

# Philip Pearlstein retrospective comes to St. Petersburg art museum

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## ST. PETERSBURG

One of the many wonderful things about Philip Pearlstein's work is its independence. For about 50 years, since he found his metier while in his 30s, Pearlstein has gone his own way, ignoring the big trends and influences that have shaped most of the important art of our time. He's pretty much a singularity in a world that likes to put art into categories.

Pearlstein is best known for his nudes, and there is a full complement of them in a retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg. But "Philip Pearlstein's People, Places, Things" is a broad, deep show that begins with a high school painting, continues through 2011 and includes portraits and landscapes.

That youthful painting, *Merry-Go-Round*, created in 1940, won first place in 1941 in the prestigious *Scholastic* magazine art competition and was reproduced in *Life* magazine. It's pretty and nicely worked in a style associated with regionalism (a category!) and especially Reginald Marsh. It is the work of a gifted student and shouldn't be overanalyzed, but it's interesting in its connection to an art movement considered a throwback in its adherence to realism and its rejection of abstraction, which would become the defining principles in Pearlstein's mature work.

But he was a product of his time and teachers, so in the 1950s he flirted with abstraction and abstract expressionism, another movement defined in general terms as combining nonobjective forms with spontaneous, emotion-fueled technique. *Superman* (1952), for example, is composed of a mass of self-conscious brushstrokes. Another interesting footnote about Pearlstein is that he and Andy Warhol were classmates at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh (now Carnegie Mellon University). They were roommates when they moved to New York, where Warhol worked as an illustrator and Pearlstein as a graphic artist. He painted this image long before Warhol embraced pop art.

In 1961, the artist found a subject that would preoccupy him for the rest of his life: the nude.

In a recent interview when he visited the St. Petersburg museum, he said he began attending a figure-drawing group in another artist's studio "every Sunday night for years. At first it was a social event for me but gradually I became more interested. In my experience, life drawing was boring. The question became, 'How do you turn a study of the figure into a total composition?'"



Nudes have been around as long as there has been art, and modern and contemporary artists have continued to work in that genre, so it was, on the surface, not an obvious revelation. But Pearlstein, who by then had earned a graduate degree in art history and was teaching studio art, decided to ignore the long tradition, from ancient statues to Lucian Freud's paintings, of imbuing the nude human figure with symbolism, emotion or eroticism. They would, instead, be about compositional problem solving.

"The bodies become incidental," he said.

Which explains why Pearlstein paints them with detachment from himself, the viewer and each other when more than one model is used in a work. The arms and legs are moving parts in a puzzle he sets out to piece together when he begins a painting.

"I start in the middle and then let it grow. What happens around the edges just happens."

What often happens is that the entire body is rarely in a painting, a foot or part of a leg lost at the edge of the canvas. The bodies are always ordinary, nothing exaggerated as in beautiful or grotesque, with the flesh tones rendered in a straightforward way.

As time has gone by, Pearlstein has raised the bar ever higher in his compositional game of problem solving, adding all kinds of objects from the trove he and his wife, Dorothy, have collected over the years. But don't look for subliminal messages. While the toy train in *Model on Lawn Chair With Tin-Toy Locomotive* may be a homage to surrealist painter Rene Magritte, for example, it isn't a threatening phallic symbol.

Though not as well-known, Pearlstein's landscapes, architectural renderings and cityscapes have, in most cases, the same fascination with formal arrangement. In the 1950s, while getting his art history degree, he created what we call today his bucket list of places he wanted to visit when he could afford to travel. He prefers watercolor to oil for these vistas that take us to, among other places, the Great Sphinx in Egypt, Machu Picchu in Peru and Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Two prints in the show, of Rome and Jerusalem, may be familiar; they were created by Graphicstudio at the University of South Florida during visits Pearlstein has made there for the atelier's famous collaborations.

He also created cityscapes of New York, where he has lived for most of his adult life. It has sometimes been a background for his nudes, but his gallery representative jokingly told him to paint more of the city because it sold better than the naked people. He paints the same scene by day and night, and they make a great pair. In the day version, Pearlstein can't resist a prop: One of his weather vanes — a horse — looks as if it's leaping through the window.

One gallery at the museum is devoted to portraits. Like his nudes, they are highly realistic and don't aim to flatter or sensationalize the sitter. Also like the nudes, the sitters, when more than one are on a canvas, seem each unaware of the other. Unlike them, the subjects of the portraits often look at us and the artist. Pearlstein rarely loads them with random objects either. Instead, he lavishes his love of detail on the clothing, Chuck Close's cable sweater and Beth Levine's blouse, for example. And independent curator Patterson Sims' observation in the catalog is true: Pearlstein is a master at painting hands. In general, his portraits can be an acquired taste. Maybe it's the clothes. The most successful in the group, in my opinion, is of fellow artist Scott Burton, who is shown shirtless (and with a *great* hand).

"I'm interested in how a painting is put together," Pearlstein said. And we see that in all his works. But the nudes are his lodestar.

This is an important show for the Tampa Bay area. It's the first retrospective of the work of this major living artist since 1983. It was organized for the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg at the request of museum director Kent Lydecker by Sims with Pearlstein's participation, and won't travel to another museum after its run ends on June 16. To further burnish the exhibition, Sims and the museum staff have created a handsome catalog with excellent essays by Sims and Richard Armstrong, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, that's worth its \$25 cost.

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## REVIEW

### **Philip Pearlstein's People, Places, Things**

The exhibition is at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, 255 Beach Drive NE, through June 16. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday with extended hours to 8 p.m. Thursday and from noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$17 adults, \$15 seniors, \$10 students 7 and older including college students with ID. Admission is \$10 on Thursdays from 5 to 8 p.m. [fine-arts.org](http://fine-arts.org) or (727) 893-8293.

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