



THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM

Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery

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“GEORGE DEEM: THE ART OF ART HISTORY” OPENS APRIL 11

(Boston, Massachusetts, March 27, 2012) “George Deem: The Art of Art History” opens to the public at the Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery of the Boston Athenæum on April 11, 2012. Deem, best known for his breathtakingly vivid re-workings of classic images from art history, died in 2008 at age 75, after a fifty-year career as a painter, spent almost entirely in New York City. The exhibition continues through September 1, 2012.

Organized by David B. Dearing, Susan Morse Hilles Curator of Paintings & Sculpture at the Boston Athenæum, with the cooperation of Deem’s estate, “George Deem: The Art of Art History” includes some 30 paintings in oil on canvas, wood panel, wood pallet, linen, and paper. It is the first important museum exhibition of Deem’s work since the artist’s death. The show focuses on the paintings Deem produced with inspiration from two of his favorite sources: the paintings of the seventeenth-century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer and those of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American artists, including Gilbert Stuart, John Singer Sargent, and Winslow Homer.

All artists rework the art of the past, at times imitating, at times extending, and at times rejecting the work of artists they admire. Deem moved the process of homage and change into uncharted territory. Art historian Robert Rosenblum has called Deem’s unconventional thematic choices “free-flowing [fantasy] about the facts and fictions of art history.” Writing in *ARTnews*, Robert Ayers praises Deem’s “unusual intelligence” and his acute awareness “of the artistic possibilities of his own and postmodern times.” Critic Holland Cotter notes the artist’s “uncannily faithful versions” of Old Master works which “establish an ongoing creative reciprocity

between past and present, and render distinctions of send-up and homage inseparable.”

“Deems’ towering technique,” writes Steve Starger in *Art New England*, “allows him to pull off what seems like an audacious act of ego: Imagine having the chutzpah to think you can ‘redo’ Da Vinci, Caravaggio, Thomas Cole, or Vermeer. Then imagine having the technique and imagination to pull it off. Deem has copious quantities of both.”

Midwestern origins

George Clayton Deem Jr. was born in 1932 in Decker, Indiana, where he grew up and often worked alongside his cantaloupe-farmer father. He attended Catholic parochial schools and the local high school before matriculating at nearby Vincennes University.



George Deem (1932-2008), *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher, Again*, 2005. Oil on canvas. Copyright Estate of George Deem/ARS, New York.

According to his *New York Times* obituary, Deem always knew he wanted to be an artist but found he mostly encountered art in churches. As a teenager, he spent time at a Benedictine abbey in Meinrad, Indiana, where a cousin was a monk. The cousin recognized Deem’s talents and urged his family to send him to Chicago for formal art training. In 1952, Deem enrolled in the widely-respected School of the Art Institute of Chicago, located within the leading midwestern art museum, whose galleries he visited every day.

Drafted into the army in 1953, Deem was stationed in the historic German university town of Heidelberg with its elegant Baroque and Rococo architecture. During his two years in service, he was able to visit many of Europe’s leading art centers, including Florence, Venice, Paris, and London. He returned to Chicago in 1955 to complete his studies at the Art Institute, where he studied with Paul Wiegardt, teacher of such leading post-war American artists as Leon Golub, Robert Indiana, and Claes Oldenburg. He also took numerous art history courses with the artist and art historian Kathleen Blackshear and adopted Helen Gardner’s classic survey text, *Art Through the Ages*, as a personal reference he would use for the rest of his career.

New York Career

Following his graduation in 1958, Deem moved to New York City where he remained for most of the rest of his life and career. He took a job in the display department of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and began to paint in earnest.

Deem's early New York paintings were, as he described it, "calligraphic images of cursive script"-- abstractions that resembled lines of old, illegible handwriting. They have been compared to the semi-calligraphic work of the American abstract artist Cy Twombly and to the lettering on ancient manuscripts.

Images began to appear with the "texts" in these works and gradually Deem returned to figural painting with what he called "Compositions with Illustrations." Deem wanted the images he used to be easily recognizable so he chose famous paintings by such European masters as Chardin, Millet, and Goya, or borrowed images of George Washington from iconic works by Emanuel Leutze or Gilbert Stuart.

In the early 1960s, when he began exhibiting in New York with artists like Larry Rivers, critics tend to class Deem with Rivers and other young New York painters as a "Pop" artist. "[W]hat soup cans were to Andy Warhol..." Dearing writes of these early critical assumptions in his catalogue essay, "famous paintings from the past were to George Deem."

Vermeer and "School of"

Fascinated by the two great artistic discoveries of the Renaissance, oil paint and one-point perspective, Deem lovingly re-imagined and re-organized masterworks he admired into entirely new paintings while, as his New York Times obituary put it, "uncannily recreating the style, the light, the brushstrokes, as well as the details of artists he loved."

In "Sargent Vermeer" (2007-08), included in the exhibition, one of many variations Deem painted on famous works by Vermeer, he removes the Dutch master's original models and replaces them with one of the young girls from John Singer Sargent's "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit," Sargent's famous canvas of 1882, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Deem also places a version of Sargent's painting in the background. In other variations, like "The Art of Painting" (2002), Deem eliminates human figures altogether. In still others ("The Red Chair" (2002)), he focuses on a single piece of furniture from Vermeer's original.

For many works playing on themes from American art, Deem sets the scene in a classic American schoolroom with rows of wood and cast-iron desks and blackboards. The “School of” in the title of many of these works is a play on the art historical term for a work that plays homage to an important master.

“This is *me*, in my schoolroom,” Deem wrote about one of his schoolroom paintings. “I can even tell you where I sat, it’s so close to historic reality... It was in this schoolroom that poetry, magic, sex--- *everything*--- developed in this quiet and inexpressive way.” In

works in the exhibition like “Hudson River School” (1995), “School of Sargent” (1986), and “School of Winslow Homer” (1986), Deem blends visual elements associated with leading 19th-century American artists with this autobiographical schoolroom image.



George Deem (1932-2008), *School of Sargent*, 1986. Oil on canvas. Private Collection. Copyright Estate of George Deem/ARS, New York.

A reputation that has defied classification

Deem’s work has proved difficult to pin down. He has been classified as a Pop artist, a Figurative Realist, a Deconstructionist, a Proto-Post Modernist, a Post-Modernist, and even as a Post-Post-Modernist. His fragmentation and re-blending of art history has been called quotation, paraphrase, collage, montage, and appropriation. Although he began his New York career during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, his paintings seem to have affinities with work by “appropriation” artists a generation or so younger, including Sherrie Levine, Yasumasa Morimura, and Cindy Sherman.

The thirty paintings in the Boston Athenæum exhibition, dating from 1970 to 2008, span a broad range of Deem’s most important themes and explorations of art history.

They will offer one of the best opportunities ever for viewers to judge Deem's place for themselves.

A fully-illustrated, 77-page catalogue with an essay by Dr. Dearinger accompanies the show.

About the Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery:

Located on the first floor of the Boston Athenæum's National Historic Landmark building at 10½ Beacon Street in the heart of Beacon Hill, Boston, Massachusetts, the Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery is the Athenæum's main public exhibition space. It is within walking distance of the Government Center and Park Street MBTA stations. Parking is available in a commercial lot across from the building and in the Boston Common Parking Garage, under the Boston Common and accessible from Charles Street.

The Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery is open to the public from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday; from 9:00 am to 7:30 pm on Monday and Wednesday; and from 9:00 am to 3:30 pm on Saturday. Admission to special exhibitions in the Calderwood Gallery is free to members; \$5.00 for non-members. The Calderwood Gallery and the rest of the Boston Athenæum building are closed on major holidays.

About the Boston Athenæum:

Founded in 1807, the Boston Athenæum is Boston's first cultural institution. It combines an art museum, with a public exhibition gallery and collections of paintings, sculpture, prints, drawings, photographs, and decorative arts; a leading research and membership library; and a civic forum including lectures, readings, panel discussions, and other events. A cultural innovator and catalyst for more than two centuries, the Athenæum was one of the three founders of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and served as the inspiration for the Boston Public Library, the first municipally-supported library in North America.

The Athenæum's overseers and members have included some of America's greatest literary figures, among them Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Amy Lowell, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and such leading politicians as Presidents John Quincy Adams and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the legendary statesman Daniel Webster, and Senator Edward M. Kennedy. The Athenæum's National Historic Landmark building

George Deem at Boston Athenæum

at 10½ Beacon Street on Boston's Beacon Hill houses collections of international importance, among them the largest surviving portion of the library of President George Washington. It holds exhibitions in its Norma Jean Calderwood Gallery and public events, lectures, panel discussions, concerts, and readings around the year. Information about membership, programs, and hours can be found at www.bostonathenaeum.org.

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