

Prehistoric Tools to Matisse Cut-Outs

By ROBERTA SMITH SEPT. 3, 2014

Check your frequent flier miles. The array of museum shows opening across the country this fall feels promising, almost an embarrassment of riches.

One of the biggest events for New York is the unveiling of Leonard Lauder's magnanimous gift of nearly 80 Cubist works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art — and in a sense, to the city — opening on Oct. 20. It will be fascinating to see how this collection of paintings and drawings (and two sculptures) by Braque, Juan Gris, Fernand Léger and Picasso will alter the modernist balance of power between the Met and the Museum of Modern Art.

The Modern, in turn, will look to the final flowering of an early modernist who ignored Cubism with “Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs” opening on Oct. 12, a show that is bound to reshape the understanding of midcentury abstraction.

Another high-profile effort is the quadricentennial commemoration of El Greco's death with exhibitions that group 29 of his paintings at three East Coast museums: 15 can be seen at the Met — six lent by the Hispanic Society of America — and three at the Frick Collection in New York (both opening on Nov. 4); 11 others will be on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington (opening on Nov. 2). If these paintings were consolidated in one museum, they would rival the Prado's holdings in El Greco.

New York's recent run of strong museum retrospectives is sure to be extended by the Modern's tribute, opening on Oct. 4, to the enigmatic American sculptor Robert Gober, who has been turning American life inside out since the 1980s. This show should also continue the schooling of New York's curators in the craft of exhibition-making initiated by the Modern's Christopher Williams show and the Whitney's Jeff Koons survey. The installation of the Modern's retrospective of the irreverent early appropriationist Elaine Sturtevant, starting on Nov. 9, may be iffier because she died in May, but she probably left the curators with plenty of ideas about how she wanted things done.

Other surveys include the one of the great Judith Scott, who wrapped fabric and wood in colored yarn to create mysterious talismanic forms. It will open at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art on Oct. 24, making it one of the only recent surveys of an outsider artist in a New York museum other than the American Folk Art Museum.

Speaking of enigmatic, on Nov. 23 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art will mount the first major survey of the French artist Pierre Huyghe. Down the coast are two shows that are a bit more overdue: a five-decade overview of the abstract painter Jack Whitten at the La Jolla branch of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego opens Sept. 20, and opening on Nov. 1 at the San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park is “Ron Nagle: Peripheral Cognition,” a three-decade examination of the achievement of one of postwar American art's best ceramic sculptors.

This year's inevitable Impressionist exhibition is “Monet and the Seine: Impressions of a River,” opening at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, on Oct. 26. A more unusual variation on this staple will be the Met's “Madame Cézanne,” opening Nov. 19, which will feature 23 of the 29 portraits on canvas and paper made by her husband over 20 years. Portrayals of this long-suffering but formidable-looking woman should offer a new glimpse of the earliest stirrings of Cubist structure. Overuse of the “behind every great man” adage should be expected.

In the Midwest, the growing attention to Native American art will continue with “The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky” at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., opening on Sept. 19. (It travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in March.) Starting on Nov. 23, the Art Institute of Chicago will take another look at the achievements of a Belgian Post-Impressionist and proto-Expressionist with “Temptation: The Demons of James Ensor.” Also in Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art will reinforce the depressing trend of museum exhibitions devoted to rock stars with “David Bowie Is,” opening on Sept. 23. (Look out for “Björk,” opening at the Modern in March.) The Bowie show, with original lyrics, costumes and set designs, originated at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where it made a little more sense, given that museum's emphasis on design, and drew mobs and raves. It may be a good exhibition in terms of capturing Mr. Bowie's achievements, but that's not the point.

A more ambiguous use of (nonrock) celebrity will be seen in “Helena Rubinstein: Beauty Is Power,” opening at the Jewish

Museum on Oct. 31. While its title makes the show sound like a survey of Rubinstein's cosmetics empire, the exhibition will also contain gradations of art. Commissioned portraits (including one by Andy Warhol) will be presented beside Modernist works by Picasso, Miró, Elie Nadelman and, mostly impressive, several examples of African art — all of which Rubinstein owned.

Toward year's end, MoMA will put a toe in the roiling waters of contemporary painting for the first time in several years with "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World," opening on Dec. 14. It will be telling how the show deals with the medium, considering that the main signs of the Modern's attention to it have been displays of individual works in the lobby.

Among the show's more interesting inclusions is Nicole Eisenman, one of numerous artists fearlessly re-engaging with the figurative forms of early Modernism, and whose own 20-year survey opens on Sept. 19 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. And perhaps in an attempt to (sort of) acknowledge this figurative impulse in its midcentury form, the Modern will present, starting on Oct. 18, the aptly titled "Jean Dubuffet: Soul of the Underground," presenting about 100 works, most of them lithographs from the mid-1950s. Although, going by the checklist, the show seems to tilt as much toward abstraction as possible.

One of the season's breakout art events will surely be the reopening on Dec. 12 of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, following a three-year closing for construction. Its expanded gallery space will feature 10 displays, both temporary and permanent installations. A central show will be "Tools: Extending Our Reach," which will present nearly two million years of tool design through about 175 objects, starting with sharpened stones. Given the Cooper Hewitt's mission, its expansion should be a beacon of outstanding museum design. Heaven knows, we need all the help we can get.