FRESH PERSPECTIVES *on the Permanent Collection from* DARTMOUTH'S STUDENTS

A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

CHECKLIST

Eileen Cowin, American, born 1947
Mirror of Venus
1988
Cibachrome
Bequest of Michael A. Dorris; PH.998.52.1

Eric Fischl, American, born 1948
Untitled
1990
Dye transfer print
Gift of Helaine and Paul S. Cantor, Class of 1960; PH.995.67.7

Childe Hassam, American, 1859–1935
The Dressing Table
1916
Etching on laid paper
Gift of Mrs. Hersey Egginton in memory of her son, Everett Egginton, Class of 1921; PR.954.20.233

Yoko Ono, American, born 1933
A Box of Smile
1984
Plastic, mirror, and embossed gold print
Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; GM.989.12.5

Pablo Picasso, Spanish, 1881–1973
Sculptor and Kneeling Model, from *The Vollard Suite*
1933
Etching on Montval laid paper
Gift of Ellen and Wallace K. Harrison, Class of 1950H, in honor of Nelson A. Rockefeller, Class of 1930; PR.965.23.40

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HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS

Pablo Picasso, *Sculptor and Kneeling Model*, from *The Vollard Suite*, 1933. Gift of Ellen and Wallace K. Harrison, Class of 1950H, in honor of Nelson A. Rockefeller, Class of 1930; PR.965.23.40. © 2005 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

REFLECTIONS ON THE MIRROR

Eric Fischl, *Untitled,* 1990. Gift of Helaine and Paul S. Cantor, Class of 1960; PH.995.67.7.

Mirrors have a complex history in art. By reflecting, revealing, and obscuring, they enrich interplays of the gaze in (and at) a work of art. Mirrors clarify and enhance a work's meaning, but they can also complicate it, when the viewer's engagement with the work intensifies and reflection and reality blur. Figuring prominently within the themes of vanity and narcissism, they are often associated with the feminine. Artists use a woman's engagement with a mirror to justify the display of her nude body and to privilege the observer via multiple viewpoints.

Mirrors often accompany the theme of women in depictions of the domestic realm of the feminine. The voyeuristic quality of the enhanced view allowed by the mirror is undeniable, and private boudoir scenes of women dressing or washing are made even more intimate by the mirror's revealing contents. American impressionist Childe Hassam's etching *The Dressing Table* (1916) depicts a partially nude woman dressing in front of a mirror, but its voyeuristic quality is tempered by her contemplative nature and solitude. Although certainly feminine, this image is not as sensual as it is quiet, intimate, and domestic. This pairing of woman and mirror was popular among Hassam's contemporaries, including Mary Cassatt and Robert Reid, and reveals an early-twentieth-century American idealism wherein women and interior spaces signified spiritual beauty and repose (Springer 1–8).

Women have also been paired with mirrors throughout the history of art to represent vanity. Although this theme owes its origins to the Greek myth of the male Narcissus, portrayals of a woman gazing lovingly at her own mirror image appear to condemn the female sex for a gender-specific vice. Rendering the woman culpable of vanity thus legitimizes her nude portrayal; if she can enjoy her own image, so can we. The mirror can thus be found in subjects of paintings such as Susannah and the Elders, where the bathing Israelite woman is spied upon by the lecherous elders of the tribe. Susannah's depiction with a mirror ties her to the sin of vanity, acquitting the elders, and us, from any voyeuristic guilt as we watch her bathe.

Eileen Cowin subverts this meaning of the mirror in her 1988 photograph *The Mirror of Venus* through her direct reference to Velasquez's famous 1651 painting *Rokeby Venus*. While Velasquez offers a full posterior view of a female nude staring into a mirror, Cowin's woman is clothed and a television, symbolic of our modern technological era, substitutes for the mirror in the original. Our mirror is the glossy photographic surface reflection; we are both included and implicated as we catch ourselves staring at the unaware woman.

Artists also strategically place mirrors to develop the interplay of gazes within a work of art. In Picasso's 1933 etching *Sculptor and Kneeling Model* from the *Vollard Suite,* the sculptor, a self-portrait of Picasso, stares at his model, whose face is strikingly classical and appears sculpturesque despite the naturalism of her lower body. She does not return his gaze, however, but stares into the mirror, which is propped up by a statue head of Zeus, Picasso's alter ego. Zeus in turn stares out at us, and we become part of the intrigue in this work. Has the creative power of the artist-genius transmitted through his gaze and turned the model's flesh into stone? Or has the model effected this transformation through the mirror by narcissistically contemplating herself as a work of art? The mirror image is not offered to us, in this case, and we can only guess what effect it might have here.

Similarly, in Eric Fischl's 1990 photograph *Untitled*, the mirror image is concealed, and with it the female model's face is also completely obscured. In contrast to her hidden face, however, the woman's body is offered to the viewer completely, its near nudity explainable in its beach context. The mirror's existence and placement in this photograph raise some provocative questions. If the photograph betrays the woman's narcissism, one must question her reasons for consulting a mirror on a public beach; is she at the beach to enjoy sunlight and relaxation or to be enjoyed herself as a spectacle of the beautiful female body? Furthermore, if the woman is absorbed by her mirror image, she is unaware that the artist is taking her photograph. By immersing her gaze in the mirror, she cannot confront the voyeuristic gazes of others and leaves her own body vulnerable to objectification.

Paradoxically, in spite of its flat, shiny surface, a mirror has many faces. It can reveal and hide, objectify and empower, promote narcissism or enable an escape from the gaze of another. Often, too, the mirror pokes fun, inspires laughter, or provokes tears. In addition to figuring critically in works of art, mirrors are part of our everyday lives, and our confrontations with them are complex and sometimes emotional. Sylvia Plath accurately describes the mirror-human relationship in her poem "Mirror," where a personified mirror-narrator writes, "I am not cruel, only truthful." Indeed, because we understand the mirror to reflect the truth, its tellings do not always fuel vanity and can sometimes evoke sadness and despair.

Yoko Ono leads us away from such serious musings with her 1984 *A Box of Smile*. Inside the tiny black box is a mirror. This whimsical object encourages us to add joy to the world by contributing the universal symbol of happiness to *A Box of Smile* and allowing it to reflect and reverberate for eternity.

—Katherine Harrison '06,
The Homma Family Curatorial Intern

Eileen Cowin, *Mirror of Venus*, 1988. Bequest of Michael A. Dorris; PH.998.52.1.