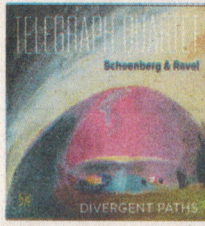
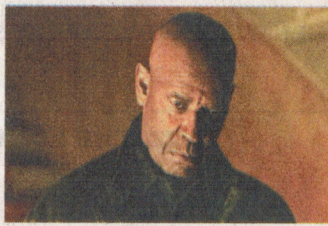


Tchaikovsky, Liszt and other works on recent classical albums.



In Italy, an avenger gets creative with a corkscrew.

BY MANOHLA DARGIS



New life for a giant painting in a cemetery's theater. BY ETHAN TATE



Weekend Arts

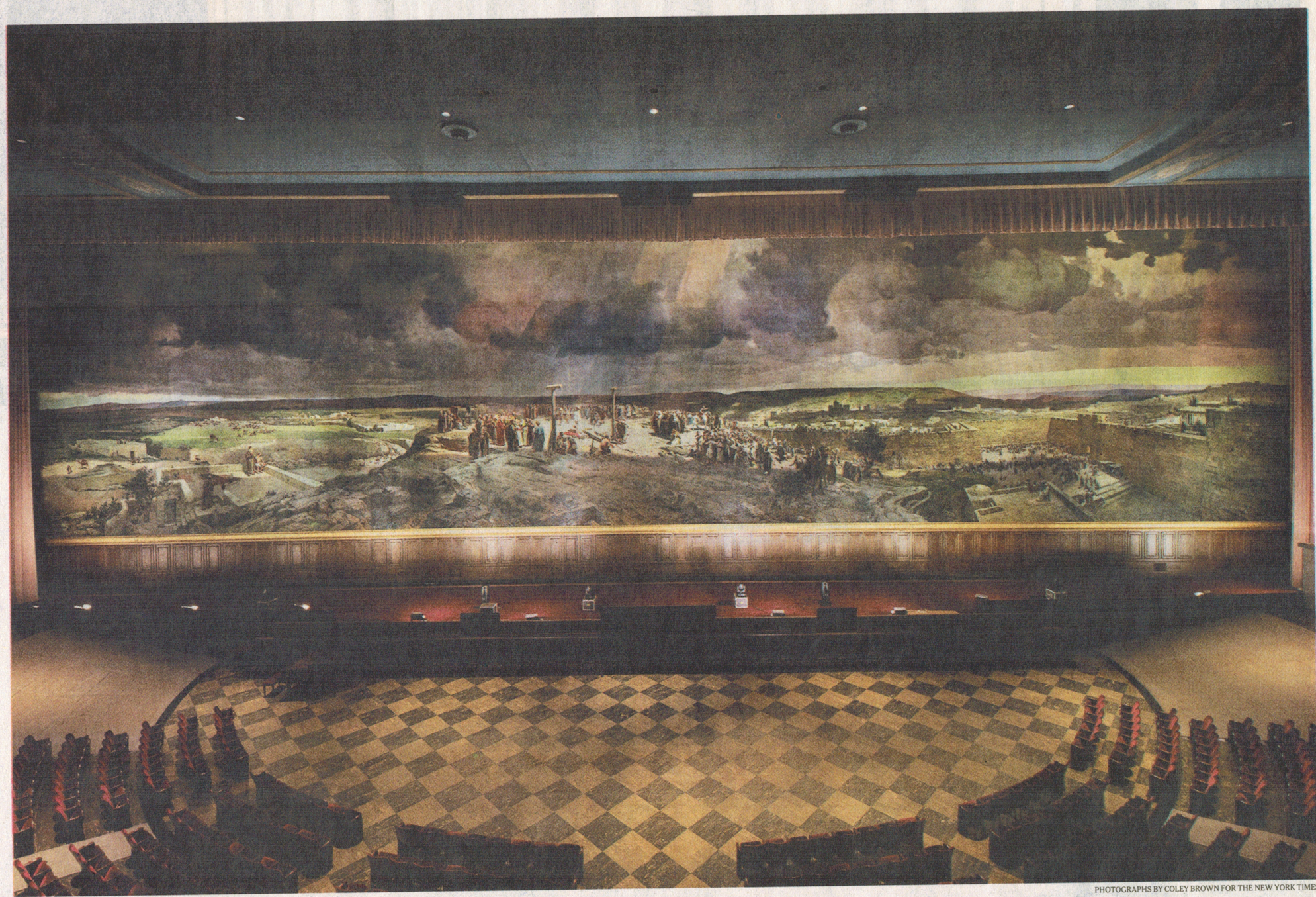
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A Panorama Lives in an Unlikely Place

In Los Angeles, a cemetery complex has a museum with ambitious goals, including bringing more attention to 'The Crucifixion.'

By ETHAN TATE

GLENDALE, CALIF. — Small armies of landscapers tend to lush grass and rolling hills, where private roads with names like Memory Lane and Baby Land lead upward past maximalist mausoleums, columbaria and imitation Renaissance statuary.

At the top is the quaintly named Mount Forest Lawn, a hill housing a theater named the Hall of Crucifixion-Resurrection, built for just a single work: the Polish artist Jan Styka's 195-foot-by-45-foot "The Crucifixion," one of the largest religious paintings in the world. A turn-of-the-20th-century marvel, the artwork is part of the short-lived genre of panorama painting — canvases hung in near-360 degrees that provided viewers an affordable immersive journey, often to vistas of Christendom or crowded

battle sequences.

The theater and adjoining art museum are part of Forest Lawn Memorial-Park, a 300-acre cemetery here that has been a Los Angeles-area landmark since it was founded by Hubert Eaton in 1917. A medley of architecture, art and artifacts, the burial grounds are the forever homes of Michael Jackson, Carole Lombard, Jimmy Stewart, Walt Disney and countless other stars, with flat grave markers to ensure that the emerald green hills and views of downtown Los Angeles remain unobstructed.

The painting lives behind some of the largest curtains in the world — twice as wide as an IMAX screen — and is viewable from 700 red velvet seats. To reach it, visitors must traverse an architectural mish-mash, entering through a crudely imitated Italian cathedral facade, then passing

through a French Gothic stained glass corridor before stepping into a grand movie hall. There, Styka's Jesus, nearing his last moments on Golgotha, gazes toward a heavenly klieg light, surrounded by Mary, the apostles and a thousand extras.

This month, visitors will see a new program for the painting, its first major overhaul since the Hall of Crucifixion opened on Good Friday in 1951. The painting has always been presented with a dramatic sound-and-light show, simulating thunder and lightning, with fire-and-brimstone-tinged narration while double-timing as an advertisement for the cemetery's mortuary services. (Feeling the Passion of the Christ was only half-told, Eaton commissioned the Southern California artist Robert Clark to produce a sequel: "The Resurrection." This smaller work was added to the Hall in 1965.)

James Fishburne, Forest Lawn's museum director and resident art historian, has re-envisioned the audiovisual program of "The Crucifixion," untangling the secular from the sacred and chronicling the painting's roundabout journey from Eastern Europe to the United States, where, according to Forest Lawn lore, it was found by Eaton in the basement of the Chicago Opera House wrapped around a telephone pole. If the previous iteration of the program resembled a late-night religious infotainment soundscape, the new version is midday History Channel. Out are the voice of God, lightning and jump-scare musical cues.

"Forest Lawn Museum is an unorthodox arts institution, but yes, absolutely, it is part of a functioning cemetery," said Fishburne, who pointed out that historically the painting's primary audience has been the few bereaved visitors who come to the theater to decompress.

"We've made a genuine effort to broaden the appeal of the experience," Fishburne explained. "Frankly, I want everyone to visit it. I want everyone from Southern California, I want everyone from the country, and the whole world to visit and I know that's an ambitious goal."

A chipper curator, Fishburne is a Navy veteran and former Getty Research Institute scholar, specializing in Renaissance-era papal coinage, somehow right at home among the undertakers and burial advisers at the cemetery. His hiring in 2018 signaled a radical departure for Forest Lawn Museum, a 5,400-square-foot space of art galleries and the adjacent theater, both of which have remained largely unchanged for 72 years.

Alison Bruesehoff, a former Forest Lawn Museum director, said that when she took over in 2001, an exhibition on Michelangelo looked like it had been there for decades.

"They had to make a decision," she said. "Do we do something with this museum or do we not?"

Forest Lawn decided to do something. "I do want to give credit to my predecessors, some of whom I know and some of whom I don't, but I think it was a gradual realization of the historic importance of this site," Fishburne said.

Now he has a star-turning role, appearing in the museum's audiovisual accompaniment of "The Crucifixion." A new 12-foot digital video screen has been added, complete with slick, globe-trotting animations, "definitely inspired by Indiana Jones," Fishburne acknowledged. He appears occasionally throughout the video as a guide, teaming with a professional narrator to tell the history of the painting, Forest Lawn's surre-



al architecture, and the biblical details in Styka's composition. Much attention has been given to new LED spotlights, which pinpoint characters and scenes in the painting.

Fishburne's makeover brings a decidedly more academic, technical and art-history-minded cadence to the theatrical show, a far cry from its previous program. The goal was to create a show that balanced its past billing as a religious, almost roadside attraction, and its future as a work of art.

"It was very, very religious," said Bruesehoff, who was pivotal in the program's last update in 2006.

"People have never heard of it," Asha Schechter, an artist and art professor, said about Styka's painting. "It's the idea of building an entire structure to house one work in this extremely theatrical way. It demonstrates art can be made that won't just live in a white box for five weeks but can exist over an indefinite period of time."

For years, Schechter has taken groups of students to visit the painting, noting that they can be overwhelmed — not just by its scale, but by the confrontation with mortality and visual aesthetics of eternal memorialization.

Sara Velas is the director of the Velaslavlavay Panorama, one of the few remaining panorama painting venues in the country. Coordinating with the start of the new program, Fishburne enlisted the help of Velas and her organization to curate an exhibition on the history of such panoramic paintings, also at the Forest Lawn Museum.

"An argument could be made that panorama paintings are not pre-cinema, but that they are cinema themselves," Velas said. "The way that peripheral vision is activated inherently makes things more experiential and opens up a different type of memory, really."

For Velas, also a painter, the installation of Styka's painting in a movie theater with overt theatrical framing makes perfect sense.

"The curtain opens and closes and it's the same psychological preparation," she said. Could the revamp of Styka's painting signal a new lease on life for the cemetery's museum program?

"If somebody said, 'Would you rather have a show at Forest Lawn Museum or would you rather have it at MOCA?,' I would pick Forest Lawn Museum in a second."



Top, "The Crucifixion" panorama painting is in the Hall of Crucifixion-Resurrection at the Forest Lawn Museum in Glendale, Calif. Above right, James Fishburne is the museum director. Above, the museum, foreground, and the adjoining Hall of Crucifixion-Resurrection are in the 300-acre Forest Lawn cemetery, left.