

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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BARNETT NEWMAN'S STATIONS OF THE CROSS ACQUIRED BY NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON - The National Gallery of Art has acquired Barnett Newman's series of 14 paintings, The Stations of the Cross -- Lema Sabachthani (1958-1966), from the artist's widow, Annalee Newman. The acquisition was made possible through a generous donation to the National Gallery by Robert E. and Jane B. Meyerhoff, of Phoenix, Maryland. The paintings are currently on view in the East Building on the Upper Level.

J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery, said: "Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross is an acknowledged landmark in 20th century American -- and I think it is safe to say -- world art. It stands out as a major achievement by one of America's foremost artists.

"The National Gallery and the American people owe a special debt of gratitude to Robert and Jane Meyerhoff for providing the funds to make this acquisition possible," Brown continued. "Our sincere appreciation also is extended to Annalee Newman for all she has done to make these great paintings a part of our nation's permanent collection."

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The Stations of the Cross is a starkly dramatic series of 14 abstract paintings which adopt the serial structure of a traditional theme of Christian iconography to create works of metaphysical feeling, rather than religious piety. The rarely exhibited paintings have black or white modulating bands of varying widths (which Newman called "zips") extending from the top to the bottom of each painting. Begun in 1958 and completed in 1966, the paintings are considered masterpieces of postwar American art.

According to Nan Rosenthal, curator of 20th century art at the National Gallery, "Here Newman is not concerned with the specific events of Christ's Passion, but rather with their thematic unity as a symbol of universal human suffering. Newman is also concerned with the question raised by that suffering: Christ's final cry, 'Lema Sabachthani' -- Why did you forsake me?"

Rosenthal continued, "Artists have often created illusions of the acts and gestures of gods, heroes and men. In this work, Newman's handling of paint -- the artist's act -- is the gesture we attend to."

In February 1958, recovering from a heart attack of the previous November, Newman began two paintings on canvases of identical dimensions. The paintings marked a turning point in Newman's practice, for in contrast to the colored oils on primed canvas which he had painted before, these two pictures were on raw canvas and only black Magna, a quick-drying, synthetic paint, was used.

Newman did not initially conceive the two paintings as the beginning of a series. However, having kept the pictures in his studio for two years, he returned to them and decided to make a series of four. When the fourth was completed Newman realized that these paintings should form the beginning of the series of 14.

The series culminates in a 15th painting, Be II (1961-64), which introduces a cadmium red edge on one side and a black, hard stripe on the other side, with white paint covering the canvas. Many have found in this picture, with its sudden use of color, a sense of affirmation and hope after the feelings of suffering and despair that build in the series itself. This painting has also been acquired by the National Gallery with the help of the Meyerhoffs, from the Barnett Newman Foundation.

Barnett Newman's 14 Stations of the Cross and Be II were exhibited in New York in 1966 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum soon after their completion. According to Jack Cowart, curator of 20th century art at the National Gallery: "This monumental series has long been one of our major acquisition priorities beginning even before the works were lent by Mrs. Newman for the opening of the East Building in 1978. We are delighted that now through the generosity and patience of everyone concerned the nation's capital and our own collection are immeasurably enriched."

The paintings will remain on view in the East Building of the National Gallery indefinitely.

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BARNETT NEWMAN (1905-1970), American

The Stations of the Cross -- Lema Sabachthani (1958-1966), 78 X 60 in.

First Station

magna on canvas, 1958

Second Station

magna on canvas, 1958

Third Station

oil on canvas, 1960

Fourth Station

oil on canvas, 1960

Fifth Station

oil on canvas, 1962

Sixth Station

oil on canvas, 1962

Seventh Station

oil on canvas, 1964

Eighth Station

oil on canvas, 1964

Ninth Station

acrylic polymer on canvas, 1964

Tenth Station

magna on canvas, 1965

Eleventh Station

acrylic polymer on canvas, 1965

Twelfth Station

acrylic polymer on canvas, 1965

Thirteenth Station

acrylic polymer on canvas, 1965-66

Fourteenth Station

acrylic polymer and Duco on canvas, 1965-66

Be II

acrylic and oil on canvas, 1961-64 (80 X 72 in.)

Note: Newman preferred "Lema Sabachthani" (My God, my God, why forsake me?) which he took from James Moffatt, The Bible, A New Translation, Harper Brothers, New York, 1935, to the more standard Hebrew "Lama Sabachtani" (My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?).