

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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THREE MAJOR TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORKS BY PICASSO, MATISSE,
AND BRANCUSI GIVEN TO NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Washington, D.C., June 20, 1989 - Three major twentieth-century works of art have been given to the National Gallery of Art by the late Rita Schreiber of Los Angeles in memory of her late husband Taft B. Schreiber.

The works are: two paintings, Harlequin Musician (1924) by Pablo Picasso and Woman Seated in an Armchair (1940) by Henri Matisse, and one bronze sculpture, Bird in Space (1927) by Constantin Brancusi. The gift was announced today by J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art.

"These superb works by three of the greatest masters of European modernism represent the artists at the highest level of their achievement," said Mr. Brown. "They are a significant addition to our collection, adding depth and providing a rich complement to the Gallery's existing holdings. They also demonstrate the extraordinary quality of the collection put together by the late Rita and Taft Schreiber."

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The Schreiber collection, which comprised approximately three dozen masterworks by European and American twentieth-century artists, ranged from Brancusi to Pollock, Giacometti, and Mondrian. Schreiber, who died in 1976, was a Republican political activist of long standing and a director and executive at MCA Inc. in Los Angeles.

Harlequin Musician (1924) is an acknowledged masterpiece in the synthetic cubist style with which Picasso was experimenting in the late 1910s and early 1920s. The model may have been his own three-year-old son, Paolo, whom the artist also depicted in two naturalistic portraits of the same year. In the more abstract Harlequin Musician, overlapping colored planes contrasting with sinuous black lines give this painting its special complexity. Colors brighten and rhythms quicken toward the composition's center where the Harlequin strums a guitar, creating an almost playful effect.

The canvas will complement the Gallery's important work from the earlier analytic, cubist period, Nude Woman (1910), and offers a fascinating comparison with his monumental collage, Guitar (1926), also in the Gallery's twentieth-century collection.

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Matisse's Woman Seated in an Armchair was painted in Nice in March 1940, just after the outbreak of World War II. The painting depicts a seated model in the artist's Hotel Regina studio. Saturated blues and blacks create a somber atmosphere only slightly relieved by the luminous yellows and pinks of the still life's elements.

Of his models Matisse said, "The emotional interest aroused in me by [them] does not appear particularly in the representation of their bodies, but often rather in the lines or the special values distributed over the whole canvas...."

The addition of Woman Seated in an Armchair will give Gallery visitors an excellent opportunity to compare this painting with another great Matisse of the period, painted only a few weeks earlier, Still Life With Sleeping Woman (1940), a gift to the Gallery from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon. Showing the same model in the same studio, the paintings, however, differ in size as well as color. The Mellon work is delicate and subtle in its elements. The Schreiber painting is a haunting, tense work reflective of Matisse's growing anxieties.

Brancusi's Bird in Space is a polished bronze cast from 1927. The artist had been exploring the theme of flight since at least 1910, when the early Maiastra, or "master bird" sculptures, were created.

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This version, with its blend of serenity and soaring energy that seems to defy gravity and propel the eye upward, is a significant achievement in the evolution of Brancusi's bird imagery. Typically, Brancusi's bronzes represent an idea first worked out in marble. In this case, there is no known marble from which a plaster cast would have been made. But Bird in Space most closely resembles the marble Bird in Space of 1925, which was donated to the Gallery by Eugene and Agnes Meyer, who also donated one of the four Maiastra bronzes (1911).

The Schreiber Bird in Space is more than an alternative to Brancusi's work in another medium. It represents a refinement, a simplification of form, in which the artist is especially sensitive to the nature of his material. The immaculate, reflective surface of the bronze has been achieved through countless meticulous hand applications of emery paper, buffing powder, and jeweler's rouge.

All three works will be installed on the upper level of the East Building as part of the new reinstallation of the Gallery's collection of twentieth-century art.

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SCHREIBER GIFT OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY WORKS
CHECKLIST

1. Pablo Picasso
Harlequin Musician, c. 1924
oil on canvas, 51 1/2" x 38 1/4"

2. Henri Matisse
Woman Seated in an Armchair, c. 1940
oil on canvas, 21 1/4" x 25 3/4"

3. Constantin Brancusi
Bird in Space, c. 1927
polished bronze sculpture, 72 1/2" high