



# Great Works





# Great Works

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Encounters  
with Art

Michael Glover



for Ruth

*Per gli occhi fiere un spirito sottile,  
Che fa in la mente spirito destare,  
Dal qual si moue spirito d'amare,  
Ch' ogn' altro spiritello fa gentile*  
— Guido Cavalcanti, Sonetto XIII

# Contents

<b>The Poet's Eye</b> Foreword by James Bradburne	p. 10
<b>A Brief Note by the Author</b>	p. 16
<b>The Overbearing Monstrousness of the Visionary Moment</b> <i>The Ghost of a Flea</i> (c. 1819–20), William Blake	p. 19
<b>The Steely, Ascetic Countenance of a Cunning Diplomat</b> <i>Doge Loredan</i> (1504), Giovanni Bellini	p. 25
<b>The Cinematic Brashness of the Deaths of the World's Greatest Beasts</b> <i>The Assyrian Lion Hunt</i> (645–635 BC), unknown artist	p. 31
<b>An Overwhelming Interior World of Troubling Tunnelling...</b> <i>Backdoor Pipeline</i> (2010), Richard Serra	p. 37
<b>The Magnificent Return of the Manga Superheroes of the Past</b> <i>Last Stand of the Kusunoki Heroes at Shijo-Nawate</i> (1851), Utagawa Kuniyoshi	p. 41
<b>Such a Comical Ramshackle Beast – Pocked, Weathered, Pre-tannery...</b> <i>The Cow with the Subtile Nose</i> (1954), Jean Dubuffet	p. 47
<b>Painting the Cold Currency of Those Democratic Lowlanders</b> <i>Winter Landscape with Skaters</i> (c. 1608), Hendrick Avercamp	p. 53
<b>A Masterful Sampling of History in the Making</b> <i>The Art of Painting</i> (c. 1666–67), Johannes Vermeer	p. 61
<b>An Apotheosis of the Spirit of the Pumpkin</b> <i>Starry Pumpkin Gold</i> (2014), Yayoi Kusama	p. 65
<b>The Pendulum Swings from Age to Youth</b> <i>The Swing</i> (c. 1767), Jean-Honoré Fragonard	p. 69

<b>Mystery Heaped upon Mystery</b>	p. 73
<i>Landscape with the Fall of Icarus</i> (1554–55), Pieter Bruegel the Elder	
<b>Deaths by Anonymity</b>	p. 79
<i>The Execution of Emperor Maximilian</i> (1867), Edouard Manet	
<b>The Bold-Breasted Dominatrix Strides Forth</b>	p. 85
<i>The Alcove: An Interior with Three Figures</i> (1939), Léonor Fini	
<b>Sweetly Tweaked Creature, No Sooner Blown but Blasted</b>	p. 89
<i>Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters</i> (c. 1594), unknown artist	
<b>The Sweet, Self-Delighting Floatingness of It All</b>	p. 95
<i>Bird Garden</i> (1924), Paul Klee	
<b>In Praise of the Modesty of Well-Made, Painted Things</b>	p. 101
<i>The Courtyard of a House in Delft</i> (1658), Pieter de Hooch	
<b>The Infinite Patience of the Unlovely Collaborator</b>	p. 105
<i>Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair</i> (c. 1877), Paul Cézanne	
<b>The Banker's Act of Worshipful Extravagance</b>	p. 109
<i>The Adoration of the Magi</i> (1423), Gentile da Fabriano	
<b>The Crushed Blushings of Autumnal Excess</b>	p. 115
<i>Autunno</i> (1993–95), Cy Twombly	
<b>When the Exotics Steamed in to Gawp at the Seaside</b>	p. 119
<i>The Beach at Trouville</i> (1875), Eugène Boudin	
<b>A Savage Crew in Brilliant Light</b>	p. 125
<i>Crucifixion of St Peter</i> (1601), Caravaggio	
<b>The Teasing Allure of the Malevolent Protectress</b>	p. 131
<i>Spider</i> (2007), Louise Bourgeois	
<b>God's Sobering Judgement</b>	p. 135
<i>The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden</i> (1425–27), Masaccio	
<b>A Message-Bearing Simulacrum of Treeness</b>	p. 139
<i>Iron Tree</i> (2013), Ai Weiwei	

- The Abiding Stench of the Charnel House** p. 143  
*The Dead Christ* (c. 1480), Andrea Mantegna
- War's Terrible Desolations** p. 149  
*Cosmos and Disaster* (c. 1936), David Alfaro Siqueiros
- The Indomitable Solidity of the Thing Itself** p. 153  
*Study of the Trunk of an Elm Tree* (c. 1824), John Constable
- The Coy, Voluptuous Prize** p. 157  
*Bathsheba with King David's Letter* (1654), Rembrandt
- The Hurrying Ahead of the Ever Disappearing Jesus** p. 161  
*Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888), James Ensor
- A Marvellously Shadowy Game of Prestidigitation** p. 167  
*An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768), Joseph Wright of Derby
- A Savage Witnessing to the Patient Application of Paint** p. 173  
*Dead Girl* (2002), Marlene Dumas
- From Squirming Rampancy to Perfect Composure** p. 177  
*The Lady with an Ermine* (portrait of Cecilia Gallerani) (1489–90), Leonardo da Vinci
- The Vast and Humbling Horrors of the Creation** p. 183  
*Traveller above the Mists* (1818), Caspar David Friedrich
- A Dispassionate Act of Pure Vengeance?** p. 187  
*Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c. 1614–20), Artemisia Gentileschi
- The Preposterous Posing of a Bunch of Bananas** p. 191  
*The Uncertainty of the Poet* (1913), Giorgio de Chirico
- A Menacing Quartet of Merciless Leerers** p. 197  
*Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)* (1490–1500), Hieronymus Bosch
- The Steady, Full-Frontal Solemnity of the Jesus of His Day** p. 203  
*Self-Portrait* (1500), Albrecht Dürer
- Such an Engorging Emblem of Shapeliness** p. 207  
*Single Lily with Red* (1928), Georgia O'Keeffe



<b>The Uncanny Watchfulness of the Imperial Oppressor</b>	p. 211
<i>The Meroë Head of Augustus</i> (27–25 BC), unknown artist	
<b>The Dance of the Prestidigitatory Image-Maker</b>	p. 215
<i>The Clown (Le Clown)</i> (1943), Henri Matisse	
<b>The Blakean Sun God Bursts Forth</b>	p. 219
<i>The Resurrection of Christ</i> (c. 1510–15), Matthias Grünewald	
<b>The Ravishing Allure of the Provisional</b>	p. 223
<i>The Vision of St John</i> (1608–14), El Greco	
<b>The Unsettled Wrenching Awry of the Human Form</b>	p. 229
<i>Death and the Maiden</i> (1915–16), Egon Schiele	
<b>The Mirroring of the Mysteries</b>	p. 235
<i>Las Meninas</i> (1656), Diego Velasquez	
<b>Yet Another Bloody Martyr to the Revolutionary Cause</b>	p. 239
<i>The Death of Marat</i> (1793), Jacques-Louis David	
<b>Misunderstanding in Carrara Marble</b>	p. 243
<i>L.O.V.E.</i> (2010), Maurizio Cattelan	
<b>The Medici Court Painter’s Bewitchingly Twisty Carnality...</b>	p. 247
<i>An Allegory with Venus and Cupid</i> (c. 1545), Bronzino	
<b>The Thunderous Spectacle of Sheer Water</b>	p. 251
<i>Niagara Falls, from the American Side</i> (1867), Frederic Edwin Church	
<b>The Mute Maker in a Fatherland of Nostalgia</b>	p. 255
<i>Carpenter</i> (1928–29), Kazimir Malevich	
<b>Making It Inside Out</b>	p. 259
<i>House</i> (1993), Rachel Whiteread	
<b>Biographies</b>	p. 264
<b>Picture Credits</b>	p. 270
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	p. 271

# The Poet's Eye

James Bradburne

Director General, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

It is difficult to know how to write about Michael Glover's art criticism in isolation. Were either of us different people, I could adopt the dispassionate tone of objective authority: 'Michael Glover is an exceptional critic in a field already distinguished by great writing and deep insight, a field that includes Ingrid Rowland, Tim Parks and others.' This would all be true, but it would not do justice to the breadth of my relationship and the depth of my friendship. For Michael is not only an art critic and a poet; he is also a friend.

I am a museum director and an exhibition maker, and Michael has been reviewing – critically – my work for nearly two decades. We first met at the Museum of Applied Art in Frankfurt (which I directed from 1999 to 2003) when he came to review *I Love You*, an exhibition on computer viruses curated by Franziska Nori. I argued that the subject was a cultural phenomenon and possible candidate for consideration as a form of concrete poetry. Michael, with a reputation as a fine poet, was the obvious choice to review the show, and rather reluctantly he was persuaded by our press officer to come to Frankfurt. I still remember his posture as he cast a glaucous eye on the row of unremarkable computers on which hackers had installed their masterpieces. He listened to my well-practised synopsis with patient reserve, but little sympathy, until we came across two wild-haired young hackers finishing their installation. He turned to them and said, 'So tell me what this means.' He was shocked to hear them describe in loving detail the way in which the code 'spoke' to them – not only its meaning but its underlying structure, its form and, ultimately,

its beauty. Clearly for them code was a language, and like all languages, it had the potential of becoming literature, even poetry. I cannot claim he was won over, but from then on he found ways to review the exhibitions I produced, at mak.frankfurt, and then from 2006 at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence.

Michael sees a great many exhibitions, but this doesn't mean he is a greenery-gallery pushover for art. On the contrary. As an exhibition maker, in my bleakest moments of self-doubt, I have wondered why people bother to go to exhibitions at all. The taste for wandering about surrounded by objects badly lit and poorly interpreted is certainly an acquired taste, if Bertie Wooster's opinion can be trusted.

I have never been much of a lad for exhibitions. The citizenry in the mass always rather puts me off, and after I have been shuffling along with the multitude for a quarter of an hour or so I feel as if I were walking on hot bricks. [...] I mean to say, millions of people, no doubt, are so constituted that they scream with joy and excitement at the spectacle of a stuffed porcupine fish or a glass jar of seeds from Western Australia – but not Bertram.

(P.G. Wodehouse, 'The Rummy Affair of Old Biffy', in *Carry On Jeeves*, 1925)

Bertie's (and oddly my own) doubts about the exhibition medium are also shared by Michael Glover, as are the means of judging the work's success:

There is a crude way of testing the value of any work of art. It is called the Ten-Second Test. If any work of art is worth staring at for as long as ten seconds, it stands a chance. That's it. Most works of art – and especially those which are being made today under the name of 'art' – fail that test miserably. Three seconds, perhaps four, are quite enough.

('The Steely, Ascetic Countenance of a Cunning Diplomat')

The research bears him out – the average time a visitor normally looks at any particular painting in an art exhibition is only about six seconds, and most of the time we spend in galleries is spent shuffling listlessly, squinting at the badly lit and even more badly written labels pasted on tiny scraps beside the artwork, which only serve to attract a crowd of knowledge-thirsty exhibition goers, who then block the view of the painting to anyone else. Six seconds is a generous estimate.

After decades of paying close attention to art, Michael has developed a keen eye, a sharp tongue and the instincts of a museum professional. With other critics, this intimacy can become a vice, as the critic's eye is no longer in tune with that of the reader. The trained eye is often blind to the beauty the naïve eye still sees. This is where being a poet helps, with poetry's relentless discipline of returning to the startling freshness of the world. Nelson Goodman once called the museum 'an institution for the prevention of blindness', which is as good a definition as I can propose. The poet helps us cure the eye both jaded and dazzled by the contemporary world's surfeit of images. Michael's touch is sure, his phrases terse and lapidary, his gaze – held for at least ten seconds – deep and insightful. The poet is anything but blind:

The point of a flea is that it is peskily small, and, from a physical point of view, utterly insignificant. [...] This flea, on the other hand, looks quite the opposite. This self-vaunting monster looks like a creature of some moment, not to be easily cast aside or screwed into nothingness beneath a careful thumb. [...] It has all the tremendous muscular allure of a male nude by Michelangelo. Malignity writ large then. Yes, it seems to have all heaven in its tow: all those shooting stars, fresh snatched from some tree in the children's nursery, look as if they are dancing attendance upon it as they fizz and roar at its back. It looks like some magician which is about to yank a trick out of its acorn cup. In short, it has a

wonderful, commanding presence. The natural world seems to pivot about it. This flea is determined to get somewhere.

(‘The Overbearing Monstrousness of the Visionary Moment’)

A.E. Housman famously admired critics more than artists (to the dismay of G.H. Hardy), and wrote, ‘Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that Heaven has in its treasures, I cannot say; but Heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets [...] if rare in comparison with blackberries, are commoner than returns of Halley’s comet: [literary] critics are less common.’ Michael Glover is a rare critic in a now crowded field, and has the power to transform the hard work of criticism into intellectual play, inviting us to join him in solving the riddle that every great work of art represents.

We could propose that [the inconsistencies of this painting are] the consequence of Bronzino having bitten off more than he could chew, that he did not quite possess the painterly expertise to get this enormously complicated composition quite right. (This is his first attempt at the theme. The second, in Budapest, is much more straightforward and academic in its approach.) That’s nonsense though – he was simply too great a painter. So he has us on the end of a spit, and, quite gently, he turns it. What a tease.

(‘The Medici Court Painter’s Bewitchingly Twisty Carnality...’)

Above all, Michael Glover is a poet, enormously aware of the hard work of making words work. This love of craft shines through in his admiration for certain artists and certain works:

What then is happening here? Here is a carpenter, a maker with his hands. He holds an axe, a chisel. This man is Russia. This man is at the heart of things. The wood which he works is on the move,

slipping sideways, part-worked, coming into being as an architectural structure of a certain Russian timelessness. See that ornamental window behind him? And yet this carpenter is being seen through the eyes of the stylisations of the modern, all those paintings by Picasso, Matisse and others that Malevich had seen in the Moscow homes of two great collectors, Morozov and Shchukin, earlier in the century, and the later experiments of the so-called Cubo-Futurists. Malevich was in the thick of all that.

(‘The Mute Maker in a Fatherland of Nostalgia’)

Michael’s gaze penetrates far beneath the surface of the painting.

Alas, all was not to go well after all. Death swept her off her feet when she was barely twenty-five years of age. Sweet creature, no sooner blown but blasted, as some court poet might have been found murmuring, from the wings.

(‘Sweetly Tweaked Creature, No Sooner Blown but Blasted’)

‘No sooner blown but blasted’ – who but a poet, quoting another poet, could write an observation as terse?

An art critic, a poet and a friend. As an art critic, Michael did not pull his punches, and when he came to visit Florence to review our exhibition on Galileo at the Palazzo Strozzi, he didn’t hesitate to express his profound reservations:

In spite of the fact that this is a 16th-century building, the show itself is contained – more constrained than contained [...] Everything feels pent, cornered and thrust forward, a-throb with scientific significance. The effect is dazzling – but also rather strangulatory. In spite of the fact that the spaces within the buildings themselves have great processional possibilities, there is no sense of pacing at all, and when we do finally come across

Galileo and evidence of his astonishing achievements in those final rooms, it comes as something of a shock – like suddenly meeting a human being on a corner in the middle of the night. And then, all of a sudden the exhibition ends, and you feel you have hit a brick wall, and are being kicked out into the street.

(‘Galileo: Images of the Universe from Antiquity to the Telescope, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence’, review by Michael Glover, *The Independent*, 16 April 2009)

He was right – it was a failed experiment, from which I learned a great deal, lessons which were ultimately put to good use in creating the next exhibition, *Art & Illusions* (2009), and ultimately *Bronzino* (2010), *The Springtime of the Renaissance* (2013) and *Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino* (2014). If we listen to good critics, good poets and good friends, the exhibitions we make are much the better for it. In the end, being a friend, Michael even wrote poetry for me at Palazzo Strozzi, in spring 2010. All the insight he has gained from decades of looking carefully at art finds its voice in his poetry, and his poetry, at least on this occasion, found itself in the exhibition *De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus*, which, after all, is perhaps as it should be.

### **La Sérénité du Savant**

*Oh to see, wide-eyed, and never to be seen!*  
*Oh to make sense of an arm,*  
*To believe in the beauty of a coat of stone –*  
*All this makes sense of being alone.*

# A Brief Note by the Author

Do not be too readily deceived. This is not a book of art criticism of the kind to which you might be accustomed. Nor is it a work of scholarship. There are no footnotes here, and no explanatory matter at the end. What you have here are three things: a blaring headline in which I have tried to encapsulate some sense of the inner nature and meaning of each work of art; its title; and some words about what I have seen in the form of a brief essay. And, oh yes, some very good pictures of what I am trying to describe.

This book is an account of a series of physical encounters. Highly personal. Immediate. Encounters which were often full of shock and surprise, amazement and delight. For that is my definition of a great work of art. It is that which shocks, amazes, surprises and delights. Week by week, as I practised my trade as an art critic for *The Independent*, I experienced these unexpected shocks. They were often almost physical shocks. And being shocking, they were entirely unpredictable – as turning a corner to be confronted by a scene of conflagration, naked flames rising to the skies, for example, can be wholly unpredictable if you were expecting yesterday's serenity, calmness, order.

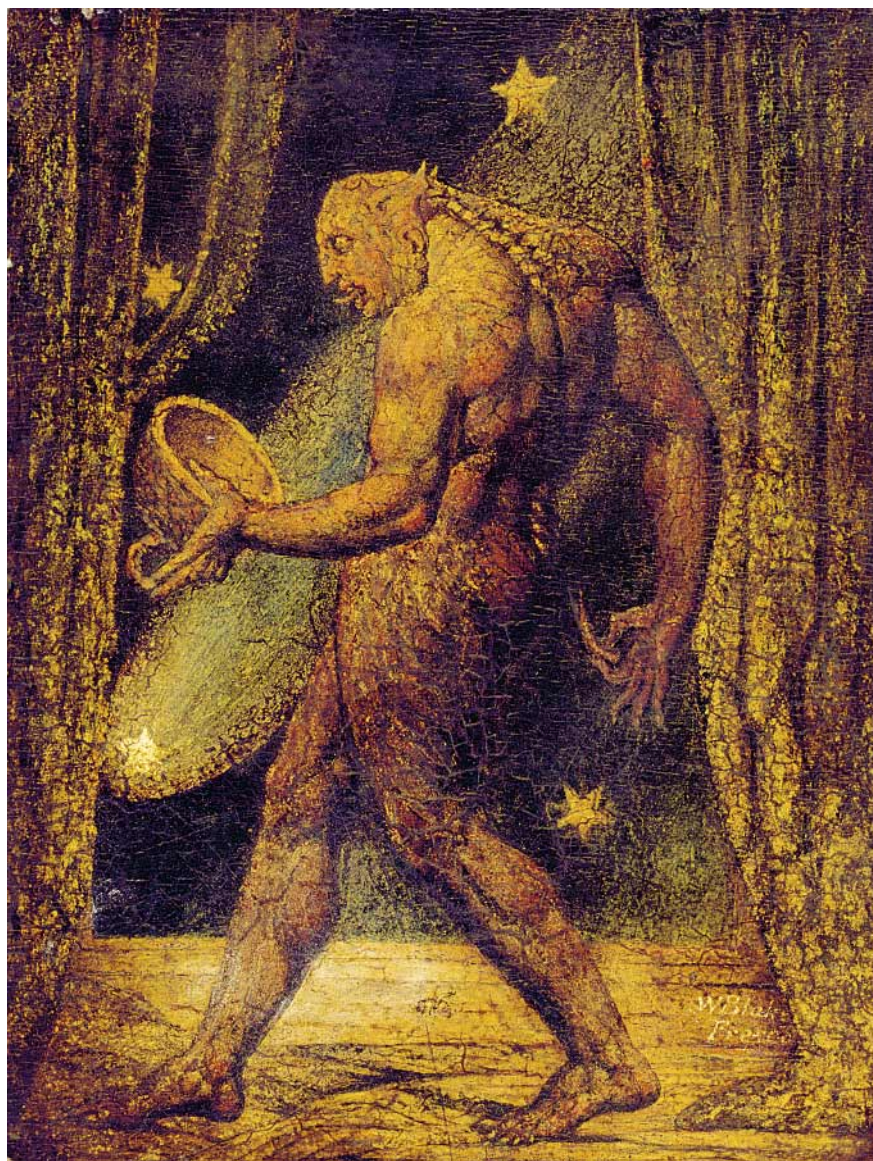
Great art is not especially serene, calm and orderly – though, from time to time, it can be. It often sets your teeth on edge. It draws you into the aura of its presence, and then it is often rather reluctant to let you go. Some of the greatest works are forever calling you back to them, demanding that you look at them again and again – quite as bothersome as any human relationship, you might say. Such a work is Giovanni Bellini's great portrait *Doge Loredan*. You are never done



with this painting of this man. He is inexhaustible. And part of his inexhaustibility resides in this: you do not finally know why he has this hold over you. And so you need to return to the Sainsbury Wing of London's National Gallery in order, once again, to endeavour to unpick his mysteries. This book is an account of my attempts to unpick many mysteries. And, having read it, you must go to see these works for yourself. I challenge you to be challenged by them too. I would probably prefer it if you disagreed with me about this, that and the other. Then we could sit down and have a proper conversation about art and why it matters.



The  
Overbearing  
Monstrousness  
of the  
Visionary  
Moment



*The Ghost of a Flea* (c. 1819–20), William Blake,  
21.4 × 16.2 cm (8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 6 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.), Tate Britain, London

**B**lake's words and images – and especially when they form a part of one or another of the many illustrated Prophetic Books – often seem to have arrived as if from nowhere. Well, nowhere within reach of our immediate understanding. Angels and demonic beings loop around his words, transporting them goodness knows where. We are never a party to his visions. How could we have been? Nor even was his wife and faithful, life-long collaborator, Catherine. We can never know who or what spoke to him, or dictated to him the words or the images that he was said to have transcribed. We can only assume that he struggled to transcribe them faithfully – as far as he was able. It is for this reason that we often seem to be looking at the world of Blake through a glass darkly, in the words of St Paul.

What we do know is that the images are often violently at odds with the common world in which we move, breathe and have our being. They live in some strange, set-apart space of seemingly endless visual exaltation. And yet this is also not quite so. We do see, in part at least, where they come from. There is a great deal of religion in his work, but it seems to be the religion of a wild apostate from the core dogmas of Christianity – even allowing for the influence of Swedenborgianism. Jesus keeps some very odd company. There is also politics, but even some of Blake's politicians take on the aura of the supernatural. And what of insects? Does he have time for those too? Well, yes. All things, great and small, seemed to matter equally to him if we are to believe those great words of his in a poem called 'Auguries of Innocence': 'To see a world in a grain of sand [...] Hold infinity in the palm of your hand'. In Blake's world, the smallest things can be huge, and the loftiest, puny. It all depends upon their imaginative and emotional heft.