THE AMERICAN MODERNS

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In January 1943 the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum accepted an offer of alliance made by the Whitney Museum of American Art. This plan contemplated that as soon as possible after the war a new structure would be added to the Metropolitan’s buildings in Central Park, in which American paintings and sculpture owned by both museums might be exhibited. While no formal agreement was ever executed because it was impossible during the war to estimate future building costs, many steps were taken in line with the proposed alliance. The Metropolitan Museum thereafter subordinated its exhibitions of American art to the Whitney; and thereafter it did not regularly exhibit contemporary American art. The late Mrs. Juliana Force, at that time Director of the Whitney Museum, was appointed Advisor in American Art to the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum. Sums from the Hearn Funds were supplied to the Whitney Museum, and on the recommendation of Mrs. Force over $40,000 was spent from 1943 to 1948 for the purchase of works of art by contemporary American artists.

The expectation that this alliance would be achieved played an important part in an agreement signed in September 1947 by the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum. This agreement recognized the primary interest of the three museums as follows: the Whitney Museum in American art, the Museum of Modern Art in both American and foreign modern art, and the Metropolitan in the older, or what is termed “classic,” art. In this agreement, too, the arrangement whereby the Metropolitan supplied sums from the Hearn Funds to the Whitney was confirmed.

However, in October 1948 the trustees of the Whitney Museum withdrew from this agreement. Accordingly, the Metropolitan announced that thereafter it would take an active part in the acquisition and exhibition of American art.

Therefore, in 1949 a new Department of American Art was established at the Metropolitan. The present writer was appointed Associate Curator and head of this department, his duties to be the inauguration of a balanced program of acquisition and exhibition of American art, particularly in the controversial contemporary field. Roland J. McKinney, who had been director of the Baltimore Museum of Art and of the Los Angeles County Museum and who had had much experience in the assembling of large exhibitions, was appointed Consultant to the Department. A Trustees’ Committee on American Art was set up to advise the Associate Curator. The members of this Committee were Elihu Root, Jr., Chairman, Walter C. Baker, and the late Sam A. Lewisohn. At present the Committee consists of Mr. Root, Chairman, Mr. Baker, and Mr. Stephen C. Clark.

On January 1, 1950 a comprehensive statement of policy in regard to contemporary American art was issued by the Museum. It was proposed that a series of competitive national exhibitions be held in the following years. These exhibitions were to cover the fields of painting, sculpture, drawing, water colors, and prints. It
was also proposed that there be held from time to time further exhibitions drawn from the holdings of the Museum as well as from other sources. In regard to acquisition in the American field it was suggested that the collection should be national in scope, that evident gaps be filled, that certain advanced trends not then represented should be included, that better works by artists poorly represented in the collection be acquired.

The first of the National Competitive Exhibitions, American Painting Today—1950, opened in December of that year. Five Regional Juries, meeting respectively at Santa Barbara, Dallas, Chicago, Richmond, and New York, made preliminary selections that in turn were submitted to a National Jury. No less than 6,248 entries were received; 307 paintings were selected. Four prizes totaling $8,500 were given to Karl Knaths, Rico Lebrun, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Joseph Hirsch by a Jury of Awards consisting of Franklin Watkins and Eugene Speicher, both well-known artists, and William Milliken, Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The second of the series was American Sculpture—1951. Some 1,100 sculptors submitted some 5,000 photographs to a Jury of Admissions; from these the works of 101 sculptors were selected. A Jury of Awards consisting of José de Creeft and Jacques Lipchitz, sculptors, and Henri Marceau, then Associate Director and now Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, gave prizes totaling $8,500 to Minna Harkavy, Rhys Caparn, Abbott Pattison, and Joseph Greenberg, Jr.

In October of the following year the Museum presented the third of its national competitions, American Drawings, Water Colors and Prints—1952. Our first competition had been attacked by certain artists who considered the composition of our juries too conservative, and our second competition by others who considered the composition of our juries to be too advanced. Faced with these irreconcilable attitudes, it was decided, for the third competition, to set up two juries in each region so that artists could send their entries to the jury of their choice. There were also two juries of award. Of 7,109 entries, 525 were accepted; $9,000 in prizes was equally distributed among 18 artists.

As it was evident to us that these three competitions attracted professionals rather than amateurs, and as the juries were most broadly constituted, it seems certain that these exhibitions reflected well and truthfully the artistic state of the union at the time. Furthermore, a considerable amount of new talent was brought to the attention of the public. In these exhibitions the Museum attempted to follow, in so far as possible, the suggestions and requests of artists and artists' groups throughout the country. In the course of the exhibitions much valuable experience was gained; certainly there was very little criticism of our final effort. It is to be regretted that largely due to the reconstruction program these competitions could not be continued.

The first activity of the new department was the presentation in March 1950 of the work of 52 American painters under the age of thirty-six. It is interesting to consult the lists of this exhibition, as many of the young exhibitors are very well known now, painters such as Kienbusch, Congdon, Motherwell, Stamos, Steumpfeg, Tam, Wyeth, Stevens, Perlin, and others.

In June 1950 a major exhibition, Twentieth-Century Painters, U.S.A., was put on display. This exhibition, occupying some 16 galleries and comprising well over 500 works, was drawn entirely from the permanent collections of the Museum. (An exhibition of twentieth-century American prints was held at the same time.)

In March 1951 an exhibition was opened celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Art Students League. Museums throughout the country contributed to this display, which consisted of the works of 75 artists associated with the League since its inception. Represented were Eakins, Henri, Bellows, Luks, Sloan, Kuhn, Inness, Saint-Gaudens, Epstein, O’Keeffe, Calder, and others.

In February 1953 paintings from the collection of Edward Root were put on display. This consisted of 124 contemporary American paintings and 16 paintings by British and Irish artists. It reflected not only the discriminating taste of a single collector but also the trends and innovations since the turn of the century.

In December 1953, as a tribute to the Bi-
centennial Celebration of Columbia University, the Museum opened American Painting 1754-1954. This vast exhibition, in which several departments of the Museum co-operated, occupied some 30 galleries and almost 1,000 works were exhibited, all from the Museum’s collections. The exhibit included paintings, drawings, prints, and sculpture, as well as the decorative arts. This display furnished a vivid picture of American life down the years and fully revealed the impressive strength of the Museum in the American field.

In March 1954 the Museum opened an exhibition of the work of America’s three great expatriate artists, Sargent, Whistler, and Mary Cassatt. This exhibition, the arrangements of which were undertaken by the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan, consisted of some 200 works, 85 of which were drawn from the Metropolitan’s collection. It was the most comprehensive exhibition of these artists to be shown in this country; works were lent by private and public collections throughout the world. An excellent catalogue was compiled by Frederick A. Sweet, Curator of American Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago.

In the summer of 1954 the special exhibition galleries in the south wing of the Museum were given over to the builders so that it became necessary to discontinue the special exhibition activities of the department. However, in February 1956 an exhibition was held on the balcony of the Great Hall of the works of Feininger, Kuhn, Kuniyoshi, Marin, and Nordfeldt. This consisted of works from the Museum’s collections, supplemented by loans from other museums and private collectors.

Since the Department of American Art was established in 1949, some 500 items have been accessioned and the accumulated funds available for the purpose have been largely spent; it is hoped it may be said that the twentieth-century collection of American art has been balanced and brought up to date.

For the many who closely follow this exciting period, it may be interesting to give a brief summary of the Museum’s present holdings. The first notable school of this century was that of the revolutionary “Eight”—Sloan, Luks, Shinn, Glackens, Prendergast, Lawson, and Davies, who, under the influence of the brilliant Henri, adopted the viewpoint of the crusading journalists of the time. Their influence and their preoccupation with the American scene may be traced through the work of Bellows, Curry, Benton, Wood, Marsh, Hopper, and Burchfield. All are represented, most by outstanding examples.

As for the early aspects of the modern movement in this country, the Museum’s position was greatly strengthened by the kind gift of Georgia O’Keeffe in 1949 of a portion of the Stieglitz collection. The Museum received many examples of Miss O’Keeffe’s paintings, as well as works by Hartley, Dove, Demuth, and others, including some 60 water colors by Marin. By now the Museum also owns examples of all the other important American artists who were early influenced by various modern European schools, such as Maurer, Davis, Knaths, Sheeler, Weber, Kuhn, Feininger, and Sterne.

During the last eight years, through its own funds and through the generosity of Edward J. Gallagher, Jr., Mr. & Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger, the late Hugo Kastor, and others, the Museum has acquired representation of a very broad field of contemporary American talent. Perhaps the best way to reflect the extent of the collection and the many trends represented is to present a list of some few of the artists included: Wyeth, Stuempfig, Rockwell, Kroll, Speicher, Brook, Brackman, Pleissner, Isabel Bishop, Peggy Bacon, Kent, Carroll, Bouché, Spencer, Edwin Dickinson, du Bois, Mattson, McFee, Raphael and Moses Soyer, Dehn, Watkins, Cadmus, Nordfeldt, Evergood, Albright, Florine Stettheimer, Loren MacIver, Grosz, Lebrun, Kuniyoshi, Price, Graves, Callahan, Tanguy, Tchelitchew, Kantor, Gatch, Levine, Rattratt, Hultberg, Tobey, Shahn, Stamos, Tomlin, Hofmann, Glasco, Okada, Motherwell, Gorky, Baziotes, de Kooning, Pollock, and Grandma Moses.

The contemporary sculpture collection includes among others: Manship, Lachaise, Anna Hyatt Huntington, Davidson, Malvina Hoffman, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Haseltine, Borthum, Nadelman, Milles, Maldairelli, Zorach, de Crefet, Calder, Noguchi, Smith, de Rivera, and Lippold.
This issue of the Bulletin is largely devoted to a description of the Museum’s holdings in the American field. In 1943, because of the extent of the collections, it was hoped that an American building might be added to the Metropolitan. If this idea had merit in 1943, it would seem that the reasons for its fulfillment are even more compelling at this time.

These reasons were well put in an open letter to Roland L. Redmond, the President of the Board of Trustees of the Metropolitan, from James N. Rosenberg, Chairman of the Board of the magazine Arts, published in the May 1, 1957 issue of that magazine.

This letter stated that the writer was well aware that up to this time, because of lack of space and funds, the Museum had been unable to accomplish such a purpose. However, it further stated that, in the opinion of the writer, the Metropolitan Museum had the greatest collection of American art in the world. And it was brought out that most Americans were not aware that they have an artistic heritage fully worthy of their great country, that their living artists are producing some of the best and most influential work being done in the world today.

The city of New York, it was pointed out, has of late become the unnamed capital of the world, yet nowhere is the full tradition of American art on permanent display. Yet the delegations of eighty-one nations, as well as consulates and representatives of foreign industries are here on Manhattan Island. And in the past ten years more than twenty-three million visitors, not only from our forty-eight states but from foreign lands as well, have come to the Museum.

The letter made it clear that neither our victories in two World Wars nor our outpourings of billions of dollars has brought peace to this planet and that art, which speaks a universal language of peace from “people to people” is entitled to speak out and help toward that better world that all mankind craves.

Mr. Rosenberg concluded by stating that a challenge and an historic opportunity confronted all who were friends of the Museum, and that it was to be hoped that a noble structure housing the art of our country might soon be an integral part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Office in a Small City, by Edward Hopper (1882- ). George A. Hearn Fund, 1953

Death of a Miner, by Ben Shahn (1898- ). Arthur H. Hearn Fund, 1950

Medicine Show, by Jack Levine (1915- ).
Gift of Hugo Kastor, 1956

Clown with a Black Wig, by Walt Kuhn (1880-1949).
George A. Hearn Fund, 1956

Easter Monday, by Willem de Kooning (1904- ). Rogers Fund, 1956
The Sun, by Richard Lippold (1915- ). Fletcher Fund, 1956. Photograph courtesy of "Life"