

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Metropolitan Museum

"Age of Empires: Chinese Art of the Qin & Han Dynasties (221 B.C.-A.D. 220)"

Not least among the achievements of Ying Zheng, the founding emperor of the short-lived Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.), was propaganda, some of which still echoes bombastically on the walls of this show: you won't depart with any confusion about who first unified China. But the chance to see a platoon of his spectacular terra-cotta warriors, half a dozen or so of the thousands that were buried with the emperor, who died in 210 B.C., and excavated in the nineteen-seventies, is not to be missed. Fitted together like action figures from mass-produced body parts and originally equipped with real bronze weapons, the life-size sculptures have individually detailed faces of surprising charisma. One kneeling archer, with square-toed shoes and a mustache, is so striking he may trigger déjà vu. Along with the soldiers comes a wide-ranging selection of contemporaneous arti-

facts, many of them demonstrating a naturalistic approach to anatomy and an untrammelled expressive whimsy—both of which were later eradicated by the heavy stylization during the Han dynasty. Examples of the former include a recently discovered terra-cotta strongman with a potbelly; examples of the latter include a bronze lamp shaped like a mythical bird tipping its head back to swallow its own smoke. But, if many of the show's pieces make Qin and Han culture look unexpectedly relatable, its highlights are those that were unmistakably made long ago and far away, particularly the unforgettable jade burial suit of the Han princess Dou Wan. Discovered in a cliffside tomb in Hebei Province, in 1968, the ritual object is made of more than two thousand rectangular panels of jade, sewn together with gold. *Through July 16.*

Museum of Modern Art

"Louise Lawler: Receptions"

In her best-known photographs, Lawler has pictured works of art as they appear in museums, galleries, auction houses, storage spaces, and collectors' homes. A Miró co-stars with its own reflec-

tion in the glossy surface of a museum bench. The floral pattern on a Limoges soup tureen vies with a Pollock drip painting on a wall above it. Johns' "White Flag" harmonizes with a monogrammed bedspread. An auction label next to a round gold Warhol "Marilyn" estimates the work's value, in 1988, at between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand dollars. Lovers of art don't often reflect on the interests of wealth and power that enable our adventures. But if that consciousness is forced on us we may be frozen mid-toggle between looking and seeing. The effect is rather sadistic, but also perhaps masochistic. Lawler couldn't mock aesthetic sensitivity if she didn't share it. Having landed herself in a war zone between creating art and objectifying it, and between belonging to the art world and resenting it, Lawler capers in the crossfire. Her retrospective comes at a moment when an onslaught of illiberal forces in the big world dwarfs intellectual wrangles in the little one of art. Who, these days, can afford the patience for mixed feelings about the protocols of cultural institutions? Artists can. Some artists must. Art often serves us by exposing conflicts among our values, not to propose solutions but to tap energies of truth, however partial, and beauty, however fugitive; and the service is greatest when our worlds feel most in crisis. Charles Baudelaire, the Moses of modernity, wrote, "I have cultivated my hysteria with terror and delight." Lawler does that, too, with disciplined wit and hopeless integrity. *Through July 30.*

Whitney Museum

"Calder: Hypermobility"

In the summer of 1922, Alexander Calder was twenty-three and doing a stint as a merchant marine. One morning made a cosmic impression. As he later described it, "Over my couch—a coil of rope—I saw the beginning of a fiery red sunrise on one side and the moon looking like a silver coin on the other." The story has the elements of a great Calder sculpture: curving lines, strong colors, organic shapes, harmonious balance, suspension in space. What's missing is a sense of motion—as essential to Calder's work as metal or paint, as we learn on the eighth floor of the museum. Among other engines for joy made between 1930 and 1959 are eight rarely seen motorized pieces. They're turned on, for brief intervals, three times a day (and twice as often Friday through Sunday), by art handlers who also activate many non-mechanized sculptures, making them flutter and spin, as the artist intended. Watching the quivering of the five-foot-high 1941 stabile "Aluminum Leaves, Red Post," whose clawlike base recalls the gargantuan Calders in public plazas from Seattle to Grand Rapids, Michigan, is like seeing a new side of an old friend you've been taking for granted. *Through Oct. 23.*

Morgan Library and Museum

"Noah's Beasts: Sculpted Animals from Ancient Mesopotamia"

This breathtaking show of nine ancient Mesopotamian sculptures, made between 3300 and 2250 B.C., was inspired by a rare Akkadian flood-narrative tablet, from 1646 B.C., acquired by Pierpont Morgan around the turn of the last century. Its text begins, "When gods were men," but a more fitting synopsis of the exhibition might read "When animals were gods." A recumbent sheep, carved from black stone, has the mesmerizing simplicity of a piece by Isamu Noguchi; a silver lion's head, less than five inches high, epitomizes dignity; a weathered-sandstone ewe's head suggests the mysterious presence of the divine. A lapis-lazuli goat, which



The bright young gallerist Helena Anrather has opened a space at 28 Elizabeth St. Her current show, "Carl/Jackie/Steve/Michelle," is a corrective to the prevailing myth that the art world has devolved into an industrial complex: it features works by two mid-career couples who are longtime friends. (Pictured, Steve DiBenedetto's painting "Pink Italy, 2017.")