Victorian modernists

Exhibit from Cone collection goes on view Sunday at Nasher

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In 1898, her older brother gave Etta Cone money to purchase something to decorate the family home. Etta Cone (1870-1949) did not buy drapes or furnishings. She bought five paintings by American Impressionist Theodore Robinson.

With the purchase of the 1888 painting “In the Grove,” along with the other Robinson paintings, Etta and her sister Claribel Cone (1864-1929) began a lifetime of art collecting. They would eventually collect paintings, drawings, sculpture and other works by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, Camille Pissarro and other artists that spanned the new techniques and styles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

“In the Grove” is among more than 50 paintings, pieces of sculpture, drawings and other works from the Cone sisters’ collection that will be on view beginning Sunday in the exhibit “Collecting Matisse and Modern Masters: The Cone Sisters of Baltimore” at the Nasher Museum of Art.

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Henri Matisse, “Painter in the Olive Grove,” 1922. Oil on canvas, 23 7/8 x 28 7/8 inches (60.6 x 73.3 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Md., BMA 1950.239. © 2012 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

GO AND DO

WHAT: “Collecting Matisse and Modern Masters: The Cone Sisters of Baltimore”

WHEN: Exhibit begins Sunday and continues through Feb. 10, 2013

WHERE: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

ADMISSION: Basic general admission tickets to this exhibit are $12. For more information about prices, call 919-684-5135 or visit nasher.duke.edu.

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The exhibit is on loan from the Baltimore Museum of Art, the home of the Cone collection.

The Cone sisters came from a textile family. Their brothers Moses and Ceasar set up a textile export company in New York, which accepted goods from Southern mills. They eventually opened Southern Finishing and Warehouse Company in Greensboro, and moved the export business there. Through their money, the Cone sisters were able to travel and buy new, groundbreaking works of art.

They lived in Baltimore, Md., and knew Gertrude and her brother Leo Stein from their days living there. In 1905, they visited the Steins in Paris, and were introduced to Picasso, and later Matisse and other artists who were part of the Steins' literary-artistic circle. Eventually, the sisters would acquire 57 works by Picasso, and more than 500 works by Matisse as part of a collection of some 3,000 pieces of art.

Like the Steins, they were among the early collectors who saw the artistic value in works that other critics dismissed. They “followed a passion for avant-garde art that belied their proper Victorian appearance,” states exhibit notes on the Nasher's website.

The Nasher exhibit has samples of Matisse's work from throughout his career, representing different style periods, said Katharine Adkins, the Nasher's coordinator of exhibitions and publications. The still life “Yellow Pottery from Provence,” part of this exhibit, represents his “Fauvist” period (a term meaning bright blocks of color and energetic brush strokes). Later in his life, Matisse began creating paper cut-outs, and while cut-out samples are not in this exhibit, the 1935 painting “Large Reclining Nude,” which is in this exhibit, shows Matisse using big blocks of color that are precursors to his cut-outs, Adkins said.

Before he completed “Large Reclining Nude,” Matisse began sending photographs to Etta Cone documenting the process of the work. At the Nasher exhibit, eight of those in-progress photographs will be displayed next to the painting, Adkins said. “What I love about Matisse is his use of color, and how he is able to evoke a form with very limited brush work,” Adkins said. She points to “Painter in the Olive Grove” as an example of how Matisse uses spare detail, yet the viewer can identify the painter in the field. She points to “Festival of Flowers,” which shows two women on a balcony watching a parade, as another example of his masterful use of brush strokes, adding detail “where he thinks you need it,” she said.

Other notable works in this exhibit are Picasso's drawing “Self-Portrait (Bonjour Mlle Cohn),” which Gertrude Stein mailed to the Cone sisters in 1907, Vincent Van Gogh's “Landscape with Figures,” Paul Gauguin's “Woman of the Mango,” and Pissarro's “The Highway” (“La Côte du Valhermeil, Auvers-sur-Oise”).

Viewers also may see a copy of a catalogue that Etta Cone had made of the collection, titled “The Cone Collection of Baltimore-Maryland.” Etta Cone sent the book to different museums, which began wanting to exhibit some of the work, Adkins said. This exhibit also will have an interactive virtual tour of the Cone sisters' adjoining Baltimore apartments, showing the works as the sisters displayed them. “It's so much fun to play with,” Adkins said of this virtual tour. “You're looking at the room in color. It's so detailed.”

Vincent Van Gogh, “Landscape with Figures,” 1889. Oil on canvas, 19 15/16 x 26 inches. (50.6 x 66 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Md., BMA 1950.303.

Pablo Picasso, “Self-Portrait (Bonjour Mlle Cone),” 1907. Pen and brown ink, 8 5/16 x 5 1/2 in. (21.1 x 14 cm.) The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Md., BMA 1950.12.481 © 2012 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.