

Along the right lines



ALEXANDRA GILL tours an ambitious exhibit on the art of drawing that contains more than 400 works, spanning 500 years, and an astonishing diversity of approaches



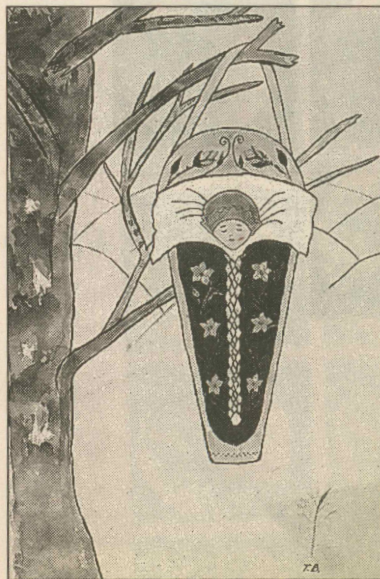
If an alien from another planet were wandering through the Vancouver Art Gallery today, he might have a hard time understanding the connection between Giorgio Vasari's finely detailed 16th-century ink-on-paper compositional study of *Three Angels Appearing to Abraham* on the main floor and John Scott's *Trans-Am Apocalypse No. 3*, a life-size installation on the upper floor that features the entire New Testament Book of Revelation savagely scratched into the painted body of a 20th-century car.

Is it a Christian motif, our little green visitor might wonder, that links the Italian Renaissance master with the contemporary Canadian hipster? Perhaps. But how then would one explain the correlation between an ornate 18th-century gold-and-watercolour miniature of the Hindu god Vishnu, soaring through the heavens on the back of a majestic bird, and a series of primitive, brightly coloured pencil sketches by Inuit artists, depicting drum dances and fish goddesses?

While spiritual themes do show up prominently in this monumental exhibit, the common denominator among the five sometimes disparate collections is something much simpler. Drawing the World: Masters to Hipsters brings to Vancouver more than 400 works, spanning 500 years, that explore the diverse worlds of drawing from various cultures.

Drawing? Yes — design, doodles, the act of moving pencil across paper. While the concept might seem foreign to otherworldly creatures, it is “as basic and intrinsic to human communication as writing,” writes the VAG's chief curator, Daina Augaitis, in the catalogue for the con-

John Scott's Trans-Am Apocalypse features the entire Book of Revelation scratched into the body of a 20th-century car.



THE OSOYOOS MUSEUM

Theresa Baptiste's untitled drawing forms part of a collection that records aspects of traditional Okanagan culture as seen through the eyes of children.

temporary portion of the exhibit.

“We scribble an image to cut to the core of a complicated idea, we doodle idly in a flow of consciousness, or we jot a diagram to explain connections. Its immediacy is as vital in the everyday world as it is in the art world.”

The significance of drawing in the visual arts can't be overstated. In the words of the great Michelangelo Buonarroti, “Design, or drawing as it is called by another name, constitutes the fountainhead and substance of painting and sculp-

ture and architecture and every other kind of creative expression.”

It has, however, been a very long time — almost as long as Michelangelo has been dead — since this neglected medium has been given the respect it deserves. Once the Renaissance had established the importance of drawing, the heated theoretical discussions that so consumed Michelangelo and his peers quickly fell out of fashion as the Western art world moved on to embrace more spectacular forms.

Today, drawing is often taken for granted, the mastery of technique sometimes even dismissed. Drawing has become art's “hard-working handmaiden,” as Augaitis puts it, “... perceived first and foremost as serving in a significant, but subsidiary role for working out ideas or preparing a work of art, for being an action rather than a finished work, a means toward an end.”

Suddenly, however, drawing is back in vogue. In the past couple of years, there has been a surge of both historical and contemporary drawing exhibits at major institutions from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. There have even been biennials (in Montreal last year, for instance) dedicated to this frugal form.

Drawing the World is by far the most ambitious of these recent shows. In addition to the collection of Italian drawings, on loan from the National Gallery of Canada, the VAG exhibit includes Power and Desire, a collection of 67 exquisite miniatures from South Asian courts

between the 16th and 19th centuries. This rare collection of two-dimensional paintings selected from the San Diego Museum of Art's massive Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, is on its final stop of a major international tour. Displayed in the room next to the Italian drawings of the same period, it makes a fascinating study in the compositional and conceptual differences between East and West.

The VAG show also includes Where the River Widens, Drawings by Baker Lake Artists. This selection of 78 works, produced over 35 years by Inuit artists who were relocated to a small community in the Western Arctic, comes from the specialized collection of the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, Ont.

The bold patterns of colour and energetic style of these drawings that depict traditional life and the spirit world certainly entail all the exotic elements that have made Inuit art such prized items for international collectors. But it's even more fascinating to look at this collection as a sociological experiment. These are adult artists who were removed from their traditional lifestyle, given coloured pencils and paper, and “encouraged” to draw — often for the first time — as a way of making money.

Drawing the World also boasts the inaugural showing of Nk'Mip Chronicles: Drawings from the Osoyoos Museum, a group of 36 historical drawings by children from the Nk'Mip nation in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley.

After touring these first four col-

lections, both aliens and mere mortals will probably be exhausted. But do be sure to head up to the second floor so you don't miss the sprawling centrepiece of this extravaganza. For the Record is a wide-ranging survey of contemporary drawing. Forty international artists are represented, and it is here we begin to try and understand why we have arrived at this boom time for drawing.

The market certainly has an important role to play in creating any sort of excitement or value around contemporary art, as do curators and critics. But as Augaitis argues, this cumulative effect is really no more than a filtering of the flow of art from the studio. It really is the artists themselves who have suddenly picked up their pencils — and other tools — and are responsible for the comeback of the medium.

Augaitis offers several explanations for the trend. “Some artists,” she says, “have taken up drawing in reaction to the cool slickness of photography to offer something less refined, more raw and mutable.” One of the rawest examples on display would be Natasha McHardy's *Weed*, a pungent installation resembling a toxic vine, which the Vancouver artist has “drawn” with cigarette butts, coffee cups, syringes, and thousands of bits of street garbage, affixed to the walls with glue and used chewing gum.

“Others,” Augaitis says, “usually younger artists, choose to defy traditional expectations of quality and engage in collaborative practices that thwart classical ideas of authorship in order to produce unex-

pected but bold results.” This exhibit includes many pieces from the Royal Art Lodge, a very hot group from Winnipeg, who have gained wide acclaim for collectively doodling around photographs, discarded objects and scholarly interpretations of high art.

Drawing can also be very democratic. “Paper and pencil, as the primary tools of this art form, offer artists an inexpensive and therefore self-sufficient alternative to the costly demands of some of the new technology-based media,” Augaitis says. Danica Phelps of New York, for example, deals with the economy of art-making in *Walking 9 - 5*, a collection of diaries that track every financial transaction she made during a trip to Amsterdam.

Many of the contemporary artists use distinctly contemporary methods, such as video and graffiti, to execute their messages. Many of those messages are compelling — and there are others that will perplex humans as much as they might a little visitor from outer space.

Art is always subjective, but by its sheer enormity, Drawing the World will surely contain something for everyone. Still, as you look at the scratches on Scott's Trans-Am or Dave Muller's paint drips on the exhibition title wall, you have to wonder what Michelangelo might think about the evolution of his beloved design. This is certainly drawing “by another name.”

Drawing the World continues at the Vancouver Art Gallery to Sept. 21 (604-662-4719).