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Treasure hunt: How NOMA curator tracked down Philippe II's scattered masterpieces

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com OCT 30, 2018 - 10:30 AM



New Orleans Museum of Art curator Vanessa Schmid talks about 'The Mill,' by Rembrandt van Rijn, featured in an exhibition of paintings collected by the man New Orleans was named after, Philippe II, duke of Orleans. The works will be up through Jan. 27 as part of the city's tricentennial celebrations.

AP PHOTO / Janet McConnaughey

The lush paintings of gods and goddesses, kings and queens, priests and pretenders look right at home on the walls of the New Orleans Museum of Art.

Yet it took planning and perseverance to gather these 38 masterpieces from 25 institutions around the world and assemble them at the New Orleans Museum of Art as "The Orléans Collection."

An exhibition to celebrate New Orleans' tricentennial was already on the books three years ago when Vanessa Schmid joined NOMA as its senior research curator for European art. With Schmid's extensive European art background, including years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the focus for the exhibition fell on the collection of the city's namesake, Philippe II, Duke of Orléans (1689-1723).

It was "NOMA's most ambitious undertaking to date," said Susan Taylor, NOMA's Montine McDaniel Freeman Director. "'The Orléans Collection' celebrates not only a collector and a collection, but also a city."

Alas, the 772 paintings amassed by the regent to France's King Louis XV were sold off by his descendants in the 1790s. Auction records left

behind gave clues to their whereabouts. But after that, tracking down the paintings would be a challenge.

“It is a complex process of knowing the basics — the paintings he had, then looking at articles and catalogues,” said Schmid. “It is a lot of sleuthing, really looking at a range of sources.”

Not all the paintings that were found could be used in the exhibition — some institutions, do not lend their art, and others didn't fit the themes that emerged.

The exhibition is divided by four guiding themes. First are works that were kept at the Duke's residence, the Palais Royal. Next are works that the Duke showed publicly. A third group highlights the Duke's personal taste as a collector.

A final part of the exhibition displays artifacts related to the auction of the collection in London in the 1790s.

“It wasn't about just getting what we could or where the pieces were from; it was a balance with what the show was trying to represent,”

said Schmid, who likens the process of finding, securing and shipping the items to a chess game.

Schmid traveled extensively for research and to arrange loans throughout the U.S. and Europe. "Building a checklist is part of the strategy that includes securing loans (of art) in an early phase," said Schmid. Positive responses early on came from the National Gallery, London, and the National Galleries of Scotland.

The show is made up of works from the 16th through the 18th centuries. It secured the rarely lent out "Vanessa and Amor," by Alessandro Allori (1535-1607), from the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, France, as well as paintings from the Louvre, another institution that is strict with what it lends to other museums. Another highlight is Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606-1669) "The Mill" from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

"The rarity of the works, the range of what people will see and the ensemble tells a unique story that has not been explored in another

exhibition," said Schmid about this show that can only be seen in New Orleans – it is not traveling anywhere else.

(The exhibition runs to Jan. 27, 2019.)

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