University of North Carolina in Greensboro, NC, Features Works by Henri Matisse and Ellsworth Kelly

The University of North Carolina in Greensboro, NC, is presenting three new exhibits including: Matisse Drawings: Curated by Ellsworth Kelly from The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation Collection; Plant Lithographs by Ellsworth Kelly 1964-1966, featuring works by Ellsworth Kelly; and Henri Matisse: Selections from the Claribel and Etta Cone Collection. All are on view at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, through Sept. 18, 2016.

The main exhibition, Matisse Drawings: Curated by Ellsworth Kelly from The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation Collection provides the unique opportunity to view the work of a modern master through the eyes of one of the greatest abstract artists of the twentieth century. Through a selection of 45 works, Ellsworth Kelly surveys Henri Matisse’s drawings from 1900 through 1950 - from sketches to finished pieces - and reveals Matisse’s process and creativity as a draftsman. The exhibition was organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in collaboration with The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation.

To accompany Matisse’s drawings, nine works from Kelly’s own Suite of Plant Lithographs (1964–66) will be shown in an adjacent gallery in an exhibition entitled Plant Lithographs by Ellsworth Kelly 1964-1966. The coupling suggests both the sympathies and distinct differences between the two artists. Matisse drew constantly throughout his life. With a deceptively simple line, he conveyed shape, volume and composition, and expressed emotion. His direct and elegant renderings inspired Kelly and continue to inspire countless others. In an interview with John Stomberg (reproduced in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition), Kelly stated, “Picasso made me want to paint, but Matisse drawings made me want to draw.”

Kelly discerningly chose for exhibition both exemplary works and works that reflect Matisse’s drawing process. Included are studies of body movements, repeated views of a single detail, and fully realized renderings, as well as sketches related to major works, such as The Dance (1910). Selected from the collection of The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation, many of these drawings have rarely, if ever, been displayed in public.

Kelly arranged Matisse’s drawings in a single row, evenly spaced, with identical off-white mats and pale wooden frames, and chose not to use wall labels. Reflecting on Kelly’s installation in the accompanying catalogue, John Stomberg states, “While every Matisse drawing was shown to its best advantage, Kelly’s aesthetic added dramatically to the experience of the exhibition. Viewers walked through an Ellsworth Kelly composition to see Henri Matisse drawings.” This minimalist presentation allows the works to be viewed without distraction.

This is echoed in the separate display of nine works by Kelly in an adjacent gallery. In 1969, Kelly stated: “The plant drawings are exact observations of the form of the leaf or flower or fruit seen. Nothing is changed or added: no shading, no surface making. They are not an approximation of the thing seen nor are they a personal expression of an abstraction… My lesson was to see objectively, no surface making. They are not an approximation of the thing seen nor are they a personal expression of an abstraction… My lesson was to see objectively, no surface making. They are not an approximation of the thing seen nor are they a personal expression of an abstraction… My lesson was to see objectively, no surface making. They are not an approximation of the thing seen nor are they a personal expression of an abstraction… My lesson was to see objectively, no surface making. They are not an approximation of the thing seen nor are they a personal expression of an abstraction.”

One of the most important practitioners of abstract art in the United States, American artist Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015) gained an international reputation by the early 1950s. Over the course of six decades, he created an extraordinary body of work comprising abstract painting and sculpture, as well as figurative drawings and prints. Kelly’s work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2002), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1998), the Guggenheim Museum (1996), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1982). The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue published by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in collaboration with The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation. It features a new interview with Kelly and reproductions of all of the works in the exhibition.

Matisse Drawings: Curated by Ellsworth Kelly from The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation Collection was organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in collaboration with The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation. Additional support provided by the JFM Foundation, and Mrs. Donald M. Cox.