

The best of art exhibitions in 2023

Highlights of a busy year included a blockbuster Vermeer show, Manet and Degas side by side, and a hip-hop celebration

Perspective by [Philip Kennicott](#) and [Sebastian Smee](#)

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The vaunted, long-forgotten era of the blockbuster exhibition made a return in 2023. It's not every year, after all, that 28 Vermeers are displayed in one place, nor is it commonplace for Manet's "Olympia" to be sent on loan from Paris to New York.

Both happened this year, and both shows were unforgettable in the very best ways. But other exhibitions achieved greatness by coming at their subjects from more oblique and modest angles: shows devoted to works on paper by Georgia O'Keeffe and Ruth Asawa, for instance, and one dedicated to the landscapes of Edvard Munch. Both kinds of exhibition excited critics and public alike. Here are our picks for the year's best.

10. 'Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde: The Modern Landscape'

How many Van Gogh shows have been staged in my lifetime? Too many. But "[Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde: The Modern Landscape](#)" at the Art Institute of Chicago eased off the usual romanticized narratives, placing the Dutchman in the context of his fellow avant-garde painters before his storied move to the South of France.

The show displayed dozens of paintings made in Asnières, on the outskirts of Paris, not just by Van Gogh but also by fellow Post-Impressionists Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Émile Bernard and Charles Angrand. It changed forever my sense of how Van Gogh became Van Gogh. Better yet, it introduced me to the brilliance of the little known Angrand. — *Sebastian Smee*



9. ‘Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in In

Focused on early attempts to forge a uniquely Buddhist art, “[Tree & Serpent](#)” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York contained dozens of incredibly old and precious loans from India. Years in the making, it was one of those rare shows that, beyond being beautiful and awe-inspiring, induced philosophical states of mind, and in the galleries an unusual hush. — S.S.

8. ‘An Italian Impressionist in Paris’

The Italian artist Giuseppe De Nittis died young and famous, but his legacy was soon eclipsed by more self-consciously modern and avant-garde figures. Outside Italy, De Nittis is mostly a footnote to exhibitions of other artists, including his friends Manet, Degas and Caillebotte.

The Phillips Collection’s engaging exhibition “[An Italian Impressionist in Paris: Giuseppe De Nittis](#)” revealed an incredibly sensitive and refined artist, equally at home innovating in the gardens of impressionism and making salon-friendly work with wide commercial appeal.

The tumult of the 19th century, its political instability and frequent economic upheaval is present here, but you have to be alert to detail to find it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people who saw this show didn’t just see it once. De Nittis rewards looking. — *Philip Kennicott*

7. ‘Georgia O’Keeffe: To See Takes Time’

I don’t know whether Georgia O’Keeffe was better with watercolors than oil paints, but after seeing this brilliantly conceived show, I know I’m in love with her works on paper.

“[Georgia O’Keeffe: To See Takes Time](#)” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was well-named: By focusing on how O’Keeffe brushed watercolor onto paper in multiple iterations of the same subject, it provoked intriguing thoughts about the value of looking, lingering, looking again. A kind of inner vision emerged. — S.S.

6. ‘Ruth Asawa: Through Line’

The [Ruth Asawa drawings exhibition](#) at the Whitney Museum of American Art had a lot of competition for attention, and nothing in this magnificent little show was going to hector the audience in. Like Asawa’s more famous and beloved looped-wire sculptures, her drawings are meticulous and masterful, but they unfold slowly and only after persistent attention and reflection.

This exhibition documented her growth as an artist, from the early days at Black M many decades of balancing art with family and public service. ✓

It also gave insight into the fluid way in which she moved between two- and three-dimensional projects. But mostly, it gave viewers a sense of Asawa herself, her deep love of the world, her devotion to friends and family, and her love of nature in its minute and intimate complexity. — *P.K.*

5. ‘The Culture: Hip-Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century’

A sage, joyous and superbly selected show, “The Culture” was one of the best of the scores of events marking the 50th anniversary of the birth of hip-hop this year. The Baltimore Museum of Art, collaborating with the Saint Louis Art Museum, struck a thoughtful balance between celebration and lucid critique, prompting fresh ideas about the many richly teeming tendrils connecting hip-hop and contemporary art. — *S.S.*

4. ‘Ed Ruscha/Now Then’

The Museum of Modern Art’s Ed Ruscha retrospective, billed as the most comprehensive ever mounted, was massive, with more than 200 works spanning a career that began in the 1950s.

Perhaps he has repeated himself a bit from time to time, and lingered on some dead-end tangents for a few years here and there. But the sum total of Ruscha’s work, its intelligence, sophistication and graphic excellence, is consistently impressive.

Nothing here contradicted the usual sense that he is the great California artist — alert to its light, landscape and the psychology of its peripatetic population.

But he is also much more — an American artist who has been channeling the country’s history from the zenith of its power to its current state of decline. Individually his works may be cool and enigmatic, but collectively they are an urgent archive of what the American empire looked like as it began rushing toward obsolescence. — *P.K.*

3. ‘Edvard Munch: Trembling Earth’

Edvard Munch, who painted “The Scream,” believed that, as an artist, you “cannot merely sit and stare at everything and paint it ‘as accurately as you see it.’ You must paint it as it appeared when the motif seized you.”



This show at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., revealed an artist who emerging from dark sickrooms, seizing the landscape, which struck his eyes as fresh and sensate. “[Edvard Munch: Trembling Earth](#)” greatly expanded our understanding of Munch’s contribution to modern art. — *S.S.*

2. ‘Manet/Degas’

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s magnificent “[Manet/Degas](#)” exhibition began with a pair of self-portraits — on one side a 40-something Manet painting himself in the late-1870s; on the other, a young Degas capturing himself in 1855 as a brooding, dour figure in his 20s.

Both are compelling likenesses, but the Manet is also a compelling work of art, and throughout the exhibition the received wisdom — Manet is a consistently great artist while Degas is often great and always interesting — turned out to be true, again and again.

The two artists were near contemporaries, coming from similar, privileged backgrounds, and there was a complex relationship of admiration and likely envy between the frenemies. They sought admiration and rewards from different audiences: Manet eager for conventional approval while Degas played a key role in developing the Parisian avant-garde.

This beautifully designed exhibition included some 160 paintings and works on paper and one of the most famous, infamous and [complex paintings of the past two centuries](#), Manet’s “Olympia,” traveling to the United States from the Musée d’Orsay for the first time. — *P.K.*

1. Vermeer

The [great Vermeer show](#) in Amsterdam, which included 28 of the artist’s 37 extant works, was highly anticipated and quickly sold out, even with the [Rijksmuseum](#)’s extended hours. In four months, about 650,000 people from more than 100 countries attended, making it a genuinely international phenomenon.

It is easy to be a little cynical about these blockbusters, and especially suspect of Vermeer, whose celebrity as a great artist has reached winner-takes-all status. But if you could focus on the works despite the crowds, the show was a revelation.

Details of light, reflection and shadow simply don’t translate in reproductions, and Vermeer crafted worlds of ambiguity and nuance with these virtuoso games. The scale of his work, often surprisingly small, needs to be encountered in the flesh.

The Rijksmuseum knew the demand to see the show would be huge, and it made a successful effort to hang the works with ample spacing and in generously proportioned rooms. The museum called it a once-in-a-lifetime event, and it probably was for most who attended.

