



**FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO  
LEGION OF HONOR**

**HIGHLIGHTS TOUR**

**Audio tour script**

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**Stop 416 Fra Angelico, *The Meeting of Saint Dominic and Saint Francis of Assisi*, c. 1427 - 1429  
61.44.7**

NARRATOR: Inside an austere church, St Dominic, in a black cloak, clasps hands with St Francis of Assisi. According to Dominic's biographer, he dreamed of meeting Francis – and the next day, recognized him in real life, in a church in Rome. Dominic greeted him warmly, appreciating that he and Francis had similar aims in mind, in founding religious brotherhoods.

This painting is tiny – it was once part of a multi-scene altarpiece. But lean in a little, and look at the faces of the two main players and their companions. They're full of expression and individuality. The Italian artist, known as Fra Angelico, was known for his tender, human portrayals of religious figures. He was also a Dominican friar himself, so this subject must have been especially close to his heart.

129 words

**Stop 421 Cesare da Sesto, *Madonna and Child with St John the Baptist and St George*, c. 1513  
– 1515, 61.44.15**

NARRATOR: In the center of this painting, a laughing Christ child pulls at his mother Mary's clothing with chubby fingers. Her blue robe symbolizes the sky, since she's queen of heaven in the Catholic faith.

But who are those men standing on either side? Luckily, Renaissance art is full of clues that help us figure out their identities. The man to the left: long hair? check. Tunic made from animal hide? Tall, reed cross? Yes and yes. All of these signs suggest that he is John the Baptist, who foretold the coming of Christ, and later baptized him. The other man is dressed in armor. So it's got to be St George, suited up to face the legendary dragon. Even the ruined classical building behind them carries a message: once Jesus begins his work, the old, pagan world will crumble and Christianity will triumph.

Finally, notice how the figures and landscape are depicted with a sense of depth and realism. \* The Italian artist, Cesare da Sesto, was heavily influenced by Leonardo da Vinci, who had spent many productive years in Cesare's native Lombardy in northern Italy.

191 words

**Stop 422 El Greco, *Saint Francis Venerating the Crucifix*, c. 1600, 61.44.24**

NARRATOR: Kneeling in prayer, St Francis of Assisi leans over a carved image of Christ on the cross. Everything about this painting by El Greco strives to give us a sense of Saint Francis's humility. He had given up a life of wealth and luxury in favor of spiritual concerns, and to found his order of monks. Here, we see him in his simple, dark robe and rope belt, in a bleak landscape, far from human company and comfort.

El Greco used subtle ways to emphasize the saint's emotional devotion to his faith. Like the darkness of the rocks behind him, the perfect backdrop to highlight his brightly-lit face, with its intent expression. And look at that sky in the background – it's full of turbulent brushstrokes that echo Christ's anguish on the cross during his crucifixion – and of the feelings in Francis's heart as he contemplates this suffering.

153 words

## **Stop 466 Peter Paul Rubens, The Tribute Money, c. 1612, 44.11**

NARRATOR: It's easy to find the most important figure here. The artist, Peter Paul Rubens, has singled him out with a scarlet robe, and golden light around his head. It's Christ, involved in a dramatic discussion. In the center of the painting, and the story, is Christ's hand holding a golden Roman coin. Another man points to it, staring Christ in the face, while his companions cluster around, their faces full of enquiry, drama, and emotion.

This man just asked Christ whether it's lawful for the Roman overlords to demand taxes from the Jewish people. In the Bible, Christ points to the emperor's image on a coin and replies, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God, the things that are God's". Christ's other hand, pointing up to heaven, clarifies that final point.

Rubens, who came from Antwerp in today's Belgium, was among the most celebrated and successful artists of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. His paintings, full of dramatic light, lush color, and figures that are full of life, appealed very much to the kings and noblemen of Europe, who lined up to have him paint their portraits and decorate their palaces and churches.

197 words

**Stop 426 Georges de La Tour, *Old Man*, c. 1618 - 1619, 75.2.9, and *Old Woman*, c. 1618 - 1619, 75.2.10**

NARRATOR: This elderly man, and the woman to the right, were painted around 1618 by the French artist Georges de La Tour. Living and working in a provincial part of eastern France, he specialized in picturing everyday life, often using dramatic light effects.

He's doing that here – see the way he creates a sense of tension and mystery with that bright light coming in from the left? It casts most of the man's face into deep shadow – making it hard to read his expression. But we see the woman's face clearly – and it looks as if she could be telling the man something serious. So who might they be? Their simple clothing – apart from that embroidered silk apron – places them as peasants, or townspeople. They may even be characters from popular theater – a docile husband and nagging wife. But whatever their identity, the paintings' extraordinary, intense realism draws us in to their enigmatic story.

153 words

**Stop 468 Rembrandt, *Joris de Caulerij*, 1632,  
66.31**

NARRATOR: What kind of person do you think this man might have been? \*\* His portrait expertly communicates various aspects of his character and social standing. First, there's the pose. He stands tall, his head turned so that he gazes directly out to catch our eye. A hand placed nonchalantly on his hip gives him an air of energy and confidence, and his other hand holds a 17<sup>th</sup> century gun called a musket – almost pushing out into our space.

Meanwhile, bright light falls on one side of his face. It's painted in extraordinary detail, giving us a wonderful sense of his character and individuality – and even the texture of his skin and hair. The metallic details of his armored collar and military garb also gleam in the light, underlining his position as a wealthy citizen – and member of a militia. Joris de Caulerij was a distinguished officer in the Dutch navy. And he got one of the finest emerging artists in the Netherlands to paint his portrait in 1632 – young Rembrandt, who was then just beginning to make his name in Amsterdam.

180 words

**Stop 432 Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Empire of Flora*, c. 1743, 61.44.19**

NARRATOR: Flowers are scattered everywhere in this painting – especially around the figure in the center. That’s because she is the most important: Flora, the Roman goddess of Spring. Reclining in her golden chariot and surrounded by bright yellow drapery fluttering in the spring breeze, she receives homage from all kinds of admirers. Chubby cherubs hover nearby, and on the left, a couple of warriors lay down their shields and present flower garlands to the goddess.

It’s colorful, light-hearted, playful and elegant – like so much European art made around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This scene is by the Venetian artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, who specialized in large-scale decorative paintings and frescoes that would transform your palazzo with a heavenly array of graceful gods and goddesses. His fame soon spread, and this particular painting was made for a German count.

139 words

**Stop 431 Jean-Antoine Watteau, The Foursome, c. 1718, 1977.8**

NARRATOR: At first, this scene looks straightforward enough – four young people sitting around a classical urn at twilight. Maybe they're about to hear a song from the man with a guitar slung over his back. But ... nothing is quite what it seems.

The men's clothing, for one thing, is decidedly theatrical. In fact, the man with the guitar is dressed as Pierrot. He's the melancholy figure who pines after a lady, in the Italian theater comedies that were so popular at this time. And the man on the left may be Mezzetin, a scheming, trouble-making character from the same theatrical tradition.

But here's where things get even more complicated. French artist Jean-Antoine Watteau, who made this painting around 1718, often portrayed the aristocracy enjoying conversation, music and flirting in a beautiful garden, with a mysterious, slightly dreamlike, atmosphere. Quite often, it's a costume party. So we may be looking at just such a delightful gathering. Or is it actually a performance, with four actors in front of painted scenery?

172 words



**Stop 480 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Anne, Viscountess Townsend*, 1779-1780 75.2.13**

NARRATOR: Anybody who was anyone in late 18<sup>th</sup> century England wanted Sir Joshua Reynolds to paint his or her portrait. And looking at this elegant painting, we can see his appeal.

He's starting with great material here – this is Lady Townsend, who he'd previously portrayed with her sisters as the Three Graces – Roman goddesses of charm and beauty. As a young artist, Reynolds had traveled to Italy, immersing himself in classical art. Back in London, he became known for his portraits that enhanced one's appearance, and contained a dash of classical style, pointing flatteringly to one's knowledge of antiquity. He shows Lady Townsend in a simple gown and fashionable hairdo, with the velvet and ermine fur cloak that signifies her noble status draped nonchalantly over the pillar beside her. The carved imagery on it is very much part of the portrait. It shows the classical myth where Paris, prince of Troy, has to choose the most beautiful of three goddesses. But there are only two – because Anne herself is the living, breathing third, and Paris leans forward on the pillar, seemingly about to select her as the winner of the beauty contest!

189 words

**Stop 477 Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Hyacinthe Gabrielle Roland, later Marchioness Wellesley*, 1791, 1991.29**

NARRATOR: There are several unusual things about this portrait, painted in 1791. First – the way this young woman’s presented. It’s so much more informal than what you’d usually see at this time. She seems to be moving – perhaps dancing – and her hair cascades over her bare shoulders, held by a scarf tied fashionably in what was called the “Greek style”.

The woman is Hyacinthe Gabrielle Roland. Her role in society probably partly accounts for the informal and vivacious way she’s portrayed. A famously attractive young French actress, she lived with an English aristocrat and had five children with him before they eventually married. And here’s the second remarkable aspect to the portrait – it’s the work of a woman, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, who was known for the freshness and liveliness of her portraits. She had an extremely successful career as an artist – unusual for a woman of her day– notably, working for Queen Marie Antoinette, before the French Revolution.

155 words

**Stop 488 John Roddam Spencer-Stanhope,  
*Love and the Maiden*, 1877, 2002.176**

NARRATOR: In an enchanting spring landscape, a young woman sits up, as if she was just asleep. And who woke her? None other than Eros, the classical god of love, with his wings and magical bow. She gazes at him, intrigued. Wait though— that flowering tree placed together with Eros means something. It's an oleander – beautiful, but also poisonous. Get it? Love can be wonderful, but also painful – even fatal.

The painting is by English late 19<sup>th</sup> century artist John Roddam Spencer-Stanhope. His love of Italian Renaissance art comes out clearly in the painting's graceful figures and details. He even used early Renaissance-style egg tempera paint and gold leaf here, to create these bright, clear colors, and crisp, exquisite details.

119 words

**Stop 485 Konstantin Makovsky, *The Russian Bride's Attire*, 1889, 53161**

NARRATOR: There is so much going on in this monumental painting set in old Russia. But the artist helps us see where to start: with the girl in a shining, white dress in the center. The ladies around her are preparing her for her wedding, but she looks down seriously at the young woman at her feet. Maybe they are sisters, sad that later in the day, they will have to part. To the left, a small boy watches the bride thoughtfully. Soon, he'll be too old to be allowed into the women's quarters. Meanwhile, at the right, an older man, perhaps the bride's father, carrying her dowry, tries to catch a glimpse of her. But he's not supposed to be there – as the woman by the door is obviously telling him.

The costumes and setting for the scene are magnificent, and incredibly detailed. Just look at those embroidered headdresses, and the little boy's boots. \*\* The artist, Konstantin Makovsky, was one of the leading Russian painters of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. But here, he's giving us a lavish, romantically imaginative insight into one of the most important social and political events of sixteenth and seventeenth century Russia – a wedding uniting two noble families.

203 words

**Stop 492 Édouard Manet, *At the Milliner's*,  
1881, 1957.3**

NARRATOR: Like several artists in his circle, Édouard Manet was fascinated by the hat shops that were everywhere in Paris by the 1880s.

But the woman in this painting is something of a mystery. It's titled "At the Milliner's", so she may be a wealthy customer, trying out different hats at a shop. But her low-cut gown and shawl are more like something you'd wear at home before dressing, and the flowery wallpaper looks domestic. So she could be trying out hats sent over for her approval, at home. Either way, it's clear that Manet enjoyed painting her creamy skin against the quick, bold dashes of paint that conjure up her gauzy black shawl, and the flowered wallpaper behind. His interest in everyday – even risqué - subjects like this, and the way he painted them with these swift, unblended brushstrokes made him one of the most radical artists of his time.

150 words

**Stop 497 Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1914–1917, 1973.3**

NARRATOR: This painting makes us feel like we're in Claude Monet's garden in northern France, standing beside him on a bridge, gazing down at the water lilies. There's no view of anything else in the garden – let alone a horizon line with sky above it, like you get in most traditional landscape paintings. But there is a sense that it's a beautiful, sunny day – the water is bright blue, and there's a cloud reflected up in the corner.

It almost feels as if we're floating, like the waterlilies.

As a young man, Monet and his fellow Impressionists had revolutionized European painting with their new way of capturing the world around them in paint, and their focus on modern life. But by the time Monet made this painting, he was in his late 70s. His garden had become his main inspiration – he planned its trees, flowers and ponds carefully, and painted them over and over again. Here, with the absence of anything else but the colors and forms of the lilies, the water and its reflections, it's almost abstract.

179 words

## **Stop 306 Seneb, the Royal Scribe, 2014.45**

**NARRATOR:** In ancient Egypt, you needed to be well prepared for death and the Afterlife. This wooden figure was made to be placed in a tomb – it represented the deceased man just in case something bad happened to his mummified body, his spirit would have a place to rest.

This was no ordinary Egyptian. An inscription on the base beneath the figure's feet tells us the man was named Seneb, and that he was favored by the king. Seneb was probably a court official. He could certainly afford to get this statue made by a top-notch artist. It's beautifully carved, using nine different pieces of wood, so that the grain follows the lines and curves of the body. Look carefully, and you can still see where black paint was used to define his eyes and eyebrows. Even his finger and toenails are picked out in pale paint.

147 words





## Stop 201 Cycladic Figure, c. 2500 BC, 1981.42

NARRATOR: This marble sculpture is almost *five thousand* years old. It comes from the Cycladic islands in the Aegean Sea, south-east of Athens. Just a few pared-down forms and lines make up the figure's head and body, with its long, slender nose and folded arms. Look how the artist has indicated the body with the minimal of lines. \* It could almost be a piece of modern art. And in fact, when Cycladic figures like these were first rediscovered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, modern artists like Picasso and Matisse were dazzled by their elegant simplicity, and inspired by their clean lines.

But would this figure originally have looked exactly like this? The answer's no – like much ancient sculpture, it would have had some painted decoration. See how the top of the head looks a little less worn? \* It's the “ghost” of the painted hair that was once there – now, long gone, the paint protecting that area from weathering.

158 words

## **Stop 205 Season Sarcophagus, 54662**

NARRATOR: Looking at the shape of this object, can you guess its original use? \* It was a sarcophagus, or coffin. Made of fine marble, with elaborately carved relief decoration, it would have been extremely expensive. And in the middle of the front relief, there's a portrait of the Roman noblewoman the sarcophagus was made for. \* She's shown wearing a mantle and holding a scroll, so perhaps indicating her education.

Arranged along the sarcophagus on either side of the woman's portrait are winged figures holding produce that symbolizes the seasons of the year. They, and the little figures in between them, are associated with the cult of Dionysus. He's best known as the god of wine, but was also connected with resurrection – so a key deity to assure one's rebirth. And of course the theme of the changing seasons remind us of the passing of time, death, and rebirth – the everlasting cycle of life.

153 words

## **Stop 207 Volute Krater, 2005.24a-b**

**NARRATOR:** In ancient Greece, wine and water were normally mixed in vessels this shape. But this one is much too big for daily use – it was made as a tomb monument. It probably commemorated a dead warrior, since its imagery tells of heroes and battles. In fact, it's all about a key moment from the Iliad, Homer's epic account of the war between Greece and Troy.

See the downcast figure, sitting on a white couch and leaning on a white staff? \* That's the Greek hero Achilles. The winged messenger of the gods is talking to him urgently – he must return to the battlefield, to rescue the body of his fallen friend, before the enemy gets there. Meanwhile, down below, there's the enemy himself – the Trojan prince Hektor - in his speedy four-horse chariot. He's racing across the plain of Troy to try to get there first. Next, Achilles will put on that white breastplate hanging behind his head, and go back into the fray, turning the whole course of the battle around.

170 words

## **Stop 208 Asklepios, 1981.41**

NARRATOR: Even though this Greek statue is missing its head, and other important body parts, we know who it is. How? By his long walking stick, or staff at the right side of his body. \* See that twisting, coiling form further down the staff? \* It's a snake, which tells us that the figure represents Asklepios, god of healing and medicine, and patron of physicians. His snake-entwined staff is his symbol.

The drapery gives the sculptor the opportunity to explore a sense of movement and realism. He depicts Asklepios leaning heavily on his staff, his torso curved over and slightly twisted toward it, his robe falling in a mass of deep folds as a result. Originally, this statue would have been painted, giving it an even greater liveliness – it must have looked as though Asklepios could almost have stepped off his plinth at any moment.

145 words

**Stop 209 Anthropoid Coffin of Iret-hor-irou,  
2002.2a-b**

NARRATOR: Why were ancient Egyptian coffins made in the image of a human body? Of course, it made them ideally shaped to hold a mummified corpse. But more than that, a coffin was meant to act as a substitute for the body inside it, if necessary. The Egyptians believed that after death, they would continue to exist as long as their body was preserved, and their spirit had a home to return to. So, in case some misfortune befell the mummy, the human-shaped coffin itself could provide a resting place for the deceased person's soul.

This one would have been extremely costly – it's made of cedar wood imported from Lebanon, and is beautifully carved and decorated. Coffins, as the outer layer covering the mummified body inside, were the perfect place to have inscriptions - magical texts that protected the deceased, and helped him or her on the journey to the afterlife. The inscriptions here were originally decorated with colored inlays that have now faded to white.

165 words

## **Stop 210 Torso of a God, 54661**

NARRATOR: This magnificent statue was made in Egypt in the fourteenth century BC. It represents a god – although we're not certain which one, as the inscription is missing. You can see he would have been almost life-size, and the details show he was made by an extremely skilled sculptor. Beneath the little bit of his beard that remains, he's wearing a decorated collar, and the even pleats of his skirt are beautifully depicted. He's holding a scepter against his chest, which signified power over land and peoples. And in his other hand, he grasps an ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life.

He's also made from highly valued "black stone". Because its color resembled the fertile black soil that reappeared annually after the river Nile flooded, black represented renewal. It was especially relevant to this statue - one of many created for Pharaoh Amenhotep the Third later in his reign, to symbolize the rejuvenation of his royal rule.

156 words

## **Stop 214 Winged Genius, 1995.47**

**NARRATOR:** This winged “genius”, or guardian divinity, once decorated the palace of the great Assyrian king Ashurnasipal II. Dating from the ninth century BC, he’s almost three thousand years old. At that time, the Assyrian monarchs ruled over a growing empire. And their capital city, Nimrud, in what is now northern Iraq, was full of splendid buildings that trumpeted their power and might.

In Assyrian culture, guardian figures like these were important elements of palace wall decoration. Carved in pairs, facing one another, they would have flanked an image of the king between them. This figure originally held a bucket and perhaps a fir cone – probably to anoint the king by purifying him with liquid. Together, each pair of guardians symbolically protected him from sickness, bad fortune and death.

As well as having great strength and magical powers, the guardian is presented as a beautiful creature. Details of his sweeping wing feathers and jewelry is carefully picked out, and his hair and beard are styled with elaborate rows of curls – giving us an insight into contemporary fashion at Ashurnasipal’s court!

179 words

## **Stop 215 Ivory Plaques from Nimrud (group stop)**

**NARRATOR:** Every one of these little ivory plaques is a masterpiece. Imagine what skill you'd have needed to have to carve these detailed designs – winged figures, animals, flowers and twisting vines – at this scale. \* They were all found in a royal palace in Nimrud – that's in today's Iraq. Around the ninth to the seventh century BC, when they were made, Nimrud was the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire, filled with splendid buildings.

These little plaques were made to decorate furniture like beds, couches and chairs. And even though ivory was a very precious material to the Assyrian kings, the artists did not leave their surfaces plain, as we see them now. They were once covered with gilding, and sometimes even inlaid with brightly colored semiprecious stones. You can still see some of this inlay in the ivory falcon-headed figure.

140 words



## **Stop 340 Ceiling from the Palacio de Altamira, 46.16**

NARRATOR: Look up. \*\* This magnificent gilded wooden ceiling was made in the late fifteenth century, for a tower in a nobleman's palace in Toledo, in central Spain. Its design helps tell the fascinating story of Spanish cultural history at that time.

Let's start with the central dome. Those flowing, interlocking geometric patterns are heavily inspired by Islamic art. Which isn't surprising – for many centuries up until this point, Christians, Jews and Muslims had lived fairly peacefully side by side in Spain. But in 1492, right around the time the ceiling was made, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella finally expelled the last Muslims from the country, and Spain became a staunch Catholic stronghold.

The Palace of Altamira belonged to the Cardenas family – their armorial shields appear on each wall panel. \* They were Catholics, and important members of Queen Isabella's court, so the ceiling contains Christian motifs as well as Islamic-inspired designs. Between the shields and the dome runs a border of little, gilded scallop shells, symbolizing St James the Apostle. \* The palace stood near a pilgrim route to St James's shrine in the city of Santiago de Compostela. So the ceiling manages to signal the family's religious piety, as well as their love of decorative, Islamic splendor.

208 words





## **Stop 330 Benvenuto Cellini, Cosimo I de' Medici, 75.2.16**

NARRATOR: At first glance, you'd be forgiven for thinking this was a Roman emperor. With his head turned commandingly, and cloak folded back to reveal a breastplate decorated with lion and eagle heads, he projects a sense of imperial authority.

But actually, this is a sixteenth century Italian Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici, who ruled the powerful Italian city-state of Florence. He commissioned this portrait bust from the celebrated sculptor Benvenuto Cellini. While presenting the Duke as a Roman leader, with all the connotations of strength that implied, Cellini also individualized the portrait. The Duke wears the emblem of the prestigious chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece – it's the little hanging sheep just below the center of his breastplate. \* Cellini also paid attention to his client's physical appearance, recording even his facial moles and slightly misaligned eyes. Perhaps this was a little too much realism for the Duke – the bust was never finished, and in fact if you look at the left side of his face, you can see little holes in his cheek made by the sculptor's caliper, or measuring instrument, which were never filled in.

187 words

**Stop 331 Panel with a Vase of Flowers,  
2005.93**

NARRATOR: Every detail in this panel, down to the delicate petals of its tulips and roses, was made with the exacting Italian technique of *pietra dura*, meaning “hard stone”. Each different colored form in the design was painstakingly cut and inlaid into the background of black marble. The stones used in this panel were chosen for their value as well as their rich colors. The gold-colored handles and decorations on the green vase are made from golden chalcedony. Among them, you’ll see small, orange and blue forms meant to resemble gemstones. \* These are made from translucent carnelian backed with foil to make them glow, and from precious blue lapis lazuli.

In the city of Florence, the ruling Medici family, who were tremendous patrons of the arts, established a workshop that specialized in *pietra dura* work – it still exists today. This panel was made there in the early seventeenth century, for the chapel of a Medici royal villa outside Florence.

159 words

**Stop 318 Pierre Gole, Cabinet on Stand,  
47.20.2a-b**

NARRATOR: This sumptuously decorated cabinet was almost certainly created for the French royal household. It was made by Pierre Gole, cabinetmaker to the French monarchy, and dates from around 1650, when the great king Louis XIV had just begun his reign, determined to make his court the most radiant and splendid that Europe had ever seen.

The cabinet, designed to hold precious items such as jewelry, small artworks and documents, is made from costly, imported ebony wood. Its surface is covered with finely carved biblical scenes from the Old Testament – if you look carefully, you can find David with the head of the giant Goliath at his feet. \* There are also scenes of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon, and along the top frieze, Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea. \* Such instances of leadership were carefully chosen to reflect and underline the power and virtue of the French monarchy in whose palace the cabinet was designed to be seen. And when the central doors were opened, a further display of magnificence appeared, in the form of an intricate classical space decorated with gilt bronze figures, acting the role of the Judgment of Solomon.

198 words

## **Stop 450 Nymphenburg House Altar, 2013.30**

**NARRATOR:** In the center of this group of porcelain figures is Christ on the cross. Both he and the two mourning figures of St John and the Virgin Mary are beautifully modeled, with a great sense of energy and theatricality. The mourners' twisting bodies and swirling drapery seems to echo the turbulent grief they feel as they look up at Christ. The figures are by Franz Anton Bustelli, one of the finest porcelain modelers in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. They were produced at the royal Nymphenburg porcelain factory, outside Munich, Germany.

The figures are part of a house altar, made for private worship within a home, or perhaps an archbishop's residence. The cabinet, which was specially designed for the purpose, has doors which open on its top surface to reveal an altar stone for the communion host and chalices to be placed. And the frieze below the bottom drawer pulls out to become a kneeler for prayer.

155 words

**Stop 250 Vincennes Tureen and Stand,  
2016.4a-c**

NARRATOR: Picture an enormously long dining table in the elegant dining room of a French palace or nobleman's chateau in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. On it, you might find arranged a huge porcelain service of dishes of all kinds – which might include a supremely elegant tureen like this one.

At this time, it was the custom to serve dinner “à la Française”, or “in the French style”. This meant that the whole meal was presented at once, with the table covered with dishes containing hors d'oeuvres, soup, fish, meat, vegetables, so that guests could help themselves to whatever they pleased.

Since one's whole porcelain dinner service was out on display, its pieces were intended to delight and impress. This tureen and its stand were made at the Vincennes porcelain manufactory, set up in 1740 in a disused royal palace just outside Paris. Much of its wares were created for the court, and the decorative scheme of little bunches of flowers were the factory's most common pattern up to the time of the French Revolution in 1789.

174 words



### **Stop 361 Martin Carlin Commode, 1931.145**

NARRATOR: This splendid commode is a fusion of the highest quality European and Asian artistry and craftsmanship. Made in Paris in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by the master cabinetmaker Martin Carlin, the commode has intricate gilt-bronze decorations in the classical style then very fashionable. They frame lacquer panels imported from Japan, showing scenes of beautiful landscapes and little pavilions from which the dramatic trees and mountains could be enjoyed. Such panels would have been extremely rare in Europe at this time, since Japan was then closed to almost all western contact and trade.

Such a rare and extremely costly piece of furniture must have been commissioned for a very special client. And indeed, Carlin's work was greatly sought-after by the French royal family and also by Madame du Barry, King Louis XV's powerful and influential mistress. This commode may possibly have been made for her splendid apartments.

147 words

### **Stop 370 Pierre Langlois, Strawberry Hill Commode, 1985.58a-b**

NARRATOR: The story of this commode, made in the mid eighteenth century, has several fascinating threads. Created in London by a French furniture-maker, it has exuberant, flame-like ormolu or gilt-bronze leaves curling up its outer edges that are a perfect example of the Rococo style then fashionable in England and France. Its elegant front panels traveled much further. Cut from a Chinese lacquered screen, they were heated and molded to conform to the commode's curved form. Asian art was much admired in England at this time. And since Europeans had not managed to replicate the complex lacquer-making process, they often reused imported Asian pieces in this way.

The final and most flamboyant strand of our story is Horace Walpole, for whom the commode was made. An English politician, connoisseur of art and antiquities, and author of the first-ever spine-chilling Gothic novel, Walpole commissioned the commode for his house, Strawberry Hill. Among its eccentric glories was a gallery designed in the gothic style, lavishly decorated with gold-framed portraits, rich red wallcovering and eclectic furnishings including this commode, with French and Italian vases displayed on its top.

180 words

## **Stop 455 Meissen, Baluster Vase and Cover, 2015.66a-b**

NARRATOR: This graceful vase was made in Germany in the early eighteenth century – a key moment in the history of porcelain. Invented and raised to an artform in China, it was an incredibly expensive and sought-after commodity in the west, its manufacture cloaked in a veil of mystery.

From the seventeenth century, Asian porcelain became all the rage in Europe, where craftsmen tried – and failed – to make it themselves. Finally, in 1709, a German alchemist named Boettger discovered the secret. His patron, King Augustus “The Strong” of Saxony and Poland, established a royal porcelain manufactory at Meissen, near Dresden, where this vase was made.

Meissen wares were soon sought-after across Europe. Meissen pieces often featured Asian-inspired designs, like those we see on this vase. And King Augustus built a little “Japanese Palace” for himself, which he filled with porcelain from China and Japan, and pieces from his own Meissen factory, such as this important vase, made for him and decorated in imitation of Asian pieces.

164 words

## **Stop 380 Fabergé Tea Table and Tea Set**

**NARRATOR:** Imagine the elegance of a tea party around this table! Both the table and its glamorous silver-gilt tea set are the work of the celebrated Peter Carl Fabergé, favorite luxury manufacturer of the Russian imperial family. This set was owned by the Grand Duke and Duchess Kirill, cousins of the Tsar who fled the Revolution, and lived in exile in France, taking the tea table with them.

The table and tea set date from around the turn of the twentieth century, when the Russian royal family lived in considerable luxury. Made from Russian karelian birch, known for its rich, burlled natural patterning, the table is finished with little silver gilt decorations in the Empire style. At this time, it was fashionable for ladies to serve tea to their family or guests themselves – once it had been set up by a servant, of course. So we can picture the Grand Duchess pouring water from the kettle, with its little spirit lamp heater, into the teapot to the left, and passing the sugar bowl with its graceful swan handles that match the other accessories.

182 words





## **Stop xxx Auguste Rodin, The Three Shades**

**NARRATOR:** A terrible pressure bears down on these three figures – which are, in fact, a single figure repeated three times and gathered into a group. Their heads and shoulders, incredibly expressive, form an almost horizontal line, and their bodies curve inward, conveying a sense of utter hopelessness.

The French sculptor Auguste Rodin meant the figures to represent shades, or souls of the damned. The figures were intended to stand at the top of a monumental doorway for a museum in Paris. He called the doorway the Gates of Hell, and worked on its design for more than twenty years. It was inspired by the Italian Renaissance poet Dante's vision of the underworld, and the Three Shades represented Dante's figures who point to an inscription at the entry to hell, reading "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here". Some of Rodin's finest, freely imagined, and most emotional work belonged to this project. For the last seventeen years of his life, he began remaking figures from the Gates of Hell as much larger, freestanding sculptures, such as this group, and "The Thinker" that you may have seen in the front courtyard here at the museum.

192 words

