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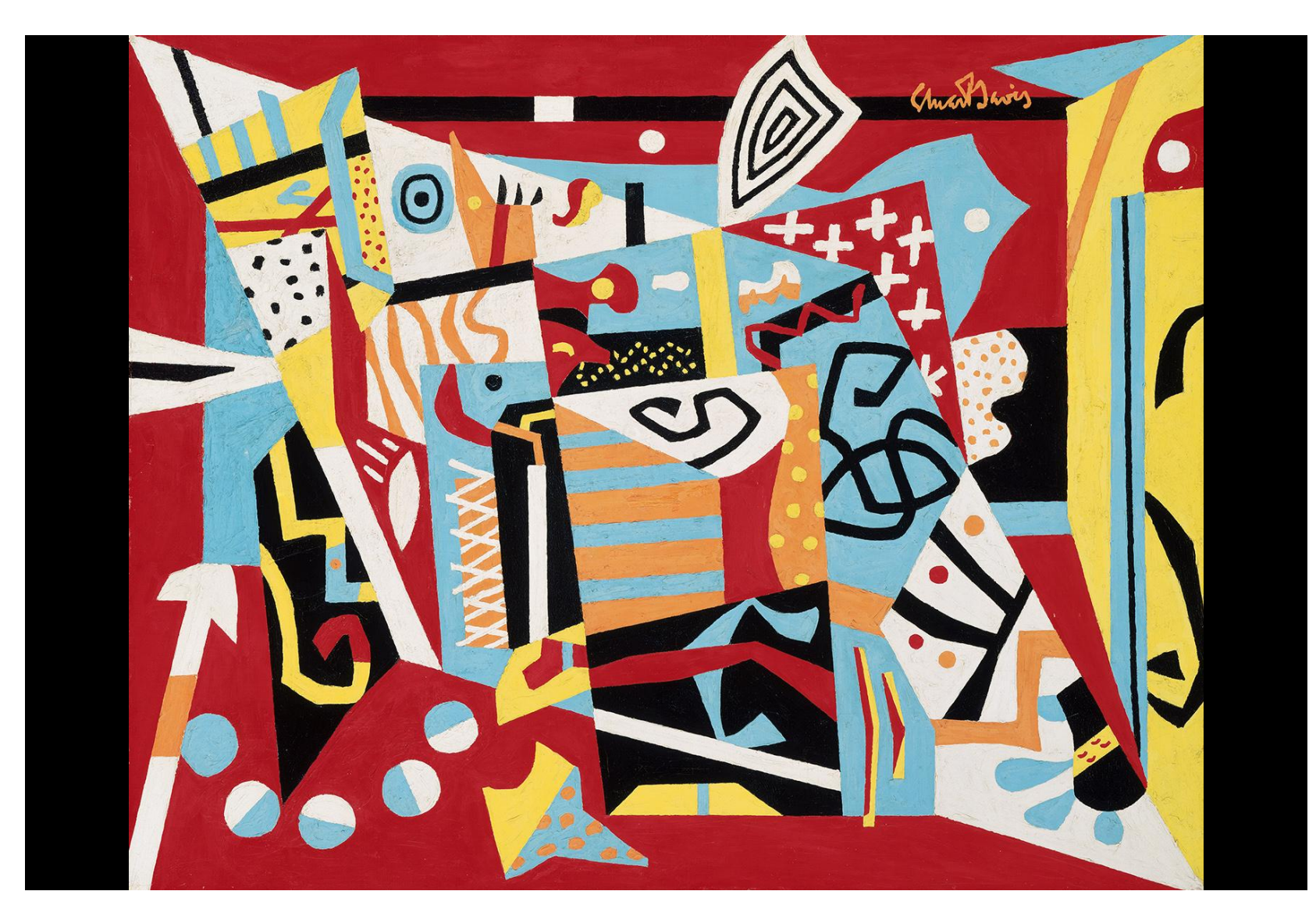

HIDE CAPTION

"Hot Stillscape for Six Colors - 7th Avenue Style," 1940, oil on canvas, by Stuart Davis - Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

By Chris Bergeron/DAILY NEWS STAFF
Posted Jul 30, 2009 at 12:01 AM
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An intriguing exhibit, "Seeing Songs" at the Museum of Fine Arts, raises provocative questions by exploring how visual artists over the last century have portrayed music's sound and power.

If you could hear with your eyes, what does Shostakovich's "Symphony for Chamber Music" look like?

Can a photograph capture the aching heartbreak of Janis Joplin singing "cry, cry baby"?

Who needs sound when a naked hairy man plays air guitar in a video?

An intriguing exhibit, "Seeing Songs" at the Museum of Fine Arts, raises these and other provocative questions by exploring how visual artists over the last century have portrayed music's sound and power.

Whether you can barely carry a tune, sing in a barbershop quartet or have an Aerosmith tattoo, this exhibit should pluck a musical chord in most everybody.

Showcasing 60 paintings, photos, prints and videos mostly from the MFA's collection, it examines how different artists sought to transform music's ephemeral flow into "visible physical form."

Some painters like Wassily Kandinsky depicted thrumming melodic beats and jarring rhythms as boldly colored abstractions. For photographers Herb Ritts and Richard Avedon, rock stars like Tina Turner and Mick Jagger were Dionysian muses for the Age of Aquarius.

As traditional boundaries between performers and their audience blurred, videographers such as Candice Breitz documented fans inhabiting Madonna's persona like squatters with no better place to go.

Organized by Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art William Stover, "Seeing Songs" is part of the Contemporary Outlook series and runs through Feb. 21 in the first floor Foster Gallery.

Stover said he created the exhibit to examine how classical and popular music has inspired visual artists using different mediums. But, he said, the exhibit also explores related themes such as "music as performance" and the relationship between musicians and celebrity in a fame-obsessed age.

In some ways the exhibit resembles a rock concert with a couple of opening acts, a headliner progressing from old favorites to new hits and ending, climactically, with the star at center stage basking in audience adulation.

While not diminishing their importance as an opening act, a gallery titled "Music: Persona and Performance" plays the same role as the warm-up acts, reminding viewers of the elevation of celebrity artists to an almost shamanistic role in society.

Shot largely by Ritts with several striking photos by Herb Greene and Elsa Dorfman, it offers a pantheon of rock gods and goddesses, including Bruce Springsteen, Prince and Aretha Franklin, as recognizable to fans today as Pan and Bacchus in ancient Greece.

Taking center stage, the exhibit's aesthetic core, a gallery titled "Music: Abstract and Concrete," offers sophisticated experiments by 20th century painters - like Kandinsky, Helen Torr and Arthur Garfield Dove - to visually depict music's fluid structure and emotional power.

Coming at a time when painters were challenging stylistic conventions, their efforts represented ambitious attempts to capture the complex structures of classical music through unorthodox forms and colors.

For many visitors, Breitz's wall-sized video installation, "Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)," delivers the bold, seductive power of the Material Girl herself.

Shot in Milan, Italy, in 2005, it features a grid of 30 screens of 15 male and female fans each singing a capella in English all 17 cuts of Madonna's "Immaculate Collection" album with heartfelt abandon.

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With all their voguing and gesticulating, these uninhibited Madonna poseurs might appear very cool or downright spooky depending on a viewer's age.

Are they experiencing ecstasy or self-immolation? Or is that just the timid caveat of someone who grew up listening to Pat Boone and The Kingston Trio?

Breitz's 73-minute "Queen" serves to introduce several other shorter videos likely to resonate with music lovers who grew up watching performers' on-screen antics in the Age of MTV.
Rather than organize the exhibit chronologically, Stover said the exhibit is "set up to be open and fluid like music itself."
"There's no one way or order to see it in. It's entirely up to the individual," he said.

Stover has chosen videos that explore both sides of the question whether music fans too easily surrender their personality to music they love.

In Gillian Wearing's 21-minute video, "Slight Reprise," several young men, including a disturbingly hirsute naked one, energetically play air guitar in their bedrooms.

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Yet in Dutch-born Rineke Dijkstra's four-minute video, an attractive but self-conscious young girl lip syncs a Backstreet Boys song with visible anxiety. Is she uncomfortable with the English language or the mildly suggestive lyrics? While Dijkstra doesn't say, visitors might sense an innocent preteen reluctant to venture into the complexities of adolescence.

Stover has chosen several videos that document the power of music, when married to high technology, to intrude on virtually every aspect of what was once our private lives.

"We travel through life with our own soundtrack. Sometimes others hear it; sometimes it's ours alone," he observed in wall text opening the exhibit. "Does music hold such a power we cannot leave it behind? Or is it a tool we use to isolate and disconnect ourselves from the world?"

"Seeing Songs" doesn't take sides.

But for MP3-wearing visitors watching 30 Madonna wannabes warble "Rescue Me," the message is clear: Pump up the volume.

THE ESSENTIALS:

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is open seven days a week.

Hours are 10 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. Saturday through Tuesday and 10 a.m. to 9:45 p.m. Wednesday through Friday.

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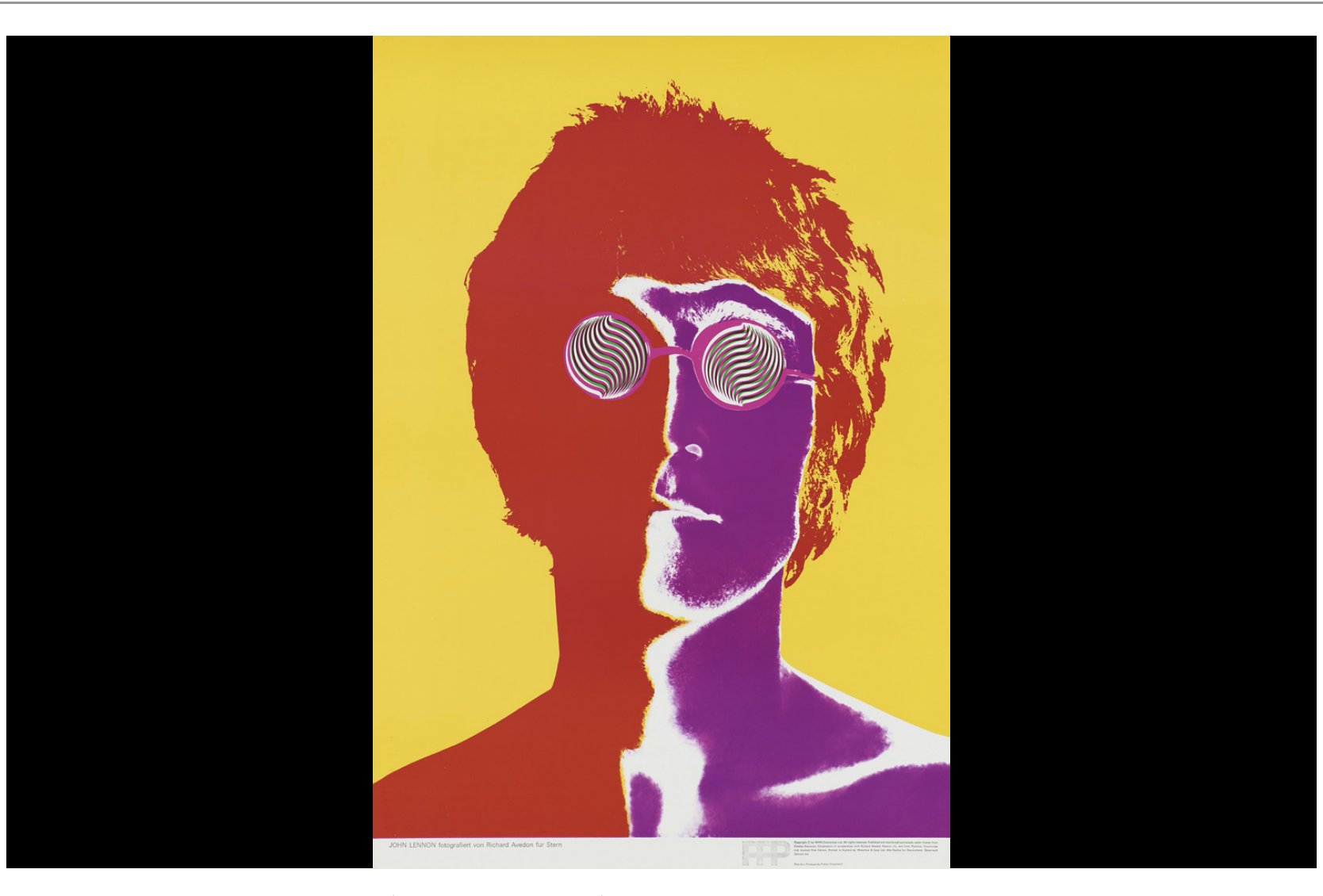
General admission (which includes two visits in a 10-day period) is $17 for adults; and $15 for seniors and students 18 and older. Admission for students who are University Members is free as is admission for children under 17 during non-school hours.

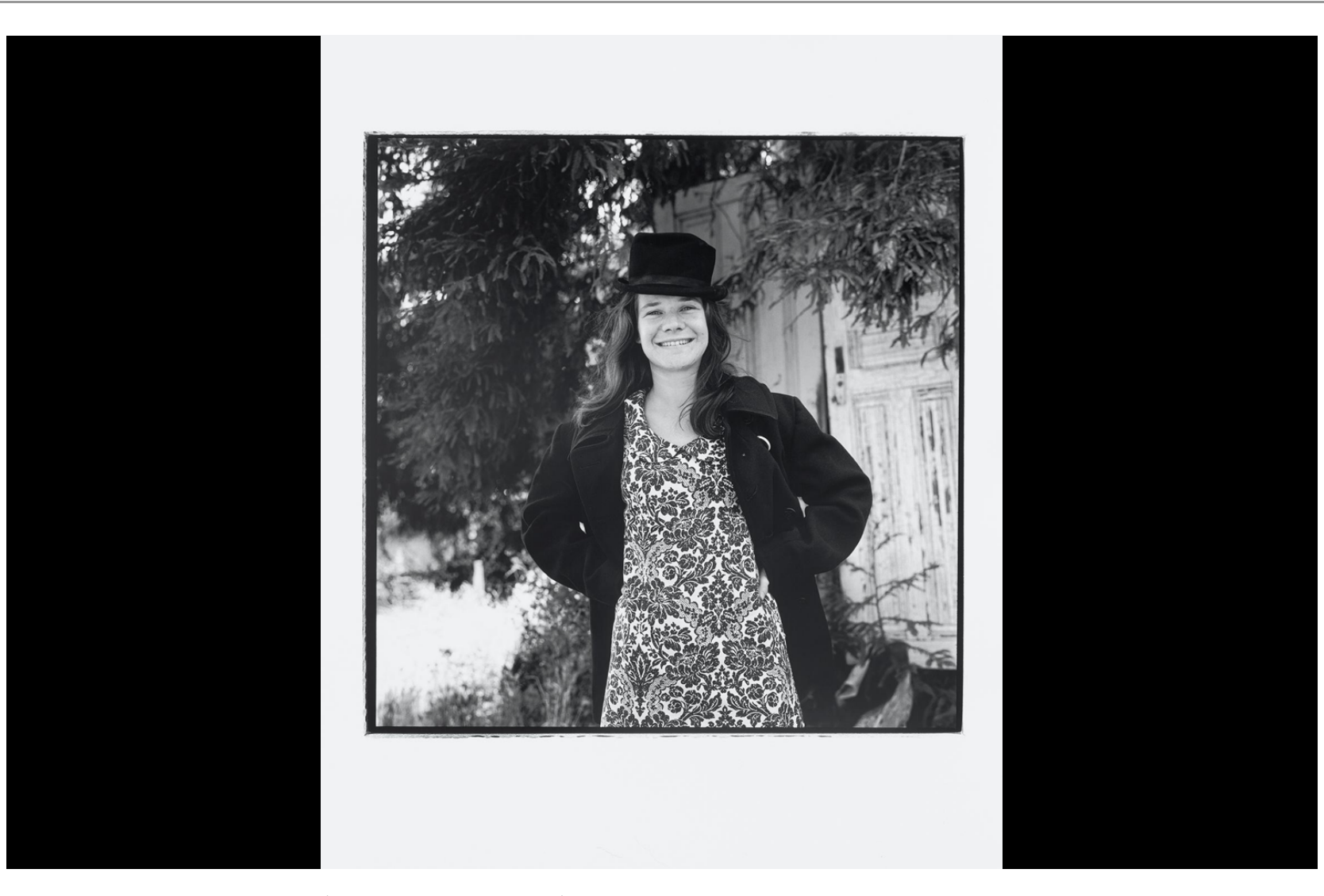
The MFA is offering several events in conjunction with this exhibit:

- Wednesday, Aug. 19, 6 to 7 p.m.: Stover will deliver a gallery talk.
- Sunday, Sept. 20, 2 to 3 p.m.: Benjamin Weiss, manager of adult learning resources, will lead a gallery talk.
- Saturday, Sept. 26, 12 to 1 p.m.: Local artist Joe Wardell will lead a gallery talk.

For information, call 617-267-9300 or visit www.mfa.org.



"John Lennon," by Richard Avedon (American, 1923-2004), 1967 Offset lithographic poster Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Lee M. Friedman Fund Photograph Richard Avedon. Courtesy The Richard Avedon Foundation. Copyright 1975, The Richard Avedon Foundation.



"Janis Joplin," by Herb Greene (American, born in 1942), 1966 Photograph, gelatin silver print Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Arlette and Gus Kayafas and The Living New England Artists Purchase Fund, created by The Stephen and Sybil Stone Foundation

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