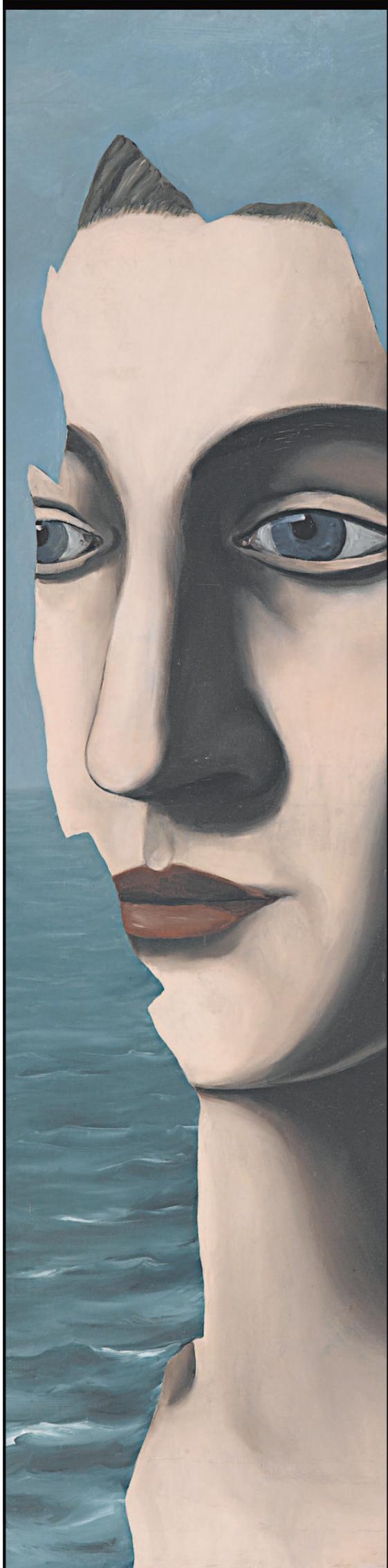


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René Magritte, *Le Double Secret (The Secret Double)* (detail), 1927, Oil on canvas, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne/ Centre de création industrielle. Purchase. © Charly Herscovici—ADAGP—ARS, 2013

Thinking About Poison

By HELENE STAPINSKI

IN an office of the American Museum of Natural History, a team of scientists, artists and multimedia experts were discussing what had poisoned Skippy, a cute Jack Russell terrier that had keeled over sick in his virtual backyard. Was it the chocolate he found in the garbage can? Did a snake, or a black widow spider, bite him? Or was a poisonous cane toad to blame?

Skippy is just one of many victims in the museum's show, "The Power of Poison," opening Nov. 16, to which the staff was busy applying finishing touches. Using iPads, visitors can examine the circumstances surrounding Skippy's fictional poisoning and, controlling their experience individually, take a crack at solving the mystery.

But because the museum is popular with small children, Skippy does not die. Instead, his animated eyes turn into Xs, he runs erratically around the yard, he drools and he vomits a bit. Eventually, though, Skippy rallies to full health.

"We were not going to make this a scary show," said the exhibit's curator, Dr. Mark Siddall. "Instead you walk out saying, 'Wow. That was cool.'"

Dr. Siddall spent two hours enthusiastically discussing poison and its properties at the museum recently, walking through some of the show's highlights. The exhibit, which takes a look at poison's role in nature, myth, medicine and human history, examines killer caterpillars, zombie ants and deadly vipers. It also looks at the possible victims, like the heavily slumbering Snow White. Plus the age-old question of what killed Cleopatra. Was it an asp, or something else? And while we're at it, was Napoleon really poisoned with arsenic?

To keep things lively, there will be a Detecting Poison theater, featuring a live presenter, film clips and Monty Python-like animation, in which the audience helps track a true poisoning case involving a household outside London that fell ill in 1833. The father, George Bodle, died and the case was eventually brought to trial.

Not much was known about detecting poisons at the time, so murderers frequently used them, since symptoms often look much like those of many common diseases. Because of the Bodle case, tests were developed to detect poison in the body, leading to great strides in toxicology and forensics.

Museumgoers will visit a recreation of a 19th-century laboratory to try to solve the Bodle case, using props in the room and the clues on hand. They will then



MARILYNN K. YEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

CALDRON BUBBLE An exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History explores poison's role in culture.

learn about the trial, its outcome and the scientific discoveries that followed.

"The 1800s were an amazing century when scientists mapped the periodic table, developed the first books on poison and learned how to treat them," said Lauri Halderman, senior director of exhibition interpretation for the museum. "This case and what grew out of it helped change the social epidemic of poisoning."

Arsenic, for instance, was so successful as a murder tool that it was known as "inheritance powder" in France — poudre de succession. If an old, rich uncle was taking too long to die of natural causes, arsenic was the poison of choice, said Ms. Halderman.

"The Power of Poison" not only focuses on foul play, but also looks at toxins in the natural world. In the introductory gallery, visitors will learn that poison is ubiquitous, found in everything from mango skins to butterfly wings. Foods like cinnamon, coffee and chili peppers get their strong taste and smell from chemicals that ward off animals and can be toxic if ingested in large doses.

Museum artists were busy building trees that will make up a miniature Chocó rain forest, a veritable land mine of poisonous plants and animals. Because the museum is science-based, poisonous animals from different parts of the world were not gathered in a fictional forest. The forest the artists have created is ecologically correct, with only animals that would share that particular Colombian ecosystem.

There are models of yellow pit vipers, wandering spiders and grackles, birds that grab poisonous ants in their beaks and rub them on their own wings to help defend themselves against parasites, like lice and mites. Live golden poison frogs, which are ounce for ounce the most toxic animal on the planet, will also be on display, as will live poisonous anemones in an aquarium.

Final touches were also being placed on the three witches from Macbeth, life-size figures whose potion will be examined in the Myths and Legends part of the exhibit. A large book of potions, 4-by-2½ feet, which the staff has unofficially named "the enchanted book," uses touch technology, electronically read by sensors hidden inside the pages.

The interactive book, which the creators were trying to make look like one of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, has scribbled annotations and hand-drawn illustrations, but comes to life as the reader turns the giant pages and touches the drawings. The eight pages include stories from mythology and examples of the use of the four poisonous plants featured: monk's hood (also known as wolf's bane), rhododendron, conium (a k a hemlock) and belladonna.

"Do you know why it was called belladonna?" asked Dr. Siddall. Because, he explained, it was once dripped into the eyes of women to make their pupils dilate and make them more attractive.

Another innovative display includes Greek urns upon which mythological stories will be projected, including the myth of Hercules and the Hydra. What starts as a simple Greek vase painting suddenly comes to animated life. After Hercules successfully kills the Hydra by cutting off its heads

and burning the wounds so more heads won't grow back, he dips his arrows into its poison blood to make his weapon more deadly. Hence, the Greek word "toxikon" which means "poison arrow" — the root for the word toxin.

To illustrate how poisons have been used over the years to treat medical conditions, a giant yew tree as high as the ceiling was being built for the exhibit. Yew trees, native to England, are so toxic that eating a handful of needles can be deadly. But a compound discovered in its bark is currently used in chemotherapy treatment for cancer patients. Dr. Siddall said that the healing properties of the yew actually come from a fungus that lives inside the tree, which scientists are now growing in laboratories.

On the literary end, there will be references to Harry Potter and Arthur Conan Doyle. A life-size Mad Hatter from Alice in Wonderland will be on hand to illustrate the term, "mad as a hatter." The saying dates back to the 19th century, when mercury was used in the millinery business. Workers exposed to mercury would experience anxiety, memory loss and trembling — known as hatters' shakes.

There's also a life-size, laid-out Capt. James Cook, who, with some of his crew members, was accidentally poisoned while on an exploration of the South Pacific in the 1700s.

And of course, there's Snow White.

"Do you think it's possible to poison someone with an apple?" Dr. Siddall asked. "What if they ask you to take a bite first?" Cutting the apple with a knife that has poison on only one side, he said excitedly, might just do the trick.

"The Power of Poison" will run to Aug. 10.

'The Heart of a Collector'

By ROBIN POGREBIN

SINCE Robert Mnuchin recently turned 80, some might expect him to be slowing down. Instead, he is speeding up, or at least starting a new chapter with the Mnuchin Gallery. He opened it this year after parting ways with Dominique Lévy, his partner at L&M Arts, a gallery that was a prominent player in the art market during the economic boom, bidding large sums at auction.

Sitting in his favorite diner recently, munching on Melba toast and sour pickles, Mr. Mnuchin played down his new venture, even though this is the first time he has been out on his own since starting his first gallery, C & M Arts, with the Los Angeles dealer James Corcoran, in 1992. Ms. Lévy opened her own new gallery this year on Madison Avenue.

"This is a continuation," Mr. Mnuchin said.

"She's giving birth to a new child," he added of Ms. Lévy. "I'm having children and grandchildren."

Mr. Mnuchin continues to operate in the elegant town house at 45 East 78th Street that was home to his previous two galleries. And he continues to specialize in post-World War II American art.

"It isn't really a new incarnation," said Arne Glimcher, the chairman of Pace Gallery. "He's had partners, but he has always been the driving force of his gallery."

If anything, Mr. Glimcher added, Mr. Mnuchin is building on a tradition of dealers who got into the business because they were passionate about art, not because they valued it as a commodity and viewed it as an investment.

"He comes to art dealing through collecting and through the absolute love of art — which is not necessarily the pattern of most dealers," Mr. Glimcher said. "A lot of us who are more senior in the art world have experience that will take dealers in their 40s

forty more years to get, if they ever do. We did not come to art as commerce. We came to art as a way to live."

Mr. Mnuchin does collect — Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock. And he said it was his excitement about art that made him leave Goldman Sachs after 33 successful years there.

"I love to be around art," he said. "I really believe I have the heart of a collector."

On a walk through his gallery recently, where his exhibition of Donald Judd's stacks had opened just a few days earlier, Mr. Mnuchin's enthusiasm for the artist's



MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

80 AND GOING STRONG Robert Mnuchin at his gallery with a Donald Judd sculpture.

vibrant boxes of metal and Plexiglas was plain.

"I've kind of fallen in love with this color," he said, standing in front of one in violet. "It's endeared itself to me."

"Obviously, he's a leading figure of minimalism," he said of Judd. "But in another way, I find something about them even romantic."

This is the first time 10 of Judd's stacks have been shown all at once, in one place, Mr. Mnuchin said. And that is the kind of exhibition he has made his specialty — focusing on one artist and one strain of work. Counter

to what one may expect of a dealer, Mr. Mnuchin said, he does not emphasize the sale.

In the seven de Kooning shows he's done over the years, for example, "there was little or nothing for sale," he said. "Not that there's anything wrong with that. These exhibitions have been about something else: giving the public the opportunity to focus on a body of work, to focus on that particular artist or that particular moment."

"I've seen many Judd stacks where I looked at the image and thought it was terrific," Mr. Mnuchin added. "When I see Judd here in the aggregate, it creates a presence, a feeling — the overall effect of them I find awesome."

Last year, for example, L&M Arts brought together 15 of Frank Stella's black, aluminum and copper paintings. "Everyone knows they're great, but they've never been together without other things," he said. "It was breathtaking. You hated to take it down."

Mr. Mnuchin's partnership with Ms. Lévy worked well, he said, until it didn't anymore. (Ms. Lévy did not respond to requests for comment.)

"I think relationships are difficult," Mr. Mnuchin said. "They take a lot of work."

"It's hard to define how people grow apart," he continued. "We also had differences and the differences made it desirable for us to each have our own gallery. But I don't want to in any way minimize the importance of our partnership."

Mr. Mnuchin got into art gradually. He describes his parents as "modest collectors" who raised him in Scarsdale, N.Y., where he "walked across open fields going to school and twisted my ankles." After graduating from Yale in 1955, he spent two years as "the least decorated private in the Army."

Then he joined Goldman Sachs at a starting salary of \$48 a week. They didn't have a seat for him at first. "I sat on a stool for over a

year," Mr. Mnuchin said, "listening and hoping one of the two people next to me would get a little bit sick."

A decade later, he became a partner and by 1976 he was co-head of the trading and arbitrage division. In 1980 he joined the management committee.

"I pushed the people to the right and I pushed the people to the left," Mr. Mnuchin said, "and I said, 'This bird is not staying in the nest. Let me out.'"

He and his wife, Adriana, developed an interest in art together — reading about it, going to museums, attending lectures. Eventually Ms. Mnuchin — herself an entrepreneur who started the stores Tennis Lady and Cashmere-Cashmere and co-founded the nonprofit Shakespeare Society — went on the board of the Whitney Museum of American Art. And they started to buy a few paintings in the 1970s. "We were more students than we were collectors," Mr. Mnuchin said. "Grow on us, it did."

They also at one point owned the Mayflower Inn in Washington, Conn., where they have a country home.

Rather than spending more time relaxing in Litchfield County, however, Mr. Mnuchin can be found bidding large sums in the front rows of the leading auction houses. Last year, for example, he bought a Rothko at Sotheby's for about \$75 million and a Gerhard Richter at Christie's for about \$22 million.

While art prices have skyrocketed — sending many wealthy people into the market — Mr. Mnuchin said he had never been in it for the money. "The reason to buy art is because you love it, you love it, you love it," he said. "Then you give some thought to, 'Is it good for what it is? Then, 'Is it reasonably priced?'"

The real test, he added, is, "Do I want that around me?"

"That's a wonderful experience to have," he said. "I've been lucky enough to have it personally."