Gifts and Acquisitions

Jan Asselijn, *The Tiber River with the Ponte Molle*

Jan Asselijn was a major figure in the Dutch Italianate tradition. After his artistic training in Amsterdam in the mid-1630s, he travelled via France to Rome to live with a group of Dutch and Flemish artists known as the *Schilders-bent*. These artists focused their attention on scenes of everyday life, as well as views of the Roman *campagna*. Asselijn sought to fuse these two realms by depicting ordinary people going about their daily activities near Roman buildings, bridges, and ruins from antiquity.

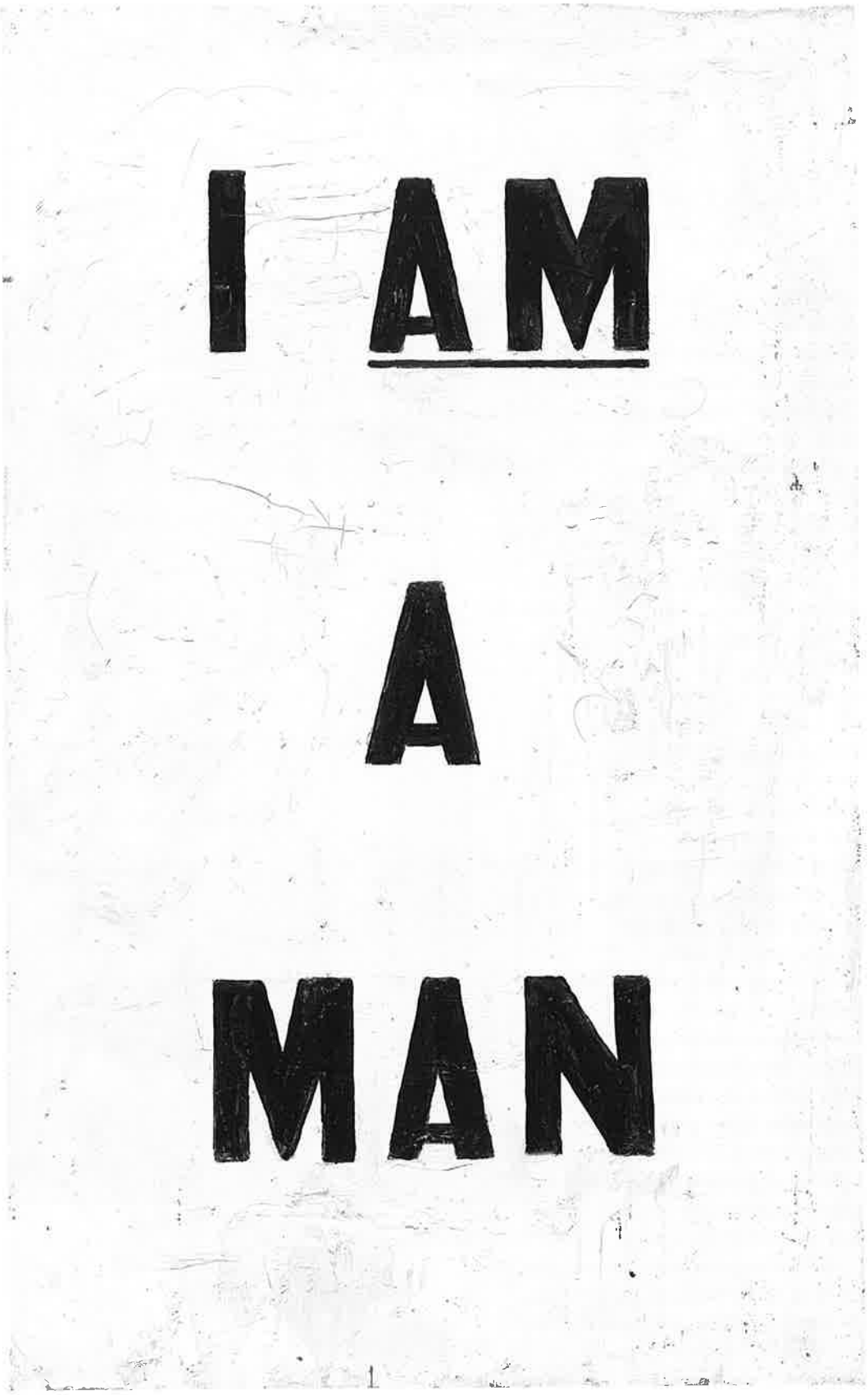
Asselijn often joined his colleagues on excursions into the countryside near Rome to make drawings, which he executed with brown pen and wash to capture the effects of light and shadow. After Asselijn left Rome in the early 1640s he continued to use these drawings as inspiration for subsequent drawings and paintings. On his return trip north he stopped for a while in Lyon, where he married, and in Paris, where he worked on a series of paintings for the Hôtel Lambert. When he eventually settled in Amsterdam in 1647 he found a thriving demand for his evocative Italianate scenes.

Asselijn's greatest period of activity as a painter was during this latter part of his career, the very years in which he executed this radiant painting of the Ponte Molle as it crosses the Tiber River. Characteristic of paintings from his Amsterdam period, Asselijn freely adapted the architectural and topographical elements of the setting to enhance the pictorial and atmospheric effects he sought to achieve. For example, he depicted the bridge as having a round tower at its northern end instead of the large pier-like structure that actually stood there. He also reversed the north-south orientation of the bridge. The rhythmic shadows on the arches of the bridge and the golden light spreading across the sky suggest that the scene is set in the late afternoon, an impossibility given his view from the southern bank of the river.

The Ponte Molle, also known as the Milvian Bridge, spanned the Tiber River just north of Rome. Forming part of the Via Flaminia, which linked Rome to Florence, this bridge was the principal access to Rome from the north. The Milvian Bridge gained great fame as the site of Emperor Constantine's decisive battle against Maxentius in AD 312, after which the emperor converted to Christianity. For Asselijn, however, this historic event was of less significance than the bridge's picturesque character and the way it evoked the quiet beauty of the Roman countryside. Shepherds and travelers along the riverbank activate the lower reaches of the landscape, while a well-dressed gentleman at the right gestures to a boatman whose small cargo vessel passes through one of the bridge's arches. The vivid accents of light falling on these foreground figures helps emphasize their subtle but important presence in the scene.

In excellent condition, this luminous painting, with a long and distinguished provenance, adds an important dimension to the Gallery's Dutch collection, which has no other work by this master. Its acquisition was made possible by the Florian Carr Fund, the New Century Fund, and the Nell and Robert Weidenhammer Fund. • Arthur Wheelock, *Curator, Northern Baroque Paintings*

Jan Asselijn, *The Tiber River with the Ponte Molle*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, the Florian Carr Fund, the New Century Fund, and the Nell and Robert Weidenhammer Fund



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, 1988, oil and enamel on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund and Gift of the Artist, © Glenn Ligon

Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am A Man)*

Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) grew up in the Bronx, attended the Walden School in Manhattan on a scholarship, and graduated from Wesleyan University in 1982. He went on to participate in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in 1985, known at that time for its language-based pedagogical approach and as a stronghold for social art history.

Ligon has come to prominence for his intertextual works that *re*-present excerpts from American history and culture through his choice of found sources (literature, Afro-centric coloring books, and photographs). In a conceptual act, Ligon changes his chosen subject's original medium to dislodge conventional narratives of slavery, the civil rights movement, and politics for contemporary audiences. The discursive effects of Ligon's work release a powerful mix of American legacies and racial and gender-oriented struggles for the Self, leading viewers to consider the complex, unfixed nature of representation.

The Gallery recently acquired Ligon's breakthrough painting *Untitled (I Am A Man)*, 1988—just such a representation, a signifier, of the actual signs carried by 1,300 striking African American sanitation workers in Memphis, made famous in Ernest Withers' 1968 photographs. To protest low wages and unsafe working conditions, the striking sanitation workers took up the slogan "I Am A Man," an evocative variant on the first line of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which read, "I am an invisible man." The Memphis strikers asserted their presence, making themselves visible in standing up for their rights. The strike attracted considerable media attention, widening in scope to involve leaders of the civil rights movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who marched with the strikers. While in Memphis, King delivered his "I've

Been to the Mountaintop" speech on April 3, 1968. He was assassinated the next day. The strike ended on April 16, 1968.

Untitled (I Am A Man) is the first work in which Ligon included a text. While he preserved the original black-on-white of the strikers' signs, Ligon painted the black letters in eye-catching enamel to call attention to a black figure ("Man") as a text, replacing the human form in figurative painting. Ligon would continue to use "blackness" as a trope for legibility and both personal and collective experience. The surface of *Untitled (I Am A Man)*, made rough and cracked by the mixing of oil and enamel paints, indexes the process of history as it changes in meaning and context, revealing its layered nature over time. Ligon actually painted this work on top of another painting, evident in the colored paint and around the edges of the canvas. The rough texture of its surface reflects the scars and struggles of the work's great subject and the artist's own process. • Molly Donovan, *Associate Curator of Modern Art*

James McNeill Whistler, *The Palace; white and pink*

When James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) settled his legally successful but financially disastrous lawsuit with John Ruskin, he was at a low point in his life. He leapt at a commission offered by the Fine Art Society to go to Venice and produce a series of twelve etchings. In fact Whistler fell in love with Venice: the gothic palaces, many falling into decay, the romantic backwaters and hidden canals, the exotic variety of colors, the constant reflections from water and shimmering light, the atmospheric dusk, and the nights with points of light. He tried to capture all these with pastels, much more than with oils or watercolors. Whistler's Venice pastels rejuvenated him. They have remained a high point of his art, and of nineteenth-century impressionism.

James McNeill Whistler, *The Palace; white and pink*, 1879/1880, pastel and black chalk, National Gallery of Art, Paul Mellon Fund and Patrons' Permanent Fund

After a century and a quarter in private hands, *The Palace; white and pink*, still in its original frame, came up for auction last May. This magnificent pastel of the Ca' Da Mosto palazzo, famous for its Veneto-Byzantine style, is ravishingly beautiful, jewel-like, on the rough oatmeal paper that Whistler favored. To capture the shimmering scene Whistler used black chalk to draw only outline hints in a strongly interlocked composition of architectural forms and gondolas. Then he raided every variety of color in his pastel box to create touches of different hues, brilliant dots and dashes like tiny explosions of pure color across the scene, enlivening it with impressionist movement and sparkle. The colors are bright and, remarkably, the medium has remained powdery and substantial, appearing as if it were drawn yesterday.

The title of this pastel is Whistler's own, typically focusing the viewer on the artistic aspects of the work, rather than its topographical representation. The warm gold frame was designed and chosen by Whistler to suit the tones of the work. Also remarkable is the pastel's provenance: it was purchased from Whistler between 1881 and 1904 by Louisine Havemeyer. Mrs.

Giovanni Antonio Fornari, *Holy-Water Stoup*, c. 1765–1775, silver, lapis lazuli, gilt bronze, and copper, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund, photo courtesy of Galerie J. Kugel, Paris

Havemeyer sold or gave Charles Lang Freer her other Whistler pastels, which are now part of the Freer Gallery's collection. Yet, *The Palace; white and pink* remained, by descent, in the Havemeyer family until last spring. The Gallery's first Whistler pastel of Venice, *The Palace; white and pink* is truly one of the greatest. • Andrew Robison, *Andrew W. Mellon Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings*

Giovanni Antonio Fornari, *Holy-Water Stoup*

This spectacular masterpiece is stamped throughout with the marks "AF" of Giovanni Antonio Fornari, who was received into the guild of Roman goldsmiths in 1760. His earliest known dated work, from 1762, is a smaller holy-water stoup in a private collection; a monstrance in the cathedral of Assisi is dated 1776. Elected an officer of the guild in 1783 and 1786, Fornari served as their chamberlain from 1787 to 1791. The source of the design, however, remains unknown.

The central medallion, stamped "FORNARI ROMA," depicts the preaching of Saint John the Baptist. Below it, the golden receptacle for holy water shows the function of this grand work of art, which is believed to have belonged to Luigi Braschi Onesti (1745–1816), nephew and adoptive son of Pope Pius VI, because Braschi's coat of arms as duke of Nemi appear on a medallion affixed to the gold-tooled leather case for the stoup.

Braschi's palace, on the Piazza Navona, is now the Museum of Rome. The inventory of his collection is 1,400 manuscript pages long and, so far, only the lists of paintings and classical antiquities have been examined.

Braschi's treasures were housed in palaces in Rome and Nemi that were sacked by Napoleon's soldiers in 1798, even though the year before Braschi

had negotiated the Treaty of Tolentino, which required the papacy to yield hundreds of works of art to France. When French forces occupied Rome, Braschi and the pope were ordered to leave. Braschi reached Venice while the French were selling off his collections; his uncle died in exile in Valence, France, in 1799. Within ten years, however, Braschi defied the new pope's threat of excommunication for collaborating with Napoleonic rule and accepted an appointment as mayor of Rome. He proceeded to win damages for his losses during the war.

Braschi was awarded his ducal title in 1786. Consequently, that year was proposed as the date for the stoup, but its style suggests that it was not created so late in the century, when the taste for neo-classicism had already brought restraint to the turbulent compositions of earlier years. Instead, the composition was clearly created in the *barochetto* or "Little Baroque" of the middle decades of eighteenth-century Rome. As the diminutive term suggests, this late manifestation of Baroque style is characterized by asymmetrical designs, delicate forms, and whimsical arrangements of figures—all of which contribute to dissolving the strongly calibrated diagonals and unified surging power typical of seventeenth-century concepts.

With its resplendent commingling of silver, gilt bronze, and lapis lazuli, this magnificent relief is the Gallery's first major example of Baroque silver and hardstone. Together with the copper repoussé relief by Angelo de' Rossi (c. 1700) and the marble relief by Pierre Monnot (c. 1710), it completes a comprehensive representation of Italian eighteenth-century sculptures of contrasting and sumptuous materials. Few examples of great Italian silver survive. Most are in churches, so the purchase of this rare masterpiece, made possible by the Patrons' Permanent Fund, is truly exceptional. • Mary L. Levkoff, *Head of the Department of Sculpture and Decorative Arts*

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Benedetto Bordone, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*

Benedetto Bordone, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, 1499, bound volume with 172 woodcut illustrations, National Gallery of Art, Florian Carr Fund

Because of its inherent quality and fundamental relation to Italian Renaissance art, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is one of the most important volumes recently added to the Gallery's collection of fine illustrated books.

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, translated in English editions as *Poliphilo's Strife of Love in a Dream*, is one of the most complex and influential creations of Venetian humanism. Finished in 1499, it is the only illustrated book printed by Aldus Manutius, the greatest publisher in Renaissance Venice. Apparently written by Francesco Colonna, a Dominican friar, the story tells of Poliphilo's pursuit of Polia, the love who had rejected him. It unfolds in a series of dreams, across a landscape of fantastic imagery that invokes ancient mythology and interprets antique forms.

Aside from the elegance of its design and the refinement of its typography, the reason for the book's importance and influence is, above all, its ravishing illustrations: 172 woodcuts of consonant inventiveness and sophistication. The

artist is most likely the Paduan and Venetian miniature painter and woodcut designer Benedetto Bordone. These illustrations, with their perfectly constructed perspectives and exquisite drawing, bear comparison to the art of leading figures of the Renaissance. Indeed, the relationship between the book's woodcuts and the most advanced art of the time was reciprocal.

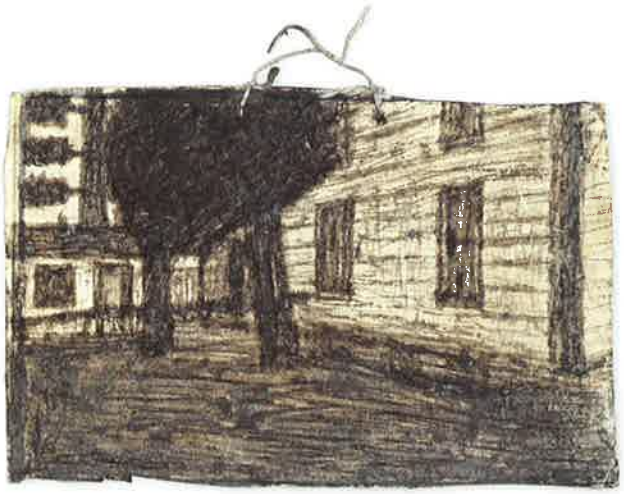
Contemporary paintings of secular subjects, especially in the schools of Venice and Ferrara, frequently refer to subjects and even specific imagery first presented in the *Poliphilus*. The most famous example is the woodcut of a sleeping nymph approached by a satyr, the inspiration for Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, and in turn Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, with echoes all the way through Édouard Manet's *Olympia* and numerous works by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Woodcuts of ancient processions and triumphs influenced Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini. Even more, the general vision of these illustrations, that stories of classical antiquity should be seen as peaceful, loving, real, and elegiac events in hospitable landscapes, encouraged the poetry of Venetian painting, culminating in the Gallery's great work by Bellini, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514. Other woodcuts, such as the first printed cross-section of a building, the first elevation, and the first picture of ancient Roman ruins, also give the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* an extraordinary place in the history of architecture. • Andrew Robison, *Andrew W. Mellon Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings*

James Castle, Drawings, Artists' Books, and Assemblages

A sooty mass of foliage hovers like a dust cloud in an unassuming drawing (opposite, center) by the American artist James Castle (1899–1977). The ground below is dark and furrowed, as if scraped repeatedly with the dull end of a stick. Scratchy lines delineate the siding of a building, and windows and a door punctuate the design. In the upper left, a vertical timber with three crossbars (perhaps an outsize electrical pole) towers above a smaller building. Castle's granular line—he was principally a draftsman—is deft and versatile. A piece of ordinary string looped through two perforations at the top allowed the artist to hang his picture as opportunity arose. This drawing, along with fifty equally captivating and wide-ranging works by Castle, was recently acquired by the Gallery with support from the James Castle Collection and Archive, the Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund, the Avalon Fund, the Cafritz Fund, the Eugene L. and Marie-Louise Garbáty Fund, and the Edward E. MacCrone Fund.

Castle's work has the semblance of reality but with conspicuous oddities: totems that crop up in landscapes, figures with furniture for heads, alphabets that flout accepted standards. While infinitely strange, his art is remarkably persuasive and conveys a knowingness that belies Castle's circumstances: he lived his entire life in rural Idaho, far from the mainstream art world and largely unaware of its developments. Because his parents were the local postmasters, floods of correspondence and mass-media publications passed through their home that doubled as a post office. Exposed to popular print culture through mail-order catalogues, newspapers, cartoons, church literature, farmers' almanacs, and magazines, Castle responded like frontline artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Ed Ruscha. He made quirky assemblages from cardboard and colored papers and appropriated images from comic books and advertisements. He was drawn to typography and language and was deeply invested in the making of artists' books. On rare occasions, he also looked to high art, including Johannes Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting*. Castle's drawing after the painting is included in this acquisition.

Deaf from birth, Castle not only lacked conventional spoken or written language but never learned to sign or lip read. Yet he evidently pined for language and understood its function (if not some words' meanings), filling his hand-drawn picture books with generic wavy lines—as if inscribing captions, imparting information, or scripting a narrative. His wonderfully tactile books are filled with arcane calendars and alphabets that incorporate Roman, Greek, and Cyrillic-inspired letters, modified to meet Castle's inventive ends. While his work may resonate with much of the advanced art of his time, it is singularly distinct and affecting. • Judith Brodie, *Curator of Modern Prints and Drawings*

James Castle, three untitled artist's books (upper left, center left, and bottom), two figure constructions (upper right), one untitled drawing (center right), National Gallery of Art, Gift of the James Castle Collection and Archive, and Acquisition with the Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund, the Avalon Fund, the Cafritz Fund, the Eugene L. and Marie-Louise Garbáty Fund, and the Edward E. MacCrone Fund

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