

A guide to international masterpieces

Reading in a Bamboo Grove, attributed to Tensho Shubun (c 1446), Tokyo National Museum

The modesty of this piece, widely believed to be by Shubun, a Kyoto temple monk who'd studied art in Korea, belies its significant backstory in the evolution of Japanese calligraphic art. Described as a "poetry-painting scroll", the hanging includes verse and its composition shows outcrops of a mist-swirled precipitous mountain, bamboo grove, and a faintly realised figure reading in a secluded hut. Despite its relatively narrow verticality, the scroll captures a vast sense of space and perspective, and is considered one of the greatest examples of the Chinese-influenced ink-and-brush art of the Muromachi era (1333-1578), a period that embraced the rise of Zen Buddhism. The work is a designated National Treasure and not always on display; also look for Shubun's Landscapes in Four Seasons at this landmark museum in Ueno Park.

STAY Aman Tokyo; aman.com

tam.jp

SUSAN KUROSAWA

The Floor Scrapers by Gustave Caillebotte (1875), Musee D'Orsay, Paris

There are so many reasons to savour a few hours in this cavernous gallery, housed in a former train station on the Left Bank. Monet, Van Gogh, Renoir and Degas are among a rollcall of Impressionist greats, but it's this painting that captivates on my second visit. Three shirtless men are stripping the floorboards in a fancy Paris apartment, the light streaming in from the balcony to highlight their muscular arms and backs and the curls of varnish. A bottle of wine and a glass, essential for getting through a day's labour, stand on a table nearby. Caillebotte submitted the work for the 1875 Paris Salon but it was resoundingly rejected for its realism and "vulgar subject matter". Not only were these men not farmers or peasants, considered more acceptable topics, but their torsos were bare. Quelle horreur.

STAY Hotel Lutetia; hotellutetia.com

musee-orsay.fr

PENNY HUNTER

A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte by Georges Seurat (1884-86), Art Institute of Chicago

Move close to neo-impressionist Georges Seurat's painting to appreciate why it's called his masterpiece. His application of coloured-dot brushstrokes to form an image was derided as "pointillism", a term that soon lost its sneer. This is a large work (207cm x 308cm) and depicts Parisians lolling and promenading on the banks of the Seine, among them a fashionable couple with a monkey on a leash, a woman fishing and a girl in white. But the visitors who cluster around the work in Chicago each day include a dollop of devotees of another masterpiece. Seurat's work was the inspiration for musical theatre composer Stephen Sondheim's Sunday in the Park with George, which won a 1985 Pulitzer Prize. The show brings to life Seurat's characters who assemble in a tableau of the painting to close Act One.

STAY Palmer House; hilton.com

artic.edu

GRAHAM ERBACHER

The Blue Boy by Thomas Gainsborough (1770), The Huntington, California

Outside Los Angeles, The Huntington is famous for its gardens and as the home of The Blue Boy, once the world's most expensive painting and today one of the most recognisable. US railway baron Henry Huntington paid an unprecedented \$US728,000 for the work in 1921, making the canvas an instant celebrity. In London, crowds gathered to view

the dapper lad before he crossed the Atlantic; Cole Porter composed a farewell ditty, Blue Boy Blues, to show cowboys "just how boys in England used to be dressed". First shown at London's Royal Academy in 1770 and originally titled Portrait of a Young Gentleman, the painting captures the youth's swagger but it's the shimmering blue satin suit that most remember, and recent restoration has revealed its true lustre. The portrait is said to be influenced by Gainsborough's hero Anthony van Dyck. And Porter would be pleased to know the lad is home in London for a wee while (at the National Gallery until May 3).

STAY The Langham Huntington, Pasadena; langhamhotels.com

huntington.org

CHRISTINE McCABE

The Skating Minister by Sir Henry Raeburn (c 1795), Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh

The insouciance of Reverend Robert Walker gliding across the frozen Duddingston Loch in Edinburgh is in contrast to the backstory and disputed provenance of this beloved Scottish painting. Action en plein air was a departure for Raeburn, Scotland's first great portraitist, and even as late as 2005 a gallery curator suggested it might have been by French artist Henri-Pierre Danloux, a notion still not completely dispelled. How-



ever, the intricate details such as the pink skate ribbons, are a trademark of Raeburn, a former apprentice jeweller. Walker was minister at Canongate Kirk, and he learned skating, then relatively unknown in Scotland, as a child in The Netherlands. The arms folded across the chest is the "travelling position", a rather advanced manoeuvre



but one well within Walker's abilities because, as a member of the exclusive Edinburgh Skating Society, he wouldn't have been admitted without passing the entry "exam" of jumping over three top hats on the ice.

STAY The Balmoral; roccofortehotels.com

nationalgalleries.org

JEREMY BOURKE

