

# **A best kept secret museum in Coral Springs**

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Arm yourself with explorers' curiosity and discover one of the best kept secrets, Coral Spring Museum of Art where you can see "Toulouse-Lautrec and His 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mentors," representing a large part of Greg Bloch's art collection until February 11. Bring the innocence of the first encounter; it prevents disappointment and it allows a fresh look at everything. For the ones who have never visited this museum be prepared to see a modern building which has windows allowing natural light and nature as the background of the outside. Inside this little museum, which could be the envy of any museum curator, regular visitors can meet art works as their "old friends" while the first time visitors may encounter the same very art works as their "new friends."

One could enjoy the artwork displayed moving around the large space divided into some chapel-like alcoves which define both the artists or the works; each alcove also gives a privacy the visitor could appreciate as well as it breaks down the overwhelming feeling of a large gallery room. The present show is an extensive collection of lithographs, drawings, prints, etchings, and posters displayed traditionally on the walls, on some easels or whimsically around the "columns" of the museum.

For the ones who want to go beyond treating themselves visually, the museum has displayed on a table in the center of the room books with reproductions and information of the art works and someone has even marked the pages. One can also get a quite helpful and extensive home-made catalogue of the show at the admission desk; read it before, while browsing, or after visiting this exhibition and come back for more (and with more understanding.)

The present exhibition, the result of Mr. Bloch's 25 years of intensive collecting 19<sup>th</sup> Century French Art, is displayed all around the museum with art works produced by the well-known artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, James McNeill Whistler, Edouard Manet, James Tissot and Mary Cassatt and the subject matter ranges from outrageous night entertainment to maternal soft display of human interaction. In addition, in that part of the museum there are some exquisite engravings of beautiful women by Paul Cesar Helleu one of the best representatives of La Belle Époque period.

Among some of the most interesting art works in this exhibition are also colorful posters produced by Jules Cheret, Theophile Alexandre Steinlen, Alphonse Mucha, or Vaclav Oliva names unfamiliar to most "art fans" of today. However, these artists produced remarkable even exceptional art works at that time which granted them not only fame but also financial stability. Their posters display a wide range of subject matter including operettas, theater performances, museums, magazines subscriptions and plain advertising. And Toulouse-Lautrec has his "lion's share" with the famous can-can dancers Jane Avril at Jardin de Paris or La Goulue at Moulin Rouge as well as the well-known "Divan Japonaise". Henri's works of art are almost everyone's "old friends" -they have been reproduced again and again even in our times.

French operetta performances during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were advertised in the same manner ukiyo-e Japanese woodblock prints advertised performers and performances in their country of origin. The Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists, among whom there were some of the artists represented in this exhibition, collected and were influenced by that type of art, which combined printing as well as catering art to a growing middle class. Following the success of advertising posters, which became in time collectable, enterprising artists like Jules Cheret provided collectors with high quality colored lithographs, which brought them fame and financial success.

Among the posters displayed in this exhibition, "Les Maitres de l'Affiche" (The Masters of the Poster) print publication is also well represented. Many of the La Belle Époque artists had their prints sold to the enthusiastic collectors-subscribers for the last 60 months of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And as the popularity of collecting color lithography increased, "L'Estampe Moderne" produced in the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century color lithographs at more reasonable prices bringing the concept of affordable art to the European market. Notice those lithographs by the "blindstamp" imprint of a woman's head in the right lower corner of the print.

And before leaving this incredible show which in the present economic context is more than affordable (\$5.00 for adults, \$4.00 for seniors and even free admission on Wednesdays) do not miss "The Return of the Prodigal Son" by James Jacques Joseph Tissot, a suite of five etchings on the left wall next to the door of the museum. The artist produced this series in 1881 while living in London following tumultuous times in France, which forced him to emigrate.

The first frame offers to the viewer's eyes an open worn old dog-eared book containing the "Parable of Prodigal Son" from the Book of St. Luke. However, the following four etchings translate the four chapters into a moralizing fable of Tissot's time. Each etching has at its bottom the respective chapter text from the frontispiece etching of the series. "The Departure" is set in a successful Englishman's business office, "In Foreign Climes" is set in an exotic Japanese teahouse (these were the times when Japonisme and the fascination with Japanese art was in full bloom) and "The Return" takes place on the docks of London.

But unlike Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal Son" which seems to have inspired Tissot's "Return" the characters in the picture are English contemporaries of the artist. Yes, the barefoot-knelt son dressed in rags embraces his father's knees asking for forgiveness. And the rest of the characters reflect a divided society of 19th century England. The fact that Tissot also used a sideways view of the son-father with some well-to-do background witnesses attests to that divide and represents a political commentary. And that commentary begs the question: who are the prodigal sons of today who succeeded to make the economy of the entire planet dive nose down? Maybe they are the descendants of the party, reminding us of Renoir's "The Boating Party," on the last piece of this suite, "The Fatted Calf."

Remember when you leave the museum to take a little stroll through "International Peace Garden," a small but rewarding sculpture garden placed between the art complex containing the museum of art and the ample free parking lot adjacent to it, and count your visit as the soul treat it was and plan a return to visit your now "old friends."