GETTY PRESENTS DRAWINGS ILLUMINATED BY HAIKU

The Poetry of Paper

Exhibition explores concept of negative space in drawings by Rembrandt, Fragonard, Seurat, and many others

July 23–October 20, 2013
At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center

LOS ANGELES—When looking at drawings, one generally focuses on what’s there: the figures, landscape, buildings, and other objects in the work. The Poetry of Paper, a new exhibition on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center July 23–October 20, 2013, however, focuses on what’s NOT there—the artists’ use of negative space, described as areas of paper left blank to create the illusion of light and form.

Featuring works primarily from the Getty Museum’s permanent collection, The Poetry of Paper contains 33 drawings by accomplished masters that span six centuries.

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“Exhibitions like The Poetry of Paper, which focus on a particular medium, provide an excellent vehicle for understanding artistic technique,” explains Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. “Our attention is automatically drawn to what an artist has drawn or painted, but sometimes it is what they have chosen not to depict that is equally important in achieving the desired effect. The exhibition explores the significance of what is not there with sometimes surprising results.”

To illustrate the use of negative space, the exhibition highlights four distinct subjects: figure studies, religious imagery, architectural structures, and nature.

When drawing the figure, artists frequently used negative space to suggest form, trusting the viewers’ imagination to fill in the void. For example, in Gustav Klimt’s Portrait of a Young Woman Reclining (1897–1898), her head rests on a swath of blank space, which through precise, minimal chalk marks can be read as a pillow. Similarly, in Cornelis Dusart’s Seated Peasant Holding a Pitcher (about 1680), the subject reclines in a seat of negative space, which through adept positioning of the body, is understood as a chair. Additionally, by contrasting pen or chalk lines with reserves of untouched paper, draftsmen created highlights—hair and fabric appear lustrous; muscles and skin emit sheen; and wrinkles and folds are articulated.

When depicting compositions that feature religious subjects, artists often employed dramatic light effect to suggest a divine presence. In Ferdinand Bol’s Messenger of God Appearing to Joshua (about 1640–1644), for example, interspersed areas of white paper amongst dark wash or chalk convey an ethereal quality of light. Bursts of “negative space” emanating from the figure convey a divine presence.

Whether showing architectural interiors or exteriors, artists utilized negative space to form their structures. The selection of architectural drawings in the exhibition demonstrates that the most efficient way to portray light streaming into a building or shining upon a column, arch, or dome was to leave areas around drawn forms untouched. In Francois
Boucher's *Interior of a Barn with a Family of Coopers* (about 1763–1766), a seemingly modest barn is transformed into a bright space utilizing a single point of light from the entrance.

In addition to figure and architectural studies, artists were also inspired by the world around them, and strove to mirror what they witnessed in nature. By juxtaposing untouched areas of white paper with various colors of wash, they could suggest puffy white clouds on a sunny day or clouds that warn of an oncoming storm.

Jan de Bisschop's *Boats on Shore in Water* (1648–1652) is a masterful example of this technique, using expanses of white paper to denote the shore, sky and sea.

In an effort to illuminate how artists employed artful restraint, exhibition curator and Associate Curator in the Department of Drawings Stephanie Schrader has chosen to write selected object labels in the Japanese poetic form known as haiku, offering simple and succinct explanations of the drawing's use of negative space. In doing so, she worked with local poet and poetry instructor Jim Natal to refine the wording of her poems and articulate prompts that will encourage visitors to create their own haiku in response to the drawings.

"Haiku poems convey much more understanding than the sum of their words—using only seventeen syllables in three lines to conjure images or ideas," explains Schrader. "I found haiku to be a fitting counterpart to the drawings on view, which also convey much by using very little—empty space and simple strokes on paper can evoke a complete picture."

*The Poetry of Paper* is on view July 23–October 20, 2013 at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center. A full schedule of related events will be announced.

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The *J. Paul Getty Museum* collects in seven distinct areas, including Greek and Roman antiquities, European paintings, drawings, manuscripts, sculpture and decorative arts, and photographs gathered internationally. The Museum's mission is to make the collection meaningful and attractive to a broad audience by presenting and interpreting the works of art through educational programs, special exhibitions, publications, conservation, and research.
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