

Locked Out of Yale's Gallery? This Museum Has Class and Heritage to Spare

By BRIAN T. ALLEN | February 25, 2021 6:30 AM



Left: Paul Manship, *Diana*, cast 1925 (one of a pair).
Bronze on marble base.

Right: Paul Manship, *Actaeon*, cast 1925 (one of a pair).
Bronze on marble base.

(Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, gift of anonymous donor. © Estate of Paul Manship)

The COVID-afflicted Connecticut Art Trail leads these days to Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum.

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COUPLE of weeks ago, I visited the

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A

distinguished
Wadsworth
Atheneum in
Hartford. It's
one of the
essential

museums for art lovers, with a long list of cultural firsts, a gorgeous collection, and eclectic, even rousing architecture. It's a two-hour drive from my home in Vermont and about the same from New York. I lived in Connecticut until my first job as a curator, so the Atheneum and the art gallery at Yale were my local museums, a blessed geography for a young art lover.

I looked at some of my favorite things, given that I hadn't been there since the COVID crisis and subsequent hysteria. The Atheneum was forced to close but opened the instant it was allowed, a credit to its visitor-oriented leadership. The art gallery at Yale, alas, opened for only a week in October and then closed again. What a disgrace. Tax-free Yale has purged the public from its campus, leaving a region with 500,000 people without their local art museum for a year, even though there's not a single documented case of COVID transmission in a museum setting. Like most universities, Yale is animated by ideology and

superstition these days.



Left: Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598-1664), *Saint Serapion*, 1628. Oil on canvas. (The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund. 1951.40)

Right: William Holman Hunt (English, 1827-1910), *The Lady of Shalott*, c. 1888-1905. Oil on canvas. (The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund. 1961.47)

Among my favorites at the Atheneum are a very French, early Whistler seascape, Holman Hunt's crazy, exotic *Lady of Shalott*, and the Zurbarán painting of the beheaded Saint Serapion, who isn't actually headless since that's gruesome. Instead, Zurbarán presents him as hangdog as a man with a head could be. I then saw two good shows.

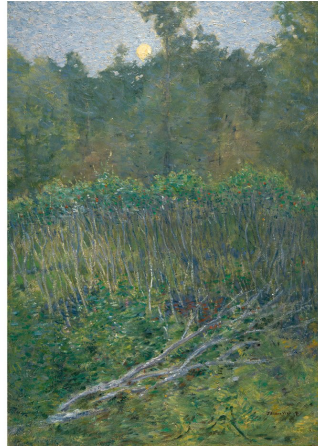


James Prosek, *Connecticut Composition No. 1*, 2020. Oil and acrylic on panel. (Courtesy of the artist)

One was an exhibition honoring the 25th anniversary of the Connecticut Art Trail, with art from each of Connecticut's museums. The curator was **James Prosek, one of my favorite young artists**, so I was keen to see it. He is a nature painter but makes intelligent documentaries, too. He lives in Fairfield County in Connecticut. It's not an exaggeration on my part to compare him to Audubon. It's a small show but an important one.

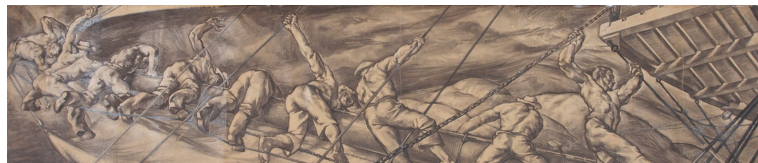
Many states have official art trails now, but I believe Connecticut's is the first. It's a marketing venture, but it's a revelation, too. They show the depth and breadth of local culture and recognize the power of private philanthropy and creative freedom. There are some very quirky museums, such as the Irish Great Hunger Museum in Hamden, which focuses on the Irish potato famine

and the immigration of thousands to Connecticut in the 1840s and 1850s. Most museums in America, except for the University of Connecticut art museum, and the places on the Art Trail are private, so the leaden hand of government isn't there to suppress vision or idiosyncrasy.



Julian Alden Weir, *Early Moonrise*, 1891. Oil on canvas.
(Weir Farm National Historic Site, The Friends of Weir Farm NHS, The Weir Farm Art Alliance, and the Weir Farm Donation Account)

The show highlights about 20 museums from the Bruce Museum in Greenwich (an art, science, and nature museum) to the Lyman Allyn Museum in New London, near the Rhode Island border.



Thomas LaFarge, *Aloft, Study for New London Post Office Mural*, 1935–37. Charcoal on paper. (Lyman Allyn Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Thomas LaFarge)

Connecticut has a storied colonial history — much of the money and supplies supporting the Patriot cause after 1776 came from the Land of Steady Habits — and a history of invention, industrial might, and waves of immigration. Thomas La Farge’s big pencil study for his Depression-era wall mural at the New London post office rollicks.

Southeastern Connecticut was the nation’s shipbuilding hub for 200 years — like every big industry, it had booms and busts. La Farge’s mural, still there, was part of the WPA work-for-artists program.

Connecticut, settled in 1636, was always prosperous. It’s a New England state with little towns, hills and forests, the Sound, and miles of picket fences, but it’s a border state, too — one chunk is a leafy suburb of New York City. These features are well known. Less realized is its place as the Silicon Valley of the 19th century. The Colt revolver won the West and the cotton gin made slavery profitable. These aren’t lauded much at all today, though Eli Whitney later pioneered the concept of interchangeable parts, thus creating the modern factory. The submarine, vulcanized rubber, the vacuum cleaner, and FM radio were Connecticut-born, as was the stuff of everyday life like tape, paper clips, the dictionary, pencils, and, yes, the

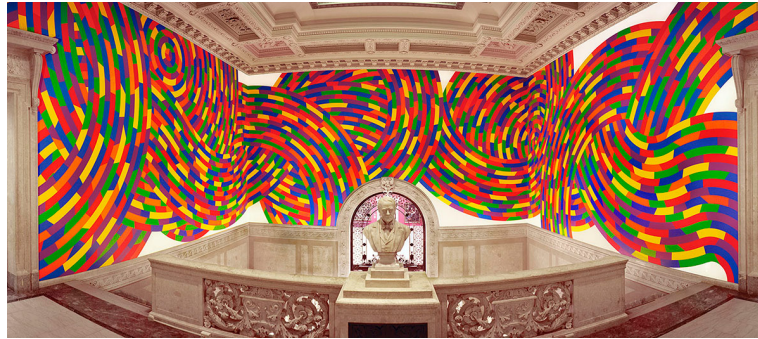
hamburger.

I love curiosity shows, and this is a fine one. Charles Goodyear's rubber desk is there, sent by Waterbury's nice Mattatuck Museum. Mark Dion's *New England Cabinet of Marine Debris* came from the Florence Griswold Museum in Lyme. The Mattatuck Museum also lent a montage of brass buttons decorated in relief. Waterbury is the Brass City. It made the button into high art.

History is aplenty. Thomas Hart Benton's splendid *King Philip* represented the St. Joseph College Museum in West Hartford. The brutal King Philip's War unfolded not only in southeastern Massachusetts but in much of eastern Connecticut. Thomas Cole's painting of the estate of the Atheneum's founder, Daniel Wadsworth, is lovely.

There are lots of landscapes and seascapes. Prosek's big, exacting array of bird, fish, and flower silhouettes came from Fairfield University's nice museum. It's a combination of land, sea, and figure. I've always been fascinated by silhouettes, which evoke prehistoric cave paintings to me in my own fanciful mind. They're old-time folk-art forms, too, first appearing in the 18th and 19th centuries. They're utterly simple and

mysterious. Prosek's work is an assembly of silhouettes so it looks at first like an abstract painting, like Gorky's glyphs. Then the exquisitely rendered silhouettes make themselves known.



Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #1131, Whirls and Twirls (Wadsworth)*, 2004 (cropped), 2004.12.1 (Photo: Allen Phillips, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford)

Connecticut has great artists by the scores, some because of its proximity to New York. The brilliant Laurie Simmons, who lives part-time in West Cornwall, has a clever, cutting photograph, *Lying House*, in the show. Sol LeWitt, Helen Frankenthaler, and Josef Albers lived and worked in Connecticut, too. They're represented, though the Atheneum is the center of LeWitt studies, with a dazzling, startling wall drawing over its grand staircase.

The Mashantucket Pequot Museum at Foxwoods Casino isn't an Art Trail member, but it should be. A good Methodist, I abhor gambling but love the museum. I'm happy, too, that the Pequots, who, when I was

younger, used to live in a ratty trailer park in Ledyard, finally got more than snake eyes in the game of life. I thought Kristin Emilyta's paintings were beautiful. She's a Native American artist who lives in Connecticut. Prosek, the curator, wanted the tribe represented not only by artifacts like ancient bowls but by art made today.

The Art Trail started as the Impressionist Art Trail in the 1990s. The Connecticut Impressionist school is famous and, well, Impressionism brings foot and car traffic. A lovely example is *Early Moon Rise*, by Alden Weir, which came from Weir Farm, a house museum in Wilton. The group expanded to include more museums, and I'm sure there's a tariff that museums need to pay to be promoted.

Missing from the Art Trail's roster are the Eric Sloane Museum in Kent, the New Haven Colony Historical Society, the musical-instrument museum and the Beinecke Library at Yale, both beauties, though shut to the public by the COVID crazies. The P. T. Barnum Museum is a must to add. Barnum, the ultimate ringmaster, was also once Bridgeport's mayor. He conceived his museum as a tribute to the entrepreneurial spirit. He said, "A sucker's born every minute," making him a

philosopher-and-psychologist king. But two of my favorites from him are “making something beautiful is the noblest art” and “without promotion, something terrible happens: NOTHING.”



Left: Paul Manship, *Centaur and Dryad*, 1913, cast 1925. Bronze. (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Bequest of Honora C. Robertson. © Estate of Paul Manship)

Right: Paul Manship, *Prometheus*, c. 1933. Bronze with gilding. (Minnesota Museum of American Art, Bequest of Paul H. Manship. © Estate of Paul Manship)

The other show at the Atheneum, *Paul Manship: Ancient Made Modern*, is a gem and very classy. It explores the Art Deco sculptor’s debt to Greek and Roman art and myth. It’s a joy to see a sculpture show done well and cleverly, and Manship is one of the best. The Atheneum augments its own things with loans that thrill.

Manship (1885–1966) is known today mostly for his grand *Prometheus* gilded bronze sculpture at the heart of Rockefeller Center. One of the bronze *modellos* is in the

show. At 23, Manship was the youngest recipient of the Rome Prize, which supported study at the American Academy in Rome for three years. Immersed in classicism and in the stories of the Greek gods, Manship returned with a vision to interpret what he learned in the latest Art Deco style.

I have nothing against Saint-Gaudens or Daniel Chester French. Their Puritans, presidents, and grandees are charismatic, but it's the charisma of Calvin and Augustus. Art Deco is streamlined, snazzy, and sexy. It's the art of jazz, the machine, and the cocktail party.

Prometheus, falling from the sky, the thief who took fire from the gods, has the perfect body, but it's not the body of Heracles. He looks like a chorus boy, or an actor in a Noel Coward play, built but slim and trim, too. He's a boundary breaker and mischief maker. Gilded to the hilt, he's metallic enough to put us off. He's hot and cold at the same time — "hot" literally because he's nude, holding stolen goods, and the loot is fire, but cold in that he's metal and, by the way, he hovers over a skating rink.

Sleek but elegant, Art Deco style decorated big movie houses and luxury liners. It's the

style of 1920s chic and Depression escapism. Manship's work is more cerebral, however much it glides gracefully before our eyes. His Rome Prize experience led him to admire Donatello, whose bronze figures are sinuous and thin, ballet dancers versus Michelangelo's football players. An early bronze of David, the biblical king, shows how closely he looked at Donatello, but so does his plaster *Centaur and Mermaid*, from 1909.

The older generation of American sculptors deployed gravity. Their work is heavy, to be sure, but it's psychologically weighty, too. Much of it is patriotic and grand. Manship's centaur and mermaid thrust up, and they are neither patriotic nor grand. They move, awkwardly since Manship was young and it is, after all, a sea-and-shore rape scene, but we can see his early will to sleekness.



Left: Paul Manship, *Flight of Night*, 1916. Bronze on a

veined black marble base. (Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art, Gift of Philip L. Goodwin. © Estate of
Paulanship)

Right: Hermonax Painter (Greek, 5th century BCE), *Oil
flask (Lekythos)*, made Attica, Greece c. 475–450 BCE.
Terracotta. (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,
purchased through the gift of Henry and Walter Keney)

Flight of Night, from 1916, is Manship
arrived. He traveled throughout Europe, and
it's fun to look at this bronze, from the
Atheneum's collection, in comparison to a
fifth-century B.C. pot showing a fleeing
woman, probably a maenad, or to the
Victory of Samothrace at the Louvre, which,
obviously, isn't in the show, but Manship
saw it on his travels. The famous Louvre
sculpture is a graceful Boeing 747 while
Manship's is a minimalist Concorde.

Manship's near life-size bronzes of Diana
and Actaeon from the Addison Gallery, done
in 1925, are the show's spectacular
denouement. They're separate sculptures
but a pair. The story is ancient, but it's the
stuff of the Roaring Twenties. By that, I
mean romance with an edge that glistens
and cuts. The hunter Actaeon is smitten with
the goddess Diana, who prefers him not. To
rid herself of the pest, she turns him into a
stag. His hunting dogs promptly kill him.
That's a black drawing-room comedy that
Evelyn Waugh would have adored. The two

make me think of sexy movies before the Hays Code sanitized them and before the Depression invited sappy, romantic storylines.

It wasn't an expensive show. A good, new idea — like studying Manship, plumbing the collection, and a few loans, most local — makes something that's ingenious and attractive. The Met's now paying for its bloated exhibition program by selling art. Both fundraising and frugality are such downers on Fifth Avenue these days. The Atheneum, which isn't rich, can teach the Upper East Side's art impresarios some lessons on good museum practice.



BRIAN T. ALLEN is NATIONAL REVIEW's art critic.

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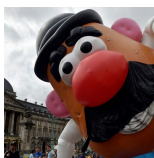
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