

The Mouse House

“The Mouse House” is the name lovingly given to the engaging yet diminutive house in Washington DC, where Olga Hirshhorn spends a part of each summer (Hirshhorn is the widow of Joseph Hirshhorn, founding donor of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, part of the Smithsonian Institution). Formerly the carriage house of a larger residence, the house was redesigned by Hirshhorn in the late 1990s to suit her needs, and to act as a fitting backdrop for her collection.

Olga Hirshhorn is a passionate collector, and has collected everything from Greek, Chinese and Pre-Columbian antiquities to prints, drawings, paintings and sculpture by contemporary masters. Her house is a treasure trove of small and domestic-scale objects, displayed in an environment that gives them optimum impact. The collection, both powerful and whimsical, demonstrates her critical eye and her sensitivity to a wide variety of styles. Along with objects from antiquity, there are names from the twentieth century that will be in the art books thousands of years from now, such as Pablo Picasso, Willem de Kooning, Alexander Calder, Man Ray, Georgia O’Keeffe and Salvador Dalí (the collection includes 6 Picassos, 4 de Koonings, 5 Calder’s, 5 Man Rays and single pieces by O’Keeffe and Dalí). And there is yet more to discover – including works by nineteenth century giants such as James Abbott McNeil Whistler, Antoine-Louis Barye, Honoré Daumier and Auguste Rodin.



Many of the twentieth century pieces are personally inscribed by the artist. A 1963 de Kooning is inscribed, “*To Olga, Love Bill.*” A 1968 Picasso bears the legend, “*Pour Olga, son ami Picasso*” (For Olga, her friend Picasso). A 1965 Niki de St. Phalle is simply inscribed “*To Olga.*” In fact, a number of works were gifts from the artists, demonstrating the close relationship Olga Hirshhorn developed with some of the 20th century’s most important figures. While her husband Joe bought breathtaking large-scale works, Olga’s predilection for small objects led her to acquire sketches and idiosyncratic, personal expressions, which reveal the artist’s working methods and the close contact she had with artists. As Olga Hirshhorn has stated elsewhere, “This collection represents a lot of friendships that we established early on, but it also teaches us about how artists think, how they work. I’ve learned a lot from living with these objects.”

One can certainly learn a great deal from this collection of intimately-sized objects, and not just about American art. To take just one example; in sculpture, a great strength of the collection, there are signature works by the seminal American modernists Man Ray, Calder and Louise Nevelson, as well as by their English counterparts, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. The French tradition is represented by Jean-Antoine Houdon, Emile-Antoine Bourdelle, Rodin and Niki de Saint-Phalle, and you will also see inspired work by Albert Giacometti (Swiss), Arnaldo Pomodoro (Italian), Yaacov Agam (Israeli) and Picasso (Spanish). Such strength is repeated in the two dimensional objects – paintings, drawings and prints. The collection in its entirety speaks volumes about the great art movements of the last 150 years, and beyond.

Though the “Mouse House” is a modern-day version of the seventeenth century cabinet of curiosities – a small room or cabinet in which collectors crowded objects of virtue and curiosity from the arts and natural sciences – it is by no means a random collection. Each work defines an artist, a style or an era. Just because these works are typically small, does not mean they lack power. On the contrary, here we have the Platonic idea of the macrocosm being illustrated by the microcosm – in this case, a whole world of art and ideas encapsulated by each tiny work of art.