



The Star-Ledger

Ten exhibits worth seeing

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One of the best things about this year's 10-best list of art shows is that four of them are still up to be seen. Two other shows, the Met's exhibit of Vincent Van Gogh's drawings and the Frick's "Hans Memling's Portraits," close Saturday.

It is simply in the nature of the past year that three of the shows listed (in no particular order) are of drawings, which enjoyed a buoyant fashionableness all year long, and two (Sandy Skoglund's show for the debut of the newly expanded Visual Arts Center of New Jersey in Summit and "Thomas Demand" at MoMA) featured large-format photography, the Cinderella genre of the moment. But in general, exhibitions -- even historical ones -- have benefited from an increasingly knowledgeable and discursive curatorial trend that emphasizes content and meaning.

This year's top 10:

New York:

- "Vincent Van Gogh: The Drawings" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through Saturday, features huge drawings, most of them from the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. It will be on most best-of-2005 lists because it is so comprehensive. It was also one of the most beautiful exhibitions of any year, filled with large, elaborate, and intensely felt drawings. The scale in which Van Gogh worked will be a surprise to many people, though the crabbed and darting sublimity will not. With more than 150 paintings and (mostly) drawings by the Austrian artist who died in the Spanish flu epidemic after World War I at the age of 28, "Egon Schiele: The Ronald S. Lauder and Serge Sabarsky Collections" (through Feb. 20) at the Neue Galerie is something every art lover should see. Scandalous in his day for his explicitly sexual themes, Schiele was in fact a draftsman of extraordinary power, and this show brings all his talents to the fore. He could make a beautiful drawing out of anything -- studio materials on a table, shelves of wine in the officers' store during the war, even tourist postcard views of German towns. This is the exhibition that cosmetics heir Ron Lauder founded the Neue Galerie to mount.
- "Hans Memling's Portraits" (closes Saturday) at the Frick Collection brings to New York 30-odd portraits, almost all on slabs of fruitwood little bigger than a spiral notebook, that helped launch the Western tradition of the psychologically meaningful portrait. Scholars now believe Memling invented the device of silhouetting a portrait against a tiny, glowing landscape (an idea Leonardo was to pinch for the Mona Lisa), and his meticulous, optical realism launched a long tradition in Northern European painting. Memling himself, like all true realists, nearly disappears from these works. His personality hovers in the background, revealing itself only as that of an obsessive craftsman and humble devotee of a strict religion.
- In "Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon" (through Jan. 23) at the Museum of Modern Art we can see nearly 200 works, most in black and white (but mostly in deep, deep, black) that make up the sleeper show of the year. Redon was an odd fish in his day, a founder of late 19th century Symbolism and a devotee of recondite literature. But his proto-Surrealist art, with its emphasis on the bizarre, disturbing, and crypto-biological, would fit in with the artists in today's cutting-edge shows. The MoMA's handsome gallery design sets off these often smallish prints and pastels to excellent effect.

- Thomas Demand is a German sculptor/photographer whose method is to take a common commercial photograph -- often a news photo, sometimes a famous historical photo -- and reproduce its physical setting entirely out of colored construction paper at life size. Then, with a large-format commercial camera, he snaps the construction and takes the whole thing down. "Thomas Demand" was one of the most interesting shows at the MoMA this year. The photos are often utterly convincing, reproducing the farmhouse kitchen where Saddam Hussein was captured, or the Dade County room where the 2000 presidential election ballots were counted, with remarkable lifelike-ness. Only by carefully examining every surface do you begin to see the paper, raising issues of the nature of reality and of mass communication. It was a great show, and you can still see a Demand in the bar of the MoMA restaurant, which has a photo of a jungle made out of construction paper on permanent display.

New Jersey:

- Sandy Skoglund is a photographer whose work in the 1980s helped launch the staged photo or narrative photo genre that has become so prevalent in modern photography, and this year the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey used a retrospective of Skoglund's work, "Beyond Real: The Art of Sandy Skoglund," to debut its multi-million-dollar expansion. The show featured two of the Rutgers-Newark professor's elaborate installations -- one involving mosaicized mannequins and hundreds of lampworked glass dragonflies, the other popcorn-encrusted mannequins and a wall of raining popcorn, as well as a score of her photos of previous constructions. Witty and wonderful.

- "The Legacy of Homer: Four Centuries of Art from the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris" (through Jan. 15 at the Princeton Art Museum and Jan. 22 at the Dahesh Museum in New York) is a truly unusual double exhibition. Drawn from the collection of competition paintings for the annual Prix de Rome held by the Ecole since its formation in the 17th century, it was the first time these paintings had traveled since the 1968 student riots in Paris ended the Academic tradition of illustrating Homer to advance an artistic career. Winners of the Prix were sent to Rome for five years of training, setting them up for prestigious commissions and posts within the French arts bureaucracy. Works by Flandrin, Ingres, David, and many others are included in the show, all displayed in full context, giving a vivid sense of a complex artistic legacy and the living culture that produced it. And, like a bonus, some of the paintings are cracking good and others downright comical. A fun show.

- This year the Newark Arts Council mounted its second downtown studio tour and a series of challenging exhibitions by mostly Newark-born or -based artists that put the city's studio scene into direct context with what is going on in the arts all over New York City and the region. "Facing Newark," curated by artist Rupert Ravens and featuring work by a group of top-drawer Brooklyn artists and Newark's own downtown crowd, was a ragged call to arms, and a delight in its abandoned 17th-floor corporate office space overlooking downtown. The best show on the studio crawl portion of the "Facing Newark" project was probably City Without Walls' exhibition of contemporary art that used guns as a theme or a subject. Slammin'!

- Last summer the Newark Museum mounted a five-part exhibition series devoted to wedding traditions, "Here Come the Brides: Fairy Tales, Folklore, and Wedding Traditions," melding departments and cultures to describe the traditions of ethnic groups who have taken up residence in New Jersey. The largest exhibit was "The Bride Wore Red: Chinese Wedding Traditions," which saw the museum's expert staging staff transform the main gallery into the courtyard of a Chinese merchant, where the merchant's daughter's carved wooden sedan chair waited. (Chinese fathers are supposed to whack the girl's head into the roof of this litter on her wedding day if she isn't crying when she leaves the house--for good luck, of course.) Next door the brewer's mansion was decorated for "Alice Ballantine's Victorian Wedding"; upstairs a traditional Oriental wedding bed was set up for "A Bride in Old Japan," elaborately woven veils and draperies were put out for "A Wedding in Rural Morocco," and "Queen for a Day: Korean Bridal Traditions." Too sweet.

- "Breaking the Mold: Sculpture in Paris from Daumier to Rodin" (through March 12) is the last exhibition to be overseen by Dennis Cate, the longtime curator of Rutgers' Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Museum. Cate went out with a bang, bringing out some 250 objects that illuminate not only the traditions of fine art in 19th century Paris but all the associated marketing and popular ephemera that characterized the French art industry. You have everything from Rodin's "Three Shades" to glass-paste portraits and engraved invitations for Christmas Eve in Montmartre here -- and nearly everything has been drawn from the Zimmerli's permanent collection. A real surprise, and worth a visit.

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