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LIFE AND LEGACY
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The Namesake's Art

From the walls of the Duc d'Orléans

BY JOHN R. KEMP

As New Orleans celebrates its Tricentennial, nothing could be more fitting than a visit to the city's namesake, Philippe II, Duc d'Orléans. Of course the duke can't come in person, he died in 1723, but what is coming to the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) in October is a large selection from his vast and historic collection of European art that once graced the

grand salons of the Palais-Royal in Paris.

A little over two years in the making, this princely blockbuster, titled "The Orléans Collection," should prove a stunning contribution to the city's birthday celebrations. Organized by the museum solely for New Orleans, the show will feature 40 to 50 masterpieces from the duke's private art collection gathered from approximately 20 museums in the U.S. and Europe, including, among others, the

Louvre in Paris, the National Gallery of London, Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery, Florence's Uffizi Gallery, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and Holland's Rijksmuseum.

According to NOMA's Senior Research Curator of European Art Vanessa Schmid, who researched and organized the exhibition, Philippe's collection, originally numbering 772 artworks, ranked among the greatest private art collections in 18th century Europe.

"Praised as one of the finest in Paris," Schmid said, "this exceptional collection comprised some of the preeminent works in the history of art, including paintings by Veronese, Tintoretto, Poussin, Rubens and Rembrandt, all of whom will be represented in the exhibition. This unprecedented, international exhibition will bring together a selection of masterpieces from the collection for the first time in over two centuries."

Philippe, who began collecting in his early 20s, particularly favored Renaissance Florentine and Venetian art, which he reserved for his grand gallery. A voracious collector, he also was among the first in France to purchase Dutch and Flemish art, which he displayed in his private apartments where, Schmid said, "most of his famous and notorious parties took place."

Underwritten by more than a dozen corporate, private, and public foundation grants, including the National Endowment of the Arts, Schmid has spent the last two years ferrying back and forth across the U.S. and Europe, tracking down paintings and researching their provenance. Some museums have closed collections and wouldn't lend their works, while others restored their paintings specifically for the show in New Orleans. Schmid's selection criteria were simple – quality and historical significance.

"I have been tenacious about quality and why everything has a place in the show," she said. "There were plenty of paintings I could have gotten but the priority from day one has been quality and range. The selection is representative of artists and subject matter in the duke's collection. That's been challenging to manage, but it's important."

As Schmid describes the paintings she has chosen, her thoughts seemed to turn inward as if she was there in Philippe's Palais-Royal strolling slowly among the masterpieces. What a glorious walk that must have been.

In addition to luxurious and historic artwork, the show also will explore the duke's artistic tastes and psychology as a collector, the Palais-Royal as a center for the arts in Paris, how the duke displayed his collection in private and public spaces in the palace, the history of the collection, court life, the collection's reputation based on earlier writings and Parisian guidebooks from the early 1700s, and, finally, the collection's influences on 18th century artists in Europe.

"I conceived the show in themes and I selected paintings to take us through those themes," Schmid said. "We have the Palais-Royal itself as the center of his court. Louis XIV brought court life to Versailles

in 1666, and the duke brought it back to Paris after refurbishing the palace. What we have for that section of the exhibition is the extraordinary centerpiece of the Palais-Royal, the Gallery of Aeneas dedicated to the Aeneas, the mythical founder of Rome."

Philippe commissioned his court artist Antoine Coypel to paint the Assembly of the Gods ceiling as well as paintings along the walls of the gallery to tell the story of Aeneas. Tragically, a fire in the 19th century destroyed the paintings.

"Fortunately," said Schmid, "we have Coypel's fabulous oil descriptive copy of the paintings coming from the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Angers, France. It is this most important record we have of the now lost ceiling. It's a rare and exceptional document that will situate visitors in the Palais-Royal section of the exhibition."

The Orléans Collection also will demonstrate how the duke organized his collection.

"It will be kind of hierarchical," said Schmid. "He prioritized the importance of Venetian art. Venetian and Florentine-Roman Renaissance were considered the supreme examples of art historical achievement. We'll also have a little section on his Dutch and Flemish pictures and a later section will discuss the disposition of his collection. Before

that, we will have works by early French artists who got to study at the Palais-Royal."

To appreciate the exhibition better and the duke's relevance to New Orleans is to know a little something about the collector himself and his place in French history. Philippe was an intriguing figure in 18th century Europe. At the death of his uncle Louis XIV in 1715, the crown passed to the former king's five-year-old great grandson, Louis XV. Because the king was so young, the Duc d'Orléans served as regent to rule France until his cousin became of age in 1723.

Apparently, the duke made the most of his eight-year regency. In a 1997 biography of the duke, British historian Christine Pevitt describes this period as "the time of (French painter) Watteau, the young Voltaire, the Mississippi Bubble, the founding of New Orleans, the plays of Marivaux, the perfection of the Paris town house, and the Boule commode."

As to his New Orleans connection, the duke strongly backed efforts to expand and develop France's American colonies, especially in the Caribbean and Louisiana. In 1712 the crown granted Frenchman Antoine Crozat an exclusive charter to the Louisiana colony. Antoine was the brother of Pierre Crozat, the duke's close friend who often represented the duke in purchasing art for his collection. After five years of losing money, Philippe

relieved Crozat of his burden. Along came Scotsman John Law, who had formed the "Banque Générale" of France in 1716. The industrious Scot convinced his friend the duke that Louisiana had potential for great wealth. In 1717 Law formed the Company of the West, later reorganized as the Company of the Indies, as a joint stock company



FACING PAGE: "THE MEETING OF DAVID AND ABIGAIL," BY GUIDO RENI (ITALIAN), OIL ON CANVAS, CIRCA 1615-20, CHRYSLER MUSEUM OF ART, NORFOLK, VIRGINIA ABOVE: "ALEXANDER AND HIS DOCTOR," BY EUSTACHE LE SUEUR, CIRCA 1648-49, OIL ON CANVAS, THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON



and sold shares to finance his Louisiana scheme. Tulane University historian Lawrence Powell describes Law's adventure as a "Ponzi scheme of mind-boggling proportions." Though a financial failure, the company firmly established the Louisiana colony, including New Orleans. In naming the city, Law and company officials chose "La Nouvelle Orléans" to flatter their benefactor.

The duke and his legacy are a bit more complex, however. He inherited a kingdom almost bankrupt with rising social and

political unrest within the aristocracy and among the masses. As a result, he made friends and enemies.

"The man who presided over (the royal court)," said historian Pevitt, "has been dismissed as a rake, an idler, a débouché, and hailed as a dedicated worker for the good of the state, a statesman of vision, a wit and a hero, a modern man in his tolerance and freedom from bigotry."

The 18th century French writer and philosopher Voltaire, once imprisoned by

TOP, LEFT: "ECSTASY OF SAINT PAUL," BY NICOLAS POUSSIN (FRENCH), OIL ON PANEL, 1643, JOHN AND MABLE RINGLING MUSEUM OF ART, THE STATE ART MUSEUM OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY, SARASOTA. TOP, RIGHT: "SUPPER AT EMMAUS," BY PAOLO CALIARI, CALLED VERONESE (ITALIAN), OIL ON CANVAS, MID-1570S, MUSEUM BOIJMANS-VAN BEUNINGEN, ROTTERDAM. BOTTOM, LEFT: PHILIPPE II, DUKE OF ORLÉANS, 1715-1723. ATTRIBUTED TO GUY NOËL AUBRY (FRENCH, 18TH-CENTURY), OIL ON CANVAS, 248 X 160 CM (97 5/8 X 63 IN). MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS D'ORLÉANS, ORLÉANS, FRANCE, FRANÇOIS LAUGINIE. BOTTOM, RIGHT: "THE VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH SAINTS JEROME, PETER FRANCIS AND AN UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SAINT," BY LORENZO LOTTO (ITALIAN), CA. 1505. NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND, EDINBURGH

the duke for his writings, described Philippe as a tolerant man of intelligence, courage and good nature. He also said the duke was a man “of few scruples, but incapable of crime.” Philippe was also known for his amorous liaisons and his passion for the arts. He played the flute, guitar, clavichord and enjoyed painting, something he started as a child and continued for the rest of his life.

“One of the most important developments over the last five to 10 years is a reevaluation of the duke as a political figure,” Schmid said. “He inherited the crown in terrible debt and managed it very well and was able to achieve a great deal of stability. That reappraisal is already happening in France. What I am hoping this show can bring out and reinforce is the duke as a tactician, a good politician, a good political mind, and well educated but also a fun-loving hedonist.”

As to the duke’s extensive art collection, the 18th century French writer Mathieu Marais once quipped tongue-in-cheek that “one does not know which is the stronger passion, that for his paintings or for his women. But he has no taste for arrangement; he hangs a religious painting near a nude, an architectural drawing next to a landscape. His main pleasure comes from amassing so many.”

True, says Schmid, but Marais and others at the time didn’t understand that Philippe’s collecting philosophy was more about “connoisseurship.” He organized his collection by artistic schools and not simply by aesthetics or visual content. The duke considered his collection to be a history of art.

“It was actually revolutionary and a new way of looking at art as connoisseurship,” she said. “That was something he was working on with his friend Crozat and his court painter Coypel. They were very interested in exploring artists, style, the significances of a certain school, and how artists dealt with subject matter. That mixing of nudes with religious paintings that

was so jarring to many was actually quite brilliant and forward thinking and a new way of looking at art. He didn’t collect willy-nilly. He had a discerning eye.”

Philippe, through dealers and agents such as Coypel and Crozat, lived in constant search of specific paintings, artists and subjects to add to his expanding collection. He purchased paintings at auctions, exchanged paintings with other collectors, and accepted paintings as gifts. In 1721, for instance, he purchased over a hundred masterpieces from the royal collection of Queen Christina of Sweden. Many of those paintings originally had been in the Habsburg family, which ruled much of Europe until World War I.

After the duke’s death in 1723, the collection remained in his family and on view to the Parisian public at the Palais-Royal for two generations before landing in the hands of his great grandson Louis-Philippe II, also known as Philippe-Égalité.

“In the early 1790s during the French Revolutions, Louis-Philippe sold the collection, which was broken up into two parts, to two groups of London art dealers,” Schmid said. “Through various sales and viewings in the 1790s in London the collection was dispersed

mainly in the United Kingdom and throughout Europe.”

During the revolution, Louis-Philippe supported the moderate democratic movement, hence the name Philippe-Égalité. Unfortunately for him, a radical turn of political events during the Reign of Terror sent him to the guillotine in 1793.

With that historical note said, NOMA’s exhibit also will demonstrate how the duke’s collection contributed to the formation of public museums such as the National Gallery in London. Prior to the sale of the collection in London in the 1790s, an enterprising Englishman put the collection up for public view in his gallery and charged admission to see the paintings. According to Schmid, this was the first time ordinary people got to see what was locked away in palaces. Many of the same people who purchased the paintings later formed art museums in England.

“The Orléans Collection” should proved to be exceptional. For unlike exhibitions that simply showcase NOMA’s collections or are on loan from other institutions, “The Orléans Collection” is creating a historic moment with lasting intellectual results. To accompany the show, the museum will publish a 300-page, fully illustrated catalog about the duke and his collection with scholarly essays written and edited by Schmid and a team of nine American and European art historians. It also will include a complete list of every painting in the original 18th century collection taken from an inventory compiled in 1727 after the duke’s death.

“Presentation of ‘The Orléans Collection’ is an unprecedented opportunity to engage in new scholarship and research,” said Susan Taylor, NOMA’s Montine McDaniel Freeman Director. “The collection offers a perspective on collecting tastes at the time of the founding of New Orleans as well as a direct connection to the city and its namesake. As the Tricentennial will

demonstrate, the connections to the court of the Duke of Orleans are many and varied.”

Schmid hopes visitors to the exhibition will take away an understanding of a complex man in a different era and world with an insatiable intellectual and aesthetic passion for art and what it meant to him and hisgency.

“The ideas around this show are big,” Schmid said. “What do these objects and subjects tell us about princely ideas? What are the allegories and what do they tell us about the historical thinking at that moment? Why were some schools of art more appreciated than others? What were the artists doing and making? However, the exhibition is about art. We are bringing important masterpieces that our local public will never have a chance to see again. This hasn’t been done before and it won’t be done again. This is a real gift to the city that our leadership at NOMA has made happen.”

Thanks also to Philippe II, Duc d’Orléans, for his art and his name. *The “The Orléans Collection” opens Oct. 26 and runs through Jan. 27, 2019. For more information, visit Noma.org.*



“PRECIOUS RECOGNIZED,” BY GODFRIED SCHALKEN (DUTCH), OIL ON PANEL, LATE 1600S, NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND, DUBLIN