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McCLAIN GALLERY

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Picasso comes to light as draftsman in two Houston shows

By Molly Glentzer | September 16, 2016 | Updated: September 19, 2016 1:28pm

Photo: RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

IMAGE 1 OF 26

The Menil Collection exhibition also includes a charcoal-and-graphite self-portrait completed from 1917-19.

How much can a few simple-looking black strokes on a piece of paper reveal about the artist who creates them? Or about the three-dimensional object those lines represent - be it a bottle, a guitar or a sensual woman?

A lot, it turns out, if the marks are Pablo Picasso's, and they span seven decades of continually evolving inventiveness.

This is the first lesson of the new exhibition "Picasso The Line" at the Menil Collection. The show features 95 works on paper - mostly drawing and collage - that span all of Picasso's major creative periods.

McClain Gallery, meanwhile, has mounted a surprisingly sympatico commercial show of Picasso prints, also spanning 70 years.

Both exhibits offer insights - even for those who know Picasso well - and include works that are being exhibited publicly for the first time.

At the Menil, guest curator Carmen Giménez can't get enough of what she calls "linear Picasso."

She has studied Picasso's use of line since at least the early 1990s, when she curated a sculpture show called "Picasso and the Age of Iron" that focused on "drawing in space." She thought she'd exhausted her possibilities in 2012, when the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (where she worked for more than 20 years) staged her landmark show "Picasso Black and White," which examined Picasso's use of a monochromatic palette in painting, sculpture and works on paper in ways that inevitably brought attention to the lines in his compositions.

But when the show came to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2013, Josef Helfenstein nudged her further. Helfenstein, then the Menil Collection director, was getting ready to build the Menil Drawing Institute's new home, so he was focused on the primacy of drawing - the idea that putting a pen or pencil to paper represents something more profound to an artist than simply preparing to create a painting or sculpture.

MORE INFORMATION

'Picasso The Line'

When: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays, through Jan. 8

Where: The Menil Collection, 1533 Sul Ross

Info: Free; 713-525-9400, menil.org

'Imagining Backwards: Seven Decades of Picasso Master Prints'

When: Tuesdays-Fridays, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m.; Saturdays 11 a.m.-5 p.m., through Oct. 29

He asked Giménez to create a show of Picasso's drawings for the Menil, which hadn't looked in depth at the modern master since opening in 1987.

She resisted, initially.

"It's complicated to do Picasso," Giménez said. "No one wants to loan the works. And I don't like to do a show that has already been done. It has to be exciting for me. Then I thought, 'I'd never done drawing and the line.' "

To Giménez, "line" and "drawing" are not the same thing. She sees a line as something constructive that can contain an idea and drawing as merely superficial - a trace left on a surface.

"The importance of line has been palpable since the origins of western art in ancient Greece," she writes in the Menil show catalog. And when she looks at Picasso's lines, she sees the invention of modern art.

To build the show, she chose drawings with flattened perspectives that depend entirely on line - not shadowing.

"He's obsessed by the line," Giménez said. "Every painting he did began with drawing."

Picasso stopped sculpting in the 1960s, and he stopped painting six months before he died in 1973, but he never stopped drawing, she said.

An image's essence

Walking through the galleries at the Menil, Giménez cheerfully pointed out that Picasso - who was born in Málaga, Spain, in 1881 - was the son of an art teacher. He was trained to draw as a child.

Where: 2242 Richmond

Info: Free; 713-520-9988, mcclaingallery.com

He also was finely attuned to both the pantheon of art history and contemporary movements.

Like other avant-garde artists of his time - including the much older Edgar Degas and slightly older Henri Matisse - Picasso admired the 19th-century French master Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who wanted to abandon Renaissance ideals of perspective and embrace a canvas or a piece of paper as a two-dimensional plane with a different kind of expressive capacity.

"Ingres started this very important two-dimensional way of seeing things," Giménez said.

Picasso was about 20 when he made the Menil show's earliest work, "Study for 'The Interview'," in 1901-02, featuring two softly robed figures who look like classical Greeks.

He didn't start distorting bodies overnight, but he played early with vertical compositions. By 1907, when the artist created studies for his revolutionary "Les demoiselles d'Avignon," he had begun to outline more spare, angular figures.

Line gave Picasso a way to reduce an image to its essence.

"A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions," he told Christian Zervos in 1935.

Lines straighten, becoming pure and dominant, in the exhibit's next room of radical Cubist works from 1912 and 1913. They include a number of collages - a technique that enabled Picasso to emphasize line, Giménez said. "Here, the line is what dominates."

The show progresses, mostly chronologically, through rooms that show Picasso's classical side, his abstract side (although he hated that term) and his final, erotic period.

Giménez has gathered a number of drawings in series. Picasso often worked that way, and from the early 1930s - when he became an international art celebrity - he dated his drawings, so it is easy to see his ideas progressing.

Eagle-eyed visitors may also discern his wealth of influences - not just classical western art and the works of his contemporaries but also Egyptian, cave painting and African mask styles - and see that he also drew still lifes and nature.

Europe was tumultuous during the first half of the 20th century, and Picasso's personal life had plenty of drama of its own, inspiring his signature, symbolic and autobiographical narrative of bulls (his own persona), horses (his first wife, Olga) and sexy women with children (so many mistresses to satisfy!).

He also could be quite funny: He wasn't above drawing smiley faces.

By the end of his life, however, his lines are utterly free and uninhibited. The show's final room is pretty pornographic - old man Picasso didn't lose his fire, obviously. He always drew nudes, but these are different, with every part exposed and celebrated.

Picasso's technique for reducing a realistic image to essential lines is beautifully rendered in a vitrine of drawings from his series "The Bull," made in 1945 and 1946. He was still tinkering with it in 1949, in red chalk, when one bull's outline has fused with the figure of a pregnant woman. This lusty work offers an amazing counterpoint to that early study for "The Interview," with its classically robed pregnant woman.

Viewers begin to see it all as an awesome ode to procreation - whether of humans or art.

"In Picasso's drawing practice, the line can articulate presence, demarcate space, question representation, build structure and give semblance," Helfenstein writes in the show's catalog. "Picasso's line is simultaneously protean, suggestive and purposeful. The line is both a building block and the building itself."

Picasso's soap opera

Robert McClain didn't know when he began planning his gallery's Picasso show three years ago that Giménez's Menil exhibit would focus on line, but he's thrilled by the harmony that his gallery's set of Picasso master prints brings to the conversation.

McClain usually concentrates on more contemporary art for his gallery on Richmond, but he has been quietly engaged with an international network of Picasso scholars and dealers for about a

decade, ever since one of his clients - a major Houston collector - began acquiring modern masterpieces.

Many of the McClain show's works are from the holdings of New York collector/dealer John Szoke, although he marshaled a number of contacts to create a dandy survey of more than 60 master prints that date from 1904-70 - including etching, color linocuts, engraving, lithographs and a few other processes.

McClain said he wanted to create an exciting exhibit that also offered a visual diary of Picasso's life (all of his women are there) but also show him as an inventive technician.

The drypoint etching "The Frugal Meal" - one of his most iconic Blue Period images - was Picasso's first try at print-making, created in 1904 and printed in 1913.

"You have to think of it in terms of what was going on," McClain said. "He was a starving artist, working in a studio with no heat and reusing existing printing plates that were scratched. Another artist had started a landscape on it. That tells you a lot about his confidence and disregard for convention because up to that point, printing was all about fine detailing."

A print, essentially, is a drawing that can be multiplied. In the early 20th century, they could be financially significant for an artist - "So instead of getting 50 francs for one sheet of paper that you drew on, you could get 25 francs, 50 times," said art historian Charles Stuckey, who wrote essays for the McClain catalog.

After Picasso became famous, making prints also allowed him to address an audience that couldn't afford his paintings.

He created a huge body of lithographs in the 1940s, when he was infatuated with Françoise Gilot. He turned to linocuts (made with linoleum) in the 1950s, featuring another muse, Jacqueline Roque, who in 1961 became his second wife.

The enormity of Picasso's soap opera surfaces through it all, with earlier images representing his long-suffering first wife, the Russian ballerina Olga Khokhlova; the sunny blonde Marie-Thérèse Walter and her successor, the darkly stunning Dora Maar.

That's the Picasso most people talk about, but Stuckey sees art-historical value in the prints, too. "Most of these pieces aren't exhibited that much. I was familiar with most of them from

reproductions in books. It's not just another Picasso print show," he said.

Even Giménez, one of the preeminent Picasso scholars, wasn't aware of the large 1934 etching "The Great Corrida, Woman Bullfighter," an allegorical gem based on the myth of Europa that also informed his monumental masterpiece, "Guernica," and alludes to his tumultuous relationships with Khohklova and Walter.

"Most of the books that have been written about Picasso - and there are thousands - have concentrated on large, expensive paintings," Stuckey said. "Drawings and prints tend to be less studied. Both exhibitions are this wonderful opportunity to look at what they have to say - and it's quite a bit, really."

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