** European Gallery, American Gallery

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Welcome to the VMFA! My name is Payton Reed. I am a participant in the VMFA's Museum Leaders in Training program. Our tour theme this year is Social Trends: Beauty and Vanity. Tonight I will be taking you on a tour discussing artists' use of their wives to inspire them in art.

Beauty and vanity are very relevant in our society. How are beauty and vanity a part of our society? *Audience: Make-up, fashion, TV shows, plastic surgery, pop singers, magazines, etc.* The idea of beauty and vanity in our culture has existed for a very long time. Since the Impressionist period and earlier, artists have used art to display the beauty of their loved ones in all sorts of ways. Follow me and we'll see how their social trends and family have influenced these next few painters.

### **OBJECT 1:**

Camille at the Window, 1873  
Claude Monet, French (1840 – 1926)  
Oil on Canvas  
# 83.38

Our first stop is in late 19<sup>th</sup> century French Art. Claude Monet is a French Impressionist painter. He is especially known for his painting *Impression, Sunrise*. This work of art gave a name to the impressionist movement. His feathery brush strokes and play of light throughout his paintings are famous in the artistic world.

As an artist, Claude Monet struggled with his economic situation. It was an issue that forced Monet to move to a smaller home in Argenteuil and it was here that he painted his wife Camille. Here she is standing in the house looking out at the Monet's extensive garden. Although the title of the painting is *Camille at the Window*, the eye is drawn to the flowers in the foreground. The way the light hits the potted fuchsias it makes them the focal point of the piece.

What is your eye drawn to most in this painting?

The colors in the painting are all very muted and earthy. The brightest colors in the painting are the white flowers in the garden and the yellow sunflowers held by Camille. The colors in the garden are repeated in the clothing worn by Camille (she even wears a white flower in her

bonnet). The dark undefined space behind Camille makes her figure as well as the flowers come forward.

If Monet is comparing his wife to a garden full of flowers what characteristics must he see in his wife? *Audience: Beauty, delicateness, etc.*

Transition: Our next work of art dates much farther back but still expresses the idea of men painting or having their wives painted as a way to showcase their beauty.

**OBJECT 2:**

A Pasha Having His Mistress's Portrait Painted, 1737

Carle Van Loo, French (1705-1765)

Oil on Canvas

#59.2

Carle Van Loo was a painter of Flemish origin who lived during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Although he created a variety of works, he is best known for his smaller (scale) paintings, such as *A Pasha Having His Mistress's Portrait Painted*.

Carle Van Loo commissioned many pieces of art for the court of Louis XV. Therefore *A Pasha Having His Mistress's Portrait Painted* could have been made on royal commission. The brightest colors in this piece are focused on the royalty and nobles in the painting so that the eye is drawn to them, while the help is set in shadow. The triangle of people in the center draws the viewer's eye around the piece. Carl Van Loo painted himself relatively in the middle of this scene along with the royalty. This speaks to a high degree of hubris. The woman in this painting was not really the pasha's mistress but his wife. This was an interesting choice on his part. She is also painted almost directly in the center of the piece

Why do you think the Pasha chose to have his wife painted in the place of his mistress?

*Audience: perhaps he thought his wife was more beautiful, or he simply favored her.*

So why did he not just have a portrait of his wife commissioned? *Audience: it could have simply been customary to have your mistress's portrait painted so this was a compromise.*

Transition: Let's move on to another painting that also showcases the wife of a talented painter.

**OBJECT 3:**

Brideship (Colonial Brides), 1927-1928

Thomas Hart Benton, American (1889 - 1975)

Oil and egg tempera on canvas; mounted on composite board

# 98.28

This painting depicts a woman on a dock selling herself as a bride to pay her passage to America. The model for the bride was Thomas Benton's wife, Rita.

This is yet another example of male painters using their wives as models in their art. As though painting people you love and are comfortable with is more enjoyable than painting a stranger.

What do you notice about the woman in this painting that reflects what she is about to do?

*Audience: she looks sad and unhappy at the prospect of what she has to do to start her life over.*

There is only a small portion of the sky visible in this painting even though it seems to be set outside. This could also be reflective of the situation. She wants more than anything to get to America on the ship in the distance but only has one option to do this. There is only one set of stairs leading to the ship. So until somebody takes her for their bride, she is trapped. Even the sky looks sad and dreary.

Looking at the painting, how do you think the colors of the painting set the tone? *Audience: They are dull and muted, dreary – like the story behind the painting.*

### **CONCLUSION:**

In the three works of art we have visited this evening you have seen how artists, especially the ones we have discussed have used their wives as models in their art, as well as how the theme of beauty and vanity play into these pieces as well.

Thank you for joining me this evening. Please take some time to listen to other M.LiT participant's tours before you leave.

### **REFERENCES:**

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts library resources and records and the VMFA website.

“Monet, Claude.” *Oxford Art Online*. © Oxford University Press, 2007. Web. 20 Nov. 2010. <<http://oxfordartonline.com>>.

“Moreau, Gustave.” *Oxford Art Online*. © Oxford University Press, 2007. Web. 25 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.oxfordartonline.com>>.

Near, Pinkney L. “Carle Van Loo: ‘A Pasha Having His Mistress’s Portrait Painted.’” *n/a*. 2003. Print.