NEW EXHIBITIONS OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY WORKS ON PAPER OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONSIDER THE STATUS OF DRAWING AS A GENRE.

By Edward M. Gómez
October 2 and run through January 2, 2011. (It was presented earlier at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, then at the Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Maine.)

Founded in 1842 and known for its holdings of Hudson River School, French and American Impressionist works, Old Master paintings and early American decorative art, the Wadsworth Atheneum is the oldest public art museum in the United States, Kornhauser points out. (After 26 years there, the veteran curator is moving on to become the head of the American-art department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.) She notes that, “compared to the Brooklyn Museum or the Metropolitan Museum, both of which opened years later, this museum got a head start, historically speaking, collecting American art, even while what would later be seen as some of the most definitive work in this field was being created.”

Today, the museum owns some 1,500 watercolors, pastels and drawings made with other media on paper by American artists, all dating from the first half of the 20th century. In large part, Kornhauser notes, the amassing of this treasure trove began in the 1920s, when the institution began collecting works by nationally known American artists in earnest. In 1923, with funds that had been provided by the widow of a locally regarded Brahmin, James J. Goodwin, the Wadsworth Atheneum purchased Mary Cassatt’s pastel-on-paper work *Child Holding a Dog* (1908) and Winslow Homer’s *A Summer Night*, a scene showing several figures in silhouette, seated at the seawater’s edge. The artist made this picture with watercolor and ink wash on paper in 1899.

In 1927, the museum’s curatorial vision took a dramatic turn with the arrival of its first professionally trained director, A. Everett “Chick” Austin, Jr., a 26-year-old Harvard-educated wunderkind. During Austin’s directorship, the museum acquired watercolors by such important American modernists as John Singer Sargent, Edward Hopper, Preston Dickinson, George Inness and Charles Demuth, among others. Austin also oversaw the first major exhibitions in the U.S. of Italian-baroque painting and surrealist art.

“‘American Moderns on Paper’ shows how, from Homer and Sargent on, American artists excelled in watercolor and revelled in the use...
of this medium,” Kornhauser says. In fact, she adds, given the immediacy of watercolor as a mode for making images, “it became a primary medium through which American artists explored evolving modernist styles.”

A good example of this creative energy can be found in John Marin’s exuberant works, especially his rollicking depictions of New York. Kornhauser observes: “The urban, of-the-moment subject matter of a lot of American modernists’ work, like Marin’s, directly related to the expressive character of the watercolor medium.”

The show also features drawings made with wax-based paint (a series of untitled abstractions by Arthur Dove from 1942; Conté crayon (Charles Burchfield’s Study of Bats in Flight, circa 1934–43); and black and sepia ink highlighted with opaque white watercolor (Thomas Hart Benton’s Old Range, circa 1943–44). They make use of different kinds of paper, from the heavy worn thread paper that Marin favored—its surface texture clearly reveals the watery nature of the medium, in which pigment is suspended in a fast-drying liquid—to Germanstate of Baden; a block of Greek stamps from 1880 with a Hermes-head design

Opening spread: Cover with stamp from the old German state of Baden; a block of Greek stamps from 1880 with a Hermes-head design

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transcend linguistic or cultural barriers. In the big book The Primacy of Drawing: History and Theories of Practice, which was published by Yale University Press earlier this year, author Deanna Petherbridge cites an observation by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger that, she argues, applies nearly to drawing. An artist, curator and former teacher at the Royal College of Art in London, Petherbridge reminds us that Heidegger once noted, “All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking.”

Since postmodernist critical theory’s most basic assertion is that the meaning of anything—an image, a song, a text, an event—can vary depending on the circumstances in which it is experienced, many contemporary artists have enthusiastically embraced the making of collages, a mainstay activity of many classically modernist artists in the past. That is because recontextualizing, giving new, sometimes ambiguous meaning to the found or recycled raw materials that many artists use to make collages, is an inherent part of their creative process.

In the works of some contemporary makers of drawings, both the recontextualizing of found materials and a sense of draftsmanship are evident. Despite their differences, a sense of line as a basic element of image-making can be discerned in all of their work. For example, the Oaxaca-based Mexican artist Dr. Lakra (born Jerónimo López Ramírez in 1972), often uses inks and brushes to make romantic-funky drawings on pages torn from old magazines. Lately, he has painted room-filling murals overflowing with phantasmagorias of wildly overlapping images. Among them: a pair of kissing lovers, a gigantic African deity and a nude woman in the form of an airplane.

Rachel Liebowitz, the curator of an exhibition of Dr. Lakra’s work that will open at the Drawing Center on December 10, says, “He pulls the viewer in with a visual overload and he also brings his personal history into his work, combining his experience as the son of a Mexican mural painter with his associations with artists in Mexico City in the 1990s and in the tattoo community.” In the show she is organizing, Liebowitz says she will “investigate Dr. Lakra’s process, highlighting his sketchbooks in the exhibition catalog and integrating his collections of record albums and comic strips that have influenced his work.”

The Missouri-born, Brooklyn-based artist David Scher is also a prolific maker of drawings. In addition to single sheets, to date he has filled some 1,000 sketchbooks. Scher’s works on paper, which often mix ink with other media, sometimes clearly depict ships, people or plants and sometimes resemble otherworldly landscapes in which human figures busy themselves with various tasks. They may feature ectoplasmic explosions or post-combat battlefields littered with fragments of not-quite-identifiable debris. “As a child, I drew and painted constantly,” Scher once told an interviewer. “There are many ways to look at drawing, a medium that has an immediacy that touches the eye—and people like to be touched.”

Joe Amrhein, the founder and director of Pierogi, a gallery in Brooklyn, where Scher’s new works are on view through October 9, says, “David is an artist of many talents—music, writing, poetry, drawing, painting, sculpture, even architecture. His drawings sometimes feel like music scores, and many are infused with wit and humor.”

The collage drawings made by Aurora Robson are elegant and clever at the same time; a subtle sense of humor may be found in the Brooklyn-based artist’s recycling, with attention to the details of color, suggested pattern and paper texture, of the printed credit-card solicitations and advertisements she receives in the mail. “I call them my ‘junk-mail collages,” says the Canadian artist, who is best-known for making sculptures from plastic bottles she “rescues from the waste stream” and paints, cuts up and assembles into futuristic, abstract sculptures. Robson, who also uses inks in her collage works, says, “Anytime you put a pen or pencil to paper, you’re either writing or drawing—even scribbling is a kind of drawing. In my collages, I ‘draw’ with the cut, colored paper.”

In New York, the artist Christopher Tanner, who has made large-scale, mixed-
Drawn Together

media assemblage paintings using giant sequins and colored stones to unabashedly celebrate beauty and glamour, has also made drawings using found paper. Tanner says, “I’ve made abstract works derived from figure studies—I still draw from live models—using wallpaper samples from the 1920s as my support surface. I’m intrigued by the mix of textures and patterns in these works, in which recognizable shapes emerge through the dense lines.” In these drawings, Tanner renders some of his sinuous, sensuous forms using colored sand flecked with glitter.

By contrast, the New York-based artist Jon Waldo, who grew up in New England and looks to that region’s folk art and craft traditions for inspiration (and also, at the other extreme, to punk rock), has created works on paper whose motifs are pure Americana—school buses, log cabins, cars and Mr. Magoo. Waldo, whose economical lines define the shapes and suggest the textures of those and other familiar subjects, makes his own stencils based on his drawings. Lately he has used spray paint on brightly painted sheets of paper to make Pop-flavored pictures. “The graphic style I’m inspired by is very 1970s,” says Waldo, “coming from record albums, lettering and posters of that era, and the visual language I’m using to get my ideas across is like sloganeering; it’s quite deliberate.”

These examples show, as the curator Rachel Liebowitz notes, that drawing remains an important part of the practice of many contemporary artists. She adds, “Some use drawing in a traditional way, as a daily exercise and a means to work out ideas, while others are looking to challenge what exactly constitutes a drawing.” Meanwhile, as Amrhein, an artist himself as well as a dealer, sees it, drawings have become increasingly attractive to collectors. Knowledgeable collectors recognize, he says, that “today, many artists, such as Raymond Pettibon, Mark Lombardi, Nicole Eisenman and Dawn Clements, develop their work mainly on paper or have become noticed for their work on paper.”

For many years, Pierogi has featured the Flat Files, a group of self-service, easily accessible drawers filled with works on paper that visitors are encouraged to examine without pressure from the gallery’s staff. “Works on paper seem honest somehow,” Amrhein says. “I’ve always worked with artists who have made works on paper, and I’ve always sold such works.”

“My wish is that each visitor to ‘American Moderns on Paper’ may have some emotional responses to the deeply personal nature of these extraordinary works,” the Wadsworth Atheneum’s Kornhauser says. “I’d like them to want to reach out and touch the works on view.” While that kind of personal contact remains strictly forbidden in most museums, what admirers of modern and contemporary drawings can and do relish is the unmistakable sense of immediacy, intimacy and intellect that characterizes the best works on paper of any era or genre and that keeps them coming back to learn more about this engaging and enduring art form.