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art review

A high-voltage collection

By PHILIP E. BISHOP
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Never underestimate the power of modest wealth when combined with immodestly good taste.

John and Eleanor Mitchell of Mount Vernon, Ill., collected impressionist and early modern American art when it was out of vogue. The highlights of their collection have traveled to the Mennello Museum of American Art as an exhibition titled "From Cassatt to Wyeth: Masterworks from the Mitchell Museum."

In the Mennello installation, one room concentrates on the glittering genius of the Mitchell collection. In "Jeune Femme Allaitant Son Enfant," Mary Cassatt's portrait of a mother nursing her child glows with the transparent pink and orange of the impressionist palette. Cassatt excelled beyond all the European impressionists, even her mentor Edgar Degas, in rendering human bodies and their garments with vibrant finesse. The mother's gown seems to be a living thing.

Near at hand is John Singer Sargent's exotic landscape "Ilex Wood at Majorca with Blue Pigs." Sargent was famed for his society portraits, but at this point in his career, he had turned to landscape. The island's twisted tree trunks and scavenging pigs seem to have freed Sargent's brushwork and choice of color. Two tourists from polite society, a young boy and girl huddled against a rock, are nearly drowned in the wild Mediterranean sunlight.

Opposite is "The Table Garden" by Frederick Childe Hassam, best known for his landscapes but here applying himself to a poignant interior. A woman in a blue dressing gown ponders daffodils sprouting before her. Through the curtained windows, we see the new skyscrapers of early modern New York City. Yet the whole impression is not of youthful vigor but rather pensive melancholy, as if Hassam foresaw already the loss of youth and death of new life.

To finish the suite, there's one of Robert Henri's vivid portraits of American waifs, a rosy-cheeked gypsy child. In contrast to a conventional portraitist such as Sargent, Henri preferred to find his subjects in the rough-and-tumble of common American life. Especially, his children embody an indomitable and exuberant optimism.

These four pictures make a sufficient legacy, but in this and other galleries the Mitchells have left other treasures. Thomas Eakins' portrait of scientist George F. Barker pays homage to a Philadelphia intellectual who stood by the



Frederick Childe Hassam, known for his landscapes, goes in a different direction to comment about life in "The Table Garden."

painter when he had been ostracized by Philadelphia society.

Julian Alden Weir, a contemporary of Eakins, represented the Paris-trained cadre of American artists who only gradually embraced the impressionist style. Weir's portrait titled "The Feather Boa" betrays the influence of the loose impressionist brush, though it is still restrained by the palette of conventional

academic painting.

Andrew Wyeth sustained the Eakins strain of sober American realism in a time when modernist abstraction reigned supreme. His watercolor "Winter Furrows" is cast in the somber colors of a New England winter, the fallow field framing a distant farm.

It must be said that this show weakens noticeably when we arrive at early

modernism. Either the Mitchells' tastes or their pocketbook was insufficient to the 20th century. There are two scenes of Maurice Prendergast that illustrate that painter's highly individualized progress toward a modern style. "By the Seashore" particularly shows a conventional impressionist subject dissolving into fundamental color and form.

Another peculiar American was Guy



Mary Cassatt captures a mother and child in 'Jeune Femme.'

More information

What: "From Cassatt to Wyeth: Masterworks from the Mitchell Museum."

When: 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, noon-4:30 p.m. Sunday (through Feb. 25).

Where: Mennello Museum of American Art, 900 E. Princeton St., Orlando.

Cost: \$8 adults, \$7 seniors, \$5 students, free ages 12 and younger.

Call: 407-246-4278.

Online: mennellomuseum.org.

Pene Du Bois, here represented by "Banquet." Du Bois was a master of social commentary — a kind of society George Grosz — and this Depression-era scene notes the self-indulgence and self-absorption of the moneyed classes.

The biggest surprise in this exhibition is Siegfried Gerhard Reinhardt, a German-born painter active in the 1960s. Reinhardt's virtuoso trompe-l'oeil paintings combine a mastery of illusionist painting techniques with a perverse and enigmatic sense of humor. "The Horn" renders different inanimate surfaces and objects with a sensuous desides at the Cedarhurst Center for the Arts, on the couple's former estate in southern Illinois. It's well-suited to exhibition at the Mennello Museum, the Central Florida legacy of another distinguished collecting couple.

Let us hope that young collectors spending their fortunes today will have the good taste and generous spirit to leave us comparable treasures.

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