

Pair of Frist exhibits delve into European art, past and present

Sara Estes, For The Tennessean 12:58 p.m. CST February 16, 2016



(Photo: Dukes of Alba Collection)

From jaw-dropping Italian Renaissance masterpieces to contemporary Dutch video art, the new exhibitions at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts offer a stunning and unexpected look at European art's past and present.

Marking its second and final stop in the United States, "Treasures From the House of Alba" brings together 140 works of art, dating from around 1500 to the 21st century, from the oldest and most impressive private collections in Europe. The Alba family is one of the most prominent noble families with ties to the Spanish monarchy since the 15th century, and maintains three immaculate palaces in Madrid, Seville and Salamanca.

Gracing the walls of the Ingram Gallery are works by Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt, Titian, Francisco de Goya, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, José de Ribera, John Singer Sargent and many more. The blockbuster exhibition surveys the family's history of collecting from the third Duke of Alba, who rose to prominence at the end of the Middle Ages, up through the current and 19th Duke of Alba, don Carlos Fitz-James Stuart.

Arranged chronologically, "Treasures From the House of Alba" allows viewers a chance to experience an art collection that has evolved and expanded over many centuries. It brilliantly showcases the impact of a European aristocracy that was not only a connected intellectual family, but a long line of art lovers and passionate cultural patrons.

At every turn, viewers are met with awe-inspiring works of art, none for which words on a page could do much justice. However, a highlight lies within the gallery that showcases Francisco de Goya's portraits of the Alba family, specifically the 13th Duchess of Alba, doña María del Pilar Teresa Cayetana, who was among Goya's major patrons. In perhaps the most famous works in the exhibition, Goya paints a full-length portrait of the Duchess entitled "The Duchess of Alba in White" (1795). Here, she is seen in an elegant white gown adorned with silken red ribbons. At her feet is a small white dog that dons a small red ribbon of its own. It is one of the artist's most celebrated portraits.



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After Titian's "The Last Supper" (1550-55) and two masterful portraits by Peter Paul Rubens, among a slew of other gems, the extensive exhibition concludes with a gallery devoted to the contemporary collection of the 17th Duke and the glamorous 18th Duchess of Alba, doña Cayetana Fitz-James Stuart, who died in 2014. Together they added significant works to the collections, including Old Master paintings and French Impressionist paintings.

In this gallery, a fascinating equestrian portrait by Spanish artist Ignacio Zuloaga depicts the 18th Duchess wearing a blue dress and, in a nod to Goya's portrait of her distant ancestor, she is accompanied by a small dog with a matching blue ribbon.

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"Charismatic and vivacious, Cayetana was one of Spain's best-known and most recognizable public figures," said Frist curator Trinita Kennedy, referring to the 18th Duchess of Alba.

In addition to visual art, the display features magnificent furniture, massive wall-spanning tapestries and antiques. There are rare historical artifacts you won't want to miss, like the first Spanish translation of the Old Testament, completed in 1430, a first edition printing of "Don Quixote," and Christopher Columbus's original logbook and hand-drawn maps from his 1492 Journey of Discovery to the Americas. The Alba Collection is the largest depository of Columbus artifacts in the world.



Guido van der Werve. "Nummer twee, just because I'm standing here, doesn't mean I want to" (still), 2003. (Photo: © Guido van der Werve; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York)

Films inspire 'concentrated looking'

Leaping forward in time, Dutch artist Guido van der Werve's solo exhibition in the Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery offers a selection of four films from his "Nummers (Numbers)" series. The succinct show introduces viewers to van der Werve's contributions to contemporary performance, music composition and video art.

Trained as an architect, translator, musician and athlete, van der Werve uses his art to reflect a complex, challenging and often humorous relationship to the world surrounding him.

In the film, "Nummer acht — Everything is going to be alright"(2007), the artist is seen walking in front of the hull of an icebreaker ship plowing through the frozen waters of Finland. The video is an exercise in physical endurance and self-discipline.

"In Guido's work, there's a conversation with the cultural attainments of Europe that is not necessarily an homage to the past, but a way of making elements of the past come to life," said Frist curator Mark Scala, drawing a connection between the two new exhibits.



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For example, three of the four films feature performances of dance or classical music set in banal scenarios that subvert expectation of the ordinary. In one film, a car hits him and a troupe of ballerinas come dance around his body. In another, he obsesses over buying a Steinway grand piano. After he buys the instrument and performs one Chopin concerto, it is repossessed.

"The slow pace and subtle twists in the films draw the audience members toward an awareness of themselves engaged in the act of concentrated looking, a skill that is often in jeopardy in this age of instant gratification," said Scala.

If you go

What: "Treasures from the House of Alba" and "Guido van der Werve: Nummers 2 6 8 14"

Where: Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 919 Broadway

When: on view through May 1

Hours: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Monday-Wednesday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday-Friday; 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Saturday; 1 p.m.-5:30 p.m. Sunday

Admission: \$10; \$7 for seniors; \$7 for students; free for youth



Guido van der Werve. "Nummer acht, everything is going to be alright" (still), 2007. (Photo: © Guido van der Werve; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York)

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