

BECOMING MODERN

A Look at the Evolution of Drawing in French Art of the 19th Century

**On view at the Menil from
February 27 through June 14, 2015**



HOUSTON, TEXAS, December 15, 2015 – An exhibition that celebrates the remarkable holdings of two American art institutions and deepens their ongoing collaboration, ***Becoming Modern: Nineteenth-Century French Drawings from The Morgan Library & Museum and the Menil Collection*** opens at the Menil Collection on February 27. The exhibition remains on view through June 14. Presenting 42 works on paper selected exclusively from the collections of the Morgan and the Menil, ***Becoming Modern***

explores an historic shift in the medium of drawing in the 1800s, from its traditional preparatory function based on emulating the past, to a new role as an independent and often experimental practice. Through drawing, artists in this era were developing a distinct language and style of making a mark that was their own. The exhibition reveals this evolution through an examination of the work of five major artists of the period: Eugène Delacroix, Vincent van Gogh, Georges Seurat, Paul Cézanne and Odilon Redon.

Organized by Menil Curator Michelle White and Jennifer Tonkovich, Curator of Drawings and Prints at The Morgan Museum & Library, ***Becoming Modern*** is the most recent product of an ongoing collaboration inaugurated in 2011 between the drawing institutes at the two institutions, to foster meaningful conversations about the medium. Aspects of the partnership include the Morgan-Menil Fellowship program, which supports postdoctoral research in drawing, and through exhibitions such as ***Cy Twombly: Treatise on the Veil*** (2014-15), which originated in Houston and was on display at the Morgan this past fall.

Said Menil Director Josef Helfenstein: “As we move ahead with plans to build the Menil Drawing Institute, giving the exhibition and study of modern and contemporary drawings a prominence found nowhere else, we are delighted to partner with The Morgan Library & Museum to organize this richly rewarding exhibition. It shows us how

drawing, in the hands of five much admired artists of the nineteenth century, evolved into a practice that anticipated the radical artistic developments of the modern era.”

The diverse styles and methods found in the works on view exemplify the desire for innovation that was common to all five artists featured in *Becoming Modern*, demonstrating how they began to use drawing as a vehicle for personal expression. Delacroix, the senior artist in the exhibition, is often spoken of as the last of the Old Masters; yet his highly original draftsmanship was deeply admired by younger artists including Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne, who were seeking new ways to make a line, use color, and capture sensations of light and space.

Van Gogh’s expressive vocabulary of marks and Cézanne’s novel approach to line and color stripped away the trappings of tradition, as each artist developed a unique artistic language. Experiments with materials also figured in the efforts of artists of this period. Georges Seurat, for example, used commercially manufactured Conté crayon to push form to its limits, defying the traditional mode of *disegno* by creating blurred contours and vaguely defined spaces on rough, textured paper. For Odilon Redon, by contrast, the velvety surface of charcoal was essential to making his *noirs*, with their mystical and sinister themes. At the end of a century transformed by new technologies and industrialization, drawing—especially by artists practicing primarily in the economically robust city of Paris, the so-called capital of the nineteenth century—became a means to respond to a rapidly transforming cultural and urban landscape that paved the way for the twentieth century avant-garde.

The exhibition is generously supported by The Brown Foundation; The John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Nancy and Mark Abendshein, Franci Neely; Russell Hawkins; Janie C. Lee and David B. Warren; Louisa Stude Sarofim; Nina and Michael Zilkha; Lazard Frères & Co.; W.S. Bellows Construction Corporation; Peter J. Fluor/ K.C. Weiner; Mark Wawro and Melanie Gray; and the City of Houston.

Image Credit: Georges Seurat; Coin d'Usine (Corner of a Factory), ca. 1883; Conté crayon on paper; The Menil Collection, Houston; Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston.

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