

ART REVIEW

Lines That Kept Moving and Knew No Boundaries

By ROBERTA SMITH
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Maybe every museum, regardless of focus, should know the box-office thrill of staging a Picasso exhibition. In 2006 the Whitney Museum — of American Art, mind you — pulled it off with “Picasso and American Art,” a somewhat flawed effort that examined his influence on a host of major and minor American artists.

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Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921, at the Frick, includes “Two Ballet Dancers,” from 1919. [More Photos](#) »

Now the Frick Collection has edged into the field. Its holdings do not extend much beyond the middle of the 19th century, but let's not quibble. “Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition” is a model of Frick-like reserve, which may be something of a blessing where Picasso is concerned.

Remarkably free of photographs of the artist and his penetrating gaze, or references to his love life, it follows Picasso over three decades from tentative schoolboy to dominant modernist. The greatness of its 61 drawings tends to be exceeded only by a stylistic diversity that may be unparalleled in the history of art and seems implicitly post-Modern. After a small but fascinating cluster of juvenilia the show covers Picasso's Rose and Blue periods, the monumental climb to Cubism and Cubist collage, and the return to neo-Classical figuration, almost always with freshly unfamiliar works.

This is the first sizable show of Picasso drawings in New York in more than 20 years. It has been organized by Susan Grace Galassi, the Frick's senior curator, and Marilyn McCully, an independent art historian and Picasso specialist; they collaborated with Andrew Robison, senior curator of prints and drawings at the National Gallery in Washington, where the exhibition will open in late January.

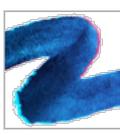
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Slide Show
'Picasso's Drawings, 1890 — 1921'

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The show starts with what may be the first drawing Picasso signed and dated (in 1890), when he was 8 or 9. With considerable, even surprising awkwardness, this work depicts a small bronze statue of Hercules that was displayed in a hallway in his family's home in Málaga in southern Spain; the pencil line scuds cautiously along the statue's silhouette like a small boat hugging the shore, determined to reach home. Over the next few drawings Picasso improves with startling speed, making good on his natural gifts with palpable determination, but also, it would seem, benefiting from the guidance of his less talented father, José Ruiz Blasco, a painter who encouraged his son's artistry in every way he could.

A small bullfight scene made only two years after the Hercules is alive with caricatural zest and a growing command of bodies in motion. Even more telling, in the Oedipal sense, is that Picasso, turning the page around, filled the top with finely realistic renderings of six pigeons, or rock doves, the favored subject of his father, who was known as El Palomero (the Pigeon Fancier). Next comes an exacting, nearly photographic portrait from 1896 of the tall, fair and aristocratic Ruiz himself. (Picasso resembled him not at all, taking after his short, dark, energetic mother.) This is followed by two large, accomplished figure studies — one from a cast, one from a male model — that mark the end of the artist's academic training. By the time he was 18 he was working on his own in Barcelona and in a few years would settle in Paris.

Incessant, restless, often contradictory progress is the name of the game here. Exploring materials, the human face and body, and landscapes or still lifes, Picasso establishes one stylistic or formal promontory after another. Then he jumps, landing somewhere that neither he nor drawing has quite been before. He doesn't seem so much to reinvent tradition, in the words of the show's title, as to simply explode it, without ever losing track of the constituent pieces, which he combines and recombines in stunning ways. He does odd things with his mediums, for example, applying watercolor and gouache with a dry brush in thin, scratchy lines, as in the early Cubist "Still Life With Chocolate Pot," creating an odd tactility that infuses his forms with light.

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 8, 2011

Schedule information on Friday with an art review of "Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition," at the Frick Collection, misstated the Frick's telephone number. It is (212) 288-0700.

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