GALLERY 213A

_A Witches’ Sabbath_ (c. 1650) by Cornelis Saftleven

It is not surprising that this painting with not one, not two, but a whole grab bag of devilish characters comes from the brush of the Dutch artist Cornelis Saftleven, a versatile painter of landscapes and genre scenes, including fantastic images of Hell. Here a classic witch—an old woman brandishing a broom—rides a goat and along with a band of vicious dogs drives off a motley crew of beastly creatures. Many characteristics of these fleeing fiends are taken from early scientific observation, such as the moth wings on the howling figure in the foreground, but they are put together in a “mad scientist” sort of way, leading to giant frogs with claws, bird-headed beasts, monstrous scorpion crabs, and winged satyrs. With this cast of characters, it’s hard to know who exactly is the baddest of them all.

GALLERY 219

_El Maragato Threatens Friar Pedro Zaldivia with His Gun_ (c. 1806) by Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes

In April of 1806, the much-feared and notorious bandit El Maragato was jailed and sentenced to death. However, the conniving criminal scaled the prison’s 44-foot wall and escaped, returning to his wicked ways. Almost immediately he locked up the townspeople of Oropesa at gunpoint and looted the town. Help arrived in the form of the usually docile and meek Friar Pedro Zaldivia. As Francisco Goya captures in these six narrative panels, Friar Pedro wrested El Maragato’s gun from him, beat him with it, shot him in the posterior, and then bound his hands with rope to await the authorities. El Maragato eventually got his due—though not chronicled by Goya, the bandit was later hanged, drawn, and quartered in Madrid.

GALLERY 219

_Head of Medusa_ (c. 1801) by Antonio Canova

A classic, and certainly Classical, villain with her serpent-covered head and deadly gaze, Medusa was initially depicted in Greek vase paintings as a horrifyingly ugly creature with swine tusks, flared nostrils, and sometimes even a short beard. Yet around the fifth century, artists began portraying her more ambiguously—both beautiful and terrifying. Neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova built on this tradition, capturing in this plaster model Medusa’s anxious gaze at the moment of her gruesome beheading. Choosing to infuse her expression with a tragic sense of both despair and surrender, Canova brings to the monster’s death a tranquil dignity while still revealing the fearsome horror boiling beneath the surface.

Please note that this is an archived mini-tour. Some works may no longer be on view or may have been moved to a different gallery.
The Picture of Dorian Gray (1943–44) by Ivan Albright

Perhaps more commonly referred to as an antihero rather than an out-and-out villain, Dorian Gray surely did some heinous things—ruining the lives of almost every person he met, breaking the heart and thus prompting the suicide of his fiancée, and then there was that guy that he killed—an artist no less! For his painted interpretation of the hedonistic, murderous scoundrel commissioned for the 1945 film adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s novel, artist Ivan Albright certainly captured every terrible detail of Gray’s physical and moral corrosion. Indeed, Albright’s journals record, almost with glee, the many stages of decay that he incorporated into the final painting, including “that loathsome red dew that gleamed wet and glistening on one of the hands as though the canvas had sweated blood.” Sounds like a fitting depiction of a villain to us!

Supervielle, Large Banner Portrait (1945) by Jean Dubuffet

The Uruguayan-born French poet Jules Supervielle was not a bad guy by any conventional definition, but this painting by Jean Dubuffet certainly portrays him as such. With his Art Brut or “raw art” approach, Dubuffet aimed to recreate the candor and immediacy of untutored creators—children, the insane, prisoners—and thus avoid the conventions derived from education and society. This portrait, one in a series of highly unflattering representations the artist made of writers and intellectuals, sought to knock these learned individuals off their pedestals. As Dubuffet explained, “The work of this poet does not interest me very much.... His physical appearance (he is a tall, lean, stooping devil, whose head—tottering constantly—[has] the expression of a camel) seemed to lend itself to a portrait which might serve my intentions.”

Gozanze Myo-o (1680) by Nakabayashi Gennai

This four-faced figure full of fury certainly looks the part, but he is actually not a bad guy at all. Those bodies that he is furiously trampling under foot, those are the bad guys—Daijizaiten and his consort, Uma, the gods of unruly human passion. Gozanze Myo-o, on the other hand, is one of Buddhism’s Five Great Lords of Light, or Godai Myo-o. His anger, like that of the other formidable deities in this same case, is aimed at all threats to Buddhism and obstacles to enlightenment. We can’t imagine an army of evil that would be brazen enough to get in Gozanze Myo-o’s wrathful way.

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