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Wilkin, Karen. "The Best Art of 2021: Reunions, Retrospectives and Radicals." *The Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2021.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



Titian's 'The Rape of Europa' (1560-02) ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

Standout shows from this year included a meeting of long-separated Titian works, a two-venue celebration of American icon Jasper Johns, and a look at Dawoud Bey's brilliant portraiture.

Among the most impressive in a season of impressive shows is "*Titian: Women, Myth & Power*" at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, on view through Jan. 2, 2022.

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It reunites the six scenes of the loves, whims and vengeance of the gods—derived from Ovid’s “*Metamorphoses*,” enacted by voluptuous nudes—that Titian painted for Philip II of Spain between 1551 and 1562. Most exciting is the last of the series, the Gardner’s glorious, newly cleaned “*Rape of Europa*” (1559-62), the terrified heroine precariously sprawled on the back of Zeus, who is disguised as a white bull. Its radiant color, bravura gestures and delicate depiction are hallmarks of Titian’s vigorous late style. It has been 400 years since the now widely dispersed masterworks were last together. We won’t soon see them that way again.

Equally impressive was “*The Medici: Portraits and Politics, 1512-1570*” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which surveyed the years when the Medici were dukes of Florence. The focus, according to the wall text, was on how Medici rulers used portraiture “to project power, assert the continuity of the dynasty, and convey cultural refinement.” A dazzling assembly of paintings by Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino, Bronzino, Raphael and Titian, plus significant sculptures by Cellini, and more, brought the era to vivid life.



Bronzino's 'Laura Battiferri' (c. 1560) PHOTO: Museo di Palazzo Vecchio

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As we entered, Cellini's monumental bronze bust of Cosimo I as a Roman emperor stared us down. A brief prologue reprised the sober values of the Florentine Republic, followed by a wealth of icy, meticulously detailed portraits of Cosimo's family, and political, military, literary and artistic figures and other notables, shown rigidly erect, necks and fingers impossibly elongated. Signs of status, rendered with fanatical care in glorious color, dominated. Cosimo, in armor, and his wife, Eleonora di Toledo, and their children, sumptuously dressed, embodied power and importance. Most weird? Bronzino's image of Giovanni de' Medici as St. John the Baptist, nude except for a strategic blue drape, artfully fitted into the rectangle of the canvas. Most memorable? Bronzino's profile portrait of the poet Laura Battiferri, presented as a female Dante, with a book and an unimaginably delicate, transparent veil.

"Cézanne Drawing," at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, allowed us to watch as the artist slowly educated his hand and his eye, internalizing works from the past, experimenting with new impulses, and transforming the concept of the work of art as a report on actuality into a powerful evocation of individual perception and response. Cézanne drew constantly, recording works in the Louvre, his family, landscape, his own face, and household furnishings. We discovered how he tested ideas for compositions and probed the components of future canvases, how he used drawing as a visible equivalent of emotion—"sensation," he called it—and always as an impassioned search. We became attuned to Cézanne's single-mindedness and his evolving obsessions, from turbocharged youthful narratives to late flickering watercolor landscapes and still lifes notable for their contradictory sense of fragility and weight. It was exhilarating.

"Soutine / De Kooning: Conversations in Paint," at the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, was inevitably, not a dialogue. While De Kooning expressed his admiration for Soutine's work, Soutine was unaware of the Dutch-born painter's efforts, unaware even of his existence. Yet a strong selection of works emphasized the artists' commonalities, especially their passion for the physicality of oil paint. "Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented," De Kooning is supposed to have said. For Soutine, that flesh was often that of a butchered animal, treated as sensually as the voluptuous bodies of De Kooning's grinning Women. The show documented and sometimes illustrated De Kooning's encounters with Soutine's canvases, revealing how they resonated with him, so that we found new affinities between De Kooning's light-struck "landscapes" and Soutine's blood-drenched beef and near-iridescent decaying poultry. In the end, we savored both painters' work as vigorous disquisitions on the history of their own making and as embodiments of their authors' desire for what Clement Greenberg called, in Soutine, "unimpeded expression of feeling."

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Dawoud Bey's 'Three Women at a Parade, Harlem NY' (1978)

The elegant, mostly black-and-white photographs in “*Dawoud Bey : An American Project*,” at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, could be described as contemporary versions of the Medici portraits. Mr. Bey’s stated intent is to “amplify” parts of American society not usually celebrated—the Black community, teenagers—whom he treats with the respect accorded the Florentine dukes by their court painters. Mr. Bey’s early images of Harlem, made in the mid-1970s, sometimes capture the unexpected, but in most (as in the work of August Sander and Diane Arbus, whom he clearly admires) his subjects are aware of being seen and gaze steadily at the viewer. Mr. Bey’s sitters are solemn, still, immensely dignified, and revealed as beautiful. The retrospective, spanning more than four decades, included the compelling paired images of young and old, from Mr. Bey’s “*Birmingham Project*,” as well as more recent, moody views of Underground Railroad sites, imagined, Mr. Bey says, as seen by a fugitive slave. Color images documenting the gentrification of Harlem were a recent iteration of his long connection with the community. But the most unignorable, poetic works were Mr. Bey’s portraits. They insist that attention must be paid.

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Jasper Johns's 'Three Flags' (1958)

The concurrent “*Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror*” exhibitions at the Whitney Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art may be the year’s most ambitious projects, each a complete retrospective with a different emphasis. We learn a lot about the constants and variables in Mr. Johns’s development and his explorations of different conceptions and materials. We are led from the early *Flag*, *Target*, *Number* and *Letter* paintings, with their banal images and lush surfaces, to the weirdly allusive but fairly impenetrable recent works. Until Feb. 13, the shows are essential viewing for Johns fans.

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For pleasure and illumination little rivaled “*Frick Madison*,” the temporary installation of outstanding works from the Frick Collection, New York, in the Marcel Breuer building constructed for the Whitney. Celebrated masterworks are in new relationships, grouped by geography and chronology, or isolated, in beautiful light, for contemplation. We see everything afresh, unimpeded by furniture. Renaissance bronzes and porcelain are presented for their own merits. Works we’ve known all our lives are newly revealed. And we have about two more years to enjoy this transformation.