

Knight, Christopher. "2011 Year in Review: Best in art." *Los Angeles Times* (Culture Monster), 15 December 2011.

In chronological order of their opening, these are the nine California museum shows, plus one show that could have been, that I enjoyed most in 2011 (the final three are still on view):

Charles Garabedian: A Retrospective, Santa Barbara Museum of Art. An innovator in the return to national prominence of figurative painting more than 30 years ago, Garabedian took his place among the best painters Los Angeles has produced.

Thomas Gainsborough and the Modern Woman, San Diego Museum of Art. A concise gem of a show that demonstrated how the British artist's pictures of women, many of them performers, underscored the theatrical power of Gainsborough's own dazzling brush.

William Leavitt: Theater Objects, Museum of Contemporary Art. After 40 years of making mass media-inflected paintings and installations that hummed along just below the larger public radar, Leavitt stepped forward in a retrospective survey that had the quiet force of revelation.

Paris: Life & Luxury in the 18th Century, J. Paul Getty Museum. The Getty's own magnificent collection of French decorative arts, which once provided the scenery of daily life for the rich and powerful, was the catalyst for a fascinating study of the established but shaky social idea that great privilege entails great responsibility.

Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought, Oakland Museum of California. The social shock of the 1970s set the distinctive tone of humor and dread for the next 40 years of the Los Angeles artist's eccentric and poignant assemblage sculptures, films and installations.

Elliott Hundley: Semele, Regen Projects. Not a museum show, Hundley's monumental collage-reliefs and assemblage sculptures ruminating on the contemporary relevance of Euripides' Greek tragedy "The Bacchae" not only marked a major advance for a gifted young artist, they also would have had profound resonance if shown among the antiquities at the Getty Villa.

Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972-1987, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. For an acutely focused five or six years in the mid-1970s, the Chicano collective Asco — principally Willie Herron III, Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk and Patssi Valdez — incisively upended the artistic, social and political constraints of America's newly dominant media-culture.

Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. All three of the museum's venues were turned over to an exceptional, often surprising survey of 1960s Light & Space art, marvelously reshuffling our understanding of the distinctive L.A. genre.

Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980, UCLA Hammer Museum. Chronicling artists and developments that are not so much unknown as under-known, this painting and sculpture survey of Melvin Edwards, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, Charles White and others illuminated the transformative context within which their work developed.

Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. An eye-boggling array of Aztec, Inca and Spanish Colonial art — especially painting — the show is the first to consider the myriad ways in which art represented the indigenous people living under the post-conquest vice-royalties established in Mexico and Peru.

Worst development: The institutional confusion of fashion with art.