Becoming Modern is organized by the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, with the Menil Collection, Houston. The exhibition is curated by Jennifer Tonkovich, Eugene and Clare Thaw Curator of Drawings and Prints at the Morgan Library & Museum, and Michelle White, Curator at the Menil Collection.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

A Century Transformed: Chamber Music from Nineteenth-Century Paris
Saturday, March 14, 3:00 p.m.
The Da Camera Young Artists perform French chamber music from the days of Delacroix, van Gogh, and Cézanne.

Thinkers as well as Painters: Grappling with Past Masters and Modernity in Nineteenth-Century French Drawing
Monday, April 13, 7:00 p.m.
Co-curator Jennifer Tonkovich discusses the exhibition.

Cover: Odilon Redon, *The Fool (or Intuition)*, 1877 (detail). Charcoal on paper, 15½ x 13½ inches (39.4 x 34.2 cm). Thaw Collection, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York. Photo: Graham S. Haber

THE MENIL COLLECTION
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Becoming Modern

Nineteenth-Century French Drawings from The Morgan Library & Museum and The Menil Collection

The Menil Collection February 27–June 14, 2015

This exhibition celebrates the remarkable holdings of nineteenth-century French drawings in the collections of the Morgan Library & Museum and the Menil Collection, museums engaged in an ongoing collaboration through their respective Drawing Institutes to foster meaningful conversation about the medium. The show is comprised of works on paper by five artists who had a significant impact on drawing during the formative years of modernism: Eugène Delacroix, Vincent van Gogh, Georges Seurat, Odilon Redon, and Paul Cézanne. The nineteenth century saw the world transformed by new technologies and industrialization, and as it drew to a close, drawing—especially by artists practicing primarily in Paris, the century's so-called capital—became a means to respond to a rapidly changing cultural and urban landscape that paved the way for the twentieth-century avant-garde.

Becoming Modern posits that some of the most exciting breakthroughs in the medium took place at the end of the century as academic models of draftsmanship, traditionally practiced as a preparatory means of study and in anticipation of sculpture or painting, gave rise to the production of independent drawings. Artists began to regard the medium as one of invention and as a crucible for new ways of thinking about the artistic process rather than simply as a space for representation and description. As Delacroix wrote, "I believe that a simple drawing is sufficient to allow one to brood over an idea, so to speak, and at the same time to bring it to birth."[1] Through its informal materials and intimate scale, drawing—as process, technique, and product—allows for rapid and repeated explorations. The medium is the ideal place for taking risks, finding new paths, and confronting history while engaging with the present.

For the artists in this exhibition, becoming modern did not mean rejecting the past entirely. They were deeply indebted to and engaged with the work of their predecessors, responding to it, copying it, and criticizing it. At the same time, as they were discovering and experimenting with new materials and techniques, the role or conception of the artist was changing. As the end of the nineteenth century neared, the Romantic idea of the independent individual artist liberated from academic conventions laid the foundation for art that was more personal and expressive. In drawing this was especially related to the rejection of traditional *disegno*, the Renaissance concept of using line to clearly define contours and describe volume. Literally meaning drawing or design, the Italian term is associated with the Academy, a group of institutions that had educated artists in Europe for over a century. Training was based on reproducing works from classical antiquity, and a strict set of rules and parameters guided technique.

Eugène Delacroix, *Forest View with an Oak Tree*, ca. 1853. Watercolor over chalk on paper, 12¼ x 8⅞ inches (31 x 22.5 cm). Thaw Collection, The Morgan Library & Museum. Photo: Graham S. Haber

Adherence to this vocabulary of mark making has been abandoned in the works in this show. Each of the featured artists developed a distinctive way of making a mark, from Delacroix's free, swirling lines that evoke movement to van Gogh's gestural ink lines. In Cézanne's watercolors, planes of shimmering color and repeated broken contours impart an energy that frees the line from simply being descriptive. The ultimate rejection of the clear and rational contours of *disegno*, however, may be the mature drawings of Seurat. The scribbles and layered marks in his works create networks of lines that build masses without defined edges or contours. Similarly, Redon's mysterious figures emerge not from lines but from murky, richly worked charcoal backgrounds that create a pronounced sense of spatial ambiguity.

Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863)

> *Delacroix is decidedly the most original painter of ancient or of modern times. That is how things are, and what is the good of protesting? . . . A long time ago he said everything that was required to make him the first among us—that is agreed. Nothing remains for him but to advance along the right road—a road that he has always trodden. Such is the tremendous feat of strength demanded of a genius who is ceaselessly in search of the new.*
>
> —Charles Baudelaire, *Salon de 1845*

The works of Delacroix serve as a starting point for this exhibition. The earliest artist included and the one most closely tied to the Academy in terms of training, he was schooled in the galleries of the Louvre and had a particularly keen interest in Nicolas Poussin, Paolo Veronese, and Peter Paul Rubens. Delacroix embraced literary subject matter from works by Dante Alighieri, as in his 1849 study for *Ugolino and His Children*, as well as William Shakespeare and Lord Byron. He also created a number of portraits and street scenes drawn from his time in North Africa, such as *A Man of Tangier* and *Danse de Marocains dans un rue de Tanger (Moroccan Dancers on a Street in Tangier)*, both 1830s.

While working within the parameters of tradition in terms of subject matter and composition, Delacroix had a fervid dislike of "academic recipes"[2] that was in many ways ahead of his time, which both garnered the admiration of his contemporaries and had a significant impact on subsequent generations of artists. He rejected realistic description in favor of conveying movement, often working quickly in pen and ink. The artist famously told Baudelaire: "If you are not skillful enough to make a sketch of a man throwing himself out the window, during the time that it takes to fall from the fourth floor to the ground, you will never produce great works."[3] The loose gestures he cultivated in his sketches give a sense of liberation to landscape studies such as *Forest View with an Oak Tree*, ca. 1853, and *Montagnes des Pyrénéss dans la brume, Eaux-Bonnes (Mountains in the Pyrenees in Fog, Eaux-Bonnes)*, 1845, and his all-over surface technique in the chalk study for *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, ca. 1856, predicts the approach to mark making and surface that is later found in the drawings of van Gogh and Seurat.

Vincent van Gogh, *Saint-Rémy, Workers in the Field*, ca. 1890. Pencil and chalk on paper, 9 x 12¼ inches (22.9 x 31.1 cm). Thaw Collection, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York. Photo: Graham S. Haber

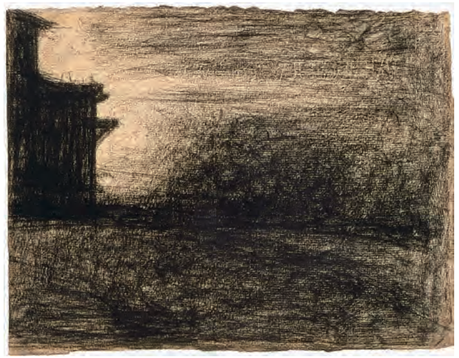
Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890)

Lacking formal academic training, van Gogh also rebelled against traditional standards of artistic achievement. He connected with Delacroix's focus on movement and gesture and conveyed his "boundless" admiration for the older artist in the letter on view to the writer and painter Émile Bernard. Van Gogh, who lived and worked in France during the prolific final years of his short life, believed that drawing does not have to be descriptive but rather can be primarily concerned with the meaning and impact of its subject. Employing the reed pen in homage to Rembrandt and Delacroix, he sought to exercise his vision in similarly forceful and energetic drawings that shared the expressiveness of his predecessors. His late drawing *Saint-Rémy, Workers in the Field*, ca. 1890, executed in the town where he was institutionalized shortly before his death, vibrates with intensity through the repeated broken contours and agitated lines that lend movement not only to the laborers digging but also to the farmhouse and terrain.

Van Gogh had an unconventional approach to the drawing process. Instead of relying on the medium as a step in anticipation of a painting, he frequently used drawing to reproduce his finished works. He often sent these drawings to his brother Theo—as he did with *Garden with Weeping Trees, Arles*, made after his painting *Sunny Lawn in a Public Park*, both 1888[4]—or to other confidants along with his letters to give them a sense of how his art was progressing as he worked in isolation in Arles and then Saint-Rémy. As he developed his reed pen style, van Gogh increasingly came to see his drawings as independent works equal to his paintings. "I *see* things like pen drawing," he wrote to a friend.[5]

Georges Seurat (1859–1891)

Seurat's brief career saw him reach artistic maturity around 1880 and go on to produce an exceptional body of work, primarily in drawing, before his death about a decade later. The artist's innovations were in many ways fostered by his choice of materials. He used synthetic conté crayon, a waxy, smoother alternative to charcoal, on a handmade Michallet paper, which provided a richly textured surface. This allowed for a wide range of marks, from faint traces skipped over the paper's weave to heavily worked passages of velvety black. Rather than using line, he formed his figures through gradated tonal values of dark and light that he created by layering the pigment across the support, varying the amount of build-up and the degree of pressure exerted on the drawing tool. As a result, the humans, landscapes, and objects relate to each other in such a way that foreground and background, figure and ground, blend together beautifully in a manner distinct from the rational ordering of space and carefully delineated contours prescribed by *disegno*. Seurat's subject matter is as distinctively modern as his technique. His drawings depict the banal realities of a modern and industrialized Paris: a working class woman pushes a child down the street in *Nurse with a Child's Carriage*, 1882/84, a city bridge appears neither grand nor monumental in 1886's *Approach to the Bridge at Courbevoie*, and a factory building on the city's industrial outskirts emerges from a field of marks in *Coin d'Usine (Corner of a Factory)*, ca. 1883.



Georges Seurat, *Coin d'Usine (Corner of a Factory)*, ca. 1883. Conté crayon on paper, 9¾ x 12⅝ inches (24.8 x 32.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

Odilon Redon, *L'oeil végétal (The Vegetal Eye)*, ca. 1885. Charcoal on paper, 16 x 12 inches (40.6 x 30.5 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

Odilon Redon (1840–1916)

In the late nineteenth century Redon produced his celebrated body of charcoal studies, or *noirs*, devoted to mysterious and uncanny subjects as in *L'oeil végétal (The Vegetal Eye)*, ca. 1885, and *L'homme-arbre (The Tree-Man)*, ca. 1895. With their grotesque hybridizations of human and plant, these drawings demonstrate the artist's preoccupation with transformation and metamorphosis that would come to characterize his visual language. His enigmatic 1877 drawing *The Fool (or Intuition)*, for example, recalls Delacroix's characterization of Mephistopheles from *Faust*, revealing Redon's lifelong fascination with the older artist as well as his similar attraction to literary themes, as seen in *Lady Macbeth (Pretesse d'Egypte)*, 1876.

Redon's drawings embrace the richness of charcoal and, like Seurat, he used fixative throughout the drawing process to set layers of his powdery medium. By drawing on top of layers of charcoal, he produced richly worked surfaces with soft, fuzzy burrs, and their materiality became an integral part of the work. The artist understood his medium as essential to the creation of his mysterious images and uniquely suited to conveying a sense of intrigue; the form inextricably intertwined with his fantastical content. He called charcoal the *agent de l'espirit*, writing, "Matter reveals secrets, it has its own genius; it is through matter that the oracle will speak."[6]

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906)

In a 1903 letter to the younger painter Charles Camoin, Cézanne advised, "…keep good company, that is, go to the Louvre. But, after seeing the great masters… hasten to leave and, through contact with nature, revive in oneself the artistic instincts and sensations that reside within us." Among the artists included in the exhibition, Cézanne is the one most often considered an old master of modernism, cast by twentieth-century artists in a role analogous to that of Delacroix to van Gogh, Seurat, Redon, and Cézanne himself. Throughout his career he would spend hours in the Louvre making drawings of works by favorite old masters such as Rubens and Poussin[7] and he used their classical subject matter as a point of departure in his modern experimentation with technique. For example, *The Bathers*, ca. 1900, epitomizes his life-long interest in the figure and in the challenges of complex compositions. Bathing figures in various arrangements appear in more than two hundred of Cézanne's paintings, drawings, watercolors, and lithographs in poses culled from works in the Louvre as well as sketches done from live models. It was, however, Delacroix's observations of the natural world that most informed Cézanne's practice.[8] Cézanne greatly admired the earlier artist's expressive, energetic style; he kept reproductions of Delacroix's work tacked to his studio walls and frequently executed copies, all-the-while vigorously pushing his classical subjects, such as the bathers, into new formal paths.

Paul Cézanne, *The Bathers*, ca. 1900 (detail). Watercolor and pencil on paper, 7⅞ x 10¾ inches (20 x 27.3 cm). Thaw Collection, The Morgan Library & Museum. Photo: Graham S. Haber

While Cézanne was an admirer of Redon and aware of the work of van Gogh and other contemporaries, he pursued a singular path largely apart from his colleagues following his withdrawal from Paris and ultimate resettlement in his rural hometown, Aix-en-Provence. There he increasingly turned to watercolor, the medium in which we see his most radical departure from the contour line. Cézanne's watercolors construct form by means of overlapping and adjacent strokes of thinned, gradated color, and by the last decade of his career he was increasingly using blank passages of the support as a major compositional element. His technique, a substantial departure from the Academy's focus on carefully modeled forms and finished surfaces, emphasizes process. Set against the bare paper, each brushstroke is suddenly legible. This interest in showcasing the hand of the artist and the act of creation foreshadows some of the primary concerns of the modern era to come.

Jennifer Tonkovich and Michelle White

NOTES

1. Quoted in Barthélémy Jobert, *Delacroix* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 46.
2. Quoted in Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 36.
3. Quoted in Jobert, *Delacroix*, 42.
4. Colta Ives, "Gardens, Parks, and Byways," in *Vincent van Gogh: The Drawings*, Colta Ives, et al. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), 252–56.
5. Quoted in Susan Alyson Stein, "Arles, 1888–89: The Synthesis," in Ives, et al., *Vincent van Gogh*, 146.
6. Quoted in Jodi Hauptman, "Beyond the Visible," in *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon*, Jodi Hauptman, et al. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 28.
7. Lawrence Gowing, *Paul Cézanne: The Basel Sketchbooks* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 19–20.
8. Cézanne told his friend Joaquim Gasquet, "as Delacroix puts it, we have seen a dictionary in which we will find all the words. Now let's go out and study beautiful nature, try to catch its spirit." Joaquim Gasquet, *Joaquim Gasquet's Cezanne: A Memoir with Conversations*, trans. Christopher Pemberton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 185.