

CHECKLIST

George Wesley Bellows

(American, 1882–1925)
Portrait of Geraldine Lee, No. 1, 1914
Oil on panel
22 ³/₈ x 18 ⁵/₁₆"
University purchase, Bixby Fund, 1966

Edgar Degas

(French, 1834–1917)
Torso (Woman Getting out of a Bath), c. 1896–1911
Cast bronze
16 ⁵/₈ x 7 ¹/₈ x 5 ⁵/₈"
University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946

El Greco

(Greek, 1541–1614, active in Spain)
The Resurrection, c. 1600–5
Oil on canvas
44 ³/₄ x 20 ³/₄"
University purchase, Parsons Fund, 1952

James Ensor

(Belgian, 1860–1949)
Le Christ tourmenté (Christ Tormented), 1888
Oil on linen
21 ⁷/₈ x 27 ⁵/₈"
Bequest of Morton J. May, 1968

Paul Gauguin

Te Atua (The Gods), 1899
Woodcut
9 ³/₈ x 9"
University purchase, Charles H. Yalem Art Fund, 2001

Philip Guston

(American, 1913–1980)
The Patient, 1979
Oil on canvas
48 x 60"
Bequest of Musa Guston, 1992

Eva Hesse

(American, b. Germany, 1936–1970)
Enclosed, from the set 7 Objects / 69, 1969
Tape, liquid rubber, powder, and balloons, 51 / 100
7 ¹/₂ x 3 x 1 ⁵/₈"
University purchase, 1969

Pieter van der Heyden

(Flemish, c. 1530–after 1572)
after Pieter Bruegel I
(Flemish, c. 1525 / 1530–1569)
The Last Judgment, 1558
Engraving, i / ii
11 ³/₁₆ x 15"
University purchase, 1966

Käthe Kollwitz

(German, 1867–1945)
Erwerbslos (Unemployed), from the series Proletariat, 1925
Woodcut, i / ii
14 ¹/₄ x 11 ⁷/₈"
Gift of the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, 1936

Alfred Le Petit

(French, 1841–1909)
L'homme d'affaire de sa Majesté (His Majesty's Businessman), from La Charge, n.d.
Woodcut with color
14 ¹/₈ x 11"
Gift of Eric G. Carlson in honor of Professor Elizabeth C. Childs, 2000

Lotus Cross Painter

(Greek, Corinthian, active c. 575–after 550 BC)
Pyxis, 575–565 BC
Earthenware
6 ³/₁₆ x 4 ³/₄"
Gift of Robert Brookings and Charles Parsons, 1904

José Clemente Orozco

(Mexican, 1883–1949)
One Woman, c. 1945
Gouache, oil, and sand on paper
19 ³/₄ x 26 ⁵/₈"
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Dagen, 1980

Pablo Picasso

(Spanish, 1881–1973)
Tête de femme (Head of a Woman), 1944
Oil on canvas
13 ⁷/₈ x 8 ⁵/₈"
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Rice, 1961

Robert Rauschenberg

(American, 1925–2008)
Ally, from the series Bones and Unions, 1975
Rag-mud (paper pulp, fenugreek powder, ground tamarind seed, chalk powder, copper sulphate, and gum powder), rope, dyed string, and bamboo, ed. 13
43 ¹/₄ x 49 ¹/₂ x 4"
Gift of Arthur and Sheila Prensky, 1984

Richard Serra

(American, b. 1939)
Rolled. Encased and Sawed, from the set 7 Objects / 69, 1969
Lead, 51 / 100
6 ⁷/₈ x 3 ¹/₄"
University purchase, 1969

Unknown

(Greek, Attic)
Kantharos, 500–490 BC
Earthenware
6 ⁷/₈ x 6 x 4 ⁷/₈"
Gift of Robert Brookings and Charles Parsons, 1904

Unknown

(Greek)
Mask of a Satyr's Face, 1st century BC
Silver, partially gilt
11 ¹/₁₆ x 1 x 1 ¹/₈"
Gift of Morton D. May, 1963

TEACHING GALLERY

Summer 2013

UGLY: AN ALTERNATIVE LOOK AT WESTERN ART

“Beauty has only one form; ugliness has a thousand.”

Victor Hugo, preface to *Cromwell*, 1827

For many people, the history of Western art exists as an imagined litany of beautiful artworks, a chronology of idealized figures and finished objects. This exhibition gathers artworks that ask us to reconsider those assumptions.

Most simply, ugliness has been conceived as the inverse of beauty, but there has always been more at stake than mere aesthetic preference. Throughout history those notions have been imbued with moral values: beauty most frequently is equated with ideals of goodness, truth, and order, while the mundane, the irrational, the evil, the deformed, and the excessive are relegated to the realm of ugliness. Over time, just as moral values have shifted, both the appearance and usefulness of ugliness have taken on different meanings and different roles, often in surprisingly powerful ways.

Although the ancient Greeks remain most strongly associated with refined sculptures of

idealized bodies crafted according to mathematical proportions observed in nature, strange, hybrid entities populated the vernacular imagination and arts. Thus, in a sharp contrast to Aristotle's call for art as an imitation of that which is noble and lofty, we see a cosmetic jar encircled by half-human, half-bird Sirens (**Lotus Cross Painter, Pyxis, 575–565 BC**). According to ancient mythology, the Sirens, though physically repulsive, could lure sailors to their death with beautiful songs; here they suggest the seductive—but perhaps also dangerous—power of the makeup that the jar once held. Likewise, the amalgamated face of a satyr (**Mask of a Satyr's Face, 1st century BC**) and a drinking vessel shaped as a woman's head but in fact probably depicting the child-eating monster Lamia (**Kantharos, 500–490 BC**) champion a disruption of the norms of nature and society, mocking decorum and indulging in wine, music, and sex.

This Teaching Gallery exhibition—on view June 5 through July 29, 2013—is curated by Elissa Weichbrodt, PhD, in conjunction with the course “History of Western Art, Architecture & Design,” offered by the department of Art History & Archaeology in Washington University's School of Arts & Sciences in summer 2013.

Centuries later in the Netherlands, similarly hybrid forms proved useful as a means of illustrating religious doctrine. In **Pieter van der Heyden's *The Last Judgment* (1558)**—an engraving after a drawing by the well-known Netherlandish master Pieter Bruegel I—unregenerate souls are swept into a chaotic underworld populated by monstrosities: a half man, half lizard; an owl with legs facing backward and webbed feet; and a giant cave, covered in brambles, that is also the maw of a fish. While the upper portion of the composition is organized in neat symmetry around the figure of Christ, van der Heyden represents evil as a swarming field of pandemonium below. Order and balance in one section of the work visually express moral uprightness, while disorder and animality represent the fate of the sinful.

El Greco's *The Resurrection* (c. 1600–5) also adopts a bifurcated composition, contrasting the tumbling, shadowed figures of the soldiers with Christ's upright, luminescent form. In painting these stretched, impossibly curving bodies, unmoored in a theatrically lit space, El Greco disregarded classical proportions in favor of a more expressive, subjective style that through its exaggeration and drama suggests the miraculous and divine nature of Christ's resurrection. Notably, the significance attributed to such distortions shifted according to the contexts and aesthetic commitments of those who saw his work. Although El Greco's work was well-received in his own time, late seventeenth-century art historians writing immediately after his death dismissed his work as “contemptible,” and later nineteenth-century classicists, such as Carl Justi, condemned this and other of El Greco's paintings as “distorted fancies of a morbid brain,” proof of the decline of culture following the brilliance of the Renaissance.¹ In contrast, nineteenth-century Romanticists and many early twentieth-century modern artists and historians praised his paintings as the expressive outworking of the artist's own private vision.²

As the notion of art as an expression of an artist's inner life gained prominence in the nineteenth century, **James Ensor** created his own idiosyncratic reinvention of a traditional religious scene in ***Le Christ tourmenté (Christ Tormented)* (1888)**. Amidst the garish colors and loosely handled paint we can make out not only the bleeding body of Christ, but a tiny demon defecating on his hand and a cluster of ghoulish faces witnessing the spectacle. In contrast to more conventional, idealized depictions of Christ, the vulgarity of the scene both underscores the horror of the

crucifixion and personalizes it, possibly also suggesting the darkness of Ensor's own psyche.

For some artists, probing the unconscious and irrational was a means of resisting the celebration of technology, efficiency, and progress that characterized the advent of modernity. Artists such as **Paul Gauguin** sought out non-Western and non-modernized cultures in an effort to make work that they believed to be a more unmediated expression. In ***Te Atua (The Gods)* (1899)**, created in Tahiti, Gauguin depicts a powerful admixture of figures drawn from a range of religions using the rough, direct medium of woodcut printing. Though completed much later, **Pablo Picasso's *Tête de femme (Head of a Woman)* (1944)** also employs a naïve style and adapts non-Western forms as the basis of a new visual language of abstraction. The sweeping curvature of the woman's nose and her pronounced almond-shaped eyes recall masks from the Ivory Coast that Picasso referenced as early as 1907. By incorporating non-Western elements into their work, Gauguin and Picasso rejected both Western ideals of beauty and the commitment to naturalism that had dominated Western art since the Renaissance.

In further rebellion against the ossified tropes of traditional Western art, other artists chose to eschew classical or religious subjects in favor of depicting the everyday, or what was then considered mundane and unremarkable. Although the armless, nude figure of **Edward Degas's *Torso (Woman Getting out of a Bath)* (c. 1896–1911)** recalls a fragment of a statue of Venus from antiquity, the title situates the scene in the ordinary, contemporary world and foregrounds the awkwardness of the woman's position, while the rough surface suggests the artist's interest in capturing a fleeting moment rather than a pose of eternal significance. **George Wesley Bellows's *Portrait of Geraldine Lee, No. 1* (1914)** is also stark and unidealized. Bellows paints the young woman—with large, soft blue eyes and rosy lips—in the beam of a modern electric light that flattens her features and casts a green pallor on her skin. Together with the tight, asymmetrical cropping of the canvas and the artist's rapid brushwork, the theatricality of the lighting imbues the painting with a kind of immediacy and energy that reflects the reality of Bellows's modern, urban experience.

Ugliness can also serve as a means of social commentary. Caricatures such as **Alfred Le Petit's *L'homme d'affaire de sa Majesté (His Majesty's Businessman)* (19th century)** use the grotesque as a

comic foil, a means of undercutting authority figures and elucidating the foibles of modern culture. Le Petit depicts Emperor Napoleon III with a bulbous pink nose, purchasing a heart—engraved with the name of the emperor's mistress—from a white-haired man with a fish's tail. Through exaggeration and juxtaposition, the artist undermines the usually strict regimes that govern representations of those in power, allowing his readers to laugh at and critique their ruler for his philandering. Ugliness here has a leveling effect, bringing the mighty down to the masses.

For **Käthe Kollwitz**, the traditional equation of beauty with dominant, high culture and ugliness with low culture and social marginality provided the means for a different political project: foregrounding the “ugliness” of the plight of the poor. In her woodcut ***Erwerbslos (Unemployed)* (1925)**, Kollwitz expresses the suffering of impoverished people by representing them as skeletal figures. The bodies of the gaunt, wide-eyed workers disappear into the inky shadow that fills the right hand side of the composition. The literal and metaphorical darkness of their situation—their economic and physical precariousness—is meant to inspire political action, not merely emotional sympathy, on the part of the viewer.

A similar condemnation of the dehumanizing and demoralizing effects of modernity appears in **José Clemente Orozco's *One Woman* (c. 1945)**, a deceptively simple portrait of a woman with marked shadows below her eyes and cheekbones. Despite the figure's neatly rolled hairstyle and collared blouse, the harsh lighting and aggressive brushstrokes of oil mixed with sand suggest the hardship of modern life. **Philip Guston's *The Patient* (1979)** likewise evokes the threatening nature of modern life, in this case through the creation of a deeply personal iconography. The anthropomorphized swaths of pinkish-red suggest both fractured human limbs and broken machines. Guston depicts a reality characterized by physical and psychic pain, rather than an idealized past or utopian future.

Ugliness has also been conceived as “formlessness,” the dissolution of coherent, stable forms into a kind of unpredictable and therefore threatening state. These objects often evoke sensory experiences beyond that of vision in an effort to rearticulate conventions of sculptural production in the postwar period. **Robert Rauschenberg's *Ally* (1975)**—a simple construction of cast paper, string, and a hanging bamboo pole—enacts this kind of destabilization. Rauschenberg created it in

India while working at a paper mill, and he incorporated the materials and smells he found there—fenugreek powder, ground tamarind seed, chalk powder, gum powder, and copper sulfate—into the pulp he used to make the sculpture. The tactile nature of the materials, as well as the earthy, exotic scents still emanating from the lumpy dark brown paper, engage our senses of touch, taste, and smell, asking us to rethink, or more literally re-experience, aesthetic notions of finish, refinement, and beauty.

In a related reimaging of sculptural production, **Eva Hesse** and **Richard Serra** call attention to the base nature of their chosen materials rather than trying to transform them into an aesthetic object. **Hesse's *Enclosed* (1969)** is a result of entropy. She applied wallpaper tape and several layers of liquid rubber to an inflated balloon and then released the air. She coated the resulting form—which uncomfortably evokes shriveled skin or a deeply ridged bone—with more latex and powder to hold the wrinkles in place. However, due to the inherently unstable nature of the materials, the work has oxidized and grown increasingly brittle over time, changing in ways outside of the artist's control. Meanwhile **Serra's *Rolled, Encased and Sawed* (1969)**, from the same set of multiples, offers a mass-produced lead pipe, filled with a rolled sheet of chemical lead, boldly accentuating the physical properties of his industrial materials.

This collection of objects does not offer a counternarrative to a history of beauty. It might, however, suggest fissures in such a history. Ugliness pushes at the boundaries of what we know and find comfortable. It can also make us more active viewers, prompting us to react, question, and take a second look.

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1. Carl Justi, *Diego Velazquez und sein Jahrhundert* (1888) (Bonn: F. Cohen, 1922), 85–87.

2. For a summary look at El Greco's reception through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see José Alvarez Lopera, ed., *El Greco: Identity and Transformation: Crete, Italy, Spain* (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza; Milan: Skira, 1999).