



# FRICK MADISON THE BRUTAL TRUTH

**T**he former Whitney Museum of American Art, now known as Frick Madison, is one of New York City's biggest works of minimalist sculpture. But unlike most such artworks, this is one you can occupy for an afternoon. When the building was completed in 1966 by architect Marcel Breuer (1902–1981), it was as if a giant public sculpture had settled onto a permanent plinth overlooking Madison Avenue.

Breuer's upside-down concrete ziggurat, with cantilevering floors and facades punctuated with projecting trapezoidal windows, is a modernist work of art that was designed to house other works of modern art. Designed in the aptly named brutalist style — whereby reinforced concrete in all its raw gray glory is left exposed, complete with smears of rust flowing down from the bolts that hold its concrete slabs in place — the Whitney instantly became a conspicuous aesthetic presence in the streetscape. In that sense, it is akin to the way Frank Lloyd Wright's telescoping Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum presents itself on Fifth Avenue as a work of art. One could argue that the Statue of Liberty is also a work of figurative art that can be occupied, though technically it's in New Jersey.

So, when the Frick Collection moved into the Breuer building in March 2021, after the building's most recent tenant (the Metropolitan Museum of Art) had departed, it was jarring to imagine the Frick's Vermeers, Rembrandts, Turners, Bellini, Duccio, Cimabue, Renaissance bronzes, and Meissen porcelains residing in a concrete fortress designed specifically for modern art. Entering Breuer's building has always required crossing a footbridge over a waterless moat, and indeed that experience



The former Whitney Museum of American Art at 945 Madison Avenue; photo: Ed Lederman



Marcel Breuer sitting in his Whitney Museum of American Art (while still under construction), 1964; courtesy Breuer papers, 1920–86, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, photo: Marc and Evelyne Bernheim

has only reinforced the disconnect of traditional art being housed in such a venue. By contrast, entering the neoclassical Frick mansion on East 70th Street requires passing through a pair of carved wooden doors into a hushed foyer whose walls are clad in veined marble.

The Frick will occupy the Breuer building until spring 2023 while its customary home is reconfigured and reimaged. I suggest that admirers of the Frick mansion refrain from walking by it for a while, given that its garden (designed by Russell Page in 1977) is now a gaping hole and its limestone facades are concealed by scaffolding. Plywood planks line its roof like something out of a shantytown.

I am supposed to like Marcel Breuer's buildings. Thirty years ago, I published a book (*Architecture Without Rules: The Houses of Marcel Breuer and Herbert Beckhard*) about 20 of his residential masterpieces around the world. I toured most of them, sipped cocktails with their owners, walked their grounds, sunned on their cantilevered terraces, but I never came to love them. Through my weekly meetings with his (now late) design partner, Herbert Beckhard, I came to admire Breuer's design ethos, his revolutionary approach to residential architecture, the way he brought the ideals of Germany's Bauhaus to American houses, and his furniture designs, on which many of us continue to sit.

But I was often disappointed by my experience of the interiors. Brutalist buildings (and Breuer's houses are of that style) are often dark, dank,

Selldorf Architects' project rendering of the Frick Collection's neoclassical mansion as it will eventually appear from across East 70th Street







**BRONZINO** (1503–1572), *Lodovico Capponi*, c. 1550–55, oil on panel, 45 7/8 x 33 3/4 in., photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr. (This painting is on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art through October 11.)



**JOSEPH CHINARD** (1756–1813), *Portrait of Louis-Étienne Vincent-Marnioli*, 1809, terracotta, 25 3/16 x 25 3/16 x 14 15/16 in., photo: Michael Bodycomb



Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* has been paired with one of Breuer's iconic trapezoidal windows; photo: Joseph Coscia Jr.

scrupulously unadorned. As I rang many a doorbell, I observed moss and lichen growing in darkened recesses, concrete surfaces streaked with rust and discolorations, flat roofs dripping with moisture. Once inside, though, walls of windows admitted an abundance of natural light, and expanses of interior walls were painted the distinctive — and appealing — Breuer Blue, a complicated recipe that results in a periwinkle/cornflower hue. Yet whenever I spotted those brutalist concrete walls, I wanted to clad them in Sheetrock, paint them, hang pictures on them, soften them somehow. Houses are not bunkers or machines for living.

There is nothing soft or cozy about the former Whitney building. Whenever I am in its low-ceilinged interior stairwell, I am reminded of a parking garage, vaguely worried that I might forget on which level I've left my car. The ceiling of every exhibition gallery is a neat grid of concrete coffers, a gaze up into which is akin to looking into the abyss. While many people profess to adore brutalism, especially now that many of these 1960s and '70s buildings are being pulled down, I cannot imagine how one could feel warm affection for their cold concrete surfaces. The material itself radiates an actual coolness. One tenet of brutalism is its "celebration" of raw materials and structure, the bolts and mortars that hold everything together, and the ways those materials were made off-site. Not once in the history of architecture, ever since the first freestanding buildings were erected some 10,000 years ago, have their makers wished to express just their structure and leave it there. Why (in the 1960s) was it thought that this had been a millennia-long wish?

The experience of visiting the Frick mansion is one of opulence. Clocks chime, Middle Eastern rugs mute voices and footsteps, Fifth Avenue





GIOVANNI BELLINI (c. 1424/35–1516), *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1476–78, oil on panel, 48 7/8 x 55 1/16 in., photo: Michael Bodycomb

traffic whooshes by — seen through French doors yet somehow not heard. The splashing sounds of the fountain in its covered courtyard trickle into the adjacent galleries, once the spacious rooms of a private home. Swags of drapery are held with fanciful passementerie pulls, and heavy mahogany furnishings discreetly keep viewers distanced from paintings on the walls. The idea of Frick masterpieces residing in Breuer's building is akin to spotting a Louis XIV commode — all marquetry and ormolu — in an IKEA showroom. Frick publicists report that approximately 290 works are on view now; back at the mansion, the typical number is 470, so that is quite a reduction.

There is a kind of cult around the Frick, a pious devotion among adherents to the museum's collection and setting. I am among its congregants.

A newly published book, *The Sleeve Should Be Illegal*, gathers essays by 62 writers and cultural figures offering comments on their favorite works in the collection. In that volume, I give a prayerful account of my love for Bronzino's portrait of Lodovico Capponi, based on an earlier essay I wrote for *The New York Times*.

Prior to the renovation/expansion now underway, a scheme proposed in 2014 would have resulted in a tower looming over part of the Frick and the removal altogether of Page's garden. Fortunately, that plan was soundly defeated; I was among the first to object with an essay in the *Times*. The new, less ambitious plan, conceived by "starchitect" Annabelle Selldorf, is definitely moving forward, though some say the museum used the pandemic as an excuse for proceeding before some community-based review processes could take place.

So, what about the Frick's artworks, which range from the Middle Ages to the 20th century? They are, after all, the ultimate consideration. When the heavenly blue sky of Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* or the magenta of the cloak in Vermeer's *The Officer and Laughing Girl* or the sea of curls on Chinard's bust of Louis-Étienne Vincent-Marniola are set



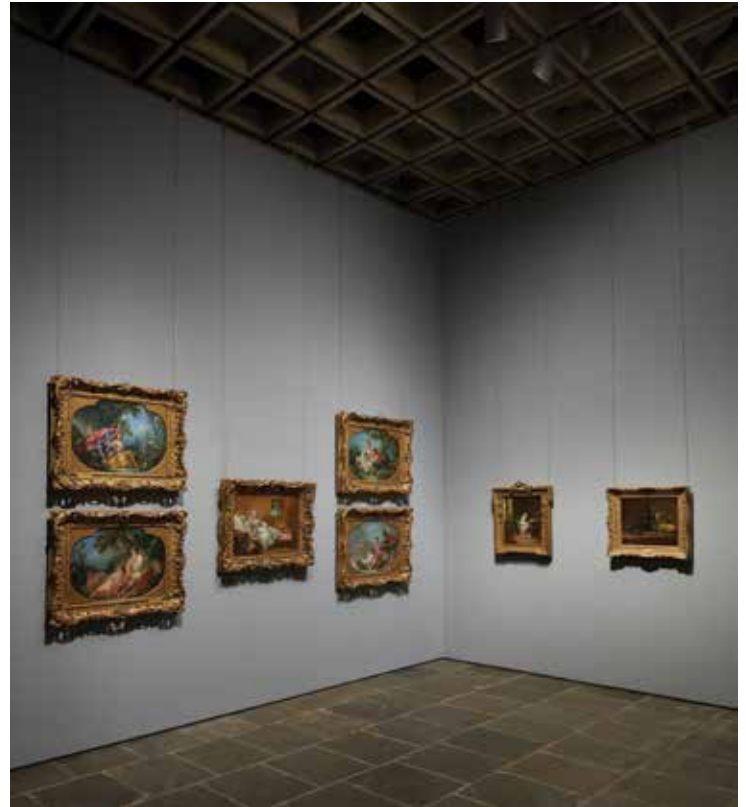
European and Asian porcelains on view at Frick Madison with two pieces of 18th-century furniture; photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.

against Breuer's plain walls, their details, colors, forms, and narratives emerge in full relief. There is nothing in the background to distract viewers, no domestic elements to compete with the image. What we experience now at Frick Madison is, perhaps, a purer form of the artworks than we saw back at the mansion.

Here there are no velvet ropes or Savonarola chairs set in front of masterworks to prevent us from getting too close. Indeed, visitors are getting awfully close now, so the guards appear to be on heightened alert as people lean in toward canvases or prepare to pet a bronze. For those who do keep the proper distance, it is a thrill to get closer than ever before. For instance, I have long tried to find any grotesque faces hidden in the folds of cloth behind Lodovico Capponi. We can see them in Bronzino's portrait of another young man in the collection of the Met, so now I look with extra zeal at the Frick Madison.

Early in the pandemic, the Frick launched a series of online video presentations titled *Cocktails with the Curator*, in which chief curator Xavier F. Salomon, curator Aimee Ng, and assistant curator of sculpture Giulio Dalvit presented conversations about specific artworks, each talk paired with a relevant drink and recipe for making it. (The series ended this past July.) The Friday broadcasts were a welcome way to continue learning about favorite works while the museum remained closed. In one episode Salomon focused on Francesco da Sangallo's *St. John Baptizing*, emphasizing that not one Frick artwork was conceived for display in a museum, a concept wholly foreign when many of its Renaissance pieces were created. Because of that fact, the curators have always needed to decide carefully how to display them, not only in the mansion but now in the Breuer building, in such a way that a dialogue ensued among them.

Except for a few tweaks, artworks have generally remained in the same locations inside the mansion for decades at a time. With the move to Madison Avenue, the curators had the chance to wholly rearrange. Talented interior designers often encourage homeowners simply to shift around items they already own, as a way to reinvigorate otherwise familiar rooms. The Frick curators, lead designer Stephen Saitas, director Ian Wardropper, and former decorative arts curator Charlotte Vignon have proved themselves talented choreographers in their ability to foster fresh dialogue and movement among the pieces. Bellini's ecstatic *St. Francis* now resides in its own gallery/alcove, with one of Breuer's largest windows bringing in a kind of filtered heavenly urban light. I admit that one of the architect's most exhilarating features is its trapezoidal windows, through which we capture views of the Upper East Side and the sky over Central Park. Those vistas are framed artworks themselves.



The gallery of 18th-century French paintings unites François Boucher (left wall) with Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (right); photo: Joseph Coscia, Jr.

The Frick's three Vermeers (there are 34 known ones in the world) occupy their own gallery, while its porcelains are now arranged by color and displayed on ledges. Viewers can now get close enough to Duccio's *Temptation of Christ on the Mountain* (c. 1308–11) to see the actual scratches near the devil's face that a 14th-century vandal made with a weapon.

A key reward of Frick Madison awaits you on the fourth (top) floor. There the ceilings are higher, the windows more numerous, and, so, the collection of French works particularly bright. Francois-Pascal-Simon Gérard's full-length portrait of Prince Camillo Borghese is so startling that it stops everyone, with men and women alike commenting on the figure's sheer beauty. And Boucher's *Four Seasons*, the series of painted panels that seemed suited only to their dedicated room in the Frick mansion, translate well here.

Ultimately, the Breuer building is a shell. It can house anything, from conceptualism to realism, from modern to ancient. Given its galleries' neutral palette and unadorned surfaces, I could imagine them working as a car showroom or hardware store, too. Maybe that is one of the building's chief attributes — its adaptability. For now, the Frick artworks prevail, and when they are redisplayed in their revamped mansion home, we might even miss seeing them in such a pure setting. Even so, I am eager to hear the clocks chime again as I wander its rooms. ●

**Information:** [frick.org](http://frick.org). All artworks illustrated here are in the Frick's permanent collection.

**DAVID MASELLO** is executive editor of *Milieu* magazine. His new book, *Collaborations: Ferguson & Shamamian Architects*, will be published by Rizzoli this October.