The Pierre Matisse Collection:
Little New Under the Son

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Special to The Washington Post

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s the dormouse in "Alice in Wonderland" observes,
"Things are much of a muchness." That's what the cultural
life of Second City is like—much of a muchness, so much so that it's
sometimes too much so. On the other hand, what looks cool on
paper often fails to pan out in person. Even the near-infillable
Metropolitan Museum of Art has been known to slip a cog on
occasion, a case in point being the recent opening of the Pierre and
Maria-Gaetana Matisse Collection. You'd think that the first of three
planned exhibitions of paintings, sculptures and drawings left to the
Met by Henri Matisse's son and daughter-in-law would have been
the surest of sure things. Instead, it proved to be entirely slipworthy.
"Don't get me wrong," Mr. and
Mrs. Matisse gave some nice things
to the Met, most of them
Matisse the elder. But even the
Matisse's Matisses don't really
profit from being shown as a group,
while none of the distinguished
items by other artists is stop-press
tests. "Tall Figure," for instance, is
a first-class Giacometti bronze, but
I've seen plenty of first-class
Giacometti bronzes that look pretty
much like this one. In any case, too
much of the collection is forgettable
stuff, some of it by second-stringers.
(-Raymond Mason, anyone?)

Neil Welliver's
"Flowers, Flowers" is
part of a show at the
Alexandre Gallery that
outshines the higher
profile Matisse
exhibition at the
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, far left.

You'd be much better off heading
over to Salander-O'Reilly, where
"Constable's Skies" is on display
through June 25. It's a top-drawer
show consisting of two dozen cloud
studies and finished paintings by
John Constable. The gallery is
bidding it as "the first sky studies
show by John Constable in the
United States," which sounds right
to me. First or second, it's a dazzler:
Constable's cloud paintings, made
in 1821 and 1822, rank high among
his most personal efforts, all the
more so because so many of them
seen all but abstract at first glance.
No less lookable is "Neil Welliver:
Oil Studies," up at Alexandre
Gallery through June 18. It's an
exhibition of small-scale
preliminary studies for about 35 of
Welliver's large paintings of the
woods of Maine. He views the
world through the prism of
"all-over" abstract expressionism,
filling his canvases with rich, not
quite realistic detail. Here, the
modest size of each painting makes
for a tauter, more focused effect, in
much the same way that Jackson
Pollock's smaller drip paintings
have a concentration missing from
his giant-size work.

What's remarkable about these
exhibits is that either could have
been booked by the Met without
raising a hackle. That's New York
for your. Even our galleries mount
shows that smaller museums would
kill to present.