The Indiscreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

Joey Skee (February 24, 2008)

A mysterious Italian woman, perhaps a lover, reveals a robber baron’s not-so-hidden ghosts.

This past week I made my way to the Frick Collection, a private museum located at Fifth Avenue and East 70th Street in Manhattan, to see the one painting exhibition of Parmigianino’s Antea (c. 1531–34), on loan from the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples. At the end of a long inner courtyard, hung the single canvas naturally lit by the skylight in the parquet-floored “Oval Room.” The near full-length portrait is of a sumptuously dressed woman who audaciously confronts each gawking visitor with her arresting gaze. Like her better-known counterpart hanging in Paris at the Lourve, Antea’s trace of a smile adds to her lasting allure.

She’s an odd one this Antea, a mystery of various sorts. Her disproportioned body, with its tiny head resting on acutely oblique shoulders and a massive torso, creates a disquieting effect. The wall text attempts to unveil her anonymity, unpacking the historical speculation to her identity as a noble bride, a famous Roman courtesan, or the artist’s daughter, servant, or mistress. We are told that Antea’s dress and accoutrements, from the marten fur stole draped across her shoulders to the gold

chain she touches with her ungloved hand, are sixteenth century symbols of fertility, lust, and eroticism.

For me, the painting wasn't the only unsettling thing I encountered on this my first visit to the museum. The shadow of coke-and-steel industrialist Henry Clay Frick loomed large that day as did the ghosts of the immigrant workers he suppressed. The Italian paramour and the Italian laborers were brought together in the problematical intertextual web of this "art world," what sociologist Howard Becker identified as "an established network of cooperative links among participants . . . that radiates out from the work in question" (Art Worlds, University of California Press, 184, p. 34-35).

It is all too easy to be seduced by the ostentatious Beaux-Arts mansion and its impressive collection of canonical artworks, including some of my all time favorites like Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert (1480), Holbein the Younger's Sir Thomas More (1527), and Ingres's Comtess d'Haussonville (1845), among others. But I could not shake the idea that these works were bought with the blood, sweat, and tears of nameless men and women struggling as part of America's industrial labor.

Frick's business acumen, his connoisseurship, and his grand benevolence in bequeathing his Gilded Era palace and collection are the highlights of the museum's hagiographical narrative. What remains untold within the rarefied context of aesthetic appreciation is the death of approximately 109 coal miners ("mostly Polish, Hungarian and Italian immigrants") in the 1891 explosion at the H. C. Frick Coke Company in Mammoth, Pennsylvania, the ferocious manner he suppressed workers during the infamous 1982 Homestead strike, and his culpability and then suppression of the investigation (along with his wealthy cronies at the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club) of the Great Johnstown Flood of 1889. All of this cursory information was found with just a few mouse clicks.

Writing about Antea's ambiguous physicality, Holland Cotter of The New York Times stated, "this is an image of a figure as a thing of contradictions." The recontextualization of this incongruous and intriguing image in the house of Frick sparked my profane illumination, to use Walter Benjamin's term, releasing the specters that haunt America's past.

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