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At the Galleries: The “big museum zone”

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Oh, the dramatic Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii* is part of *Drama & Desire*

Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario

Want to cool down this summer? Skip the beach and head to that air-conditioned big-museum zone between the AGO and the ROM. Leah Sandals lists some seasonal blockbusters that add only intellectual heat to the trip.

1. *Drama & Desire* at the AGO

317 Dundas St. W., to Sept. 26

Promising to explore the ways that 1800s art mavericks were influenced by theatre, *Drama & Desire* contains many beautiful, internationally renowned paintings. (Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* and John Singer Sargent's *Lady Macbeth* are just a couple of examples.) Campy props — such as crystal chandeliers and old-fashioned wind machines — also add period zing. But in a bizarre plot twist, *Drama & Desire* forsakes one of the great joys of both art history and the stage: straight-up, old-fashioned storytelling. Most of these paintings were created to crystallize sprawling narratives, yet only a few have any accompanying explanation. (Even stranger, it's the well-known stories, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, that actually get explained.) This lack leaves most viewers mystified about the actual dramas at hand. On a related note, true stories of class and gender are also AWOL. Many scholars note that 19th-century theatres often served gritty, lower-income audiences, and that even high-toned playhouses were hotbeds for prostitution. Degas (included in the show) actually tried to expose the tawdriness beneath theatre's surface glitz. But *Drama & Desire*'s strategies merely amp that glamorous façade, leaning on theatre's current status as elite entertainment and distancing viewers from the vital, vicious reality of the era it purports to immerse us in. Unintentional comedy? Gentle tragedy? *Drama & Desire* is both — and thanks to the fame of its paintings, it's still a must-see.

2. *Private Pleasures* at the Gardiner Museum

111 Queen's Park, to Sept. 12

Showcasing the recently donated collection of Bill and Molly Anne Macdonald, *Private Pleasures* traces the history of Japanese porcelain — and related societal shifts — from 1603 to 1868. In this way, its lovely artifacts become portals through which to tell a wider story about their time and place. Highlights include these dishes' surprisingly macho status (exemplified by a print of a Samurai guarding a stack of pretty plates), a board game based on identifying different incense odours, a charming tiger portrait and a “flaming tortoise” vessel. These one-time status symbols also prompt questions of how our own culture might be represented in future — Vitrines of Balenciaga bags? Cases of Cranium? — and that realm of wondering is good geeky fun. The downfall of the show, however, is that you sometimes feel more like you're reading it (or its extensive text panels) than seeing it. What's needed in our future museum blockbusters is a balance between the AGO's flashy, visual approach (described above) and the Gardiner's academic, historically sensitive tack.

3. *Scream* at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Cir., to Aug. 21

Last summer, curator Nancy Campbell won raves by pairing edgy Toronto artist Shary Boyle with dreamy Cape Dorset drawer Shuvina Ashoona at the Barnicke. Now, Campbell reworks the strategy for another stunner. This outing combines the delicate-yet-grotesque drawings of established local Ed Pien with the traditional-yet-tormented carvings of Cape Dorset's Samonie Toonoo. Though technically finessed, both artists deal in a kind of raw psychological horror. Toonoo's sculptures, which include menacing-looking missionary men and a suicide swinging from a tree, evoke the traumatic legacy of residential schools and subsequent addictions and suicides. Pien's drawings offer mutilated bodies and crying eyes; though Pien prefers this work to remain ambiguous, his works also summon the deep, ricocheting pain of individual and cultural violence. Overall, this show howls, persists, frightens and enrages all the way to hell and back — all wonderfully and rightfully so.