

FRICK MADISON

Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters

An Essay by Xavier F. Salomon



The Frick’s extraordinary collection of Old Master paintings as installed at Frick Madison continues to elicit a number of new responses, both from the public and our curatorial team. In his will, Henry Clay Frick specified that the museum housing his collection was to be “for the use and benefit of all persons whomsoever.” Taking this important mandate to heart, we always strive to offer unexpected perspectives on—and invite fresh reactions to—familiar works of art, which serves to constantly challenge and deepen our understanding of our holdings. The context of our temporary home on

Madison Avenue brings this approach to the fore. In September, we embarked on our latest project to broaden the collection’s meaning and relevance, a rotating installation titled *Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters*.

The Frick is particularly rich in its holdings of European portraiture, which—in canvases by Van Dyck, Raeburn, Greuze, and Hals—often depicts couples as pendants, invariably showing pairs of married men and women. From classically inspired objects to genre paintings by Vermeer to the panels in Fragonard’s *Progress of Love*, heterosexual romance abounds in our galleries. However, love, desire, and life partnerships have always been more nuanced and expansive than how they are traditionally depicted, or codified, in paint. We live in a world that is catching up with this reality and making strides toward the acceptance of the wide spectrum of gender and sexuality, as well as of shifting notions of family.

To explore these themes within the context of our collection, Curator Aimee Ng and I invited four New York-based artists—Jenna Gribbon (b. 1978, Knoxville, Tennessee), Doron Langberg (b. 1985, Yokneam Moshava, Israel), Toyin Ojih Odutola (b. 1985, Ile-Ife, Nigeria), and Salman Toor (b. 1983, Lahore, Pakistan)—to each create a painting that responds to and confronts familiar Frick works. (These new paintings will replace select canvases that will be temporarily off view at various points throughout the year.) On display now through January 2022 are Langberg’s *Lover* and Toor’s *Museum Boys*; paintings by Gribbon and Ojih Odutola will be presented next February and April, respectively.

All four artists work in the figurative tradition, and their canvases have typically dealt with issues of gender, sexuality, race, queer identities, intimacy, and relationships. It is no accident that all are based in New York, although none were born here; this is also true of the project’s co-curators, Aimee Ng and myself. Thus this project celebrates the range of voices and perspectives found in this great city of ours, which is full of important sites of LGBTQ+ life, culture, and history.

Langberg’s paintings celebrate the physicality of touch, in subject matter and process. His intimate yet expansive take on the self, relationships, sexuality, nature, and family proposes how painting can both portray and create queer subjectivity. *Lover* captures a domestic moment: the subject at home and undressed, nestled on a sofa reading a paper.

Like Holbein's portrait of Sir Thomas More, to which *Lover* specifically responds, Langberg's canvas is based in direct observation and close study of the sitter. Though in much different ways, the surface treatment and paint handling in both portraits animate their respective figures, causing the paintings to feel as alive as their subjects. With expressive gestures, abstracted depictions, and broad swaths of intense color, Langberg combines the evidence of his painting process with naturalistic portrayals of the human form, carefully noting its contours, textures, and details like body hair and the fall of light on flesh. Where, for Holbein, the illusion of tactility—a stubbled chin, a velvet sleeve—conveys his mastery as a painter and the material wealth and power of his sitters, for Langberg, physical and illusory tactility eroticize his subject and his viewers' acts of looking. By engaging the viewer in this desirous relationship with both paint and subject, Langberg brings us into his queer world.

Salman Toor's figurative paintings depict quotidian moments in the lives of fictional young, brown, queer men ensconced in contemporary cosmopolitan culture. *Museum Boys* draws on the quiet domestic exchanges in two of Vermeer's paintings, which hang in the same gallery. Set in an allegorical space filled with imaginary sculpture, a ghost-like figure in the foreground smiles coyly at the man in the middle ground, echoing the mood of tipsy flirtation in Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl*. Likewise, the work's feeling of arrival and anticipation mirrors the exchange depicted in *Mistress and Maid*. Whereas the objects in Vermeer's paintings illustrate the growing influence of the Dutch Republic on international trade, the surreal menagerie in Toor's painting conjures queer mythology and colonial plunder. The heap of objects and limbs in the vitrine signifies greed, lust, exhaustion, and consumerism—hinting at a darker aspect of Vermeer's prosperous subjects, beneficiaries of the global trade of spices, porcelain, silk, and fur. Bringing together a love of narrative, questions of cultural ownership, and queer taxonomy, *Museum Boys* is a sultry, sidelong glance at the canonical world of the Old Masters.

Despite glaring absences in the Frick's holdings in terms of representation, it is our belief that the permanent collection can still speak significantly to a diverse public. Likewise, it has the power to participate in dialogues that encourage us to reconsider the modern relevance of familiar works by Vermeer, Holbein, and other Old Masters. Through contemporary responses to these traditional images, we seek to re-contextualize our centuries-old works, emphasizing issues of identity and representation typically excluded from narratives of the past.

With *Living Histories*, we hope to initiate important conversations across histories, cultures, and geographies. The Frick Collection is, and should be, a meaningful place for everyone. We welcome “all persons whomsoever,” celebrating the commonalities and differences of every visitor's and employee's individual experiences. Gribbon, Langberg, Ojih Odutola, and Toor offer vital perspectives, bridging the gap between the art of the past and broader questions of human relationships, the complexities of representation, and the nature of museums.

Image: Xavier F. Salomon, Deputy Director and Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator; Salman Toor; Aimee Ng, Curator; and Doron Langberg with Toor's *Museum Boys* (2021) and Langberg's *Lover* (2021). Photo: Joseph Coscia Jr.