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## ART IN REVIEW; 'Picasso: The Classical Period'

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Picasso's Classical period can seem like a regressive way station between the rigors of his Cubist works and the alternately feverish and languorous machinations of his Surrealist phase. In fact, Picasso's Classical years (1917-1923) were punctuated by Cubist masterpieces like the Museum of Modern Art's "Three Musicians" of 1921. And he was not exactly taking it easy, much less moving backward, even when working in a Classical mode.

The 19 drawings and paintings in this extraordinary show reveal that mode to be bracingly energetic and nearly as multisourced and distortion-prone as Picasso's Cubist phase. His close study of things like drapery, bridgeless noses and small, full lips -- which was facilitated by a trip to Italy in 1917 -- is underscored by the inclusion of two Greek heads and the torso from a Roman copy of a caryatid from the Erechtheum.

In a brilliant catalog essay that bodes well for the third installment of his monumental Picasso study, John Richardson details the course of Picasso's friendships and his love life (his marriage to Olga Khokhlova, a dancer with the Ballets Russes). He also writes of his assimilation of Ingres and Renoir; Greek, Roman and Greco-Roman art; and the Michelangelesque reliefs by Jean Goujon, a 16th-century French sculptor, in Fontainebleau.

Picasso's Classical images tend to be peopled by rooted, sausage-fingered women in Grecian coifs and white gowns. Rendered in a subdued, implicitly sculptural palette of pale tans and grisailles, some of these figures hint at a comic lightness, not only in their mismatched proportions but also in the incisive economy with which they are painted. An example is a small, cryptic profile of a woman delineated in a few fat, accurate strokes.

Two small studies for "Three Women at the Spring" make a stronger impression than the final version, which the Modern has lent to this show. Another delight is a silvery portrait of a woman with her arms raised, which may be related to the painting "Woman in White," also lent by the Modern. The smaller painting inculcates Classical form with modern pensiveness, but its grisaille tones are rendered in careful scudding brushstrokes that loosely mimic chisel marks.

Picasso puts some space between himself and Classicism in a tough little drawing of a woman in an armchair, probably based on Olga, wrapped in a robe as if resting between sittings. She cups her cheek in one monstrous hand, and crosses her legs so that one big foot dangles toward us. Impatience reigns; something like Surrealism threatens, and you know that Picasso will find many uses for the clumsy proportions, unflattering likenesses and dark feelings lurking beneath the surface.

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