

Old World Treasures in the Old South

By Taylor Holliday

Dresden to Paris in less than three minutes" promises the banner on the side of the Mississippi Museum of Art. And that's without ever leaving downtown Jackson, a capital not of the Old World but the Old South.

If the past is any indication, hundreds of thousands of visitors from throughout the South will attend "The Glory of Baroque Dresden" (through Sept. 6), the latest in a series of blockbuster shows bringing Europe's royal treasures to the Mississippi Arts Pavilion. (Previous exhibits came from the palaces and museums of St. Petersburg, Versailles and Spain.) The smart visitors will extend their trip across the parking lot to the Museum of Art's "Paris Moderne" (also through Sept. 6). Each exhibit is grand on its own, but following up a visit to early 18th-century Dresden with one to early 20th-century Paris, comparing how the elite of each era lived—their wildly different ideas of elegance and style in life and art—makes both shows all the more rich.

First to Dresden. To turn the nondescript, gray-brick Arts Pavilion into a version of the Zwinger, the High Baroque masterpiece built to house parts of Dresden's State Art Collections, the not-for-profit Mississippi Commission for International Cultural Exchange—or more precisely, its director, Jack Kyle—persuaded the Collections to lend it more than 400 priceless, peerless items. The MCICE then persuaded German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to visit Jackson and open the show—the first in the U.S. drawing from these collections since the reunification of East and West Germany.

Back in the Baroque era, when the head of state wore a crown, he not only

taining children's audio guide has him say: "I'm addicted to dishes!" First he filled room after room with the finest East Asian porcelain, and then he imprisoned a local alchemist until the man created from Saxon soil the first European hardpaste porcelain. The nearby Meissen Manufactory still produces ornately embellished and painted dishes, if not the king's prized life-size animal figures.

August III preferred paintings—lots and lots of paintings—purchasing as many as 700 a year by the likes of Rembrandt, Rubens, Titian, Mantegna and Van Dyck. The *pièce de résistance* of the Mississippi exhibit is one of only 35 known Vermeers in the world (and the

Jackson, pop. 400,000) ever amassed this trove to begin with, it's even more so that it has survived centuries of natural and manmade disasters. The collections were moved to safety during World War II, and most survived, though 206 paintings were destroyed and 507 went missing. The Russians took truckloads of art to Moscow as the spoils of war. But then, surprisingly, the Soviets returned most of the booty to their Communist satellite in 1955. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the continuing rebuilding of Dresden, one can again see the glories of Dresden in Dresden. Or one can see them now in Mississippi.

On to Paris. At the neighboring Mississippi Museum of Art, two centuries have passed since the Baroque, and it's the dawn of modernity in art and décor. Gone is everything elaborately carved, ornamented or jewel-encrusted, and in its place in the homes of society's elite is the stripped-down, streamlined luxuriousness of the new style called Art Deco.

Art Deco got its name from the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, for which the French government commissioned roomfuls of furnishings specified as "adapted to modern requirements." Much of it—as well as items from the 1937 Paris World's Fair—later ended up in the hands of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, from which this exhibit of 75 works is drawn. "Paris Moderne" was organized by International Arts & Artists, and Jackson is the only venue.

Art led the way to the modern, freeing itself from the subject matter and techniques of centuries past, as exemplified here by such artists as Braque, Picasso, Bonnard, Delaunay, Dufy, Matisse and Modigliani. The decorative arts were also breaking with the past, if less defiantly. Still, the furniture steals the show.

André Arbus's set of elegantly reimaged Louis XVI furniture, stripped to its essence and covered in ivory silk-satin, is divine in white on white around a bronze table topped with exotic shell. It's easy to imagine the modern woman who would have entertained in such a room, as there's a painting above the chaise longue by Pedro Pruna O'Cerans of one "Madame R.M.," lounging in a white gown in her own white cloud of a room.

Members of her social class may have liked the idea of modern comfort and style, but they still liked their furnishings handmade from the most precious and rare of materials—see Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann's Egyptian writing desk made of Burma burr wood with a drop-leaf covered in Nile crocodile skin and edged in ivory.

We still can't resist such refined luxury. Beginning June 8 and running through Sept. 5, one can see a Ruhlmann retrospective and an accompanying Art Deco show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Or one can see such treasures now in Mississippi.

Ms. Holliday last wrote for the Journal about "Art of Tennessee."



Well, go on down to Jackson to see Vermeer's "The Procuress" (1656) at one of the two grand exhibitions in town thanks to the Mississippi Commission for International Cultural Exchange.

first ever shown in the South). "The Procuress" (1656) glows with conspiratorial humor and intrigue, especially if you see, as many art historians do, the grinning onlooker in what appears to be a brothel transaction as the painter himself. The painting glows even more nowadays thanks to the MCICE's \$100,000 contribution toward its restoration.

The kings also inherited some exceedingly fancy armor for men and horses; bought up drawings and sculpture (ancient Roman, contemporary likenesses of themselves, etc.); and adorned themselves with giant jewels. August III even splurged on a 41-carat green diamond, called the Dresden Diamond, the only large, naturally occurring one ever found (which is not likely to ever travel again after it leaves Mississippi).

Such jewelry would have been worn when they received guests in the audience hall of Dresden Castle, which has been partially recreated here. The throne and matching tables, in heavily carved and gilded silver, are offset by the similarly exuberant ceiling mural. Though the original painting was destroyed in the 1945 Allied bombing of Dresden, the MCICE had it meticulously copied for this exhibit.

If it's amazing that a town the size of Dresden (only a bit larger than greater

THE GLORY OF BAROQUE DRESDEN

Mississippi Arts Pavilion

Through Sept. 6

PARIS MODERNE

Mississippi Museum of Art

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opened art exhibits but personally collected the art within. Or at least that was true of August the Strong, elector of Saxony and king of Poland (1670-1733), and his son and successor, August III (1696-1763), both of whom were mad for collecting. Their reigns left Dresden with hoards of art and objects, from classical to Renaissance to Baroque; one of the first modern-style public museums; and a reputation as a premier art destination (Goethe raved that seeing Dresden and its glories gave him an entirely "new outlook").

August the Strong's main weakness was "porcelain fever" (or, as the enter-