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The Geometry of Beauty

by Jeanne SchintoSplendor and Elegance: European Deco

A Book Review

by Jeanne Schinto

***Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection* With essays by Horace Wood Brock, Martin P. Levy, and Clifford S. Ackley**

MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2009, 160 pp., hardbound, $55, available from the MFA Bookstore and Shop, 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115-5523, or on line (www.mfa.org/publications).

Cabinet-on-stand, circa 1805, London, England, attributed to James Newton (English, 1773-1821), oak, pine, and mahogany, veneered with satinwood, rosewood, tulipwood, ebony, and boxwood. Photo courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Horace W. Brock in honor of G. Peabody Gardner, Jr. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Regency "Buhl" inkstand, circa 1815, London, England, by George Bullock (English, 1782/3-1818), tortoiseshell and brass veneer, and glass. Photo courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Horace W. Brock. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Mathematics isn't what usually springs to mind when one is in the presence of a dazzling collection-unless, perhaps, calculations on values are being made. But Dr. Horace "Woody" Wood Brock, a mathematical economist, said he formed his collection of European furniture, drawings, and decorative arts over 30 years "in accordance with a mathematical theory...about what makes objects beautiful."

At a press preview of *Splendor and Elegance*, an exhibition featuring approximately 185 of those works at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, through May 17, Brock expressed the formula in a phrase: "optimal asymmetricality." It's achieved by striking the right balance between order and disorder. "If the theme is simple, then we are most satisfied when its echoes are complex," he wrote in his catalog essay, "The Truth about Beauty." He uses as a case in point an English Regency chair by Henry Holland, a pair of which are in the exhibition.

It's natural enough to want to ignore his "Fundamental Theorem of Beauty-in-Design" and just enjoy the show. Even Brock wants to forget about the numbers sometimes. "Screw it all. Sunsets are beautiful," he jested at the press preview. After a half-century during which ugly "shock-art" has been adulated and elitists scorned, Brock said that the main message of the exhibition is "Beauty is back." Indeed, MFA director Malcolm Rogers asserted those words are the exhibition's unofficial "unashamed slogan." But visitors to the exhibition or readers of the catalog will find it impossible not to appreciate Brock's mathematical point even if they don't understand his "Relative Complexity of Transformation" or agree with him that beauty "most definitely is not" subjective.

A Louis XV console table, made in Paris about 1735 in giltwood and marble, features swirls and curls like golden smoke rings blown by some marvelous genie with a hookah-and yet it is perfectly balanced without being perfectly symmetrical. A rococo cartel clock in a case by Frenchman Charles Cressent (1685-1768) illustrates the same principle. So does the composition of a pen and ink portrait of the snaky-locked Medusa's severed head by Flemish artist Godfried Maes (1649-1700).

The furniture and decorative arts cover quite a range, from 17th-century Flemish to early 19th-century English Regency, with the bulk of them 18th-century English and French objects. One aspect that connects them all is their use of sumptuous materials-exotic woods, gilt, marble, enamel, and lacquer-and virtuosic craftsmanship. The approximately 75 drawings, primarily French and Italian, constitute an exhibition in themselves. They include many figural studies of human musculature, Classical subjects (Jupiter, Apollo), religious works (Moses, St. Stephen's martyrdom), and creatures from fables (a rat and elephant, a bloodthirsty cat). Among the highlights are a 1600-05 anatomical study by a young Peter Paul Rubens and *A Young Man with an Owl on a Stick* by the Italian Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri).

The artworks' ink colors range from golden to dark mahogany brown to black-furniture colors that work perfectly with the pieces chosen for the exhibition. Often the images are grouped thematically, but just as often they have style or color in common: red chalk and gray washes, for example, or the blue paper that was popular in 18th-century France as a base for drawings and pastels.

Brock, an MFA "Distinguished Benefactor" and overseer, has been giving objects to the museum since 2004 and promises to give more. Some Brock gifts are in this exhibition. One is a circa 1805 cabinet-on-stand attributed to English cabinetmaker James Newton (1773-1821). Designed to hold coins and other small collectibles of the period, it is made of oak, pine, and mahogany, veneered with satinwood, rosewood, tulipwood, ebony, and boxwood and decorated with sphinx heads. Other English Regency gifts from Brock include a round circa 1815 "Buhl" inkstand by George Bullock (1782/3-1818) made of tortoiseshell inlaid in brass veneer and inspired by the marquetry of André-Charles Boulle (1642-1732), cabinetmaker and sculptor to Louis XIV.

There are also some Boulle works, including a circa 1685 long-case clock commissioned for Louis XIV's palace at Versailles. It is a true Boulle rarity—only seven other examples have survived.

Optimal asymmetry reigns in the exhibition space itself. To be sure, there are pairs and pairs and pairs—of lion-handled vases, heart-back armchairs, caryatid pedestals, perfume burners, and porcelain figurines. But their placements, along with the drawings on the walls and other objects in the tableaux, always express a playful twist that tweaks the nose of twinning.

One of my own favorite pieces is a circa 1680 giltwood German barometer that hung in the hunting lodge of the Saxon royal family for three centuries. It is flanked by a pair of circa 1755 south German giltwood floor-standing candlestands whose sinuous forms MFA curator George Shackelford likened to "belly dancers." I was also partial to a griffin wall light. The winged beast, just this side of gargoylesque, was made of bronzed limewood circa 1802 in England after designs published by Thomas Hope (1769-1831).

Perhaps it's not a coincidence that both are functional objects. That's my personal bent. Most of the rest is art for art's sake "without apology," as Brock would say. "The stark reality is that the kinds of things I have loved have become ever more unfashionable since I began collecting thirty years ago," he writes in his exhibition catalog essay.

Aristocratic art's being out of fashion means "there has never been a better time to acquire works of great beauty and elegance," Brock states in his essay. He names several London dealers with whom he has worked over the years. One of them, Martin P. Levy, contributes his own catalog essay in which he praises Brock for his "integrated approach" to collecting, one that has allowed him to mix media, styles, and periods so fearlessly.

Brock credit's Levy's father, George Levy (1927-1996), with being the sounding board for his mathematical theory. The collector said he communicated the theory to him in some 40 letters written in 1981. He also thanks the late Tracey Albainy (1962-2007), an MFA curator "who was the architect of the exhibition that this book accompanies, and who remains its inspiration."

For more information, see the museum Web site (www.mfa.org) or call (617) 267-9300.

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