

## Robert De Niro Sr.

DC MOORE GALLERY

In certain measure, the critical task sheds light on the new as it surveys the old. While the lens and the laptop have inexorably altered our relationship to the brush, must work that reveals a dexterous, evolving hand still be taken for an oddity? The revival of the work of Robert De Niro Sr. (1922–1993) strongly suggests otherwise.

The twenty-nine paintings and drawings in this show were made between 1948 and 1989. The earliest serve to remind us of a different Greenwich Village, a different Little Italy, and a different Fifty-Seventh Street, one along which the blue-chip galleries were situated to the east, the Art Students League to the west. Eighth Street began at the end of St. Marks Place. Further along were bookshops, leather craftsmen, surrealist silversmiths, the New York Studio School (located in the building that housed the original Whitney Museum of American Art), and the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts.

De Niro was something of a prodigy. Born in Syracuse, he had by his teens, studied with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina; by the early 1940s, he had become a student of Hofmann's both in New York and on Cape Cod, in "P-town." Hofmann actually knew Picasso and Matisse; his "push and pull" owed much to the migrating color of Matisse's painting—color that did not stay within delineated configurations but traveled across and through them, declar-

ing its own shape-shifting powers, a lesson not lost on De Niro. From Hofmann, De Niro also obtained a puddled wet color and a long, looping brushstroke (which anticipates certain linear flourishes of de Kooning in the 1970s, when the Dutchman mashed the landscape and the figure together into a single genre). In 1946, De Niro had his solo debut at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery; beginning in 1950, he showed with Charlie Egan, and near the end of that decade, appeared in the Jewish Museum's famed exhibition "Artists of the New York School: Second Generation," a moniker that helped sink the work for a decade.

In 1961, De Niro began a five-year sojourn in Paris. Divorced, closeted in the tediously macho AbEx world, and stripped of the better part of his early work owing to a studio fire in 1949, the artist now studied Matisse, Picasso, and Georges Rouault on their home turf. In France, he surely encountered many of the touchstones of that era: the double oval rooms of Paris's Musée de l'Orangerie, with Monet's *Nymphéas*, 1914–26, which held young painters spellbound, not to mention Matisse's Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence, 1948–51, where sunlight streaming through stained glass cast intangible, mobile color on brusque black-and-white drawings on tile. During this period, De Niro developed a vocabulary of broad, telegraphic strokes and dragged applications of wet paint on wet underpainting. We see explicit borrowings from Picasso, especially the still lifes with classical busts of the 1920s, in such ambitious works by De Niro as *Untitled (Still Life with Classical Head)*, 1960, and the earlier, lightly blushed, *Still Life with Greek Head*, 1955. Matisse's *La Blouse roumaine*, 1940, is recycled in such works as *Portrait of a Woman in a Green Blouse*, 1961.

De Niro's deeply Matissean drawings are central to his contribution. *Seated Woman Wearing a Dress*, 1966, is outstanding, as is *Seated Female Nude with a Parrot*, 1980. There appears to be only a single work based on a photograph, the gouache-and-ink *Lola Montez with Cigarette*, 1958–59, derived from a famed shot of the Irish dancer. All in all, De Niro clearly illuminated the shift in artistic ambition over the last four decades of his life while underscoring the hollowness of the anti-hand-and-brush fiat. If ever a baby was tossed out with the bathwater, this is an occasion to reach for that old saw.

—Robert Pincus-Witten



Robert De Niro Sr.,  
*Woman in Red*, 1961,  
oil on linen, 70 × 54".