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Dusting Off Gems From the Attic

A Partial Look at the Corcoran Collection

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Critic's Notebook

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WASHINGTON — With the closing of the Corcoran Gallery of Art here, we've lost a venerable museum but gained access to an eclectic, in odd corners brilliant, time capsule of a collection. Long housed in a block-filling chunk of Beaux-Arts granite that also held an art school, the museum had limited exhibition space and could show only a fraction of its holdings of 17,000 works. Now nearly half of them are being absorbed into the National Gallery of Art. And maybe just as important, the remainder will be parceled out to other Washington-area museums, raising the chances that, with a little schlepping, we'll eventually be able to see more of the Corcoran than we could when it was intact.

But that's in the future and will depend a lot on how resourceful the receiving institutions are about dealing with their own space headaches. All we know now is the identity of the nearly 6,500 Corcoran pieces that the National Gallery has officially and permanently acquired (the museum rarely deaccessions anything). What did it get? Most of the work is still in storage, but lists are online, and you can see at least a handful of things in two introductory sampler shows in the National Gallery's West Wing.

Over all, it seems clear that, apart from single paintings by de Kooning, Rothko and Warhol, no instant-recognition marquee items have emerged from

the Corcoran, though such a judgment will very much depend on your field of interest. If your thing is photography, the acquisition of 689 pristine prints from Eadweard Muybridge's "Animal Locomotion" series will register as huge, as will the arrival of the 155 photographs that made up Jim Goldberg's harrowing 1995 book on teenage runaways, "Raised by Wolves."

For specialists in mid-19th-century American art, Frederic Edwin Church's panoramic 1857 painting of Niagara Falls and Hiram Powers's 1846 female nude sculpture "The Greek Slave" rank high in the pantheon. Both were wildly popular attractions in their Manifest Destiny day. "Niagara" advertised America's surging God-given bigness. "The Greek Slave" demonstrated to Europe that klutzy ex-colonials could do Classical, and even do sexy.

Closer to the present, with the arrival of four paintings by the California artist David Park, the National Gallery, in a stroke, widens its geographic reach. And with one of those paintings a 1958 portrait by Park of Richard Diebenkorn, and another of Elmer Bischoff, it gives us a nutshell history of Bay Area Figurative Modernism.

The real big new gain for the National Gallery, though, is simply the Corcoran collection itself, or a major piece of it, in bulk. As varied, uneven and surprising as an auction box lot, it's a century-and-a-half-old artifact to be parsed, a present and future source to be drawn from, and, to some degree, a personal souvenir of its Georgetown-born founder and namesake. William Wilson Corcoran (1798-1888) was a familiar American type, a hard-driving moneyman who luster-glazed his public profile with philanthropy. The glazing stood him in good stead. In 1862, he was more or less hounded out of Washington after declaring his support of the Southern secession from the Union and sat out the Civil War in Europe. But when he returned a few years later to create the country's first official art museum — essentially, a national gallery before the National Gallery — he was embraced as a civic hero.

Corcoran started out collecting European paintings, and the National Gallery has taken a few, among them two Dutch landscapes by Jan van Goyen, some Gainsborough portraits and a small Chardin of a scullery maid, all of which supplement the museum's holdings in these artists. In the 1850s,

though, he started buying American in a serious way. There may have been practical reasons. The Europe art market was a minefield of fakes; at home he could get the genuine article straight from the artist's studio.

Also, supporting American art, or what he called "American genius," was the patriotic thing to do. By midcentury, the country had gained a sense of itself as an international political force and had developed art to promote that identity in the form of dramatic landscapes and detailed genre scenes. Corcoran went in for both. In doing so, he shaped a museum of predominantly American art, and it is in this field that the National Gallery has made the most of its Corcoran acquisitions.

You get some sense of this in the collection show, "American Masterworks From the Corcoran, 1815-1940," organized by Nancy Kay Anderson of the National Gallery and Sarah Cash, formerly of the Corcoran. Much of what's here is best-foot-forward big-guns stuff: "Niagara"; "The Greek Slave"; an 1860 portrait of a pre-presidential, pre-bearded Abraham Lincoln; Thomas Eakins's touching, penumbral "Singing a Pathetic Song"; and one of Frederic Remington's tabletop cowboy bronzes, expertly cast kitsch of impeccable provenance.

Among other landscapists, Albert Bierstadt makes a splash with a couple of Western wilderness scenes, one of which he shamelessly retitled "Mount Corcoran" — it was originally called "Mountain Lake" — in the interest of landing a sale. What significantly adds to the National Gallery collection, though, and to our knowledge of preindustrial America, is a set of small genre paintings. Four of them, by artists all new to the National, sit side by side on one wall, starting with a meticulously composed 1837 tavern scene by the great William Sidney Mount and continuing with pieces by more obscure but no less incisive practitioners including Frank Blackwell Mayer, Alfred Jacob Miller and Miller's student Richard Caton Woodville, who died from a morphine overdose at 30, leaving just 15 known paintings behind.

Too easily dismissed as illustrational and therefore beneath notice, a single genre picture, coded with complex cultural references, can tell us more about American class, customs, ethics and political ideals, delusional and

otherwise, than a dozen grand landscapes. With the potential they offer for writing new, different histories, these little pictures are invaluable additions to the National Gallery holdings.

And in the same transformative category, I would place the acquisition from the Corcoran of art by women. You'll find a very cool example in "American Masterworks": a picture called "Sita and Sarita" from around 1921 by the New York artist Cecilia Beaux of a young woman with dark hair, the faintest of smiles and a black kitten perched on her shoulder. Basically, it's a double portrait, human and animal, superbly painted and spiced with sly nods to other art (Manet's "Olympia"). It's the first Beaux work owned by the National Gallery. If I could pick one Corcoran piece to take home, this would be it.

The numbers of pieces by women increase in the later 20th century. A second smaller sampler show, "Focus on the Corcoran: Works on Paper, 1860-1990," organized by Andrew Robison and Judith Brodie, has at least a few examples, from a superb 1947 chalk drawing by Louise Bourgeois to an intricate 1981 Betye Saar collage. These artists, just by their presence, point both toward other less-known figures — Malvina Hoffman, Loren MacIver, Kay Sage, Dorothy Dehner, Minna Citron, Sylvia Snowden — who should certainly appear in future shows, as well as toward another general area of expansion: art by African-Americans.

Much of this material arrived at the Corcoran in 1996 as a ready-made package: 33 pieces by 28 black artists given by Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. (1952-1997), who ran an art gallery out of his home near Howard University. He put faith in the Corcoran. He saw it as having the potential to simultaneously reshape the narrative of American art and to be what it had started out as, Washington's community art museum — something the National Gallery is not and has never been. He wanted to help push these possibilities forward with a donation that included historical artists from around the country, like Aaron Douglas, Noah Purifoy and James Van Der Zee, along with others — Sam Gilliam, Lois Mailou Jones, Renée Stout — who had firm Washington roots.

It's a bad idea to routinely isolate artists by gender or race or place, but

the existing marketing system, which is based on selling stereotypes, often forces that choice: show together or don't show at all. The true value of the Corcoran acquisition, whatever the worth of the individual components, is that it gives the National Gallery of Art, a sluggishly conservative institution, a chance to break with routine, interrupt old deadlocks, throw unalike things together, toss out handed-down scripts. We need our museums to do this, to rethink "American" and "art," to pull down the partitions between man, woman; black, white; now, then. And shouldn't such change, fundamental and in-depth, come from Washington, the political heart of the nation? It should.

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