

# The San Diego Museum of Art

## Highlights of a Visit



James Lightner

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# The San Diego Museum of Art: Highlights of a Visit

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The San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA) has been around for about a hundred years and is a wonderfully stimulating place. My assignment today is to share with you some highlights, which we will do with a short slideshow. There are a lot of paintings on display so I've whittled down the tour to the following twelve pictures:

- 1) *The Arrest of Christ*, c. 1515, by the workshop of Hieronymous Bosch (Dutch)
- 2) *Portrait of a Venetian*, 1550, by Tintoretto (Venetian)
- 3) *The Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1620, by Giulio Cesare Procaccini (Northern Italian)
- 4) *Saint Bartholomew*, 1632, by Jusepe de Ribera (Spanish; worked in Italy)
- 5) *The Grand Canal with the Rialto Bridge*, 1775, by Francesco Guardi (Venetian)
- 6) *In the Catskills*, 1848, by Asher Durand (American)
- 7) *Wounded Drummer Boy*, c. 1864-71, by Eastman Johnson (American)
- 8) *The Young Shepherdess*, 1885, by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (French)
- 9) *By the Seashore*, 1908, by Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida (Spanish)
- 10) *The Blue-eyed Boy*, 1916, by Amedeo Modigliani (Italian)
- 11) *Torrey Pines*, 1925, by Nicolai Fechin (American; from Russia), and
- 12) *In the San Felipe Valley*, 1927, by Charles Reiffel (American).

As there is no common theme among them we'll proceed chronologically.

After seeing these paintings on the screen I am hopeful you'll feel inspired to re-visit the SDMA and give it your support. You are probably aware that the paintings in the collection have been donated by civic-minded patrons or purchased with money from gifts. We should pause at the outset to thank those donors. Imagine the San Diego region without a serious public art museum: it's a depressing thought. If donors to the SDMA know they're appreciated, more will emerge and the Museum can improve.

- 1) *The Arrest of Christ*, c. 1515, by the workshop of Hieronymous Bosch (Dutch)

These days Bosch may be the most popular painter of the Dutch Renaissance even though his pictures feature a lot of calculated ugliness. His most celebrated work, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, is a large triptych in the Prado that depicts precisely-painted, fabulous and macabre scenes of the Garden of Eden, Earth and Hell, with imaginary landscapes, a sea of naked figures, nightmarish creatures and dozens of disturbing details. The first time you see it is harrowing. However, with all the cultural interest in grim fantasy it's no surprise it's popular today.

*The Arrest of Christ* at the SDMA (**Figure 1**) is a much smaller work, 20" x 32", showing close-



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ups of seven figures including Christ, and it is not attributed directly to Bosch but to his workshop, which means made under the master's supervision and / or by a deft imitator. An almost identical version is owned by the Rijksmuseum (**Figure 2**). The picture is disturbing and ironically modern in the way it caricatures the shadowy crowd - it might have inspired George Grosz or Otto Dix and contrasts sharply with sublime later renderings of Christ's betrayal, such as Caravaggio's masterpiece *The Capture of Christ*, painted in 1602.

There are many interesting details here. Peter is portrayed as a stout monk with a tonsure and a red robe who wields a terrifying jambiya dagger; Christ's arm is extended to restrain him. Opposite Peter a member of the Sanhedrin pulls a counter-sword. The two lower fingers of the ogreish figure's left hand which hauntingly grasps Christ's neck appear leprous and decaying. There is a tinderbox in the center of the melee; it appears that a flame is about to be lit. I'm not sure if the buried figure with the blue robe who holds the tinderbox is Judas or if Judas might be the figure wearing the tricorne and holding the torch in the back.

There is a similarly strange, provocative painting at Princeton which I would like to show you as well, somewhat larger and more elaborate and also attributed to Bosch's workshop. This one is titled *Christ Before Pilate* (**Figure 3**) and shows the Roman governor prepared to wash his hands after handing over Christ. One of the details I noticed is the four gold ring-piercings on the faces of the crowd, including two around the mouth of the boorish figure with the Judenhut and one in the nose of the helmeted figure with the gross underbite. While pierced ears were popular across Europe, I don't know that other kinds of piercings were common in the 16th century. These called to my mind the nose-ring given to Isaac's wife in the Old Testament, although in the Princeton picture the rings are not associated with beauty, to say the least.



**Figure 1.** *The Arrest of Christ* (SDMA)





Figure 2. *The Arrest of Christ* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)



Figure 3. *Christ Before Pilate* (Princeton U. Art Museum)

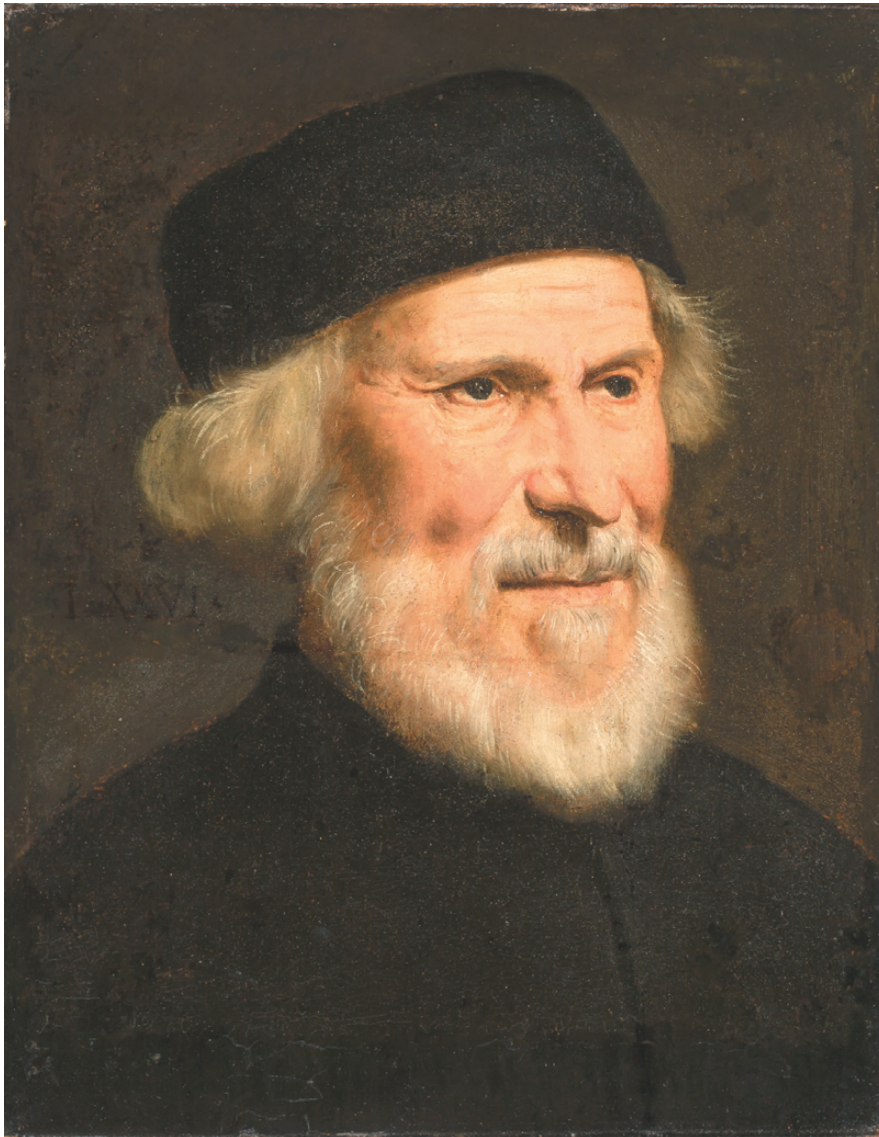


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2) *Portrait of a Venetian*, 1550, by Tintoretto (Venetian)

This small portrait from 1550 by Tintoretto (**Figure 4**) depicts the head of an anonymous, stern, elderly Venetian man with gray hair and beard, black eyes, a black coat with high collar and a black hat similar to a Roman pileus pannonicus. We can suppose this was painted in winter. The hair and the colors in the subject's skin and the folds of the skin are painted with masterful realism. The matching black of the eyes, hat and coat are balanced to draw the view to the eyes, which are hard and cold, showing no pupils and only slight specks of light.

The man in this portrait strikes me as quintessentially Venetian, calling to mind the remarkable commercial success and endurance of the old Republic, which dominated the Adriatic and much of European trade for centuries. This figure, with his dispassionate stare, narrow long aquiline nose, tight lips and slight underbite, appears unsentimental and shrewd, as many of Venice's leaders must have been at the time. If you admire Venice's history, you have to admire this portrait by one of Venice's greatest artists.



**Figure 4.** *Portrait of a Venetian* (SDMA)

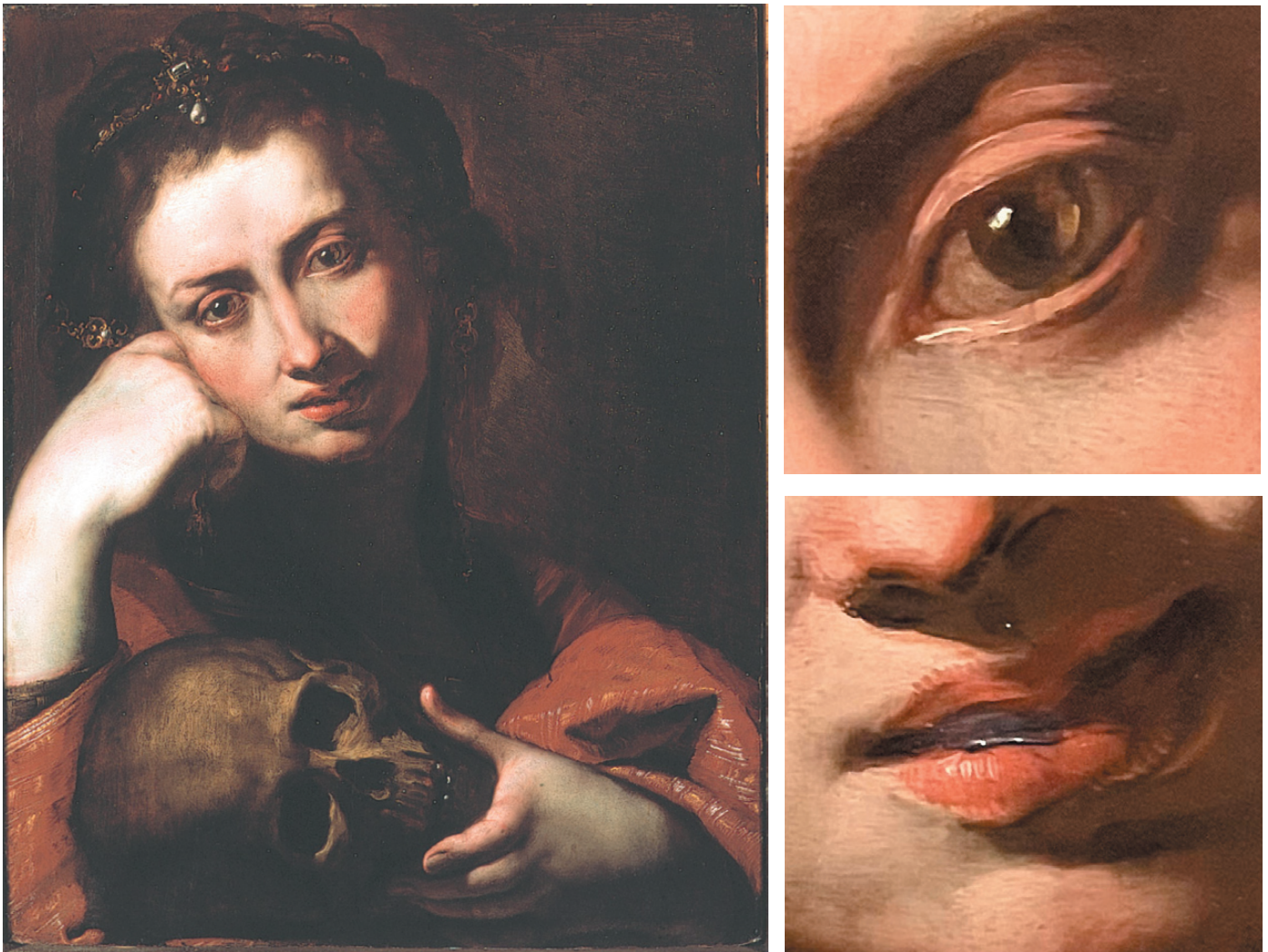
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3) *The Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1620, by Giulio Cesare Procaccini (Northern Italian)

Before I saw this painting of *The Penitent Magdalene* (**Figure 5**) at the SDMA I had never heard of the artist, Procaccini. I consider this the finest Magdalene painting I've seen, which includes those by Titian and Caravaggio. Of course I've still only seen a tiny fraction of all the Magdalenes that have been painted; she is one of the most oft-depicted subjects in Christendom. So there may be other fine renderings, but this one to me is stunning.

One thing to like is that it does not show the subject's breasts and body, as so many paintings of her do, given the historical speculation about her sinful life and the seven devils Christ cast out. Procaccini gives her a beautiful face and hair, but her physicality is not the point; this is a psychological study of devotion, grief and regret. It is relevant to every viewer. This is a person who wiped Jesus' feet with her tears and wept alone by his tomb.

The listless face, the deeply sad, glazed and swollen red eyes and the slightly open mouth evoke profound despair and loss. Here are close-ups of the eye on right and the mouth. One detail that perplexes me is the glint of silver in the lower lip and the contorted edge in the shadow. It could be the silver is a precious mark from kissing Christ's feet while the deformed edge is a scar from her past; or it may mean something else - I'm not sure what the artist intended.



**Figure 5.** *The Penitent Magdalene* (SDMA). Right: close-up of right eye, and of lip showing silver.



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4) *Saint Bartholomew*, 1632, by Jusepe de Ribera (Spanish; worked in Italy)

I first became interested in Saint Bartholomew after seeing the large sculpture of him to the right of the altar in the Milan Duomo made by Marco d'Andrate and commonly referred to as "Saint Bartholomew Flayed", the most arresting sculpture of a martyred saint I know of. I've since learned of other representations of Bartholomew's death, including a gruesome painting in a church in Rome that depicts the Armenian executioners forcefully stripping flesh from the saint. Bartholomew was one of the twelve apostles, and following Christ's ascension he evangelized in the eastern provinces of the empire, possibly as far as India. Second- and third-hand sources allege he was skinned alive after offending an Armenian prince.

This outstanding Ribera painting in the SDMA (**Figure 6**) has nothing to do with his martyrdom; it portrays him as a handsome young man with thick brown hair and a nascent beard long before his death. This is a big canvas, 47" x 39", but most of the interest is in the area of the face. The other two points of interest are the hands, one of which holds an excerpt from the creed; the other fiercely grips a wooden staff.



**Figure 6.** *Saint Bartholomew* (SDMA)

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The attraction of Ribera's Bartholomew reminds us of Procaccini's Magdalene: it's the story told by the face. All the light is on it, shining as it tilts to heaven. Unlike the Magdalene, who looks straight at the viewer, Bartholomew looks up knowingly. The eyes and mouth combined express deep sorrow and unmistakable determination; he has been profoundly hurt and moved. The sacrifice of Christ has transformed his faith.

For comparison here is an excerpt from a painting Ribera made of Saint Peter (**Figure 7**). The angle of the head and direction of the eyes are nearly identical in the two paintings. In the Bartholomew, however, the saint's mouth is resolutely closed. There is more pain evident and I would say more commitment, perhaps because of the subject's youth.



**Figure 7.** *Saint Bartholomew and Saint Peter*, both by Jusepe de Ribera.

5) *The Grand Canal with the Rialto Bridge*, 1775, by Francesco Guardi (Venetian)

For anyone who has been to Venice this next picture of the Rialto Bridge (**Figure 8**) painted just three decades before the Napoleonic conquest and the end of the Republic will seem a surprisingly authentic representation of daily life in the heart of the city before the advent of cameras and mass tourism. Wealthy European tourists began to visit Venice for holidays in the 18th century but there appear to be only locals in this scene. The twenty or so gondolas pointing in different directions with the gondoliers energetically pushing and pulling their oars are all engaged in minor trade of some sort. This is a picture of a working place, alive with commerce, gritty and productive. The bridge's splendid architecture is the primary focus and the painting shows how important it was as a pedestrian thoroughfare.

The artist, a prolific Venetian, used a limited palette. Most paintings of this scene today would be splattered with bright colors, masking the old Republic's no-nonsense ways.

**Figure 9** is another painting Guardi made of the same scene. This one is in the National Gallery's collection and indicates the artist probably sold his work to visitors.





**Figure 8.** *The Grand Canal with the Rialto Bridge* (SDMA)

**Figure 9.** *The Grand Canal with the Rialto Bridge* (National Gallery, Washington DC)





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6) *In the Catskills*, 1848, by Asher Durand (American)

Moving across the Atlantic to New York State, this is Asher Durand's *In the Catskills* from 1848 (**Figure 10**). Normally I would say Durand is not my preferred 19th-century landscape painter. His most famous work, *Kindred Spirits*, strikes me as cartoonish. He could have followed Caspar David Friedrich more closely and dropped the bird from that painting and obscured his friends' faces. His trees can also seem affected despite his claim to portray nature with integrity.

That said, this particular Durand painting at the SDMA is a superb mid-century American landscape. The composition is masterful, following an appealing S, from the road to the valley to the mountain and clouds and sky. The artist created a wonderful feeling of depth with the gray-ing of the distant mountains. The road with the figures, horse and dog and the adjacent glassy river catch the eye before it moves to a riparian woodland and rolling summer farmland and in the far distance the lurching peak that appears proportionate, not exaggerated as many mid-century paintings of mountains were. The two large beeches or oaks in the foreground frame the road and figures without overpowering them.

Here the positions of the small figures and their animals seem natural, and - unlike in *Kindred Spirits* - they convey genuine rural life, with the barest accents of white on the hat, red on the blanket and copper on the horse to attract the eye believably. I find myself guessing what those two fellows discussed. "Where are you headed, friend?" This is a calming, beautiful painting that captures a peaceful moment in antebellum America.



**Figure 10.** *In the Catskills* (SDMA)



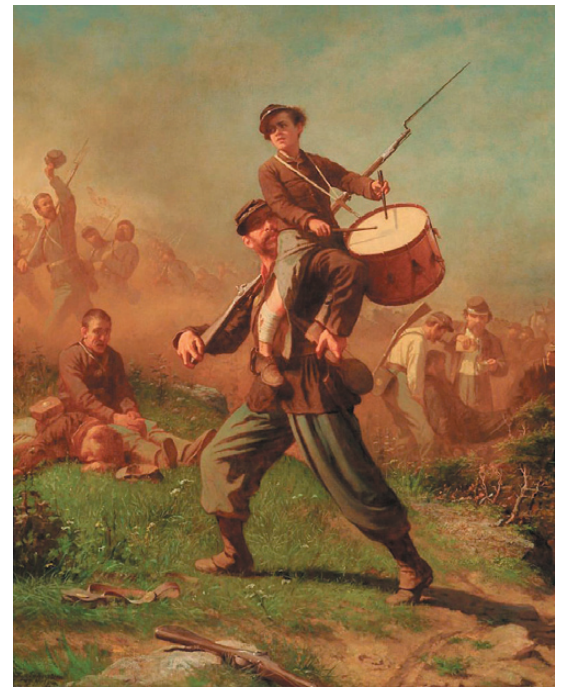
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7) *Wounded Drummer Boy*, c. 1864-71, by Eastman Johnson (American)

As an allegory of the fractured American republic struggling to heal and grow after the horrors of the Civil War, the *Wounded Drummer Boy* (**Figure 11**) is a significant painting from a critical moment in US history. Johnson was convinced of his idea; he painted at least three nearly identical sketches - this one at the SDMA (26" x 22"), one at the Frick Art Museum in Pittsburgh and one at the Brooklyn Art Museum - plus a finished version that was 48" x 39" and was re-sold to a private collector in 2021, which I will show you here for comparative purposes (**Figure 12**).

In the finished version a bayonet was added to the rifle and the background was filled with details. I prefer the SDMA study because in it the face of the boy suggests shock and trepidation, while in the final painting the expression seems complacent. The SDMA's description of its painting notes that Johnson was inspired by the Battle of Antietam. It is hard to believe the Union Army allowed young boys to be near such terrible scenes.

As our survey has now progressed into the late-19th century, we need to acknowledge the advent of photography, which led to increasing abstraction in painting. Photography was widespread during the Civil War. Here is a photo of a drummer boy from a Michigan regiment.



**Figure 11.** *Wounded Drummer Boy* (SDMA)

**Figure 12.** *Wounded Drummer Boy* (private collection). Bottom right: photo of Civil War drummer boy.



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8) *The Young Shepherdess*, 1885, by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (French)

By 1885 Bouguereau must have seemed to innovative French artists a monument to all things *passées*, but a significant majority of the *haute bourgeoisie* remained on his side up until his death in 1905 at age 79. He was a traditionalist in style and subject-matter and in his professional life, working steadily, painting lucrative commissions and exhibiting at the Paris Salon.



There is no denying he was a master of paint with a clearly defined aesthetic and a mission to convey his sense of beauty, not to experiment or challenge conventions. We do not have to take sides in the struggle between old and new to admire his genius and say he was a descendant of David and Ingres. The SDMA is fortunate to have a painting from the height of his career.

*The Young Shepherdess* (**Figure 13**) (62" x 29") is one of several paintings the artist made of barefoot girls in pastoral settings of rural France. Looking at this rural scene I thought of the contrast with Manet's *Lunch on the Grass* of 1863, which shows an older, immodest woman looking at the viewer with her head at a similar angle. That is not to say Bouguereau avoided female nudes; he painted scores of them, often in classical poses and idyllic settings, as he strove to convey ideal forms.

This painting is divided into two parts: the brightly backlit third above the horizon, and the lower two-thirds on earth, from the loose strap of the bodice to the rocks by the girl's feet. The side-pose and layers of country-clothing reinforce the subject's modesty. The dark hair is set against a backdrop of white clouds; the hair is tied in a bun while curly filaments float around her head. Her perfect child's face with smooth skin, big brown eyes directed at the viewer, well proportioned nose, delicate chin and fine small mouth with lips quietly closed suggests there are places far from Paris where innocence endures.

**Figure 13.** *The Young Shepherdess* (SDMA)



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9) *By the Seashore*, 1908, by Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida (Spanish)

In the summer of 2014 the SDMA hosted “Sorolla in America”, a delightful retrospective of Spain’s famous impressionist, and in the following year it purchased *By the Seashore* (**Figure 14**), a large canvas (51” x 41”) and an ideal painting to have here in San Diego given the similarities between the coastal orientation here and that of Sorolla’s Valencia. It is very hard not to like Sorolla’s beach paintings. They are loose, colorful and full of sunshine and happy activity. They often include children and people enjoying the waves.

A critic could look at this picture and object to the roughness of it, the big unrefined brushstrokes, the rushed or sloppy or unfinished quality. The point is valid; I doubt the artist spent much time making this. But the amount of time or effort might not be what matter. The artist was 45 when he made this painting; he knew what he was doing - he wanted the casual, semi-abstract quality. Stand back from the picture and blur your eyes. The proportions are perfect, the colors are luminous yet natural, and the feeling you are left with is that living near sunny beaches is a wonderful blessing, and healthy young children are among life’s greatest joys.



**Figure 14.** *By the Seashore* (SDMA)



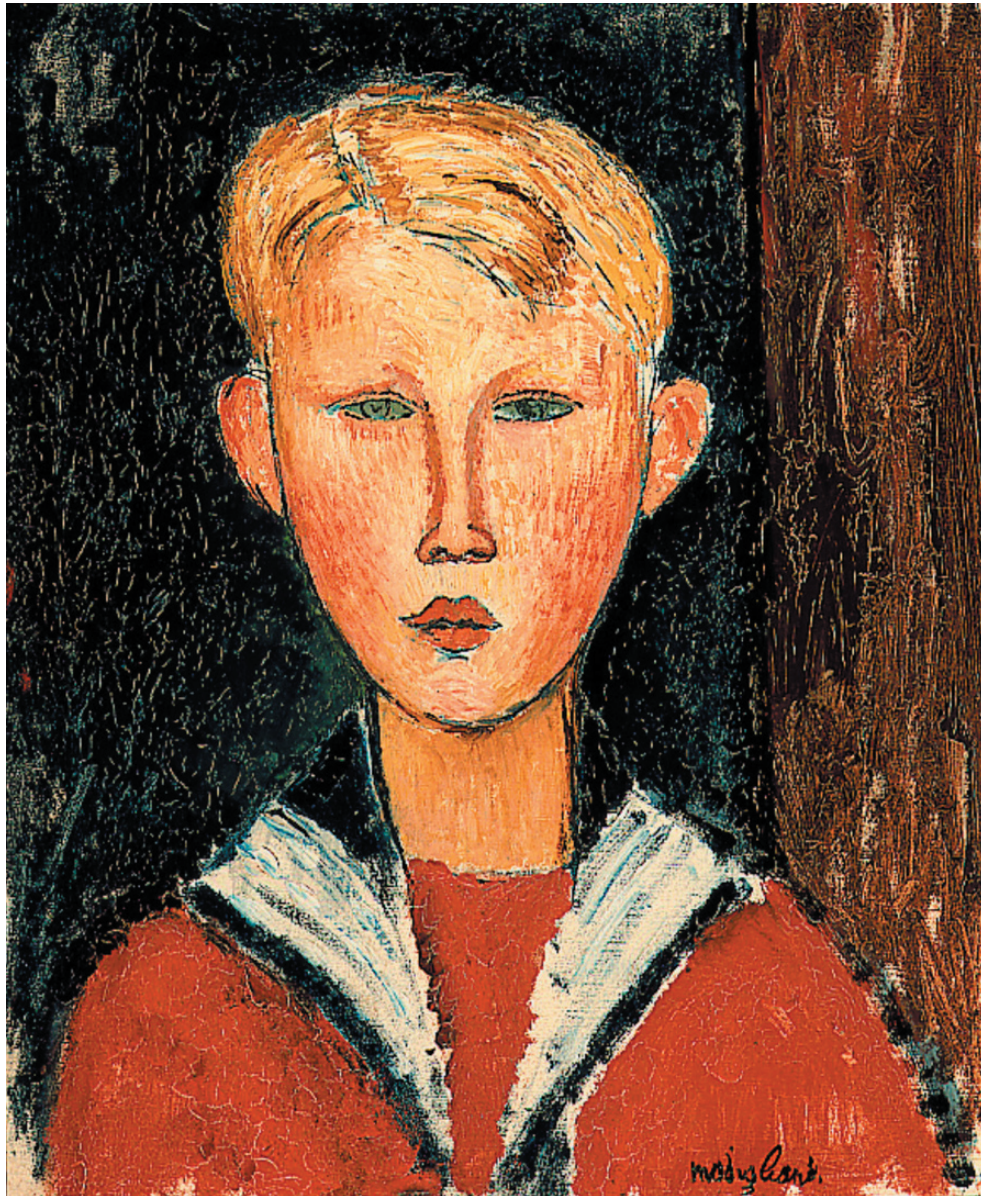
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10) *The Blue-eyed Boy*, 1916, by Amedeo Modigliani (Italian)

This small Modigliani painting (**Figure 15**), 18" x 15", from 1916 of a blond boy with a red shirt and blue eyes - including blue whites of eyes - is included in our survey to acknowledge the radical changes in art that occurred as post-impressionism metastasized between 1890 and 1920 and scores of colorful paintings were made that are incredibly popular today.

Born in 1884, Modigliani was a contemporary of both Henri Matisse (b.1869) and Pablo Picasso (b.1881), though the two modern giants had much longer lives; Modigliani died at 35 in 1920. His work was not well known while he lived. Today he is famous, and the SDMA keeps this painting on prominent display.

I am not immune to the seductive simplicity of Modigliani's paintings, which have a distinct, immediately recognizable style blending elementary composition, primitive forms, indifference to perspective, bodily distortion, hard lines and heightened color. This is a painting that is easy to look at and guaranteed not to bog you in the past.



**Figure 15.** *The Blue-eyed Boy* (SDMA)



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11) *Torrey Pines*, 1925, by Nicolai Fechin (American; from Russia)

We have arrived in San Diego with this 30" x 36" oil painting titled *Torrey Pines* (**Figure 16**) by Nicolai Fechin, who lived for several years in Taos and Los Angeles in the second quarter of the 20th century. Though the canvas is large this could be a plein-air study; it appears to have been made quickly with wide brush-strokes for the flesh-colored sandstone and rich blue sky. Fechin, an academically trained Russian who emigrated to the USA in 1923, was able - like Sorolla - to capture the design and color of a subject with amazing economy.

The subject here is the most visited natural park in San Diego County. The artist only put one pine in the picture, however, far at the top, and only hinted at it. Instead the painting depicts an open flat and a bare hill on a dry south-facing slope, probably sometime in summer. The sparseness of the scrub, the evident geology and the plants he shows ring true. We know the plants by their shapes and honest colors: a dark patch of Chamise in the center, a Prickly Pear in the left foreground and a Mojave Yucca at right. The Yucca is the star of the picture, expertly implied with perfectly straight, sharply pointed radiating strokes.

If you have spent many years around San Diego County you know places like this patch of Torrey Pines Reserve by the colors of the earth. Fechin was not only a skilled painter of figures; he was an expert at painting landscapes. We are fortunate that he came to San Diego and that the SDMA has this specific record of his stay.



**Figure 16.** *Torrey Pines* (SDMA)



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12) *In the San Felipe Valley*, 1927, by Charles Reiffel (American)

In 2012, two years prior to its Sorolla exhibit, the SDMA organized a retrospective of Charles Reiffel (1862-1942) and published a fine book about the artist, who came to San Diego in the 1920s and died here in 1942 at 79. It is a joy to recall that exhibit and again look through the book, which is titled "Charles Reiffel: An American Post-Impressionist". Many of the paintings are magical, not only because he had a unique style of fluidly brushing paint and juxtaposing vivid colors, but also because he painted so many scenes of the San Diego region before it was transformed by World War II. Looking at his pictures now brings wonderful life to the dreary decade of the Depression.

*In the San Felipe Valley* (**Figure 17**) could also be called *View of Volcan Mountain*, as that massive landform is the dominant feature of the canvas. But look at the valley alone for a moment - there is a rushing river and a gorge. If you drive to Scissors Crossing today and hike up San Felipe Creek you are unlikely to see anything like that, even on a thundering rainy day, probably because the water-table since the 1920s has been sucked dry by residential wells up the hill and in Ranchita. The picture suggests winter with the spread of green in the normally arid landscape



**Figure 17.** *In the San Felipe Valley* (SDMA)



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and the dark shadow on the mountain which indicates the sun is low in the south. I am not sure what kind of plant the artist was drawing in the foreground; the gold foliage suggests willows or cottonwoods but neither of those types would appear conical. The true shape of the trees may have been modified by the artist to point the eye to the mountain, and the burnished golden color was used to complement the purple-blues above.

Reiffel's landscapes from his San Diego years are full of movement and the bold color-choices of what the SDMA book calls a post-impressionist, that general term encompassing seventy percent of artists after Cezanne. It is worth repeating the words of a Los Angeles art critic written in 1927 and quoted on page 27 of the SDMA book:

Reiffel has the oriental feeling for melodic and rhythmic line. Nature moves and dances for him and every inch of his canvas partakes in this rhythmic dance. His pictures are as exhilarating as an early spring day...[and] reflect the qualities of locality and atmosphere with fidelity.

Those words apply to the San Felipe painting. If I had to choose five or ten favorite Reiffel paintings, this would be one - although I might place ahead of it a few of his landscapes with fantastical skies, like *Back Country Houses* (1935) and *Harbor Night* (1937).

### **Is There Anything About the SDMA Not to Like?**

You must have detected my opinion that the SDMA is a vital institution that's well worth visiting. There isn't much of importance I would criticise.

One thought I can pass on is the comment of a mischievous local artist, that the "San Diego" in the name should be replaced with "Just Another". It does appear that the SDMA, like dozens of art museums across the USA, is not much interested in the artistic tradition of the city and county for which it is named but rather aspires to be a miniature "The Met" and "MOMA" combined, which has the effect of making it seem even smaller than it is.

In fact on a recent visit I counted five paintings by San Diego artists on display, all in sub-plum positions. The Reiffel landscape, the most impressive of the five, hangs in the busy foyer next to a hallway-door where nobody would practically stop, while the paintings by Alfred Mitchell, Maurice Braun and Charles Fries are placed in the back hall between the men's and women's restrooms where nobody would wish to stop. This while a few uninspiring German paintings have their own gallery and a peculiar pop-chapel occupies one big room.

I am not a museum-director and can only guess at the challenges SDMA's leaders have faced over the years staffing the institution, attracting and staging popular exhibits, prioritising paintings in limited spaces, and building and trading such a large collection of art. Surely there have been trustees who have pushed for more regional focus, and surely there are reasons that focus has not been pursued. We could speculate about all that - maybe another time.

For those who would like the Museum to have at least some historical-regional focus, I recommend you continue to praise the donors. Maybe some will emerge who own great collections of regional art, and the SDMA will gain the ability to live up to its name.