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New BMA Exhibit Highlights Matisse's Influence On Diebenkorn

Nearly 100 works show how an American post-war painter used a French master's work as inspiration.

By Gabriella Souza. *Posted on October 20, 2016*

They were painters separated by decades, continents, and artistic movements, but their love of color and passion for painting united them. Though they never met in person, their work is an example of what is possible when one artist is inspired by another.

Early on in Richard Diebenkorn's career, he was exposed to the work of Henri Matisse, and, as he remarked in 1952 after viewing an exhibit of the French modern master's works, "It absolutely turned my head around."

"Matisse was the artist who inspired him most," says Katy Rothkopf, the exhibit's curator, who is the head of the department of European painting and sculpture at The Baltimore Museum of Art. It became one of the most productive instances of a painter using his fellow artist's work as inspiration in 20th-century art history.

Rothkopf first had the idea for the exhibit after viewing drawings of women by both Diebenkorn and Matisse in the BMA's collection, noticing the similarities, and thinking, "These should be displayed together." It took 15 years for her to compile the 92 works in the exhibit, some of which are from abroad or institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and she had difficulty finding a time when they all weren't in other shows.

As Baltimoreans, we all know and love the works of the brilliant Matisse, since the BMA has the largest collection in the world, thanks to sisters Etta and Claribel Cone. But this exhibit sheds light on Diebenkorn, one of America's great post-war painters who, because he lived primarily in California, is associated most with the West Coast.

Diebenkorn's canvasses are stunningly bold, with statement-making hues and brushstrokes. Matisse's works are more intimate and on a smaller scale, but displayed side-by-side, the viewer will immediately notice the how they mirror one another in line, composition, and color.

We've selected a few images that highlight the depth of the exhibit—which runs through Jan. 29, 2017 before heading to San Francisco—and showcase how Matisse influenced Diebenkorn's throughout his career.



Matisse's Studio, Quai Saint-Michel (1916); right, Diebenkorn's Urbana #4 (1953) -Courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Art

Matisse “shows you how he painted his works,” says Rothkopf, like in the 1916 work *Studio, Quai Saint-Michel*, which Diebenkorn would have seen when he visited what is now The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. The bold lines that define the room shows the viewer how Matisse structured his canvas and balanced the scene inside the room from the imagery outside the window and door.

Diebenkorn would use a similar color palette and canvas structure in his 1953 work *Urbana #4*, which showcases the more Abstract Expressionist style he'd adopted at that point. At the time, he'd taken a teaching position in Urbana, Illinois, and found the landscape so bleak that he blacked out all his windows so he could revel in the lush paints on his canvas.



Matisse's The Yellow Dress (1929-31); right, Diebenkorn's Seated Figure With Hat (1967) -Courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Art

In 1966, Diebenkorn attended a major Matisse retrospective, which included more than 300 works by the artist, who had died 12 years before. Among the paintings displayed was this work, *The Yellow Dress*, which is a part of the Cone collection at the BMA.

A year later, Diebenkorn produced *Seated Figure With Hat*, which in a way is his own version of Matisse's own seated woman. He uses a similar color palette, with vibrant yellows and orangey reds, but puts his own twist on his model, who happens to be his wife, Phyllis, as he angled her away from the viewer. Unlike Matisse, "Diebenkorn wasn't as interested in facial features," Rothkopf says, instead choosing to focus on more of the feeling the figure's placement gave to the painting.

This would be one of the last of Diebenkorn's figurative paintings. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, his work again began to change.



Matisse's *View of Notre Dame* (1914); right, Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park #79* (1975) -Courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Art

Diebenkorn is perhaps most celebrated for his *Ocean Park* series, a group of paintings named for his studio locations in southern California. *Ocean Park #79* from 1975 shows how much his work has reverted back to abstraction. But instead of the heavy, textured brush strokes of his early career, these paintings are geometric and serene, with lines that give the work an altar or window-like structure.

Matisse's *View of Notre Dame* has a similar linear composition, and the less-detailed form of *Notre Dame* seemingly appears through a window. This 1914 work came at a time when Matisse was the most experimental. "Diebenkorn thought this was his most interesting period," Rothkopf says.

Diebenkorn would continue in this direction until his death in 1993, and this painting by Matisse continued to serve as inspiration. "There are three paintings that come up repeatedly for Diebenkorn—this is one of them."