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Calouste Gulbenkian Museum

The Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, which houses one of the world's great art collections, is located in a most unlikely place: off the Avenida de Berna in a small park in Lisbon. Calouste Gulbenkian, the Armenian oil magnate, who was once the richest man in the world, founded the museum. The modern, spacious museum displays the artwork that Gulbenkian, who was "harder to squeeze than granite" according to one account, saved his money for. Gulbenkian's taste—like his oil interests—spanned the globe, and it went deep. At his museum, room after room is filled with his treasures: Flemish portraits, Impressionist landscapes, Louis XIV furniture, Roman coins, Egyptian statuary, Islamic carpets, Chinese porcelain, and in a gallery all of its own, the fabulous jewelry of René Lalique.

Calouste Gulbenkian never wanted the world to see his collection. He called his masterpieces his "children" and he preferred to commune with them alone. "My children must have privacy," he liked to say. For many years he housed his collection in a 100-room renovated mansion—protected by a thirty-foot barricade and guarded by watchdogs—at 51 Avenue d'Iena in Paris. The property rumored to be worth \$30,000,000 after the First World War. (He hired several architects to submit models for the renovations and gave the losing entries as doll houses to children of his friends.) To reflect Gulbenkian's priorities, the house was built around the dining room and the dining room was built around a set of glorious Italian tapestries woven in Ferrara in the sixteenth century of Cardinal Gonzague of Mantua. At the foot of the stairs he placed his Houdon sculpture of Diana which he had acquired from The Hermitage collection when the Russians were desperate for cash after the Revolution.

Gulbenkian acquired many of his choicest pieces from the Russians. Others he acquired through straws at Sotheby's and Christie's auctions. Only toward the end of his life did Gulbenkian make any provision to let the public view his masterpieces. One night he called up his friend Sir Kenneth Clark and asked if he would like to borrow any of his paintings for the National Gallery. Clark came away with 24 of them. At age eighty-one, two years before his death, Gulbenkian wrote a will establishing a Foundation for his art in the city where he was then living—Lisbon.

The museum was designed by the American architect William Delano, and it is a vast, sprawling place that, if only by its size, reflects the international

character of its holdings. Starting with the Ancient Egyptian art and finishing with the collection of René Lalique jewelry eighteen rooms later you may feel as though you have made a personal tour of the art of three continents. So pace yourself; the best comes at the end. Fortunately, the museum is well-equipped with chairs, and is nicely arrayed around an interior garden of irises, dogwoods, and daffodils, so that if your eyes should ever tire of seeing artifice, they can come to rest on nature.

The rooms devoted to ancient art are mercifully selective. The section begins with a single alabaster bowl of nearly Shaker simplicity from Egypt's Third Dynasty. Near it is an obsidian head of a later pharaoh, probably Amenemhat III. One particularly charming piece is the bronze of a cat suckling her kittens. Some mummified cat remains were kept in a box beneath. In the adjoining Classic Art room, a small collection of glass ointment and funerary vases from the Roman period take on a startling iridescence, due to the way the glass has decomposed over time, under the spotlights. Beyond it is Gulbenkian's extensive collection of Greek gold coins which he bought from J.P. Morgan. Some of them were awarded to the winners of the Olympic Games in 242-243 B.C. in honor of Alexander the Great; they are adorned with Alexander's image.

Born in Turkey, Gulbenkian maintained an avid interest in Persian art that is amply illustrated at his museum. A long room contains a variety of Sumerian artifacts, including a limestone cylinder seal from 2500 B.C., a ninth-century bas-relief of the Genius of Spring and some lovely green-glazed vases. The next gallery contains Gulbenkian's collection of Persian ceramics, which bear the same delicacy of colors and detail as the familiar painted miniatures from illuminated books; long colorful coats; and a variety of carpets. Some are woven with unusually light-tinted threads and are called Polish carpets because they bear the Polish coat of arms. And, appropriately, there is a Portuguese carpet, because it is decorated with Portuguese sailing ships in the corners.

The colors turn more vivid and the motifs more supernatural as you move on to Gulbenkian's large collection of Chinese porcelain. Some of the vases are nearly five feet tall, but the finest—and most valuable—piece in the collection is about five inches. That is a little stemmed bowl from the 14th century; it has a bluish glaze that is decorated by a slender string of pearls.

As if to indicate the crossing into a new continent, you pass over to another section of the museum to explore the great reaches of Gulbenkian's European holdings. The viewer is introduced to the Western tradition through a gallery of medieval ivory diptychs and triptychs with religious scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary, along with a variety of illuminated parchment manuscripts showing other Biblical scenes. The painting begins with some modest efforts of Flemish and German artists from the 15th century. But the beautiful and honest *Portrait of a Young Woman* by the Florentine Domenico Ghirlandaio sets the tone for the masterpieces to follow: Rembrandt's moving *Figure of an Old Man* and golden-helmeted *Pallas Athena*, Rubens' portrait of the bosomy Helene Fourment, who fixes the viewer with a coquettish eye, and a thrashing seascape by Dutchman Jakob Ruysdael.

Gulbenkian also had an eye for the graceful, pastel-shaded canvases of eighteenth century France by Boucher and his famous pupil Fragonard, and for their equivalent in furniture, chiefly such cabinet-makers as Cressent, Jacob, Dubois and the foreign-born Oeben. All of the gaiety—and some of the excesses—of the eighteenth century French court are apparent in the writing tables, chairs, bookcases and screens assembled here at the museum. You might feel that you had wandered into Versailles.

The Western Art section culminates in a good sampling of the Impressionists Monet, Manet, Renoir and Degas. The Monets include a rare still life and the *Break-Up of the Ice*, painted at the high-point of his career that fully conveys the damp and chilly air in winter. Finally, there is a touching picture by the American Mary Cassatt of a mother and child called *Motherly Care*.

The tour concludes with a look at Gulbenkian's collection of the jewelry of his friend René Lalique. In the art nouveau manner, Lalique has dipped into the natural world for his often otherworldly effects: a peacock entwined in its tail, a grasshopper on the branch of a plum tree, a comb of anemones, all of them done in the surreal purples, pale greens and golds.

In the end, you can see that Calouste Gulbenkian was justly possessive: he had quite a family. ■

John Sedgwick is the author of The Peaceable Kingdom just published by William Morrow.

AUTOMOBILES

(Continued from page 14)

relatively high compression ratio truly demands premium.

The 90 Quattro is presently only available in a 5-speed manual transmission. This transmission is completely new. It features a fully synchronized reverse gear, revised leverage ratio for shorter gear shift travel, lubed-for-life gearbox, and internal selector shafts which run in ball bearings. The net result is a lighter, more precise shift.

An anti-lock braking system is standard on the 90 Quattro. The car also includes a free Roadside Assistance Program, which is a three-year membership in the U.S. Auto Club, Motoring Division, Inc. The vehicle body also is covered by Audi's six-year corrosion perforation limited warranty with no mileage restriction.

The test drive over, I realized that the more I had driven the 90 Quattro, the more I had appreciated its road-handling capabilities. A good performance-oriented car, it was truly fun to drive. I still wanted to find weather and terrain conditions to further challenge the Quattro. But I was immensely happy of one thing, I had grown up in time to trade in my bike for this 90 Quattro.

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