

of its fleshy weight lifts, ever so slightly. Bulbs set to timers flicker, then illuminate, pushing corners away, widening the atrium. The scrub nurses are arriving, their mouths set in firm lines that will not waver under their surgical masks all day. Custodians and cleaning crews arrive in blue uniforms, stamping snow off their boots. Riding the elevator up to the cafeteria, you fall asleep on your feet. You miss your floor; you sink back down, awakening in the lobby. You push the button again; this time you stay awake by laughing in the empty elevator. You laugh with a quiet solitary ferocity, your eyes shut, your head leaned back.

The cafeteria is still closed. It is empty in the hall, except for an ancient-

looking coffee machine; the huge kind with large tan-coloured buttons and a dusty looking picture of coffee beans on the front. It drops a paper cup into which it morosely dribbles a mix of boiling amber fluid and artificial creamer. You take the cup by its top and bottom edge; the sides are too hot. You walk back toward the elevators. The coffee is too hot to sip just yet so stand there, and notice another window. You notice the light growing behind it. You suddenly yearn for that light, feeling desperate and small.

The elevator dings and rumbles open, issuing a plume of brightly dressed nurses, bringing wisps of the cold outside air with them. They are out of place, smiling and too loud, their

hair freshly washed. Their scrubs are purple and red and new, their makeup bright. Their smells, hairspray, powder and perfume will quickly succumb to the high vinegar of the cafeteria. They file past without so much as a glance; you stay camouflaged in dull shades of yellow and amber. A trial sip of coffee singes your tongue. A hiss of pain, and then the pager erupts. Between five and six is over. The elevator stands open, waiting. You walk into the elevator without giving the window a second look. The hospital closes its walls around you.

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Lifeworks

Lost on the voyage

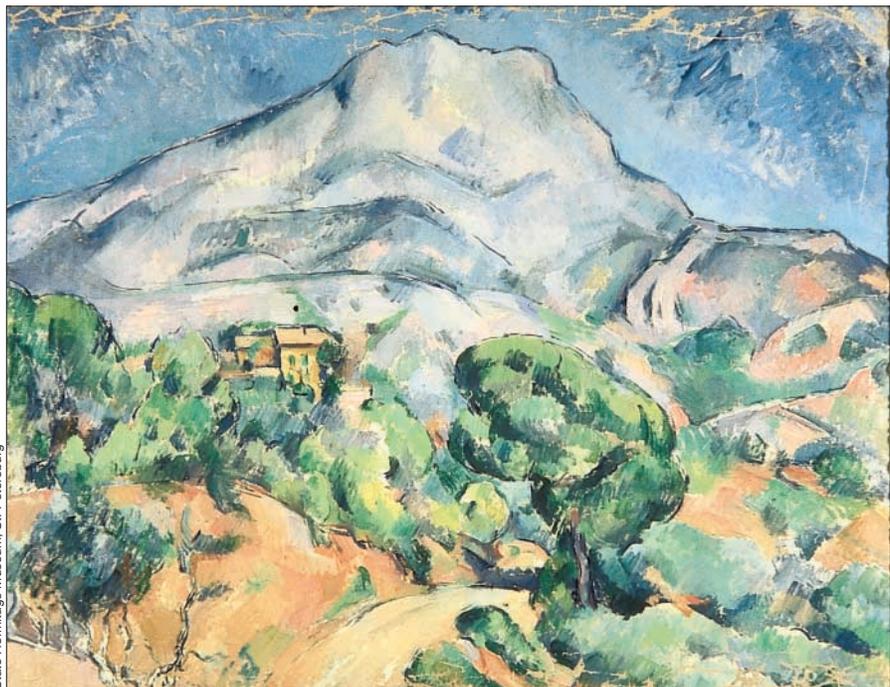
It's that *fin de siècle* thing. Just as Matisse was poised to assume his rightful place as grand patriarch of the Moderns, Picasso stole the show. Now it seems he's upstaged by the likes of Fantin-Latour: father of the supermarket still life. Will the humiliations never cease?

Above all, *Voyage into Myth* is a scrumptious peek into one of the world's greatest collections of art and a rare chance to stand in front of paintings that made history. As might be expected, the patterns of inclusions and emphases are an exercise in art-historical revision, revealing as much about 2003 as they do about 1903.

"Come on, great is great," you might protest as we regard Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1896-98). It's hard to argue the point from this vantage. Even the damage along the top and bottom edges of the canvas (was it rolled for storage a few too many times?) doesn't detract from the mesmerizing but unassuming beauty of the picture. Maybe it's the uncanny sense of fluidity he conveys in his perspective, or the simultaneous evocation of solidity and ephemerality in his subjects, but once you let Cézanne under your skin, he stays there.

As the widely acknowledged fulcrum of 19th- and 20th-century Western art, Cézanne's works are pregnant with tendencies and latent suggestions that

artists of all stripes claim as precedents. Not comfortable with the informal composition or the apparently casual subject matter of his peers, he said that



Paul Cézanne, circa 1896–1898. *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. Oil on canvas, 78.5 cm × 98.5 cm

he wanted “to make of Impressionism something solid and durable.” Well, if the aforementioned “fluidity” and “ephemerality” are any evidence of failure (by Cézanne’s own criteria), then we have only to shift the terms a little to appreciate his accomplishment.

Cézanne’s decidedly classical impulse to produce “solid and durable” pictures belied his actual tendency to upset compositional structure. While eschewing the shifting play of light and colour across surfaces, he developed new ways of expressing fluidity in perspective and form. In a way, he applied the painterly innovations of the Impressionists to drawing.

All this of course results in the explicit disjointedness and instability of the world according to Cubism. At any rate, that’s the standard line. What isn’t quite so standard is how Cézanne is also claimed as a precursor to the artists in *this* show, who catered to the Dionysian whims of patrons with the retrograde

narratives of ancient myths.

Enter Maurice Denis, whose *Story of Psyche* cycle (1908-09) is given the best address in the show. Here’s where the historical revisionism of *Voyage into Myth* is most glaring. In 13 panels, Denis shows how Psyche seduces Cupid, how she’s carried off to the island of Bliss, how she inspires the jealousy and subsequent vengeance of Venus, how Jupiter sanctions her marriage to Cupid, etc.

This kind of schmaltz has always been the standard fare of artists working for kings and priests. The extraordinary thing about 19th-century France is the emergence of bourgeois art patrons. How else to account for paintings that celebrate the pleasures and banalities of the here and now? Why else would Pierre Bonnard, in the Mediterranean triptych (1911), fill so much blank canvas with a scene that might well be captioned (along with most other Impressionist works): “Here is a nice day, there is nothing happening — all is well?”

Clearly, classical myths and themes evoking a lost Arcadia don’t go away, even after a revolution. Bruised and diminished, they persist in the inclination of moneyed patrons to cast themselves in the roles of aristocrats. The 75 works in this show hearken from the private collections and commissions of two entrepreneurs: Ivan Morozov and Sergei Shchukin. In spite of the suggestion in the publicity that these rarely-seen-before paintings, unearthed from Soviet-era storage vaults, force a historical re-evaluation, what we really have here is a case of shifting tastes.

Until recently, a prominent “materialist” perspective in Art History linked Impressionism’s fascination with the banalities of urban life and the condi-

tions of modernity, through Cézanne to Cubism and beyond. Like any good story, its drama and sticking power depended as much on what was left out as what was put in. Contradictions could not be allowed to cancel out its progressive narrative, and if Fantin-Latour or Maurice Denis didn’t fall into line, they would have to be quietly ushered out the back door.

The revisionism of *Voyage into Myth* is constructive to the extent that it reshuffles the deck and uncovers repressed material. What we have here are the accepted masterpieces alongside the kind of work that comprises the bulk of production in any generation, but doesn’t make it into the history books. Delusional, or escapist though it is, the implicit suggestion that even forward-looking artists and movements also had regressive tendencies re-injects complexity and contradiction into our sense of the past.

Aside from profiling some great work, the curatorial gesture of *Voyage into Myth* should be taken with a large lump of salt. When Maurice Denis railed, 100 years ago, against his peers for recording (like cameras) the unheroic details of life without exotic embellishments, he articulated a very contemporary retort to the “materialist” impulse mentioned above. “The myopic copying of anecdotes from society, the stupid imitation of nature’s blemishes, dull observation, *trompe-l’œil*, the glory of being as true, as banally exact, as the photograph no longer satisfies any painter, any sculptor [any curator] worthy of his name.” This tirade against what we now refer to as the “everyday” should trigger alarm bells for anyone who believes that art should face (and not mask) social and material realities.

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Voyage into Myth: Gauguin to Matisse. The French Avant-Garde from the Hermitage Museum was presented at The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Jan. 31 - Apr. 27, 2003. This was the second and last stop on its Canadian tour.



Maurice Denis, circa 1908. *The Story of Psyche*. First Panel: Cupid is Struck by the Beauty of Psyche. Oil on canvas, 394 cm x 269.5 cm