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A renovated Huntington Art Gallery

The reopening of the San Marino gallery couldn't be more timely.

By Christopher Knight
Times Art Critic
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THE PAVED terrace behind the Huntington Art Gallery is 80 paces wide. By my stride, that's more than 165 feet. Stand at the center and look south, with the imposing Beaux-Arts mansion and its striped green awnings at your back, and infinity rolls out before you.

Over the Italianate balustrade, between stone urns carved with rams' heads, ribbons and grape garlands, hinting at Dionysian revelry; down across the lawn that separates a stand of tropical palms from a grove of live oaks; skimming the tops of jacaranda, the continuum unfurls. It proceeds unimpeded into an atmospheric haze, a horizon line almost impossible to detect.

San Marino's Huntington Art Gallery reemerges Wednesday after a magnificent two-year, $20-million renovation. The view from the terrace, remarkably as free of buildings in today's jampacked metropolitan Los Angeles as it was 100 years ago, when the great country house was being planned, has been there all along. The Huntington extrapolates that vision of boundless space into something that approaches the California Dream.

Infinity is an ancient idea, but 17th and 18th century Europeans were mad about it, and it's their art the Huntington enshrines. The popularity was fueled by exploration. Lucrative traders circumnavigated the globe, and scientists voyaged into novel universes opened by the microscope and telescope. Artists probed and played with infinity in their art, architects in their buildings.

The first grand room of the Huntington mansion, built in a young city now famous for blurring the separation between indoors and outdoors, offers a typical interior architectural representation of the exterior garden's infinity view. The oak-paneled library was designed to accommodate magnificent 18th century Beauvais tapestries showing aristocrats engaged in rituals of idealized country courtship, designed by François Boucher. But mirrored doors at one end match the big mirror placed over the fireplace at the other, so that the crystal chandeliers hung on the axis between them reflect into glittering infinity.

The Huntington's terrace view is framed by sensational -- and brutal -- life-size bronze sculptures, cast in 1680-81 for Jacques Houzeau. The French *animalier*, an artist specializing in realistic animal portrayals, helped decorate the gardens at Versailles.

In a now-weathered green patina, these sculptures show slavering dogs bringing down a ferocious wild boar and a regal stag. Survival is hard in the turbulent forest, the theatrical sculptures assert, but powerful, civilized creatures can triumph over the feral and the savage.

In short, it's good to be the king. Or, at the westernmost edge of America's Manifest Destiny as the 20th century began, it was good to be Henry E. Huntington, heir to a huge railroad fortune and the most powerful industrialist in L.A.

Likewise, it was good to be Arabella D. Huntington -- the lovingly nicknamed Belle, Henry's former aunt by marriage and now his wife, reputed to be the country's richest woman. Together the couple created a magnificent house, library, garden and art collection. Today, as a whole new Gilded Age has trickled down after a quarter-century of supply-side economics, the reopening of their handsomely refurbished, smartly reinstalled gallery couldn't be more timely.

The renovation

MUCH OF the Huntington restoration has taken place on the gallery's exterior and in hidden structural systems. But inside, considerable rearrangement of the collections has also taken place, adroitly guided by director John Murdoch.

The first floor is now an eloquent sequence of domestic period rooms, anchored by the library with its leather-bound volumes of Matthew Arnold, Lord Tennyson and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and conqueror's histories of Egypt and India. Eighteenth century English paintings -- the collection's hallmark -- get an ancien régime pedigree with deluxe French furniture and refined Persian carpets.

A large drawing room is installed with children's portraits by George Romney, Joshua Reynolds and the lesser-known Reynolds imitator, John Hoppner, a subject repeated in tapestry-covered chairs showing cherubic kids learning music and literature. The youthful theme recalls that this is the room where Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of teen heartthrob Jonathan Buttall -- the picture-postcard "Blue Boy" -- originally hung when the Huntingtons were alive.

Next is a small drawing room. An intimate space housing seven British portraits of women, it subtly but smartly evokes Belle's central role in creating the art collection.

In an imposing, rather Georgian-style dining room adjacent, the slender crystal obelisks topping an amazing chandelier make a formal nod to Gilbert Stuart's anomalous American portrait of George Washington over the fireplace. Nearby, Gainsborough's idyllic fantasy of an English country cottage depicts "the simple life" for a British aristocrat -- and for a turn-of-the-century American robber baron.

Finally, the Thornton Portrait Gallery is the best-known room in the house, even though it wasn't added until 1934, a decade after Arabella's death and seven years after Henry's. Alternating with portrait busts on pedestals are 14 full-length Grand Manner pictures on forest-green damask walls. They show Britain's hereditary finest posing like august Roman statuary, and gesturing in echoes of Renaissance masterworks.

"The Blue Boy" gazes from one wind-swept summit to another across the room, where Thomas Lawrence's virginal depiction of young Sarah Moulton, a.k.a. "Pinkie," resides. The lofty encounter occurs under the imposing eye of Reynolds' looming masterpiece, a portrait of actress Sarah Siddons enthroned like a cross between Zeus and a biblical prophet from Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling. Painted in the russet-brown tones of Rembrandt and enacting the role of Melpomene, the mythical Greek muse of tragedy, she's familiar to moviegoers as the model for the coveted Broadway award statuette in “All About Eve.”

That's versatility.

Upstairs, where bedrooms, bathrooms and assorted offices once were, the house turns into more conventional museum galleries. To get there, a two-story staircase has been enlarged to accommodate a 15-foot-tall, neo-Gothic stained glass window by Morris & Co., co-founded in 1875 by William Morris to promote hand-craftsmanship in the face of the booming Industrial Revolution.

The backlighted window, designed by Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones, is a strange array of Protestant personifications of virtue, cast as secular versions of traditional Catholic saints. Truth holds a candle against the darkness. Faith reaches up to grasp the hand of God. Courage is steeled in armor while Liberty clutches a pair of crimson wings, like an earthly seraph, the highest rank of angel.

Across the Channel

ACOUPLE of surprises are on the second floor. Twenty-two thematic galleries include major works of British art, with powerful landscapes by John Constable and J.M.W. Turner as well as remarkable silver, porcelain and furniture. Despite the Huntington's identification with all things English, however, these galleries also house a notable collection of French art. An excellent, hefty new catalog records 202 French works.

They include a charming Jean-Baptiste Greuze picture of a girl asleep at her knitting, plus a lovely little Antoine Watteau of dancing courtiers. (Look closely and you can see where the rectangular panel was once cut into a

circle, then later restored.) Both are from Pasadena's Green collection, acquired in 1978.

Arabella's own French purchases were limited to decorative arts. She likely engineered Henry's 1906 acquisition of the five Beauvais tapestries downstairs in the library -- his first big-ticket purchase. In today's inflation-adjusted currency, he paid $13.3 million, more than the cost of the house.

In the smart new catalog, Huntington curator Shelley M. Bennett explains why French decoration made sense amid the collectors' fervor for British art. British nobility, long attuned to the power of theater, used French décor to give themselves a gloss of old dynastic status. The avaricious Americans followed suit, setting the stage to transform vulgar new money into genteel old.

Henry underscored his late wife's Francophile enthusiasms with a memorial 1927 acquisition of Jean-Antoine Houdon's amazing, life-size bronze cast of Diana, Roman goddess of the hunt. A nude, her sex is shockingly exposed. Yet the display is also in perfect harmony with Houdon's effortless naturalism, shown in a massive striding figure balanced lightly on the ball of a single foot.

Think of it as a symbolic portrait of Belle. It introduces rooms that house a small selection of her Renaissance and Old Master works, notably Rogier van der Weyden's rare, exquisite "Madonna and Child" (circa 1460). Not 20 inches high, Rogier's golden devotional panel majestically fuses divinity and humanity.

The young mother's face registers sweet sorrow. She dandles a haloed infant whose nakedness is revealed, while his baby face merges with that of a wise elder. Mary's soft right hand gently steadies him. But her left hand clutching the Bible, which tells of his coming sacrifice, is contorted in anguish. The boy fumbles with the book's clasp, as any inquisitive child might do, while momentously unlocking the spiritual mystery inside. The greatest Renaissance picture in L.A., it's the Huntington's most important painting,

The compleat "Blue Boy"

BUT IT'S not the best known. In fact, Gainsborough's "The Blue Boy" is surely the most famous European Old Master painting in the U.S.

In 1944 a young naval neuropsychiatric technician stationed in San Diego hitchhiked to San Marino during leave to visit the Huntington's cactus gardens. Robert Rauschenberg, then 19, wandered into the art gallery and saw "The Blue Boy," which the sailor from Texas knew from cocktail napkins and playing cards, and had a sudden epiphany.

"It dawned on me that this was something other than magazine illustration," the celebrated artist, who died this month, told The Times four decades later. "I don't know how I stayed so stupid for so long, but it never occurred to me [until then] there was such a thing as painting."

Twenty-three years earlier, Henry and Belle were on board the Aquitania sailing to Europe. Their stateroom, the Gainsborough Suite, adjoined that of their traveling companion, art dealer extraordinaire Joseph Duveen. They got to talking about the reproduction of "The Blue Boy" in the dining room, which Duveen shrewdly explained hung at London's Grosvenor House, owned by the duke of Westminster, and could not be had at any price. Henry promptly agreed to pay more than any painting was then known to have fetched.

"Los Angeles Man Buys 'Blue Boy' " announced The Times headline on Nov. 14, 1921. The Huntingtons were out about $728,800 -- nearly $7.5 million in today's dollars -- but the transfer was lateral. The duke was said to be England's richest peer, Arabella's aristocratic equivalent.

Surely Belle-the-huntress was pleased. Remember the portraits of women displayed in the small drawing room? Among them is Romney's sultry picture of Emma Hart, notorious Lady Hamilton, at the tender age of 17 or 18. A huge straw hat shades her eyes, and she's tossing one of the great come-hither looks of all time.

The presence of "that Hamilton woman!" -- later the mistress of Admiral Nelson -- can't help but reflect on Belle's own clouded past. Born in Alabama circa 1850 and married to a local (though, suspiciously, neither a birth certificate nor a marriage license exists), she hooked up with the ruthless Sacramento railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington, 30 years her senior, who had done a brisk business in bribing politicians for favorable corporate legislation. He likely fathered her son, Archer. She and Collis married in 1884, but despite their vast wealth, New York and San Francisco society wouldn't give them the time of day.

Thirteen years after Collis died, she married his nephew, Henry, who had inherited one-third of his uncle's $450-million estate (in today's dollars). That gave Henry the necessary cash to put into his interlocking businesses, essential to inventing suburban L.A. -- a trolley network connecting far-flung land holdings, run on electric power distribution.

And it gave the rest of Collis' fortune back to Belle. She had been advising Henry on plans for the San Marino estate since he first conceived of it. At Duveen's shop alone, the couple spent more than $360 million on art and antiques over the next 10 years.

Belle hated Southern California, preferring Paris instead, so much of her art did not end up in San Marino. But the project made the Huntingtons the region's original power couple. And it made them plutocratic innovators in the emerging mythos of Los Angeles as the ideal place to reinvent your life, which Hollywood soon democratized.