Modern women

The Cone sisters and the coming of modernism at the Nasher Museum

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"Money creates taste," according to artist and sloganeer Jenny Holzer. Those inclined to agree will find much to ponder on the Duke campus, where the Nasher Museum of Art is showing the modern art holdings of the Cone sisters of Baltimore.

When Holzer, who studied at Duke in the late 1960s, coined that line in her 1977 landmark public work, Trauma (which was displayed in a group show at the Nasher last year), she had turned away from painting. She was part of a generation of postmodernists who were, among other things, skeptical that the traditional tools of representation couldn't say anything that hadn't been said before. From Jackson Pollock to Gerhard Richter, in our times there's been anxiety about painting.

And today, the people with money are driving art prices to absurd heights; earlier this year, Pace Gallery sold a Richter work for $3 million. But today's rich collectors are unlikely to resemble the ones of yore, who had the leisure time to put in weeks and months of travel between New York, Paris, Rome, India, China and Japan on couches, tramp steamers and trains. They seem more likely to be hedge fund managers and Middle Eastern oil barons who jet in to Miami and Basel for a busy weekend and throw money at the latest hotshot out of art school.

To such collectors, fine art is the apotheosis of the magical thinking that their livelihoods depend on: intrinsically worthless objects that appreciate in value simply because people think they are precious. But the modernist period, from Manet to Matisse, was an age of heroic painting, of finding new expressive possibilities with light and pigment, shapes and strokes. This work was often difficult, baffling and scandalous, and required support from perceptive critics and open-minded collectors.

So Collecting Matisse and Modern Masters: The Cone Sisters of Baltimore is about painting in the golden age of painting. It's about the creation of taste. It's also about women. But not just the women on the walls, typically nude, painted and sculpted by Matisse, Picasso and Gauguin. In the Nasher galleries, we also see images of three Jewish women from Baltimore. They're seated together at a café table in 1903, in a photograph taken in Settignano, Italy. At the center is Gertrude Stein, not yet out of her 20s and not quite the celebrated experimental writer, salon hostess and tastemaker she was to become. On each side are the stiffly dressed sisters, covered from neck to wrist to ankle, but this E.M. Forster-like tableau is charmingly undermined by the very contemporary-looking straw hat on Stein's head.

If Stein was the brains and soul of a generation of Modernists, then the Cones were the rich American arriveres out of a Henry James novel who are persuaded to buy the art. Money creates taste. The Cones had money; Stein had taste. What good was one without the other? The Cone sisters were members of a single generation of a German-Jewish clan that left its influence across the South, including North Carolina. If you spent time in Greensboro and Blowing Rock, you're familiar with brother Moses Cone, his family, the hospital, the park and more. A 19th-century textile magnate with many mills in North Carolina and elsewhere, Moses and his brother earned enough money to support their two unwed sisters and their acquired taste for art collecting. Etta, six years younger than the family patriarch, was born in 1870 in Baltimore, where the family relocated after living in Tennessee during the Civil War. (Notoriously, Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant tried to expel Jews from areas under his control in Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky.)

The Nasher exhibit includes a reproduction of a rather remarkable 1916 feature on Claribel that appeared on the society page of the Baltimore Evening Sun. The sub-headlines of the profile read "Her Work Is Chiefly In The Laboratory. But She Finds Time, Also, To Collect Book Covers And Old Roses. She Unites A String With A Hairpin While SheDiscurses Interestingly Of The Habits Of The Wary Bacillus."

In the subsequent interview, Claribel discusses her struggle against institutional sexism to become a pathologist. She explains her preference for German educational philosophy and displays a few antiquities that she and her sister have acquired, before telling the reporters that she is expecting a visit from a student. But before the wormen leave, would they like to have a look through her microscope at a "nice tuberculous germ?"

In this single article, one can sense the ongoing collisions of modernity: the stirrings of female emancipation, the battle against a disease that killed generations of artists and the urban poor, the increased curiosity about non-Western cultures, the coming three decades when the mighty fortress of German culture would implode.

Although Claribel was the older, bolder and more idiosyncratic of the two sisters, it was Etta who initiated the collecting, starting with an innocuous home redecorating project with $300 provided by Moses. Later, on a trip to Paris, Etta visited with Stein, who in The End...
The show includes a marvelous Matisse sculpture entitled "Two Negresses," which shows two sturdy built nude women in a half embrace, the right arm of each on the other's shoulder. The dominant one, signified by a bare head, has her right hand on her hip, while the other, with long hair, lets her left arm fall by her side. Only about 18 inches high, it's a remarkably evocative representation of a close female relationship. Take a couple of trips around it.

Another suggestive piece is a sketch called "Young Girl With Plumed Hat in Profil," which shows a young girl wearing something on her head that looks like a headdress from The Lion King. (Matisse himself designed it.) The girl is slouched, and Matisse draws her pouting lips and nose with special care. It's amusing to learn that Etta liked this 1919 piece so much that she hung it in her bedroom. Such biographical details suggest that the "male gaze" that later feminist semiotics would explain may have also been a female gaze.

The show isn't all about Matisse, Picasso and their girls, however. There are some fine works by other painters that seem to have been acquired in later years to round out the Cone collection, including pre-Modern works by Eugène Delacroix and Gustave Courbet. The former, an 1847 classical subject by one of France's greatest and most influential painters, will catch your attention.

One of Guaguin's Tahitian women, painted with richly saturated, eggplant-and-mango-colored pigments, and one of Matisse's famous large reclining nudes. And then there are the odalisques, which seem to have preoccupied Matisse for decades. Odalisques, in their original context, were merely low-level housemaids who waited on higher-ranking women in the homes of Turkish sultans. But they took on an erotic fascination for Westerners starting around the 18th century, when their carnality was subdued within traditional academic nude forms.

Nineteenth-century painters such as Ingres gave female ideal a good workout, and by the 1920s, the odalisque was a thoroughly familiar subject to Western audiences. But in Matisse's hands, the odalisques become unabashedly sensual and fleshly. There's no modesty, no pretense to higher spiritual or intellectual interest in his paintings. But what's left is not pornography or prurience. Instead, we have the bare breasts and bellies of young women at ease, gazing directly at the viewer, seemingly uninhibited in harlequin pants, with Matisse's typical arrangements of their arms and legs.

What is unavoidable in the Nasher galleries is the contrast between the erotic, fleshly nudity of the odalisques and the numerous photos of the dowdy and starchily swaddled Cone sisters. We're told that even in the 1920s, they struck their contemporaries as old-fashioned, continuing to wear ankle-length Victorian dresses. The contrast between the sisters' personal style, and perhaps personal inhibitions, and the overwhelmingly sensual nature of their purchases couldn't be more striking.

The figures of Etta, Claribel and Gertrude loom over this show, curated by the BMA's Karen Levitov, the female form that dominates on the walls and pedestals of the Nasher galleries. Excluding indistinct figures in the relatively few landscapes, I counted seven male subjects among these works—and four of them are in a single Cézanne. (A fifth is a Picasso self-portrait in which, hat in hand, he not-so-subtly implies Etta to buy more of his pictures.) Although a handful of landscapes by the likes of Pissarro and Van Gogh are on display, as well as Japanese silks and Belgian lace and other decorative purchases, the sisters were clearly drawn to female nudes, both on canvas and cast in bronze, produced by Picasso and, especially, Matisse.

At this stage of art history, it's difficult to appreciate that there was once the shock of the new about Picasso and Matisse. But with the encouragement of Stein, and her brother, Leo, and their rapidly increasing confidence in their own taste, the Cones forged ahead, purchasing oils, sketches and castings of young women in various stages of repose and undress.

The Nasher walls contain many images that are now familiar and canonical, including