

4E ■ SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2017 ■ MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL ###

'Degas to Picasso' traces path of modern art on paper

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Special to Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Their names are inextricable from the very definition of modern art – Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso. Along with their artistic milieus in Paris, their muscular and daring creativity tested the boundaries of art and brought about new forms in bold contradiction to artistic tradition.

"Degas to Picasso: Creating Modernism in France," at the Milwaukee Art Museum, appears to be a preordained blockbuster. It offers the archetypal trajectory of modernism, the greatest pivot in western art. Consisting mainly of works on paper, the exhibit was displayed earlier this year at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. The work comes from the personal collection of Stanley and Ursula Johnson and includes 150 works by over 50 artists.

Arranged chronologically, the exhibit marches viewers from the salons of academic realism to abstraction.

In the early 19th century, the French Academy taught, displayed and discussed a narrow view of art devoted to traditions from antiquity and of the Old Master artists. Reacting against those confines, artists began to experiment with form and subject matter. Romanticism, Impressionism and Cubism became the renowned offspring of this ex-



"After the Bath, Woman Drying her Leg" (1900-'05), by Edgar Degas

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

perimentation.

The subjects and style of the French Academy greet visitors. Jean-August-Dominique Ingres and Jacques-Louis David display neoclassical themes and style clearly in their work. Interestingly, Ingres, who was the director of the Academy for a time, also presents some of the most chillingly beautiful drawing in the show. His two graphite studies of saints and a nearby portrait demonstrate uncanny visual power and com-

IF YOU GO

"Degas to Picasso: Creating Modernism in France" is on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum through Jan. 28. For more information visit mam.org.

positional control. Degas was a protégé of Ingres, and indeed the younger man's early drawings, also on display, echo the academic mastery of his mentor.

Degas and Picasso both have galleries dedicated entirely to their work, but the collection by Degas was notably stronger. Two large pastel drawings of women toweling themselves after the bath are remarkably energetic and visceral. Degas throws down dynamic lines that appear to render the foot in motion. He redraws it three, four, five times and then runs a white zigzag up the woman's arm to expand on the vigorous gesture. An electric arc of blue runs around the contour of the woman's body, a lightning bolt of near abstraction.

Many of the drawings and prints are intimate, even personal in scale. Some are the nascent, questing sketches of artwork still to be created. We know Picasso's revolutionary "Demoiselles de Avignon." What we have not seen is the painter's journey to create this painting. A humble, quick sketch in black crayon reveals four female nudes. The artist has begun to mold these figures into

more angular, geometric forms. The viewer can see his mind at work as he confronts the task of disassembling the history of art and rearranging it into the daring shock of the new that Cubism would soon become.

Other work in the show is more conclusive. A drawing of a guitar by Juan Gris stands out as a definitive example of Cubist construction. The guitar is flattened into separate planes and developed with multiple approaches to allude to light and shadow, wood grain, and the perspectives we have come to recognize in works from this period. It also alludes to the use of collage, another Cubist innovation. The drawing seems to be created in separate pieces but is in fact drawn on a single sheet.

At times the exhibit seemed a bit bloated. But a few contributions defined a period succinctly. A tiny, brown and black ink drawing of a brooding seascape and tree by Victor Hugo communicated Romanticism more powerfully than the work of its flashier neighbors. Similarly, a little drawing by Georges Seurat of an elderly man with a cane walking away from the viewer made me pause. The drawing was humane and sympathetic, but retained modernist forms. It made me think that this exhibit might have benefited from not trying to achieve blockbuster status, but instead devoted itself to fewer, and more precious, examples.