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The Museum of Modern Art

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Department of Public Information

Some Notes on The Museum of Modern Art and its Collections

Premise: The Painting and Sculpture Collection of the Museum is the best in the world. Best in range (every major movement of 20th-century art is represented), best in quality (more top works by more leading artists).

Its history is a kind of miracle on 53rd Street. It has been assembled since 1929 with virtually no purchase funds or endowment, but with the aid of hundreds of patrons, dealers, artists, trustees and a discriminating staff headed by Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

The most recent and conspicuous donor was Sidney Janis and we recently published a book about the collection he gave us. Unusual terms (interesting in the light of the current controversy at the Met)-- i. e. we can (and, indeed, are urged) to sell after a period of time anything in his gift so long as we use the proceeds to buy something in the spirit of the Janis collection.

There is a difference, of course, between a private and a public collection. Sidney Janis recognized this when he made his gift with such generous provisions for future sales.

Another great, private collection, part of which is promised to us, is Nelson Rockefeller's. We have published a book on this collection, too. Incidentally, the difference between public and private collecting could be elucidated by George Heard Hamilton, Professor of Art History at Yale for many years, now head of the museum at Williams College and Chairman of our Painting and Sculpture Committee.

Artists have also helped build this collection. For instance, one of the most famous American artists, Alexander Calder, gave us our choice of a great many of his things. Another artist of renown, Robert Motherwell, a scholar as well, probably knows this collection as well as any contemporary painter.

Regarding the general public, a young woman accompanied by her mother came regularly from Brooklyn over a period of years just to look at two paintings. Then there are the people from all over the country who come to see the "original," thoroughly familiar with many of the masterworks from reproductions in mass magazines, in text books, in color reproductions, in art books. Is that the real "Guernica"? they ask.

These are some of the reasons why we maintain this collection. The care and feeding is enormously expensive, of course, and everybody is helping through tax abatements, gifts, money from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts -- money that comes from the purse of the culture-loving or unloving public.

Incidentally, another informed person is Russell Lynes who has just finished a book about the Museum which Atheneum is publishing in May. He is full of anecdotal material

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on the forming of the collection, the trades, the reluctances, even anger of some trustees when we bought something they considered "not art."

Mr. Barr always said the sin of omission was more serious than commission. If one in ten of the works we acquired stand the test of time that's a good record, he said. It's the ones that get away that are lost forever.

Another aspect of the question of refining and "upgrading" the collection (a policy we have always believed in and done) is the whole question of the art market. How do you get the best price for a work you want to sell? If you offer it to the museums that have the funds to buy it, they probably won't because they, too, have superior examples of work by those artists. The museums that have no works, and would welcome, say, a small Degas, don't have any purchase funds. If you offer it to six public institutions publically, and they turn it down, haven't you lowered its value in the eyes of private collectors?

The Art Dealers Association has now offered to appraise any work any museum wants to sell and to guarantee to buy it at 30% off. They have the option of assigning it to a member of their association for sale. Perhaps someone from their group-- such as Ralph Colin-- would bring another view.

Most articulate of all, however, on the subject of collecting art today, is Bill Rubin, Chief Curator of the Collections and responsible for the new installation.