

The Art Newspaper exclusive on the memoir MoMA declined to publish: The details

Here we publish an account of the memoirs of the late William S. Rubin, director of the paintings and sculpture department of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for 15 years

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William S. Rubin, the eminent longtime curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), died, aged 78, at his weekend home on 22 January and has now been buried in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. He had spent more than two decades in MoMA's department of painting and sculpture, which he joined as curator in 1967 and of which he became director in 1973, a post he held until his partial retirement in 1988. Shortly before his death, although in failing health, he invited The Art Newspaper to the spacious East Side apartment he shared with his wife Phyllis Hattis, to discuss a recently completed memoir of his career as a collector, teacher and curator. He said MoMA had declined to publish the manuscript and handed us a copy instead.

The 198-page typescript chronicles Rubin's professional life, with particular focus on the museum's complex relationships with dealers, trustees, collectors and artists. Few if any published accounts lay out these usually covert matters in such frank detail. In characteristically precise and elegant prose, he provides snapshots of art world personalities, observations on the market, seasoned critical aperçus, and a window into the internal workings of MoMA. But most of all, the memoir conveys the passion and intelligence

with which Rubin tirelessly pursued great works of art on behalf of the museum. He saw collection building as the curator's most important function and remained most proud of his achievement in this respect.

Passionate collector

The memoir, entitled *A curator's quest*, is dedicated to MoMA's founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr, who hired Rubin in 1967 and set the example he would follow. "I hope that my additions to the collection have been worthy of the foundations Alfred laid," he writes. That they were is evident from a second, unfinished portion of the planned book that is an illustrated catalogue of 250 of the most important works he selected from the scores of works he acquired for the museum. (Some of the entries are written by Rubin himself and others by commissioned scholars.) They include many now familiar works by Klimt, Kandinsky, Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Klee, Duchamp, Giacometti, Magritte, Pollock, Lichtenstein—virtually all of the major artists of the 20th century. Rubin saw his role as filling in gaps in Barr's foundation and extending it into Abstract Expressionism and beyond.

The text is remarkable in part for its recollection of significant, but often forgotten, events, such as a proposed merger between MoMA and the Guggenheim in the late 1970s. Rubin and MoMA director Richard Oldenburg sought to combine the "complementary" collections in an eight-storey addition to MoMA's building. The Guggenheim would be converted into a showplace for architectural drawings and models, and would house the city's architecture commission. Rubin reports that Guggenheim director Thomas Messer brought the idea to the Guggenheim heirs in the 80s. They said no. Rubin's Plan B was to reunite Kandinsky's *The four seasons*, divided between the two museums. Mr Messer agreed to a trade of a 1932 Picasso and a Matisse portrait for two canvases in the ensemble, which now hangs in its entirety at MoMA.

Honouring the patrons

One by one, Rubin pays homage to the collectors and philanthropists who made his collecting possible, from David Rockefeller to Ronald Lauder to Agnes Gund, pausing to explain why he felt certain works were required by

the museum, and recounting the lengths he went to in order to get them, making sure to demonstrate his shrewd handling of affairs and his considerable powers of persuasion. The stories are legion. When Rubin got to know CBS chief William Paley in the 1960s, the longtime trustee was considering installing his large collection on the top floor of a Museum of Broadcasting that he was planning to create. Rubin convinced him it would be disappointing without his finest picture, Picasso's Rose-period Boy leading a horse, that he had already committed to MoMA. "Bill [Paley] told me that he hoped to buy it back from the Museum, but I explained that this was impossible". Paley wound up bequeathing his collection of 80 works to MoMA.

Curatorial ideas and standards

Rubin also weighs in on matters other than collecting. For example, he comes out strongly against thematic hangs that ignore chronology: "There can be no one 'ideal' installation—only more or less revealing ones. An installation, however, that sacrifices all historical order will not only fail to clarify the relationships between different artists, and between different groups of artists; more crucially, it will omit the drama of the single artist's development through time. [MoMA] has the works necessary to chronicle, step by step, the inception of Cubism," he notes. "This can be seen in no other museum in the world, a fact which, for me, constitutes a mandate in itself. Not to show it, or to break it up", he writes, "would be, to my mind, a breach of museological trust."

Pursuing works of art

But more often, it is the pursuit of works of art that occupies Rubin most. He methodically filled in gaps in the holdings of Matisse and other classic Modern artists, then turned to Abstract Expressionism, which Barr "tended to undervalue" but Rubin felt "had to be represented as the ground-breaking phenomenon it was". From his own collection he donated David Smith's *Australia* (1951), "a grand adventure in abstract sculptural drawing", and acquired pictures by Gorky, Rothko, Kline and Newman from the collection of Ben Heller. In 1968 he bought Pollock's *One (Number 31, 1950)* using proceeds from the sale of two Mondrians from the large bequest he had

secured from dealer Sidney Janis. Rubin's memoir also surveys art he acquired during the 1970s and 80s, but the more compelling passages relate to the earlier period.

Rubin and Picasso

One of the most engaging anecdotes concerns Rubin's and Barr's efforts to get one of Picasso's rare Cubist constructions. Picasso had never sold any of them but had given the painted wood Still-life with upholstery fringe (1914) to the poet Paul Eluard. He later sold it to the English painter and Picasso biographer, Roland Penrose, who was unwilling to part with it until around 1970 when thieves stole art from his country house and he needed \$114,000 to meet their ransom demand. Penrose told Rubin he would sell the Picasso for that amount if the museum could pay within three days. A wire transfer was sent, but in the meantime trustees of the Tate Gallery offered to help Penrose if the work could remain in England. The deal with MoMA fell through and Penrose later committed the piece to the Tate.

Swiss dealer Ernst Beyeler suggested that MoMA offer Picasso a Cézanne or a Van Gogh in exchange for one of his constructions. Rubin sent Beyeler a letter for Picasso along with a photograph of a "decent but undistinguished" 1880s Cézanne L'Estaque from MoMA's store room. Beyeler showed the photograph to Picasso who invited Rubin and Beyeler to bring the Cézanne to his villa in Mougins in the South of France.

"Happily, Picasso and I hit it off instantly," Rubin writes of their first meeting in February 1971, "and after dinner he took me downstairs to the sculpture studio to find out precisely what object the Museum wanted in exchange for its Cézanne. I told him the [sheet-metal] Guitar [1914] was our first choice." Rubin describes the work as "the first of a new race of constructed—as opposed to carved or modelled—sculptures, and an object more radical and influential in the history of sculpture than was Les demoiselles d'Avignon in the history of painting". Rubin, however, discovered that Picasso already owned a superior version of L'Estaque by Cézanne. "I shall never forget Picasso rapping his knuckles on the centre of the canvas. The dust flew and Picasso said in his heavily accented French something I probably remember because it rhymed: 'regardez la mer, c'est

solide comme la pierre’.” Picasso said he needed a day to think about the proposed exchange. When Rubin returned the following day, the artist met him at the door and said, “Mon pauvre Rubin, I cannot take your Cézanne.” Rubin says his spirits dropped, but then Picasso added, “However, I shall give you the Guitar.” And so he did. (Rubin later traded MoMA’s Cézanne to collector Walter Chrysler for Picasso’s The charnel house, making up the \$150,000 difference in value by throwing in a Kirchner that Rubin himself had donated to MoMA, having paid \$300 to acquire it in his college days.)

Collecting Klimt

Another story involves the museum’s efforts to acquire a Jugendstil-period Klimt in the early 1970s. Only one was outside Austria and it was committed to another museum.

Two were privately held in Austria, but the Monuments Commission (Denkmalamt) had forbidden export of any works by Klimt. Rubin devised a clever strategy: he offered both of the private collectors sums higher than they could have got in Austria and signed contracts giving MoMA purchase options if the Monuments Commission permitted export. With contracts on both, Rubin felt he would have a better chance of getting one of them through the Denkmalamt.

One of the Klimts was Danaë owned by Peter Bock of Graz, and the other was Hope II (both 1907-08) owned by Rudolph Leopold of Vienna. MoMA’s painting and sculpture committee decided to go after Hope II for \$800,000, including dealer Ernst Beyeler’s commission. To raise the money, the museum would sell its only Klimt, the landscape The park, to Serge Sabarsky Gallery for \$500,000, and trustee Ronald Lauder would donate another Klimt landscape that could fetch \$650,000. The Denkmalamt were “frightened that Austria might lose Danaë (presumably through diplomatic pressure that we would [bring to bear from authorities] above their heads)”, but Rubin writes that he argued that it would benefit Austria and Klimt’s reputation if MoMA could show a Jugendstil Klimt. The Austrians allowed the export of Hope II as long as the museum signed away its rights to Danaë. Hope II entered MoMA’s collection in 1978. (As a coda to the story, Mr Lauder donated an additional \$300,000 for the museum to buy back the landscape from

Sabarsky.)

Dissent in the boardroom

Rubin's candour in recounting the internal dynamics at the museum discloses surprising disagreements among the trustees on matters of aesthetics. For example, Conger Goodyear, a member of the committee that founded the museum, resigned as president in 1939 when Barr purchased a Rothko. Trustee Stephen C. Clark was so "infuriated" by the purchase of Giacometti's tiny Chariot that he reneged on an earlier agreement and bequeathed pictures promised to MoMA to the Metropolitan instead—including Cézanne's Cardplayers and Seurat's Parade. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, when Barr wanted a work that the "conservative" painting and sculpture committee turned down, the architect Philip Johnson, who once served as a curator in the department of architecture and design, would buy it and later give it to the museum. Rubin says this is how the museum acquired Barnett Newman's Abraham (1949), "considered unworthy of the collection by the Committee" and Jasper Johns' Flag (1954-5) "which upset members who feared the public might take it as insulting to the flag".

MoMA's policies revealed

Rubin's memoir also refers to several rarely discussed policies at MoMA. For example, donated collections cannot be shown in rooms set apart from the rest of the museum's display of "the unfolding of Modernism". For that reason, the great New York collection of Walter and Louise Arensberg, which included the largest group of Brancusi sculptures outside Paris and the world's best holdings of Duchamp, was first offered to MoMA but went instead to its own rooms in the Philadelphia Museum of Art to which it was donated in 1950.

Another policy is that, except for temporary exhibitions, objects installed in the painting and sculpture galleries must already be in the collection or promised gifts.

And a third is that no works by living American artists are to be sold or otherwise eliminated from the collection without the artist's permission, and if sold the the proceeds generally are used to upgrade his or her

representation.

Barr also set a policy that donors have no guarantee that a work donated to the museum will remain in the collection. This left open the possibility of deaccessioning lesser works, a practice that began under Barr, who sold most of the founding bequest of Lillie P. Bliss (including six of 11 Cézannes) to acquire Van Gogh's *Starry night*, Picasso's *Demoiselles*, Brancusi's *Fish* and 90 other works.

When Rubin arrived at the museum, deaccessioned works were sold through dealers. "I decided...to set dealers against one another in a series of closed auctions that prevented them from forming the usual consensus as to price," Rubin writes. "Some six to 10 dealers...would be invited to MoMA at short, staggered intervals on the same day...As they viewed the pictures, they would sign a sealed bid for the price they would offer. As one dealer was ushered out the back to 54th Street, another would be brought into the museum." Rubin says the formula was a great success, but eventually he began to place objects at the auction houses in order to take advantage of soaring prices.

Early years

The opening section of the memoir skims over Rubin's PhD studies with Meyer Shapiro at Columbia University and his 16 years teaching art history at Sarah Lawrence in Bronxville, NY. By his mid-20s Rubin had begun buying Modern art for his parents and, using an inheritance, increased his own collecting of contemporary art. He bought a Manhattan loft, had it remodelled by the then unknown architect Richard Meier, and proceeded to install paintings and sculptures by Pollock, Smith, Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt, Still, Segal, Stella and other New York School artists. He got to know people at MoMA, including Barr and curator James Thrall Soby, who invited him to guest-curate a Matta retrospective that opened in 1958.

While working on his second show, "Dada, Surrealism and their heritage", Barr appointed him curator of the department of painting and sculpture. "I was walking on air," Rubin writes. But William Lieberman, who had joined the museum as Barr's assistant in 1945 and became a curator in 1953, was less

thrilled with the news: “Bill [Lieberman] had been thought by many to be Alfred’s intended successor (and some Trustees felt that he should have been).” By the early 1970s, “a truly needless tension had developed between us.” Rubin says he took Lieberman to lunch “to see if we could smooth things over”, but when Lieberman said, “Bill, I want you to be my number two man”, Rubin explained that was not the job that Barr had offered him. Lieberman said, “Let’s take this to the Trustees.” When they did, a committee created a new department of works on paper and made Lieberman head; they made Rubin chief curator of paintings and sculpture. After seven years, Lieberman resigned to become the director of the fledgling department of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan.

In the mid-1970s Rubin dispersed his personal collection, giving a number of works to MoMA. Proceeds from a Pollock bought him land in the South of France, where he would later build the home that allowed him to visit Picasso, whose friendship resulted in 11 gifts to MoMA. Rubin revels in his friendship with the artist: “I have always felt that one of the greatest debts I owed MoMA was that of getting to know Picasso,” he writes, describing 18 or so visits in the last three years of the painter’s life. He would later organise the landmark 1,000-work Picasso retrospective in 1980 that was attended by nearly a million visitors and generated more than \$2 million in sales of catalogues and posters alone.

Exhibitions

Inspired by conversations with Picasso about some of his tribal objects, he organised in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe, “Primitivism in 20th-century art” (1984), still regarded as one of the most provocative and illuminating idea exhibitions of the latter part of the 20th century. He also curated “Cézanne: the late work” (1977), “De Chirico” (1982), “Picasso and Braque: pioneering Cubism” (1989), and “Picasso and portraiture” (1996), as well as retrospectives of Anthony Caro, Ad Reinhardt and two of Frank Stella. (Rubin does not address the fact that his brother was a dealer of Stella’s works.) But, above all, as this unpublished memoir makes abundantly clear, Rubin regarded temporary shows as secondary to the collection. “The collection is, at least for me, the enduring heart of the curatorial function.”

In his own words

On artists

Through the good offices of the dealer Ernst Beyeler, I had met Picasso as my house [in Provence] was being finished. My proximity to him (an hour's drive) certainly counted in the number of meetings I would have with Picasso over the last three years of his life—and later with his widow Jacqueline. These friendships brought 11 important gifts to MoMA from both the painter and his wife...The closeness and warmth of my rapport with Picasso during the three years plus I knew him came as a great surprise to me and I always attributed it to the fact that his friends, among painters, poets and even dealers...were already dead. (The one dealer he seemed to enjoy and whom I considered to have the best eye among them was Ernst Beyeler...).

Joseph Cornell was a very closed personality, whose passions and interests one could discover only through the iconography of his work. On my first visit...I spied in the corner an unusually large vertical box with a doll, twigs and dried flowers painted here and there. I asked if we could pull it out so I could really see it. He was loathe to do so, but said "Maybe next time—if there is a next time". I insisted to Cornell that this early 1940s box had to be at MoMA...Cornell gave in, not totally happily, and the piece is now MoMA's.

Mark Rothko matched Robert Motherwell for generosity. I could more or less pick anything I wanted. One of the three canvases the artist immediately gave was Number 22.1949.

I was an early fan of Ellsworth Kelly and [his work] was already in my private collection. I was, needless to say, gratified when, in 1969, Kelly, acting on my suggestion, gave us his magnificent Colors for a large wall, 1951, a seminal work.

Frank Stella was and is a particular favourite of mine. Long before I came to the museum, I was collecting Stella's work. It was Bill Seitz [Rubin's predecessor as curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA] who first put me onto Frank's work before he had shown anywhere. I went down to see him and bought a Black picture right from the studio.

Richard Serra is an artist whose work impressed me early on...Ever since, I have followed his work closely, as I am convinced Serra is one of the greatest artists of the age.

On collectors

Gordon Bunshaft was...a very modest collector, but no one loved the Museum of Modern Art more than he. Gordon, with whom...I maintained a close friendship for many years, gave or willed to the museum his entire collection of 49 paintings and sculptures. Its strongest suit was the group of 15 Dubuffets.

Not long after I had joined MoMA, Florene and Wolfie [Florene and Wolfgang Schoenborn] invited me to dinner at their apartment on 79th Street and Park Avenue. Their rooms couldn't quite hold the entire collection, but I remember being overwhelmed. From that day on I had in my mind a group of five or six pictures that I hoped Florene would one day bequeath MoMA...One day I came for lunch, [Matisse's] Moroccan garden was leaning against a wall...as we chatted [Rubin's wife] Phyllis observed that this picture would feel very much at home among the four Schoenborn Matisses already at MoMA. Florene answered: "You know, you're right. Take it out of here". The next morning MoMA's preparators picked it up.

John Hay (Jock) Whitney was first known to me as a millionaire art collector, but also a person of many other passions and talents among them. Jock came to a number of acquisition meetings in my first years at the museum. Jock's tastes in painting ran from Impressionism to the Cubist Picasso. He had an insider's opportunity to buy these works through John Rewald.

Mary Sisler was one of the strangest and most difficult women I have ever met, but the possibility that Duchamp's Network of stoppages of 1914 might be denuded from her collection enticed me.

Louise Smith was a tough-minded person when it came to painting and sculpture. She instantly knew what she liked, and what she liked was difficult art. She became a trustee in 1955.

On colleagues

This book is dedicated to Alfred H. Barr, Jr, whose unparalleled accomplishments, particularly in the area of collection building, I was able to measure from close range during my years at the museum. I hope that my additions to the collection have been worthy of the foundations Alfred laid.

During my tenure, no one more embodied the spirit of the museum than Philip Johnson. On graduating from Harvard, Philip immediately joined the museum, then one year old, as director of the department of architecture...Throughout my stay at MoMA, and beyond, Philip continued to be an active and generous member of the painting and sculpture committee.

Ronald Lauder was an exceptional member of the Trustee Acquisitions Committee, and not surprisingly he became for a time its chairman. Notwithstanding his generosity in the areas of painting and sculpture, Ronald's most intense activity during my years at the museum was in the connection with works on paper. In 1984 he underwrote the creation of new galleries for the exhibition of 20th-century drawings—the first ever devoted exclusively to works on paper at the museum.

The generosity and leadership of Ronald was echoed in the work of another deeply committed member of the MoMA family, Agnes Gund, known to all her friends and fans as “Aggie”. Together, they formed a “dreamteam” for the museum. At the museum, she focused on contemporary American paintings...Aggie's invaluable gifts include Jasper John's 1981 encaustic painting *Between the clock and the bed*...Philip Johnson and David Whitney had originally led Aggie to this painting and urged her to acquire it.

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