

Real Clear Arts

Judith H. Dobrzynski on Culture

Matching Wine And Spirit, Scholarship And Popularity In The Academy

"Until now, no serious art exhibition has coupled the histories of wine and art in a cross-disciplinary fashion."



That line comes from the lede of a [press release](#) issued recently by the [Mount Holyoke College Art Museum](#), and my response is "indeed."

In years past -- even recent years past -- that theme would probably have been considered unacademic, lacking in scholarship value, and therefore unlikely to enhance the career of the curator. At many art history departments, it would be better to study some narrow aspect of a much-researched subject, or to deploy the lens of deconstructionism or gender studies, say, on a well-trod area than to study something so approachable, and probably popular.

So it's double-interesting that the show is at a well-respected college, and that it will travel to the [Memorial Art Gallery](#) at the University of Rochester.

According to the press release, the exhibit -- *Wine and Spirit: Rituals, Remedies, and Revelry* -- will examine the "imagery of sacred, social, and restorative practices that have occasioned wine's singular mystique in civilizations across nearly every age." On view since Sept. 2, it includes more than 100 works of art and literature:

...the earliest a rare Neolithic wine jar from Hajji Firuz Tepe dated 5400-5000 BCE, and the most recent, a 2009 painting of *Ariadne Discovered by Dionysus* by New York artist Leonard Porter [below].... 17th century Dutch paintings by Pieter Claez and Jan Steen [his *In Luxury Beware* is above]... prints, drawings, and photographs by Honoré Daumier, Pablo Picasso, Jacob Jordaens, Roger Fenton, and others... Greek vases, Roman glassware, Renaissance drinking vessels, medieval manuscripts, and rare books... Italian Renaissance apothecary jars, early printed treatises, herbal books, and pharmacopiae...

And here's another aspect that may be notable: the exhibit was curated by [John Varriano](#), a professor emeritus of art history at Mount Holyoke. Would no younger scholar risk it?

Or does this signal a new era at art history departments?

The exhibit illustrates that use of wine imagery, which thrived in centuries to and including the 18th, then took a dip, appearing less frequently -- "but Picasso refocuses attention on the scenes of revelry and debauchery of the ancient era," again quoting the press release.



I may be reading too much into this, but it seems to me that this exhibit marries scholarship with popular appeal in a way that many so-called populist shows, conceived to draw crowds, do not. It shows that we can have our cake and eat it, too.

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