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ARTNEWS

STRIKING UP A CONVERSATION: THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART UNITES MATISSE AND DIEBENKORN IN A GLORIOUS EXHIBITION

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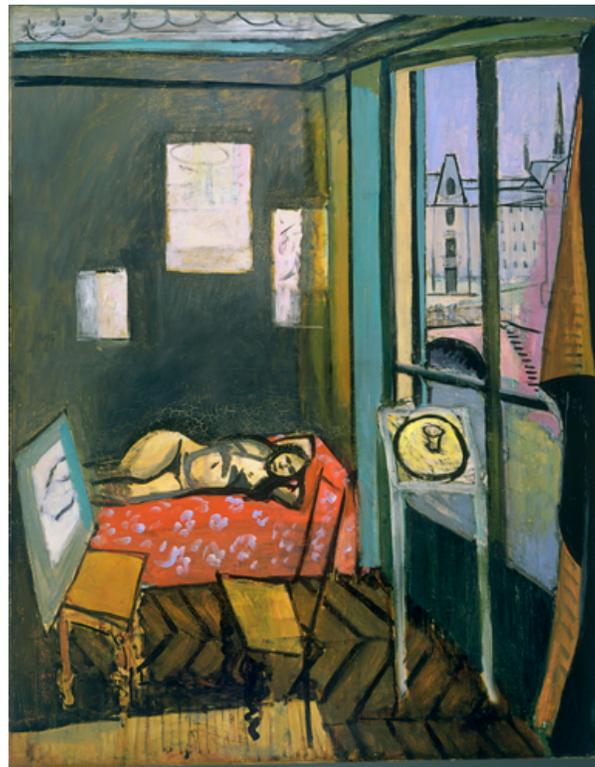
Installation view of “Matisse/Diebenkorn,” 2016–17, showing, from left, Richard Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park #5* (1972) and Henri Matisse’s *View of Notre Dame* (1914), at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

PHOTO: MITRO HOOD, THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART; ART, FROM LEFT: ©2017 SUCCESSION H. MATISSE, ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK; ©2017 THE RICHARD DIEBENKORN FOUNDATION/SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Though many critics and curators rate Richard Diebenkorn highly, the public still seems less familiar with his art than they should be. Expect this to change with “Matisse/Diebenkorn,” currently at the Baltimore Museum of Art and traveling to SFMOMA in March. It’s a glorious show featuring almost 60 well-selected paintings and works

on paper by the Californian alongside three dozen or so canvases, including many beloved masterpieces, as well as drawings by the great French modernist.

The latest themed exhibition du jour at museums and galleries across the United States and Europe calls attention to two artists who share similar aesthetics. This seems to be the art world's equivalent of the Hollywood buddy movie. Typically, the show is either the story of two friends and colleagues, or an old-timer admired by someone younger, or artists from different countries and/or cultures sharing much in common. In the past few months, there have been two-person shows devoted to Alberto Giacometti and Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder and Picasso, Diego Rivera and Picasso, Edvard Munch and Jasper Johns, Giacometti and Yves Klein, Giacometti and Bruce Nauman, Willem de Kooning and John Chamberlain, Jean Dubuffet and Larry Poons, and even de Kooning and Zao Wou-Ki. As it is, I'm probably missing a few.



Henri Matisse, *Studio, Quai Saint Michel*, 1916.

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Not all these exhibitions work, but showcasing the art of Matisse and Diebenkorn makes great sense. Diebenkorn had a lifelong—and well-documented—interest in the French Modernist's paintings. Diebenkorn saw his first Matisses in person when, as a Stanford University undergraduate, he visited the Palo Alto home of collector Sarah Stein. By 1943, Stein owned more than 100 paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and ceramics by Matisse, including his haunting 1916 portrait of her, and the enchanting *Woman with a Hat* (1905).

About a year later, as a newly married Marine stationed just outside Washington, D.C., during World War II, the young soldier frequented the nearby Phillips Collection and traveled to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. At each institution, he continued to be enthralled by Matisse's color combinations, sinuous lines, and flair for composition—and he was intrigued, too, by the former Fauve's pentimenti, decorative flourishes, and downright awkwardness.

Recalling the retrospective with 66 works by Matisse that he saw in Los Angeles in 1952 while visiting his in-laws, Diebenkorn said, "It absolutely turned my head around." He would get up close and personal with Matisse at least two more times. During a cultural exchange trip he made to the USSR in 1963, he made pilgrimages to both the Pushkin Museum in Moscow and the Hermitage in Leningrad where he saw Matisses that never traveled outside Russia. And, in 1966, he was impressed by yet another body of pictures he saw in a much-praised retrospective at the UCLA Art Gallery.



Richard Diebenkorn, *Window* 1967.

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In the radiant exhibition currently on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the curators were able to borrow treasures like *French Window at Collioure* (1914), *View of Notre Dame* (1914), and *Studio, Quai Saint-Michel* (1916) that served as beacons during the three acts that comprise Diebenkorn's stellar career. The French modern master was a critical force when the Californian was making both his early and late abstractions as well as his middle-period representational work.

To be sure, when Diebenkorn executed his nonfigurative and figurative works, different aspects of his hero's art inspired him. At first, he responded to Matisse's unusual colors as well as the broad bands that stretch across pictorial surfaces. Later, he seems to have been as intrigued by the Frenchman's subjects, be it a woman sitting in a chair or a view glimpsed through a window. (Has any American ever painted more beguiling folding chairs?) Matisse's structure eventually informs the "Ocean Park" series. When *Window at Collioure* and *View of Notre*

Dame are viewed alongside Diebenkorn's great late paintings, it's easier to discern their architectonic and landscape underpinnings.

Astonishingly, Diebenkorn's paintings in Baltimore are never overshadowed, as you might expect, by Matisse's masterpieces. The American who twice lived outside San Francisco—in Berkeley (1953–66) and Healdsburg, California (1988–93)—as well as on the western outskirts of Los Angeles (1966–88) doesn't just hold his own: he actually upstages Matisse.



Installation view of "Matisse/Diebenkorn," 2016–17, showing, from left, Henri Matisse's *Interior, Flowers and Parakeets* (1924), Richard Diebenkorn's *Girl with Plant* (1960), and Diebenkorn's *Woman on a Porch* (1958), at the Baltimore Museum of Art.
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At first, I suspected that the larger size and more ample scale of the Diebenkorns was what made them so impressive. Then I thought about the last time I had seen so many paintings by Diebenkorn; it was in 1998 at his retrospective at the Whitney Museum. Because it was overcrowded with an inordinate number of paintings that were hung too close to one another, it was almost impossible to focus on individual canvases. Has Diebenkorn's art aged well? I think so.

It's been almost a quarter of a century since Diebenkorn died of heart failure, in 1993, at the age of 70. Like Matisse, he's become the type of artist we expect to see hanging on the walls of museums. And so much has happened in the art world since the early 1990s, we now can look at his paintings and works on paper with fresh eyes. In Baltimore, it becomes clear that Richard Diebenkorn was America's answer to Henri Matisse.