RED HOOK JOURNAL

Press Releases

Have We Met?

Claire Barliant

Seated Nude in a Studio, a photograph by Chauvassaignes, 1856.

Fra Filippo Lippi's 1440 *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at the Casement*.

A nineteenth-century instrument, which looks like a bronze teapot, called a "sankh."

Refresh.

English suit of armor from 1527, possibly for Henry the VIII.

Twelfth-century Islamic chess set.

The Thinker by Thomas Eakins.

Matisse's painting of Icarus.

Refresh.

What image am I seeing?

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A cosmetic spoon in the shape of a woman holding a dish, from Egypt, circa 1390–1352 B.C.

I could do this for hours. With each click, each *refresh*, I see, on the 12-inch screen of my laptop, twenty images plucked randomly from the 338, 215 works (at last count) that the Metropolitan Museum of Art has posted on its ever burgeoning website. The database is not organized chronologically or geographically; it has no use for categories based on gender or media. This is Malraux's Museum without Walls, or Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, with the added bonus of the shuffle algorithm. Their minds would have boggled at the possibilities for inadvertent connections among works from different eras and geographical locations. Thus Chauvassaignes's contemplative nude seems to be in dialogue with Lippi's aristocratic lady, caught in medias flirt at her window, while Henry VIII exchanges military strategy with the chess set. Matisse's plummeting Icarus seems to reify the internal struggle of Louis N. Kenton in Eakins's melancholy portrait (or maybe it's the other way around). And then there's that spoon, which is so richly evocative on its own.

I was a reluctant convert. A few years ago, the Met introduced a series of ads emblazoned with the slogan, "It's time we met." The goal of the campaign was clear: to put a friendlier face on the imposing Upper East Side institution. The ads invited visitors to post photographs of themselves standing beside priceless art works. Examples included teenagers wrapped in toilet paper, mugging in front of a mummy, or pulling faces in imitation of an African mask. Each time I saw the posters on the subway, I cringed—they made the Met seem desperate, like an aging socialite in skinny jeans.

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So, when it came time to compose a review of the Met's growing online presence, I sharpened my knives in anticipation of a hatchet job.

And then I discovered the miraculous database.

From there it was a quick scoot of the mouse before I was happily lost in the timeline of art history, which begins in 8000 B.C., or the world maps. I'm almost ashamed to admit this, but I'm even charmed by the Met's "Connections" videos, which are being uploaded every Wednesday throughout the year, and which always feature a different employee's personal introduction to the Metropolitan. The voices range from editorial assistants to curators to my favorite contributor so far, video producer Christopher Noey and his meditation on works that remind him of his native Tennessee. Noey notes that the pink marble of the Met's floor comes from his home state, where it is so plentiful that it is used to construct all manner of buildings, so every time he looks at the museum's floor he thinks of his high school bathroom.

At this point my editors are aghast at my gushing. So here come the qualifiers: There are plenty of reasons to be wary of metmuseum.org. The museum's contents, which often remain hidden deep in storage, are now public playthings. Does art surfing encourage weak armchair scholarship? Maybe more important, as the materiality of the artwork recedes, are we even aware of what is being lost? There is much to be gained from the physicality of art, from standing in front of an object and absorbing its scale and texture, along with the atmosphere it creates in the room, the way it is presented in a gallery, and the way other people respond to it.

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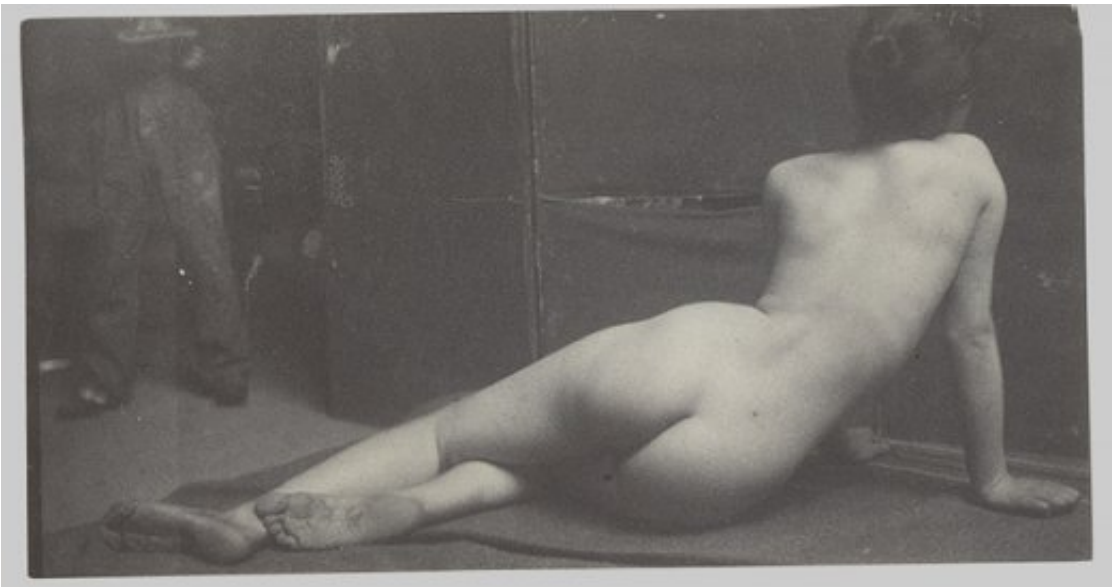
And yet, stripped of their aura, their *en filade* context, the works on metmuseum.org are free-floating, open to new associations that develop as we sift through them. “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory,” Jacques Derrida wrote in *Archive Fever*. “Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”

So it would seem that thanks to our new access to the Met’s archive, albeit in virtual form, at some level

we can indeed find a measure of redemption in the online collection database, and, occasionally, a righting of wrongs, including even imperialist ones.

Take the case of the *Shahnama*, or “Book of Kings,” commissioned by Shah Tamasp. The Persian illustrated manuscript was completed around 1530, and eventually ended up in the hands of collector Arthur Houghton, who, to the horror of many, simply tore it apart, giving seventy-eight paintings from the book to the Met as a gift in the early 1970s. The example is apt: Our relationship to works of art has *always* been compromised by not seeing them in the setting or context for which they were intended. Purists will continue to be horrified at the prospect that reproductions will displace the real thing. And yes, it’s only slight compensation for Houghton’s act of destruction, if it’s even compensation at all, that the reproductions (though not all of them) are now so easily accessed on the Met’s website. But the *Shahnama*’s new availability, like many other features of the museum’s expanded online presence, is a positive move. Think of it as an appetizer before the main course: the access whets the hunger for a museum experience, it doesn’t replace it.



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Claire Barliant writes about art for the Goings on “About Town” section of the *New Yorker,* and for other places too.

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