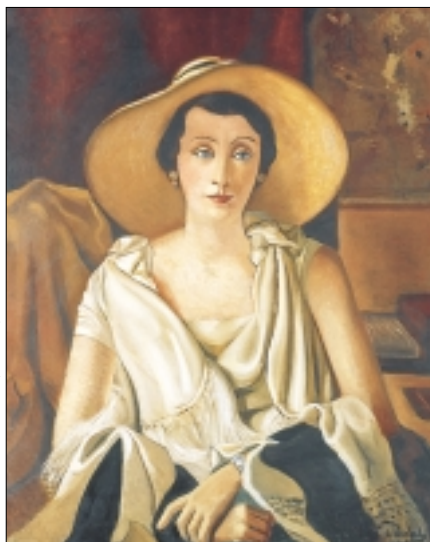


Lifeworks

Packaging Picasso

The billboards and shop windows of Montreal are filled with highbrow hoopla this summer promoting the current blockbuster at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: *From Renoir to Picasso*, 81 paintings from the esteemed Walter-Guillaume Collection of the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris. Whatever else this exhibition may be, it is certainly a marketing success. The four-colour, 30-page guide handed out to visitors gratefully notes that, in view of the "significant economic spinoff" expected from the show, "both the private sector and the Quebec government have contributed generously to its presentation in Montreal." Statements like these make sense of the phrase "cultural industry." The business logic doesn't surprise me, but the gallery's willingness to be so frank about it does.



André Derain, *Portrait of Mrs. Paul Guillaume in a Wide-Brimmed Hat*, c. 1929. Oil on canvas, 92 cm × 73 cm.

Marketing savvy is a matter of survival for galleries and museums these days. But it's almost true to say that what impressed me most deeply about this exhibition was not any one of the paintings but the offerings of the gift

shop conveniently set up at the end. After 10 rooms of Matisse, Modiglianis and Rousseaus one arrives breathlessly (and, in view of the crowds, airlessly) at the souvenir shop, where the experience is transmuted into consumable goods: Renoir aprons and placemats, crockery inspired by his *Strawberries* (are strawberries the quintessential Renoir?), replicas of the straw hat and silk scarf worn by Domenica, the wife of art collector Paul Guillaume, in her portrait by Derain. Art appreciation has become muddled up with consumerism and the house-proud craze for gardening, decoration and overeducated cuisine. Thus one may choose from books entitled *À la table de Picasso*, *Le goût de la Provence de Paul Cézanne* and *Renoir's Table: the Art of Living and Dining with One of the World's Greatest Impressionist Painters*. The bourgeois excess of it must have these once-iconoclasts spinning in their graves.

The poster slogans for the show read along these lines: "The three sisters of Matisse are spending the summer in Montreal." Ditto for Renoir's son and Cézanne's wife — all references to subjects in their paintings. What is offered is not (merely) art but also an imaginary form of elbow-rubbing. But the fact is that these painters *have* entered our consciousness like few others, and their contribution to modern art is almost incalculable. The schools and styles that followed the Impressionist reinvention of vision — Postimpressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism (not to mention sheer individualism) — are all familiar to us, and all have been assimilated into contemporary art and design. It is difficult to see, if not these particular *paintings*, then these particular *painters*, as if for the first time. On the other hand, the 11 artists represented include some (e.g., Derain, Soutine and Laurencin) who lack the mythic status of the title offerings, and their works help to demonstrate how complex the currents



Amedeo Modigliani, *The Young Apprentice*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 100 cm × 65 cm.

and countercurrents of early 20th-century French art were.

The challenge of the gallery goer is to leave an "important exhibition" like this one energized rather than drained. If you're in Montreal before the show closes on October 15 (it then moves on to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, the only other North American venue), block out the hype and ignore the crowds. Looking at 81 paintings isn't like "doing" the Louvre in a day, but forget about absorbing them all. Stand stubbornly before whatever canvas moves or intrigues you. Spend an hour with Matisse or Cézanne or (if you don't suffer from vertigo) Soutine. Then skip the boutique and take time for coffee and conversation on the way home.

Anne Marie Todkill
CMAJ