LUST, LOVE, and LOSS

IN RENAISSANCE EUROPE

TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE

IA&A INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND ARTISTS

LUST, LOVE, and LOSS

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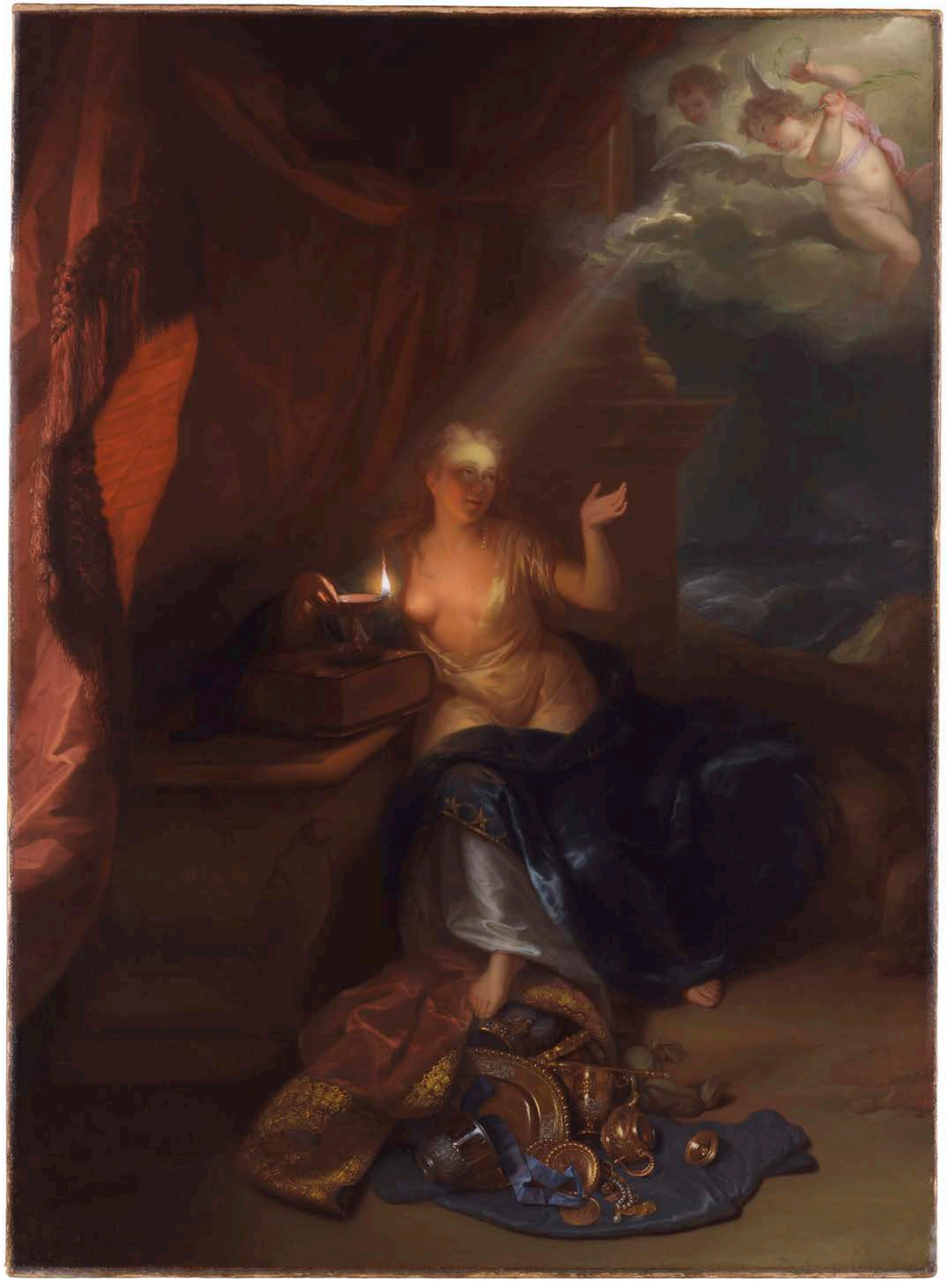
Passion, violence, and virtue emerge in this exhibition as fundamental, intertwined elements in the art of Renaissance Europe. The objects on view—created for enjoyment and edification in private homes—offer glimpses into the lives of artists and their audiences. Painters, printmakers, and craftsmen, inspired by popular literary sources including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and the Bible, interpreted their stories for everyday settings. Their artworks both codified and confronted social expectations about the duties and relationships of men and women. Such objects played an essential role in intimate experiences, while also shaping and responding to the profound intellectual, political, and religious shifts throughout Europe between 1400 and 1700.

Cover Image—Master of the Apollo and Daphne Legend (Italian, active circa 1480-1510), *Daphne Found Asleep by Apollo*, circa 1500, oil formerly on panel, transferred to canvas, 34 9⁄16" x 62.13" x 3 ¼", photograph © 2023 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.

1. Unidentified Artist, after Francesco Albani, *Actaeon Surprising Diana and Her Nymphs*, circa 1617, oil on canvas, 28 ⅜" x 32.75", photograph © 2023 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.



Many of the works featured in *Lust, Love, and Loss* attest to the centuries-long popularity of certain narratives and themes throughout the European continent, while others represent more localized cultural traditions. Fifteenth-century Italy saw an explosion of objects and images tied to familial rites of passage, including marriage and childbirth. Domestic artworks, such as painted panels and ceramics, commemorated these momentous life events, yet their narratives were often not overtly festive. Their imagery might lament the dire fates of mismatched lovers, revealing societal anxieties about fidelity and paternity. Meanwhile, the Northern European interplay between virtue and vice manifested in innumerable engravings and woodcuts showing even happy and passionate couples faced with the inexorable progression of time. Images of hapless lovers pursued by menacing skeletons starkly confronted viewers with their own mortality. Artists working and traveling north and south of the Alps produced vibrant canvases and complex print series that echoed these ideas in grander formats, purposefully highlighting the consequences of moral trespass or opportunities for redemption. Taken together, the featured works of art illuminate the myriad roles Renaissance objects played in the cultural rituals and consuming desires through which relationships were formed, celebrated, and extinguished.

Generously supported by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, *Lust, Love, and Loss in Renaissance Europe* offers new perspectives on women's artistic, literary, and cultural agency. In addition to featuring works by women artists and authors, the exhibition explores the experiences of women audiences through their engagement with the kinds of objects and narratives on display, as well as with one another.

Lust, Love, and Loss comprises four sections. "At Home in the Renaissance" features domestic artworks, such as painted *deschi da parto*, or birth trays, and investigates the alignment between private life and public obligation. "The Realm of Venus" illustrates how tales of the classical goddess of love and beauty captivated artists for centuries, whether as a tantalizing source of inspiration or as a cautionary lesson about unbridled passion. "On the Worth of Women" considers other stories of exemplary women from classical mythology, ancient history, and the Bible, along with the ways artists allegorized women's bodies as sites of conflicts about virtue and desire. The final section, "Morality and Mortality" examines images of Death personified, and the correlations artists made between erotic love and punishment throughout an era of exceptionally innovative printmaking in Northern Europe.

2. Godefridus Schalcken (Dutch, 1643-1706), *Conversion of Mary Magdalen*, 1700, oil on canvas, 94.5 x 69.2 cm, Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection, New York.

3. Woman artist, now unknown (English), *The Banishment of Hagar and Ishmael*, mid-to late 17th century, silk and linen framed in gilt and painted wood, 24” x 17 ½” x 1 ½”, Photographed by Rachel Robshaw, Image courtesy of Cora Ginsburg LLC.

At HOME in the RENAISSANCE

The works of art in this section once surrounded Renaissance families in their homes, where objects acquired at moments such as betrothals, marriages, and births mingled with possessions that animated everyday life. At times of celebration, middle- and upper-class families would commission a wide range of items, while those of lesser means might buy them ready-made, acquire them second-hand, or borrow them. Although familial rites of passage could offer personal joy and fulfillment, they were also moments when private life aligned with public obligations. Alliances between families—and the offspring that resulted—were intended to solidify dynastic ties for reasons of economic and political security. Accordingly, the artworks that commemorated marriages and births often emphasized themes of duty and virtue. Yet the delightfully ribald or dramatically gruesome narratives that adorned such objects could entertain as much as they instructed.

Many of these artworks offer insights into the social, sexual, and cultural experiences of Renaissance women in particular, whose lives typically revolved around their families. However, their homes were also places where objects—including many they made themselves—helped them cultivate friendships and maintain ties beyond their immediate households. Whether acquired or homemade, these personal treasures could serve as a vehicle for connection. As one Renaissance conduct manual advised, newlywed women should "Take [guests] ... and guide them around the house, and in particular show them some of your possessions, either new, or beautiful, but in such a way that it will be received as a sign of your politeness and domesticity, and not arrogance: something that you do as if showing them your heart."

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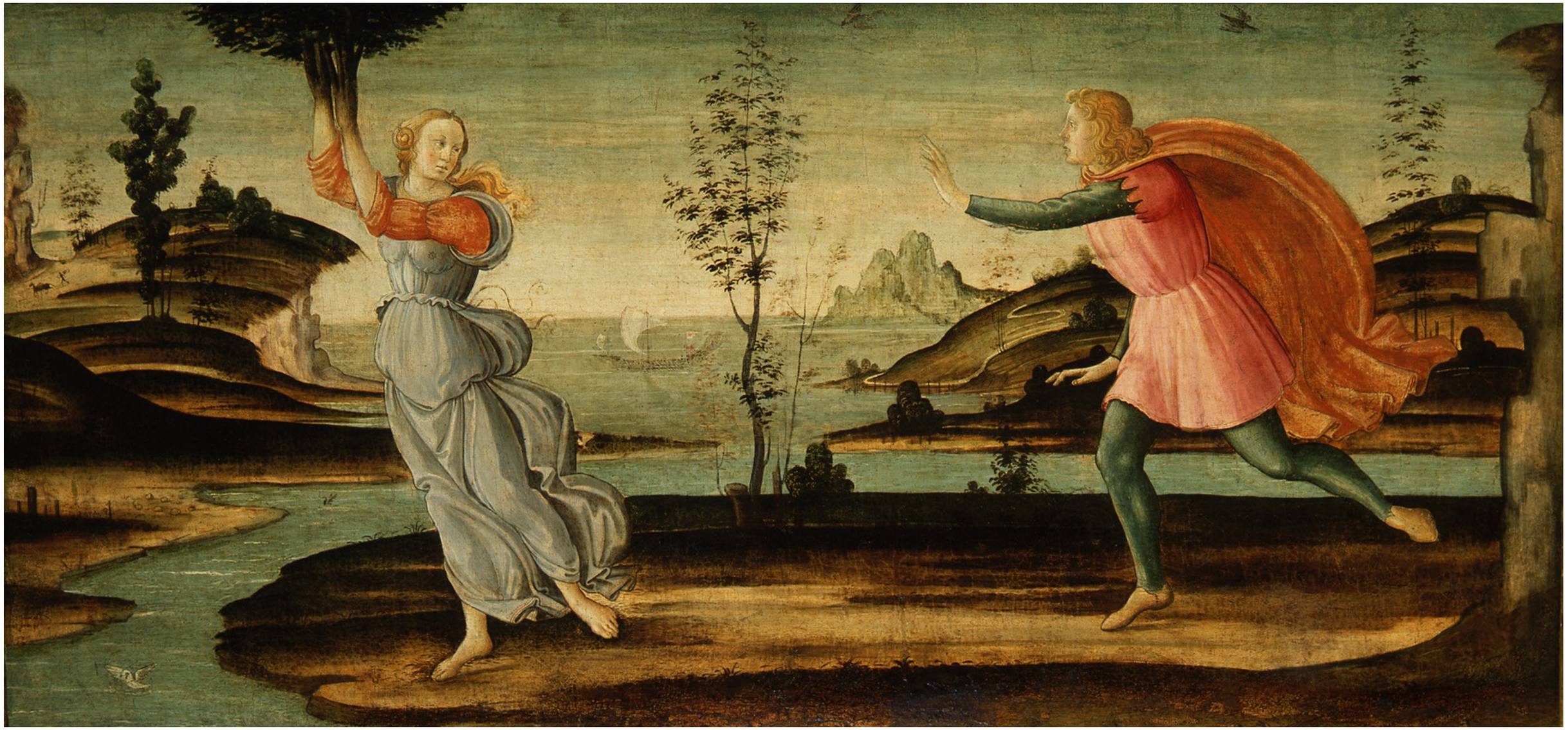
4. Workshop of Orazio Fontana (Italian, 1510-1571), *Birth Bowl* (Front), 1575, polychrome tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica), 2 ⅜" x 8 1⁄2", photograph © 2023 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.
5. Workshop of Orazio Fontana (Italian, 1510-1571), *Birth Bowl* (Back), 1575, polychrome tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica), 2 ⅜" x 8 1⁄2", photograph © 2023 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.
6. Romulo Cincinato (Italian, Florence 1540-Madrid 1597), *The Birth of the Virgin*, pen and brown ink and wash over black chalk, 7 1⁄2" x 4 35⁄8", Image courtesy of Sotheby's, Inc, © 2026.



7. Master of the Apollo and Daphne Legend (Italian, active circa 1480-1510), *Daphne Fleeing from Apollo*, 1500, oil formerly on panel, transferred to canvas, 35 1/2" x 62.13" x 3 ¼", photograph © 2023 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.

The REALM of VENUS

As the classical goddess of love and beauty, Venus provided Renaissance audiences with an endless source of inspiration. Beginning with the late-fifteenth-century excavations of antique sculpture, Venus's virtues as well as her indiscretions captivated artists. They drew on ancient epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, depicting Venus in a variety of scenes inspired by her amorous escapades. She could be a doting mother to her son Cupid (himself the god of desire and erotic love), a temptress, a woman swayed by seduction, or a metaphor for art itself.

Yet the renewed interest in Venus extended far beyond the revival of antiquity, as artists and their audiences saw pagan divinities as avatars for contemporary concerns. Venus was both muse and moral conundrum for male and female audiences alike, and her image helped shape ideals of beauty and conduct. The proliferation of depictions of the goddess coincided with a surge in texts devoted to feminine appearance, from cosmetics manuals to books on self-presentation. For many women, cultivating one's looks offered a crucial avenue for influence and advancement, even as it bound them to exacting standards. Together, the artworks and texts on display illuminate a shared preoccupation with beauty as social and cultural currency. In addition, subjects like Venus's tempestuous affair with Mars, the god of war, and her husband Vulcan's discovery of their liaison proved no less charged, supplying both tantalizing tales and moralizing messages. Such divine exploits—often intentionally humorous as well as instructive—served as reminders about proper marital conduct and the threat that adultery posed to social stability and dynastic continuity.

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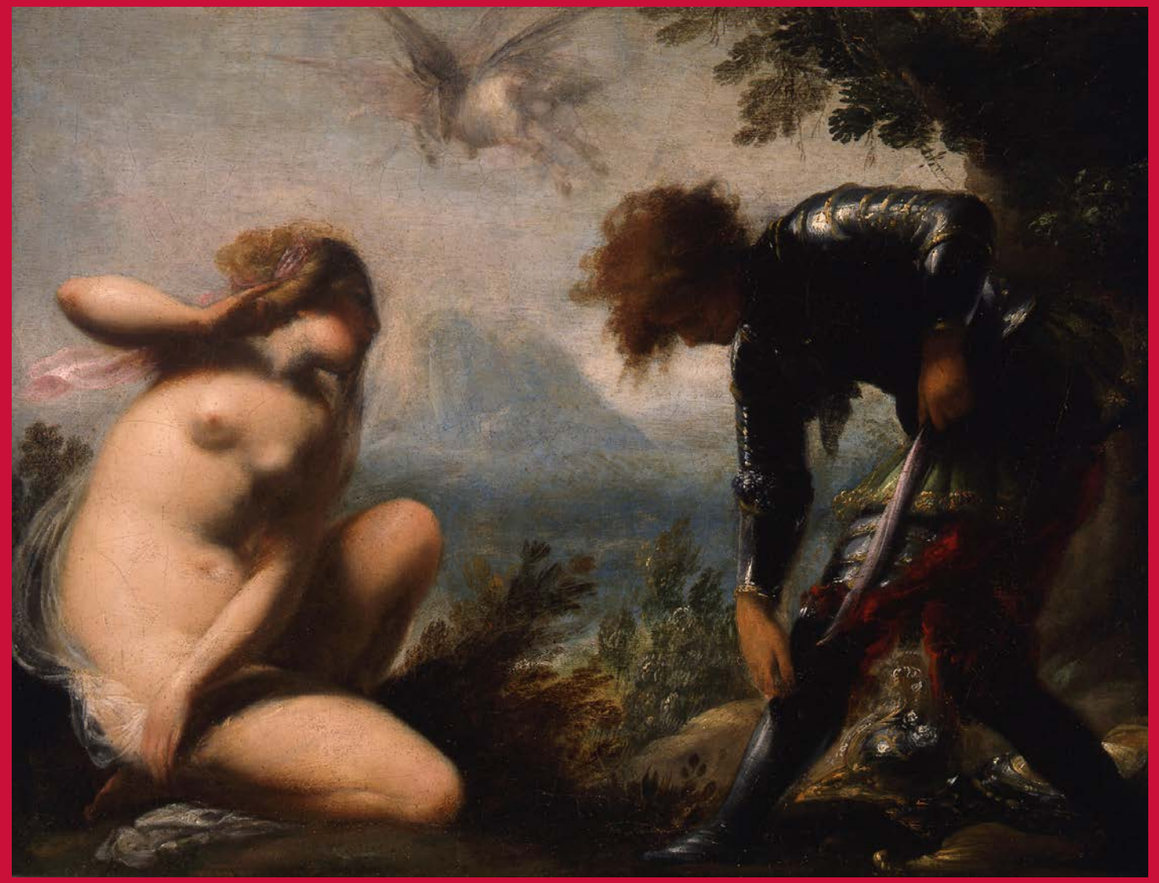
8. Francesco Fanelli (Italian, 1590-1653), *Venus and Cupid*, circa 1635, cast bronze, 15 ¼" x 8", photograph © 2023 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.
9. Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558-1617), *Venus and Mars Caught by Vulcan*, 1585, print, Image courtesy of the Rijksmuseum.



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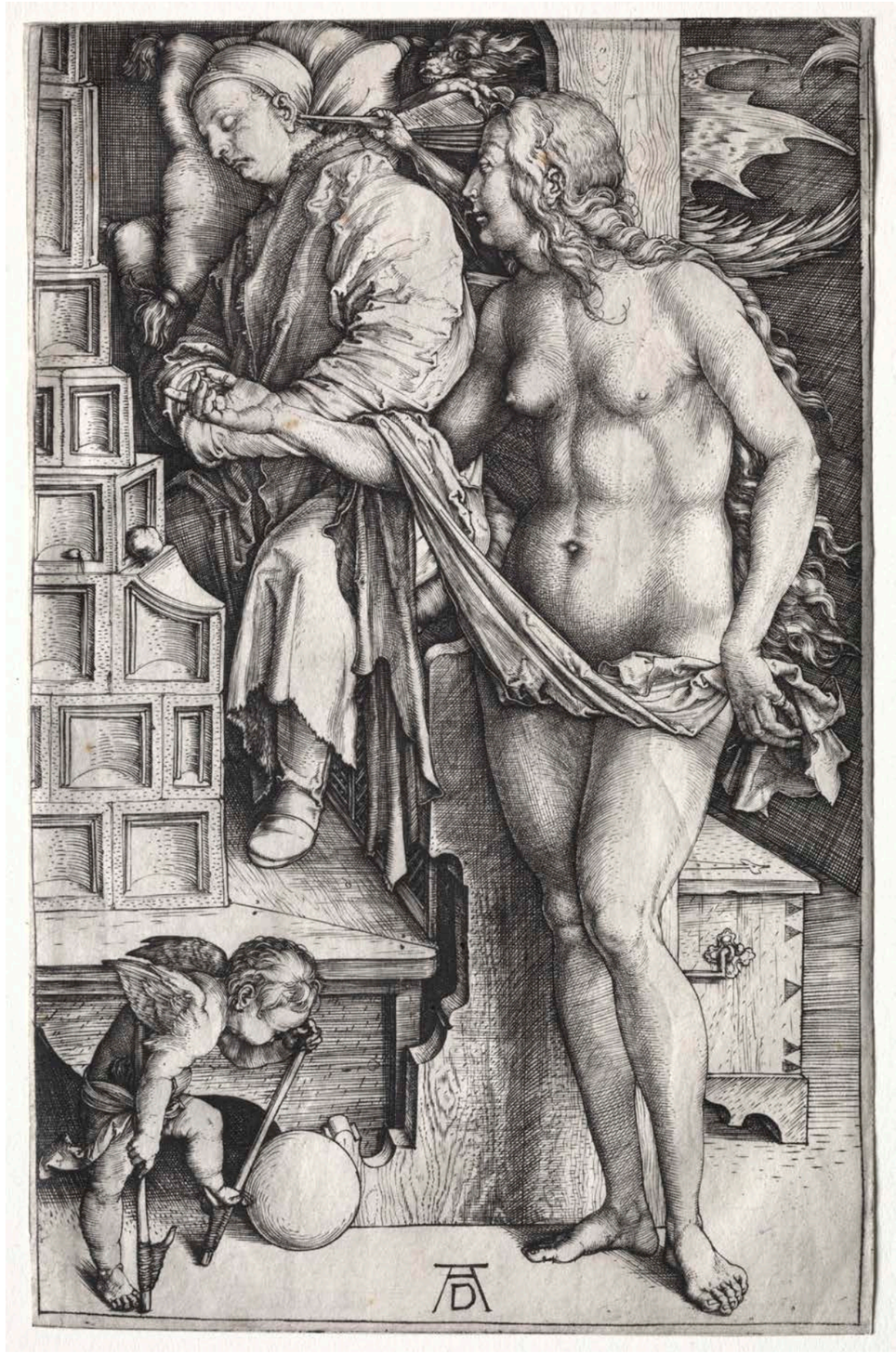
10. Cecco Bravo (Italian (Florentine), 1607-1661), *Angelica and Ruggiero*, circa 1640, oil on canvas, 18 ¾" x 23 1/2", photograph © 2023 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.
11. Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471–1528), *The Dream of the Doctor (Temptation of the Idler)*, circa 1500, engraving, image: 7 1/2" x 4 13/16", Image courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Leonard C. Hanna Jr., 1934.341.



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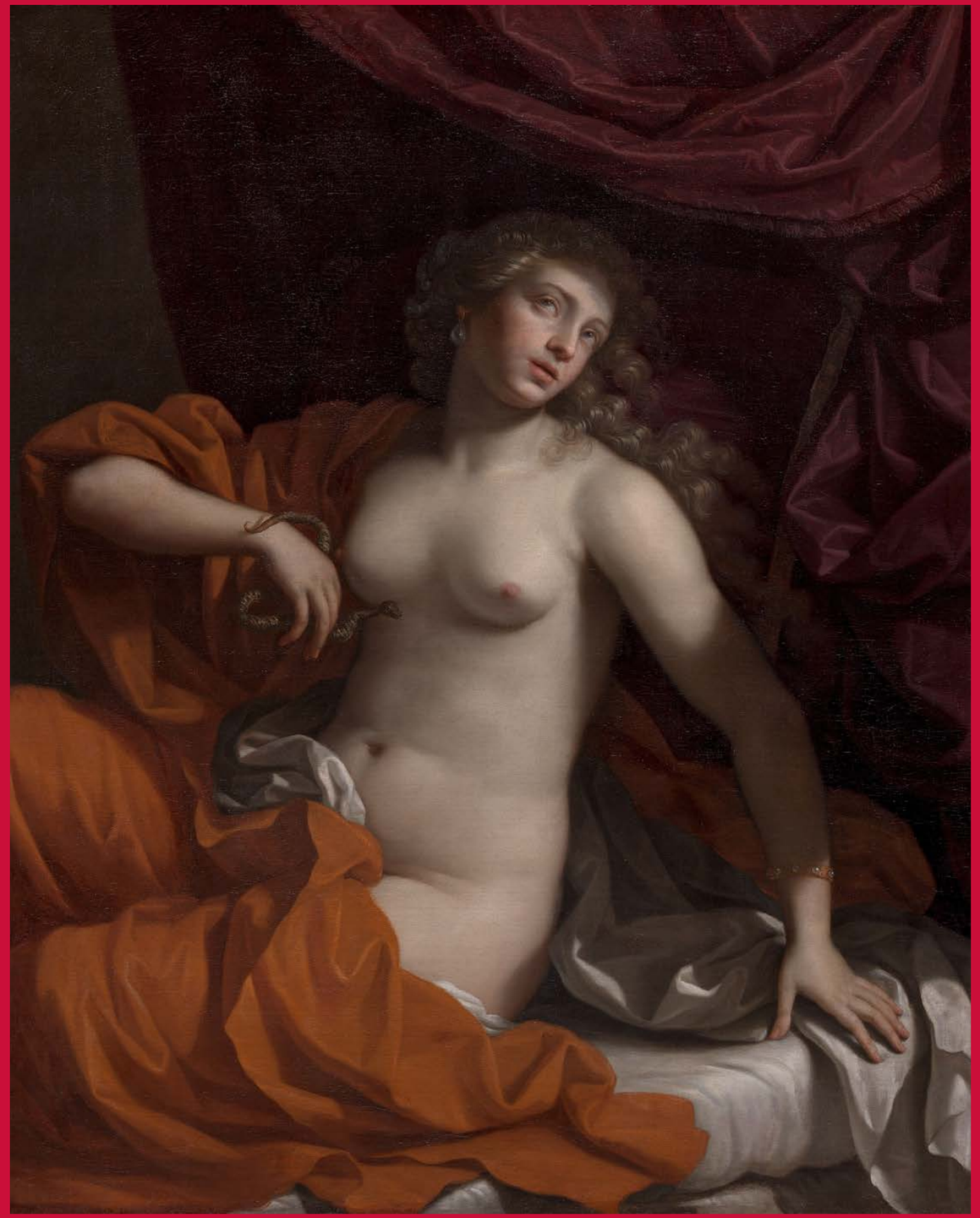
On the WORTH of WOMEN

Moderata Fonte's audacious sixteenth-century dialogue *Il Merito delle donne (On the Worth of Women)* championed women's merit in public society at a time when it was fiercely disputed. The book presents a conversation among seven friends who question traditional expectations and ask why women so often bore the consequences of men's actions. The artworks in this section explore similar themes through stories of feminine fortitude and sacrifice. As the subjects of unwanted or misdirected desire, exemplary women from the Bible, mythology, and ancient history faced tragedy and violent death—whether their own or another's. Their bodies became sites of conflict between power and desire that both frightened and inspired Renaissance viewers. By adding contemporary settings and clothing, artists connected these women's lives to the religious and political upheavals of their own time.

12

12. German artist, *Tankard with Lid and scenes of Judith, Lucretia, and Venus*, 1600-1639, repoussé and engraved silver, partially gilded, 5 ⅝' x 5 1⁄16" x 3 15⁄16", Image courtesy of University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, 1966/2.18.
13. Benedetto Gennari (Italian, 1633–1715), *Cleopatra*, (1674-1675), oil on canvas, Image courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, B2004.1.



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In the early 1500s, the rise of the Protestant Reformation challenged papal authority and established doctrine, plunging the Catholic Church into unprecedented turmoil. In response, Catholics launched the Counter Reformation, a powerful century-long campaign beginning in the 1540s. These disputes extended even to the Bible. Catholic writers and artists celebrated Hebrew heroines such as Judith and Esther as allegories of the Church's triumph over heresy, while Protestant audiences interpreted them as political metaphors for the defeat of Catholic rule. Women from ancient history—such as Lucretia and Virginia—likewise became secular saints whose lives and tragic deaths symbolized civic virtue in the face of corruption. Far from simply pitting victims against perpetrators, their portrayals reveal the nuanced responses that Renaissance audiences brought to the uneasy liaison of violence and virtue.

14. Jan Adriaensz van Staveren (Dutch, circa 1614-1669), *Esther before Ahasuerus,* circa 1640-45, oil on panel, 34.13" x 29 3/5", Image courtesy of The Leiden Collection, New York.

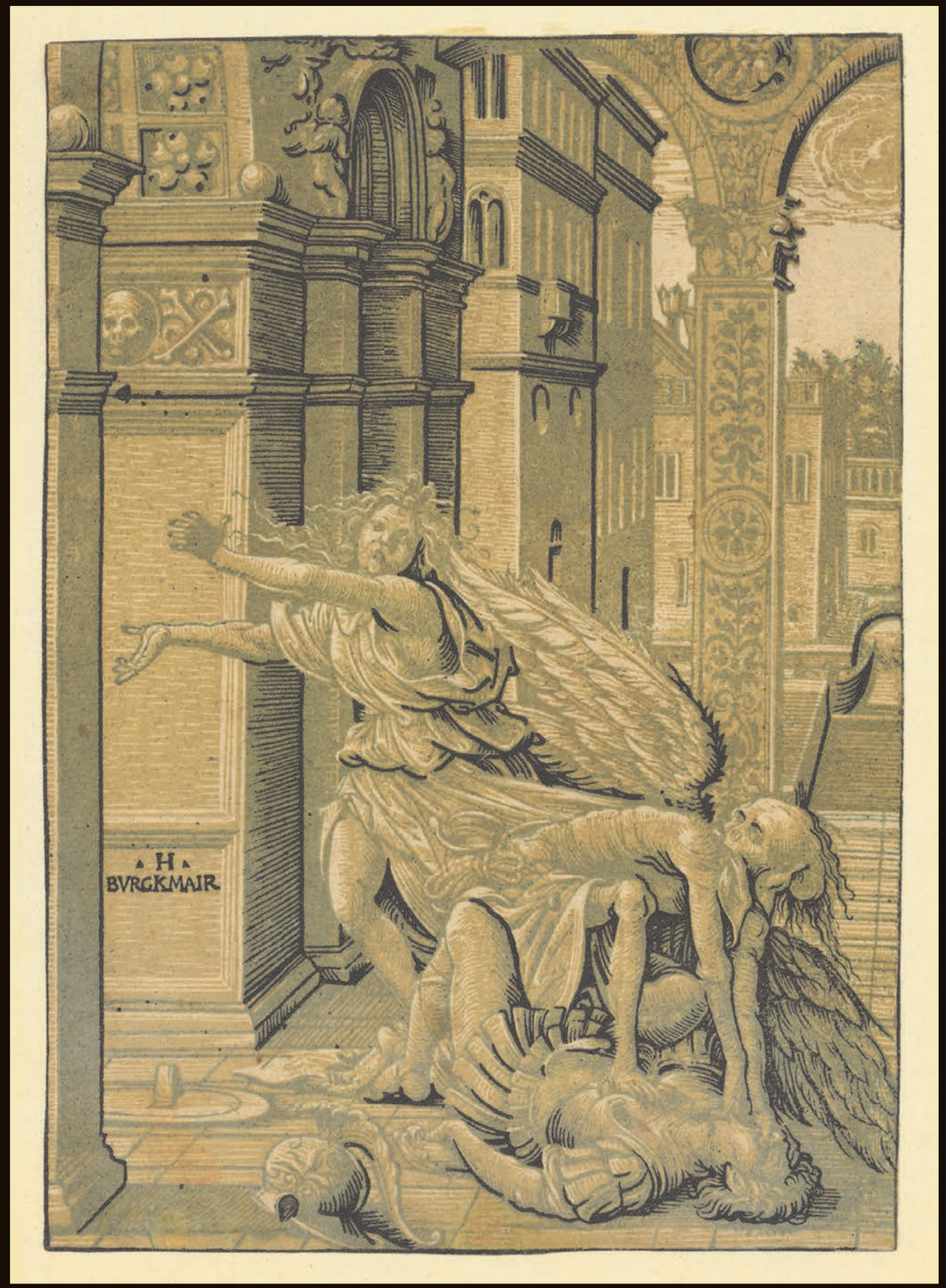
MORALITY and MORTALITY

Lust could be lethal, but it could also be laughable. Northern Renaissance artists seized on both possibilities, with innovative prints that explored the consequences of desire in turns grim and absurd. Their scenes contrasted youth and beauty with grotesque skeletons, starkly confronting viewers with their own mortality. Artworks evoking these *memento mori* themes, based on the Latin dictum "remember that you will die," reflected the fears of a population contending with waves of plague, war, and famine. The related concept of *vanitas* extended this warning, encompassing images that cautioned against sins of excess and the dangerous, fleeting nature of earthly pleasures. Such depictions, like those of mismatched couples exchanging money for pleasure, wryly admonished viewers about the perils of passion or the foolishness of old age. Circulating widely in domestic settings throughout Europe, these prints directed social criticism tinged with comedic satire at elite and ordinary audiences alike.

Alluring young women figured prominently in these scenes as seducers, victims, or foils to masculine folly. In an age consumed with the cultivation of physical beauty, such images struck at the heart of a pervasive anxiety. For women especially, whose appearance was closely tied to their social standing and prospects, the pursuit of beauty was also a vital struggle against the forces of decay that artists depicted. Yet for all their seeming worldliness, these works carried a graver message. The connection between temptation and punishment was, at its core, biblical. These haunting images allude to the Renaissance belief that human mortality is the ultimate consequence of the original sin of Adam and Eve, which first and forever linked desire and death.

15

15. Albrecht Dürer, (German, 1471–1528), *The Ravisher*, circa 1495, engraving, sheet: 4 1⁄2" x 4 1⁄16", Image courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund, 1968.36.



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16. Hans Burgkmair (German, 1473-1531), *Lovers Surprised by Death*, 1510, color woodcut (three blocks), 8 3⁄16" x 5 ¾, Image Courtesy of Armin Kunz, © C.G. Boerner.
17. Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471–1528), *Coat of Arms with a Skull*, 1503, engraving, 8 5⁄8" x 6 ⅛", Image Courtesy of Armin Kunz, © C.G. Boerner.

18. Willem Wissing (circa 1656–1687), *Mary of Modena*, 1685-1687, oil on canvas, Image courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, B1986.10.

ABOUT the CURATOR

Nora Lambert is an art historian specializing in cross-continental artistic exchanges and the gendered nature of artistic production and reception. Her 2026 dissertation at the University of Chicago, "Picturing Mobility: Late Medieval and Renaissance Naples at the Threshold of the Mediterranean," was generously supported by the Fulbright Program, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and the Bibliotheca Hertziana — Max Planck Institute for Art History. She has held positions at museums including the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and in several New York City collections. Nora was the inaugural 2020-2021 Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art, where she organized the first iteration *Lust, Love, and Loss in Renaissance Europe*. She is also a member of the 2020 cohort of the Center for Curatorial Leadership's Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Seminar in Curatorial Practice.

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works
Approximately 45 objects

Requirements
High Security; 2,000 square feet

Participation Fee
Please inquire

Curator
Nora S. Lambert

Shipping
IA&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay outgoing shipping costs within the contiguous US

Booking Period
12 weeks

Tour Dates
January 2027 - April 2028

Contact
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