Drawing From the American Mainstream

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JUST WHEN it seemed certain that the great wave of Bicentennial exhibitions surveying American art had come to an end—that, indeed, there could scarcely be anything Ica in the storerooms to dust off and hart on the walls — the Whitney Museum of American Art has come up with a show that can take its place beside the best of the Bicentennial events. it is called "American Master Drawings and Watercolors," and it is a show of superb quality. Even for people who think they know this field pretty well, there will be some delightful surprises.

This is very much a connoisseur's exhibition. Its guest curator is Dr. Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., curator of American painting and sculpture at the University Art Gallery, who has just. produced a comprehensive history of American drawings and watercolors under the sponsorship of the Drawing Society. Over three years' work have some into this important study, and into the selection of the exhibition that the American Federation of Arts invited Dr. Stebbins to organize on the basis of his research. Few exhibitions at the Whitney have been so seriously prepared as this one.

It is a big exhibition, too—over 240 works on paper—and it embraces the entire history of American art from Colonial times to the present day. Almost everything that one expects (or hopes) to find in such a survey is here in abundance: excellent and often unfamiliar examples of such established masters as John Singleton Copley, Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederic E. Church, Martin Johnson Heade, Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer. But there are also works that are rarely, if ever, shown alongside the art of these major figures.

"I have included both the works in the mainstream and those out of it, using quality as my guide," Dr. Stebbins remarks in the introduction to his book, and much of the excitement of the exhibition is to be found in the mix that results from this wide-ranging policy. We are given fine examples of drawings by folk artists—some particularly beautiful Shaker drawings, among others—along with the work of botanists, explorers

and illustrators. The so-called “mainstream” of fine art remains the mainstream of this exhibition, but we are reminded at every turn of what else was being done by draftsmen who did not consider themselves “artists” in our sense of the word.

Not all of the surprises are to be found among the unfamiliar names, either. Eakins's immaculate “Drawing of a Lathe” (1860), looking like something out of the Precisionist movement of the 1920's, is something of a shock, while Homer's watercolor “The New Novel” (1877) surprises us in another way—it must be the most sympathetic portrait’ of a girl ever painted by this first New England bachelor.

Again, and again, we are made to feel that everything has been freshly observed. Childe Hassam's watercolor “The Island Garden” (1892), for example, is quite the best thing by this artist I have ever seen, and almost persuades one that he may be first rate, after all. And in many different genres—from William Milliner's elegant anatomical study, “The Neck Muscles in Use” (1876), to Jerome Myers's haunting “Self Portrait’’ (circa 1915–20) to the still-life watercolors of Georgia O'Keeffe and Charles Demuth in the 1020's—we are startle] into looking at things with a new keenness.

In the more recent sections of the survey. Dr. Stebbins maintains his usual catholicity of taste, which ranges from Robert Motherwell and Ellsworth Kelly to Chuck Close and Andrew Wyeth. It is in the contemporary selections that one is tempted to quarrel, but that is often the case with historical surveys.

“American Master Drawings and Watercolors,” which remains at the museum through Jan. 23, is, in most respects, a model of how such shows should be done, a model the Whitney would do well to emulate in the future. And the book that Dr. Stebbins has produced, with the assistance of John Caldwell and Carol Troyen, is a major contribution to the study of American art. “American Master Drawings and Watercolors,” published by Harper & Row, is priced at $10.95 (paperback) and $50 (hardcover), plus $1.50 postage for mail orders.

The Whitney Museum, Madison Avenue and 75th Street, is open weekdays, except Monday, from 1 A.M. to 6 P.M.. Sundays and holidays tram noon to 6, Tuesday evening until 10. Admission is $1.50, except on Tuesday evening, when it is free.

Other exhibitions this week include the following:

Reuben Kadish (Borgenicht, 1018 Madison Avenue at 79th Street): This is sculpture of the female nude in the Expressionist mode, with rough, boldly modeled surfaces that convey broad painterly contrasts of light and shadow to the eye and a rush of raw feeling to the mind. The themes (or at least the titles) are drawn from various mythologies—Eve, Isis, Aphrodite—but the feeling derives unmistakably from the pictorial Expressionism of the 1950's, especially de Kooning's.

Surprisingly, however, the style comes off with more force in the free-standing pieces (mostly bronze) than in the big reliefs (terra cotta), which tend to smother the artist's forms in his own robust energy. (Through Dec. 10.)

Gregory Gillespie (Forum, 1018 Madison Avenue at 79th Street): There are several varieties of, realism to be seen in Gregory Gillespie's paintings. In the self-portraits, there is a realism of psychological intensity; in the still life, realism of detached observation. In the huge “Studio Wall,” measuring 8 feet by 10 feet, which is the tour de force of this show, yet another mode of realism is broached—a pictorial game of appearance-and-reality as objects, paintings, photographs, sketches and the other materials of the artist's studio are examined, depicted and made to seem more “real” than the space they occupy.

There is, at times, a very chilling quality to the meticulous detail of Mr. Gillespie's painting. It is when he confronts his own image, in the self-portraits, that his reserve is broken, and something more intense makes itself felt. (Through Dec. 4.)

Al Held (Emmerich, 41 East 57th Street): The black-on-white and white-on-black structures that form the imagery of Al Held's abstract painting seem to have acquired an almost science-fiction atmosphere. The cold, distant space we glean in these pictures begins to look like an imaginary interplanetary space, and the forms that define our view of it begin to look like the interiors of an imaginary spaceship. Everything in these pictures suggests precision, transparency, distant vistas and unbounded space, yet the basic idiom is that of geometrical abstraction. One is left wondering how much is intended by the artist and how much is sheer association on the part of the viewer. (Through Wednesday.)

Joyce Weinstein (Cortella, 41 East. 57th Street): The sensations of summer sunlight on urban surfaces, of fleeting, liquid reflections in a man-made world—these, apparently, are the visual bases for the free, delicate tides of paint that define here abstract paintings. In each picture, there is form that seems to dissolve in a swirl of light, that seems to exist for the purpose of being dissolved. There is nice lyric touch at times, but then the eye yearns for something a little more palpable to hold on to. (Through next Friday.)

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