ART REVIEW | 'STORIES TO TELL'

Illustrations by American Artists at the Dahesh Museum

Kelly Collection

"For a Space of Minutes," an oil painting from 1915 by Harvey T. Dunn.

By KEN JOHNSON
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At one time, serious artists avoided illustration like the plague. When abstract formalism ruled in the 1960's, painters were not supposed to use their skills to tell stories of escapist adventure or erotic intrigue, and did not lend their talents to the marketing of shirts and toothpaste — or to magazines like The Saturday Evening Post.

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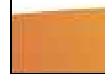

In today's art circles, it can be hard to find an artist whose work does not illustrate something, and that is partly what makes an exhibition of paintings from the so-called golden age of illustration, "Stories to Tell: Masterworks From the Kelly Collection of American Illustration," now at the Dahesh Museum of Art,

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Kelly Collection
J. C. Leyendecker's painting "Florist," from the Kelly Collection.

surprisingly gripping. In an era that has been shaped by narrators like Philip Guston, Cindy Sherman and, recently, Dana Schutz, it is illuminating to study how skilled and tremendously successful visual storytellers like Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth and J. C. Leyendecker performed.

Organized by the museum's chief curator, Stephen R. Edidin, the exhibition presents 90 original paintings and drawings by 35 artists, dating from the 1880's to the 1930's, a time when magazine and book illustrations captivated the American imagination the way movies do today. The works are from a collection assembled by Richard J. Kelly, a private investor who lives in Great Falls, Va.

One prejudice that the exhibition dispels is that illustrators care less about their mediums than about making images. The paintings and drawings in this show were made to be photo-mechanically reproduced, but every artist clearly intended the work to be seen as a painted or drawn picture. Many exaggerated painterly aspects so that the hand-made qualities would not be lost in reproduction. And most had trained in the same American and European art schools that their fine-art counterparts attended.

The relationship between image and paint is most striking in the works of Leyendecker, whose paintings from the 1920's epitomized the insouciant elegance and exuberant energy of the Jazz Age. With emphatic contour lines and sharp contrasts of darks and lights, Leyendecker painted men and women of supernatural beauty posed in fanciful situations. A 1909 painting features a sumptuously dressed couple flying a Wright Brothers-type airplane. In one from the 20's, a lovely flower girl pins a corsage to the lapel of a man in top hat and tails.

These images may seem silly, but the way they are painted imbues them with an uncanny vividness and erotic energy. The slashing but suavely controlled brushwork and the sparkling highlighting gives his subjects a gleaming, sculptural quality. No doubt they fueled the imagination of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Because of advances in reproduction technology, Leyendecker's kind of graphic high-definition was not an artist's only option. Walter Biggs, for example, used an Impressionist style. In an illustration from about 1930 for a Palmolive advertisement, a young woman in a pink gown sits under a flowering tree that filters dappling sunlight. The soft-focus, pastel colors and shimmering light conjure a sense of Edenic immersion in the sensory pleasures of nature.

It is unusual for an illustrator to allow concerns about painting and perceptual experience to override the narrative point, but that does happen in one of the show's best works, Walter Everett's picture of a man purchasing a parrot in an exotic marketplace. The story being illustrated cannot compete with the lush, complex play of light and color in the baskets of fruit and clay jars in the foreground. Not surprisingly perhaps, Everett had trouble meeting deadlines and retired early from a business he found intolerably frustrating.

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All the other artists put expressive style to the service of narrative and emotional impact. In a Winslow Homer-like maritime scene by Harvey T. Dunn, thick paint, stark contrasts of light and shadow, lunging diagonals and billowing volumes enhance the climactic moment of a stormy night when a woman tries to restrain a wild-eyed, pistol-waving sea captain. In Saul Tepper's "Couple in the Moonlight," a picture of a handsome man and his pretty wife sitting on the front steps of their suburban home, the patchy paint and the Whistlerian lunar light bring to life a moment of spiritual awakening in a Ladies' Home Journal melodrama.

These artists were not just illustrating. They were processing feelings and desires that animated the collective American psyche. That is true as well of Jessie Willcox Smith's images of mothers and children, which express a yearning for an otherworldly domestic bliss.

It is not irrelevant to note that the Abstract Expressionists grew up during this golden age of illustration, "a time when people of all classes and walks of life were regularly informed, entertained and influenced by painted images," as Chris Fauver, the Kelly Collection's curator, writes in the show's catalog.

Conventional wisdom associates artists like de Kooning, Kline and Rothko with a high-culture tradition that extends from Velázquez to Picasso. But perhaps they were also influenced by the explosive emotional urgency — Mr. Fauver calls it "repressed hysteria" — of the illustrations they saw every day. Is it possible that while disposing of the clichéd images, they continued the Romantic connection between painting and feeling that the golden-age illustrators cultivated?

Most of the illustrators address themes at least indirectly related to the concerns of Abstract Expressionism. Howard Pyle's pirate adventures, N. C. Wyeth's battling knights on horseback, Dean Cornwell's soap operatic tales of love, guilt and redemption, Sarah Stillwell's decadent vision of a sultry woman in a scarlet dress in the company to two big leopards: these images dream of more elemental, instinctually and emotionally authentic lives at a time when corporate bureaucracies, factory assembly lines, planned suburbs and department stores were on the rise.

The Abstract Expressionists found their freedom in the process of painting and in bohemian lifestyles. The illustrators projected their turbulent emotions and yearnings for adventure into fantasies of other times and other places. The one painting by Norman Rockwell in the exhibition is poignantly apt. "Dreaming of Adventure" (1924) shows a sad-faced clerk pausing from writing in a ledger to gaze into space as a ghostly old frigate under full sail plows the waves in a circular vignette, hovering behind him like a cartoon thought-bubble.

The golden-age illustrators and the Abstract Expressionists also shared a belief in a broad-based, still-living culture of painting. Today, no hand-made art form has the near-universal currency that painting once did. For better or worse, photography, film, video and digital technologies are the means by which our society talks to itself. There will always be illustrators, but it is hard to imagine another Leyendecker or Rockwell using paint and canvas to make our American dreams as widely visible as they are in the films of Steven Spielberg and "The Sopranos."

"Stories to Tell: Masterworks From the Kelly Collection of American Illustration" is at the Dahesh Museum of Art, 580 Madison Avenue, at 56th Street, (212) 759-0606, through May 21.

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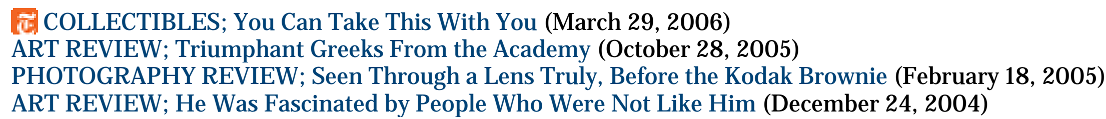

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