

MLiT Tour by Reed Canaan

Title: Beautiful Inside and Out

DESCRIPTION: Learn how the perception of beauty and personality in young women has changed over time, and how this has been expressed through art.

LOCATION: European and Art Deco Galleries

INTRODUCTION:

Hi, everyone! Welcome to the VMFA. My name is Reed Canaan and I am a participant in the VMFA Museum Leaders in Training program. The theme for our tours this year is Social Trends: Beauty and Vanity. This evening I am going to take you on a tour discussing how the perception of what is beautiful – both beautiful physically and beautiful in a personality- has changed over time and the different forms it has taken in art. We are going to focus on how this has affected girls in the 1800's through modern times.

When you think of Beauty, what do you think of? There are no wrong answers to any question. *Audience: models, make-up, fashion, movie stars etc.* This need to be beautiful is engrained in our culture. In order to fit in and be successful, an outer beauty is expected. Fashion trends are ever changing and important in day to day life. Do you follow the crowd? This isn't necessarily just with clothes. Do you have an iPod like everyone else or a different mp3 player? *Yes, you need to be successful. No, being unique is more important.* These expectations are not new to the world. Follow me, and we will see how they have existed in since the 1800's.



OBJECT 1:

The Three Sisters: Finette, Babillarde, and Nonchalante
Jean-Antoine Laurent, French
Oil on Canvas
#2005.61

This is our first stop. Laurent did many pieces for various royalty, and this piece actually belonged to King Louis-Phillipe. He participated in the Troubadour movement, which consisted of pieces focused on the national history of France, Middle Ages to 17th century.

This piece tells a story – one that is based on a 17th century tale by a woman. Just by looking at the picture, what do you think might be happening to these girls? *Audience: girls hanging out together, etc.* What do you think each of these girls' personalities is? What is each thinking about? *Audience: one is lazy, one studious, etc.*

The story behind this piece is this: Three girls with three very different personalities were left behind when their father went off to war. They were locked in a tower because their father did not want them dating or marrying without him there. Each sister was given a glass distaff that would break if they dishonored their father. Can you find the three distaffs? *Audience finds three.* As you can see, the only sister with her distaff unbroken is Finette, which means Delicate, studious at the window. Her sisters are said to have been hanging out with the prince too much. If the only girl who has not been dating is the studious one, what does this say about the view of female beauty at the time? *Audience: outward beauty was important, women weren't expected to be as intelligent. The girl who is delicate is the smart one.* What does this piece say about rulers or royalty at the time? *People were expected to give in to their rulers, submitting to the king was very important.*

TRANSITION: Now let's go see a girl who probably won't be dating the prince.



OBJECT 2:

The Little Dancer, 14 Years Old
Edgar Degas, French
Cast bronze

Here is Edgar Degas' Little Dancer. Degas is well known for his paintings and sculptures of dancers. As you can see, we have others here at the museum. Degas actually originally intended to be a lawyer, and briefly registered at law school. However, he found his passion in art. One of his goals as an artist was to be a classical painter of the modern life in France. He once said, "My art has nothing spontaneous about it, it is all reflection."

His work, therefore, provides us with an accurate view of life while he was alive. This sculpture was originally done in wax, and is the only sculpture Degas decided to exhibit. Casts of this piece were done in 1919, after his death.

How might this girl be viewed in today's society? *Audience: she would be pretty, she would be ugly, etc.* The girl was picked to be Degas' model, so in France at the time, she must have been considered fairly pretty. What about her dress here? It is certainly different from what we would expect to see on a dancer today – the skirt is longer, and there are buttons down the front. Her hair is pulled back using a ribbon. As you can see, fads have changed since the 1800s in France.

How many of you wear your parents' clothes? *Not expecting many hands to go up.* I don't wear my parents' clothes either. Why? Most of their clothes are old and out of style. I would get

looked at weird in the halls at school. If we know that styles are bound to change, why do we spend so much time worrying about them? *Audience: we want to be accepted and cool now, we aren't worried about the future, etc.* If that is the case, is having an interest in fashion and fads being vain? Why or why not? *Audience: Yes, it is because you are focusing on yourself today. No, it isn't because you are looking at what other people are doing and studying that.*

TRANSITION: Now we'll see a pair of girls who probably wouldn't get along very well with each other.



OBJECT 3:

Pair of Gates, 1929
Edgar Brandt, French
Wrought-iron

Edgar Brandt was a French ironsmith living in Paris. He set up his own studio in 1919, the same year that castes were made of the sculpture we just saw. Not only did Brandt create gates, but also lamps, radiator grills, and other decorative things. Why do you think that artists make “pretty” things instead of just the thing? Why did Brandt include the faces and swirls instead of just making a plain pair of gates? *Audience: makes things more interesting, something to admire, be proud of* If this outer beauty does not serve a functional purpose, can it be considered vain to do this? Why or why not? *Audience: Yes, it is focusing solely on outer beauty and “showing off”, No, it isn't supposed to be the most beautiful thing, simply interesting.*

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this piece is the light, airy feel that the swirls and faces give, even though they are made of heavy iron. What message might the artist be giving? *Audience: under a pretty surface, there can be problems.* It is not certain what these two girls' faces represent. One girl is surrounded by flowers and leaves, and has beautiful flowing hair. She looks straight back at the viewer. The other girl is looking down, with her hands pulling a hood over her head. What might these two represent or mean? *Audience: day and night, summer and winter, good and evil, beauty and vanity* Whatever these girls represent, they have fulfilled their purpose by looking pretty.

CONCLUSION: This evening you have seen how ideas of beauty have changed over time. The artists have portrayed what they believed was beautiful, and we can see how over time, these interpretations have changed. Fads change, styles change, culture changes, and teenagers are greatly impacted by this. Vanity so often accompanies beauty in art.

Looking back on past interpretations of beauty, we think of our interpretation as better and more beautiful. Celebrities often are considered the most beautiful, the coolest, the most fashionable. If

someone in 100 years is going through People magazine, what are they going to think? What will people think of our society in 100 years looking back on our fads portrayed by celebrities?
Audience: we are very concerned about outward appearance, strength of character isn't as important, our celebrities get into trouble

Thank you for joining me this evening. If you can, please listen to some other M.LiT tours before you leave.

REFERENCES:

Brandt, Edgar. VMFA Artist File. VMFA, Richmond.

“Degas, (Hilaire Germain) Edgar” Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, 21 Nov 2010,
www.groveart.com

“Laurent, Jean-Antoine” Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, 21 Nov 2010,
www.groveart.com

The Three Sisters: Finette, Babillarde and Nonchalante. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. VMFA,
Richmond