

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

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MORE THAN WORDS OFFERS PERSONAL LOOK AT MAJOR ARTISTS

The handwritten note or letter has become a dinosaur in our age of e-mail, instant messaging, BlackBerries, and iPods. *More Than Words: Illustrated Letters from the Archives of American Art*, on view at the Museum of Fine Arts from May 9-July 19, transforms personal notes into works of art.

Of course, these letters are from some of the most gifted artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most include drawings, caricatures, watercolors, even collages. **MFA Chief Curator Dr. Jennifer Hardin, a specialist in American art, will introduce the works in a gallery talk at 2 p.m. Saturday, May 9.** The *St. Petersburg Times* is the media sponsor of all museum exhibitions.

These 58 illustrated letters and notes offer revealing insights into the lives and work of such major artists as Thomas Eakins, Thomas Hart Benton, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Frida Kahlo, Alexander Calder, Andy Warhol, and Dale Chihuly. These very personal expressions bring us closer to the movement of the artist's hand. Through word and image, they have a spontaneity that we rarely glimpse in a more finished artwork.

"Illustrated letters are inspired communications," writes Liza Kirwin, the exhibition's curator and the Curator of Manuscripts at the Archives of American Art. "They have the power to transport the reader to another place and time—to recreate the sights, sounds, attitudes, and imagination of their author."

The exhibition is arranged by themes. They include "Bon Voyage," letters to and from travelers; "I Do," romantic notes; "Plays on Words," using metaphors, puns, and puzzles; "Visual Events," describing key personal and professional moments and current affairs; "Graphic Instructions," providing illustrated directions to the reader; and of course, "Thank You" notes.

For example, painter William Cushing Loring pictures Paris' Bastille Day celebration in 1901 for his parents—and now for us—with wonderful sweep in a small frame. Painter and writer Edith Schloss wrote her words in a spiral, along with whimsical drawings, in a "thank you" note to American painter Philip Pearlstein. The words are an integral part of the visual composition.

Southern visionary artist Howard Finster is known for cramming verbal sermons about the apocalypse into his paintings and drawings. Finster uses every inch of the space. His “thank you” note to curator Barbara Shissler does not evoke hellfire, but visually, it is like a miniature Finster. What a wonderful gift for a curator to receive from an artist whose work she has studied and featured in an exhibition!

Sculptor Paulanship also creates a small artwork in his drawing of a voluptuous model, whom he is recommending to painter Leon Kroll. The figure is amazingly sculptural, again in such a small space.

Moreover, the great Mexican painter Frida Kahlo defies her image as the ever suffering Frida in a lively letter from New York thanking her friend Emmy Lou Packard for taking care of her former husband Diego Rivera. He was in San Francisco painting his mural, *Pan-American Unity*. Kahlo signs it with three lipstick kisses.

More Than Words holds many other surprises. It provides a rare opportunity to see artists we have admired “up close and personal.”

The show is organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) and the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The hardcover book by Ms. Kirwin, *More Than Words: Illustrated Letters from the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art*, is available in the Museum Store for \$24.95.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

The MFA has the only comprehensive art collection, extending from antiquity to the present day, on the Florida west coast. The collection of more than 4,600 objects includes important works by Monet, Gauguin, Renoir, Morisot, Cézanne, Rodin, Bourdelle, Hassam, Henri, Bellows, O’Keeffe, and Andrew Wyeth. The MFA has been repeatedly named the best museum in the Tampa Bay area by *Tampa Bay Magazine*, *Creative Loafing*, and *Tampa Bay metro*.

Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday. **Admission is \$12 for adults, \$10 for those 65 and older, and \$6 for students seven and older with current I.D. Children under seven and Museum members are admitted free. Groups of 10 or more adults pay only \$8 per person with prior reservations.**

The MFA Café is open from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and serves special brunches on the second Sunday of the month. Don’t miss the holiday brunches for Easter (April 12), Mother’s Day (May 10), and Father’s Day (June 21). For café reservations, please call 727-822-1032. The Museum Store has been named the best museum store in the Tampa Bay area by the *duPont Registry*. For more information on the MFA, call 727-896-2667 or check out the web site at www.fine-arts.org.