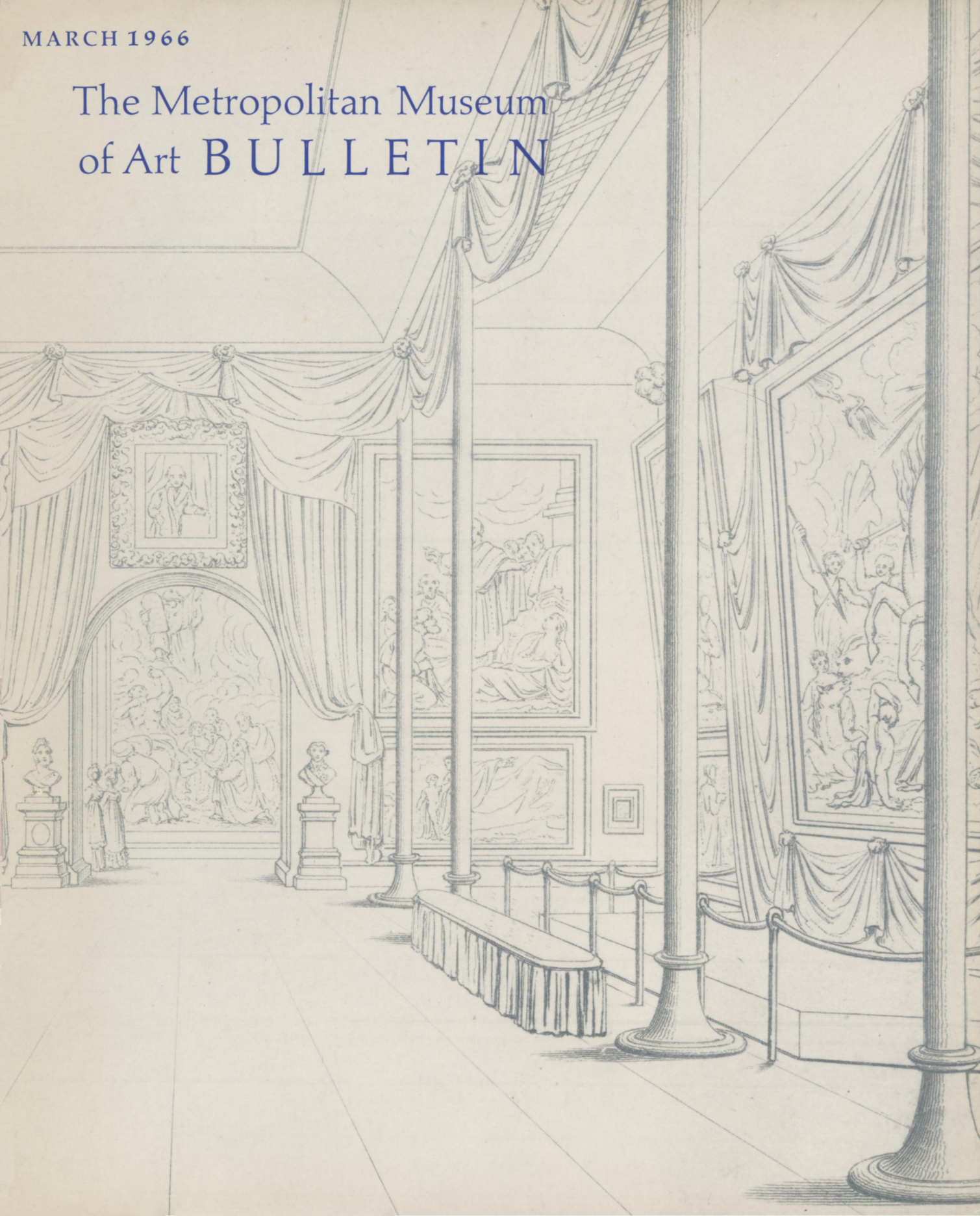


MARCH 1966

The Metropolitan Museum of Art BULLETIN





Commesso showing Prudence (front) and Diana of the Hunt (back). Figure of Prudence of white chalcedony with hair and drapery of tooled and enameled gold. The mirror is a square, table-cut diamond, and the snake is green enamel. Enameled gold background and border, set with emeralds, rubies, and a pendant pearl. Tooled gold back inlaid with transparent enamel. Height 3½ inches. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.907

ON THE COVER:

*A view of Benjamin West's gallery. Engraving from C. M. Westmacott, *British Galleries of Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1824). See the article on page 225*

Commessi

YVONNE HACKENBROCH

Associate Research Curator of Western European Arts

The versatility of Renaissance jewelers was prodigious, especially when one considers the limits imposed by the nature of their work. Assimilating the forms and themes of contemporary sculpture and painting, they endowed them with the peculiar charm of all things small and precious. Their aims are particularly well realized in a few jewels of rare technique, with carved, semiprecious stones forming an integral part of the design. Such jewels are known as *commessi*, an Italian term originally applied to mosaics of mixed marbles or other *pietre dure*, which may indeed have suggested alternatives in gold and other precious materials. But more immediate impetus was derived from the practice of restoring rare ancient gems by adding missing parts in gold, as seen on the fragment of a Roman sardonyx cameo (Figure 2), formerly in the French royal collection. The profile is intact, whereas the lost back of the head has been replaced by a long, trailing veil of enameled gold. The linear treatment of this addition shows the stylization characteristic of French court art of the sixteenth century, particularly during the brief reign of Henry II (1547-1559). There exist, in fact, a small number of *commessi*, now widely dispersed, that can be traced to Henry's court – some simply by their style, some by the use of the ornamental fleur-de-lis (a royal prerogative in France), and some by detailed entries in the inventory prepared after Henry's death, the *Inventaire des joyaux de la couronne de France et du cabinet du roi à Fontainebleau* of 1560.

The *commesso* is a rare art form that flourished only briefly and under particularly fortuitous circumstances, created through the close collaboration of French and Italian artists. The merging of French and Italian genius, which stimulated all the arts in France, was much encouraged by the Valois kings, especially after the sack of Rome in 1527, when the chance to attract Italian artists presented itself as never before. It was in this invigorating artistic climate that the *commesso* flourished, after a brief first appearance at the Burgundian court one century earlier. (A portrait medallion of Philip the Good in the Schatzkammer at Munich belongs to this group, but so few other examples survive that they may well represent the isolated effort of a single master.) Although probably invented by Italian artists, *commessi* were seldom produced in Italy – or anywhere else in Europe.

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2. *Sardonyx cameo (Roman, 1 century A.D.) restored with enameled gold. Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*



3. *Profile portrait. Italian, middle of the XVI century. White agate face, gold hair. The back of the head is a baroque pearl. Black onyx background. Museo degli Argenti, Florence*



Unless otherwise indicated, all the jewels illustrated are French commessi, executed during the reign of Henry II (1547-1559)

Among the Italian artists in France whose contributions were decisive in the development of this art form was Matteo da Nassaro of Verona. His versatility as goldsmith, gem cutter, medalist, painter, and musician attracted the attention of Francis I, who succeeded in luring him away from his first patron, Isabella d'Este at Mantua. He arrived in Paris in 1515, left when the King was taken prisoner at the battle of Pavia in 1525, and returned a year later, to be reimbursed by his royal patron for the entire period of his absence. Thereafter Matteo's name appears repeatedly in the King's private account books, the *Comptes des Menus Plaisirs*, where he is referred to as *graveur en pierres fines et en monnaies du roi François I*, until Henry II created him *graveur général* upon accession to the throne, in 1547, shortly before Matteo's death. According to Vasari, Matteo attracted many French and Italian pupils. Installing hydraulic wheels in ships on the Seine ("moulins hydrauliques installés sur la Seine"), he established there the first center for cutting and polishing precious stones in France ("pour pollir dyamans, aymeraudes, agattes et aultres espèces de pierres"). He also launched the great fashion for cameos at the French court, of which the *compresso* is the ultimate achievement. Matteo's individual style, however, can only be recognized in two intaglios bearing his initials, and in a few portrait medals of Francis I. These indicate that he was deeply committed to the classical models he revived, but his style may have changed in later life, to follow the general trend toward stylization characteristic of the school of Fontainebleau.

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4. Mars. Figure of pink and white chalcedony, in gold armor with shield of carved shell. Lapis lazuli background. Gold foliage border with red and green enameled flowers. A stone on Mars's throne has been lost, and the sword is a restoration. Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen

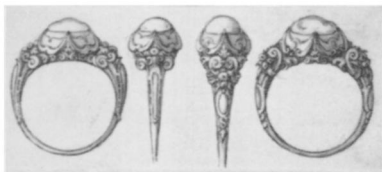
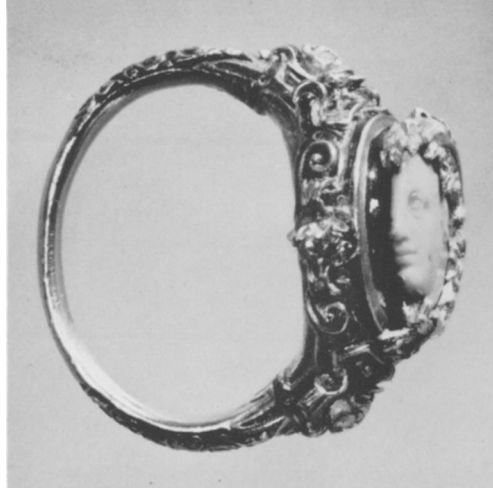
In Italy, the tradition of gem cutting had continued almost without interruption from antiquity. In France, by contrast, cameos and intaglios were considered rare items, collected by royalty and honored by complementary gold settings. Nonetheless, the few examples of commessi in the Italian style do not exhibit the same studied ease in translating one medium to another that accounts for the irresistible charm of the French adaptations: an Italian oval portrait medallion of the same period (Figure 3), for example, shows too close a dependence upon *pietra dura* work of larger scale, intended for broader effects. In two other Italian commessi, both of which show Mars carapaced in Roman armor, brandishing a sword and holding a shield set with a cameo of Venus and Cupid (Figures 4 and 5), a faint echo of Roman imagery is evoked, but the rendering is awkward and the movement of the figures halting and inarticulate. Both jewels appear to be experimental, executed in a new technique, with possibilities as yet not fully exploited.

A ring in an enameled setting (Figure 6) may indicate how classical form was accepted and modified in France. The ring itself follows an Italian type, established in France through engravings by Androuet Ducerceau and drawings by Etienne Delaune (Figure 7). It features a commesso of Alexander the Great as Hercules, following the portraits on Alexander's coins (Figure 10). But the color contrast

5. Mars. White chalcedony figure, with gold hair and enameled gold armor set with two baroque pearls. Lapis lazuli background. The sword, shield, banner, and border are restorations of the late XVIII century. Hermitage State Museum, Leningrad



6. Ring with a profile of Alexander. Turquoise face, with hair and lion mask of enameled gold. Black enamel background and enameled gold setting. Height 1 inch. Rogers Fund, 10.110.2



7. Drawing for rings, by Etienne Delaune, French (1518–about 1583). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



8. Alexander or young Hercules. Italian, about 1530. Double cameo (the reverse shows the mature Hercules) of brown and beige onyx in gold setting with diamonds and rubies. British Museum



9. Alexander. White onyx face, with hair, lion mask, and laurel wreath of gold. Translucent brown enamel background encircled with rubies. Gold border, enameled in green and white, and set with four square diamonds and four small rubies. The pendant pearl is a later addition. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

of vivid turquoise and gold produces an entirely new effect. Traditional form, suddenly aspiring toward color, is adapted to local taste and results in a change of emphasis from the heroic to the aristocratic. Comparison of this ring with an Italian sixteenth-century cameo (Figure 8), set in a jewel once owned by Charles V, demonstrates the difference between classical measure and French sophistication. On the French commesso Alexander has lost his convincing virility to harmonize with the ideals of beauty at Fontainebleau, which tended to celebrate grace before vigor.

There is one other commesso with a similar representation (Figure 9), which shows Alexander wearing not only the lion skin of Hercules, but also the laurel wreath of Greek kings and Roman emperors, with whom the French kings liked to compare themselves. The combination of these two distinct features, however, is both unclassical and un-Italian, an overstatement by one not entirely conversant with Greek mythology, confusing rather than establishing the identity of the hero. The gold openwork setting terminates in loops for the attachment to cap or hat, for it was in this fashion that most such jewels, known as *enseignes*, were worn. The pendant pearl below is a later addition.

The preoccupation of the Valois kings with rulers and heroes of antiquity was prompted by the desire to equal or excel them. Rosso Fiorentino painted Francis I in the guise of Julius Caesar, in the Gallery at Fontainebleau; Henry II's parade armor, designed by Etienne Delaune, displays classical battle scenes with



10. *Silver drachma of Alexander. Greek, IV century B.C. Diameter 1 inch. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 05.44.392*

contemporary overtones (discussed in Helmut Nickel's article in the November *Bulletin*); and Jean Goujon's festival decorations for the triumphal entry of Henry into Paris on June 16, 1549, included such allegorical portraits as a *Hercule gaulois* with features of Henry's father Francis I, symbolizing the alternative chosen by that humanist ruler, who had exchanged physical strength for eloquence, inspired by the poets he patronized.

Henry's own features can be recognized on a commesso showing a king in armor, crowned with laurels, and displaying a slain, bearded head (Figure 13). The chalcedony profile of the king follows Roman imperial portraiture on the cameos, intaglios, and coins that the French kings collected. A denarius of Septimius Severus (Figure 11) might have served as inspiration, with features altered to those of Henry himself, as conveyed by medals (Figure 12) or engravings. The incised strap-work on the reverse (Figure 14) resembles the stucco cartouches at Fontainebleau, the ornamentation of Henry's parade shields, and that of title pages in books printed in Paris during Henry's reign and their tooled leather bindings (Figure 15).

This strange representation of the king holding a slain head seems almost a premonition of the massacres that followed so soon upon the end of his reign. Religious strife was brewing everywhere in France, and this unrest may have contributed to the conception of the king as David, heroic defender of the true faith. But the deeper meaning of the symbol is disclosed in the final passage of a



11. *Gold denarius of Septimius Severus (A.D. 193-211). Diameter $\frac{13}{16}$ inch. Bequest of Joseph H. Durkee, 99.35.47*



12. *Bronze medal of Henry II, commemorating the capture of Calais, 1558, by Giovanni Antonio de' Rossi, Italian (Milan). Diameter $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 36.110.20*

13. *Henry II as David with the Head of Goliath. Henry's face and hands of white and gray banded chalcedony. The breastplate is a mottled blue chalcedony cabochon. Goliath's face of white enamel. Brown agate background. Gold setting with diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and rubies. National Museum, Copenhagen*



14. Reverse of the jewel in Figure 13. Gold with traces of black enamel



15. Book binding, probably by Claude de Picques. French (Paris), about 1560. Red morocco, tooled in gold. Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library



New Year's poem that Marguerite, Queen of Navarre, sent to her brother Francis I, "avec ung Davit pour ses Estrennes" ("with a David as a New Year's gift").

Ce Goliatz, géant espouvantable,
D'un tout seul coup, cella est véritable,
Je mis à mort, au temps de mon enfance,
Estant tout nud; . . .
Je dis géant tout homme qui veult
Estre du roy François ou ennemy ou
maistre.

Ces motz oys, j'euz claire congnoissance
Qu'avecques luy vous portoit la puissance,
Que par la foy vous donne le grand maistre,
Qui son second David vous a faict naitre.

(This Goliath, the terrible giant,
It is true, I killed with a single stroke,
At the time of my childhood,
Being completely nude; . . .
I call giant anybody who chooses
To be the enemy or master of King Francis.
When I heard these words I clearly understood
That with him you share the power,
Which through faith the great Lord grants
you,
Who caused you to be born as his second
David.)

Marguerite evokes the biblical hero who, above all, symbolizes youthful achievement. This comparison is particularly fitting for Henry II and his reign, and expresses a sentiment similar to that of his emblem, the crescent moon, and its motto, *Donec totum compleat* (or *impleat*) *orbem* ("Until [the moon] shall fill the whole sphere") – that is, great expectations will be fulfilled. (This emblem he shared with his mistress Diane de Poitiers, who inspired the cult of *Diane chasseresse*, Diana of the Hunt, at Fontainebleau; like much of the symbolism associated with Henry, it is ambiguous, although the spirit of chivalry is abundantly clear.) David, young and almost unknown, attained sudden fame through his victory over a menacing enemy. Henry II, Francis I's second son, not intended for the throne while his brother Francis was alive, rose to fame early in his reign, in 1549, when

he succeeded in recapturing Boulogne, which had been pawned to the English:

Sur Bollongie vendue un tel exploit il fit,
Qu'aussi tost qu'il l'eut veue, aussi tost il
la prit.

(He achieved such an exploit at Boulogne,
which had been sold,
That as soon as he saw it he conquered it.)

– Joachim Du Bellay, *Tumbeau de Henri II*

Whether the jewel with Henry's portrait is in fact a royal commission cannot be ascertained, although its superb quality would seem to indicate that it was. Certain other jewels, however, can be so assigned, through the appearance on them of the royal fleur-de-lis. One occurs on a commesso showing the pro-

16. *Profile portrait. Sardonyx face, amethyst bust. Gold hair, with black enamel, emeralds, and rubies. Tooled gold background. Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Windsor Castle*



17. *Detail of a woodcut from Hypnerotomachie ou discours du songe de Poliphile, by Francesco Colonna (Paris, 1546). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 26.77*



file of a young lady (Figure 16). Her simple, classical attire is in contrast to the complicated arrangement of her hair, with jeweled and enameled bands passing over and across braided tresses. This treatment illustrates contemporary French court fashion, familiar from portraits, engravings, book illustrations (Figure 17), and Limoges enamels of the middle of the sixteenth century. The background, roughened with small punches, is treated in a fashion similar to some of Henry II's armor, and also to some of the Paris book bindings of his period (Figure 15). The fleur-de-lis surmounts the simple twisted rope border, and recurs twice on the tooled and enameled reverse (Figure 18).

18. *Reverse of the jewel in Figure 16. Enameled gold*





19. *Leda and the Swan, with Cupid. White chalcedony figures set in gold, enameled in blue, white, and black. Border set with diamonds and rubies. Height 1 7/8 inches. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*



20. *Detail of a salt by Benvenuto Cellini, Italian (1500-1571). Completed at Fontainebleau, 1543. Enameled and jeweled gold. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*

No less than eight blue enameled fleurs-de-lis enhance the jeweled border of an exceptionally fine commesso showing Leda, the swan, and Cupid (Figure 19). It has an open-work setting so similar to the one displaying Alexander's profile (Figure 9) that both must have originated from one workshop. The Leda has even been attributed to Benvenuto Cellini, although not a single jewel can be definitely assigned to his hand. The architectural background, with marbled columns in blue and white enamel, is closely related to similar detail (Figure 20) on the famous gold salt that Cellini completed for Francis I at Fontainebleau in 1543. Primaticcio and the painters and engravers around him at Fontainebleau used similar backgrounds, which had become requisite for classical scenes, yet it would be hard to believe that the jeweler was not at least familiar with Cellini's celebrated work. But whereas the salt is impressive as the work of a sculptor accustomed to create on a larger scale, the Leda jewel displays the lightness of touch of an artist endowed with special feeling for small and intimate form. In the subtle interplay between the smooth chalcedony of Leda's body and the finely tooled, matted gold of her drapery, for instance, he has succeeded admirably in making sculptural and pictorial qualities complement one another. In so doing, he follows Rosso Fiorentino and Primaticcio, in whose decorations at Fontainebleau frescoes alternate with stucco figures and cartouches, a combination lending new interest to both painting and sculpture. A very special kind of rhythmic beauty results, characteristic of the best work Italian artists executed in France.

The strongest historical testimony concerning the origin of these jewels is derived from the inventory prepared after the death of Henry II. Its detailed descriptions, together with the visible evidence of style and technique, firmly establish commessi as court art from the French royal workshops. According to the inventory, for example, the favorite non-devotional subject for enseignes was that of Lucretia. No less than five such jewels are listed (Numbers 329, 330, 361, 410, and 433). An elflike figure (Figure 21) illustrates the

theme, although her original setting has been lost. The linear movement of the gold drapery complements the appealing nudity of the smooth body; such treatment may have been suggested by the marble reliefs of nymphs by Jean Goujon of the Fontaine des Innocents, erected for the triumphal entry of Henry II into Paris in 1549. The languid pose of this figure may have been derived from a portrait of Diane de Poitiers painted at Fontainebleau (Figure 23), which shows Diane with jeweled diadem and loose drapery, exposing some of her more intimate charms.

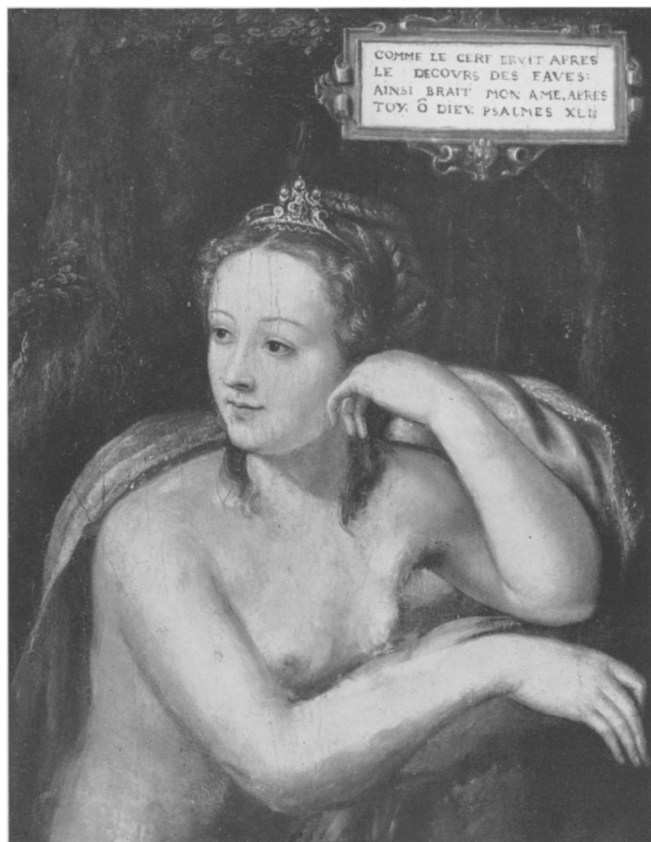
The figure of Lucretia and the portrait of Diane de Poitiers in turn help to establish the origin of another enseigne (Figure 22). Although not specifically mentioned in the inventory, it corresponds to a number of entries, such as Number 356: "Another large enseigne of gold, with a head and breast of jacinth" ("Une autre grande enseigne d'or où il y a une teste et le pect de jacinthe"). Here the head



21. *Lucretia. White chalcedony figure, with gold hair and drapery. Traces of red enamel on the cloak, near the emerald clasp. Cabochon rubies in the hair and drapery, and on the pommel of the dagger. The original setting is lost. Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen*

22. *Female bust, possibly a portrait. Mottled blue chalcedony figure, with red-and-black enameled gold drapery. Gold belt set with diamonds and rubies. Gold hair, with a diadem of red and white enamel and a diamond. Tooled gold background enameled in green. Gold border inlaid with flowers and leaves of red, green, and blue enamel, and set with four rubies. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*

23. *Diane de Poitiers. Contemporary copy of a lost painting from the School of Fontainebleau. 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches. Collection of Lord Spencer, Althorp, Northampton, England. Photograph: Henry Cooper & Son, Northampton*





24. *Bust of a Negro. Head of black agate, banded with gray. White agate background. Enameled gold turban, drapery, and border, set with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. The chain and pendant stones are later additions. Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano*

and bust of the lady are of mottled blue chalcedony; her head is slightly inclined like Lucretia's, and her red and gold drapery, supported by a beltlike row of diamonds, also follows similar lines. She wears an elaborate diadem like Diane's. The full bust recalls poems of Ronsard and his circle, in praise of fair ladies and their *beaux témoins*.

A combination of stylistic and documentary evidence also helps to identify a commesso featuring the profile of a Negro (Figure 24). It corresponds closely to the description in item 359 of the inventory: "Another enseigne of agate, on a ground [of the same], with the head of a Moor wearing a turban" ("Une autre enseigne d'agate, rapportée sur ung fons, d'une teste de More avec son turban"). This piece also shares many distinctive details with two other jewels already described. Like the profile of Henry II (Figure 13), the Negro's head is carved of banded stone; here the lighter bands form the underpart of the turban. The erect, proud poses of the heads are also very similar, as are the jeweled oval frames around each piece. The turban, on the other hand, recalls the elaborate headdress and classical attire of the lady shown in Figure 16. The jewel thus forms a link between the other two, and suggests a common origin for all.

Number 348 in the inventory describes "An enseigne of gold, with a small figure of agate who admires herself in a diamond" ("Une enseigne d'or où il y a une petite figure d'agate qui se mire à ung diamant"). Number 355 describes another just like it. There is a beautifully preserved jewel in the Metropolitan (Frontispiece) that corresponds faithfully to these entries. It shows a lady with face and hands carved of white chalcedony (a form of agate), and hair and gown of gold with traces of enamel, on translucent blue enamel over a hatched gold ground. In one hand she holds a mirror made of a square table-cut diamond, and in the other a serpent of green enamel. On the reverse is an oval plaque depicting Diana and two hounds, rendered in translucent enamel, after a design by Etienne Delaune (Figure 1), and obviously alluding to *Diane chasseresse*.

The mirror in one hand and the serpent in the other identify the lady as a personification of Prudence. Prudence occurs on two other, fragmentary jewels, divorced from their original settings and backgrounds. One of these (Figure 25) shows her crowned with laurels; her attire is not as timeless as that of the figure at the Museum, for the jeweled gown, bead necklace, and bracelet with diamond clasp give her an air of courtly elegance. The other, also more ornate than our example, now occupies the center of a gem-studded basin (Figure 26).

Prudence, as one of the four cardinal virtues, guards the tomb of Henry II at Saint Denis; she also appears in emblem books as a symbol associated with Henry's queen, Catherine de' Medici. In his *Les Devises ou Emblèmes héroïques*, published at Lyon in 1559, Gabriel Syméon proposes as a fitting motto for the Queen: *Fato prudentia maior* ("Prudence greater than destiny"), implying that although her stars had been propitious, Prudence had granted her greater gifts. The choice of Prudence for these jewels may indi-

cate a desire to evoke her protection, or the wish to acquire the virtues she personifies. The serpent, recalling the ancient parable of the all-knowing serpent of Paradise, is derived from Matthew 10:16, "Behold, I send you forth a sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." The mirror indicates self-knowledge, which endows Prudence with her profound wisdom, and also alludes, somewhat indirectly, to The Wisdom of Solomon 7:26, "For she [Wisdom] is . . . the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness."

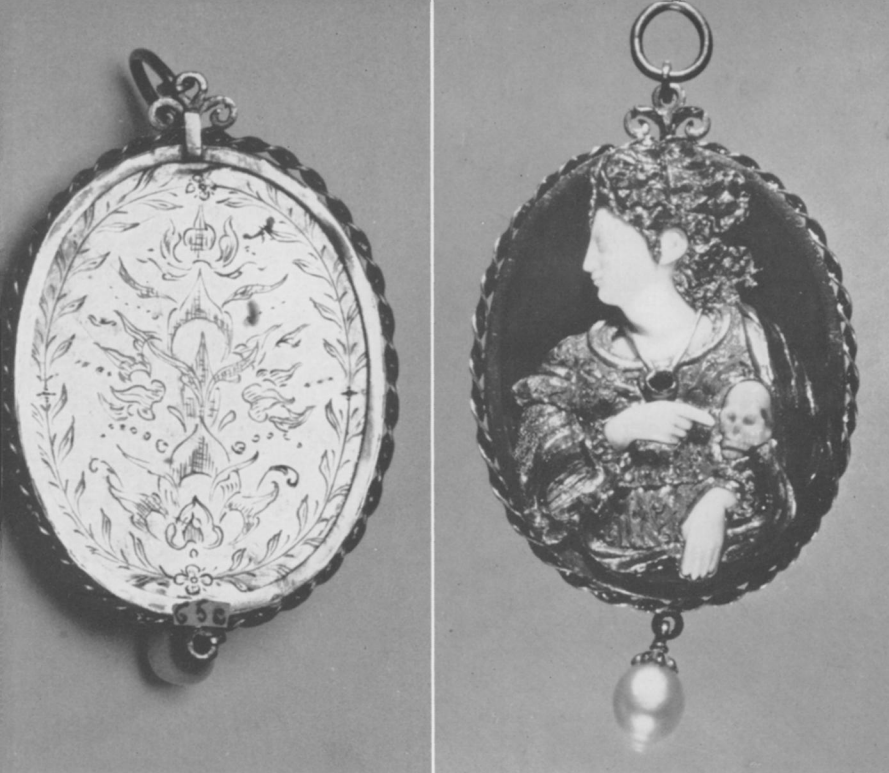
The mirror symbol is nonetheless ambiguous. In the hands of the Virgin the mirror signifies purity, yet held by a siren it becomes indicative of magic and of seductive powers. In the hands of Prudence's symbolic opposite, Vanity, it reflects beauty tinged with conceit. Another attribute that frequently appears with both is the skull; with Prudence it signifies a "continual meditation upon death," as Cesare Ripa put it in his famous *Iconology* (1593); with Vanity it is a reminder of the transitory pleasures of life and the certainty

25. *Prudence. White chalcedony face and hands. Dress enameled in green, blue, and red; snake of green enamel. The mirror is a diamond, and other small diamonds stud the figure. The original setting is lost. Wallace Collection, London*



26. *Prudence. White chalcedony face and hands. Dress enameled in green, blue, and red; green enamel snake. The mirror is a small diamond, and other diamonds stud the figure. Hatched gold background, once enameled. The original setting is lost, and the jewel now occupies the center of a XVII century basin. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*





27, 28. *Vanity and reverse. Face, hands, and skull of white chalcedony. Enameled dress. Moss agate background. A cabochon ruby forms the center of the necklace, and a pearl is suspended from the border. Private collection, Paris*

of death. In one particularly aristocratic commesso (Figure 28), Vanity is shown with a skull as sole attribute. Carved of white chalcedony, her distinctive features resemble those of marble figures and reliefs by Jean Goujon (Figure 29), executed for Henry II and Diane de Poitiers about or soon after 1550. The simple, twisted border appears on another jewel (Figure 16) and corresponds to several entries of enseignes "ornamented with a surrounding cordelière" ("garny d'une cordelière à l'entour"). The pattern engraved on the back (Figure 27) also recalls contemporary designs for book bindings, as illustrated in Figure 15. A small fleur-de-lis indicates, once again, a royal commission.

The ambiguity and complexity of such symbols as Prudence and Vanity are characteristic of the nervous, vacillating mood of the man-

nerist period, and of court society at Fontainebleau, particularly during the reign of Henry II. This mood is echoed in the sophisticated melancholy of Ronsard and the Pléiade, as in the first lines of Remy Belleau's *Discours de la Vanité*:

De pure vanité la terre est toute pleine,
Tout n'est que Vanité, des vanités très veine.

These jewels are indeed "vanités" of the purest kind, which admirably reflect the spirit of their period. They were created by inspired artists, who succeeded in harmonizing Italian and French imagery, and in endowing their work with originality, perennial charm, and a sense of splendor.

NOTE

The group mentioned in this article includes all the commessi I am aware of. More may exist. For example, the famous Debruge-Dumenil collection, which was broken up and sold in 1849, contained much jewelry, including the piece illustrated here as Figure 24. In the sale catalogue also appear the following descriptions, undoubtedly commessi:

"Lot 1009. Enseigne of oval form. In high relief a warrior in armor, seated upon a golden throne. His head, one arm and both his legs are of rose-colored agate; a baroque pearl forms his body. The figure is applied to a ground of blood-red jasper, surrounded by a tree branch of tooled gold, upon which a garland of enameled flowers is displayed. Height 70 millimeters, Length 55.

"Lot 1010. Enseigne of oval form. Laureated profile, applied to a ground of blood-red jasper. The figure is of white jasper; the top of the head is formed by a pearl; crown, hair, and draperies of the bust are of enameled gold; the border, also of enameled gold, is set with six rubies. Height 48 millimeters, Length 38.

"Lot 1011. Enseigne of oval form. Lucretia committing suicide. Nude figure, frontal, shown three-quarters, in white jasper applied to blood-red jasper. The lower part of the torso is covered by a cloak; this cloak, and also the hair, are of gold, set with diamonds, rubies and emeralds. The border of enameled gold is enriched with rubies. Chain suspension with a pendant pearl. Height 75 millimeters, Width 60."

The whereabouts of all three are unknown.

29. *Detail of the Descent from the Cross, 1550-1560, by Jean Goujon, French. Marble relief. Fletcher Fund, 29.56*



West's Legacy

ALBERT TENEYCK GARDNER

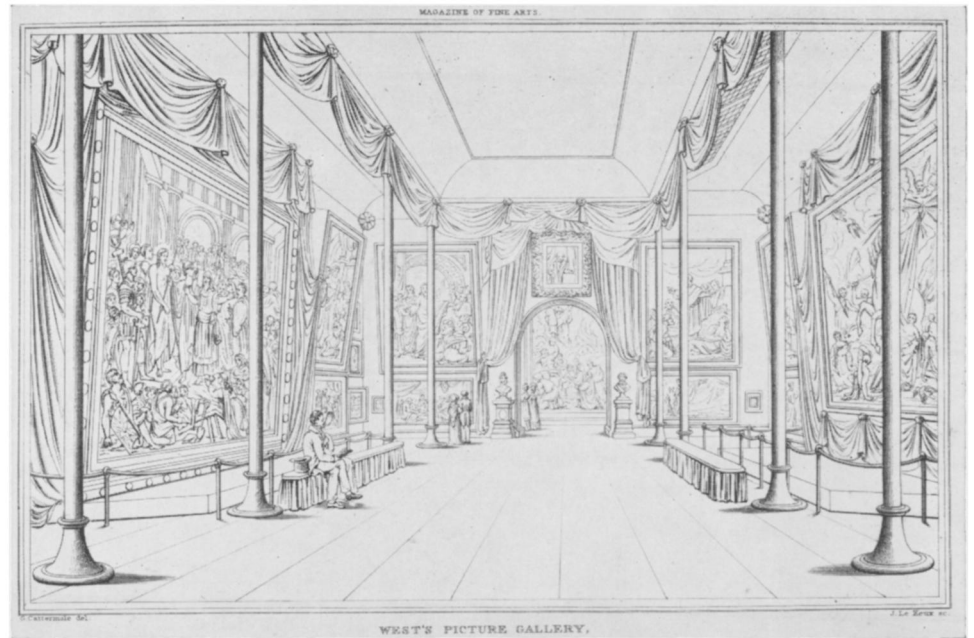
Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture

When the famous American artist Benjamin West died in London on March 11, 1820, he left to his sons Raphael and Benjamin an estate of impressive value, consisting of his fine town house, his remarkable collection of prints, old master drawings, and paintings by some of the great artists of the past, and three galleries of pictures painted by West himself. But there was not much cash in hand for the heirs. West's sons, both ne'er-do-wells, who had always lived in comfort on their father's bounty and in the security of his fame and success, immediately planned the dispersal of the art collection, the house, the grand gallery of their father's masterpieces, and the contents of his studios as soon as it was legally possible.

When the old man died, the officials of the Royal Academy took over the planning of the funeral obsequies of their late president and laid out over two hundred pounds toward the expenses of the occasion. But West's sons bore the major share of the charges and paid almost seven hundred pounds for the rental of mourning carriages and payment of an extraordinary band of professional mourners. John Galt, in his book *The Life, Studies, and Works of Benjamin West, Esq. . . .*, published in London in 1820, devoted the last eight pages to a detailed account of the funeral. He printed a diagram showing the marching order of the long funeral procession from the Royal Academy to St. Paul's Cathedral and listed the names and titles of the attendant mourners. At ten thirty on the morning of March 29, the procession escorted West to his last resting place, and that day he was interred in the crypt of St. Paul's between the remains of Sir Joshua Reynolds, his predecessor as president of the Royal Academy, and Thomas Newton, former Bishop of Bristol and Dean of St. Paul's.

No American artist before or since has been laid to rest with such elaborate pomp. The ceremony was attended by many notable men, among them the Archbishop of York, four other bishops, the American ambassador, the Lord Mayor of London, three dukes, two marquises, nine earls, many members of the Royal Academy, and the corps of students at the Academy. In addition to these were many traditional funeral functionaries: pages and mutes, as well as police marshals of the City of London, and a large

1. *A view of Benjamin West's gallery. Engraving by John Le Keux from C. M. Westmacott, British Galleries of Painting and Sculpture (London, 1824), opposite page 1. 4¼ x 6⅞ inches. Lent by Albert TenEyck Gardner*



consortium of religious dignitaries – an almoner, some vicars choral, some canons of the Cathedral, a prebendary, sub-deans, and junior canons. There were, of course, the usual honorary pallbearers and mourners. West's body was conveyed by an elaborate hearse "with rich trappings, feathers and velvets" drawn by six horses. Galt remarked: "The whole of this affecting ceremony was conducted with great solemnity and respect, and was witnessed by an immense concourse of people." The mourners were conveyed by a train of more than sixty carriages. After the ceremony, the whole procession returned to the Academy for refreshments.

Soon after the funeral, West's sons began the conversion of their inheritance into cash by the auction of their father's prints, old master drawings, and books, and his important collection of paintings by (or attributed to) the great European painters of the past. Three auctions were held in June and July 1820. They took place in West's Gallery in Newman Street and were managed by James Christie, son of the founder of the auction firm that still bears their name. A number of the paintings by old masters had to be withdrawn from the sale because the bidding did not reach the reserve prices, but these were later sold at auction in 1821.

West's Great Gallery, where the auctions were held, was one of the most extraordinary structures designed by any artist for the display of his own work. This palatial one-man museum was a most curious monument in the history of Anglo-American art. Many of its paintings were large replicas of some of West's most famous pictures, which he had painted for display in the gallery. For many years it was one of the sights of London. Susceptible visitors were known to burst into tears on viewing his affecting masterpieces there.

The poet and essayist Leigh Hunt described at some length in his autobiography his visits to West's gallery and recorded the impression of complacent tranquility the place made on him as a child, giving a good idea of Benjamin West, the man, as well. He wrote: "The two principal houses at which I visited, till the arrival of our relations from the West Indies, were Mr. West's (late President of the Royal Academy), in Newman-street, and Mr. Godfrey Thornton's (of the distinguished City family), in Austin Friars. How I loved the Graces in one, and everything in the other! Mr. West (who, as I have already mentioned, had married one of my relations) had bought his house, I believe, not long after he came to England; and he had added a gallery at the back of it, terminating in a couple of lofty rooms. The gallery was a continuation of the house-passage, and, together with one of those rooms and the parlour, formed three sides of a garden, very small but elegant, with a grass-plot in the middle, and busts upon stands under an arcade. The gallery, as you went up it, formed an angle at a little distance to the left, then another to the right, and then took a longer stretch into the two rooms; and it was hung with the artist's sketches all the way. In a corner between the two angles was a study-door, with casts of Venus and Apollo on each side of it. The two rooms contained the largest of his pictures; and in the farther one, after stepping softly down the gallery, as if reverencing the dumb life on the walls, you generally found the mild and quiet artist at his work; happy, for he thought himself immortal.

"I need not enter into the merits of an artist who is so well known, and has been so often criticized. He was a man with regular, mild features; and, though of Quaker origin, had the look of what he was, a painter to a court. His appearance was so gentlemanly, that, the moment he changed his gown for a coat, he seemed to be full-dressed.



2. *A view of the Museum's Paintings Gallery, 1889*

3. *The Wise Men's Offering*. Oil on canvas,
50¾ x 23 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James W.
Fosburgh, 64.9





4. *The Battle of La Hogue*. Oil on canvas, 64½ x 96 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 64.57

The simplicity and self-possession of the young Quaker, not having time enough to grow stiff (for he went early to study at Rome), took up, I suppose, with more ease than most would have done, the urbanities of his new position. And what simplicity helped him to, favour would retain. Yet this man, so well bred, and so indisputably clever in his art (whatever might be the amount of his genius), had received so careless, or so homely an education when a boy, that he could hardly read. He pronounced also some of his words, in reading, with a puritanical barbarism, such as *haive* for *have*, as some people pronounce when they sing psalms. But this was, perhaps, an American custom. My mother, who both read and spoke remarkably well, would say *haive* and *shaul* (for *shall*), when she sang her hymns. But it was not so well in reading lectures to the Academy. Mr. West would talk of his art all day long, painting all the while. On other subjects he was not so fluent; and on political and religious matters he tried hard to maintain the reserve common with those about a court. He succeeded ill in both. There were always strong suspicions of his leaning to his native side in politics; and during Bonaparte's triumph, he could not contain his enthusiasm for the Republican chief, going even to Paris to pay him his homage, when First Consul. The admiration of high colours and powerful effects, natural to a painter, was too strong for him. . . .

"The quiet of Mr. West's gallery, the tranquil, intent beauty of the statues, and the subjects of some of the pictures, particularly Death on the Pale Horse, the Deluge, the Scotch King hunting the Stag, Moses on Mount Sinai, Christ Healing the Sick (a sketch), Sir Philip Sidney giving up the Water to the Dying Soldier, the Installation of the Knights of the Garter, and Ophelia before the King and Queen (one of the best things he ever did), made a great impression upon me. My mother and I used to go down the gallery, as if we were treading on wool. She was in the habit of stopping to look at some of the pictures, particularly the Deluge and the Ophelia, with a countenance quite awe-stricken. She used also to point out to me the subjects relating to liberty and patriotism, and the domestic affections. Agrippina bringing home the ashes of Germanicus was a great favourite with her. I remember, too, the awful delight afforded us by the Angel slaying the Army of Sennacherib; a bright figure lording it in the air, with a chaos of human beings below.

"As Mr. West was almost sure to be found at work, in the farthest room, habited in his white woolen gown, so you might have predicated, with equal certainty, that Mrs. West was sitting in the parlour, reading. I used to think that if I had such a parlour to sit in, I should do just as she did. It was a good-sized room, with two windows looking out on the little garden I spoke of, and opening to it from one of them by a flight of steps. The garden, with its busts in it, and the pictures which you knew were on the other side of its wall, had an Italian look. The room was hung with engravings and coloured prints. Among them was the Lion Hunt, from Rubens; the Hierarchy with the Godhead, from Raphael, which I hardly thought it right to look at; and two screens by the fireside, containing prints (from Angelica Kauffman, I think, but I am not sure that Mr. West himself was not the designer) of the Loves of Angelica and Medoro, which I could have looked at from morning to night. . . .



5. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Oil on canvas, $54\frac{1}{2} \times 60\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 95.22.3

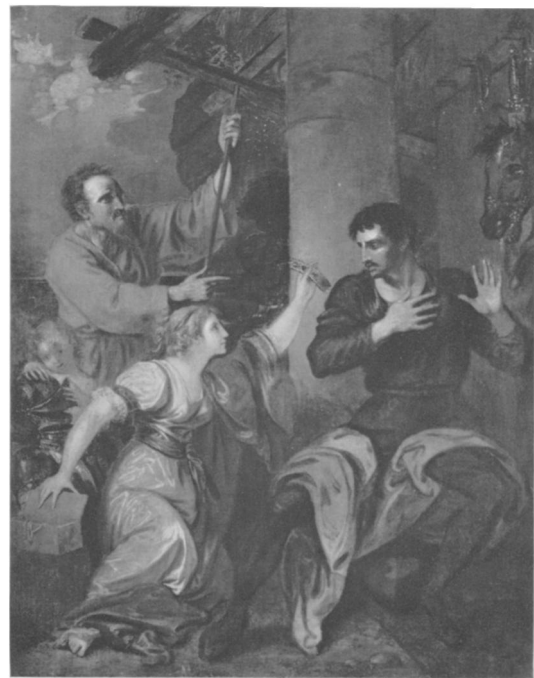


6. *Omnia Vincit Amor*. Oil on canvas, 70 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 80 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 95.22.1

“Mrs. West and my mother used to talk of old times, and Philadelphia, and my father’s prospects at court. I sat apart with a book, from which I stole glances at Angelica. I had a habit at that time of holding my breath, which forced me every now and then to take long sighs. My aunt would offer me a bribe not to sigh. I would earn it once or twice; but the sighs were sure to return. These wagers I did not care for; but I remember being greatly mortified when Mr. West offered me half-a-crown if I would solve the old question of ‘Who was the father of Zebedee’s children?’ and I could not tell him. He never made his appearance till dinner, and returned to his painting-room directly after it. And so at tea-time.”

The engraved view of West’s Gallery shows it in 1821 as West left it (Figure 1). The theatrical nature of his vast paintings is emphasized by their settings of ruffled and draped fabric – perhaps it was red velvet. Some of the paintings even have a sort of stage projecting on the floor in front of them. Velvet rope barriers supported by stanchions separate viewers from West’s visions. The room is impressive in size and decoration, with its slender soaring columns and elaborate gold frames; another gallery is seen through the arch. In fact, there were three rooms hung with pictures, as well as two painting rooms, as the studios were called.

It is interesting to see that this dramatic and opulent style of art gallery decoration persisted through the nineteenth century, and was adopted by the Metropolitan Museum in the 1880s and 1890s, when our galleries of paintings were hung with valances and canopies and draped curtains of twilled garnet serge (Figure 2). The purchase



7. *Scene from “Orlando Furioso.” Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 inches.*
Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 95.22.5

of this tremendous yardage of cloth was perhaps instrumental in drawing the attention of George A. Hearn, the well-known dry goods merchant prince, to this need, as well as others, of the Museum.

After their father's death Raphael and Benjamin first tried to turn West's Gallery into a money-making attraction, by opening it to the public and charging admission of a shilling, and selling a printed catalogue for another shilling. But the novelty of this static exhibition soon wore off. In 1825, again in need of cash, they sought to raise money by the sale of their remaining assets, which by then consisted only of the house and gallery of paintings by their father, in Newman Street. They attempted to sell the paintings *en bloc* to the British government, employing the art dealer William Carey as adviser and agent. The government, however, was then in no mood to buy pictures, and showed no interest in West's, as it had just paid a sizable sum for the collection of John Angerstein, which formed the newly established National Gallery in London.

Carey then suggested another scheme – to sell the collection to the government of the United States for the foundation of an American national gallery. Carey had good connections in the United States, his brother Matthew being a well-known publisher and author in Philadelphia. With the help of Benjamin and Raphael, Carey drafted a letter to J. W. Taylor, Speaker of the House of Representatives, offering the collection for sale to the United States Government. Appended to the letter was a list of 150 pictures with their dimensions.

The letter was read in the House of Representatives on December 11, 1826, and was tabled. No action was taken except that the letter and list of pictures were printed as House of Representatives Document No. 8, 19th Congress, 2nd Session. This must be one of the very few government documents of the time dealing with the fine arts. It is a new and curious addition to West's bibliography and an interesting footnote to the history of American art museums and to the pre-history of our National Gallery.

When Carey's plan fell through, West's sons decided to sell the pictures at auction, and also the house, gallery, and studios. An elaborate catalogue was prepared for the sale, and the 181 pictures brought about 16,000 guineas. The sale lasted three days – May 22, 23, and 25, 1829. There were two later auctions, in June and July, of pictures, prints, frames, and colors.

The printed catalogue was in such demand it had to be issued in three editions. The gallery was described on its title page: "In West's Gallery, almost all the British and Foreign Nobility, – all the great and honored of the age, for half a century, were used to assemble; and here were first discussed, by the enlightened leaders of public taste, those measures which awakened the rulers of the state to a sense of the national importance of the culture of the Fine Arts. Hence, no site is more sacred to Science and Arts than this Gallery, which, fondly familiar to the memory of three generations, almost from infancy, is about to close forever upon this last display of the genius of its venerable Founder." The "sacred" site was, however, sold along with the paintings; the building was the last item in the sale, and it went for 4,800 guineas.

8. *Hagar and Ishmael*. Oil on canvas, 76 x 54½ inches. Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 95.22.8



Several of the pictures sold have come together again in the collection of this Museum; one of them, *The Wise Men's Offering* (Figure 3), a recent gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Fosburgh, still has its original frame. Another is the famous *The Battle of La Hogue* (Figure 4), a joint work by West and his pupil John Trumbull.

Four other pictures in the Museum were also in the sale: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, *Omnia Vincit Amor*, *Scene from "Orlando Furioso,"* and *Hagar and Ishmael* (Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8). These four came from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Seguin. They were apparently given to Seguin sometime between 1829 and 1839 as collateral for a loan. The loan was never repaid, and the collection became his property. The Seguins came to America from London in 1839, bringing with them a large collection of paintings, most of them by West or attributed to him. Seguin was noted in his day for his talents as an opera singer, and was described as having one of the finest voices ever heard. He established the Seguin Troupe, which was very successful in giving operatic performances in this country and Canada. Mrs. Seguin also was a singer. After her husband's death in 1852, she abandoned her career on the stage and became a fashionable music teacher in New York.

Toward the end of her life she deposited the rest of her paintings in the Metropolitan Museum. There were nine of them, all attributed to Benjamin West. These remained on deposit as loans from 1881 until 1923, when the whole group was purchased from her heirs. In recent years the attribution of five of the Seguin pictures has been changed, but the rest remain a part of West's legacy.

NOTE

The passage describing West's gallery is from L. Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt* (Humphrey Milford: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 111-115.

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