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Review of the Norton Simon Museum

By Megan Kyriss

The Norton Simon Museum, located in the center of Pasadena California, spans almost eight acres of the land originally settled by the Carr family in the late 1870s. Transformed into a park with an astounding garden, it slowly was passed through the hands of many different owners and families until finally, in 1941, it was deeded to the city of Pasadena under the restriction and guidelines that it would become the Pasadena Art Institute. The Pasadena Art Institute was originally under the local city government’s control as it began to grow its collection and transition into the museum it is today. Eventually, it became the Pasadena Art Museum and was redesigned. Then in 1974, Norton Simon, an art collector, took control over the museum and added a selection from his own personal collection. With this, a new board of trustees was brought in and organized to take control over the museum and its collections. Norton Simon took over the management of the Pasadena Art Museum, and it became a modern art museum that was a rising contender to other major American art museums. The original museum buildings were designed in 1969 by famed architects Ladd & Kelsey and included a reflecting pool. The red brick with an onyx glaze curved siding, designed by Edith Heath, made the building flow, and it had a white concrete base to match the stark white roof. The brick design even won Edith Heath the highly prestigious Industrial Arts Medal award granted by the American Institute of Architects, the first of its kind handed out to a non-architect. The building housed a massive collection of modern contemporary art with an avant-garde inspired interior,

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broken by brief interludes of nature between each collection of pieces.

When Norton Simon acquired and took control of the Pasadena Art Museum with his newly reorganized Board of Trustees in 1974, it was just the beginning of new and exciting changes for the museum. Norton Simon, born in 1907, was an exceptional businessman, who established one of the first international consumer product corporations that spanned from Canada Dry, to Avis Car Rental, to even a publishing firm. Norton Simon had an exuberant passion for art and had collected many pieces including Impressionist paintings, contemporary art, and some unique pieces from India and Southeast Asia. He sadly died in 1993 but wanted to preserve his collection, and with the acquisition of the Pasadena Art Museum and the creation of the Norton Simon Museum in 1974, he made sure that there was a home for his extensive collection. The stark changes began in 1977 with architect Craig Ellwood, who began the redesign of the building's interiors. Craig Ellwood was not the only architect involved, and between 1996 and 1999, Frank Gehry drastically altered the interior with his re-design. All of these architects lead to massive changes and continued progress. The changes did not stop when the interior was finished in 1999. Nancy Goslee Power redesigned the landscape changing the main focal point of the entrance and removing the massive reflecting pool, focusing on a more organic and simple design.

Today the Norton Simon Museum holds a unique collection of art and artifacts, that span from approximately the first century to today. It encompasses many unique items such as paintings, altarpieces, statues, sculptures, books, prints, drawings, photographs, and everything in between. They have not lost the roots of the land and have kept many pieces of the garden-like landscape intact. They even have a special garden area sectioned off containing a statue of the Buddha Shakyamuni in a peaceful

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quiet section off the lower level Asian exhibit. There is an extensive collection of art from South and Southeast Asia that ranges from the first century to the nineteenth century C.E. These are parts of the museum’s extensive permanent collection from a range of countries including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Tibet, Cambodia, and Thailand, along with a few specially chosen pieces from China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan, all part of the museum’s permanent Asia exhibit.

The Asia exhibit also often features a traveling collection of Japanese woodblock prints, from the personal collection of Frank Lloyd Wright.

The vast permanent collection does not stop there. It includes masterworks of European art from the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries, including many altarpieces and impressionist art. One of the pieces, *Venus and Cupid in a Landscape* (c.1515) (Pictured Below) by Jacopo Palma (also known as Palma

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11 The Norton Simon Foundation (NSF), https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/F.1975.17.03.S.
Vecchio), is especially unique, as conservationists found during a restoration in the 1970s that at some point the baby Cupid was painted over to leave Venus alone in the scene. The painting was restored to its former glory removing the layer of paint over Cupid.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{venus_cupid.png}
\end{center}

\textit{Venus and Cupid in a Landscape (c.1515)}\textsuperscript{16}

The Collections include such distinctive items like \textit{Fidelity} (c.1485) by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, a fresco that was transferred to canvas. These items are exquisite examples of the diverse and wonderful collection of European classics held in the Norton Simon Museum. The museum’s newer art includes nineteenth century Impressionist and Post-Impressionist pieces, including from artists such as Monet, Degas and Van Gogh.\textsuperscript{17} These paintings are accompanied by bronze sculptures and lead into modern twentieth century art. Picasso and Matisse adorn the walls scattered with other modern art, including a unique post-World War II collection that is adorned with artists such as Warhol and Rauschenberg. The museum also holds a special selection of California art from between the 1950s and the 1970s that contains pieces by Henry Moore and many others, works of bronze, lead,


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} NSF, “In Focus”, https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/in-focus/.
and marble. The Norton Simon had a temporary exhibit through March of 2020 called *By Day & By Night*.\(^{18}\) It is a collection from Paris in the Belle Epoque (or “Beautiful Era”) from late nineteenth and early twentieth century Paris.

The museum’s extensive collection caters to a broad audience, especially when one considers their temporary exhibits. They have historically influential and unique art pieces in an array of mediums, and with a modern art section, the museum maintains a flow of paintings to guide one through the ages. The museum offers two audio tours, one for children and one for adults. The children’s audio tour does not cover every single painting and sculpture but instead covers a carefully chosen selection with interesting facts for children. The second audio tour covers almost every piece of art and shares the history and facts of many of the paintings. The museum also offers a ‘Family Guide’ that serves as an activity book for kids to help them engage with the art containing a map, facts, trivia, quizzes, and other activities, including a postcard in the back featuring a piece of art. This goes above and beyond as many art museums do not cater towards children. The steps the museum has taken to drive children’s interest in art, rather than focusing on just admiration\(^{19}\) is wonderful and refreshing. Kids are not the only audience that the Norton Simon caters to, and with the Southeast Asian exhibit the Museum draws in a unique audience by sharing the history of some Southeast Asian cultures. The artifacts from temples and shrines along with numerous figurines and sculptures\(^{20}\) that give light to a far-off culture that many may never have the chance to


\(^{19}\) Where many museums focus on the art and history and the reverence the pieces deserve, the Norton Simon tries to engage kids and teach them about the art and its history. The Norton Simon also has tours for adults and children with special needs.

visit or explore. The pieces, some the size of one’s hand and others closer to the size of a small car, are so unique and have such astonishing detail that they are hard to just pass by. Even high school and college students can find something interesting especially with the vast collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings.

The Norton Simon collection is vast but can be a lot to see in just one day as it spans such a wide variety. The museum has a great collection of historical pieces and would satisfy the requirement for any art history class, or history class for that matter. The expanse of their collection of European paintings and sculpture is an excellent base for the collection, and an awe-inspiring aspect for history lovers. The South/Southeast Asia exhibit was stunning and is a must visit; it shows such a beautiful aspect of this part of Asia’s vast and expansive history. The Garden attached to the South/Southeast Asian exhibit is simple but beautiful and radiates a peaceful, calm aura that is often associated with Buddhism. The exhibitions are a great addition to the museum as a whole and rotate often enough that it adds a fresh aspect and perspective so museum-goers can always find something new and interesting. The modern paintings incorporate so many different artists than anyone can find something they like or that intrigues them. The Norton Simon is an excellent museum and is an excellent example of what a vast collection looks like. It strays from the basics of European art with its South/Southeast Asia exhibit, and delves into the twenty-first century with its modern pieces. This museum caters to so many different people and is an excellent example of how to look at the world of art.
Reviews

Bibliography


Author Bio

Megan Kyriss is an undergraduate student at CSUSB working towards a BA in History and was also part of the editing team of this edition of History in the Making. Her goal is to continue on for a master’s and doctorate to become an historian and work on historical reconstructions. She loves to travel and hopes to one day fill her passport to its capacity. Lastly Megan extends her deepest gratitude to her family, friends, and fellow students for without their support, none of this would be possible.