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Richard Diebenkorn's "Urbana #2 (The Archer)" (1953), oil on canvas, was based upon a prehistoric cave painting in Spain.

Diebenkorn's early works

Collection reveals nascent promise and direction of painter's career



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Richard Diebenkorn's *Untitled* (c. 1945), demonstrates his facility with watercolor.

By Charles Desmarais

The Crocker Art Museum's "Richard Diebenkorn: Beginnings, 1942-1955," opening Saturday, Oct. 8, is not for the Diebenkorn beginner. It covers only the first quarter of an active career that spanned more than 50 years, and it consists largely of works on paper by one of the past century's great American painters.

For the Diebenkorn enthusiast, however — and particularly for the Modern art scholar — the show is informative and deeply satisfying. The exhibition catalog, a lushly illustrated biography by the Sacramento museum's chief curator, Scott A. Shields, is a document that should find an immediate place on the shelves of art history libraries everywhere.

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Diebenkorn's works show growth

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The show and book are the product of a partnership with the Richard Diebenkorn Foundation, which controls rights to the artist's images and archives. "Beginnings" likely could not have happened without the foundation, which in fact claims authorship "in conjunction with" the Sacramento museum. RDF holds (and sells, using proceeds to fund scholarship on the artist and other charitable purposes) thousands of works. Of the precisely 100 objects in the exhibition, 99 come from that single source.

All of which is to say that this was a labor of love and convenience as much as scholarship — not a bad thing, but worth keeping in mind when considering the absence of key paintings, nicely illustrated in the book but absent from the exhibition. To include high-value works from multiple lenders would have exponentially increased the cost and effort of the show.

Notwithstanding that limitation, there is much to learn from the exhibition. Diebenkorn's technical facility as a painter in oils on canvas was at least matched by his skill with watercolor and ink, and his celebrated handling of broad areas of color did not limit his sheer wizardry as a charmer of the serpentine line.

All the works here were made before the artist turned 33, yet even in his early years the promise and the shape of Diebenkorn's future career seems apparent.

An untitled collage dated 1946 already contains some of the elements we will see in much later works — the soft colors, hints of erasures and the division into what can be read as distinct pictorial precincts.

A number of inky drawings are included, each a startling departure from the next, yet many of them identifiably by the hand that fans know well from his extensive production of prints over his lifetime. Some of the drawings might almost be crude maps, made looking down from the hills of Berkeley or Sausalito, two of the places he called home during the time covered here. Others are lusciously tumescent, if not downright sexual in an archly abstract way.

One of the most useful lessons we learned about the artist from the recent San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Matisse/Diebenkorn" was his deeply felt connection to certain artists of the past, and his enthusiasm



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Richard Diebenkorn, "Untitled (Albuquerque)" (1952), oil on canvas.



Untitled (1955), charcoal, gouache, and ink on paper, above, and Untitled (1950), ink on paper, left.

for art history. Here, we at first see him working out artistic responses to the work of, for example, John Marin and Paul Cézanne in the mid-1940s.

The exhibition is meant to

bracket the first abstract period in Diebenkorn's career (there would be a second one) between this earliest work and his return to figuration some 10 years later. These were the years during which

he came under, then rejected, the influence of Abstract Expressionism and its West Coast founders and followers at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute).

Richard Diebenkorn: Beginnings, 1942-1955: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays; until 9 p.m. Thursdays. Oct. 8-Jan. 7. \$5-\$10. Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St., Sacramento. (916) 808-7000. www.crockerartmuseum.org.

The conceit works well enough as a loosely fitted exhibition theme: We can clearly see his art enduring a tempering that will strengthen his mature figurative style. It is how he earned the authority, and the confidence, to become original. One chapter of the book, in fact, is called "Becoming Diebenkorn."

But "Beginnings" also reveals that throughout this formative period, the artist never quite let go of depiction for very long. As a didactic label points out, a bright untitled watercolor painted in 1945 includes clear references to a boat propeller and an American flag amid its complex formal web.

A large oil painting from 1950-51, "Untitled (Albuquerque)," vibrates in the viewer's mind between nonobjective painted canvas and quintessential Southwest image of a stuccoed wall.

One key painting in the exhibition gives the game away. "Ubana #2 (The Archer)," painted in 1953, has many of the maplike features of drawings made around the same time. Yet it also undeniably describes a kneeling archer, as Diebenkorn acknowledged when he told an interviewer the work was based upon a particular prehistoric cave painting in Spain.

It's a simple step from there to understanding other pieces as both designs of startling invention and as calligraphic transcriptions, or aerial views of real or imagined places. The 1954 "Untitled (Horse and Rider)" is presented here as Diebenkorn's announcement of his return to figuration.

I am most taken, though, by curator Shields' concluding wall, with its pair of dark drawings from 1955 of scarred and swollen duelists, surrounded by ominous and violent marks. They are a fitting coda to the story that has come before of artistic transition and struggle. One has no title. The final work is called "Untitled (Abstract Expressionist Painter)."

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