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Installation view of 'Caravaggio 2025.' NATIONAL GALLERY OF ANTIQUE ART/PALAZZO BARBERINI/ALBERTO NOVELLI AND ALESSIO PANUNZI; XOROSHO/ISTOCKPHOTO

The Best Art Exhibitions of 2025: Spectacle and Surprise

The year's finest shows ranged from ancient Roman sculpture to exemplary contemporary painters, and focused on such giants as Caravaggio, Van Gogh and Vermeer.

By Karen Wilkin

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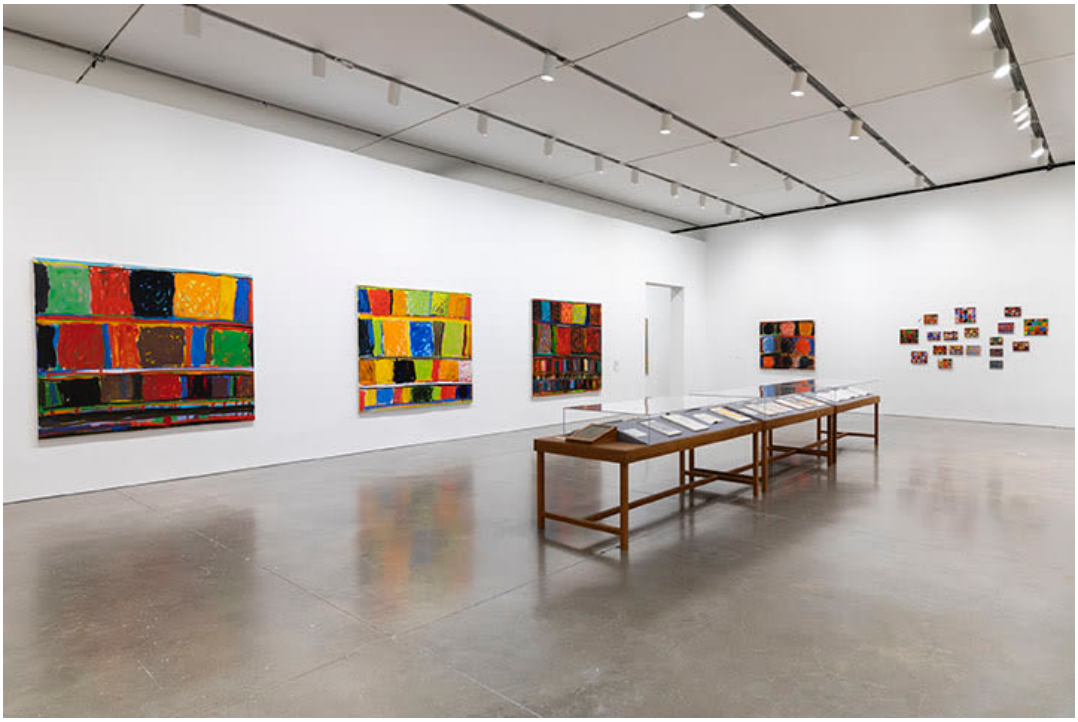
Most spectacular exhibition of the year? Arguably **“Caravaggio 2025”** at the Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Rome. Twenty-four paintings spanned the working life of the “bad boy” who died at age 38 in 1610, after reinventing conceptions of what a painting could be. The selection, informed by current research, included recently attributed and rarely seen paintings, such as the first version of the “Conversion of Saul,” and acclaimed ones, such as the wrenching “David With the Head of Goliath,” with the anguished face of the artist, eyes half closed, mouth open, as the head of the vanquished giant. Everything was chosen for relevance to Caravaggio’s decade in Rome and to his Roman patrons. Even we Caravaggio addicts learned a lot.

Van Gogh’s ‘The Yellow House (The Street)’ (1888). MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Ideas about another acclaimed "tortured artist" were enlarged by **"Van Gogh: The Roulin Family Portraits"** at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The postman Joseph Roulin and his wife, Augustine, became Van Gogh's principal friends during his stay in Arles. In 1888-89, Van Gogh painted 26 portraits of the Roulins and their three children. The MFA assembled 14 of these, contextualized by self-portraits, Japanese prints, works by artists Van Gogh admired, and paintings by Paul Gauguin, who joined his friend in the south toward the end of 1888. The family came vividly alive—we sensed Augustine's role as nurturing mother, as well as the cockiness of the older son. Translations of Joseph's letters to Van Gogh, hospitalized after the ear-cutting incident, were poignant testimony to their friendship.

Caillebotte's 'Paris Street, Rainy Day' (1877). ART RESOURCE, NY

At the Getty, Los Angeles, and then at the Art Institute of Chicago, **"Gustave Caillebotte: Painting Men"** celebrated the wealthy yachtsman, boat designer, soldier, philatelist, horticulturalist and accomplished painter who exhibited with his Impressionist friends and collected their work. Caillebotte chronicled his circle and his family of brothers, and depicted modern life and sport, painting with audacity and an emphasis on geometric underpinnings. Instead of Impressionism's usual female world of chic *Parisiennes* and ballet dancers, we encountered laborers, such as the hard-working, half-naked men in "Floor Scrapers" (1875) against the converging lines of the floorboards. The show was revelatory of Caillebotte the artist, his society and the challenges he issued to it.



Installation view of 'Stanley Whitney: How High the Moon.' MEL TAING

At the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, an exemplary selection of paintings, works on paper, and notebook studies in **“Stanley Whitney: How High the Moon”** traced the evolution of his signature, intensely colored grid paintings from 1972 to 2023. A “salon” of multiple smaller works introduced each section, enlarging on Mr. Whitney’s shift from gatherings of blunt, sometimes layered, rounded forms to the abutments of rectangles that have preoccupied him since the 1990s. A large, gestural 1972 painting attested to a road not taken, while records of his sojourns in Europe and Africa revealed the influence of architecture on abstract structure. The last, eye-testing gallery of recent work demanded and rewarded concentration. We discovered surprising color relationships, varied edges, nuanced paint application, shifting proportions and dislocations of apparently continuous space—a lot to look at.

Installation view of ‘Sean Scully: The Albee Barn, Montauk PARRISH ART MUSEUM

That also describes **"Sean Scully: The Albee Barn, Montauk,"** at the Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, N.Y., an account of the effect of the artist's 1982 residency at the Albee Foundation, on Long Island. Mr. Scully says that experiencing Montauk's expanse of sea, sky and beach was transformative, leading to small, intensely physical paintings on found pieces of wood that depend on collisions of differently proportioned colored stripes—a permutation of ideas he was already beginning to investigate. At the Parrish, more than a dozen of these Montauk paintings were followed by works made subsequently. Blocky "Wall of Light" paintings and stacked horizontal "Landline" works, made in the 2000s, traced the continuity and development of ideas first proposed in Montauk. So did "Tower" (2024), assembled from disjunctive panels of moody noncolors. In the context of the show, "Tower" became a grown-up, exploded version of a Montauk painting.

Vermeer's 'Mistress and Maid' (c. 1664-67). THE FRICK COLLECTION

For admirers of Golden Age Netherlandish painting, there was the small, perfect exhibition **"Vermeer's Love Letters"** at New York's Frick Collection, which united three celebrated paintings, with similar suggested narratives. The earliest, the Frick's "Mistress and Maid" (c. 1664-67)—the last painting acquired by Henry Clay Frick—isolates two large, half-length figures against a neutral ground. In "The Love Letter" (c. 1669-70, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), we are excluded from the room where a woman is interrupted at her music by the arrival of a letter. Kept at a distance, we become voyeurs. In "Woman Writing a Letter With Her Maid" (c. 1670-72, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin), the latest and most sturdily composed of the trio, we come close to the two women, while the rational geometry of a painting on the wall, the rug-covered table, the curtain, and the window define the interior, creating a light-drenched volume that contains the figures. The three paintings had never been exhibited side by side before. The combination was illuminating.

Equally illuminating is **"Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces From the Leiden Collection."** The collection of more than 220 paintings and drawings (and still growing) includes 17 Rembrandts from throughout his working life, remarkable works by his pupils and colleagues, a spectacular Jan Lievens self-portrait, and the only late Johannes Vermeer in private hands. Earlier this year, a selection of 75 works was shown in Amsterdam, part of the celebrations of the 750th anniversary of the city's founding. Now, that exhibition is at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Fla., through March 29, 2026. It's a dazzling assembly of portraits and self-portraits, scenes of everyday life, and the occasional religious or mythological theme. All this and a subtext of relationships among the leading artists of the period.

Garment from pontifical vestments (1619). THE FRICK COLLECTION

Most opulent exhibition? **"To the Holy Sepulcher: Treasures From the Terra Sancta Museum,"** at the Frick through Jan. 5, 2026. The show demonstrates the wealth and power of Catholic Europe in the 17th and 18th century, when the rulers of Spain, Portugal, France, the kingdom of Naples, a host of Italian cities, and the Holy Roman Emperors sent costly gifts to the church as substitutes for the arduous journey to Jerusalem—a collection known as the Treasure of the Custody of the Holy Land. It's hard to reconcile the magnificence of the gold and silver sanctuary lamps, jewel-studded altar furnishings, and heavily embroidered vestments on view with the fact that the Custody was founded and is maintained by Franciscans, bound by vows of poverty, but "Wow!"

Installation view of 'Myth & Marble,' featuring 'The Torlonia Nile.' FONDAZIONE TORLONIA, AGOSTINO OSIO

"Myth & Marble: Ancient Roman Sculpture From the Torlonia Collection," at the Art Institute of Chicago (and now at the Kimbell Art Museum through Jan. 25 before moving on to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), showcased the vast "collection of collections" assembled in the 19th century by a distinguished family of enthusiasts. The Torlonias, immigrants from France to Napoleon's Italy, became bankers to the Papal States and the Bonaparte family, acquiring immense wealth, an impressive real-estate portfolio and a string of noble titles. The first Roman Torlonia acquired important antique sculptures assembled by earlier collectors, with everything restored to perfection—no missing noses or limbless torsos. (A vigorous goat was dramatically refurbished by Gian Lorenzo Bernini.) We were offered both an overview of Roman sculpture of the Imperial period and insight into types of collecting from the 17th through the 19th century. We also received an exhaustive tutorial in the history of taste and of restorations executed to respond to that taste, with helpful diagrams for each exhibited work indicating what was old and what was added.