Ryan McGinness
STUDIO VISIT

Art history is not linear, although it is often taught as such. Culture is a multidimensional network that feeds and builds upon itself in a mash-up that transcends time.

—Ryan McGinness

Born and raised in Virginia Beach and now based in New York, McGinness (born 1972) is known for his lively marriage of abstraction and figuration. His early interest in design, illustration, and popular culture led to a flat, clean-edged style of bold logo-like images that he calls icons, a nod to his interest in merging corporate culture and fine art.

VMFA commissioned McGinness to create a new work for its reopening in 2010. The colorful painting—*Art History Is Not Linear (VMFA)*—hangs in a permanent location, behind you in the entry concourse of VMFA's McGlothlin Wing. The painting's two hundred icons represent works in VMFA's collection, which McGinness studied over several years through direct observation, books, and the museum's website. McGinness reinterpreted the works through a process of hand drawing and computer design. With intuition as his guide, he then layered the images on sixteen panels using the screen-printing process. The vibrant, densely layered work serves as an introduction to the museum's holdings. This exhibition explores the creative process behind the making of the commissioned painting.

Photographs and video of McGinness's studio by Sherry Griffin, 2013.

CONRAD FELIXMÜLLER

German, 1897–1977

Portrait of Ludwig Fischer, ca. 1920

Drypoint

Ludwig and Rosy Fischer Collection, Gift of the Estate of Anne R. Fischer, 2009.145

Felixmüller was a German Expressionist whose work was committed to political causes. This portrait shows the art collector Ludwig Fischer who began collecting art with his wife, Rosy, in 1905 after visiting an auction in Munich. Their collection later came to Richmond with their son Ernst and daughter-in-law Anne, and it eventually became part of the permanent collection at VMFA. McGinness's icon is based on the figure over Mr. Fischer's right shoulder.

ANDREW WYETH

American, 1917–2009

The Country, 1965

Tempera on panel

Mrs. Alfred I. DuPont Fund, 65.29

Wyeth, who painted in rural Pennsylvania and coastal Maine, is best known for his regional landscapes and figure subjects, often using the exacting tempera medium. He established his reputation in the 1940s as a "magic realist," tempering his sober descriptive style with fantasy and mystery. This work depicts his wife, muse, and manager, Betsy James Wyeth, which may explain the painting's warmer, atypical mood. Wyeth's frequent inclusion of windows—which McGinness emphasized in his icon—suggests their art historical associations with memory and imagination.

Indian, Deccan, Maharashtra

Illustrated Manuscript of the Jnaneshvari: Ganesha Receiving Homage from His Wives, 1763

Opaque watercolor and ink on paper, red velvet bindings embossed with gold

Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 91.9.1/628

This page is from a lavishly illustrated 18th-century copy of the *Jnaneshvari,* a 13th-century commentary on the great Sanskrit text the *Bhagavad Gita (Song of the Divine One),* which is part of the epic *Mahabharata.* The text explains a central Hindu doctrine about the goal of life: to escape rebirth and attain salvation by becoming one with Absolute Reality. This frontispiece image shows the elephant god Ganesha seated in regal splendor receiving the worship of his two wives, whom McGinness's icon omits in favor of Ganesha's distinctive silhouette and royal attributes.

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER

German, 1880–1938

Portrait of Erna Kirchner, 1917

Oil on canvas

Ludwig and Rosy Fischer Collection,
Gift of the Estate of Anne R. Fischer,
2009.200

Kirchner was a German Expressionist painter and printmaker and one of the founders of Die Brücke or "The Bridge," an early 20th-century group whose radical art is well represented in VMFA's Fischer Collection. With the onset of World War I in 1914, Kirchner, like many German Expressionists, adopted a more sober style. This portrait of his longtime companion Erna Schilling (1884–1945), whom he met a year or two before making this painting, has a subtler palette and more naturalistic forms than his prior work. Although Ernst and Erna never married, Erna obtained the right to be known by the name Kirchner after the painter's death.

Maya (Mexico or Guatemala)

Miniature Mosaic Mask,
AD 600–900

Jade

Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 82.14

Many Pre-Columbian peoples considered jade to be sacred and used it to make objects indicative of royal status. The image below shows an 8th-century Maya king and his wife in a scene carved in a lintel above a temple doorway. Hanging from the king's necklace and his wife's pectoral are small jade masks similar to the example displayed here.

Lintel 24 from Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico. Drawing by Ian Graham (Peabody Museum Publications).

WILLIAM BLAKE

English, 1757–1827

There were not found Women fair as the Daughters of Job in all the Land, Plate 20 from *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, 1825

Engraving

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 73.80.21/22

The twenty-two engraved prints illustrating the biblical story of Job are among Blake's greatest print works and were also a rare commercial and critical success. They were the last set of illustrations Blake completed; his illustrations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* were left unfinished upon his death. In this image, Job tells his story of sin, suffering, and redemption to his daughters. Some scholars interpret the series as personal statements about Blake's own tribulations and the spiritual peace he found late in life. McGinness's ethereal icon suggests a related sense of spiritual release.

RYAN McGINNESS

Art History Is Not Linear (VMFA), 2009

Acrylic on panel

Collection of the artist

McGinness created twenty panels, each measuring four-by-four feet, for the commissioned painting installed in the museum's entry concourse behind you. In the end, only sixteen panels were needed for an overall dimension that is eight feet high and thirty-two feet wide; the artist retained the other four panels, shown here.

RYAN McGINNESS

Untitled (VMFA cyanotypes #1–12), 2010

Twelve unique cyanotypes on Saunders Waterford paper

Gift of an anonymous donor in celebration of VMFA's 75th anniversary, 2011.480-491

McGinness made these twelve prints using the same collection of icons that he created for the commissioned painting. Cyanotypes result not from a camera but from a photographic process in which an image is produced by exposing light-sensitized paper to ultraviolet rays, such as those from the sun. This process creates white silhouettes against an indigo or Prussian blue ground wherever a mask of the icon was placed. Each of the twelve prints was made in an edition of ten plus two artist's proofs, but no two prints are the same given the vagaries of the developing process.

RYAN McGINNESS

VMFA Process Sketches, 2011

Etching

Gift of Pace Editions, Inc., in celebration of VMFA's 75th anniversary, 2011.492

VMFA Process Sketches translates into etching a selection of McGinness's hand drawings made during the process of creating the two hundred icons from objects in VMFA's collection.

RYAN McGINNESS

VMFA Drawings (Blind), 2011

Relief print

Gift of Pace Editions, Inc., in celebration of VMFA's 75th anniversary, 2011.493

VMFA Drawings (Blind) reproduces all two hundred of McGinness's finished VMFA icons, embossed onto the paper without ink, hence "blind."

RYAN McGINNESS

Untitled [Art History Is Not Linear (VMFA), 1], 2010

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall Jr.

In addition to the twenty paintings on wood panel, McGinness made two paintings on canvas at a somewhat larger size, this and the one opposite. He then destroyed the screens (except for those preserved for this exhibition) and produced no other VMFA-related paintings.

RYAN McGINNESS

Untitled [Art History Is Not Linear (VMFA), 2], 2010

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall Jr.

In addition to the twenty paintings on wood panel, McGinness made two paintings on canvas at a somewhat larger size, this and the one opposite. He then destroyed the screens (except for those preserved for this exhibition) and produced no other VMFA-related paintings.

RYAN McGINNESS

Historical Perspectives in Art & Design Assignment I: Chart of World Art, 1990

Ink on paper

Collection of the artist

McGinness made this for a freshman-year assignment at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, where he studied design and fine art. Its grand overview of art history anticipates his VMFA-commissioned painting, whose images span the broad spectrum of cultures and periods that make up the museum's encyclopedic holdings.

African, Luba culture
(Democratic Republic of Congo)

Stool, 19th century

Wood, glass beads, string

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow
Endowment, 91.502

A stool with its seat supported by a female figure is one of the essential royal symbols for a Luba king. Reflecting the central role of women in politics, social organizations, and creation myths, the female figure is the primary subject matter of Luba art. Here the serene and beautifully detailed figure holds the seat effortlessly aloft in a sensitively balanced composition. McGinness's icon emphasizes the symmetry and patterning of the carving.

Tibetan or Nepalese

Serpent King (Nagaraja),
15th–16th century

Gilded copper alloy, gemstones

Berthe and John Ford Collection,
Gift of the E. Rhodes and Leona B.
Carpenter Foundation, 91.555

This powerful serpent king was originally an adoring attendant figure on the pedestal of a Buddha image. Cobra hoods emerge from his head and ornaments adorn his richly gilded body. An inspired statement of ecstatic rapture and dynamic energy, this image is one of the finest *nagarajas* in Nepalese art. McGinness's icon suggests that he interpreted the graceful and delicate figure as female.

CLÉMENT ROUSSEAU

French, 1872–1950

Chair, ca. 1925

Rosewood, sharkskin, mother-of-pearl, upholstery

Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis, 85.129

Although examples of his work are rare, Clément Rousseau was one of the most prolific designers of the Art Deco period. His work was displayed regularly at exhibitions in Paris during the 1920s. The stylized flower petals, volutes, sunray patterns, and frames are of dyed-green and natural-gray shagreen (sharkskin), which was a very strong material and a favorite of Rousseau's and other Art Deco designers.

ATTRIBUTED TO NAZZANO PAINTER

Etruscan

Red-Figure Kalyx-Krater (Mixing Bowl),
ca. 370 BC

Terracotta

Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 82.137

Side A: *Amazonomachy (Battle against the Amazons)* Side B: *Satyrs and Maenads*

Depictions of battles against Amazons, a mythical tribe of warrior women, were popular throughout the ancient world, but this scene is unusual. Here Amazons fight with satyrs: half-horse, half-human followers of the god Dionysos. The scene may refer to Dionysos's defeat of the Amazons during his conquest of India. Only ten vases are attributed to Nazzano Painter, who was one of the finest Etruscan vase painters. McGinness extracted a face and bird from the scene and reconfigured them in a new composition.

EARLY WORK

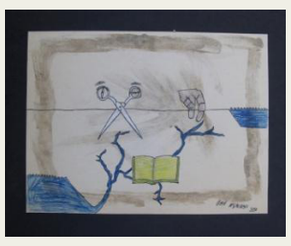
McGinness's childhood art shows his early interest in drawing and printmaking and in creating simple, legible forms that—like his current work—communicate humor, imagination, and keen observation of his environment. The following works are from the artist's collection.

The Iffy Book, 1980–81
Pencil and color pencil on six pages of lined paper stapled inside folded construction paper, with colored marker and yarn

Untitled, ca. 1982–83
Pencil and colored pencil on paper stapled to construction paper

Untitled, 1983
Pencil on paper

Untitled, 1984
Ink on construction paper



Untitled, 1983
Ink and colored pencil on paper mounted on construction paper

Ryan's World, ca. 1982–83
Pencil and colored marker on paper stapled to two pieces of construction paper

Untitled (lightbulbs in packaging), ca. 1981–83
Colored pencil on black construction paper

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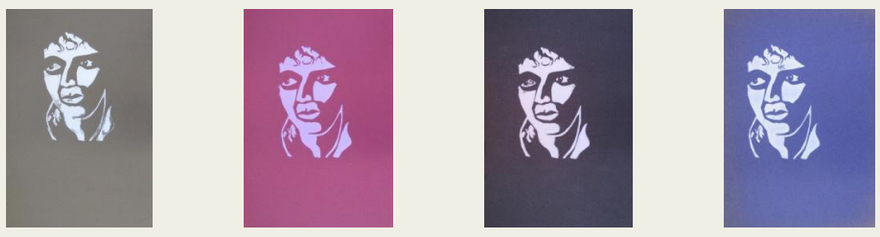

Untitled, 1984
Ink on construction paper

Life in VA Beach, ca. 1990
Photograph mounted on board with Life-Saving Museum of Virginia Merit Award

Untitled, ca. 1988
Photograph mounted on board

d'Art Center, 1988
Photograph mounted on board

Untitled, ca. 1991
Cut paper on board

Untitled, 1990
Ink and gouache on board

Untitled, 1990
Ink and gouache on board

2·D, 1991
Ink and gouache on board

Untitled, ca. 1990
Ink on paper (left) and black marker on tissue (right) mounted on construction paper

VMFA ICONS

This enlarged grid of two hundred images features the finished icons that McGinness created in response to objects in VMFA's collection. Each icon was made into a print screen—or sometimes several of varying sizes—and used to create the finished paintings, which were screen-printed onto wooden panels.