

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN ART: THE EBSWORTH COLLECTION

REVEALS DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN MODERNISM

AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, MARCH 5 - JUNE 11, 2000

Washington, D.C. -- Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection, presenting more than 70 works from one of the premier private holdings of American modernist art, will be on view in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, March 5 through June 11, 2000. The selections, from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barney A. Ebsworth of St. Louis, Missouri, reveal the dramatic development of American modernism. They include important paintings and a small number of exceptional sculptures and works on paper by such renowned artists as Charles Burchfield, Alexander Calder, Charles Demuth, Willem de Kooning, Arthur Dove, Arshile Gorky, Morris Graves, Marsden Hartley, David Hockney, Edward Hopper, William Glackens, O. Louis Guglielmi, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Gaston Lachaise, Franz Kline, John Marin, Joan Mitchell, Alice Neel, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Charles Sheeler, David Smith, Joseph Stella, Wayne Thiebaud, and Andy Warhol, in addition to less familiar names such as George Ault, Peter Blume, Francis Criss, John Storrs, Bob Thompson, and others.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery. It will travel to the Seattle Art Museum, where it will be on view August 10 through November 12, 2000.

"The Ebsworths selected works to please themselves, and not, as often happens with museum collections, to present a visual version of the accepted linear history of modern art. This offers visitors an opportunity to view the development of American modern art from fresh perspectives," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are very grateful to the Ebsworths for their generosity in making their collection available for this exhibition."

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Barney Ebsworth has been a member of the Gallery's Trustees' Council and co-chair of its Collectors Committee since 1996. In 1997 the Ebsworths gave the Gallery Or (1973), its first work by Pat Steir. In 1998 they funded the purchase of another painting by the same artist, Curtain Waterfall (1991), and made a partial and promised gift of Georgia O'Keeffe's Black White and Blue (1930).

The exhibition begins with American modernism's roots in European art as seen in the 1913 Armory Show in New York City, to its dominance on the world scene, and ends in the late 1960s, just before many critics proclaimed the death of painting. Among the well-known masterworks are Charles Sheeler's stunning paintings of the Ford Motor Company's then-modern River Rouge plant near Detroit, such as Classic Landscape (1931); Georgia O'Keeffe's Black White and Blue (1930), the culmination of a series of cross paintings that the artist made in New Mexico; O. Louis Guglielmi's extraordinary surrealist works: Mental Geography (1938) and Land of Canaan (1934); and Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup with Can Opener (1962), the only painting of its kind from his iconic series featuring an opener poised to cut through the can lid.

Works by established artists are seen anew when placed in juxtaposition with works by their lesser-known contemporaries. The biomorphic abstractions in Arshile Gorky's Good Afternoon Mrs. Lincoln (1944) are similar in approach to Alice Trumbull Mason's Forms Evoked (1940). The spare and surreal atmosphere in Edward Hopper's classic Chop Suey (1929) is also seen in Francis Criss' Melancholy Interlude (Grain Elevator) (1939). These juxtapositions illustrate the value of this great single collection: it allows the viewer to create his or her own history of American art and its relationship to American culture.

The curator for the exhibition is Franklin Kelly, curator of American and British paintings at the National Gallery of Art. The fully illustrated catalogue to be published by the National Gallery of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., includes an introductory essay by Bruce Robertson, professor of art history, University of California, Santa Barbara, and entries on each of the works written by National Gallery of Art curators. The hardcover catalogue will be available for \$49.95 and the softcover for \$39.95 at bookstores and the National Gallery of Art Shops. To order by phone call (301) 322-5900 or (800) 687-9350, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov.

The National Gallery of Art and Sculpture Garden, located on the National Mall between Third and Ninth Streets at Constitution Avenue, NW, is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. Admission is free. For general information call (202) 737-4215, the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the National Gallery of Art's Web site at www.nga.gov. To receive the Gallery's free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.

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National Gallery of Art

Washington, D.C.

Backgrounder

THE EBSWORTH COLLECTION AND AMERICAN MODERNISM

"The greatest performance in America -- as well as its most original creation -- is surely the United States itself. Sometimes expressed as ugly or naive jingoism, sometimes as bitter satire, the abiding focus of the creative life of American artists in this century has been America, whether defined in opposition, supplying what is lost, affirming or amplifying what is there. American modern art is a space that inverts, investigates, questions this performance. Here is where the value of a single great collection returns—as one cast on a stage of the heterotopia of painting, which we can view as an audience and witness the ongoing drama."

-- Bruce Robertson,
from the exhibition catalogue
Twentieth-Century American Art:
The Ebsworth Collection

"What you see is what you see."

Frank Stella, artist

The Ebsworth collection tells the story of the dramatic development of American modernist art beginning at the 1913 Armory Show in New York City, at which the American public and many American artists had their first glimpse of the European avant-garde: the expressionists, the fauves, and the cubists. For the next thirty years artists in America played catch-up. Not until Jackson Pollock emerged in the late 1940s did American art become dominant in the world scene. The story ends in the late 1960s—the moment just before many critics would say that painting died.

The collection begins with two American artists shaped fully in the tradition of French painting and working in New York. William Glackens' painterly Cafe Lafayette (Portrait of Kay Laurell) (1914) has its roots in French impressionism. However, Andrew Dasburg's Landscape (1913), painted one year earlier, already shows influences from the Armory Show and specifically that of Cézanne. Joseph Stella's kaleidoscopic futurist works, including Tree of My Life (1919), go one step further, strongly reflecting the latest European trends, as the artist himself had lived in Paris.

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It is with the group of artists associated with photographer and dealer Alfred Stieglitz that we find American artists beginning to work in new and individual directions. Among these, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe are represented in this exhibition. Although each of these artists was individual in his or her subject matter, they shared the belief that modern art meant abstraction. But the Stieglitz group's style of abstraction was more organic in form than the ideal, geometricized work coming out of Paris. Dove's muted Moon (1935) is a poetic work, an abstraction of nature and of its unseen forces. Much of O'Keeffe's work, both representational and abstract, was inspired by the organic forms of nature. Charles Sheeler was both a photographer and painter. He developed a type of abstraction that relates more with the ideal cubism of the French than with that of the Stieglitz group. In 1927, Sheeler was commissioned to photograph an automotive plant designed by Albert Kahn, a pioneer of modern factory design. Sheeler declared his subject "thrilling," and photographed the plant for the next six weeks. These photographs, in turn, became the basis for a stunning series of abstract paintings, which include Classic Landscape (1931).

In works like Chop Suey (1929), Edward Hopper continued the realist tradition in painting with direct, honest depictions of American life. Louis Guglielmi moved from the real to a form of surrealism, undoubtedly influenced by the European avant-garde and such exhibitions as the Museum of Modern Art's 1936 Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism show. Guglielmi's brilliant Mental Geography (1938) is a complex riff on New York's Brooklyn Bridge.

Suzy Frelinghuysen's husband collected works by modern European artists, such as Braque, Picasso, Miró, and Mondrian. In her own pieces, she, too, responded to the European lead by incorporating Picasso and Braque's cubism and collage techniques into works such as Composition (1943). Frelinghuysen used actual cardboard along with pieces of newspaper clippings and other found elements to add texture and richness to her spare cubist works.

At the same time, some American artists actively sought to go beyond a dialogue with Europe. In 1944 Jackson Pollock had said, "I accept the fact that the important painting of the last hundred years was done in France." Six years later, Pollock himself had taken the lead on the world stage, having reached a point of total abstraction in his work. Pollock's energetic Composition with Red Strokes, one of his classic "poured" paintings, was created in 1950. That same year Pollock said, "A reviewer...wrote that my pictures didn't have any beginning or end. He didn't mean it as a compliment. It was a fine compliment."

A Long Island neighbor of Pollock's, born in The Netherlands, Willem de Kooning never embraced abstraction to the same extent as Pollock, but in paintings like Woman as Landscape (1955) he incorporated Pollock's sense of energy, openness, and freedom.

His subject, the woman, was still clearly present, but dramatically dematerialized. Jasper Johns' painting Gray Rectangles (1957), original in its own right, recalls earlier American artists, like Dove and O'Keeffe, who sometimes kept to muted palettes, but he also absorbed Pollock and the idea that a painting can be its own subject. In Gray Rectangles, Johns' gray is not the color of Dove's delicate mist or of O'Keeffe's silvery light. It is the dull gray of flannel. Only on closer inspection is it apparent that the three panels had been painted the bright primary colors of red, yellow, and blue. An icing of neutral gray encaustic encases Johns' surface. In his work, the subject is no longer nature or abstraction, but ideas about withholding and manipulation. Johns consciously tried to empty his paintings of meaning, saying, "if the painting is an object, then the object can be a painting."

The pop artists of the 1960s made an insolent about-face by reintroducing the subject to painting, only now, they stipulated, the subject matter was completely irrelevant. Wayne Thiebaud's Bakery Counter (1962) strives to be nothing more than depictions of bakery goods: no abstraction, no organic life forces, no metaphors. Andy Warhol, in works like Campbell's Soup with Can Opener (1962), goes one step further, by choosing a subject both impersonal and banal. As the artist Frank Stella put it, "What you see is what you see."

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