

Art and architecture combine for...

A GRAND TOUR

...at UT-Austin's Blanton Museum of Art

Story by Randy Mallory

During the 17th and 18th centuries, rich young British aristocrats journeyed to France and Italy to sample the art, architecture, and culture of the European continent. The travel experience, known as the Grand Tour, was the pinnacle of an enlightened classical education.

I feel a bit like a modern-day Grand Tourist as I venture through the new Blanton Museum of Art on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. As with Grand Tourists of old, I discover that the experience is about more than viewing creative works. It's also about history, politics, literature, music, and religion—the cultural forces that move artists to create.

A Jewish queen tenderly begs a proud Assyrian king to save her people in the Renaissance painting, *Ester and Ahasueres*, by Luca Cambiaso, the first great master of 16th-century Genoa, Italy.

Sinuuous green ropes squeeze a bruised yellow banana in *Alone in Green* (1973), a political commentary by artist Antonio Henrique Amaral, who fled his native Brazil following a brutal military coup.

Nineteen large colorful geometric shapes spill across the floor in *Two in One* (1966), a sculptural interpretation of American jazz by artist and jazz student, George Sugarman.

Two well-dressed young women stand by the road, ready to hitch a ride out of a bleak Texas oil camp in *Oil Field Girls* (1940), artist Jerry Bywaters' perspective on the Depression of the Thirties.

A winged angel leads a startled Saint Peter to freedom, past sleeping prison guards, in Antonio de Bellis' *The Liberation of Saint Peter*, a massive oil painting meant to inspire church faithful in 17th century Italy.

Such telling artworks proffer ample opportunity for enlightenment in the \$83.5 million Blanton Museum of Art. Some 400 works on display come from the university's diverse 17,000-piece permanent collection—including Old Master paintings, modern and contemporary American and Latin American art, and a consummate collection of prints and drawings.

The Blanton's new high-profile location—where Congress Avenue meets the UT campus—makes it the latest member of a close-together quartet of cultural landmarks. A few blocks south, the restored Texas Capitol exhibits 19th-century Renaissance Revival architecture. A few blocks north, the university's Harry Ransom Center archives world-class literature, art, and photography. Across the street from the Blanton, the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum chronicles several centuries of Lone Star heritage.

The Blanton fancies itself as a public gateway to campus. In fact the museum's plaza garden does seem like a spacious green welcome mat. Rising from a manicured lawn, long rows of cedar elms form a natural extension of Congress Avenue pointing onto campus.

On one side of the plaza, the Blanton's education and visitor pavilion is well

underway (set to open in early 2008, it will have a café, museum shop, classrooms, and auditorium). On the plaza's other side looms the 124,000-square-foot gallery building, home of the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. The two-story structure's beige limestone walls and red-tiled roof reflect the university's signature Spanish Colonial Revival style developed by the classically-trained architect Paul Philippe Cret in the 1930s.

In the late 1920s, philanthropist Archer M. Huntington donated 4,000 acres on Galveston Bay to help fund a UT-Austin art museum. It eventually opened in 1963 and later bore Huntington's name. In 1968 famed novelist James A. Michener and his wife, Mari, handpicked the university to receive 400 of their 20th-century paintings. In the wake of that quantum collecting leap, the museum garnered other major collections—including the Barbara Duncan Collection of 200 Latin American paintings and 1,200 drawings; the Leo Steinberg Collection of 13,500 prints and drawings from the Renaissance to the present; and the Suida-Manning Collection of 300 predominantly Italian Old Master works.

By the 1990s the museum was bursting at the seams, forced to show its collection at separate on-campus sites. Fundraising for a single state-of-the-art facility gained momentum after a \$5 million donation from the Micheners and \$12 million from Houston Endowment Inc. (to honor of the foundation's former chairman, Jack S. Blanton, who also served as UT Regents chairman). Last spring, the Mari and James A. Michener Gallery Building of the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art opened to showcase 500 years of art from Europe and the Americas.

On the first floor a light-filled atrium sits between the expansive print and drawing research center and the special exhibition galleries (now showing *Luca Cambiaso, 1527-1585*, through January 14, 2007). An open stairway climbs 50 steps from the atrium to the second-floor permanent collection. There European Old Master works fill 14 interconnected galleries and modern and contemporary pieces fill 14 more. Each set of galleries is laid out in the shape of two “L’s” nestled together. An inner “L” shows prints and drawings and an outer “L” shows paintings and sculptures—all arranged roughly in chronological order. Adjustable skylights allow a proper mix of natural and artificial light in each space.

The second floor also boasts a temporary gallery called WorkSpace, where emerging artists display experimental works. In the adjacent eLounge, visitors and students relax in armchairs, play art-related games, browse the museum’s online image gallery, and enjoy elevated views of the Capitol and downtown. Scattered throughout the galleries are padded benches (with collection catalogs tucked into recessed pockets) where art-lovers ponder masterpieces hanging nearby.

Several visitors gather close to *The Storyteller*, a small oil on canvas painted in the mid-1770s by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo. In a piazza, a Venetian cantastorie (taleteller and troubadour of the day) entertains a throng as a woman in red turns her attention to a mysterious cloaked figure behind her.

Not far away, several university students linger beside 20 or so small etchings by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn. The fine-lined works demonstrate the 17th century Dutch artist’s command of technique. An adjacent gallery displays etchings inspired by Rembrandt’s mastery of the printing process.

One university art student even tries her own hand at art, carefully copying in a sketchbook the nuanced style evident in *Portrait of a Lady as Cleopatra* (ca. 1680) by Roman Baroque painter, Baciccio.

In a nearby gallery I slip on the audio tour headphones to learn about an oil sketch by Peter Paul Rubens. *Head of a Young Boy*, it turns out, was an early study done in 1601-1602 by the Flemish Baroque master that appears in at least four of his subsequent works.

Interestingly, the audio tour also includes commentary by Austinites from different walks of life. A minister remarks about the dreamy, pensive look of Daniele Crespi's *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (ca. 1621). A music professor notices how oddly the euphoric patron saint of music sits at an organ in Simon Vouet's *Saint Cecilia*. A hair stylist puts in her two-cents worth on the glowing complexion and bohemian-style wig in *Portrait of a Man* (ca. 1715) by prolific portraitist Nicolas de Largillierve. And a magazine editor comments on live new coverage as depicted in Peter Dean's *Dallas Chaos II*, in which a white-hooded officer watches a sinister Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald, who's dressed as a clown.

"There's no wrong way to view art," says Jonathan Bober, curator of prints, drawings, and European paintings, "but there's always more than meets the eye. These works are about visual beauty and representation, but also about ideas and human experience."

Annette DiMeo Carozzi, curator of American and contemporary art, agrees: "We hope to encourage people to explore various themes through art—such as the settling of the American West, industrialization, Civil Rights, the effect of media on our lives, and

the relationship between North and South America.”

That last theme rings especially true in the *America/Americas* permanent exhibit, which intermingles art from the U.S. and Latin America. Rightfully so, says Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, curator of Latin American art. “Increasingly, the U.S. is part of Latin America, and Latin America is part of the U.S. People and ideas about politics, culture, and life constantly move back and forth across the border. This exhibit gives visitors some interesting ideas to reflect on.”

A few teenagers and I found plenty to ponder inside the sheer black curtain of a conceptual installation by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. *Missao/Missoes* [*Mission/Missions*] (*How to Build Cathedrals*) (1987) features 600,000 copper coins laid out in a 12-foot square enclosed by paving stones. A narrow column of 800 communion wafers rises from the money into an illuminated cloud of 2,000 cattle bones overhead.

I wondered why the artist chose church wafers to connect objects of wealth and death. Some of the kids sat on the paving stones and fingered quietly through the coins. For all of us, I think, the art proved provocative and memorable.

“When you read a wonderful book or see a great play or hear a terrific piece of music, the experience can have a strong lasting influence on you,” notes museum director, Jessie Otto Hite. “The same is true of art. We hope when you come to the Blanton, you will have a transformative experience that will make you want to come back again.”

In a nutshell that is the educational essence of a Grand Tour, then and now.

essentials THE BLANTON

The Blanton Museum of Art (512/471-7324, www.blantonmuseum.org) is at the corner of Martin Luther King Blvd. and Congress Ave. on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. Hours: Tue-Wed and Fri-Sat 10-5, Thu 10-8, Sun 1-5; closed Mondays and holidays (Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, and Fourth of July).

Admission \$5 adults, \$4 for ages 65+, \$3 for ages 13-25, free for 12 and under, UT ID holders, and members. (Group discounts are available.) Thursday admission is free, and there's a themed tour at 3 p.m. Tours are also Sat-Sun at 2 p.m. and during monthly events. Call for details.

The first major U.S. exhibition of 16th-century Italian artist, Luca Cambiaso, runs through Jan. 14, 2007. Other exhibitions include: works by Cristián Silva (through Dec. 31, 2006); *Virtuoso Lithography* and *Parmigianino: His Graphic Legacy* (both Dec. 22, 2006 through Apr. 8, 2007); and works by Matthew Day Jackson (Jan. 12 through Mar. 25, 2007).

Paid parking garages are nearby, plus free street parking after 5:45 p.m. weekdays and all day on weekends. Free parking also is available evenings and weekends in nearby State employee lots. For parking details call 512/471-5482 or see the website.

RESOURCES

--Blanton staff:

Sheree Scarborough--Public Relations and Marketing--512-475-6784

Jessie Otto Hite, director--512-471-9211 or -2005

Jonathan Bober--Curator of Prints, Drawings, and European Paintings—512-471-7553

Annette DiMeo Carlozzi--Curator of American and Contemporary Art—512-232-1450

Gabriel Perez-Barreiro--Curator of Latin American Art-- 512-471-9213

WEBSITES

--Re: history/facility

http://www.blantonmuseum.org/about/history_overview_mission.cfm

http://www.blantonmuseum.org/our_new_home/our_new_home.html#facilities

--Re: Grand Tour

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grtr/hd_grtr.htm

http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/grand_tour/what.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Tour

--Re: Cret & architecture

http://72.14.209.104/search?q=cache:3ZXkg5_1RfEJ:www.finearts.utexas.edu/bma/files/media_kits/ut_background.pdf+university+of+texas+spanish+colonial+revival+architecture&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=6