

Release Date: April 3, 2009

National Gallery of Art Acquires Seminal Painting by Norman Lewis; Works by Hugonnier, Rugg, and Bochner Also Acquired



Norman Lewis, *Untitled (Alabama)*, 1967. oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Gift of the Collectors Committee, 2009

At its annual meeting in March, the Collectors Committee of the National Gallery of Art made possible the acquisition of *Untitled (Alabama)* (1967) by African American artist Norman Lewis (1909–1979). This ambitious abstract painting references the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

"*Untitled (Alabama)*, Norman Lewis' first painting to enter the Gallery's collection, is a significant addition in the area of abstract expressionist art," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are very grateful to the Collectors Committee, which enables the Gallery to continually enhance its holdings of contemporary art."

The Collectors Committee discretionary fund for prints and drawings also supported the

acquisition of *Art for Modern Architecture (Homage to Ellsworth Kelly)* (2005), a suite of seven collages on newspaper by Marine Hugonnier (b. 1969), and *No More Dry-Runs* (2008), a cut-and-rearranged newspaper by Kim Rugg (b. 1963).

The Collectors Committee discretionary fund for photographs, combined with the Richard S. Zeisler Fund, also enabled the Gallery to acquire one of Mel Bochner's most important photographs, *Surface Dis/Tension* (1968).

***Untitled (Alabama)* by Norman Lewis**

Harlem-born Norman Lewis is often described as the most important African American artist in the abstract expressionist movement. His 1967 painting *Untitled (Alabama)* is one of the most powerful of his "black paintings" (1946–1977), which are characterized by compacted, flame-like strokes of white and black that move and twist across the canvas, suggesting the ambulatory confrontations that punctuated the civil rights movement. Although Lewis disclaimed political efficacy for his art, *Untitled (Alabama)*, one of his greatest works, is unique in its historical ambition.

No official title is on record, but Lewis' widow reports that the artist called this work "*Alabama*." Its composition reflects and exaggerates the shape of that state, while also suggesting a cleaver or guillotine. The hood of a Klansman emerges from a welter of black and white strokes. The wedge-like geometric shapes within which these brushstrokes are confined reflect the geometric abstractions of the time and foreshadow the art of Richard Serra and Maya Lin, who are also concerned with the politics of human locomotion.

Untitled (Alabama) is the first painting by Lewis to enter the collection; in addition, the Gallery recently added three prints by Lewis when it acquired the Reba and Dave Williams Collection.

Works on Paper and Photographs

In a suite of seven collages, *Art for Modern Architecture (Homage to Ellsworth Kelly)* (2005), French-born artist Marine Hugonnier made cutouts from Ellsworth Kelly's book *Line Form Color* and pasted them onto front-page images of the *Al Ayyam* newspaper. Recalling Kelly's early found and altered objects and renewing his ambition

to integrate art and modern architecture and thus position art in daily life, Hugonnier elegantly recast Kelly's thinking by appropriating fragments from his book and collaging them onto the "architecture" of the newspaper, arguably the most representative voice of everyday life.

In *No More Dry-Runs* (2008), Canadian-born artist Kim Rugg put an anachronistic twist on the daily newspaper, painstakingly cutting the August 8, 2008, edition of the *Financial Times* into minute, individual characters and rearranging them by category and in alphabetical order. With the newspaper industry facing stiff competition from the Internet, Rugg reverted to a fundamental technology invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1455, setting movable type by hand. By alphabetizing the text, Rugg also obscured and invalidated what we judge to be the news.

A pioneer of post-minimal and conceptual art, Mel Bochner turned to photography in 1966 to document his installations of serially arranged blocks. He soon realized that photography deserved exploration in its own right and made a series of photographs from 1966 to 1968 that explore the concept of perspective both as a theory of art making and a perceptually verifiable phenomenon. The most ambitious and complex of all of his photographs is *Surface Dis/Tension* (1968). Made by soaking a photograph of a grid in water until its top layer could be peeled from the paper support, then dried and photographed again, *Surface Dis/Tension* examines the workings of perspective and the distortions caused by the camera lens.

History of the Collectors Committee

The Collectors Committee has made possible the acquisition of more than 300 works of art since the committee was formed in 1975. Approximately half of these acquisitions have been works by living artists. Founding benefactor Paul Mellon asked Ruth Carter Stevenson, chair of the Gallery's board of trustees from 1993 to 1997, to be the first chair of the Collectors Committee. Roselyne C. Swig and John Pappajohn, both major collectors of 20th-century art, currently chair the Collectors Committee. Pappajohn, who resides in Des Moines, is president of Equity Dynamics, Inc., a financial consulting firm. Swig, a San Francisco resident, is active in cultural organizations and served as director of the U.S. State Department's Art in Embassies Program.

###

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Press Office

National Gallery of Art

2000B South Club Drive

Landover, MD 20785

phone: (202) 842-6353 e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Deborah Ziska

Chief of Press and Public Information

(202) 842-6353

ds-ziska@nga.gov