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The Museum of Modern Art

AN EXHIBITION CELEBRATING THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER PRINT ROOM OPENS AT MOMA

Exhibition Will Feature Approximately 100 Prints Formerly In Mrs. Rockefeller's Private Collection

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Print Collecting: An Early Mission for MoMA
June 24-September 21, 1999

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874-1948), a noted philanthropist and one of The Museum of Modern Art's three founders, was the single most important force in the establishment of the Museum's Print Department. Donating her own collection of 1,600 prints, Mrs. Rockefeller hoped to deepen the understanding of modern printmaking and encourage private collecting of prints both for aesthetic pleasure and for the support such collecting would provide living artists. In 1949, The Museum of Modern Art dedicated The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Print Room, a behind-the-scenes area dedicated to housing and studying this art form.

Beginning June 24, 1999, MoMA will present *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Print Collecting: An Early Mission for MoMA*, a display of approximately 100 prints that Mrs. Rockefeller enjoyed in her private collection, before donating them to the Museum. The exhibition's rooms will be modeled after the Art Deco private gallery she had on the top floor of her residence in the 1930s. The exhibition was organized by Deborah Wye, Chief Curator, and Audrey Isselbacher, Associate Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, The Museum of Modern Art. "It is a wonderful tribute to Mother that MoMA is mounting an exhibition of her print collection in a setting that so closely reflects her own gallery at our home on West 54th Street," says David Rockefeller, Chairman Emeritus of The Museum of Modern Art and a son of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.

Mrs. Rockefeller formed her modern art collection primarily between 1925 and 1935, acquiring mainly works on paper, such as watercolors, drawings, and most significantly, prints. While Mrs. Rockefeller's collection included many prints by the most celebrated modern artists of Europe, most were by Americans living and working in New York City. For this group she could be a patron in the fullest sense of the word, providing direct assistance through her purchases and also playing a role in garnering recognition and support for the artists' work. Sometimes she commissioned particular works and made financial contributions to efforts mounted specifically for the aid of the artists.

Mrs. Rockefeller loved New York City--her home for more than 45 years--and the subject matter of her American art collection focused on this metropolis. Her prints include modernist interpretations of New York's elevated subways, bridges, and skyscrapers by Stuart Davis, John Marin, and Charles Sheeler, as well as studies of the city's inhabitants by John Sloan, George Bellows, and Reginald Marsh. Her collection provides lively views of subway riders on their way to work, shoppers loaded down with purchases, apartment dwellers making use of their roofs, and revelers in

Central Park and at Coney Island.

German Expressionist prints, with their bold compositions, unrefined technique and often uncompromising subjects, were another of Mrs. Rockefeller's interests when she turned her attention to modernism. Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff of *Die Brücke*, as well as Max Beckmann, Käthe Kollwitz, and Wilhelm Lehmbruck of a slightly later period, are among the artists whose prints could be found on her walls. However, her favorite among the Germans was Emil Nolde--represented in the exhibition by works such as *Frauenkopf III (Head of Woman III)* (1912)--and she collected a comprehensive sampling of his etchings, woodcuts, and lithographs.

Mexican art and culture were also of keen interest to Mrs. Rockefeller in the 1920s and 1930s, when she worked actively to promote friendship between the United States and Mexico. This period was one in which the muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, known as *los tres grandes* (the three great ones), were widely celebrated and sought after for commissions that brought them regularly to this country.

Yet in Mrs. Rockefeller's collection, after American artists, the French were represented by the largest number of works. She believed that modernism originated with avant-garde painting in France in the late nineteenth century, and her collection included works by the Impressionist Edgar Degas, the Post-Impressionist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and the Symbolists Odilon Redon and Paul Gauguin. Her donation of sixty-one lithographs by Toulouse-Lautrec, covering the full range of the artist's important printed oeuvre, made the Museum a major repository of his work. However, she also acquired twentieth-century works by artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, with figurative art of greater interest to her than abstraction, even in the case of Picasso.

As Mrs. Rockefeller's art collection grew, she wanted to display it in her New York City residence. She chose a top-floor area formerly used by her children and had it renovated by American interior and furniture designer Donald Deskey, in collaboration with architect Duncan Candler. (Deskey's Art Deco interiors are best known from Radio City Music Hall, which he designed soon after Mrs. Rockefeller's gallery.) The room for exhibiting prints had the most radical design. Gray Bakelite walls, gray carpeting, evenly distributed lighting, and streamlined furnishings created a neutral, complementary background for the art. The walls supported an ingenious hanging system that was both decorative and functional. Horizontal, channeled metal strips allowed prints to be displayed with movable hanging devices so Mrs. Rockefeller could change her installations frequently. The present exhibition evokes the spirit of her radical, modern gallery that stood in such stark contrast to the traditional décor elsewhere in her home.

As the Museum planned a new building in 1939, Mrs. Rockefeller decided to donate her collection of prints to the Museum with the understanding that a Print Room would be incorporated to house her collection. Unfortunately, the war effort and related programming preempted the opening of the Print Room and it was not until 1949 that it was finally inaugurated. Mrs. Rockefeller died in 1948 and did not see the establishment of the curatorial department that had been one of her missions for The Museum of Modern Art. The Print Room, the first such facility devoted to the modern period, was named in her honor.

Today, the print collection has grown to 40,000 objects. The Abby Aldrich

Rockefeller Print Room, staffed by specialists, is the site of numerous educational activities and is open to the public by appointment. Similar in organization to traditional print rooms found in libraries and museums devoted to earlier periods of art, it is made up of several components. A storage area holds the collection and employs a filing system that allows for easy retrieval; a library and research area provides the scholarly tools needed for the study of prints; and a spacious study center allows for prints to be examined quietly and first-hand, outside their frames.

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