

Matisse, Picasso and the School of Paris

– By Massoud Shiraz and Sherrill Shiraz, images courtesy of The Raleigh Art Museum

From October 10, 2004 through January 16, 2005 the North Carolina Museum at Raleigh presented "Matisse, Picasso, and the School of Paris" exhibit from the Baltimore Museum of Art. This exhibit is connected with North Carolina through the selected pieces from the collection of Etta and Claribel Cone of Baltimore, who maintained connections with North Carolina through their family's textile business. The exhibit features paintings and sculpture, focusing on works by Matisse, Picasso and artists in Paris from the late 19th century and early 20th century. The Cones collected 113 Picassos (most on paper) and more than 500 pieces of Matisse's work. Their collection is the largest of Matisse's work in the U.S.

Our family's trip to "Paris" began with a non-stop two and half hour drive to Raleigh. In the exhibition, we stood shoulder to shoulder, often with five or six people waiting in line to view paintings and sculptures in what is probably the most important art exhibit to ever take place in the Carolinas.

Here was a Monet Charing Cross Bridge, Degas' Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen, a Van Gogh landscape, and a Paul Gauguin portrait of a cellist. The importance of these works and their presence in our state speaks volumes as we stand amidst these mind boggling masterpieces. The Degas is a charming bronze of a young ballerina in fourth position, and is the only Degas sculpture to have been exhibited during his lifetime. The realistic beauty expressed in Degas' sculptures may have brought him a great deal of criticism in his lifetime, but the grace and elegance expressed in his sculptural work is unsurpassed in the modern era of art.

Paul Gauguin's, The Player Schneklud, is another exceptional piece, created by the artist in 1894, while he was in Paris between trips to Tahiti. Although the title of the work makes it clear that Gauguin's subject was friend Fritz Schneklud, a Danish cellist, the cello is the dominant subject of the painting, with Schneklud in a supporting position. The warmth of

Tahiti and Gauguin's experience in his travels is communicated through the green background and the warm earth tones of the stage. Vibrant colors are used to create movement with harmony, warmth and balance.

The works by Pablo Picasso are from his earliest stylistic phases, the Blue period and the Rose period. Picasso developed his first original style after the suicide of his friend Carlos Casagemas. Woman with Bangs from 1902 is representative of this period, known by followers as The Blue Period. The subject is somber and shadowed. Her clothing is simple and cumbersome, representing poverty and hopelessness. Although the painting expresses Picasso's grief and loss, there is also beauty in her figure. Picasso's work leaves nothing amiss. His composition is perfect. The lines are agreeable and comforting to view.

The majority of the Picasso's in the Cone collection are from the Rose period from 1905-1906. The exhibit displays several of these sketches on paper. The subjects include the circus performers of Montmartre and an impressive sketch of a young boy. These pieces are charming and show a lighter side of this artist so often associated with chaos and emotional turmoil.

The works by Henri Matisse include paintings, sculpture and graphic works. Etta and Claribel Cone collected these pieces throughout Matisse's career from 1917 to 1944, creating the single largest collection of his works. Matisse began painting at the age of 20 while recovering from an attack of appendicitis, giving up his study of law to become a devoted artist. Large Reclining Nude is a masterpiece of composition. Matisse presents the essential lines of the human form with a shock of color. The subject's face is serene, staring at the viewer, while the reclining position of her body stretches languidly across the canvas. The balance of the composition, the gracefulness of the subject's body, and the lines and curves are meditative. Her body becomes a beautiful, mountainous landscape.

The exhibit provides the documentation and photographs Matisse recorded as this painting developed through twenty-two stages. These photos present Matisse's mind at work, allowing us to better understand the importance of this painting and the growth in his composition. The exhibit literature explains, "It was only later that, in its final state, the painting

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became as flat, abstract, and pink as it appears." Matisse searched for the significant and necessary in both color and composition.

Purple Robe and Anemones, from 1937, is alive with color and movement. The brilliant hues contrast and accentuate through lines, swirls and dots, but the composition does not allow the colors to dominate. The flowing lines of the subject's purple robe, and the simple bouquet of anemones provide a sense of calm and harmony.

Even though few people can afford to pursue their collecting on this scale, it is important to understand that Claribel and Etta collected these paintings when Matisse and Picasso were only beginning and virtually unknown. They bought what they liked, and they loved their works, displaying them throughout their home.

The North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh should be on every art fan's agenda. Our state's collection offers representations from most periods of art, ranging from Egyptian antiquities, Classical Roman, and Renaissance, to a fine American collection and modern collection with an excellent selection of frames. There is so much to see and do at the Museum and it is only two and a half hours away. ncartmuseum.org

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