


February 14, 2008

On West 53rd Street, MoMA Has No Monopoly on Art

 By **MATTHEW GUREWITSCH**
February 14, 2008; Page D6
New York

Every art lover knows the first block of West 53rd Street off Fifth Avenue as the home of the Museum of Modern Art, a magnet so powerful that Yoshio Taniguchi's design for the reconstruction expanded the lobby clear to West 54th. Yet on weekends and even on weekdays, the crush there can be disheartening even now. The first Saturday of the New Year, having errands to run in midtown, I thought of dropping in for a last look at the Seurat drawings, a show whose subtleties were best contemplated under conditions of quiet and serenity. *Sacré!* What were the odds?

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Still, did this have to be a day without art? Not at all. On offer across the street, at the Museum of Arts & Design, was "Pricked: Extreme Embroidery" (on view through April 27), following up on last year's sleeper "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting." And those averse to braving the traffic had but to stroll a few steps west from MoMA's front door to the American Folk Art Museum for "Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel" (through March 23). Both are well worth a much longer detour. Yet

access is no problem. Though each makes do with a single ticket counter, on the holiday weekend in question you could walk right in. And while the galleries were hardly deserted, only the most grouchy of misanthropes could have complained to see some extra bodies.

David McFadden, the curator of "Pricked," knows full well how disheveled a domain he has chosen to investigate. Work on display may be sewn by hand or by machine, by the artist or by hired help, stitched into gauze or muslin or (yes) stone. The match of medium to message sometimes make immediate intuitive sense, sometimes none at all. Neat, precise needlepoint in a traditional mode abuts swiftly captured portraits sketched by needle and thread as if by the pen of a Fragonard. Whole pages torn from magazines are reworked in silk threads, the viruses that cause herpes and HIV depicted in computerized machine-embroidered rayon lace.



The material is organized around six loose, overlapping themes,



Museum of Art and Design

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each encapsulated in a snippet of prose or poetry as infinitely suggestive as a Rorschach inkblot. "Neither More Nor Less" (Lewis Carroll) is oriented to words and text; "Politics is Not a Science" (Otto von Bismarck), to radical thought. "Whatever is Well Said by Another is Mine" (Seneca) deals with quotation, reference and appropriation; "Memory is What Makes Our Lives" (Luis Buñuel), with introspection. "Bodies Never Lie" (Agnes de Mille) focuses on the human form; "Shadows Numberless" (John Keats), on dream and nightmare.

The craftsmanship varies as much as the technique. In a four-panel series by Maira Kalman, the correlation between stitched lines of Goethe and various vignettes is obscure but haunting; the needlework is homespun in the extreme. Tamar Stone's "A Case of Confinement" consists of an antique metal doll bed, neatly made up. Each piece of bedding is embroidered with an excerpt from a journal or diary in which a woman writes of the experience of childbirth, and the view is never rosy. The

meticulous stitching mimics type, both Roman and italic, in various fonts. (The artist calls the piece a book.)

As its title indicates, Stephen Beal's "Periodic Table of the Artist's Colors" takes off from the grid of the elements well known to every chemistry student, proceeding in orderly fashion from the hydrogen atom to radium and beyond. Each of Mr. Beal's 81 little squares has its own color and a verbal description redolent of a Proustian memory. (Three spaces from "The Sea at Marseille" we find "The Sea at Naples"; the tag "Half of Haydée's wardrobe" appears twice -- once with blood red, once, far distant, with basic black.) Andrea Deszö's "Lessons From My Mother" consists of 48 individually framed cotton squares embroidered with illustrated bits of off-the-wall, scurrilous, sometimes scatological, and often sickening lies and superstitions (among the *less* offensive: "My Mother Claimed That A Woman's Legs Are So Strong That No Man Can Spread Them If She Doesn't Let Him").

Among the needlepoint mug shots by Maria E. Piñeres is a gravely angelic portrait of Nick Carter, of the Backstreet Boys. Art history is put to witty use in Stephen Beal's "Vincent Tries on Rembrandt's Hats" and Cindy Hickok's "The Fast Supper," after Leonardo, in which 12 figures -- taken from Vermeer, Picasso, Van Gogh, El Greco, Seurat, et al. -- share oysters, prosciutto, and Cézanne's apples under the gaze of Manet's barmaid from the Folies-Bergère, who is the stand-in for Jesus.

But the piece likeliest to haunt your dreams is Paul Villinski's "Lament," assembled from found objects: a backpack stripped to its frame, and dozens of dark knit gloves that form a pair of giant wings, with needles dangling from threads like frozen rivulets of tears. Extreme embroidery, indeed. It sounds as narrow a window as the biblical eye of the needle, yet the views it commands are legion.

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"Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses" has just one, forgotten story to tell. The heroes are immigrant Jewish woodcarvers



that the dead had to be buried upright, in antique models of old wooden synagogues, in Torah arks and related temple furniture, and in amazingly elaborate papercuts, all illustrating visual motifs later adapted for the uses of secular merry-making.

Pride of place belongs, of course, to the Lion of Judah, emblem of the Israelites since the Book of Genesis. Generally, the lions appear in pairs, frequently on their hind legs, flanking the Ten Commandments or supporting a crown. Their poses range from foursquare to arabesque, their personalities from ferocious to goofy. Some, to our eyes, are marred by the red incandescent bulbs screwed into their eye sockets, but in the Age of Edison that crass touch must have seemed little short of miraculous. As the Lord said, "Let there be light!"

Seeing the lions in their habitat, one might miss how short the step is to the carousel horses, prancing under their canopies with manes flying, flamboyant in gemstones and roses. In the present context, the evolution is plain as day. So is the sense of liberation the fairground creatures convey. From oppression and persecution, the Jews of Eastern Europe had reached a shore of golden opportunity, as believers and simply as human beings in pursuit of common happiness. Judaism is a culture more often thought of in terms of the abstract intellectual metaphor than the sensual visual image. The poetry of the Psalms and the Song of Songs tell quite another story. So do the paintings of Marc Chagall, whose scenes may flash on a visitor passing through these galleries. In a state of grace, where all is spirit, holy days and holidays are one. "Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses" bridges worlds.



Paul Foster, Portland, Oregon

At the American Folk Art Museum, a carousel lion reveals its Jewish heritage.

Mr. Gurewitsch writes for the Journal on the arts and creative personalities.

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