

PRESS RELEASE

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Philip Guston (1913–80)
Punchinello Drawing
1933
Ink, watercolour and crayon
17.8 x 12.7 cm
© Estate of Philip Guston

PHILIP GUSTON: LOCATING THE IMAGE

23 November 2019–8 March 2020

American artist Philip Guston (1913–80) is known as one of the abstract expressionist painters who rocked the art world in the 1950s. He is also well-known for making a dramatic break with abstract painting and developing a new style and figurative language that was uniquely Guston's own. While there is enormous variety in his work, his drawings in particular reveal fascinating continuities that have been somewhat overlooked. Focusing on 35 works on paper and including books and ephemera that belonged to him, the exhibition explores Guston's enduring sensitivity to the world around him and the tumultuous events that he lived through in the 20th century. It also shows his life-long interests in the art and literature of the past that encompassed everything from Chinese Song Dynasty paintings, the European surrealists, to the writings of Franz Kafka and T.S. Eliot.

Guston was born Philip Goldstein in the Jewish ghetto of Montreal, Canada. His family moved to Venice, California, near Los Angeles, when he was 6 years old. He began drawing incessantly from the age of 12. Aside from a brief period at the Otis Art Institute in 1930, Guston was almost completely self-taught. After he and his friend, the future abstract painter Jackson Pollock, were expelled from Los Angeles Manual Arts High School for distributing satirical pamphlets, he worked in factories, drove a truck and was employed as a Hollywood movie extra. During his hours off he would copy reproductions of works by Renaissance masters like Uccello and Piero della Francesca from books in the city's public libraries. One of his earliest surviving drawings, made when he was 17, is a characterful and expressive study of the face of one of Masaccio's figures from the Brancacci Chapel frescos in Florence. Years later Guston displayed reproductions of the works he loved in the kitchen of his home in Woodstock, New York, so that he could look at them while he ate; and the exhibition will show his works alongside Old Master prints and drawings from the Ashmolean's collection.

In 1932 Guston had his first face-to-face encounter with modern European art when he visited collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg's house in the Hollywood Hills. There he saw two works by Giorgio de Chirico that made a lasting impression. The following year he made *Punchinello Drawing*, a highly finished composition in ink, watercolour and crayon. It shows two figures, one wearing a mask and the other a hood, holding lutes, dressed like performers of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*. They are boxed into a surreal, panelled interior reminiscent of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings. The masked or hooded head was a motif Guston would return to over and over again. It would play various functions and draw on a range of sources including Domenico Tiepolo whose drawings were reproduced in books in Guston's library. Experimenting with different scales, colours and styles, Guston would make the figure variously sinister or comical, condemning the evil of the Ku Klux Klan or poking fun at human folly.

In 1935 he moved to New York and adopted the Anglo-Saxon sounding 'Guston' as his surname amidst the virulent antisemitism of the 1930s. Like the poets and writers he admired, Guston was attuned to social and political movements that were sweeping Europe and echoing in American society. This found expression in social realist murals he made in the employ of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project, the government



Philip Guston (1913–80)
Self-Portrait
1946
Brush and ink on paper
35.6 x 27.9 cm
© Estate of Philip Guston

programme that commissioned artworks as part of the New Deal economic initiatives. After World War II, as the WPA was winding up, Guston took the first of a series of teaching posts at universities and began to concentrate on smaller scale work. One of the most important pieces in the exhibition is a rare self-portrait made in 1946. This stark, monochrome image, dominated by large dark-circled eyes, was made after photographs of the liberated German concentration camps appeared in the press.

By the end of the 1940s Guston had received several major awards for his work and was a nationally recognised artist. In 1948 he won the Prix de Rome which afforded him a break from teaching and the opportunity to spend a year in Italy making pilgrimages to the Old Masters he had admired since his youth. Reassessing his own work, he stopped painting for nearly two years and focused exclusively on drawing. From 1948 to 1960, we find drastically pared back images, the ink brush abstractions from the mid-1950s and, finally, drawings that hover between abstraction and figuration where recognisable objects just about emerge out of gestural, meandering ink lines.

When Guston returned to New York after his fellowship in Italy, he gradually moved toward abstraction. In 1951 the first solo show of his abstract paintings was held at the Peridot Gallery. In that same year he was also among 60 artists, including Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Robert Rauschenberg and his old friend Jackson Pollock, who showed their work in the ground-breaking '9th Street Art Exhibition' which introduced a wider public to abstract expressionism. Despite his growing reputation Guston's alignment with the New York School was brief. Towards the end of the 1960s, he was re-evaluating his work again, looking for a new visual language with which to respond to the tumult of the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Nixon administration. He began to re-introduce the material world into his works on paper and developed a unique semi-abstract vocabulary of everyday objects. Shoes, books and furniture are rendered surreal and unsettling as Guston combines cartoon-like simplicity with unexpected scale or unusual monochrome palettes. His work addresses the upheavals of the day but it also raises the largest questions about human experience. His *Coat* (1980) is an instantly recognisable garment, but as it bobs on a roiling sea, with dozens of shoes clutched tightly under its arms, the viewer invests it with a human frailty and desperation. His departure from abstraction was met with critical opprobrium in the art establishment. Only after his death in 1980 was Guston reconsidered and appreciated as a profoundly sensitive and wholly original artist.

The exhibition is curated by Karen Lang, Oxford's Slade Professor of Art History 2019–20, with Dr Lena Fritsch, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Ashmolean Museum.

Professor Lang says: 'We are delighted to be able to show Guston's works on paper in dialogue with specially selected examples of historical and modern works from the Ashmolean's collections, and books from his personal library which are on public display for the first time. Revealing Guston's ties to European art and literature over the course of 50 years, the exhibition offers a fresh viewpoint on his work.'

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▪ PRESS IMAGES:

Images for editorial use are available to download at: <http://bit.ly/ashmoleanguston>

▪ NOTES TO EDITORS:

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