

PRESS RELEASE

3 February 2017, for immediate release:



DEGAS TO PICASSO

Creating Modernism in France

10 February–7 May 2017

The Ashmolean's spring exhibition tells one of the most compelling stories in the history of art – the rise of Modernism. From the early nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, this story was played out in France and especially in Paris where international artists were drawn by salons and dealers, the creative exchange between poets and painters, and the bohemian atmosphere of such places as Montmartre and Montparnasse. The exhibition plots a course from Neoclassical and Romantic artists like David, Ingres and Delacroix, through Impressionists and Post-Impressionists like Degas, Monet and Seurat, to the groundbreaking experiments of Picasso and Braque; but it shows that there was no straight line leading from tradition to the shock of abstraction. The story is altogether more interesting as academic artists and members of the avant-garde exchanged ideas and as rivalries developed between different schools and powerful characters. In works by Manet, Pissarro, Cézanne, Degas and Picasso, the exhibition explores the artists who created Modernism and how they did it.

DEGAS TO PICASSO surveys key moments in the development of art in France from the French Revolution to the Second World War – a time when artists evolved new means of expression, which often depended on new subject matter, and adopted new techniques and formal strategies. The invention of lithography in the late 1790s, for example, encouraged Géricault, Daumier and Manet to portray the horrors of war, or the pretensions of politicians and plutocrats, with ferocious immediacy. Later in the century Degas and Cézanne used the medium to experiment with their favourite subject matter, bathers, in a succession of monumental prints. The development of man-made coloured chalks gave the Impressionists a valuable alternative to watercolour in their search to capture the instantaneous. Nevertheless, the traditional technique of etching – drawing with a needle on a hard ground and 'biting' the plate with acid – was also attractive to many progressive artists, notably Jean-François Millet and Manet. Van Gogh's only etching, the famous portrait of Dr Gachet, was undertaken with the encouragement of the sitter, himself a prolific amateur etcher.

At the heart of the exhibition, which has been selected from the Ursula and R. Stanley Johnson Family Collection, is a choice group of works by Picasso, Braque and other artists who first experimented with Cubism. Examples include an early study by Picasso for *Les Femmes d'Alger* of 1906–7, and oil paintings and works on paper produced by artists who exhibited at the first public showing of Cubism, the Salon des Indépendants in 1911, including Léger and Braque as well as important but now lesser-known figures like Jacques Villon, Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes. Indeed comparing works such as Picasso's *Fan* of 1911, Léger's *Contrast of Forms* of 1913 and Gleizes's *Portrait of Igor Stravinsky* of 1914 reveals a fascinating diversity of approaches, all equally valid, to the disintegration of form and perspective and the introduction of a fourth dimension, time, into an art of two dimensions. Other artists, too, were drawn into the adventure, one of the most exciting in history. So Raoul



Dufy, later known for his brightly coloured seaside scenes, was also an important early figure in the development of a Cubist approach as seen in his visual exploration of l'Estaque, the picturesque Provençal village that Cézanne had made famous several decades earlier.

Dr Xa Sturgis, Director of the Ashmolean, says: 'This exhibition presents a period of unparalleled artistic invention and experiment through the revealing lens of a private collection. The discernment, passion and judgement of Ursula and Stanley Johnson mean their collection offers a unique insight into this extraordinary period. We are, therefore, enormously grateful to them for allowing the Ashmolean to be the first museum to show the full range of their collection of French art in a major exhibition.'

ENDS

▪ FURTHER INFORMATION:

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▪ CAPTIONS:

Fernand Léger (1881–1955)
Mother and Child (Mère et Enfant)
c. 1949
Gouache, 58.5 x 50 cm
Private Collection. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS London 2016

Albert Gleizes (1881–1953)
Portrait of Igor Stravinsky (Portrait d'Igor Stravinsky)
Gouache and black ink on paper, 29 x 24.5 cm
Private Collection. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS London 2016

▪ PRESS IMAGES:

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▪ NOTES TO EDITORS

Exhibition: DEGAS TO PICASSO
Creating Modernism in France
Dates: 10 February–7 May 2017
Press View: Thursday 9 February 2017, 11am–2pm
Venue: The John Sainsbury Exhibition Galleries
Tickets: £10/£9 concessions
Publication: a fully illustrated catalogue of the exhibition with essays by Colin Harrison, Jon Whiteley and others accompanies the exhibition. £25 available at the Museum and online at www.ashmolean.org/shop

The exhibition is supported by the Patrons and Friends of the Ashmolean.