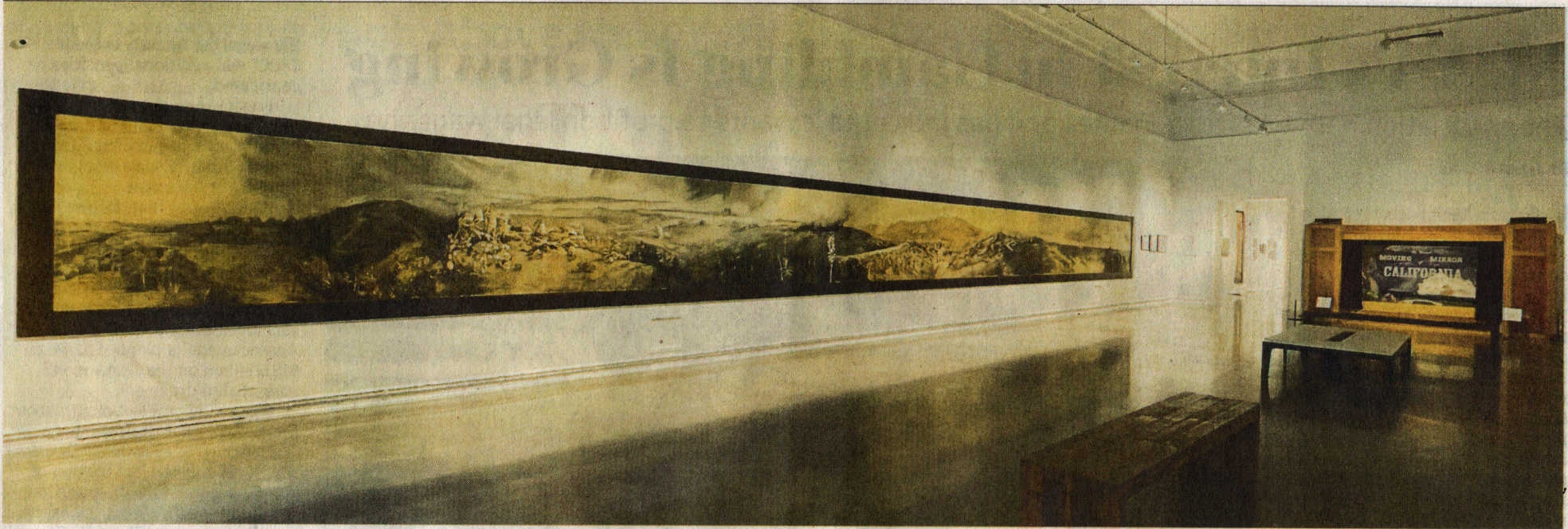


ARTS IN REVIEW



ART REVIEW

Painted Portals
Into Other Worlds

BY EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Los Angeles and Glendale, Calif. In its details, it is a fairly traditional historical painting. We are looking at a cosmopolitan Chinese city. There are Buddhist pagodas dating back to 1643, horse-drawn carts in an open-air market, a railway station, an 18th-century palace. It is the city of Shengjing between 1910 and 1930. But we see it while standing on a platform. Shifts in lighting suggest the passing of time. And we hear distant sounds of conversation and commerce. The painting—some 6 feet tall and over 90 feet long—forms a circle, surrounding us. It was created in 2017 by three Chinese artists—Li Wu, Yan Yang and Zhou Fuxian—and installed in the Velaslavasay Panorama, a quirky, charming institution in the University Park neighborhood of L.A., housed in what was once a silent-movie theater and devoted to rescuing an entire genre of painting: the 19th-century “panorama” and its 360-degree vistas.

Sara Velas, the creator of the Velaslavasay, and her co-curator, Ruby Carlson, have also joined James Fishburne, director of the Forest Lawn Museum in Glendale, to create an exhibition at that museum: “Grand Views: The Immersive World of Panoramas.” It begins by surveying the history of wrap-around paintings (thought to have been invented in Scotland in 1787).

For more than a century, panoramas were a major form of public spectacle. The example at the Velaslavasay is, by historical standards, a miniature. Two 1829 prints here show elaborate platforms inside the London Colosseum—a Romanesque building custom designed to display what is believed to be (as the label puts it) “the largest painting ever created.” Visitors would ascend a



tower at the center of a domed space to see London, painted as if it were being seen from the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

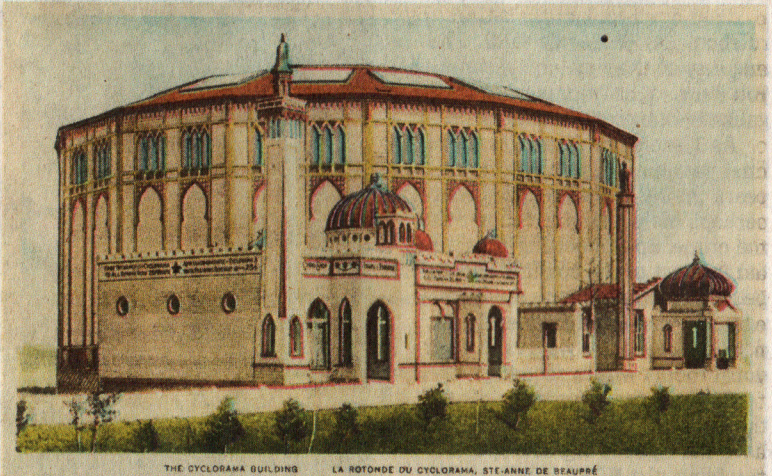
Varied names were often devised for panoramas, which might feature great military battles as well as great cities. One broadside here from 1863 promotes a “Polyorama” of the Civil War: “Officially Authentic!” One extraordinary panorama—dubbed a “cyclorama”—was restored as a permanent installation at Gettysburg National Military Park in 2008; it is a 12.5-ton, 377-foot-long, 42-foot-tall painting of the decisive battle between Gen. Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and Gen. George G. Meade’s Army of the Potomac. The Civil War’s Battle of Atlanta is the subject of another restored cyclorama, permanently displayed in that once-embattled city.

Visit those if you can and you begin to get the point. They are

An exhibition explores the history and powerful appeal of panoramas.

immense cinematic spectacles. And when you see them, you feel the lure of immersion. This may be something much art aspires to—to create a distinct world, so powerfully wrought that we lose any sense of separation and find ourselves drawn into its embrace. Panoramas do not strain for high aesthetic goals; their ambition is more visceral.

And the form isn’t aimed at just cities and battles. We learn at the exhibition that until the early 20th century, “the crucifixion was by far the most popular subject for religious panoramas.” Four survive. We get some sense of their effects next door. In 1951, Forest Lawn, which is primarily a cemetery and “memorial park,” opened the “Hall of Crucifixion” to display Jan Styka’s “Crucifixion” (c. 1896). Painted for semi-circular display, its expanse—45 feet tall and 195 feet long—is now



Clockwise from top: installation view of ‘Grand Views’; lithograph of the Cyclorama Building in Quebec (c. 1920); and the Velaslavasay Panorama

stretched across the front of an auditorium. Surprisingly, the drama unfolding on Golgotha is underwhelming; instead we are struck by the vast landscape encompassing Jerusalem and its surroundings—a God’s-eye view.

The exhibition itself can’t really suggest the impact of such paintings from small reproductions and broadsheets. In its final gallery we do end up seeing one recent panorama, but it is mounted flat, not as a surrounding image, and so becomes less effective; it is also modest in size and power, showing a bleak landscape painted for the Velaslavasay by Ms. Velas.

The history we get here also does not take into account the ways in which 19th-century American landscape paintings or the works of the Hudson River School were influenced by panoramas. But we see enough to understand just how tenuous a hold the genre actually had on the cultural landscape. Full-scale panoramas required immense custom-built halls. And by the end of the 19th century, with the advent of cinematic spectacle, the collapse was sudden. Everywhere, cylindrical buildings were demolished and their ungainly paintings discarded.

That didn’t stymie the immersive impulse, of course, as we see here in a description of Cinerama. Introduced in 1952, it required movies to be filmed with three

cameras; three film strips would be projected simultaneously on an ultrawide screen. The process was so costly, the exhibition notes, only seven movies were shot using the process.

More successful has been IMAX. Now come other immersive extravaganzas. In a new gallery of the American Museum of Natural History the floor, walls and ceiling pulse with images reacting to our movement. There are popular immersive art exhibitions—like those devoted to Van Gogh—which engulf us in musical scores and digital animations of stylistic forms and colors. And then, for more personal immersion, there are virtual-reality headsets.

But tech innovations are often accompanied by opposing reactions. During the past three decades, a panorama revival has led to the founding of the Velaslavasay, the belated beginnings of Chinese fascination with the form (starting in the late ‘80s) and the creation of the International Panorama Council (which is holding its 32nd conference in September in Iowa). And through surveys like the one at Forest Lawn Museum, we get a small-scale panoramic view of the form’s still-evolving life.

Shengjing Panorama
The Velaslavasay Panorama

Grand Views: The Immersive World of Panoramas
Forest Lawn Museum, through Sept. 10

Mr. Rothstein is the Journal’s Critic-at-Large.

CULTURAL COMMENTARY

The Sultan of the Music Business

BY JOHN EDWARD HASSE

Ahmet Ertegun has been called the “greatest record man” in American history. He discovered, recruited or recorded some of the most significant musicians of the mid-20th century, from Ray Charles to the Rolling Stones. He co-founded Atlantic Records, one of the most important independent record labels. Raised a Turkish Muslim, he championed jazz and African-American music, attesting to their global appeal. A self-created figure, he became known for his business acumen

transformed Ahmet into a lifelong jazz connoisseur.

Arriving in Washington with his family at age 12, Ahmet was repulsed by the racial segregation. “To us,” he recalled later, “everything white was hip and everything black was square.” He and his brother spent many hours in record stores patronized by black customers, listening and learning. They went door-to-door in black neighborhoods buying old 78 rpm records. Eventually they amassed thousands of jazz and blues discs.

While still a teenager, Ahmet haunted the black-oriented Howard



Ahmet Ertegun, who co-founded Atlantic Records in 1947

often Jewish. And, especially in the formative years of the company, he worked primarily with black musicians. Dapper and charming, he was equally at home at swanky parties and in down-home dives drenched in gut-bucket music.

The standard practice in the recording industry in the 1950s had artists being paid flat fees for their sessions, but Ertegun insisted on paying royalties—though not necessarily the full share of what artists deserved. In the 1980s, under pressure from singer Ruth Brown, Atlantic recalculated past royalties and, to support legacy artists, donated \$1.5 million to create the Rhythm & Blues Foundation.

Ertegun sold Atlantic Records to Warner Bros. in 1967 but stayed on as chairman. He became an elder yet hip statesman of the music business who loved nightclubbing, and he helped establish the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, which opened