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exhibition review of

Samuel F. B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre" and the Art of Invention

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Samuel F. B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre" and the Art of Invention

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino
January 24–May 4, 2015

Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth
May 23–August 23, 2015

Seattle Art Museum, Seattle
September 16, 2015–January 10, 2016

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville
January 23–April 18, 2016

Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
June 18–September 18, 2016

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem
October 8, 2016–January 8, 2017

Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem
February 17–June 4, 2017

New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain
June 17–October 15, 2017

Companion book:

Peter John Brownlee, ed.,

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Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art in conjunction with Yale University Press, 2014.

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The exhibition *Samuel F. B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre" and the Art of Invention* focuses on a monumental American painting that was created with the aim of educating and inspiring nineteenth-century Americans. The title of the exhibition hints at what would become Samuel F. B. Morse's most remarkable achievement: his invention of the telegraph. Before earning renown as an inventor, however, Morse was an artist, and *Gallery of the Louvre* (fig. 1) was his magnum opus. To his great disappointment, the painting was poorly received when he exhibited it in New York in 1833, and shortly afterward it fell into oblivion. Thanks to the enthusiasm of the late Daniel J. Terra, who acquired the painting and later transmitted it to the Terra Foundation, *Gallery of the Louvre* has been resurrected. The recent extensive cleaning and restoration of the painting inspired a trio of exhibitions called *A New Look*:

Samuel F. B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre," which in turn resulted in the publication of a volume of new scholarship on the painting.^[1] The success of the first group of shows presumably offered the impetus for the exhibition under review here.



Fig. 1, Samuel F. B. Morse, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831–33. Oil on canvas. Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, Chicago. Artwork in the public domain; photograph courtesy of the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

Sponsored by the Terra Foundation, *Samuel F. B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre" and the Art of Invention* traveled to eight new venues by the time it closed in October 2017. One of the missions of *The Art of Invention* was to share Morse's newly restored painting with a wide audience, something that it surely achieved during its tour of American museums. Many of the participating institutions are small to midsize regional museums whose intimate scale and geographic diversity attest to the Terra Foundation's mission to foster cross-cultural dialogue and to inspire significant new research on American art through its [Terra Collection Initiatives](#). Thanks in part to the collaborative ethos of the latter, each host institution staged the exhibition differently. This review examines the show at the Detroit Institute of Arts, but readers may wish to consult the [Terra Foundation's website](#) for photographs that document the installations at several of the other institutions.

At roughly six by nine feet in size, *Gallery of the Louvre* is large enough to feel substantial but not overwhelming. Morse has depicted part of the Salon Carré at the Louvre Museum, with the expanse of the Grande Galerie visible from the doorway at the back of the room. Within the Salon Carré, Old Master paintings hang cheek by jowl on sequoia-colored walls whose boundaries are demarcated by a classical sculpture in each corner. Morse populated his canvas with figures whose activities alert us to *Gallery of the Louvre's* intended message: the importance of study and learning. At the front and center of the painting, a seated woman pauses in her drawing to listen to the man who leans over her shoulder, pointing out some detail on her sketch. The fact that the man is none other than Morse himself strengthens the force of the painting's pedagogical theme. Beyond them, near the door to the Grande Galerie, a woman sits in front of an easel, evidently listening to the comments of her two companions, a man and a woman. Solitary work takes place to our right, where a woman sits at a high table, facing us as she works quietly at a book-sized easel in front of her, and to our left, where a man paints alone at an easel bearing a canvas whose composition appears to be the product of his own invention, rather than a copy of anything in the room.

Through the activities of these figures and the setting in which they take place, Morse modeled the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Harkening back to the seventeenth century, academic art education insisted that an artist's talent for invention depended first upon the imitation and then the emulation of the art of classical antiquity and the Old Masters. In *Gallery of the Louvre*, Morse provided a miniature showroom of the works of the Old Masters, the renowned artists of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, primarily from Italy, France, and Flanders, with a select pair from Spain (Murillo) and the Netherlands (Rembrandt). The installation we see in Morse's Salon Carré was his own invention, and he adhered rigorously to the academic canon. Even Morse's palette and his use of many layers of glaze show his allegiance to the techniques of the artists whose works are displayed within the painting: Leonardo, Titian, Rembrandt, Murillo. With its emphasis on the study of the artists of Renaissance and Baroque Europe, *Gallery of the Louvre* communicates a particular ideology of art education.

Lest his message seem too pedantic, Morse endowed his painting with an air of informality and sociability that makes education seem like a pleasurable enterprise. By setting his picture at the western end of the rectangular Salon Carré, Morse gave the painting an intimacy of scale that softens the grandeur of the space. Undaunted by the imposing high ceiling or the many masterpieces clustered on the soaring walls, men and women sketch, paint, and chat with one another. Indeed, they seem very much at ease in the museum. The seated woman in the middle foreground stretches her legs forward, ankles crossed, while her male companion leans on the back of her chair, crossing his right foot casually over his left leg. The relaxed poses of these figures heighten the sense of informality and project an attitude of certainty that they belong in this space. The other figures around the room share in this relaxed but dedicated study of the paintings around them. In fact, the man on the left wears a scarf wrapped around his head as if he were working in his studio rather than in a public space. Notably, these figures are not anonymous visitors: they are portraits of Morse and his American friends. Their presence invites the painting's intended American audience to imagine that the Louvre and its collection are theirs to use.

In the exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre* and its diminutive companion, *Francis I: Study for "Gallery of the Louvre,"* were integrated into the permanent collection, rather than being given a separate space. While this might seem unusual at first, the DIA has taken a similar approach with its one-painting exhibitions. In 2013, for example, the museum exhibited Vincent van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles* (visiting from the Musée d'Orsay) in the seventeenth-century Dutch galleries, rather than in the main floor galleries where its own van Goghs are displayed. That installation seemed to reflect more a desire to enhance visitor awareness of the Dutch collections than to achieve an educational objective: whereas the main floor modern galleries are immediately adjacent to the heavy visitor traffic of the central hall and the Rivera court, the Dutch collections are on the uppermost floor of the museum, tucked away at the back of the building. In the case of *Gallery of the Louvre*, the location of the exhibition was a better match from an historical point of view, as it was installed in one of the American galleries next to the main entrance hall. Yet it also reflected the same practical attitude that informed the earlier exhibition: museum-goers will probably be willing to trek up to the third floor to see a van Gogh, but they might not make the same kind of effort to find a painting by a lesser known artist.

Within the American galleries, Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre* was exhibited in a room containing large nineteenth-century paintings, where it hung on the wall opposite Rembrandt Peale's enormous canvas, *The Court of Death* (1820). The latter was flanked by two small Shakespearean paintings on each side: to the left, Henry Peter Gray's *Truth* (1859) and Albert Pinkham Ryder's *The Tempest* (1892; reworked 1896–1918) and, to the right, William Rimmer's *Scene from the Tempest* (ca. 1850) and *Scene from Macbeth* (ca. 1850). The adjacent walls displayed Washington Allston's *Balshazzar's Feast* (1817–43) and John La Farge's epic stained-glass triptych *Helping Angel, Faith and Hope*, and *Abou Ben Adhem: Write Me as One that Loves His Fellowmen* (1890). The objects from the DIA's collection are united both by their emphasis on the religious and supernatural sublime and, at the level of form, by their treatment of light. The paintings all possess a Romantic chiaroscuro—a velvety Rembrandtian glow—that is heightened by the dim gallery lighting and the warm radiance of the backlit stained glass. Thanks to Morse's abundant use of glazes, *Gallery of the Louvre* shared something in common with these pictures from a formal and technical perspective. With its comparatively prosaic subject matter, however, his painting felt a bit out of place among these exemplars of American Romanticism.

Despite the apparent disjunction between *Gallery of the Louvre* and its neighbors, the works actually shared several powerful connections that the DIA opted not to mention. This is a pity, because the links between the paintings would have helped unify the installation and enrich an otherwise modest exhibition. Given Morse's enthusiasm for both academic art education and Old Master paintings, for example, it would have been natural to call attention to his own teacher and mentor Washington Allston, whose *Balshazzar's Feast* hung on the wall to the left of *Gallery of the Louvre*. Indeed, Allston played a crucial role in convincing Morse of the need to study European art of the Renaissance and Baroque eras (15). His *Balshazzar's Feast* is inspired by Poussin and Rembrandt, among others, and paintings by both of these Old Masters figure in *Gallery of the Louvre*.^[2] Morse's picture has an even more meaningful connection to another painting in the DIA gallery. Morse aimed to use *Gallery of the Louvre* for a traveling, one-painting exhibition that would educate Americans by exposing them to European masterpieces. This idea came from Rembrandt Peale, who developed a profitable traveling show with none other than *Court of Death*, the very painting that hung directly opposite *Gallery of the Louvre* in the DIA's installation (79). The DIA's decision to ignore these fascinating links seems like a real missed opportunity to make the most of both the visiting painting and the museum's own, superb collection.

These lacunae aside, the greatest strength of the DIA's staging of this exhibition emerged from its thorough grasp of its role as a public art museum that serves a wide range of visitors. I have already noted the savvy choice of site for the installation. The content and presentation of a laminated informational booklet was another excellent example of this understanding. The booklet rested on a little stand in front of a bench at a comfortable viewing distance from the painting (fig. 2). This arrangement allowed viewers to sit, read and look at the painting all at once, thus inviting contemplation and engagement. Inside the booklet, five two-page spreads explained—briefly, and with illustrations—who Morse was, why he visited the Louvre (for educational purposes and because there were no public art museums in the United States at the time), and how the painting functioned as a “miniature” art museum. One section of the booklet included a key that identified each of the paintings depicted in *Gallery of the Louvre*. With their usual expertise in understanding their

constituency, the DIA team also included a section on the Mona Lisa, one of the only paintings within *Gallery of the Louvre* that is likely to be recognized by a wide audience.



Fig. 2, Installation view of *Samuel F. B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre" and the Art of Invention*, September 2016. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit. Photograph courtesy of the author. [\[larger image\]](#)

The eponymous volume that was published in conjunction with the exhibition is not a catalogue but should be understood as an important adjunct to the show. As noted previously, the exhibition draws its name from the title of this book, which contains essays drawn from the three symposia on the painting that took place between 2011 and 2013. The essays in the first section of the book examine the broader contexts of the painting: the role of the Louvre as a museum; the Louvre gallery painting as a specific pictorial type; the American roots of Morse's conception of the gallery painting; and the impact of Morse's intention to make *Gallery of the Louvre* the cornerstone of a one-painting traveling show. The second section of essays covers a wide range of topics, including the significance of the sculptures within the painting, the conservation treatments of 2010, the role of technology in the conception and making of the painting, and the impact of Morse's religious beliefs and his xenophobic, anti-abolitionist, anti-Catholic agenda (138). The last issue in particular offers an important reminder that while inventors (or "tech geniuses") may be forward-looking and open-minded when it comes to technological innovation, these values do not necessarily translate to progressive or even moderate social and political views. Despite his legacy of invention, Morse's virulent bigotry makes him a deeply unsympathetic figure. The fact that Morse owes the resurrection—and indeed, recognition—of his forgotten masterpiece to the efforts of the late Daniel J. Terra, an Italian immigrant, is a most delicious irony.

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Notes

[1] Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven (March 1–June 12, 2011), the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (June 25, 2011–July 8, 2012), and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia (August 4, 2012–August 25, 2013). Each museum hosted a symposium, which led to the publication of the book *Samuel F. B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre" and the Art of Invention* (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art in conjunction with Yale University Press, 2014).

[2] Rembrandt's *The Angel Leaving the Family of Tobias* and *Head of an Old Man* appear in *Gallery of the Louvre*, as do Poussin's *Deluge (Winter)* and *Diogenes Casting Away His Cup*.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Samuel F. B. Morse, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831–33. Oil on canvas. Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, Chicago. Artwork in the public domain; photograph courtesy of the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



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