

Ecstasy and Melancholy in Masters of Emotion at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery

At a time when highly successful international touring exhibitions are a regular feature of the programs of Australia's major art galleries (such as *Rembrandt, Caravaggio, and Dutch Masters* in recent years), the opportunities for Australian curators to initiate large exhibitions with works by the Old Masters are infrequent. However, Independent Curator Irena Zdanowicz, formerly Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), has done that with *Masters of Emotion: Exploring the Emotions from the Old Masters to the Present* at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery (20 April – 24 June 2007). This was made possible in no small part by generous loans from many of Australia's major public collections, particularly the NGV, as well as private owners. Furthermore, Zdanowicz has brought these fragile and valuable works to a regional gallery where such things are rarely seen.

The exhibition began, as it were, with a mistake. A seventeenth-century Flemish drawing in the collection of the NGV was traditionally believed to represent the head of the Virgin mourning Christ's death. By chance, Zdanowicz came across Van Dyck's altarpiece from which the head appeared to be copied, and found to her surprise that the drawing depicts Saint Monica in ecstasy. The confusion of religious ecstasy for personal grief led to reflection. What are the means that artists have used to evoke emotional states?

On entering the first of three rooms of this exhibition, the visitor encountered a chronological preface featuring engravings after Giotto's celebrated *Pietà* in the Arena Chapel and Raphael's *The Morbetta (The Plague of Phrygia)*. The wall label and catalogue also refer to the writings of Alberti and Vasari, the texts and images combining to provide a snapshot of Italian attitudes to the depiction of emotions from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Vasari praised Giotto's naturalism, one that in the context of the exhibition encompasses the reality of human emotions. The catalogue refers to Vasari as the first historian of art, although, as with most firsts, this claim must be treated with caution. After all, decades earlier Ghiberti provided a rudimentary history of art from classical times to include Giotto's mural paintings in the Arena Chapel, which incidentally Vasari omitted.¹ Furthermore, Italian Renaissance painters had rivals in the depiction of emotions. Italians were themselves great admirers of the emotive qualities of the sacred art of Netherlandish painters—one only has to see Rogier van der Weyden's *Deposition* in the Prado to understand why. The Italians' avid collecting of Netherlandish works testifies to this, even if their artists were loath to admit it, witness Michelangelo's famously

derisive comment that Northern works were most appealing to women, the very old, the very young, monks, and nuns.²

At the rear of the first room was an intimate installation of sixteenth and seventeenth-century prints and manuscripts evoking the ambience of a humanist's studio, in which a small and unexpected treasure is Rembrandt's etching with drypoint *The Goldsmith*, from the estate of the late Dr Ursula Hoff. It shows the artist tenderly holding a sculpture (of the Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist?), even as he taps on its base with a mallet. This work entered into a dialogue with the Renaissance texts displayed in the cabinet below, even perhaps Giambattista della Porta's somewhat spurious *De humana physiognomonia (On Human Physiognomy)*, about the malleability of the human form as a means for expressing feelings—in the treatise, the various animal characteristics of the human face; in the print, the tender maternal embrace, as well as the goldsmith's loving paternity of his sculpture.

Naturally for security reasons Old Master paintings would be difficult to include in an exhibition such as this, although an exception might have been made for old copies. *Les Jaloux (The Jealous Ones)*, rarely brought out from storage at the NGV, might have made a valuable complement to the eighteenth-century prints on the right wall of the first room, representing in part the light-hearted sentiment of French Rococo art. The painting shows two men spying on a party of four enjoying an intimate musical performance in a wooded park. The work was acquired in the early years of the Felton Bequest as the original submitted by Watteau for entrance to the Académie Royale in Paris in 1712. However, it was dismissed after 1973 as one of a number of copies, because French specialists—who may well have known the work only from reproductions—thought it lacked the magic of Watteau's own touch.³ It is, though, on a walnut panel, a species used by Watteau on more than one occasion. Furthermore, there appear to be horizontal striations in the priming, visible through the paint layers, also a characteristic of the artist's technique. Finally, from an engraving generally accepted as having been made after the original, it is known that the Melbourne composition is almost identical to the original and closely matches its dimensions. This might make an interesting subject for a future art historical and conservation assessment. Infrared reflectography investigation, in particular, might help to determine if there are any *pentimenti*—modifications made by the artist during the execution of the work—that might indicate whether we have the original.

Along one wall in the second room of the exhibition Zdanowicz staked a strong claim to Dürer's *Melencolia I* (NGV) as a key work in the western canon for the depiction of this state of mind. The engraving was displayed beside a series of paintings, prints, and photographs (notably Dorothea Lange's well known *Migrant Mother, Nipoma, California*) in which their subjects are

shown in similar despondent poses, some resting their heads in their hands. This motif has a long history, it was already in use with the fifteenth-century Italian painter Paolo Uccello for the figure of Joseph in his Adoration of the Child scenes. According to the Medieval Italian author Giovanni de Caulibus, Joseph was morose at the Nativity because he could not provide his child with a more comfortable environment to be born in.⁴ On the opposite wall depictions of couples embracing hung in contrast to the lonely melancholics. The star in this series was William Blake's *Satan Watching the Endearments of Adam and Eve*, also from the NGV, the writhing body of the serpent a vivid symbol of the twisted feelings of resentment or jealousy experienced by the first couple's observer. Appropriately, hanging between the opposing sides on an adjacent wall was Bill Henson's *Untitled #70*, one of his disturbing nocturnal trysts. Its subjects seemingly alone in their togetherness. The *coup de grâce*, though, in the second room was a series of well judged juxtapositions, such as two of Piranesi's hallucinatory *Carceri (Imaginary Prisons)* prints beside one of Warhol's grim *Electric Chair* screenprints; while Schenck's *Anguish* (a ewe protecting her dying or dead lamb from menacing crows) is saved from its Victorian melodrama by Tracey Moffatt's wry *Invocations #5*, a homage to Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

The third room contained for the most part twentieth-century works, a key feature of which—perhaps not surprisingly—is the increasingly rare portrayal of emotions through the human form. Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack's woodcut *Desolation, Internment Camp, Orange, NSW* places a lonely silhouette within a fenced enclosure. The emotion, bourn no doubt out of the artist's personal experience, is engendered through the void around the body. In later works, the personal, political, and linguistic bases of emotions are more frequently addressed, even more obliquely, through abstraction or texts. A work by Damien Hirst would have fitted well here—the NGV is to be congratulated for the recent acquisition of one of his prints. The unrivalled demand for Hirst's works indicates some collectors believe him to be one of the most important contemporary artists. A recurring theme of Hirst's oeuvre is the sinister quality of a world drained of affect, replaced by the clinical paradigm of science: specimens preserved in formaldehyde; life and death played out under controlled conditions; prescription drugs as a means of manipulating physical and mental states; and the subjects of his 'dot' paintings described in terms of molecular formulae.

An astute coupling in the last room was made between plates one and two from Picasso's *The Dream and Lie of Franco* series and Arthur Boyd's pen and ink *Figure in Factory Chimney with Beast*—the terrorising effects of war in the former replaced by the dehumanising effects of industry in the latter. The Gallic black humour of Louise Bourgeois' re-gendered *Saint Sébastienne* (pricked by arrows locating stress points on a headless and armless woman's body)

and the self-deprecation of Grayson Perry's *Map of an Englishman* (locating the neuroses of an English man's psyche on a fictitious map) brought the show to a close on a lighter note.

The thematic enterprise of this exhibition is to be praised. There are parallels with Hans Haacke's reinstallation of the Old Master and contemporary collections at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1996.⁵ Through a process of selection and alignment a dialogue emerged between artworks usually separated by museological departmentalisation, teasing out new meanings, and reigniting interest in works in public collections. It also brought to light little known works by important artists held in private collections. Picasso's drypoint *Minotour Caressing a Sleeping Woman* was another welcome surprise in this respect. This was a multi-faceted show, sparkling with ideas—a jewel in other words.

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¹ L. Ghiberti, *I commentarii* (*Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, II, I, 333*), introduced and edited by L. Bartoli, Florence, 1998.

² For a discussion of Italian responses to early Netherlandish art, particularly Florentine ones, see: M.L. Koster, 'Italy and the North: A Florentine Perspective', in *The Age of Van Eyck: The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting*, T.H. Borchert (ed.), exh. cat., Groningemuseum, Bruges, 2002, pp. 79–90.

³ See U. Hoff, 'Variation, Transformation and Interpretation: Watteau and Lucien Freud', *Art Bulletin of Victoria*, 31, 1990, pp. 26–31.

⁴ In discussing Uccello's Karlsruhe *Adoration* I. Dresel, D. Lüdke, and H. Vey (*Christus und Maria: Auslegungen Christlicher Gemälde der Spätgotik und Frürenaissance aus der Karlsruher Kunsthalle*, exh. cat., Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, 1992, pp. 114–19) traced the lineage of Dürer's *Melencolia I* to an illumination depicting Walter van der Vogelweide in the early fourteenth-century Codex Manesse housed in the Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek.

⁵ H. Haacke, *AnsichtsSachen, Viewing Matters*, exh. cat., Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1999.