

LEOH Trip

MFAH – The Audrey Jones Beck Building

March 3, 2023

MFAH *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*
Susan and Faye S. Sarofim Campus

The Beck building is named for its patron, Audrey Jones Beck. Exhibits include collections of ancient art, European art, and American art, including photos, prints, and drawings, to the mid-20th century.



Margaret Hansen
MFAH Docent



Upon entering the museum, LEOH members were greeted by our docent. She handed out over-the-ear listening devices, which allowed everyone to hear her clearly throughout the tour.

We immediately noted some large and impressive sculpted pieces upon entering. The marble sarcophagus, created by an unknown roman sculptor between 140-170 AD, depicts a battle between soldiers and amazons (warrior women)! Covering the wall behind this and other exhibits were names of museum donors.

Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Art

The late Medieval and early Renaissance periods, 1300–1500, overlap organically. The rise of cities and trade produced a wealthy merchant class that competed with aristocrats to commission art. The Italian city-states of Siena, Florence, and Venice emerged as rivals in commerce, banking, and the arts. The legacy of Sienese, Florentine, and Venetian painting of this period is characterized by radiant gold leaf and elegant human forms.

Luxurious textiles and liturgical items fashioned from precious metals were in high demand, as the Church remained the center of communal life. By the mid-15th century, the style of art across all media began to transform. Artists started to look to nature and classical antiquity for inspiration, spawning the early Renaissance (meaning “rebirth”). Gold leaf was abandoned for naturalistic landscapes, and the human form became more lifelike, exemplified in works by artists such as Verrocchio and Giovanni Bellini.

Art in 16th-Century Venice

The proud Venetian Republic, called *La Serenissima* (meaning “the most serene one”) was a network of islands within the Venetian Lagoon. Its dominance in maritime trade, spanning from Italy to the Middle East, brought untold wealth and artistic treasures to the city for centuries. In the 16th century, Venice rivaled Rome as the capital of Renaissance art. This small seafaring republic established itself as a center of artistic innovation, particularly in the area of monumental wall and ceiling paintings, glass production, and book printing.

Artists from Northern Europe, including Albrecht Dürer, traveled to Venice for study, thus establishing an important link between Venice, the Netherlands, and the broader German region. Venetian painting is celebrated for its bold use of color, energetic brushstrokes, and a penchant for the monumental. Artists who embody this tradition include Titian, Jacopo Bassano, Paolo Veronese, and Jacopo Tintoretto.

16th-Century Netherlandish and German Art

The Netherlands (Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg) and Germany in the 16th century were burgeoning economic powerhouses. Roman Catholicism was the official religion until the Protestant Reformation arrived. In 1537, the *Bildersturm* (meaning “image storm”) erupted in Augsburg, then in the Netherlands in 1566, and religious images were destroyed by portions of the population. This turmoil focused the Catholic Church’s effort to produce and defend sacred images. The artworks of intimate dimensions in this gallery, intended for use in domestic spaces, display the mixture of the sacred and secular that remained present in everyday life.

Netherlandish artists of the 15th century exercised immense influence throughout Europe and especially Italy. This tradition of artistic prowess, characterized by attention to detail and naturalistic rendering of landscapes and the human figure, continued into the 16th century, as exemplified by artists such as Rogier van der Weyden and Albrecht Dürer.



On the left:
Virgin and Child are depicted on limewood, painted and gilded, by and unknown south German, c. 1500-1510

On the right:
 Also by an unknown German, **Saints Margaret and Elizabeth Presenting a Female Donor**, c. 1525-1530, stained glass



Virgin and Child
 c. 1395-1400
 By unknown Italian (Florentine) artist, tempera and gold leaf on wood



Our docent discusses this piece
by an unknown Italian,
**The Meeting of Solomon
and the Queen of Sheba.**
Painted with tempera
and gold leaf, c. 1470-1473



Above is a German **Morse**, or clasp (c. 1520), used
in the 16th century as a closure for a cope, a cloak-
like vestment worn by the clergy. Catholic rituals
at this time were complex and full of imagery.



This fantastic table was designed by
Giovanni Vincenzo Casale, Italian sculptor.
The Corsini Table, 1580-1590.
Made of rare marbles, alabaster,
and mother of pearl.



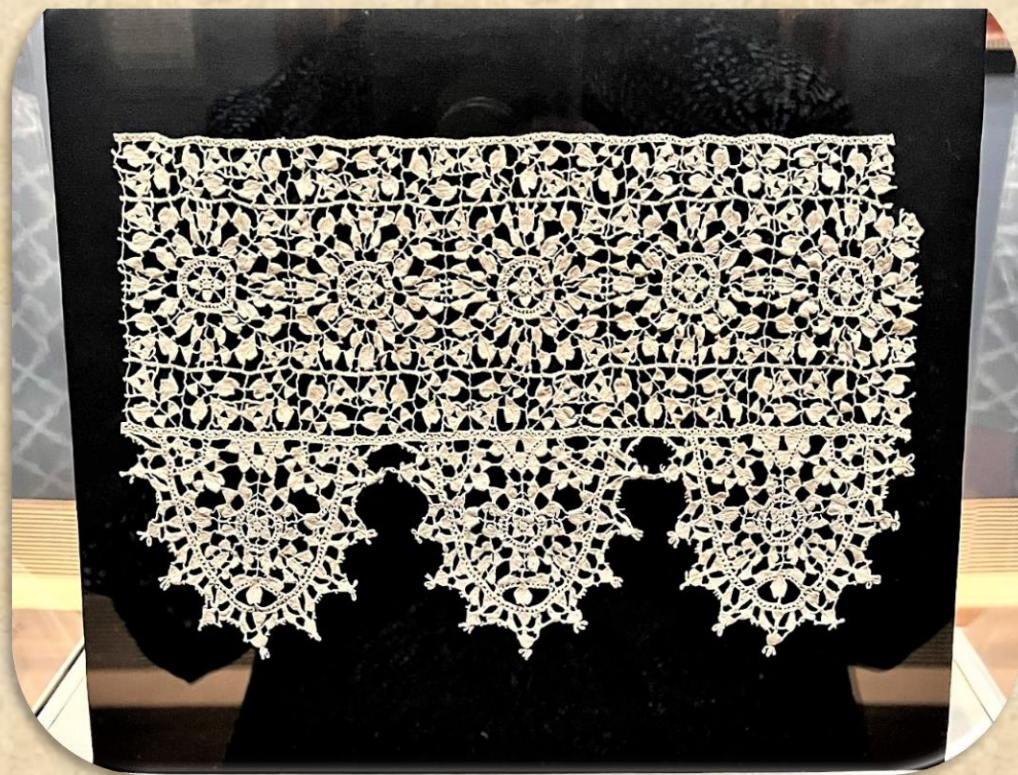


Sometimes one can forget that many artists paintings were quite large!



Two shell cups, c. 1601-1625, from the workshop of Italian Alfonso Patanazzi. These type of story paintings depict historical, biblical, or mythological scenes, with some commissioned by Renaissance patrons for home display.

Below, a lace border of linen, early 17th century. *Punto in aria* was an early form of needle lace devised in Italy.





LEOH members are admiring a large coffer made of silver and gilt-bronze, by Italian Nicola De Angelis, c. 1710. Coffers such as this one were meant to securely hold treasured items, such as religious relics or jewelry. So.....a giant jewelry box!

To the right - our docent discusses the bronze sculpture **Bacchante with Infant Faun**, by Frederick William MacMonnies, c. 1893-1894.



To the right – the ornate and beautiful clock and table were not made by the same person; however, they do display nicely together.



Extremely realistic paintings were on display, very impressive for their almost three-dimensional effect on the viewer. Below, see Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn's **Portrait of a Young Woman** 1633, oil on wood



Banquet Piece with Ham
by Willem Claesz. Heda
1656, oil on canvas

Still Life of Flowers and Fruit
Jan van Huysum, c. 1715.
Oil on wood



A Cabinet of Curiosity

We entered a room of paintings that also contained curio cabinets and display tables. Quoting the pamphlet which explained the contents, “In the 16th and 17th centuries, European princes and wealthy collectors created “cabinets of curiosity” by gathering intriguing, exotic, and visually stunning objects into comprehensive collections meant to represent the world in microcosm”.



These curiosities on display included small statues, animal skeletons, coins, porcelain vases, a snuffbox, a rosary, sundial, writings, and seashells.





The Yellow Scale

Self-portrait by
Czech artist
Frantisek Kupka,
c. 1907



American Dress

Silk, cotton, and velvet.
A style fashionable from
the 1840's through the
early 1860's,
c. 1860

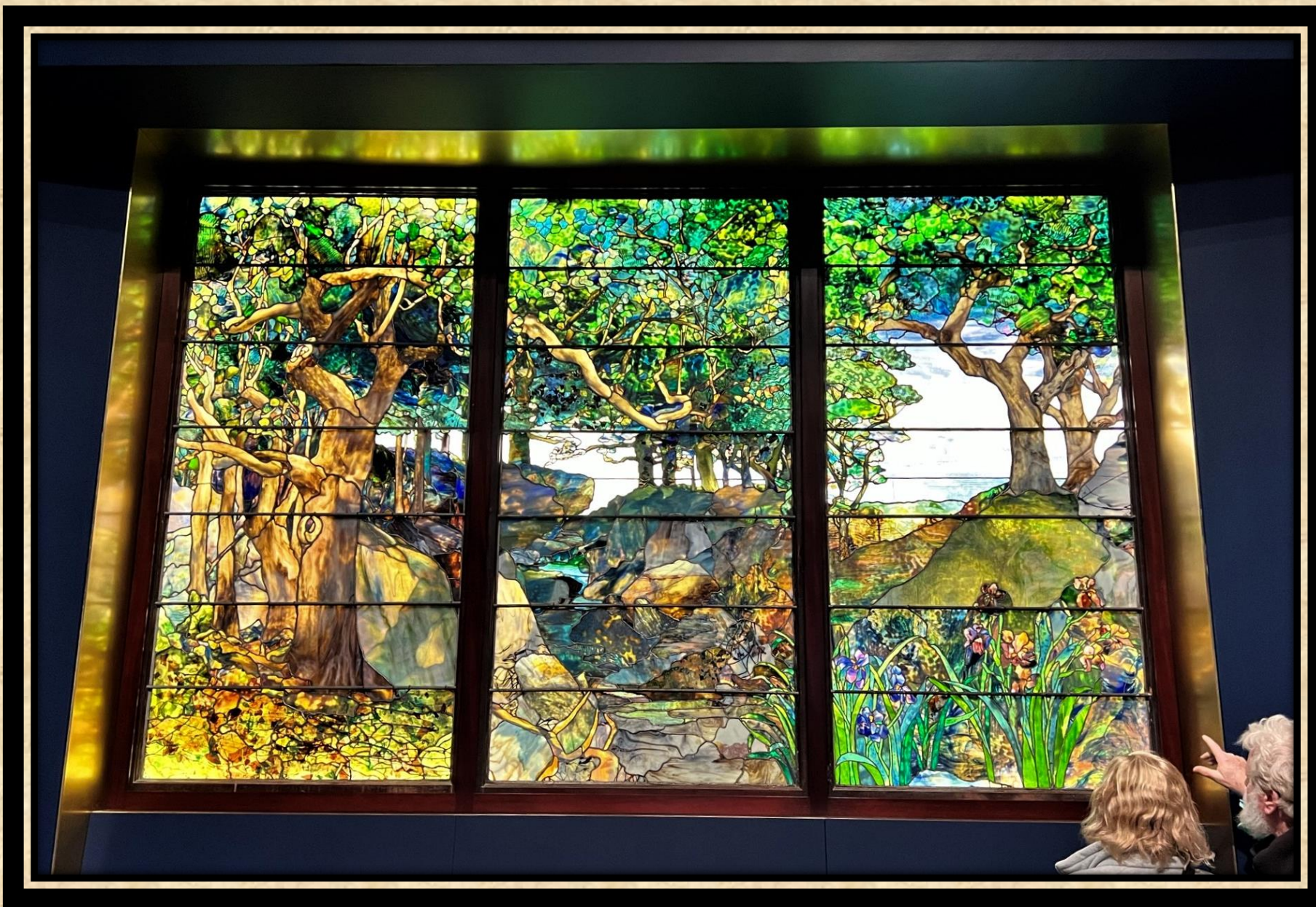


Marcelle Aron (Madame Tristan Bernard)

Artist Edouard Vuillard, 1914.

Distemper on canvas.

Our guide pointed out that the painting
was unusual in that the subject is
reflected in a large mirror behind her.



Our last stop was lunch at ***fia's pizzeria***, a short distance from the Beck building.

Thank you, LEOH trip coordinator Ann Fairchild, for yet another fascinating and educational trip!

A Wooded Landscape in Three Panels

American artist Louis Comfort Tiffany, c. 1905; Glass, copper-foil, and lead