The impact of drawing: Two exhibitions of master drawings in New York

By Clare Hurley
12 January 2013

Mantegna to Matisse: Master Drawings from the Courtauld Gallery at the Frick Collection (October 2, 2012 to January 27, 2013) and Dürer to de Kooning: 100 Master Drawings from Munich at the Morgan Library & Museum (October 12, 2012 to January 6, 2013) in New York City

From quick sketches to elaborately detailed art works in their own right, drawings range in style and purpose from the most intimate to the most public, but they offer a pleasure quite distinct from that represented by the grander mediums of painting and sculpture. This was highlighted in two concurrent exhibitions of master drawings from the Renaissance to the modern period at the Frick Collection and the Morgan Library in New York this past fall, which were also reminders that shows need not be blockbusters to pack considerable power.

Executed in pencil, pen and ink, chalk or, in a few instances, watercolor or gouache, this wide diversity of drawings is united by their support—namely by being on paper. This means that drawings are subject to damage from handling and light, and as a result, they have usually been safeguarded in collections not widely accessible to the public. Nevertheless, drawings have long been valued not just as objects of aesthetic appreciation but also of study by subsequent generations of artists and scholars, and it is in this regard that the collection of the Courtauld Gallery in London is additionally significant.

The fifty-nine works on display at the Frick were selected from approximately seven thousand sheets of European drawings and watercolors in the collection of the Courtauld Institute of Arts. The Courtauld is unusual not only for its collection having been organized in the 20th century—whereas most comparable collections in Europe are much older—but in having a mandate to share its holdings with a wide audience.

The Courtauld’s three wealthy co-founders—Viscount Lee of Fareham (1868-1947), Samuel Courtauld (1876-1947) and Sir Robert Witt (1872-1952)—were brought together by a shared recognition that while Britain possessed fine collections of art in private hands and in public institutions such as the National Gallery (founded in 1824), the country lacked institutes to train experts to maintain this artistic heritage and help interpret it for the general public.

Courtauld and Witt traveled to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1927 to visit the Fogg Art Museum, an “art laboratory” established a short time before with the idea that the training of experts should be based on a study of the finest representative examples of original art work in every epoch.

In 1932, each of the co-founders contributed his personal collection, which reflected individual taste to some extent but were complementary, in order to form the Courtauld Institute as a teaching and resource center. Lee had always collected with an eye to his holdings’ pedagogical value, and though he primarily collected paintings, he bequeathed a small number of drawings to the Courtauld. One of these on view at the Frick is the delightfully detailed scene in pen and brown ink of a village church festival in the Netherlands, Kermis at Hoboken (1559), by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

© World Socialist Web Site
Another drawing of a similar intimacy is *Saskia (?) Sitting up in bed, Holding a Child* (c. 1635) by Rembrandt van Rijn, which tenderly portrays the artist’s wife and child amid the bedclothes with an economy of red chalk lines. Leonardo da Vinci’s sketch for *Studies for Saint Mary Magdalenæ* (c. 1480–82), likewise comprised of just a few lines, offers another kind of intimacy, namely a privileged view into the artist’s use of drawing as part of his analytical process. The sketch shows the artist considering various positions for Magdalenæ’s head and hands, each of which would have carried a different symbolic meaning. The final painting realized from this sketch remains unknown.

Edgar Degas’s charcoal study *Woman adjusting her hair* (c. 1884) is a quite different type of drawing, though it likewise offers a glimpse into the artist’s consciousness. Large in scale, it is possibly a preparatory study for one of Degas’s paintings of elegant Parisian women trying on hats at a milliner’s. The rich smoky black of its shading brings out the bold shape of the woman adjusting her hair viewed from behind, as well as revealing the subtle correction the artist made to the arms and curve of the back to give them more dynamic emphasis.

Other drawings showed an unusual side to a given artist. The British Romantic painter J.W.M. Turner is known for bold seascapes such as *The Slave Ship* (first entitled *Slavers throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying—Typhoon Coming On* and exhibited in 1840 as part of the effort to abolish the slave trade) and *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839), which symbolized the end of an era in England’s maritime empire. Turner’s pastel drawing *Dawn after the Wreck* (1841), while characterized by the same maritime setting and sensitivity to color as the artist’s paintings, focuses on a lone dog on a desolate stretch of sand baying at the rising sun. It conveys a far more isolated and poignant mood than the grandeur of the artist’s more familiar work.

Additional highlights at the Frick included a wickedly comic ink sketch, *Singing and Dancing (Cantar y Bailar)* (c.1819–20) by Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, of a witch kept aloft by virtue of her own natural gas, as indicated by another figure on the ground holding his nose. The exquisitely finished color drawing of *Helena Fourment* (c. 1630–31) by Peter Paul Rubens strikes a more dignified note.

Demonstrating the varied uses to which drawings have been put, a small pen and ink work by Bruegel the Elder, *A Storm in the River Schelde with a view of Antwerp* (c. 1559), was even accepted in lieu of a tax payment. Characterized by vigorous pen strokes to convey the bustle of the activity in the harbor, it likewise resonates across the centuries in the inventive variety of pen marks used by fellow Dutchman, Vincent van Gogh, in *A Tile factory* (1888).

The changing role and character of drawing comes across in both exhibitions. Drawing flourished in particular during periods of advancement in science and the humanities—during the Renaissance across Italy, the Netherlands and Germany, and then again in the 18th and 19th centuries during the Enlightenment and with the strengthened cultural position of the bourgeoisie as a result of industrialization in Europe.

Not surprisingly, the drawings in the earlier periods include a greater proportion that served essentially as blueprints for further art works. These are often marked by a grid or have their outlines pricked out or darkened in order to be transferred to canvas or onto plates for prints.

In the days before mechanical reproduction and computer design
In the modern period drawing increasingly emerges as a medium of expression in its own right, a trend underscored in the exhibition at the Morgan Library with its selection of 100 master drawings from the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung in Munich.

The Munich collection is far larger than the Courtauld’s, with an inventory of 400,000 works on paper, including approximately 45,000 drawings and 350,000 prints. Accumulated through a series of royal acquisitions and bequests from wealthy donors, the core of the original collection belonged to Palatinate Elector Carl Theodor (1724-1799), who was forced to move his works on paper from Mannheim to Munich in 1794-95 in advance of French revolutionary troops. This formed the basis of the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung collection, which first opened its doors to the public in 1823 and became an independent museum in 1874.

Like the Courtauld, the mission of the Munich collection’s founders and stewards was to amass the best representatives of all historical periods and national schools for scholarly and educational purposes. The Munich holdings include treasures from the Italian, French, German and Dutch schools—notably a red chalk study Two Standing Women (after 1530) by Jacopo Pontormo, Albrecht Dürer’s Portrait of Kaspar Nutzel (1517), the exquisitely sensitive Study of a Woman with her Head Raised in Prayer (1470-1480) by Matthias Grünewald and another pen and ink drawing of Saskia in Bed (ca. 1638) by Rembrandt. However, the Munich collection is additionally interesting for its drawings from the 20th century, which made up nearly half the Morgan Library exhibition.

A quite different quality can be detected in these drawings, both in mood and technique. Drawings seem to occupy a more dominant place in an artist’s work. In some cases, the artist is best known for his or her drawing. Thus, Käthe Kollwitz’s somber charcoal drawing on dark grey paper, Battlefield(1907), in which a peasant mother searches for her son among the corpses, is a motif that recurs in much of the artist’s graphic depiction of revolutionary uprisings and the horrors of war.

Other works by artists of the pre-First World War generation are well represented in the Munich collection. The German Expressionist movement, along with the Die Brücke (The Bridge) and Der Blaue Rider (The Blue Rider) groups, included Ernst Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde and Franz Marc, whose works bear the impact of the social and psychic crisis preceding the war in their turn inward to often highly colored, subjective and/or mystical interpretations of reality.

Particularly striking in the exhibition were Marc’s lushly erotic Leda and the Swan (1907), Kirchner’s almost brutally colored Nude Girl in an Interior (ca. 1910) and Nolde’s magical Evening in Schleswig (1918-20). The drawings by Rudolf Schlichter, one of the artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement that emerged out of the world war, return to more realistic depictions of working people, such as Unemployed Waiter (1925), in which the man’s hand and worn unshaven face are depicted with a gentle detail reminiscent of Grunewald’s woman at prayer.

The period after World War II
is only summarily represented in the Morgan Library exhibition by a handful of almost miscellaneous drawings by various Abstract Expressionist, Pop, Neo-Expressionist and other contemporary artists—Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers and David Hockney—some of whom have produced interesting drawings, although those on display are not the finest examples.

The falling off in quality in the recent period, somewhat disappointing as a conclusion to such a rich and varied exhibition, reflects the compounded disorientation in successive generations of artists from the immediately post-World War II years until today. A little like A.R. Penck’s lonely red man in *I and the Cosmos* (1968), the best such figures can do is stare wistfully up at the starry black sky all around.

In their historical and artistic scope, the exhibitions at the Frick and the Morgan Library highlight the unique ability of drawing to make sense of the world, with all the skill and perceptivity that it demands.

(Both exhibitions are accompanied by comprehensive catalogues of high-quality reproductions that can be appreciated almost as fully as the originals.)