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Picasso's Hungry Hand Stars in Flipbook Show at Frick: Review

By Lance Esplund - Nov 17, 2011 6:01 AM GMT+0100

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Outstretched, palm up, the hand is welcoming, ready to shake and guide. A little overeager, like that of a fondler or beggar, it's also poised to take.

"Picasso's Left Hand" is the first work to greet you at the downstairs entrance to "Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition," an exhibition of more than 60 works on paper at the [Frick Collection](#) in [New York](#).

Enlarge image



"Sleeping Peasants" (1919) by Pablo Picasso. The painting is part of the exhibition "Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition" at The Frick Collection. Source: ARS/Frick Collection via Bloomberg

The small pen-and-ink study from 1902 suggests Goya and Rembrandt, which isn't unusual for an artist who also assimilated tribal art, Brueghel, Cezanne, El Greco, Rodin and [Van Gogh](#), and who claimed he was Ingres reincarnate.

Picasso advocated that an artist must not merely borrow but, rather, take absolute ownership. Steal. Possessing a voracious appetite, Picasso thieved from masters in every period. Devouring the art of the past, he regurgitated it anew.

Enlarge image



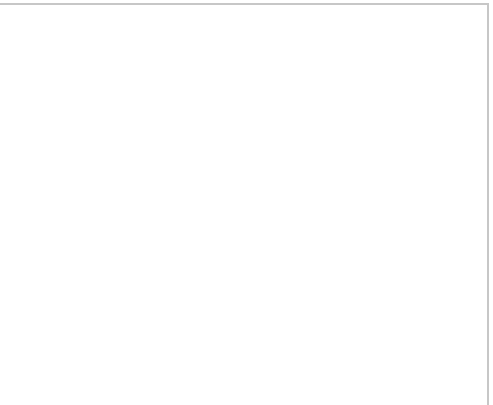
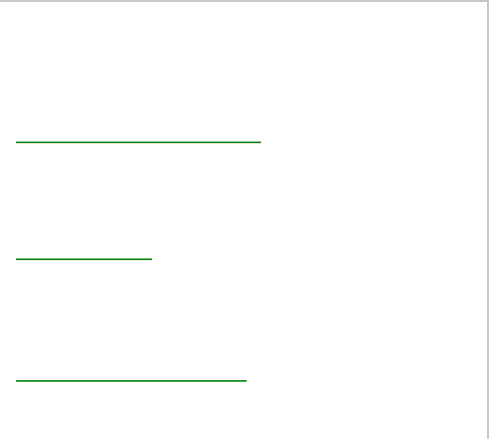
"Two Women With Hats" (1921) by Pablo Picasso, in the exhibition "Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition." Source: ARS/Frick Collection via Bloomberg

The Frick's chronological show includes works in pencil, ink, watercolor, gouache, pastel and chalk. Spanning the first three decades of Picasso's more than 80-year-long career, it covers his student days; the Blue and Rose Periods; Cubism; set- and-costume designs for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; and the neoclassical women of his late teens through 1921.

The show begins when Picasso was 9, with a drawing of Hercules wielding a club; a bullfight in which a toreador is gored before a delighted crowd (at age 11); and a charcoal study made after a plaster cast of a reclining male torso from the Parthenon (at age 14). These academic drawings are accomplished. Yet beneath their precisely rendered surfaces roils a restless, revolutionary spirit.

Pablo's Flipbook

Picasso had lyrical, expressionist and classical modes. The beauty of the Frick's enlightening exhibition is that it errs on the side of innovation and variety.





"Pierrot and Harlequin" (1920) by Pablo Picasso, currently at The Frick Collection. Source: ARS/Frick Collection via Bloomberg

As if seen through a flipbook, the show leaps from one period to the next. In this dense, well-chosen installation, however, you're reminded that Picasso didn't change course abruptly. Throughout his career, he kept in motion, and wedded, numerous sources and influences simultaneously.



"Bathers in a Forest" (1908) by Pablo Picasso, part of the exhibition "Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition" at The Frick Collection. Source: ARS/Frick Collection via Bloomberg

As Picasso looks backward, he's ahead of the game. Heated color in the pastel "Castilian Village" (1901) anticipates Fauvism. A self-portrait from 1902 suggests the frontality of Giacometti. "Female Nude in Profile (Hommage a Gauguin)" (1902) combines elements of Raphael and an Egyptian figure. "Two Ballet Dancers" (1919) heralds Calder's "Circus."



"Study of a Torso" (1895) by Pablo Picasso. Source: ARS/Frick Collection via Bloomberg

At the Frick, we never lose sight of Picasso's love of African, Egyptian, Greco-Roman, French, Italian and Spanish traditions. Cubism arrives naturally -- less like a cannon shot. A Cubist woman recalls a fluted Grecian column. The Cubist "Nudes in a Forest" (1908) suggests an Impressionist El Greco. And the serene Rose Period emerges out of the cooler Blue Period like a Neoclassical dawn.

Plump Deities

Upstairs, ending the show in the Frick's narrow Cabinet Room, is a grouping of monumental female portraits from 1921. They suggest Greek goddesses, matriarchs and plump fruit.

"Two Women With Hats," in silvery pastel, feels carved out of bluish-gray marble -- it's twilight personified. There's so much light, rotundity and pumped-up volume in these drawings that the Frick's corridor seems ready to burst.

Before you head upstairs, you will again encounter "Picasso's Left Hand." Looking a second time, I was reminded of Byzantine and Renaissance depictions of God's disembodied hand reaching down from the heavens to command, to damn, to bless and to accept offerings. This reference didn't escape the curators; nor can it have eluded the master thief Picasso, who was well aware that his art gives much more than it takes.

"Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921: Reinventing Tradition" is at the Frick Collection, New York, through Jan. 8, 2012. The exhibition will be on display at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from Jan. 29 to May 6. Information: <http://www.frick.org> and <http://www.nga.gov>.

(Lance Esplund is U.S. art critic for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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