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ARTnews

INVASION OF PRIVACY

John McEnroe

FROM CENTER COURT TO SOHO

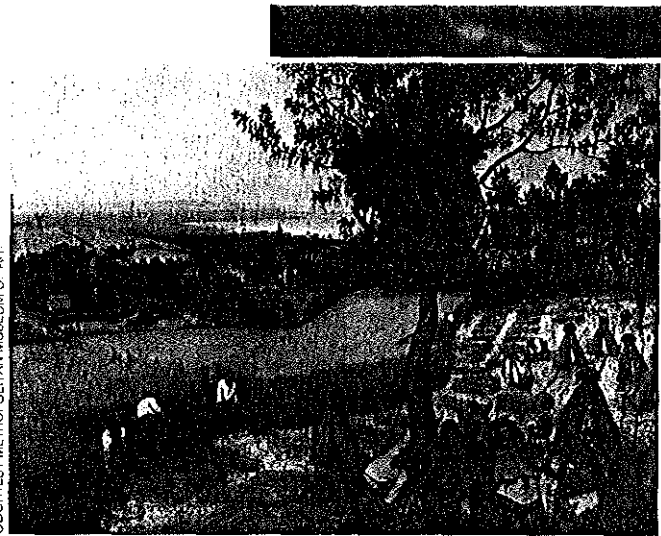


SQUABBLING OVER ABSTRACTION
VIÑOLY'S GLASS EXTRAVAGANZA

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Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Harvesters*, 1565, at the Metropolitan Museum, was recently covered with glass.



FRANK OJESMAN

Through the Glass, Bleakly

“I FELT AS IF I HAD SEEN A LOT OF OLD FRIENDS LOCKED UP AND SENTENCED TO LIFE IMPRISONMENT”

Last September, when I was trying to come to grips with city life after the wonders of a rural summer, I sought solace, as so many do, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Entering the building just after it opened, I hastened off to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Harvesters* (1565). The painting has moved me for at least 30 years—since my college days, when I first began to lose myself in its space, absorb its rhythms, and marvel at the perfect repose of the dozing figures. The way the sheaves of wheat resemble bread crust in their color and texture, thus effectively linking the raw material and the chewy country loaf that is its end product, has always given me sustenance.

On this particular day, however, I sensed something was horribly wrong. Seen from about ten feet away, the painting appeared flatter—both spatially and psychologically—than I had remembered; somehow anesthetized. Then I realized why. In the few months since I had last breathed in *The Harvesters'* fresh Flemish air and walked through its fields, glass had been placed over the painting. Not run-of-the-mill window glass, but expensive, invisible, nonreflecting glass, the type you are not supposed to know is there. Yet the painting appeared lost behind it: stultified, aged, even deadened.

The nearer I got, the worse the problem became. Part of the pleasure in seeing the Bruegel at the Met rather than in art books is the opportunity to study its brushwork and the rendering of details from as close as two feet. But now, when I stood at the distance I had so often enjoyed in the past, I saw not

16th-century Netherlands but the Metropolitan Museum in 1995. A track-lighting canister shone back at me from the pear tree. The glass ceiling of the gallery turned up in the Flemish sky. A museum guard in his gray uniform was in there overpowering the distant hay wagon drawn by a pair of oxen.

Hoping that this was an aberration, I moved on to another favorite, Jan van Eyck's *Last Judgment* (1425–30). It is so vivid, so plausible and terrifying, that I have frequently seen its bizarre creatures from hell in my dreams. And because the van Eyck is so small, and always displayed at eye level, the experience of viewing it has been truly intimate.

Now, however, the diptych offered another sort of nightmare. It was in a Plexiglas cube. I knew the painting was there—but it was impossible to experience it as before. The mirror effect of the case was so strong that, rather than gaze into the painting, my first inclination was to straighten my tie.

I looked for relief, only to discover an epidemic. One Netherlandish painting after another had been glazed. Petrus Christus's marvelous *Lamentation* (mid-15th century), Hans Memling's *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* (ca. 1479), Hugo van der Goes's *Portrait of a Man* (pre-1475) were all immobilized.

Moving into the Italian Renaissance galleries, I headed instinctively—as I have each September for three decades—to Giotto's *Epiphany* (ca. 1320). The travesty had been perpetuated here as well. I tried to study Giotto's superb Virgin, but there was the gold clasp of a passerby's Gucci handbag. Fortunately Ghirlandaio, Fra Filippo Lippi, Simone Martini, and

LOOKING AT ART

many others had been spared. But Carpaccio's *The Meditation on the Passion* (1508-15) was trapped behind glass.

I headed to the Dutch galleries. Three of the five Vermeers had been glazed. Mercifully, however, almost all later work in the museum had been left alone. The Poussin was as vibrant as ever. Titian's Venus still pursued Adonis without me in the picture. Chardin and Watteau had no glass. While on the one hand this visit to the museum had made me feel as if I had seen a lot of old friends locked up and sentenced to life imprisonment, elsewhere I realized that it is still possible to savor the values of painting at the Met. The combination of satisfaction and frustration left me discombobulated.

"One of the reasons for glass is the fear of an act of violence," explained Hubertus von Sonnenburg, chairman of paintings conservation at the Met, when I complained. "It needs just one madman," says von Sonnenburg, and the painting can be destroyed forever.

Ever since the 1970s, when a deranged visitor to St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome attacked Michelangelo's marble Pietà, some sort of protection has been a fact of life for many works of art. Without it, the damage in the 1993 Uffizi bombing would have been far more extensive. "Our foremost task is to make the art last as long as possible," says von Sonnenburg.

The police have often advised the Met to put glass on certain pictures. This happened with Velázquez's *Juan de Pareja* (ca. 1610-70). Its record purchase price in 1971 caused the public to flock to see it, necessitating a protective covering of glass. The attention gradually subsided, and since then the museum has been able to display it without protection.

Fear of vandalism is not the only reason for glazing; pollution also weighs in. "When you clean a work, you can enjoy seeing that the dirt you get is on the glass and not on the painting," says von Sonnenburg. He adds that the museum usually glazes newly restored pictures.

Another major concern is over accidents—in particular, scratches on small panel paintings. Von Sonnenburg says he insisted on having "one of our best Holbeins" glazed two years ago. "Its surface is so delicate that even the slightest scratch would be regrettable." With small paintings in particular, "people tend to get very close." Hence the Plexiglas box

around the van Eyck.

Budget constraints can be a factor, too. "Those early Netherlandish galleries are not well attended by guards, so that visitors are often left on their own," says von Sonnenburg. "This shortage of guards is a very important fact."

Insurance companies require glass with many traveling Old Master exhibitions. The organizers of the Vermeer retrospective, the conservator notes, insisted on glazing everything they borrowed—and offered to foot the bill.

Appreciating my concern over the effects of the glass, von Sonnenburg



Van Eyck's masterful *Last Judgment*, 1425-30, enclosed in a new Plexiglas box.

assured me that his goal in displaying art was "to avoid any unnecessary interference."

Francis Bacon is a rare example of an artist who actually wanted glass on his paintings. Most artists feel that it destroys a lot of what they try to achieve. In 1980, as it was being uncrated at the Venice Biennale, Balthus discovered that the Met had put glass on his *Nude in Front of a Mantel* (1955). He shook his silver-handled cane at the work and inveighed against the transparent covering that prevented his textures and color and light effects from being seen as he intended.

One of the reasons the recent Mondrian retrospective was so moving was that so many of the paintings could be seen without glazing—in some instances, for the first time in decades. Art historian and curator Angelica Rudenstine, who organized the exhibition, avoided glass whenever possible. She told me, "There is a sense of suffocation when these works are suddenly encased in a box."

She wants the art to breathe as it did during the artist's lifetime. "In putting this exhibition together, one of the important aims was to give people the best possible opportunity to confront Mondrian's extraordinarily sensitive surfaces. The brushstrokes are fundamental to one's grasp of his intuitive sensibility."

And last October, Madrid's Reina Sofía museum announced it would no longer display Picasso's *Guernica* behind the reinforced glass that had protected it since it came to Spain in 1981. Museum officials say fears of a politically motivated attack have subsided.

But while Mondrian's works and *Guernica* are coming back to life, other paintings around the world are less lucky. So we travel thousands of miles to feel the miraculous connection with the actual object only to find ourselves locked out. In London's National Gallery last fall, soon after my visit to the Met, I discovered that van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* (1434) is now encased. Mentally, I used to stand in the room with his newlyweds and assume the same position that van Eyck took. In the old days I would unconsciously imagine myself as the painter—a process augmented by van Eyck's presence in the mirror. I could smell the oil paints with which he documented his subjects' betrothal. Now, with glass there, I felt as if I were observing it all through a peephole. I was harshly reminded that I was in the 20th century observing events in the 16th. I went from being participant to being that observer, from feeling art as if from within to being an outsider.

Most tragic of all, Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* (1651) is under glass, its sensuousness sanitized. I knew that the painting and I were only a few feet apart, that I was standing the same distance from it as on so many previous occasions, but whereas once I was so keenly aware of the painter's brush and his subject's skin, now I experienced a hard, unyielding, brittle uniformity. Venus's flesh taken from the realm of the living to the pages of a glossy magazine! The glass was safely in place, but the sense of immediacy, that glorious oneness with art and with the life it represents was shattered.

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