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The Layton Collection: MAM Remembers Milwaukee's First Art Museum

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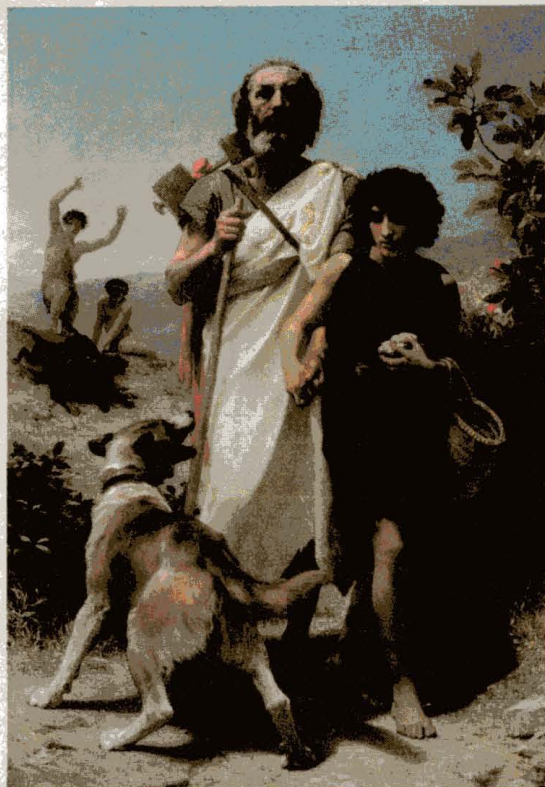
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(top) Eastman Johnson, *The Old Stagecoach*, oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 60 1/8 in, 1871; (bottom) William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Homer and His Guide*, oil on canvas, 82 1/4 x 56 1/4 in, 1874; (right) Gaetano Trentanove, *The Last of the Spartans*, marble, 26 1/2 x 79 1/2 x 27 3/8 in, ca. 1892

VISUAL ART | REVIEW

The Layton Collection

MAM REMEMBERS MILWAUKEE'S FIRST ART MUSEUM

BY CURTIS L. CARTER

For anyone curious about the history of the visual arts in Milwaukee, the 125th anniversary celebration at the Milwaukee Art Museum affords visitors the opportunity to explore this issue. At the center of the festivities in Gallery 10 is an exhibition of works from the Frederick Layton Collection.

The exhibition is hung in salon style, as in their original home, and contains a selection of some 55 European and American paintings by major and minor painters of the late 19th century. American paintings include Eastman Johnson's signature work *The Old Stage Coach* (1871), Winslow Homer's *Hark the Lark* (1882) and Asher Durand's *In the Catskills* (1857). English works represented in the exhibition include Frederic Leighton's *At the Fountain* (1892-92) and Edward William Cooke's *The Pilot Boat* (1839).

Among the notable paintings by French artists are Rosa Bonheur's enigmatic *Two Goats* (ca. 1870), William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Homer and His Guide* (1874), *Landscape* (ca. 1870) by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and museum visitors' favorite, Jules Bastien Lepages's *Wood Gatherer* (1882). Completing the slate are a geographically diverse lot of paintings by Austrian, Belgian, German, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Scottish and Swiss artists, plus two sculptures: Gaetano Trentanove's *The Last of the Spartans* (ca. 1892) and a bust of Layton by Salvatore Florenti Albano (1889).



The collection represents traditional aesthetic values, as none of the paintings reflect the "avant-garde" Impressionists who were emerging during the time the collection was formed. Only one of the artists on display is a woman artist, again reflecting the state of art collecting at the time the collection was formed.

Who was Frederick Layton? Layton (1827-1919) was the British-born Milwaukee meatpacking magnate who founded the Layton Art Gallery. The gallery opened in 1888 on the corner of Mason and Jefferson near Cathedral Square. This striking Greek Revival building, designed by London architects W.J. and G. A. Audsley, housed the Layton collection. It represented the beginnings of serious art collecting in Milwaukee.

The Layton Gallery served as a principal cultural landmark in the midst of Milwaukee's then-thriving industrial complex of breweries, brickyards, meatpacking houses, tanneries and shipyards. Perhaps the greatest architectural sin committed by mid-20th century developers in Milwaukee was the demolition of the Layton Gallery in 1958. The land where the museum stood became a parking lot.

Thankfully, the collection assembled by Layton has fared better as its stewardship has evolved into safer hands through a partnership with the Milwaukee Art Museum. While not all the paintings in the collection would qualify as masterworks, it is worth noting that a selection of the works reinstalled in Gallery 10 turns out to be among the signature pieces of the museum's entire collection.



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