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# SAMUEL F.B. MORSE: GALLERY OF THE LOUVRE

By Joshua Rose

Samuel F.B. Morse's classical painting, *Gallery of the Louvre*, is not only one of the most significant works of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century American art, it is also one of the last works Morse painted before turning his attention toward science and technology with the discovery of the telegraph and the development of Morse code.

Thankfully, *Gallery of the Louvre* went through an extensive conservation treatment in 2010–2011 in the studio of Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, specialists in American paintings who have restored major American works of art such as Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and Rembrandt Peale's *The Court of Death*.

"The conservation treatment greatly improved the overall look of the *Gallery of the Louvre* and confirmed that Morse was as fearless an experimenter with painting media as he was with the daguerreotype and the electromagnetic telegraph letter later in his career," says Peter John Brownlee, associate curator at the Terra Foundation for American Art.

In 1982, the Terra Foundation of American Art, the brainchild of Chicago businessman Daniel J. Terra, bought the painting for



## Samuel F.B. Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre and the Art of Invention*

Edited by Peter John Brownlee (Terra Foundation for American Art in conjunction with Yale University Press, 2014). 224 pages, 135 color illustrations, \$45

\$3.25 million, at the time a record for an American painting. According to Elizabeth Glassman, president and chief executive officer of the foundation, Terra "immediately sent it on an extended tour of museums across the United States, attracting widespread acclaim that helped re-establish the importance of Morse's painting for the study of early American art history."

After the recent conservation treatment, the painting was the focus of three major symposia in successive years: the first at the Yale University

Art Gallery (2011), then the National Gallery of Art (2012), and, finally, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (2013). These three conferences produced the series of essays that now appear in this current volume, *Samuel F.B. Morse's "Gallery of the Louvre" and the Art of Invention*, published by the Terra Foundation in conjunction with Yale University Press. The book will also accompany a multi-year tour of the painting beginning this month and will include stops at The Huntington Library, Amon Carter Museum of

American Art, Seattle Art Museum, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Detroit Institute of Arts Museum, and the Reynolda House Museum of American Art.

Morse was concerned with raising the level of cultural taste and artistic understanding for the new republic and thought a painting such as the *Gallery of the Louvre*—depicting masterworks from artists such as Caravaggio, Rubens, Titian, Raphael, and Rembrandt—would help to accomplish such a task. He also gave lectures at the New York Athenaeum in 1826, where he addressed similar issues, as well as his beliefs on the intentions of the fine arts and the role of reproducing the fine arts to achieve loftier goals. As Brownlee states in the introduction to this book, "*Gallery of the Louvre* fuses the adoration and imitation of the Old Masters and the experimental techniques favored by the English painter Joshua Reynolds, as well as by Benjamin West and Washington Allston, with a genre of gallery paintings that were premised on the relational mode of exhibiting pictures."

Other essays in this volume include *Morse*



and the Louvre, by Andrew McClellan; *Images as Evidence? Morse and the Genre of Gallery Painting*, by Catherine Roach; *The Sculpture Club* by Wendy Bellion; *More and Mechanical Imitation*, by Sarah Kate Gillespie; and *Gallery of the Louvre: Glazing and Problems of Preservation*, by Lance Mayer and Gay Myers. As again mentioned by Brownlee, “*Gallery of the Louvre* embodies an intersection of art, religion, science and technology. Thoroughly of its cultural moment, as the essays in this volume attest, the painting continues to invite and reward divergent, yet interrelated, lines of speculation and study regarding its conception, design and execution.”

The exhibition will kick off this month at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in Pasadena, California.

“We are delighted to host the kickoff of this extraordinary tour,” says Kevin Salatino, director of art collections at The Huntington. “And *Gallery of the Louvre* is particularly fitting here, where our collections span the history of American art, as well as that of science and technology—interests shared with Morse himself. Los Angeles audiences are sure to be fascinated in many ways

by this gem of an exhibition.”

One of the many assets of the book is a long biographical introduction documenting Morse’s early career in art and his life leading up to the creation of this seminal work of art. Art was truly Morse’s first love and, in 1811, at the age of 20, he sailed to London, where he joined a circle of American artists that include Allston, West, John Singleton Copley, and John Trumbull. Morse was soon elected into the Royal Academy of Arts, and his first major painting exhibited at the academy was *Dying Hercules* in 1813. Based on this success in London, Morse returned home, full of vigor and enthusiasm for the cultural arts of his own country, and made it his mission to “advance a strong and elevated national art.”

It is this same enthusiasm for the art of this country that is at the root of the mission of the Terra Foundation, as well.

“Our founder, Daniel Terra, believed American art was a dynamic and powerful expression of the nation’s history and identity,” Glassman says. “He also held that engagement with original works of art could be a transformative experience, and we’re thrilled to honor his legacy by sharing this masterwork from our collection with audiences across the country.” ■



**Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872)**, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831-33. Oil on canvas, 73¼ x 108 in., Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1992.51.

