

# GalleristNY

review

## *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: 'Picasso's Drawings, 1890-1921' at the Frick Collection*



"Pierrot and Harlequin" (1920) by Pablo Picasso. Pen and black ink with gouache on cream paper, 10 3/4 x 8 3/8 inches. © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Like one of his Cubist creations, Picasso would seem to have as many faces as his curators require. Despite several Picasso solo shows this year (the intellectual collage artist at MoMA, the adulterous powerhouse painter at Gagosian Gallery), the Frick has, in the early drawings, discovered yet another facet to the 20th century's favorite artist: precocious turn-of-the-twentieth-century draftsman. Looking at Picasso through the lens of drawing, and positioning him in relation to his engagement with artists of the past during the first three decades of his career, is a clever trick for the Frick, a museum of old masters; the result is a portrait of youthful ability and intense ambition.

The show features some 60 early Picasso drawings borrowed from the Museu Picasso, the Picasso estate, the National Gallery of Art, and a number of other museums and private collections. From the artist's first signed drawing—executed at age 9, and alarmingly adept—to the pieces he made as a young father and famous painter, these works on Ingres

paper and cardboard, scraps of notebook and collage, bring you into the artist's early career through the particularly intimate medium of drawing. Picasso thought through line, and line is also where his ambitions, imitations and desires are revealed most clearly.

Picasso was a child prodigy. If you've been to the Museu Picasso in Barcelona, you already know the precocious work of this young man whose father, José Ruiz Blasco, was a drawing instructor at the local art academy. Picasso grew up with the apparatus of the academy at hand: plaster molds and young men in dusty suits seated in front of drawing easels. *Hercules* (1890) is a light but competent sketch of a Renaissance sculpture—nothing special, except when you consider that he made it at age 9. *Bullfight and Six Studies of Doves* (1892), done when he was 11, shows some humor and verve developing in his work.

This is art by a child, not to be confused with "my child could do that" art. At a time when the art world idolized the childlike, the exotic and the primitive, Picasso was learning how to draw like a man. You wonder how much of his later work—slashing and carving the drawn page, eschewing the male academic nude and reveling in the erotic female form—was propelled by

an Oedipal desire to defeat a tradition bound up in his father's profession.

Picasso first hits Paris in 1900, when his painting was shown in the Spanish pavilion of the Exposition Universelle. In a self-portrait made in late 1901-02, you see that the teenager has taken in Gustave Courbet's romantic self-portraits. The black chalk scribble frames his intense glare; the pale, handsome face hovers above an overcoat and cravat. The shock of brilliant black hair is a surprise—we know these eyes and the shape of this head mainly from images of a mid-20th-century bald man; to see this same figure in the costume of a 19th-century Romantic is enjoyably incongruous.

When Picasso moved to Paris permanently, in 1904, sex entered the pictures. The weight of bodies, the forms made with caressing gestures of the arm, and the erotic combination of the female nude and the primitive mask are all in play in drawings like *Study of Seated Female Nude and other sketches (recto)* (1906), a palimpsest of poses in blue and black ink. If his women have odd proportions and abstracted, angular buttocks, it is because they, unlike the studied Barcelona sketches, are not academic—these were drawn from life, with a ravenous impatience for experiences only obtained outside of the classroom.

Other drawings speak to the experience of collegiality. By 1907 he was working on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and famously "borrowed" two ancient Iberian heads from the Louvre with his friend the artist Guillaume Apollinaire; these were later returned to the museum. *Yellow Nude (Study for Les Demoiselles d'Avignon)* (1907) came out of that prank, but this bold yellow woman standing with arms akimbo and a masklike head is equally indebted to the Primitivist fantasies of Paul Gauguin.

Post *Demoiselles*, the Cubist Picasso begins in earnest. His *Nudes in a Forest*, from early 1908, is a confident take on Cézanne's *Bathers*. He tracks Cézanne (who died in 1906) through a series of still-life studies in blue and brown gouache (*Still Life With Chocolate Pot*, 1909) and arrives at some startling papier collé and charcoal pieces, like *The Cup of Coffee* (1913), a collage of wallpaper, white chalk, charcoal and other cutout materials in which the letter E becomes a lute, then a cup of coffee. The piece speaks to the transformative properties of materials and language, but does so lightly, playfully.

Historically, we tend to know two Picassos, one all slashed thick lines, curves and volumes, and the other idealizing, delicate and seen as classical by his contemporaries. The Frick show makes a case for yet another, lesser-known Picasso, one whose photographic realism came from drawings from photographs, as in the *Portrait of Madame Georges Wildenstein* (1918). Here Picasso is looking at Ingres—his crisp, refined lines, and pencil-on-paper's paper-thin perfection.

Finally, from Picasso's Ballet Russes phase, there's *Two Ballet Dancers* (1919), a comical take on the desire and artifice inherent to performance. Two ballerinas—all breasts, big hands and flaring nostrils—take the stage, a sexualized tribute to Degas's favorite subject. These women are no "stage rats," though—they are muscular-armed and thick-waisted, as solid and monumental as elephants. You get the feeling that this is Picasso's type—one Ballet Russes dancer, Olga Khokhlova, would become his first wife.

A final room of drawings from a 1921 stay in Fontainebleau, where he, Olga and their new baby, Paulo, spent the summer, gives us big sentimental graphite heads in pastel and charcoal. Here, Picasso is channeling Renoir, and is at his most simplified, calm and "timeless." These pieces represent a tranquil period for the artist. He'd made the transition from the precocious child of a drawing teacher to a 40-year-old man with a wife and child of his own, drawing constantly. He would continue to do so until his death some 50 years later.

Organized by Susan Grace Galassi of the Frick and Marilyn McCully, an independent scholar, with Andrew Robison of the National Gallery of Art, the show manages to conjure a Picasso more familiar from European museum collections than from American blockbusters. The exhibition's larger thesis is that innovation, and specifically Modernism, emerges from a thorough engagement with the past; this seems a fitting lesson for a show about a canonical artist who still, it would seem, has a few new tricks to teach us.

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