Article 3 -- No Title
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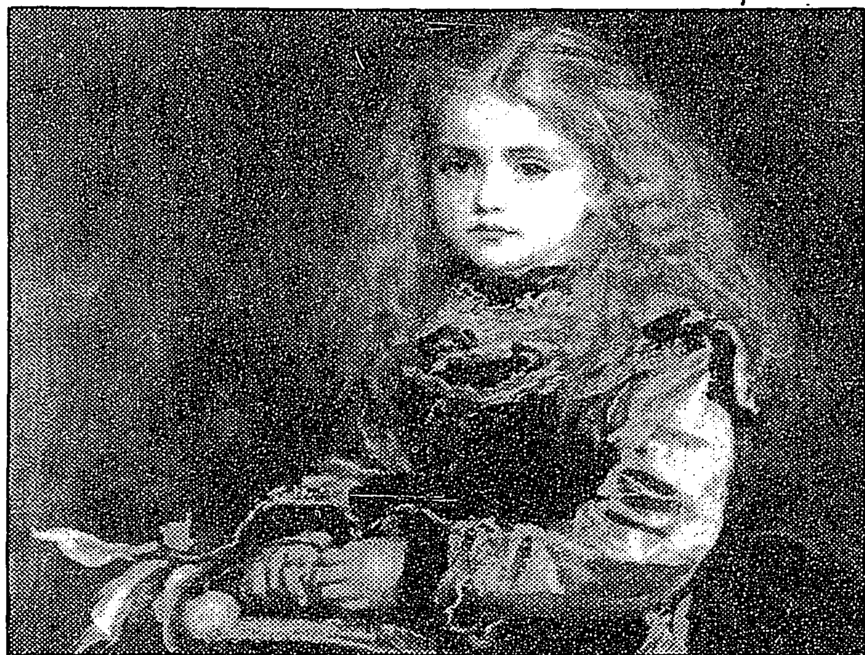
New York Times (1857-Current file); May 6, 1983;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
pg. C23

Art: A 2-Century Show From Royal Academy



"A Souvenir of Velázquez" by Sir John Everett Millais, one of of paintings from the Royal Academy now at the National Academy of Design.

By JOHN RUSSELL

THIRTY and some years ago, under the presidency of Sir Alfred Munnings, the Royal Academy of Arts in London had sunk to a very low ebb. Notorious, above all, for having said in a broadcast speech at the academy's annual dinner that he would like nothing better than to give Picasso a running kick from behind, Munnings was a coarse brute who managed in no time at all to alienate every shade of educated opinion.

(In fairness, by the way, to those who admire Munnings's paintings of horses, I should add that a large loan show of them can be seen through June 3 at Wildenstein & Company, 19 East 64th Street.)

Munnings almost sank the Royal Academy, but in recent years it has acquired in Sir Hugh Casson a president who is the best imaginable ambassador, not only for the academy but for his country as a whole as well. It has a schedule of temporary exhibitions that ranges in date from antiquity to "The New Spirit in Painting." Its current membership includes many who would not formerly have dreamed of crossing its threshold. All together, it is a happier and a more productive place than it has been for a very long time.

But like many another ancient and productive institution, the Royal Academy needs money to keep going. That is one reason why we can see, through June 15 at the National Academy of Design, Fifth Avenue and 89th Street, a traveling exhibition called "Paintings From the Royal Academy: Two Centuries of British Art." Drawn primarily from the first 100 years of the academy (which was founded in 1768), it includes paintings and drawings by almost all the major names of the time.

Some of them would stand out anywhere. There is, for instance, a large and glorious painting called "The Leaping Horse" by Constable, which was first shown at the academy in 1825. There are three of the anatomical drawings of horses by George Stubbs that prompted a well-known Dutch anatomist to say that he was "amazed to meet in the same person so great an anatomist, so accurate a painter and so excellent an engraver."

From the high Victorian era, one could single out the portrait of a little girl in the style of Velázquez by Sir John Everett Millais. Those who know Millais for the precisely enameled look of his portrait of Ruskin in the Tate Gallery will be surprised by the vigor and dash with which he tackles the sitter's sleeves. It isn't Velázquez, but it has the headlong energy that came with Britain's position as boss of the world.

Also from a later age, there is "An Interior in Venice" by John Singer Sargent. If there is a finer evocation of the Venice that Henry James and Marcel Proust knew and loved, this visitor has yet to see it. The scene is set in the Palazzo Barbaro — then as now a holy place among English-American enthusiasts for Venice. (How should we not be impressed by a house in which the books in the library were hand picked by Henry James and the upstairs kitchen once served as a studio for Sargent?)

Much of the noble room is in shadow, but we see what we need to see. Life goes on as if the painter were not there, and there is just enough light from the Grand Canal for us to see exactly how far the younger couple have gone in flirtation and with what practiced good humor their seniors are managing to fill out the day.

The show is also very good on the way in which one artist looks at another. We know J. M. W. Turner better for having seen George Dance's drawing of him. Constable, as painted by his biographer C. R. Leslie, turns out to be a pink-cheeked and bright-eyed country gentleman who might well be everyone's favorite lawyer. And when Landseer painted John Gibson, the sculptor who studied with Canova and Thorwaldsen, he gave him a loom of noble introspection from which every vestige of Bohemianism was excluded.

This aspect of the professional life is apotheosized in a famous group portrait of the academicians of the day, which was painted in 1795 by Henry Singleton. Not only is this one of the most impressive things of its kind ever to have been turned out, but it also reminds us that the Royal Academy in the late 18th century was neither chauvinist nor sexist, in that it had an American president (Benjamin West) and two distinguished women members (Angelica Kauffman and Mary Lloyd). Singleton also managed to touch in both the self-portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the academy's first president, and Reynolds's state portrait of King George III, without whom the Royal Academy would never have got going at all. So Singleton gave good value for money, and so does this show.

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Also of interest this week:

Giuseppe Santomaso (Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street): Giuseppe Santomaso, a Venetian painter now in his 75th year, is a man of great natural benignity, whose work has been shown all over Europe since the end of World War II. Never one to side with one faction against another, he has a fund of well-nourished conversation that turns upon everything except himself, his career and his rivals. Nor is there in existence a better guide to his native city.

These are endearing traits, against which could sometimes be set a certain blandness in the work. But the good news is that in this show, Santomaso has found not only a new and cogent motif but also a fine spareness of idiom. "A Letter to Palladio" is the generic title of these paintings, and they have in common a form that can be read as that most provocative of shapes, the back of a sealed envelope.

The form can also — as more than one Italian critic has already observed — be read as an allusion to the triangular form of a Palladian pediment as it is seen upside down when reflected in water. We must next add to that the particular tonality — the white of sea salt and Istrian stone — that recurs throughout Venice. The result evokes, but does not describe, the contribution of Palladio to Venice and its attendant countryside, together with the input of color and shape that has gone on continuously during the four centuries that have elapsed since Palladio died. It's a nice balance, and a firm hand holds the scales. (Through May 28.)

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John Bellany (Rosa Esman Gallery, 29 West 57th Street): Not many people outside of Scotland know it, but Scottish painting is quite unlike English painting. It is more reckless, more ferocious in color, more extreme in its subject matter. There is such a thing as Scottish color, a Scottish way with the brush and a Scottish aggressivity. Scottish painting is local in a dense, committed, pugnacious way, and Scottish painters don't like to be confused with English painters.

All this is relevant to the paintings of John Bellany, who was born in 1942 and is widely regarded as the leader of the new Scottish painting. Why this should be so is made quite clear at the Rosa Esman Gallery, where his large, boisterous and densely populated paintings make a powerful effect. The influence of Max Beckmann, almost omnipresent in Bellany's earlier paintings, is still there. But the element of emulation has been overlaid by the artist's own wild energy. These are paintings that deserve to be seen. (Through tomorrow.)

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Edmund D. Lewandowski (Sid Deutsch Gallery, 20 West 57th Street): The paintings in Edmund Lewandowski's new show range in date from 1950 to 1982. They can loosely be called Precisionist, in that they put the best possible face on the construction industry. Bethlehem Steel also comes out well, as do milling machines of undefined origin.

The original fascination of the machine, as it was conceived by Fernand Léger after World War II and by Charles Sheeler a little while later, is still intact in these paintings, where never an angle is smudged and the infill of color is everywhere neat and exact. Some paintings of Amish farms complete the show, as if to prove that exactitude predated the Industrial Revolution. (Through May 26.)

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Karl Mann (Arras Gallery, 29 West 57th Gallery): As an importer of art, a commissioner of art and a maker of art, Karl Mann leads a manifold life. His new show is made up of collages large and small, painted and unpainted, raw and cooked. They display a digital agility that is quite exceptional, together with a speed and an impartiality of judgment that keep him one jump ahead of our expectations.

Sometimes it is the big ones that impress by their breadth of ambition. Sometimes it is the little ones, for their subtlety of color and inherent mischief. Either way, these collages have a depth of personal commitment that makes us take them seriously, together with a free-running sass that suggests that they were great fun to make. (Through May 14.)

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