Inside Art
Carol Vogel

A Venetian Canvas Joins Met Treasures

While it had prime examples of most of the artists who define Venetian high Renaissance — Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese and Lorenzo Lotto — the Metropolitan Museum of Art had no work by Jacopo Bassano. Yet “The Baptism of Christ,” Bassano’s last known painting, is one that Keith Christiansen, the Met’s curator of Italian and French paintings, knew well.

So when Mr. Christiansen got word that the canvas — hanging in the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio since 1992, on loan from a collector living in Paris — might be for sale, he showed it to Mark Fisch, a collector, real estate developer and Met trustee.

“Two days after Mark saw it, he called and offered to buy it for the Met,” Mr. Christiansen said. “This gives us one of the key artists we were missing.”

Besides simply filling a gap, the painting is considered an important work by Bassano, who died in 1592 before he could finish it. The work’s broad, broken brushwork — or “stabs of color,” as historians have described it — is characteristic of his late style.

But perhaps the most unusual thing about the painting is that it is a nocturnal scene. Baptisms are generally depicted in brilliant sunshine and pastoral settings, but this is dark and moody and seems surprisingly modern. “I love pictures that defy expectations,” Mr. Christiansen said, adding that it “looks ahead to both Goya and to Francis Bacon.”

The Bassano, which recently went on view in the Met’s gallery of Venetian Renaissance painting, is one of two Renaissance works the Met acquired recently. The museum also bought a richly detailed bronze oil lamp from around 1515-20 by Andrea Riccio, a noted goldsmith and sculptor.

When the Frick Collection had a show devoted to Riccio, which closed in January, this work was not included because the owner, a Swiss collector, refused to lend it. Experts at Christie’s negotiated the deal between the seller and the Met. (The museum paid for the bronze out of its general acquisitions budget.)

“I think this is one of the greatest Renaissance objects,” said Ian Wardropper, chairman of the Met’s department of European sculpture and decorative arts. “It represents Riccio’s imaginative response to the ancient world.”

Part of a group of six, the lamp is the most complete example because its lid is preserved. The object is richly decorated with curling tendrils, grotesque masks and ram’s heads. It went on view Friday in the museum’s Italian Renaissance bronze gallery.

People-Watching

At least three times a week for the past year, video artist Shannon Plumb, 38, could be found hanging out in Madison Square Park, that swath of green space between Madison and Fifth Avenues from 23rd to 26th Street. After clocking enough hours during various seasons, Ms. Plumb created 12 short films chronicling her observations, a series she calls “The Park.”

Capturing everyday moments — a dog and its walker; an office worker getting away for lunch; someone talking on a cellphone; even a hapless sunbather — Ms. Plumb created films that meld classic vaudevillian humor with poignant bits of quotidian human behavior. “All the inspiration came from the people in the park,” Ms. Plumb said.

The films will be shown on four outdoor screens at the south end of the park daily from March 19 to April 23, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

“The Park” is the first in a series of art projects scheduled for the site this year. This is the 10th year that the public can find a continuous program of public art organized by the Madison Square Park Conservancy, which oversees the work with the city Parks and Recreation Department.

“We are expecting record numbers of people in the park this season,” said Debbie Landau, executive director of the conservancy. “With so many people who don’t have a place to go because they are out of work, parks are more important than ever.”

In planning this season, Ms. Landau said, she deliberately sought out lighthearted work. Ms. Plumb’s project, she said, was largely about the “democracy of space.”

Following it will be a site-specific installation by the sculptor Jessica Stockholder, on view May 1 to Aug. 15. Called “Flooded Chambers Maid,” it will consist of a triangular platform 14 inches high and nearly 3,000 square feet across the northern end of the central oval lawn. Typical of Ms. Stockholder’s work, the installation will be colorful, using industrial grating in steel and fiberglass to form a sort of mosaic in a starburst pattern.

The schedule will also include a group of abstract sculptures by Mel Kendrick, on view Sept. 17 to Dec. 31, and a performance piece (a first for Madison Square Park) by Bill Beirne, running Oct. 1 to 29. Dressed as a groundskeeper he will maintain three areas of the park’s smaller lawns every day, and his performance will be monitored by surveillance cameras transmitting a live feed to three video monitors on the south side of the park.

MoMA Performance Art

The Museum of Modern Art is enhancing its performance-based programs with a new exhibition series that includes a Marina Abramovic retrospective scheduled to open in March 2010. (In 2005 she spent a week at the Guggenheim recreating some of performance art’s greatest hits.)

MoMA is also holding workshops for artists and curators. Among those who will be performing next month are the choreographers Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer. The museum also has recently acquired seminal performance-based works by artists like Francis Alÿs, Paul Chan, Joan Jonas and Tino Sehgal.

“We’re thinking about how to conceive and collect performance art,” said Klaus Biesenbach, the museum’s chief curator for media and performance art. “It’s been very undervalued.”

ONLINE: FILM IN THE PARK

Watch scenes from Shannon Plumb’s films inspired by her observations at Madison Square Park:
nytimes.com/design