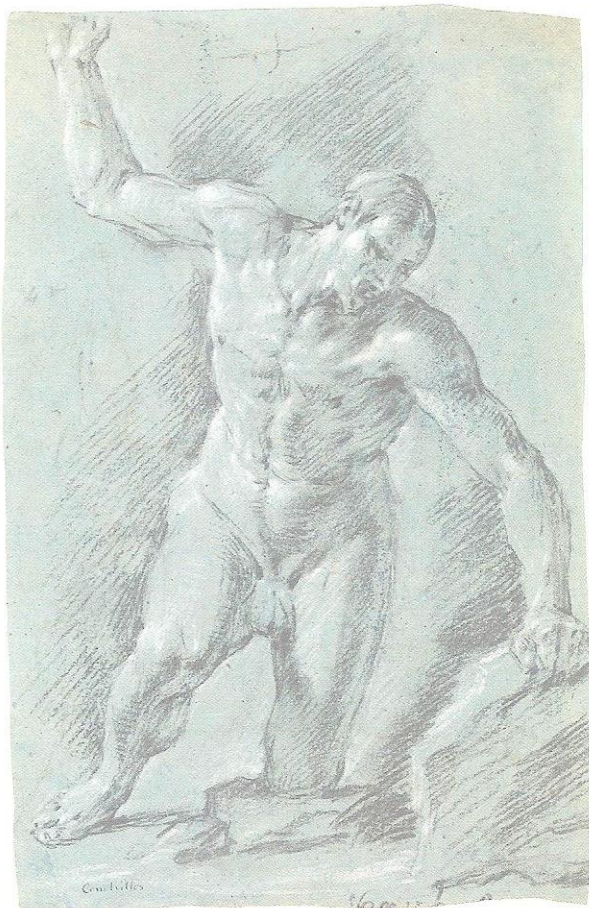


By rights my abiding memory of 2012 should be from the London Olympics, an event that was almost as successful in delivering home-grown sporting success as it was in emptying central London, but instead it is of the intense hushed engagement of the crowds of more than 400,000 who thronged to the two Spanish exhibitions we held in Room 90. The first of these was devoted to the magnificent impressions of Picasso's *Vollard Suite* that were acquired at the end of 2011 through the generosity of Hamish Parker. As many commentators noted in the hugely positive critical reaction to the show, it was remarkable to see how works that had become so familiar as isolated images grew in power when seen together. The appreciation of Picasso's protean creativity was enriched by Stephen Coppel's inspired decision to punctuate the display with prints and drawings by some of the artists, such as Rembrandt and Ingres, whose imagery was echoed in the *Suite*. The inclusion of a handful of ancient Roman marbles and Etruscan etched mirrors also underscored how Picasso's unresolved conflict between tender sensuality and bestial brutality in matters of love and lovemaking was a dichotomy familiar to classical artists too.



One of two Spanish drawings purchased through Ottley Group funds. Juan Antonio Corchillos y Falcó, *Study of a Male Nude*. Black charcoal and white chalk on blue paper, 1690–1705.

The Goya late lithographs of a bullfight among Picasso's treatment of the theme, with himself as the stricken minotaur, heralded his major part as the endpoint in Mark McDonald's no less revelatory exploration that followed of the Museum's hitherto little-studied collection of Spanish prints and drawings. The exhibition and the accompanying publication brilliantly countered the widespread assumption that the graphic arts did not thrive in Spain. The complex and at times fractured history of Iberian drawing and printmaking had never been recounted in such detail, and it is gratifying that such a shining example of the virtues of a well-researched and judiciously selected exhibition will go on to be seen at the Prado in Madrid and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

While the main part of Room 90 became a Spanish province in 2012, the section nearest the Study Room entrance did, at least for the duration of the Picasso show, include displays which demonstrated that the peninsula's grip was not total. Among these was one which the theme, selection of works and labels were the work of a dozen English A-level students from Camden School for Girls motivated by the works of literature that they were studying. The liveliness and engagement of the students was inspiring, although it was more than a little unsettling to be told by a razor-sharp north London teenager that she now wanted my job. The success of the initiative owed much to Sarah Longair, the Museum's Education Manager for schools and young audiences, who enthusiastically took up the idea of collaborating with a local Camden school, and we will be repeating it this September with a fresh batch of students.

As regular visitors to the Department via the Montague Place entrance can testify, last year saw the transformation of the World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre from an enormous scar in the London clay to a structure that resembled a building. On a recent rain-soaked departmental visit to the site we stood in hard hats and fetching luminescent yellow tabards on the 70 metre-long floor that will become, when it has a roof and walls, the exhibition gallery. The rectangular slab of concrete put me strangely in mind of a deck of an aircraft carrier, as though poised to launch a thunderous airstrike towards Tottenham Court Road. Such bellicose imagery may owe something to James Rosenquist's 5.6 metre- (18 foot-) long colour lithograph depicting the celebrated US military aeroplane, F-111, that will feature in this department's first outing in the gallery in 2016 of post-1960 American prints. The new exhibition space allows us to show works of this monumental scale that could not be comfortably accommodated in Room 90, and in the case of the American show will also enable a selection of paintings, sculptures and video pieces that will help contextualise the printmaking activities of the artists involved.