

## LEISURE &amp; ARTS

## OPERA



A scene from San Francisco Opera's production of 'Nixon in China.'

## Empowered Politics

## Nixon in China

Through July 3

## The Magic Flute

Through July 8

## Attila

Through July 1

San Francisco Opera

By DAVID LITTLEJOHN

San Francisco

Almost 25 years after its premiere in Houston and 40 years after the events it depicts, John Adams's first opera, "Nixon in China," opened in San Francisco earlier this month in a production far better than the Peter Sellars original.

It probably helps that the real-world events are that much further in the past. Back in 1987, many people still had strong opinions about Richard Nixon and his wife, Pat; aging Mao Tse-tung—as his name was transliterated then—and his power-hungry wife, Chiang Ch'ing; Henry Kissinger (who is still with us); and premier Chou En-lai. People also had strong opinions then about a new opera dealing with what still seemed yesterday's headlines, written in a thumping, eclectic and highly individualist style and showing both Nixon and Mao in a human, sympathetic light.

Today we can simply accept "Nixon in China" as one of the most powerful operatic scores of our time. The rapidly repeated chords and arpeggios (once dismissed as "minimalist") now seem a terrific way of driving a scene forward. They change keys endlessly, and transpose into lyric or thunderous orchestral outbursts, as called for by the character or plot. Since 1987, Mr. Adams has been a master at writing music to suit both the rhetoric and inner feelings of his characters, as well as grand, noisy spectacles like the arrival of the presidential jet in Beijing, an increasingly drunken banquet at the Great Hall of the People, and a production of Madame Mao's clunky agitprop ballet.

Erhard Rom's sets are simple, striking, imaginative and most often red. Act I is generally realistic—starting with the arrival of a full-size mock-up of a Boeing 707 onstage before chanting Chinese crowds. For the final act, six 21-foot-high pillar-boxes are rolled forward, bearing enlarged photographs of the historical characters. Their singing counterparts stand in front of them to express their final thoughts.

Baritone Brian Mulligan is in strong voice as Nixon and Chen-Ye Yuan is an excellent Chou En-lai. Simon O'Neill is unconvincing as a high tenor Mao, except in his softer and louder lines. Pat Nixon and Henry Kissinger are relatively thankless roles, but Maria Kanyova and Patrick Carfizzi perform them well. The vocal star is Hye Jung Lee ("I am the wife of Chairman Mao!"), who graduated from the company's Merola training program just two years ago.

I have never heard Mr. Adams's music sound better than it does here, with the excellent opera orchestra under the baton of conductor Lawrence Renes. Michael Cavanagh has directed his Vancouver Opera production with crowd power and intimate tact. Ian Robertson's throbbing, couplet-chanting chorus potentially represents the rest of China's

## Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"I'm not interested in the physics of parallel universes, professor; I just need to know if we can tax them."

(then) 800 million people.

"The Magic Flute," Mozart's final opera—is the most dramatically incoherent stage work he composed in the last 12 years of his short life. As Erik Tarloff once wrote, the libretto (by his friend and fellow-Mason, Emanuel Schikaneder) "pretends to comic hijinks when it's just crude, to sublimity when it's portentous, and to simplicity when it's vapid."

The reason to see the new San Francisco production—in addition to Mozart's occasionally sublime music—is the astonishing visual production by the Japanese-American artist Jun Kaneko. Mr. Kaneko listened to the Colin Davis recording a few hundred times, then made some 3,000 abstract paintings (mostly of lines—moving, straight and curving, wide and narrow—in bright primary and secondary colors, sometimes softening to pastel or darkening to gray). By digital means, he was able to keep all these lines growing, curling, exploding, and changing colors throughout the opera in time and in tune with the music. Tamino's Trial by Fire had him and Pamina walking past a wall of writing, ascending red and orange lines, preserved by his magic flute. The pseudo-Masonic "brotherhood" rituals of Sarastro and his fellows are usually quite tedious. But not here, thanks to Mr. Kaneko's brilliant setting and costumes.

Rory Macdonald conducts with a good ear for Mozart's musical styles, and Russian soprano Albina Shagimuratova (who had to learn the role in English, for company director David Gockley's slangy-modern translation) spins well through the Queen of the Night's show-off coloratura. Icelandic bass Kristinn Sigmundsson, as Sarastro, is the only other first-rate singer in the cast, though even he, on opening night, couldn't quite handle his lowest notes and was challenged by the new translation. The lovers (Alek Shrader and Heidi Stober) are adequate but not memorable, and Nathan Gunn's Papageno is a disappointment.

Quite appropriately, Mr. Kaneko received the most prolonged opening-night applause.

"Attila" (1846) ranks near the bottom of Verdi's 29 operas—and a lot of the blame must go to the original librettist, Temistocle Solera, who wrote the simple-minded, sentimental texts for several of Verdi's early works. But the score sounds like bad imitation-Verdi: the stock oom-pa-pa intros before every aria or ensemble; the orchestra bouncing along like a jolly organ-grinder, even when the singer is mouthing platitudes about my false lover, my lost homeland, suicide or revenge. Huge, identically garbed choruses mill mindlessly about, booming in near-unison the same bellicose or patriotic lines, over and over. Conductor Nicola Luisotti and chorus director Ian Robertson struggle heroically, with 135 people onstage. But there is only so much one can make of this muddled text and off-the-rack score. And they are fighting director Gabriele Lavia's and designer Alessandro Camera's 2011 La Scala conception.

Messrs. Lavia and Camera have set Act I (appropriately) in Aquileia in northern Italy, a town ravaged by Attila in 452; Act II (less appropriately) in the ruins of a 19th-century opera house; and Act III in a shabby 20th-century movie theatre, playing blurry, irrelevant scenes from a 1954 movie starring Jack Palance as Attila, while the hapless singers and chorus try to drag out the fifth-century plot in front of the tattered screen. Attila—an unmoving Ferruccio Furlanetto—never does invade Rome. He collapses on his knees at the sight of Samuel Ramey as the Pope—a five-minute role in which Mr. Ramey displays a wobble as wide as the Tiber, and Verdi placated the Vatican censors. The best singing is that of baritone Quinn Kelsey, a 2002 Merola program graduate, in the short but potent role of the Roman general Ezio.

Mr. Littlejohn writes about West Coast cultural events for the Journal.

## A CULTURAL CONVERSATION | With Mark Leonard

## Conservator Restored

By DANIEL GRANT

At the interview for his first job as an art conservator—at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the late 1970s—Mark Leonard brought his résumé and other papers that indicated he knew how to restore paintings, but he also brought his painting portfolio. Mr. Leonard had gone to Oberlin College with thoughts of being an artist, but in 1976 he earned a bachelor of arts degree in a multidisciplinary program involving studio art, art history and chemistry. From there, he earned a master's in art history and art conservation at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. A lot of art conservators have a studio-arts background—helpful because you might have to fill in an area where the paint has fallen off, for instance, or know how to mix paints to get a certain color. John M. Brealey, who was in charge of paintings conservation at the Met, took a look at the portfolio and pronounced the work "very good." But then he told the young applicant, "You can be a paintings restorer or a painter, but you can't do both."

For close to 30 years, Mr. Leonard followed Mr. Brealey's advice. But more recently he has proved his old boss wrong. Five or so years ago, Mr. Leonard started painting again, and last year he had a solo exhibition at Louis Stern Fine Arts in West Hollywood, Calif., at which 26 of the 28 drawings and paintings on display were sold. Come this December, other paintings will be on view at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. And, starting July 2, Mr. Leonard will start his new job as chief conservator at the Dallas Museum of Art, which he now refers to as his "day job."

"Brealey was right in his advice to me," Mr. Leonard said. "I was only able to follow one passion completely, and I wouldn't have been able to enjoy it as much if I had been pursuing another career at the same time." The job of a conservator "is to disappear, to humble yourself to the voice of the artist" whose work needs cleaning or mending, while the work of an artist is to "make your ego as visible as possible."

Mr. Leonard left the Met in 1983, joining and eventually heading the paintings conservation department at the J. Paul



Ken Rallin

Getty Museum in Los Angeles, from which he retired in 2010 to devote himself to full-time painting. During his last years at the Getty, "I became more comfortable with the back-and-forth of having another artist's work in my hands and then doing my own painting."

His own painting is geometric abstraction, with precious little resemblance to the Old Masters that had been the focus of his career. Well, maybe there is some resemblance. "From time to time, I've taken a photographic detail from an Old Master, say the

clouds that were done in the early 1820s by the British landscape artist John Constable. Mr. Leonard was very familiar with the Yale Center, as he had done conservation work on paintings in the overall collection while at the Met and the Getty. The Constables, which were donated to the Yale Center by philanthropist Paul Mellon, were intended to be studied rather than artworks to sell. "Constable was told that his clouds weren't realistic-looking," Mr. Leonard said, "so he spent a couple of summers in Hampstead ... just painting clouds."

## The job of a conservator is to disappear, while the artist makes his ego as visible as possible.

sleeve on a figure in a 17th-century Dutch painting, and blown it up, and what you see is a geometric abstraction," he said.

Still, his "weavings"—drawings and paintings consisting of criss-crossing lines on a grid in a range of colors, which were exhibited at Louis Stern Fine Arts—are quite unrelated to the stitching on any Dutchman's coat or shirt. To Mr. Leonard, the woven elements reflect things loved and lost in life, and one of those losses was a partner who died of AIDS in the 1980s.

The paintings that will be on display at the Yale Center for British Art were inspired by a series of 200 *plein-air* paintings of

Mr. Leonard's paintings, which bear titles such as "Constable Study IV" and "Constable Study IX," are still abstract geometric shapes that wouldn't be confused with Constable's own work, although the colors used are the same. "Mark's paintings look very different than Constable's," said Cassandra Albinson, the Yale Center's curator of paintings and sculpture, "but Mark was able to see an intensely structured element to Constable's paintings of clouds, which he has picked up on and used in his work."

"I was very taken by these cloud studies," Mr. Leonard said. And after he left the Getty, the

## ART

## Chinese Art From the PEM's Own Trove

## Fish, Silk, Tea, Bamboo: Cultivating an Image Of China

Through Jan. 31, 2013

## Perfect Imbalance: Exploring Chinese Aesthetics

Through Jan. 31, 2013

Peabody Essex Museum

By LEE LAWRENCE

Salem, Mass. Confront the difficult task while it is still easy," a verse in the Tao Te Ching advises; "accomplish the great task by a series of small acts." Two modest shows at the Peabody Essex Museum seem to have taken this sixth century B.C. wisdom to heart. "Perfect Imbalance" illustrates three recurring themes in Chinese art, using works from the Neolithic age to the 21st century, while "Fish, Silk, Tea, Bamboo" showcases pieces mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries that Chinese artists and artisans made for the European market.

Both draw from the museum's impressive collection of Chinese works. In addition to an 18th-century Chinese merchant's house that the PEM brought over and reassembled down to every last beam, brick, bed and basket, its collection includes some 7,000 pieces made for use in China as well as about 19,000 works made for export, ranging from ceramics, furniture and textiles to paintings and sculptures.

Yet the PEM currently devotes relatively little gallery space to Chinese art, though this stands to change in 2017 after it completes an expansion with 75,000 square feet of exhibition space. In the meantime, curators of Chinese art are showing that small can be highly effective, and that institutions often need look no further than their permanent collections for exhibition source material. The current installations feature 25 to 30 works and were independently conceived—the first falls under the purview of curator Nancy Berliner; the second was curated by Karina Corrigan.



'Laying the Warp Threads' (c. 1793), part of a series on silk production.

Taken together, they chip away at the daunting task of helping a general audience get its arms around millennia of Chinese art.

A good place to start is "Fish, Silk, Bamboo, Tea," which is as much about Europeans' notions about China as it is about the mastery of the Chinese artists and artisans who catered to them. China was the source of opulent and exotic imports, as evidenced by a red and gold-brocade robe made for the Catholic Church about 1600. It was also the source of fads. The word for carp or goldfish in Chinese is a homophone for abundance, making them auspicious pets in China. Enchanted by this, Europeans began importing them in the late 1600s and, over time, adopted the goldfish as both pet and decorative motif. A most spectacular example is a twin set of 18-inch-long carp-shaped porcelain tureens (1760-80) destined for the table of a Spanish nobleman.

Other works fed Europeans' curiosity and preconceptions about China. Charming watercolors from the mid-1700s depict the stages of silk production, from an almost abstract painting of white silkworm larvae wriggling in a circle of green mulberry leaves to meticulously ordered scenes in which elegant women weave silk. No hustle-bustle of production here—just order and open spaces. Similarly, an enameled porcelain

the installation groups works under three headings: "Views of the Cosmos," "Revering Antiquity" and "The Aesthetic of the Brush." The selection is appropriately varied, from classic brushwork and bronzes to paper-cutting and contemporary sculpture. While some of the labels could do a better job relating object to theme, the wall texts provide useful cultural context. They note, for example, that skillful calligraphy, historical allusions, and symbols give cultural legitimacy to a work and communicate a person's degree of culture, erudition and even morality.

This informs how we look at, say, a 1744 seal with archaic writing, a carved 18th-century jade bowl featuring a dragon (the son of heaven) diving in and out of waves (the earth), or Sa Benjie's 1994 ink outline of a table surrounded by finely executed calligraphy. We see artists looking back to history and literature not with unquestioning reverence but with deliberation and purpose.

## Proof that institutions often need look no further than their own permanent collections for exhibition material.

Sometimes, though, form contradicted content. A reverse painting on glass from about 1765 shows curtains parting to reveal the shelf-lined study of an elderly scholar teaching his female pupil, calligraphy brush in hand. The scene speaks of traditions passed down, unchanged, generation after generation—yet the painter used a technique adopted from Europe and included a round mirror, an even more recent European import.

This is good to keep in mind when entering "Perfect Imbalance," since any show that singles out recurring themes runs the risk of implying that the art is static. While the title refers to the slight asymmetry many artists throughout the ages favored,

director of the Yale Center, Amy Meyers, "invited me to do a body of work that related to the conservation work I had been doing there. I spent a week as an artist-in-residence last October, doing a series of sketches and color studies that are a direct response to Constable's compositions and color patterns."

There is another way in which his work as a conservator has influenced his painting: "I paint with the same materials I use in conservation, because they are the most stable materials I can get my hands on." Mr. Leonard happened to have formulated that particular type of synthetic retouching paint along with National Gallery of Art conservator René de la Rie, and it is now manufactured by Gamblin Colors, an art-materials supplier based in Portland, Ore. Among the benefits of this retouching paint is that the colors do not fade as quickly.

It isn't easy to start an art career in your mid-50s (gallery owners are more interested in young artists), but Louis Stern had known Mr. Leonard through the Getty Paintings Conservation Council, which raises money to help smaller museums without conservation departments or budgets, and he was willing to exhibit Mr. Leonard's work. "Mark doesn't knock them out, but I'm happy to be patient with him, because everything he produces is a quality product," Mr. Stern said. That patience also paid off, since almost everything from Mr. Leonard's first show found a buyer.

But, having barely started his art career, Mr. Leonard is going back to full-time museum work, starting a new conservation department at the Dallas museum, "and I guess now I'll have to be a Saturday and Sunday painter." Part of the draw is the stimulation of trying something new ("I like to build things—in this case, a new department") in a new city ("what's going on in Dallas in the arts is very exciting, very stimulating"), as well as the challenge of tending to the museum's sizable and growing collection of modern and contemporary art. "There wasn't much of that at the Getty," he notes. Time for a contemporary artist to do contemporary work.

Mr. Grant is the author of "The Business of Being an Artist."

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