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MoMA hands over four prized drawings to the Met and to the Art Institute of Chicago because they are no longer modern

The donation fulfils the 1948 bequest of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

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The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has delivered four prized drawings to The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago in fulfilment of the peculiar 1948 bequest of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Her will left two drawings by Van Gogh to the Met and two by Seurat to the Art Institute, but stipulated that MoMA, an institution she helped found, could retain them for up to fifty years. After half a century, she reasoned, they would no longer be “modern”, and might more appropriately reside among works by Old Masters in museums with historical collections. The unusual, time-delayed transfer was in keeping with inter-museum relations in New York City during a period when the fledgling MoMA was in the throes of an identity crisis.

In 1947, the same year as Mrs Rockefeller wrote her will, MoMA, the Met and the Whitney

signed an agreement to cooperate in pursuing separate collecting spheres. The Met was to provide MoMA with funds for the purchase of contemporary American works of art that would be transferred to the Met once they attained “classic” status. In return, MoMA would sell the Met classic works of art, including Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masterpieces recently bequeathed by co-founder Lillie Bliss (the Whitney was to merge with the American wing of the Metropolitan.) The crucial issue, which remained unresolved, was at what point a work ceases to be modern and becomes classic?

In 1953, realising it was playing a losing hand, MoMA abandoned its self-conception as a “feeder” to the Met and, led by director Alfred Barr, voted to establish its own permanent collection. By that time the late Mrs Rockefeller had already prescribed the destiny of her collection in harmony with the inter-museum compact. Thus, the transfer of the Rockefeller drawings is properly seen not as some “confusion” on the part of Mrs Rockefeller, as art critic Arthur Danto stated in a letter to the New York Times, but as a distant echo of that epoch’s scuttled rationalist good intentions.

“I think Mrs Rockefeller would have been an active proponent of the changes that developed after her death”, states director Glenn Lowry. “The irony is that she died in that [specific historical] moment” he continues, adding, “I think if she lived she might very well have changed her will.” He is relieved to report there are no more time-elapse bequests awaiting expiration.

But what about the controversial distinction between “modern” and “classic”? With the century and millennium about to close and MoMA on the eve of major expansion, the need for clarity seems all the more urgent. But to judge by the disparate chronological parameters of museums of “modern” art, it seems that even the experts cannot agree. In the Hague, the Stedelijk’s collection stretches back into the mid-nineteenth century, but MoMA’s starts several decades later, and the Pompidou Centre’s with Fauvism, leaving earlier periods to the Musée d’Orsay. There is virtually no consensus.

Neither is there agreement as to the place of contemporary art within the modern tradition. Did the modern epoch end in the 1960s with the rise of post-modernism, as Dr Danto and others claim? MoMA considers post-modernism yet another manifestation of the modern spirit of irony and self-examination. David Ross, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which collects only twentieth-century art and older photographs, says “modern” is more a poetic word than a definitive one. According to Mr Lowry, “It’s premature at this stage to try

and define it declaratively. Rather, our job is constantly to question what it means to keep searching.”

Meanwhile, the museum has forfeited four splendid and valuable works of art. Van Gogh’s haunting 1889 gouache of the concentric ochre archways of the hospital corridor at St-Remy, and his 1888 pen-and-ink of thatched-roofed cottages along the street in Saintes-Maries— together worth around \$40 million—augment seventeen paintings (one double sided) and four more drawings by the artist at the Met, where the new acquisitions will be on view 1 December to 7 February 1999. Seurat’s conté crayon studies for “Sunday on the Grande Jatte” (about 1884), valued at about \$1.5 million, join the renowned painting itself, as well as a related oil sketch and other crayon studies already in the Art Institute.

The Metropolitan has pursued its own course of collecting modern and contemporary art, which Mr Lowry says is all for the best. But he adds coyly, “If the Met wanted to devolve their entire twentieth-century collection to us we would certainly give it a great deal of thought.”

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