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SALLY METZLER

Visitors to Loyola University Chicago are often surprised to find nestled among the stately brick buildings on Lake Michigan an art museum displaying medieval chalices embellished with precious stones, Limoges enamel plaques, Rheinisch wood carvings of the Renaissance, and Roman Baroque paintings. Many universities can boast of art museums, in which exhibitions reflecting contemporary sensibilities are usually staged. Loyola also has such a museum—the Crown Center Gallery—dedicated to displaying student and faculty work, as well as avant-garde exhibitions.

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But at Loyola’s Martin D’Arcy Gallery of Art, one will find nothing in the least “cutting-edge,” unless we’re talking about the cutting edge of the medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque periods. The Martin D’Arcy Gallery of Art preserves and promotes research on a premiere collection of art exclusively from those periods (ca. 1150-1750). The collection spans seven centuries of enormous achievement in the arts, focusing on works created by the major schools of Italian, French, Spanish, German, and Netherlandish artists.

The existence of such an exceptional collection at Loyola University Chicago is a natural extension of the Jesuit tradition of excellence in education. The Gallery gives students a rare opportunity to observe and study objects of beauty, craftsmanship, and intellect. The collection, which includes paintings, sculpture, tapestries, furniture, and decorative arts, bears witness to the creative and spiritual fervor manifest during the periods it covers. Many of the objects in the collection display a religious theme, as the Church was a major patron of art throughout those centuries. In keeping with the Jesuit tradition of boundless exploration and inquiry, however, the D’Arcy also houses important secular works.

The D’Arcy Gallery, founded by Donald Rowe, S.J., opened in 1969. It is named for the distinguished Jesuit theologian and philosopher Martin Cyril D’Arcy, who, as Master of Campion Hall (1933-45), transformed the Jesuit residence at Oxford University into a centerpiece of architecture and an important center of religious art. Under D’Arcy’s leadership Campion Hall was rebuilt according to the plans of English architect Sir Edward Lutyens, and became the home of an increasingly distinguished collection. Asked why he chose to devote a significant portion of his time building an art collection at Oxford, D’Arcy once explained that in “surrounding God with all the human splendor we can find, we pay our due homage and make public our sense of his majesty.” Fr. Rowe, an American studying at Oxford University, was inspired by the work and teachings of D’Arcy and came to Loyola determined to begin an art gallery for the university. Working with the advice of D’Arcy, and with the generous assistance of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Englehard, the Gallery’s major benefactors, Rowe began building the Gallery and its collection. With D’Arcy’s Gallery as a model and guide, Rowe steadily built a collection grounded in D’Arcy’s vision.

The D’Arcy Gallery is located in the same building as the Cudahy Library, so students find it a convenient place to visit on a study break. (One graduate student at Loyola in theology used the D’Arcy as his primary study space for his Ph.D. exams!) The Gallery is small and intimate in comparison to most city museums. One can easily grasp the scope and beauty of the collection in one visit, although certainly in order to penetrate the individual integrity of the objects, several visits are needed. Music composed during the same historical epochs that the collection represents plays in the background, enhancing the overall aesthetic experience of the visit. The physical space and style of the installments are intended to invite personal and close-up contemplation. A precious rosary bead, for example, so finely and intricately carved that it never ceases to perplex, can be observed so closely that every millimeter of detail is evident. The staff monitoring the Gallery is well informed about the collection and is trained to make all visitors feel welcome and relaxed.

In keeping with the mission of the collection to disseminate culture and to encourage interdisciplinary research in the humanities, the D’Arcy hosts a program entitled Kultur und Kaffee—a series of informal, salon-style lectures by Loyola faculty and visiting scholars. Refreshments are served during the program, which almost always includes a visual presentation. Last spring, the series included scholar Jacqueline Mussachio from the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland, who lectured on “The Image and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy.”

The educational benefits of a university art museum of the D’Arcy’s nature and caliber are many. By providing direct access to objects highly valued by human beings past, the collection gives the student of history, philosophy, theology, or literature (not to mention political science, sociology, psychology or indeed just about any academic subject one can name) tangible evidence for his or her search into the heart of the mystery, human and divine. The D’Arcy looks back not only to confirm the glorious achievements of the past, but to understand them with an eye toward the enrichment and understanding of our contemporary world and our future.

The medieval epoch saw the rise of monastic orders which in turn promulgated an art dedicated to spirituality, meditation, and pedagogy. Several objects in the D’Arcy collection address these issues. Among the most notable and skillfully crafted objects is the ivory diptych of the Passion of Christ. Intricately carved scenes, divided into four panels, display an admirable exactitude and refinement. The diptych, measuring only about 9 x 9 inches, is classified as a private devotional object on account of its diminutive size. The dip-

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the final scene in the diptych’s narrative, the crucifixion which includes St. Longinus, who kneels at the foot of the cross declaring his newly found belief in Christ. The drapery on the figures is deeply carved, hinting at a physical body beneath the folds. The figures are set in active poses, conveyed by the animated and emphatic gestures. Perhaps most striking in this masterful object is the amount of pathos and drama reflected on the faces of the tiny figures.

During the Italian Renaissance, the appreciation of the natural world intensified, coupled with an interest in the classical harmony of the antique with respect to architecture and the representation of the human form. Artists employed aesthetic values in the creation of religious art for the sheer sake of beauty. A small gold-ground panel painting of St. Jerome dating from the early Italian Renaissance demonstrates these principles. Although the background is gold, the color often used in late Gothic and early Renaissance art to denote heavenly light, St. Jerome is seated in an expanse of ordinary grass. He is swathed in a panoply of rich red fabric and wears the elegant hat of a cardinal. St. Jerome appears as if he has paused briefly to reflect upon his writings, and he rests a book upon his lap. The artist does a fine job conveying the mass and bulk of the figure. Although indeed a saint, as his tooled halo connotes, St. Jerome’s legs and knees are apparent beneath the bevy of drapery. His face is exquisitely rendered and we have a sense of an individual man with specific facial characteristics. Heavy circles of flesh below Jerome’s eyes express his age, weariness, and his devotion to the church. The artist has also meticulously rendered his full beard of gray, white, and black. The man Jerome is just as apparent as the saint.

Cassone (Florentine, c. 1460 - 70). Painted and gilded wood
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Ernest Joresco. The Martin D’Arcy Gallery of Art
The D’Arcy Gallery is also an important center at Loyola for the study of domestic art. One of the most popular and rare objects in the collection is an intact cassone, or marriage trunk from Renaissance Italy. This cassone, although ornately decorated with three narrative panel paintings, was in fact a piece of common furniture in the home of a wealthy Italian. Given to the bride upon her marriage to bring into her new home, the cassone stored linens, dresses, and other household items. It is constructed just wide and long enough so that a dress could be placed inside without too much trouble, and it was never to be too deep so as the person could not reach comfortably to the bottom. The wear and tear on the cassone, evident by the dents and paint loss, indicate that it was indeed a utilitarian object; it was frequently opened and closed, sat upon, and no doubt inadvertently kicked in the process of daily living.

What is so marvelous about the D’Arcy cassone is that it provides a window into the culture and society of Italy. The choice of myths for the three panels inset on the front of the chest is also telling of the attitudes towards women and society. Painted in a Venetian manner, with a hazy golden light, the scenes all tell of heroic acts of women. The central image depicts the Old Testament heroine Judith with the head of the Assyrian general Holofemes. Judith, by severing the head of Holofemes, saved her entire village from destruction and death. Such scenes of honorable and heroic women placed on a marriage chest and given to a woman about to enter into a new life of matrimony were perceived as appropriate methods of inspiration and education for a young woman.

The epoch of late-Renaissance and early Baroque art saw an increase of intellectual inquiry and a rise of princely patronage and collecting. Major scientific advances influenced artistic expression and technique. Another secular object in the D’Arcy collection includes a whimsical and precious collector’s chest, a miniature version of the Wunderkabinett. The D’Arcy chest is decorated with precious materials including lapis lazuli, feldspar, and bloodstone and opens to reveal a Medusa head in the center of what was the most secret and thus precious storage area. The production of such artifacts speaks of the princely and humanistic interest in the philosophical notion of appreciating the value of all created things.

Natural objects such as rocks and plants, as well as crafted items such as precious jewelry would have been kept together in one container. This represented the microcosm of the world. For the European prince striving to maintain control over his domain, this was a type of symbolic act, a personal pursuit of understanding and controlling the newly discovered wonders of the world.

These human qualities reflected in the art of the D’Arcy Gallery engage the contemporary visitor and particularly the student community. Our brief tour has been able to highlight only a few of the treasures housed at the D’Arcy. The Gallery will continue to grow and expand its academic programs as well as other community-related activities. Although indeed the collection of precious objects is unique, the practice of encouraging students to pursue intellectual and aesthetic beauty, to admire past achievements and examine the history of western civilization, is certainly not exclusive to Loyola. The Gallery serves the students, faculty, and staff, but is also open free of charge to the public. In the spirit of its namesake, its founder, and the tradition that sustains both the D’Arcy and Loyola itself, the Gallery will continue to be an accessible, inclusive, and welcoming place, challenging its patrons to experience the deep wonder embodied in splendid work.

Collector’s Chest  Wentzel Jamnitzer  
(German, 1508–1583) Silver gilt, ebony, lapis lazuli, feldspar, bloodstone, amethyst quartz, and cold enamel. The Martin D’Arcy Gallery of Art