

MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

The New York Times



LAST CALL: MOMA'S CLOSING, AND CHANGING

BY ROBERTA SMITH

June 6, 2019

The Museum of Modern Art is slouching toward a shutdown starting June 15, in order to complete its latest expansion — which is really an attempt to fix the last one. With the museum on the brink of change, the art and architecture critics of The New York Times took the occasion to revisit favorite (or famous) artworks, review shows not yet covered and consider the implications of the ghost in the machine — the loss of the American Folk Art Museum, once next door but now part of the Modern's new footprint.

Over the next four months, the museum will cut six openings in its western wall to connect three floors of new galleries to existing ones, and will install the largest-ever display of its vast permanent collection, a feat that curators have been planning for years.

When the museum reopens on Oct. 21, after its \$450 million overhaul, we are told it will be physically more comfortable, allow better traffic flow, offer free access to the ground floor and its new galleries, and add about 40,000 square feet for the permanent collection. But most important, the story of modernism as we know it — linear and dominated by European male geniuses — will be radically revised, expanded and rendered more inclusive.

In preparation for the closing, MoMA has already dismantled its permanent collection galleries on the fourth floor and slightly reconfigured those on the fifth in a way that foreshadows some changes to come. Assessing what remains on view, like tea leaves, provides a moment to think about MoMA's past, present and future, and above all the challenges it faces.

Even before you enter the fifth-floor galleries, there are gestures large and small to consider. In mid-April, with less than two months to shutdown, MoMA went to the trouble of installing Jennifer Bartlett's 1975-76 magnum opus, "Rhapsody," in the atrium. A preparator's nightmare in the form of 987 12-inch steel tiles that perfectly fit the long walls of that yawning space, this jubilant battle of artistic styles and mind-sets covers stark geometric abstraction, paint-

by-numbers realism and everything in between. It looks ever more prescient and in some ways exemplifies the pluralism that MoMA needs to aim for in its next life.



Assessing some of MoMA's recent moves, like tea leaves, gives clues to the future. In April, the Modern went to the trouble of installing Jennifer Bartlett's 1975-76 magnum opus, "Rhapsody," in the atrium. Credit The Museum of Modern Art; John Wronn

A very small hint at the possibilities can be found near the fifth floor escalator, where "Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, Pardons a Sentry," by Horace Pippin, the great self-taught African-American painter, hangs beside "Christina's World," by the white realist painter Andrew Wyeth and one of the Modern's most popular paintings. This should bode well for the increased visibility and equal status of self-taught and folk artists, whose work had a big role in MoMA's early years. It's also time to end this sidelining of American art from before World War II. It should be mixed in with art from Europe and beyond.

The collection, as now installed in the fifth-floor galleries, is something of a stopgap measure, highly truncated, that starts with the standard hits of Post-Impressionism and Cubism and Matisse and ends with Jasper Johns's 1958 flag, becoming more inclusive in terms of nonwhite, nonmale artists as it proceeds. It is a snapshot of a collection in flux, looking at once full of possibility and a little forlorn.

In some places you'll see MoMA trying to bend its linear view of history toward the justice, and reality, of this more complex view. But it is going to take some doing.

You still sense the weight, the grip, the drag of modernist history on the place, wondering what will go, what will stay. Vincent van Gogh's "Starry Night," for example, which my colleague Jason Farago meditates on, will resume its prominent place in the collection's opening gallery, the museum says. Still, will there ever again be such a large gallery devoted entirely to Matisse's most radical paintings of the 1910s? Or to the founding of Cubism, which at MoMA is 90 percent Picasso? How about Monet's "Water Lilies," a longtime constant? Maybe. Somehow I think we'll manage without some of these genius-infused total immersions.

In the Modern's permanent collection, it is always revealing to check the time lapse between when a work was made and when the museum acquired it. For example, those worried that MoMA might slight Cubism should look to George Braque's small composition, "The Table (Still Life With Fan)" from 1910. It entered the collection in 2008, showing MoMA is still cultivating its central obsession. The painting is a perfect introduction to Analytic Cubism. It is possible to imagine that in the future fewer than 10 Cubist works will be up at one time; this little Braque should remain among them.

The absence of art by women in the first six galleries is breathtaking. The only exception to the unrelieved maleness is Sonia Delaunay-Terk's fiery 1915 "Portuguese Market," acquired in 1955.

In the collection's next iteration, a mixing of mediums has been promised and this may help the paucity of female artists: For example, according to its collection as listed online, MoMA has no painting by Marie Laurencin, but it has several of her prints and drawings that could be installed in the new order of things. MoMA owns nothing at all, as listed online, by Gabriele Münter, a talented German expressionist painter (and Kandinsky's companion). Perhaps MoMA might sell or trade some Picassos to acquire work by female artists from this crucial "heroic" period, perhaps the biggest challenge the museum faces. Blasphemous as selling Picassos may sound, it would not only create a better balance of the sexes but also adjust the scales in a collection heavily weighted toward Picasso. (MoMA lists 1,241 Picasso works online, compared to 385 by Matisse and 46 by Braque.) And selling Picassos would not be new. A catalog of deaccessions assembled by the artist Michael Asher, indicates MoMA sold 20 Picasso paintings between 1929 and 1998.

You don't see another painting by a woman until the seventh gallery, where the Russian Constructivist Varvara Stepanova's weirdly brushy yet angular "Figure" of 1921 (acquired in 1941) shares a corner with Sophie Tauber-Arp's abstract "Composition of Circles and Overlapping Angles" from 1930 (acquired 1983). And the display finally departs the European continent with "Colorhythm 1," by the Venezuelan artist Alejandro Otero, a 1955 painting on wood acquired with alacrity in 1956, and "Planes in Modulated Surface 4" by the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. Her work in Formica and industrial paint on wood was made in 1957 but didn't reach MoMA until 1983.



Faith Ringgold's "American People Series #20: Die," from 1967, depicts black and white families and the violence of the era. Credit Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

In the final fifth-floor galleries, devoted primarily to painting from the 1950s and '60s, and Surrealism, the cavalcade of male innovation is disrupted by Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Meret Oppenheim, Frida Kahlo and Louise Bourgeois along with recent acquisitions by artists of color like Norman Lewis and Beauford Delaney. Kazuo Shiraga, known for painting with his feet, is represented by a muscular, lava-like swoosh of red from 1964. Acquired this year, it makes Barnett Newman's robust Abstract Expressionist classic "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" look frail.

One of the most striking new sights in this area is "The Moon," an abstract landscape by the Brazilian modernist Tarsila do Amaral, from 1928 but decades ahead of its time and also acquired this year. Just outside the galleries, you can't miss Faith Ringgold's hair-raising "American People Series #20: Die" made in 1967, a year of widespread race riots in America. It was acquired a half-century after it was painted.

MoMA's imminent closing and reopening casts everything now on view in an unusual light. You can see the future bearing down on the museum's fabulous if blinkered past, which is about to be stretched and rearranged. The question of how profoundly and effectively this will be done should keep us on the edge of our seats all summer.