

Norton Simon Museum For Immediate Release

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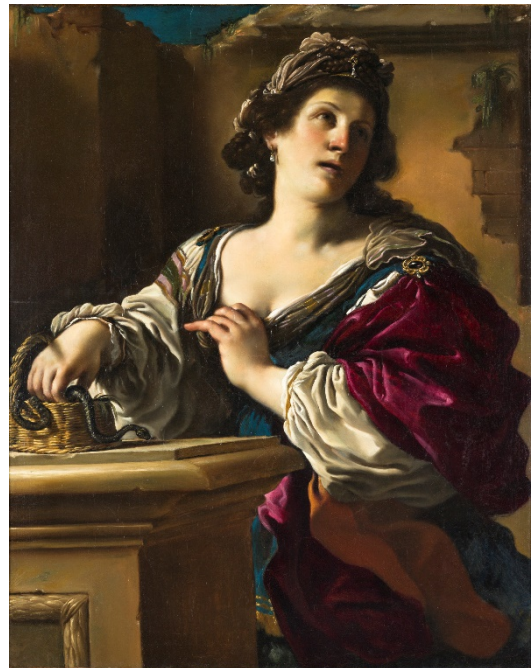
The Expressive Body: Memory, Devotion, Desire (1400–1750)

April 16 – September 6, 2021

Pasadena, CA—The Norton Simon Museum presents *The Expressive Body: Memory, Devotion, Desire (1400–1750)*, an exhibition that examines the ways in which the human form has provoked powerful responses, from the physiological to the mystical. In the early modern period—that is, the centuries following the Middle Ages—works of art were thought to have such power that they affected the viewer physically. From erotic paintings produced for wealthy patrons to venerated statues of the wounded Christ installed in local chapels, representations of the body stimulated visceral and often self-reflexive reactions of desire, compassion or aversion.

Culled from the Norton Simon’s collections, the more than 60 artworks presented in the exhibition include paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures from throughout Europe and Latin America, some of which have rarely been exhibited. The exhibition is on view in the Norton Simon Museum’s exhibition galleries on the lower level from April 16 through September 6, 2021.

The Expressive Body is organized around two major themes: “Love and Suffering” and “Accessing the Divine.” Within these sections are art objects that were created to be experienced in multisensory ways, including sculptures meant to be caressed, prints that were handled and even sacred images that were



Guercino (Italian, 1591–1666)
Suicide of Cleopatra, c. 1621
Oil on canvas
46 x 36-3/4 in. (116.8 x 93.3 cm)
The Norton Simon Foundation

kissed (although not permitted today in a museum setting). Indeed, medical theory during this era suggested that even gazing at representations of beautiful lovers could have physical consequences, leading to the conception of handsome and healthy children, whereas spiritual practice could involve meditating on the portrayal of a tortured martyr in order to empathetically feel his or her torment.

The exhibition's introductory section explores the notion of "The Body and the Senses," providing context for the role of the body in perceiving art in the period. Included is Jusepe de Ribera's fascinating painting *The Sense of Touch* from c. 1615–16. Seated at a wooden table, a blind man uses his hands to thoughtfully observe a carved head; a painting rests beside him, unexamined. By depicting the sense of touch in this way, Ribera engages with a major debate in the period over the merits of sculpture versus painting. Sculpture seems to be the victor here, since it can be perceived by both touch and sight, and is therefore the more accessible and verifiable of the arts. Ribera's naturalistic rendering of the sculpture, however, also makes a case for the virtuosity of painting. The artist uses paint to create the effects of texture and weight, emphasizing the man's wrinkled hands as they hold the bust. Through vision the painting appeals to the sense of touch, inviting viewers to imagine the sculpture's smooth contours under their own fingertips.

The theme of love and suffering has long been explored by artists. In Francesco Trevisani's *Apelles Painting Campaspe* from 1720, the artist blurs the line between real and represented bodies in his depiction of Apelles, the favorite painter of Alexander the Great, who painted a beautiful portrait of Campaspe, the ruler's mistress. As the apocryphal story goes, the artist's representation was so flattering that Alexander chose the painting over Campaspe herself. This clever interpretation, which would have amused 18th-century Roman patrons, makes an argument for the beguiling power of painting.

Also in this section is Guercino's dramatic *Suicide of Cleopatra* from around 1621. This large painting depicts a moment of despair for the powerful queen, but like many images of this subject, the painting has erotic undertones. Guercino emphasizes the drama of the moment through the dynamic pose of the Cleopatra's body, and he highlights her beauty with strong contrasts of light and dark. The soft lushness of her garments adds to the tactile nature of the painting, and contrasts with the perception of the sharp pain of the asp's bite.

Religious images likewise had palpable effects, but to devotional ends. In the "Accessing the Divine" section, visitors will encounter the *Head of Christ* from 18th-century Mexico, a sculpture that invites worshippers to meditate on the physicality of Christ's pain, brutally represented by his lacerated flesh and his lips parted in agony, subtly exposing delicately carved teeth. These details become all the more arresting in their three-dimensionality, mimicking the scale and appearance of a human head, and

making the representation of the suffering Christ feel inescapably real. Polychrome sculptures like this one were common, but they caused anxiety among some religious reformers who feared that the sculptures would prompt too much empathy in viewers, leading them to treat the inert representations as living idols.

A more tender representation of Christ can be found in Baciccio's *Saint Joseph and the Infant Christ* from around 1670–85. The artist represents the strong familial bond between the baby Jesus and his earthly father, Joseph, which was unusual, since such scenes of parental affection typically involved the Madonna and Child. Baciccio brilliantly portrays the recognizably human gesture of a baby reaching up to the face of his parent. The act of touching is a central component of this image—we can imagine the scratchiness of Joseph's beard in Christ's hands, or the weight of the baby in Joseph's arms. Though the painting depicts a human moment between father and child, the monumentality of the figures reminds the viewer of the baby's divine nature.

When presented together, the objects in *The Expressive Body: Memory, Devotion, Desire (1400–1750)* reveal the historical potency of the represented body to move the mind through the flesh, and they invite us to examine our own responses to these works today. The exhibition is organized by Assistant Curator Maggie Bell and is on view in the Museum's lower level exhibition galleries from April 16 through September 6, 2021. A series of events and programs will coincide with the exhibition.

About the Norton Simon Museum

The Norton Simon Museum is known around the world as one of the most remarkable private art collections ever assembled. Over a 30-year period, industrialist Norton Simon (1907–1993) amassed an astonishing collection of European art from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and a stellar collection of South and Southeast Asian art spanning 2,000 years. Modern and Contemporary Art from Europe and the United States, acquired by the former Pasadena Art Museum, also occupies an important place in the Museum's collections. The Museum houses more than 12,000 objects, roughly 1,000 of which are on view in the galleries and gardens. Two temporary exhibition spaces feature rotating installations of artworks not on permanent display.

Location: The Norton Simon Museum is located at 411 W. Colorado Blvd. at Orange Grove Boulevard in Pasadena, Calif., at the intersection of the Foothill (210) and Ventura (134) freeways. For general Museum information, please call (626) 449-6840 or visit nortonsimon.org. **Hours:** The Museum is open Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from noon to 5 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is closed on Tuesday. **Admission:** General admission is \$15 for adults and \$12 for seniors. Members, students with I.D., and patrons age 18 and under are admitted free of charge. Admission is free for everyone on the first Friday of every month from 5 to 8 p.m. All public programs, unless stated otherwise, are free with admission. The Museum is wheelchair accessible. **Parking:** Parking is free but limited, and no reservations are necessary. **Public Transportation:** Pasadena Transit stops directly in front of the Museum. Please visit <http://pasadenatransit.net> for schedules. The MTA bus line #180/181 stops in front of the Museum. The Memorial Park Station on the MTA Gold Line, the closest Metro Rail station to the Museum, is located at 125 E. Holly St. at Arroyo Parkway. Please visit www.metro.net for schedules.