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Howard Kissel writes the the Sunday "Cultural Tourist" column and does reviews of art and classical music. He has been chairman of both the New York Film Critics Circle and the New York Drama Critics Circle. In 1994 he served on the drama jury for the Pulitzer Prize. He has written "The Abominable Showman," an unauthorized biography of David Merrick, and "Stella Adler on the Art of Acting," both published by Applause. In 1980 he played Woody Allen's manager in "Stardust Memories."

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## Triple your local treasures

Three exhibits at New York museums display Swiss, Mayan and Napoleon-themed pieces

Many people learn about art from books and slides. And many New Yorkers learn about art firsthand from the steady stream of masterpieces that visit here on a regular basis.

Sometimes the special exhibits at New York's museums fill in our knowledge of artists and periods we already know. But sometimes entirely new stars appear on the horizon - undeniably great artists that would only be known to specialists.

Such is the case, for example, with the 18th-century Swiss portrait painter Jean-Etienne Liotard, an exhibit of whose astonishing work is currently at the Frick Collection. Liotard was born in Geneva and educated in Paris, but he also spent time in Constantinople, where he acquired Turkish techniques. He also acquired a beard, which enhanced his racy reputation when he returned to Western Europe. The exhibit features a number of powerful self-portraits, which suggest his intense honesty and a captivating sense of humor.



**The Met's 'Treasure of Sacred Maya Kings'**

Among the most fascinating works in the show are a set of portraits of 11 of the 12 children of the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. Here too Liotard's uncompromising honesty trumps a portrait painter's natural propensities to flattery. Not all mothers might be pleased with this approach, but Maria Theresa told Liotard she carried the portraits with her whenever she traveled.

For contemporary viewers, of course, the most interesting of the portraits is that of her daughter Marie Antoinette - in it we can see both the delicate beauty that made her greatly admired when she first came to France as well as the severity that came into play during her later years when she schemed to save the monarchy and her life, neither successfully.

There are always discoveries to be made at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Right now, for example, there is an exhibit of historic significance. Raphael's

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## COLUMNIST ARCHIVE

## Required Reading!



The dean of Broadway musical directors, with our Howard Kissel extending his reach, shows how the dynamics of the book, music and lyrics of a show work together to create Broadway blockbusters. Kissel offers a thoughtful history on how musical theater has evolved in the three decades since Lehman Engel wrote "Words with Music" in 1972 and how Engel's classic work remains vital and illuminating

Colonna Altarpiece has been at the museum since the early 20th century. But seven small panels that were part of the work when it was commissioned by the nuns of a convent in Perugia have not been united with the two main pieces since they were sold by the nuns in 1663 to pay their debts. They are together for the first time since then, as well as some remarkable works by Raphael's predecessors.

When the Met mounts one of its Egyptian shows, there's no better theater in town - these monumental works are invariably presented and lit with a majesty that evokes their original intentions. The show about the 15th-century B.C. female Pharaoh Hatshepsut is no exception.

But in some ways the most eye-opening of the current shows at the Met is "Treasure of Sacred Maya Kings," which illuminates a civilization we don't usually confront, Central America in the first millennium. There is much helpful information about the culture that gave rise to the objects on display, but you don't need historical background to appreciate the raw power many of these objects radiate.

There is an arresting Mexican death mask assembled from pieces of jade in a way that makes a modern viewer think of Cubism. The show offsets the imposing ritual objects with many whimsical pieces that feature animals as well as works of great delicacy, like a Guatemalan lidded pot with day names.

The Dahesh Museum, at 580 Madison Ave., has an extremely stimulating show, "Napoleon on the Nile," on the impact of the French army on Egypt and of Egypt on the French mind. In addition to his army, Napoleon brought a battalion of French scientists and artists with him. Among their achievements was the discovery of the Rosetta stone, which enabled modern men to translate ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The show is full of fascinating material, including some breathtaking drawings of Egyptian animals by Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

As a footnote, it's worth remembering that it was the French who aroused the ire of an Islamic preacher named Wahab, the founder of the Wahabi sect whose fiery teachings continue to have impact.

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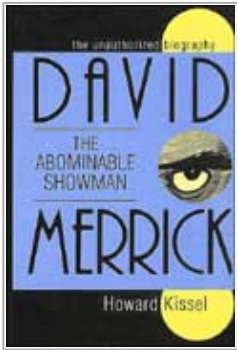
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Among Howard Kissel's books is the first-ever biography of David Merrick, the most astonishing showman of our time, and perhaps of all time. From his decade-long investigation, Kissel reveals the man, the mask, and the myth of Merrick. The charismatic and reclusive mogul emerges as a Broadway version of Howard Hughes, with his own panoply of eccentricities, genius and neuroses. Click to order the book and see others!

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