

The Museum of Modern Art

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THE LILLIE P. BLISS INTERNATIONAL STUDY CENTER

NOTES ON LILLIE P. BLISS

Lillie P. Bliss, in whose honor The International Study Center is dedicated, was one of the founders of The Museum of Modern Art in 1929, with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.) and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan.

Miss Bliss was born in Boston in 1864, the daughter of Elizabeth Plummer and Cornelius N. Bliss. She came to New York as a child; when her father was Secretary of the Interior under President McKinley, she acted as hostess for him in Washington as her mother was in delicate health. After her father died in 1911, Miss Bliss continued to live with her mother in a house on East 37th Street.

Miss Bliss was an active supporter of the arts, at first particularly of music. Her interest in modern art was stimulated by the Armory Show of 1913 and her long-time friendship with the painter Arthur B. Davies.

After her death in 1931, the Museum held a memorial exhibition of her collection. In the accompanying catalogue, a friend recalled: " . . . she was an advocate for modern art when it had few admirers, a patron when it had almost no market . . . To gather that which has stood the test of time takes skill and taste, but to select wisely from the vast amount of unweeded material produced by contemporary artists requires taste, courage, and insight that amounts almost to the gift of prophecy."

In 1939, A. Conger Goodyear, the first President of the Museum, also paid tribute to Miss Bliss: "From the beginning her support had been essential and in leaving the Museum the great collection of pictures that bears her name under conditions that required us to provide an adequate endowment, she performed her greatest service. There could not have been a wiser plan or a finer incentive for its fulfillment."

Under the terms of Miss Bliss's will, the collection was given conditionally: three years from Miss Bliss's death the Museum was to be sufficiently endowed by

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\$1,000,000, and placed on a satisfactory financial basis if it were to receive the bequest.

The country was in the midst of the Depression, and only \$600,000 was raised. Miss Bliss's brother, Cornelius N. Bliss, executor of her estate and her successor as a Museum trustee, reduced the requirement, and the Bliss Collection came to the Museum in 1934. ("He hated modern art but he had family feeling," a relative has said of him.)

The Lillie P. Bliss Collection included 21 Cézannes, two Gauguins, two Picassos, four Matisses, three Derains, plus works by Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Daumier, and Seurat.

During the ensuing years many of these works were sold or exchanged, and today, the paintings bearing her name constitute one of the Museum's most valuable and important holdings. For example, a painting by Degas was sold in 1937 so that the Museum could buy Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, and in 1941 three minor works were sold in order for the Museum to acquire van Gogh's Starry Night.

In 1934, when the Bliss Collection was accessioned, the Museum published a book describing it. Part of a letter Miss Bliss had written to a National Academician was included in the text:

We are not so far apart as you seem to think in our ideas on art, for I yield to no one in my love, reverence, and admiration for the beautiful things which have already been created in painting, sculpture, and music. But you are an artist, absorbed in your own production, with scant leisure and inclination to examine patiently and judge fairly the work of the hosts of revolutionists, innovators, and modernists in this widespread movement thro' the whole domain of art or to discriminate between what is false and bad and what is sometimes crude, perhaps, but full of power and promise for the enrichment of the art which the majority of them serve with a devotion as pure and honest as your own. There are not yet many great men among them, but great men are scarce--even among academicians.

The truth is you older men seem intolerant and supercilious, a state of mind incomprehensible to a philosopher who looks on and enjoys watching for and finding the new men in music, painting, and literature who have something to say worth saying and claim for themselves only the freedom to express it in their own way, a claim which you have always maintained as your inalienable right.

Mrs. Bliss Parkinson, President of the Museum, is the niece of Lillie P. Bliss.

Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019.