

Nina Katchadourian

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## Museums Shake Things Up by Mixing Old and New

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Frans Hals's "Banquet of the Officers of the Calivermen Civic Guard," left, from 1627, hangs next to Anton Henning's "Interior No. 559" from 2018, at the Frans Hals Museum.

HAARLEM, the Netherlands — Frans Hals, a Dutch Golden Age portraitist of wealthy merchants and jolly rogues, was popular and successful in his lifetime, but before he died, he fell out of fashion. His loose, bold brush strokes were too rough for the 18th century. But the Impressionists rediscovered him in the 19th century, and resurrected Hals as a modern master.

Nowadays, Hals ranks with his compatriots Rembrandt and Vermeer in the pantheon of art history, but Ann Demeester, director of the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, prefers to see him as a "transhistorical" figure, whose influence leapfrogs across time, and into contemporary art.

That is why she has taken the unusual step of rehangng highlights from the museum's permanent collection of Hals works and other Golden Age art alongside the works of living artists such as the photographer Nina Katchadourian, the multimedia artist Shezad Dawood, and the painter and

sculptor Anton Henning, for “Rendezvous with Frans Hals.” She hopes to demonstrate that today’s artists are still inspired by Hals’s 350-year-old legacy.

“Transhistorical” is something of a buzz word in curatorial circles these days, as museums seek new ways to ignite public interest in older art. The blending of old and new has drawn interest from collectors at art fairs such as Frieze New York, and auction houses are doing it too: Christie’s sold Leonardo da Vinci’s “Salvator Mundi” in a sale of contemporary art last year for \$450 million.

The Frans Hals Museum has shifted its strategy to bring in transhistorical ideas. The current show will stay in place through September, after which the museum will present other collection mash-ups, such as a February 2019 show, “Frans Hals and the Moderns,” that will present Hals works alongside Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings.

“What it is trying to do is to say that history lives,” Sheena Wagstaff, chairwoman of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s modern and contemporary art department, said of the transhistorical trend.

Ms. Wagstaff oversees the Met Breuer, the museum’s branch on Madison Avenue and, in a telephone interview, she described her programming there as “consciously transhistorical,” a term she said she started using about six years ago.

“With a blending of history and contemporary art, we can reveal some of the puzzles at the centers of great art,” she said.

The Breuer’s 2016 exhibition “Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible” presented incomplete paintings through the ages, from Titian to Lucian Freud, Gerhard Richter and Bruce Nauman. She followed up with “Like Life: Sculpture, Color and the Body (1300-Now),” on view until July 22, which takes a nonchronological look at 700 years of sculptures of the human body.

Including not only fine art but also wax effigies and anatomical models, the show opens with a hyperrealistic sculpture by Duane Hanson from 1984, jumps from a 15th-century Donatello sculpture to a Spanish Renaissance work by El Greco, and juxtaposes a modern android with a 19th-century effigy of Jeremy Bentham, made with the British philosopher’s bones.

“The idea with this show was to open it up and to expand the canon more, with work that could be seen in a more populist way,” Ms. Wagstaff said.

Suzanne Sanders, an art historian in Amsterdam, who organized conferences on “The Transhistorical Museum” in 2015 and 2016, calls transhistorical curating “the most urgent thing curators are doing in trying to reinvent the museum to create some sort of new paradigm.”

“It can be ‘trans’ in all these senses of the word,” she explained, “from across history, to transdisciplinary or queer, or just to represent things in an inclusive way, to find a balance between acknowledging and addressing points of view.”

But James Bradburne, director of the Brera Art Gallery in Milan, said the trend was just a new term for what curators have always done: “Try and bring people back to the moment when the art was contemporary.”

“We are always obliged to re-perform the art we have in our collections in a contemporary way,” he said, “just as an actor, when they perform Shakespeare, has to re-perform it for a contemporary audience, whether in mafia costumes or in drag.”

A year ago, M, a museum in Leuven, Belgium, rehung its permanent collection as “Collection M: The Power of Images,” presenting new comparisons, such as a 14th-century Pietà alongside a 16th-century Baroque painting and a conceptual art installation from 2009.

“We wanted to get out of this time-chain approach,” its director, Eva Wittocx, said by telephone. “Even people who know these works for a long time can find new meanings or new ways of looking at them.”

The Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, whose permanent collection features art from Ancient Egypt to 1800, borrowed 22 works of contemporary art for “The Shape of Time,” which runs through July 8. A nude covering herself partly with a fur coat, by the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens in 1636-38, for example, is presented alongside a full-frontal nude portrait from the early 1970s by the Austrian artist Maria Lassnig.

“I’d like to think that we are teasing out all of the ideas and concerns and dreams and nightmares that are buried in all of the historical works that we have,” said Jasper Sharp, who curates the museum’s program for modern and contemporary art. But he added that the curators spent a few years trying to figure out “what types of confrontations would be interesting, respectful,” he said.

Pairing Édouard Manet with Diego Velázquez, or bringing a Titian into conversation with a J.M.W. Turner seemed to work, he said, because “these are very well-documented admirations of younger artists looking at older artists.”

But other choices proved riskier. Scores of art lovers responded on Instagram to the museum’s juxtaposition of a Rembrandt self-portrait next to a Mark Rothko color field painting. “Half of them were saying ‘this is absolutely abysmal,’ or ‘Rembrandt must be turning in his grave,’” Mr. Sharp said. “Some of the connections knit together instantly; others reward more sustained looking.”

Ms. Demeester of the Frans Hals Museum pointed out that the history of art is cacophonous in its connections and influences — with “people talking to each other in salons and cafes and messing things up.”

“In creating more meaning and new stories for an audience, it’s important as a museum to think more like an artist,” she added. “An artist is more free, or less inhibited than an art historian, to make connections that go across time or across culture or across geography. To connect.”