The Rock ’n’ Roll Lifestyle

Money, fame, adoring fans, and of course, hard and fast living—the rock ’n’ roll lifestyle can only be enjoyed (and survived) by a select few. Take a vicarious walk on the wild side with this rockin’ guide to the collection.

GALLERY 244

In the Sea (1883) by Arnold Böcklin

Before they obsessively followed bands around the country on concert tours, before they hysterically screamed and cried over Elvis and the Beatles, rock groupies apparently could be found in the sea, fanatically pulling and tugging on harp-playing centaurs—at least that’s how it appears in this reinterpretation of classic mythology by Swiss-German artist Arnold Böcklin. The work’s four singing naiads could easily be taken for today’s crazed fans, the centaur (who some claim bears a striking resemblance to Böcklin himself) for the dreamy and irresistible lead singer, and the two tritons looking on in the background as less lady-luring members of the band. In fact, Böcklin often referred to the painting as Café-Concert in the Sea, the café-concert being about as close as the 19th century version got to today’s rollicking rock concert.

GALLERY 241

The Drinkers (1890) by Vincent van Gogh

Along with sex and drugs, alcohol just seems to be a part of rock ’n’ roll—from the bottles of booze drained onstage to the beers downed in the audience. While the adult drinkers in this painting by Van Gogh certainly have a similarly weathered and gnarled appearance to some notoriously hard-drinking rockers and imbibe with a real avidity, these men are certainly no rock stars, nor even fans. Their rough, leathery appearance comes from a much different kind of hard living—years of toil in the factory and fields. Long sympathetic to laborers and peasants, Van Gogh based this painting on a drawing by Honoré Daumier but added the at-once industrial and rural landscape and softened the expressions of his subjects. It was one of the last paintings the artist completed before his death in July of 1890.

GALLERY 208

Still Life with Dead Game, Fruits, and Vegetables in a Market (1614) by Frans Snyders

Like movie stars and television personalities, the most celebrated bands are known to get the star treatment, including lavish spreads of comestibles. Several still lifes in the museum would suitably exemplify the luxury foodstuffs and costly serving vessels afforded to this celebrity class, but this painting of an overflowing market stall by Flemish artist Frans Snyders has more of an energetic rock ’n’ roll feel to it. Along with the carcasses of several large animals displayed with limbs and wings akimbo, Snyders’ painting offers a touch of commotion with creatures that are still very much alive—the fighting roosters and lurking cat under the table and the fleeing dove in the upper right. And adding to all this raucousness is a boy in the lower left who picks the pocket of the oblivious shopkeeper.

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.
Want to rock out more at the museum?

Join us for After Dark on June 8 and August 10 for a chance to meander the museum galleries after-hours and rock out to DJs and performances by theatrical ensemble Collaboraction. Then return this fall for the exhibition Allen Ruppersberg: No Time Left to Start Again/The B and D of R ‘n’ R, opening September 21. Who knew the Art Institute was such a rockin’ place?

GALLERY 285
Flight Patterns (2011) by Aaron Koblin

When they’re not in the studio recording their next big album, bands are often on the road, hitting up to 20 different venues in a month. That, of course, means a whole lot of traveling, whether that involves schlepping their own gear in a beat-up van or riding luxuriously in tricked-out tour buses or private jets. You can get a sense of this sort of hectic travel schedule in this work by artist and designer Aaron Koblin. Using data visualization and Processing (an open-source computer programming language), Flight Patterns captures the paths of air traffic over North America during a 24-hour period—over 140,000 planes! Of course, with its mesmerizing beauty, Flight Patterns also seems like perfect in-flight entertainment—just the ticket to make long travel times pass in no time.

GALLERY 296
Two Candles (Zwei Kerzen) (1982) by Gerhard Richter

You might be wondering what a serene and slightly somber painting like this has to do with the riotous world of rock ‘n’ roll. (No, we weren’t going for a tie to waving lighters at concerts.) This painting comes from a series of 32 works Gerhard Richter made between 1982 and 1983 featuring candles and skulls. The band Sonic Youth used a work from the series very similar to this one—with just one candle—for the cover of their 1988 album, Daydream Nation. But they aren’t the only band to have turned to renowned artists for cover art. The Velvet Underground and Nico’s 1967 debut album famously featured Warhol’s peelable banana, the Pogues’s Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash had the band re-enacting Gericault’s 1819 The Raft of the Medusa, and Coldplay’s Viva la Vida used Delacroix’s 1830 Liberty Leading the People.

GALLERY 182
BLESS N°19 Uncool (Spring/Summer 2003) by Bless

Whether it’s punk rock’s ripped t-shirts and safety pins or grunge’s signature flannels, rockers have a knack for transforming and recontextualizing the ordinary into must-have items in mainstream fashion. The designers behind the fashion house Bless, Desiree Heiss and Ines Kaag, have a similar appreciation for recycling materials and do-it-yourself methods, tweaking or adding to existing objects to create new and unexpected alternatives. For their spring/summer 2003 collection, Uncool, the pair put together a collection of chunky wool gloves, sweaters, and hats—all obviously hand knit. Bless finds beauty in such handmade or repurposed items, especially amid the glut of identically mass-produced objects, and thrives on creating products whose “uncool” imperfections make them so totally cool.