

The Museum of Modern Art

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IMPORTANT NEWLY ACQUIRED PAINTING AND SCULPTURE AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Notes by William S. Rubin, Chief Curator of the Painting and Sculpture Collection

Marcel DUCHAMP. American, born France. 1887-1968

Network of Stoppages. (1914) Unsigned, undated
Oil on canvas. 58 1/4 x 77 5/8"

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund and Gift of Mrs. William Sisler, 1970

Beyond its initial impact as a challenging, disconcerting painting, realized entirely outside the syntax of even avant-garde composition of its time, the Network of Stoppages is a palimpsest revealing three aspects of the integration of Duchamp's Large Glass. Viewed on the axis of its left side, as now hung, it reveals traces of its earliest phase: the second, unfinished version of A Young Man and Girl in Spring (1911), in which the sexual confrontation central to the Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even) is adumbrated. Viewed on the axis of its right side, one can make out traces of a pencil layout of the Large Glass, drawn to half scale. It was at this point that Duchamp painted in the black panels on the sides (now the top or bottom) in order to reduce the field to the proportions of the Glass.

The third "layer" of the work, to be viewed as the picture is now hung, was the map-like study for a network of what would become, in the Large Glass, the "capillary tubes" which connect the "malic molds" of the Bachelor apparatus to the "sieves," or "drainage levels." The layout of this network was established by means of "standard stoppages," the unit of measurement in Duchamp's "new science"--which strains the laws of physics "just a little." According to a note from "The Green Box": "a straight horizontal thread one meter in length falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane while twisting at will and gives a new form to the unit of length." Three such threads were fixed to strips of cloth mounted on glass to make the Three Standard Stoppages. Together with wooden templates cut in the profile of fallen threads they were enclosed in a specially prepared croquet box ("canned chance") and are now in the Museum Collection.

The numbered circles along the stoppages in the painting indicate the positions of the "malic molds" as they were to appear in the Large Glass. Duchamp had planned to photograph the canvas at an angle in order to put the network--shown from above in the painting--in proper perspective for the Large Glass. But as photography proved inadequate, he found it necessary to make a perspective drawing.

Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics). (1925) Unsigned, undated
Motorized construction. 58 1/2 x 25 1/4 x 24"

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund and Gift of Mrs. William Sisler, 1970

The Rotary Demisphere was Duchamp's most complex coupling of mechanical and optical devices in his exploration of the ambiguous relation of reality

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and illusion. On a white demisphere he painted a series of slightly eccentric circles which, when set in motion by the motor, give the convex surface an appearance of concavity. The demisphere is set against black velvet in order to eliminate reflections and is covered by a glass dome fixed to a copper ring. On the outer edge of the latter, Duchamp engraved a verbal pun: Rose Sélavy et moi esquivons les ecchymoses des esquimaux aux mots exquis.

Duchamp began work on the Rotary Demisphere in 1924, purchasing the stand for the apparatus from a medical supplier and obtaining the services of a mechanic. Following its completion in 1925, André Breton, leader of the Surrealist movement, invited Duchamp to exhibit the Demisphere in a group show. But Duchamp wrote to Jacques Doucet, who had financed the work and owned it: "All exhibitions of painting and sculpture make me sick. And I would like to avoid associating myself with them. I should also regret if this globe were to be regarded as anything other than 'optics.'"

Frederick J. KIESLER. American, born Austria. 1890-1965. To U.S.A. 1926.

Totem for All Religions. (1947) Unsigned, undated
Wood and rope. 112 1/4 x 34 1/8 x 30 7/8" (Dimensions given are for wood element, not including supporting rope)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Armand P. Bartos, 1971

The 1947 Surrealist Exhibition at the Galerie Maeght in Paris was devoted to the theme of myth, and for it Kiesler created a "Hall of Superstition," a "first effort," as he called it, "towards a continuity of architecture, painting and sculpture, with the means and expression of our epoch," a continuity in which the three arts would "metamorphose into one another." In the framework of his "magic architecture," Kiesler invited a number of artists to realize works within his iconographic program: around a "black lake" (by Max Ernst) were altars, totems, and fetishes by Miró and Matta, among others.

The Totem for All Religions was designed by Kiesler and was executed with the help of the French sculptor Étienne Martin. This was Kiesler's first essay in an art that would preoccupy him increasingly until his death. While the carved wood construction recalls Brancusi in some respects, the configuration is both personal and inventive, reinterpreting iconographic ideas that were in the air in the Surrealism of the thirties and forties. The rope is an integral formal and poetic element of the sculpture as well as a means of anchoring it. Kiesler had indicated that he would like to see the Totem outdoors, tied to the branches of a tree--an intention whose fulfillment will regrettably have to depend upon the possibility of adequately protecting the wood against weathering.

Henri MATISSE. French, 1869-1954

Reading. (1905-06) Signed, undated
Oil on canvas. 29 5/8 x 23 3/8"
Promised gift of David Rockefeller

This painting shows a young girl reading at a table in a colorful, light-filled interior. It undoubtedly represents Matisse's daughter

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Marguerite, whose posture here is closely related to that in Marguerite Reading (Grenoble Museum), a small sketch for which was included in the recent exhibition, "Four Americans in Paris: The Collections of Gertrude Stein and Her Family." Reading will give The Museum of Modern Art its first opportunity to show the development of Matisse's art as it stood in the very year of the famous Autumn Salon of 1905, when he and the painters in his circle were dubbed "fauves," or wild beasts. It thus situates itself in the Museum's collection between Luxe, calme et volupté, 1903, which represents his pointillist phase and the oil study for Music, 1907, in which the fauve style that Matisse had shared with Derain, Vlaminck, Braque, and others had already given way to Matisse's more individual manner, seen fully formed in The Dance of 1909.

Like many other fauve Matisses of 1905-06, passages in Reading synthesize different brushwork styles: remnants of neo-impressionism, loosely brushed patches of color, and carefully defined contouring. It is also notable for the important role unpainted canvas plays in the composition. The coloring has been largely freed from naturalism, the choices--as for instance Marguerite's green hair--being determined by the desire to establish decorative harmonies of hues. One is struck above all by the ease and openness of the composition. Matisse's willingness to forego absolute consistency of style made possible the improvisational use of a considerable battery of painterly devices, and endowed the picture with an open-ended, exploratory character.

Pablo PICASSO. Spanish, born 1881. Lives in France

Sleeping Woman. (1908) Signed, undated
Oil on canvas. 32 x 25 3/4"

Acquired by exchange through the Katherine S. Dreier Bequest, the Madame Katia Granoff, Hillman Periodicals, Philip Johnson, Miss Janice Loeb, and Mr. and Mrs. Norbert Schimmel Funds. 1970

The acquisition of the Sleeping Woman, painted in the spring of 1908, enables the Museum to indicate Picasso's development in the crucial period that separates the last phases of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) and Houses with Trees of autumn, 1908 (promised gift of David Rockefeller; formerly in the Gertrude Stein Collection). The influences of Iberian and African Negro sculpture discernible in Les Demoiselles and other of Picasso's paintings of 1907 are more assimilated, more generalized, and hence less evident in the Sleeping Woman. The power and energy of the earlier figures has been contained--transmuted from an active into a passive state. This containment is achieved through an incipient form of the gridwork or scaffolding that would increasingly determine the architecture of Cubism. The sense of immense if dormant power in the woman--intensified by the way she fills the space of the canvas to the point of crowding, and by the picture's broad brushwork--are virtually Michelangelesque in scale. One thinks of Night in the Medici Chapel, and of the Sibyls and Prophets in the Sistine Ceiling, whose titanic proportions make them seem to burst beyond their classically enclosed niches.

Guitar. (1911-12) Unsigned, undated
Sheet metal and wire. 30 1/2 x 13 3/4 x 7 5/8"
Gift of the artist, 1971

Guitar is the earliest of Picasso's construction sculptures. He recalls that it antedates by many months the Still Life with Chair Caning,
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widely accepted as the first collage. Thus, Guitar was executed no later than early 1912, and very possibly in 1911. This forces a revision of the generally held theory that relief construction, and hence eventually free-standing construction sculpture, owed their beginnings to collage. Rather, it would seem that in the years just prior to World War I, there was a reciprocal relationship between these modes.

The constructions in metal, wood, and cardboard that Picasso made between 1912 and 1916 (and again between 1928 and 1934) are not only among the finest works in the history of sculpture, but they have had an immense influence on the development of the art. Even more than the work of Donatello, Bernini, or Rodin, they have changed the nature and direction of sculpture and may be said to have formed the basis of a veritable second history of the medium. An art which, from even before the time of the Egyptians and Greeks up to the time of Brancusi and Arp, had remained essentially one of modeling and carving has since become predominantly one of construction--an innovation of Picasso's. Sculptural configurations, heretofore primarily monolithic, have now become increasingly planar and linear, opening the way to new materials and techniques.

The Charnel House. Signed and dated 1945
Charcoal and oil on canvas. 78 5/8 x 98 1/2"
Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn Bequest Fund, by exchange. 1971

The Charnel House, one of the largest and most important of Picasso's paintings, is iconographically unique in his oeuvre. It was inspired by the first published photographs of the corpses piled high in the captured German concentration camps. As of 1945, the year in which it was painted, it represented only the second time that the pressures of the outside world drew Picasso from the more personal paths of his art. Like Guernica, painted eight years earlier, it is a "Massacre of Innocents"--an evocation of horror and anguish amplified by the spirit of genius. As the final act in the drama of which Guernica may be said to illustrate the beginning, the picture could almost be considered a sequel to the larger work. After its showing in "20th Century Pioneers," The Charnel House will be hung in proximity to Guernica, the first time this juxtaposition will have been possible.

The Charnel House has many affinities with Guernica, despite its less symbolic, less allegorical character. It is painted in a similarly expressionistic style and limited to monochromatic, appropriately funereal, tones. As in the earlier work, Picasso left many pentimenti--traces of charcoal drawing from earlier stages of the composition--which haunt the work like ghosts. There are also iconographic cross-references to Guernica. In the center of The Charnel House, for example, two raised arms recall the raised and "living" arm of a dead man that, until it was displaced by the dying horse, dominated the center of Guernica. In Guernica, the hand of the raised arm held grain, a symbol of rebirth, and was illuminated by the sun. But as Picasso worked on the composition, the sun became an electric light, and the optimism symbolized by the raised arm and the grain disappeared. In The Charnel House the raised, dead hand holds nothing, and it is held aloft simply by the fact that it is tied to another arm. In the upper left of the composition is a still life of a cooking utensil and a pitcher, which Picasso kept as a line drawing, giving them a spectral effect. These everyday, inanimate objects of the once living inmates below point up the way in which the treatment of the dead had reduced them also to the state of "things." In his 1946 book on Picasso, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. wrote:

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The fury and shrieking violence which make the agonies of Guernica tolerable are [in The Charnel House] reduced to silence. For the man, the woman, and the child this picture is a pietà without grief, an entombment without mourners, a requiem without pomp. "No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war . . . " against "brutality and darkness." Twice in the past decade Picasso has magnificently fulfilled his own words.

SÉRAPHINE (Séraphine Louis). French, 1864-1934

Tree of Paradise. (c.1920-25). Signed, undated
Oil on canvas. 76 3/4 x 51 3/4"
Purchase, 1971

The Museum has long wanted an important work by Séraphine to fill out its outstanding collection of "primitives" or naifs. Séraphine was discovered by Wilhelm Uhde, one of the first to celebrate the work of primitives, and the author of the earliest book on them. Uhde had rented rooms in a house in Senlis, near Paris, where Séraphine did the housecleaning. He was deeply impressed by her pictures, and as he dabbled in art dealing, he bought paintings from her and made it possible for her thereafter to work exclusively on painting. After some success life became difficult for Séraphine--as for Uhde--following the crash of 1929-30, and she spent her last years in an insane asylum, where she died in 1934.

Tree of Paradise, an unusually large painting for Séraphine, is, like other of her pictures, characterized by a decorativeness based on a roughly all-over accenting of the composition, a somewhat obsessional tendency not uncommon in the work of auto-didacts and of psychotics. But unlike most of them, Séraphine is the mistress of her effects. Within the decorative imagery, she constructs an X-relationship between the tree, which moves upward diagonally from the lower right corner, and the river, which instead of being shown in perspective recession is tilted up into the plane of the picture. Séraphine achieved her luminous color with a mixture of pigment substance she concocted herself, and the "secret" of which she would never reveal. She was deeply pious and often dipped her brush in the oil lamp she kept burning before an image of the Madonna. Profoundly conscious of her "angelic" given name, Séraphine painted only pictures of flowers and trees--paradisical transmutations of the exotic artificial flowers she used as models.

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