

PHILADELPHIA STORY

By STUART PRESTON

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THE greater a museum, the more apt it is to be taken for granted, although in a physical sense the Philadelphia Museum of Art can hardly be ignored. Its vast, tawny neo-Greek structure, sitting heavily on elevated ground, dominates the horizon and suggests some climactic temple on a new Acropolis.

It is altogether too awesome as a piece of architecture but, at least, its grandiosity does justice to the grandeur and variety of its collections, all the long way from one of the most beautiful Poussins in the world, "The Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite," and the remarkable Arensberg Collection of modern art to—mind the step—Princess Grace of Monaco's wedding dress in the Fashion Galleries.

These attractions notwithstanding, the Philadelphia Museum is holding two special summer loan exhibitions of paintings from the well-known collections of Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson and of the Rev. and Mrs. Theodore Pitcairn. Both concentrate on French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, but each, within this conventional and familiar framework, contains pictures that could be put among the principal ornaments of any gallery in the world.

French Victories

Four of these are Tyson pictures—two Manets; a very late Cézanne landscape of Mont Sainte-Victoire, and Renoir's "Les Grandes Baigneuses," a key picture in his work, which Sir Kenneth Clark considers "one of the most satisfying tributes ever paid to Venus by a great artist."

The Manets illuminate admirably two aspects of this perplexing artist, his devotion to the old masters, and his skill, daring and high spirits in painting scenes of contemporary life. "Le Bon Bock," with its unconcealed derivation from Hals, was Manet's one great popular success during his lifetime and continues to be deservedly so.

On the other hand, "Le Bateau de Folkestone" (actually painted some years earlier), depicting passengers boarding a Channel steamer, is a sparkling fountain of color and light, the very kind of "vulgar" subject that the public of 1869, accustomed to idealized scenes and figures found chaotic and offensive. Its sense of actuality establishes

Manet's claim to be the first genuine realist of the nineteenth century.

The Cézanne landscape of Provençal noon's transparent might is one of those final studies of his great motif that his eyes seem not so much to have seen as to have bored right into. As for the Renoir, so carefully planned and executed, it may come as a surprise to find that this master, who usually painted with such sensuous ease, has produced here a picture that appears to be the triumphant result of an intellectual struggle with form and composition. It dates from a critical moment in his life and embodies his reaction against the easy-going approach of the Impressionists.

The Pitcairn pictures cannot, as a whole, stand up to the grandeur of the above quartet.



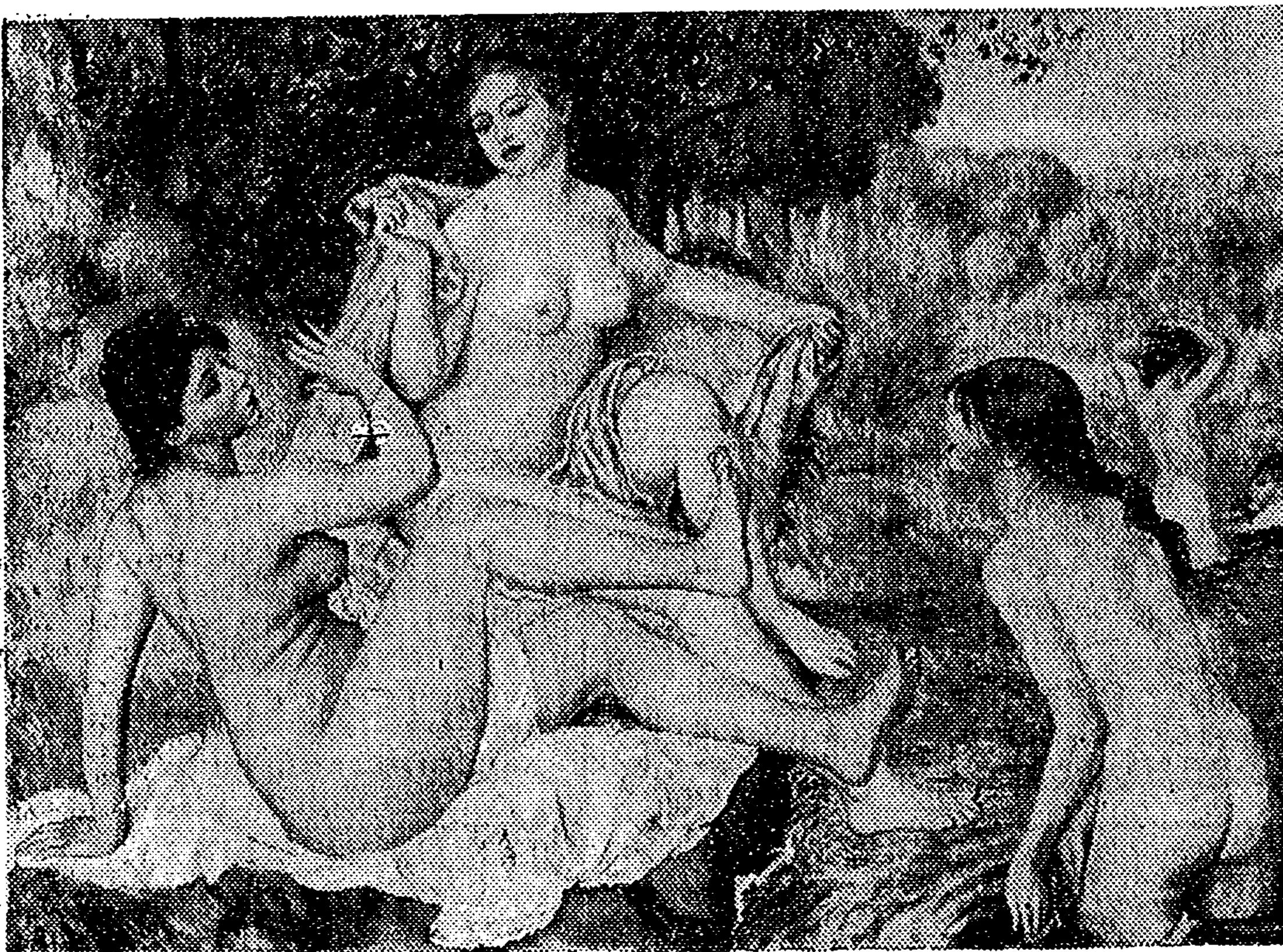
BUDDHIST—Indra, bronze, 12th cent., Nepalese. On loan to Philadelphia Museum.

But they include several Van Goghs, notably a touching oil study of his mother; a flame-like "Crucifixion" by El Greco, and Monet's radiant "Seaside Terrace near Le Havre" of 1866, which is always a pleasure to see. They also include, alas, a whole roomful of paintings by Philippe Smit, a twentieth-century Dutch artist of the most bizarre eclectic taste—an unhappy jumble of Greco, Van Gogh and, strangely enough, Zuloaga. Or so it seems.

From the Himalayas

So much for the temporary shows, which close on Sept. 18. Philadelphia's newest permanent installation is a gallery devoted to the art of Nepal and Tibet, bronzes and paintings of great finesse and fascination, the content and subject matter of which are highly mystical and metaphysical. This religious character undoubtedly comes between the layman and a thorough appreciation of these objects. But an entirely spiritual vision, according to which what we see is an illusion and only the Divine Ideal is real, does not, happily, destroy all possibility of creating beauty for profane eyes.

Such is the impression made by the Nepalese and Tibetan objects here, which make up, incidentally, far and away the finest group existing in the Occident. Looking at these bronzes and paintings, we can afford to remain in darkness as to their symbolism (the average person has no choice in the matter), and delight in their majestic feeling and vitality and, particularly, in the ecstatic color of the paintings. These are qualities that transcend cultural limitations. The touchstone of quality applies here.



FRENCH VENUSES—"Les Grandes Baigneuses," oil, 1885-87, by Auguste Renoir, on loan to the summer exhibition at Philadelphia Museum of Art from Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson.