# Adding it up : print acquisitions 1970-1995 : May 27-September 5, 1995

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# Adding it Up

## PRINT ACQUISITIONS 1970–1995

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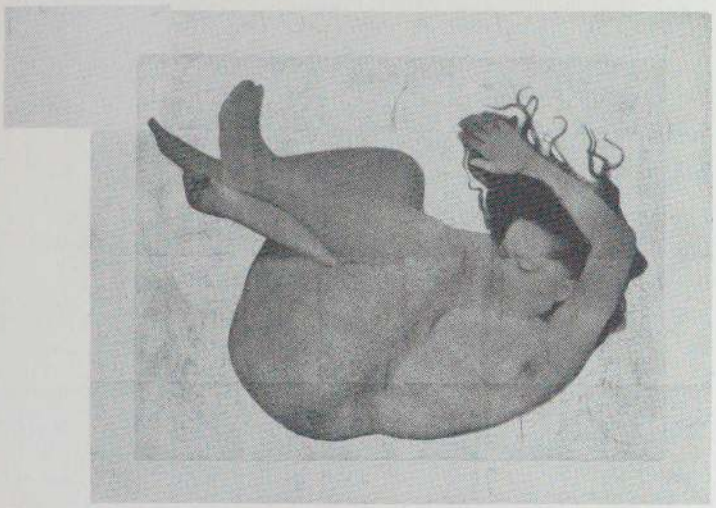
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
NEW YORK



***Note:*** *The responsibility for adding to The Museum of Modern Art's extraordinary collection of prints and illustrated books, established by the Museum's first director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the first curator of prints, William S. Lieberman, has been mine for the past twenty-five years. To the lustrous historical overview gathered by my predecessors it was mainly necessary to continue acquiring new works and fill in the gaps among the older ones. The choices, many of which were the suggestions of other members of the curatorial staff, were approved by a sympathetic and supportive trustee committee, established in 1973. Motivated by my retirement this year, I have made an unabashedly personal selection of works that might be considered major additions to the collection or seem to be compelling representatives of the period of their creation from over 4,500 acquisitions made during my tenure. Few curators have this opportunity, and fewer museums would allow them to take advantage of it.*

— R.C.

The collection of nearly every museum begins with other collections — usually those of its founders. The collection of this Museum began in a similar way when Paul J. Sachs, advisor to the founding trustees, donated a group of eight contemporary German prints and one drawing in 1929. Within forty years most of the monuments of modern printmaking had been acquired through gift and purchase. There remained, of course, some prints that had escaped the net or seemed unattainable and others that, through circumstances of geographic and political isolation, were not yet known.

In the first category, Pablo Picasso's earliest finished print, *The Frugal Repast* (1904), was already represented in the collection, but by an example from the large edition published by Ambroise Vollard in 1913. The autographic and rich qualities of the 1904 proofs were lacking in the later printing, so when one of those rare proofs — in fact, the first that Picasso signed and dated — became available under exceptionally favorable circumstances, it was acquired in 1993. Of similar rarity was a hand-colored woodcut, *The Night* (1903) by Vasily Kandinsky, an early work inspired by the folkloric woodcuts of Russia.

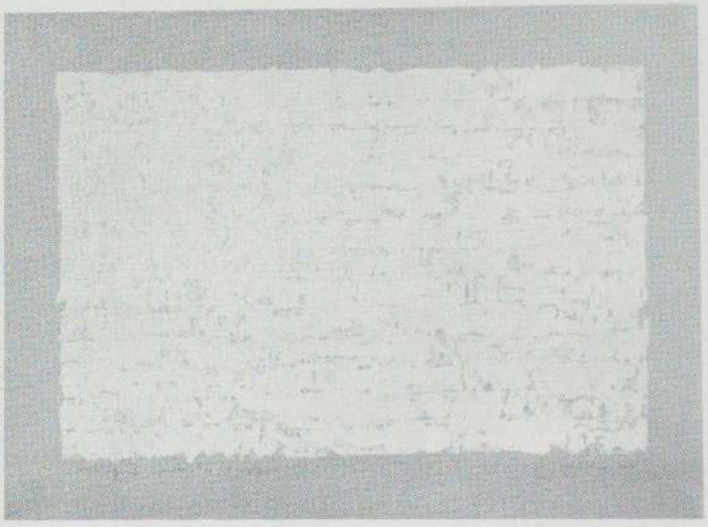
Of those prints that were little or not known, the most numerous and valuable examples that emerged during the last third of the collection's existence were those of the Russian avant-garde, for the most part imprisoned in pamphlets on untouched bookshelves in the Soviet Union since the 1920s. Slowly, in the 1970s, they came on the market, accompanied by the scholarship that authenticated their artistic and historic value. Among the many pieces that were added to the few collected as ephemera in the 1930s are lithographs and woodcuts by the leading women artists of the time, Natalie Gontcharova and Olga Rozanova, and prints by the Constructivist Kasimir Malevich, whose pamphlet cover for the *Congress of Committees of Peasant Poverty* (1918) is among the most important pieces of modern European printed art.

The search for *The Frugal Repast* was concomitant with an interest in finding other artists' first prints. The American Abstract Expressionists, for example, were not entranced by the print mediums and preferred to be alone in their own studios to working with others in a printmaking workshop. However, in the 1940s and early 1950s a few painters and sculptors made some prints. Adolph Gottlieb had his

Top: Kiki Smith. *Free Fall*. 1994. Photogravure, etching, and drypoint, 27⅞ x 35½" (68.6 x 89.9 cm). Gift of Emily Fisher Landau, 1995

Bottom: Kasimir Malevich. Front cover of program for *Congress of Committees of Peasant Poverty*. (1918). Lithograph, 11½ x 11 ⅛" (29.2 x 29.0 cm). Gift of the Lauder Foundation, 1980

Jackson Pollock. Untitled. (c. 1938 – 41). Screenprint with gouache and India ink additions, 17 x 21⅛" (43.2 x 55.4 cm). Purchase, 1982



own press. Among the European artists who escaped from Hitler was Stanley William Hayter. Atelier 17, his New York workshop, was used by David Smith and Jackson Pollock, who engraved his first abstract prints there in 1944–45. A few years earlier, under the influence of the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, he created his first screenprint; one of the three copies of this print known to exist was added to the unique collection of his unpublished engravings already in the Museum. Grace Hartigan's first screenprint as well as what seem to be the only prints by Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko illustrate the tentative nature of their approach to printmaking.

The past twenty-five years have witnessed exceptional changes in the making and understanding of art. There were several turning points, more like diversions, that preceded this period, but attitudes toward works that were deemed art were radically altered by the end of the 1960s. Reaction to these changes affected not only decisions about which pieces of contemporary art were collectible, but also those about which older works might fit into the already rich mix of European art of the modern period. Additions which increased understanding about an artist's work or about its place in our culture were made to several exceptionally rich areas of the collection. What probably was an experiment in using photomechanical techniques by Jean Dubuffet in 1946 resulted in a series of portraits, which never were printed in editions but were essential additions to the nearly complete printed oeuvre of the artist already in the Museum. Edvard Munch's small etching *Puberty* (1902), would seem to be a footnote to his more important lithograph of the same composition, one of the Museum's exceptional collection of prints by this artist, except that, most revealingly, it had been owned by the controversial psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich.

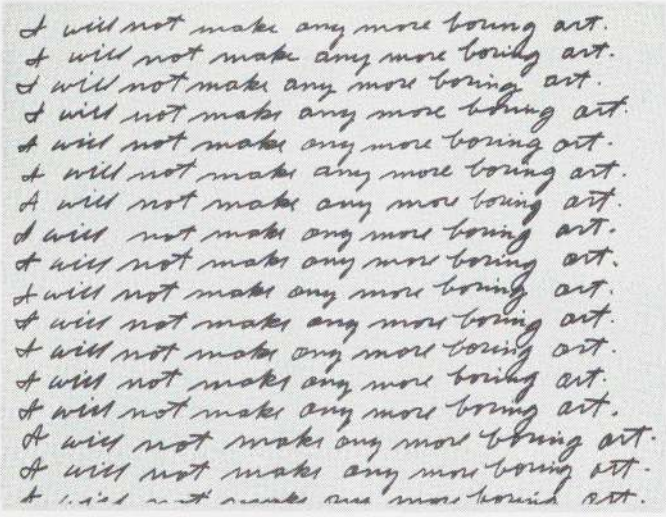
Jasper Johns. *Flag II*. 1960. Lithograph, 17¼ x 27" (45.0 x 68.6 cm).
Gift of Leo and Jean-Christophe Castelli in memory of Toiny Castelli, 1988

Two of Alfred Barr's major legacies were his interpretation and collection of Matisse's and Picasso's work. Both artists were eventually represented by large numbers of their finest prints, but, as noted above, some important works were still to be added. After Picasso's death in 1973 many proofs of unpublished prints came to light. Among the prints acquired since then are an untitled aquatint portraying Dora Maar (1939), one of a set of Picasso's first color prints, and an untitled engraving made on Bastille Day of 1942, during the German occupation of Paris. After the death of Nelson A. Rockefeller in 1979 the Museum received his bequest of Matisse's most beautiful lithograph, *Large Odalisque in Striped Pantaloons* (1925).

Contemporary printmaking by painters and sculptors, the thrust of the Museum's collecting policy, was transformed in the 1960s. In America the revival of lithography allowed artists to work easily with brush or crayon and made printing colorful images possible. In addition, silkscreen or screenprint, a stencil technique originating in America decades earlier, became the succinct medium of those artists who required sharply defined and fully saturated color areas for the success of their compositions. Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol were the masters of this print technology, and their impact on how and what kind of prints were accepted during the subsequent quarter-century is undisputable.

But, more radical than the printing techniques were the attitudes that art encompassed. Rauschenberg and Warhol drew heavily upon photographic imagery for their concepts, and Johns's compositions often were made up of numbers and letters or

Andy Warhol. *Cagney*. (1964). Screenprint, 29⅞ x 39 13/16" (75.9 x 101.2 cm).
Vincent d'Aquila and Harry Soviak Bequest, 1993




included words and phrases. Statements by artists that had heretofore been titles for their works became their entire fabric, relating the limited-edition print to posters as, in bold and insistent words by artists such as Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Barbara Kruger, and Bruce Nauman, the medium became the message. The unsettling political climate in both Europe and America at the end of the 1960s inspired many artists, including Richard Hamilton, James Rosenquist, and Antoni Tàpies, to make prints that responded to the events of the times. Concurrently, Robert Morris, Sol LeWitt, and others would create prints in which they explored concepts that were central to art, such as placement and measurement.

The idea of making an image into a multiple work of art, the basis of printmaking, had already been revolutionized by Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein, and Gerhard Richter, who hand-painted and stamped "editions." The "multiple" or art object other than traditional, cast sculpture, was a phenomenon of the late 1950s and the 1960s, wherein loosely organized groups such as Fluxus produced objects (*Fluxkits*) that coexisted with their "events" or "happenings." These items were souvenirs of ephemeral actions and became mythicized when Joseph Beuys's *Felt Suit* (1970) was issued, for it did not reprise an event but encompassed essential elements in the artist's autobiographical repertoire.

Mixtures of various print techniques, sophisticated materials and machinery, and a myriad of inventions resulting from artistic need produced prints of astonishing size, color, and volume. Inevitably, the paper which underlay the printed image was understood to be integral to it, and ultimately artists worked with the paper itself as

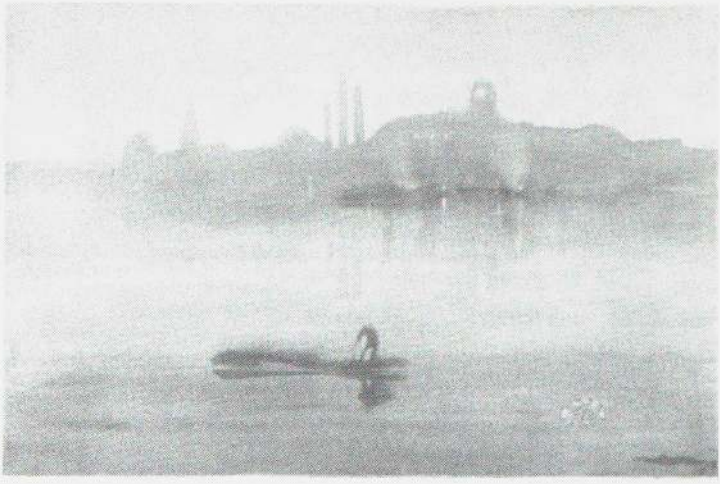
John Baldessari. *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art.* 1971. Lithograph, 22⅛ x 29¾" (56.8 x 75.1 cm). John B. Turner Fund, 1972

another medium that could be multiplied. In a contrary mode, in the 1970s more and more artists began to treat the print as a unique medium: as monotypes, printed from paintings they made on plates or mylar sheets, or as monoprints, reworking each sheet of an already printed image with paint, crayon, pencil, etc. Works of this sort by Jim Dine and Mary Frank embody these directly expressive techniques.

The prints of European artists, particularly those with Neo-Expressionist and figurative content, began to have an impact during the 1970s. The monumental linoleum cuts of Georg Baselitz, the obsessive drypoints of Arnulf Rainer, and the allegorical etchings of Francesco Clemente were fresh reminders that the cradle of printmaking was in Central Europe. Europe was also the birthplace of books embellished with prints, although increasingly, American artists have taken to the form. Some imaginative examples from both continents are Daniel Buren's *Passage* (1972), *Domus Aurea* (1977) by Anne and Patrick Poirer, Gilberto Zorio's *Tredici Sonetti del 1983* (1988), Joan Mitchell's *Smoke* (1989), and Antonio Frasconi's *In Memoriam: Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1993).

Curators who manage a collection for a number of years find that special interests, their own and those of others, modify as well as extend the parameters of what was there when they started. Print collections tend to have broader outlines than those of paintings or drawings, and traditionally have been treated as picture libraries. As wide a range as has been given to the choice of acquisitions, there will always be differences of opinion as to the appropriateness or importance of this or that work. The print that opens the exhibition seems relevant to illustrate this point. James McNeill Whistler made his atmospheric lithotint, *Nocturne: The River at Battersea* (1878), shortly after his disastrous libel suit against John Ruskin (who had derisively criticized the artist's painted Nocturnes, which, like the print, were visions of the Thames River at night). The artist had argued that he sought in his work an "artistic impression," but those who believed that pictures should depict something thought that viewers would find it difficult to identify details in his dark paintings and that they might need to use their imaginations. For his post-trial publication, *Whistler v. Ruskin Art & Art Critics* (1878), Whistler sketched the same nocturnal scene as

Joseph Beuys. *Felt Suit*. (1970). Two-piece felt multiple, 69⅞ x 28⅛ x 5⅞" (177.5 x 71.5 x 13.5 cm). The Associates Fund, 1993



the lithotint on the proposed cover, possibly with the thought of using the print in the booklet. Given its history, Whistler's *Nocturne: The River at Battersea* was a particularly meaningful addition to a collection that covers a period when individual insight and interpretation became essential to understanding and appreciating art. It reminds us of what made art modern.

Riva Castleman
Chief Curator
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

*During the past twenty-five years, the following members of the curatorial staff, past and present, proposed works that were acquired for the collection: William S. Lieberman, Director of Drawings; Deborah Wye, Curator; Audrey Isselbacher, Howardena Pindell, and Wendy Weitman, Associate Curators; Andrea Feldman and Alexandra Schwartz, Assistant Curators. The chairmen of the Committee on Prints and Illustrated Books have been Walter Bareiss (1973) and Joanne M. Stern (1974–present).*

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Cover: Pablo Picasso. *The Frugal Repast*, second state. 1904. Etching, 18⅜ x 14⅞" (42.6 x 37.8 cm). Gift of Thomas T. Solley with Mary Ellen Meehan, and purchase through the Vincent d'Aquila and Harry Soviak Bequest, funds donated by Lily Auchincloss, The Associates Fund, The Philip and Lynn Straus Foundation, and John S. Newberry (by exchange). 1993

James Abbott McNeill Whistler. *Nocturne: The River at Battersea*, second state. (1878; published 1887). Lithotint, 6¾ x 10¼" (17.1 x 26.0 cm). Purchase, 1995