

NEWS

First Look: Transfigurations at the Wex

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"Nu au Fauteuil Noir" (Nude in a Black Armchair) Pablo Picasso, 1932

Before today, I could have counted my intimate encounters with Pablo Picasso's original oil paintings on one hand. Maybe one finger. For most of us, the canvases Picasso poured over in his Hotel de Savoie studio in Paris or at his La Californie villa-turned-museum in Cannes are almost mythic-part of the art history canon that surely exist somewhere, but are rarely, if ever, within arm's reach.

Through the end of the year, those who visit *Transfigurations: Modern Masters from the Wexner Family Collection* at the Wexner Center for the Arts will have an up-close and perhaps unprecedented look at 19 Picasso originals and 41 other gems from [Les and Abigail Wexner's private collection](#).

This is likely the first and last time the Wexners' collection will be on public display, Wex director Sherri Geldin reflected before today's exhibition preview. The paintings and sculptures, ranging from Picasso to Alberto Giacometti to Susan Rothenberg, were amassed quietly over four decades, Les Wexner says, never with the intention of being compiled into a show. Yet, here they are, the centerpiece of the Wex's 25th anniversary season.

Transfigurations, at first glance, may have the air of a trophy exhibition. But Geldin and guest curator Robert Storr (dean of the Yale University School of Art) endeavored to make it anything but.

From beginning to end, Storr arranged the pieces so as to detail the evolution of the body (human and animal) in abstract expressionism over a span of nearly 100 years. From Edgar Degas' graceful "Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans" (Little Dancer Aged Fourteen) to Giacometti's imposing "Grande Femme Debout I" (Tall Standing Woman I)-and every curve and camber in between-Storr keeps us staring, thinking, moving.

The gallery's upper level is devoted to the paintings of Jean Dubuffet and Willem de Kooning, as well as a crowd of bronze Alberto Giacometti sculptures surrounded by Susan Rothenberg's warm horse paintings. The middle level is a welcome interactive space. Touch screens detail the artists and their works, and a wall-spanning timeline lends historical context to the varied pieces throughout.

"Instead, it is our intention to put the work into context, treat it historically, take it out of its domestic area and give it the cadence, space, light and rhythm that you'll find in a museum exhibition," Geldin says.

Storr's advice to visitors: Don't prepare for the exhibition. "Don't let the backdrop of your mind tell you what you should be thinking and feeling," he says. "Not knowing is an interesting proposition of modern art."

I was swallowed into Dubuffet's "La Mare L'Hourloupe" (The Hourloupe Tide) and haunted by Giacometti's "Diego dans l'Atelier" (Diego in the studio). But Picasso—who demands the gallery's entire lower level—won my attention, specifically with his famed "Nu au Fauteuil Noir" (Nude in a Black Armchair). The large 1932 painting appropriately hangs alone on the lower room's back wall. Even as I tried to move on, I couldn't stop looking at the vibrant canvas over my shoulder. The farther I stood from the painting, the more it appeared to take on a life of its own, as if its subject were contorting inside the frame.

Also of note on the lower level are Picasso's "Comptier et Bouteille sur un Gueridon" (Fruit Bowl and Bottle on a Pedestal Table) and "Mere et Enfant" (Mother and Child), carefully positioned side by side. The contrasting paintings, completed within a single year of one another, are reminders of a then-40-year-old Picasso's ambition and versatility as an artist.

Throughout the exhibition, Picasso is represented from age 16 to age 78. (As the one of the gallery's wall inscriptions puts it, the works included are, well, "various.") Even then, they're carried and united by one thread: the body—something that has captured Wexner's interest since he purchased Willem de Kooning's evocative "Pink Lady" in 1978. And as a Degas quote along one of the gallery walls proposes, "We were created to look at one another, weren't we?"

