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

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A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

CHECKLIST

Kendall Banning, American, 1879–1944  
*Cast Hand of Mark Twain (1835–1910)*, 1908, plaster  
Gift of Kendall Banning, Class of 1902; 29.63.17456

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Benjamin Degen, American, born 1976  
*In Sight, a Riot*, 2008, pen on paper  
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2010.89.4

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Hector Garcia, Mexican, born 1923  
*José Clemente Orozco*, 1945, gelatin silver print  
Gift of Peter H. Voulkos; PH.2001.51.5

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Fernand Leger, French, 1881–1955  
*Feasts of Famine (Fetes de la Faim)*, from the portfolio  
*8 Lithographs for Rimbaud*, 1949, lithograph on wove paper  
Gift of Varujan Boghosian; PR.955.41.2

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Roy Lichtenstein, American, 1923–1997  
*Finger Pointing*, from the portfolio *Works by Artists in the New York  
Collection for Stockholm*, 1973, screenprint on wove paper  
Gift of James Sutton Regan, Class of 1964; PR.974.372.15

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Frank Lobdell, American, 1921–2013  
*7.20.91*, 1991, etching and aquatint on Rives BFK paper  
Gift of Elizabeth and Mark T. Gates Jr., Class of 1959; PR.992.15.8

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Wendy Snyder MacNeil, American, born 1943  
*Untitled (Hand)*, not dated, platinum print on tracing paper  
Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund; PH.985.14.10

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Jack Pierson, American, born 1960  
*Untitled*, 1995, etching and aquatint on wove paper  
Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; PR.995.53

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Do-Ho Suh, Korean, born 1962  
*Bowl, Peter Norton Family Christmas Project*, 2004, handblown glass  
Gift of the Director of the Hood Museum of Art; G.2004.82

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Roy Lichtenstein, *Finger Pointing*, from the portfolio *Works by Artists in the New York Collection for Stockholm*, 1973, screenprint on wove paper. Gift of James Sutton Regan, Class of 1964; PR.974.372.15 © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

# HAND ALONE

## Articulating the Hand in Art



In Chauvet, France, red ochre handprints and stencils are found in chambers throughout the Pont-d'Arc Cave. These are the oldest known representations of the human impulse to make marks, to bring pigment to surface. A common hypothesis: these hands are a form of early signature. And so on through history, with the hand being created into a distinct visual trope again and again. Think of Egyptian hieroglyphs and how they look so distinctly Egyptian. Look at the Assyrian hands on their carved reliefs, and notice how clearly Assyrian. Or even Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Raphael—all are of the same style, yet each produces a distinguishable hand. The hand, for all of its biological constancy of form, is

Jack Pierson, *Untitled*, 1995, etching and aquatint on wove paper. Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; PR.995.53

vulnerable to flourishes of expression like few other body parts.

This is all to open with a simple, maybe even self-evident, idea: the hand is a versatile vehicle for meaning, and this is a fact long acknowledged. This is not so surprising, for certainly the artist must obsess over the hand; it is his instrument for shaping the world, the visual index of his internal perspective. But as it dangles from a wrist, so can it dangle from focus. Take the face; few neglect it as an expressive instrument. Now take the hand: so small in size and so easily hidden from view, it is too easily subordinated in visual work by both artist and audience.

But what if we move it to the foreground and examine only art that ignores the rest of the body? What might such a forceful framing of the hand say? The hand as pictured is not subject to the automatic forces that standardize its form. The pictured hand is standardized to no laws except those of perception. Let us measure that impact.

The work will not be easy. Montaigne writes of gestures, “Behold the hands, how they promise, conjure, appeal, menace, pray, supplicate, refuse, beckon, interrogate, admire, confess, cringe, instruct, command, mock, and what not besides, with a variation and multiplication of variation which makes the tongue envious.” How do you capture the meaning of such a multivalent symbol? How do you create sufficient critical distance for objectivity when the thing in question is attached to your body?

By freezing it, by detaching the hand and studying it in suspension, without input from the rest of the body to interfere with your findings. That is what this installation showcases; each work relies on visual synecdoche (re: the hand standing in for the whole body) as the artist’s device for viewer response. *Hand Alone* explores how the hand can suggest wildness (out of hand) and signify relationships of control (in hand), how it can express personal agency and seem to manifest detachment, how it can represent the everyman and exist in intense individuality, like a fingerprint. The hand seems to say it all.

The best example of the hand’s instrumentality is, perhaps, Benjamin Degen’s *In Sight, a Riot*. The deliberate lines arranged in such painstaking pattern evidence visually Degen’s reliance on his hands. Wendy Snyder MacNeil’s piece is a different kind of ode to the hand. Instead of demonstrating for us its skill, she casts it in a soft glow, makes it haunting. The hand is a thing to be admired. It is both capable of making beauty and of being beautiful itself.

Consider Hector Garcia’s Orozco portrait. The intention is obviously portraiture; the eponymous title proves this is meant to represent Orozco the whole. There is the hand, and so there is he. Wonder, “Can the hand synecdochically substitute for Hector Garcia, a photographer, in the same way it can for Orozco, a more material artist?”

Kendall Banning’s (Class of 1902) cast of Mark Twain’s hand asserts the same as Garcia’s photograph of Orozco, that the hand can stand for man the artist. This conflation of personality and physiology is historically rooted in trends like phrenology, the study of the skull as a means of revealing the character, and in the widespread practice of casting the hands of the rich and famous, as an alternative of sorts to the bust.

Today, the impulse to believe in the physical manifestation of personality seems silly. But certainly we all believe character can be revealed from the hand, almost as from the face. The barest hint of a suit in Lichtenstein’s *Finger Pointing* reinforces the urgent authority of the color scheme, and the unyielding nature suggested by its thick, forceful lines. The smashed bottle held lackadaisically by the hand in Degen’s pen and paper work makes

quite obvious the wielder’s intent, and is suggestive of his broader personality. The dangled cigarette in Pierson’s untitled print tells of practiced apathy, ennui. All this in the pose of a single hand. You don’t even need two.

Detaching the hand from the arm literally imposes the critical distance necessary to become aware of the things we forget we assume about our hands. And rest assured: you are assuming. In psychology, the sensory homunculus is a miniature representation of the “body within the brain.” It visually demonstrates what man would look like if the size of his body parts were directly proportional to how richly innervated a given appendage. The lips balloon; the arms and legs wither. And the hands? They explode, each becoming bigger than the man himself. This re-visualization of hands relative to their sensorial impact may explain the human capacity to find hands in works as elusive as Frank Lobdell’s *7.20.91*. Here, the hand is abstracted to a near unrecognizable extreme. And yet, there they are—three-pronged hands connecting to form a border for an otherwise difficult work made of unlike colors and unlike shapes. The term abstract is unfortunate, for it suggests remoteness, recalling the emotionally disembodied, instead of just the literally disembodied. Behold the human capacity to recognize pattern, to find itself in the inanimate.

Able to shape, and shaped by what it encounters, the hand requires an attentive eye. The space between an artist and his work, and the space between a work and its audience, is an intimate, made space, both visual and tactile—the space of the handed self.

Margaret E. Tierney, Class of 2014  
Kathryn Conroy Intern

Hector Garcia, *José Clemente Orozco*, 1945, gelatin silver print. Gift of Peter H. Voulkos; PH.2001.51.5

