

# A PROPOSAL FOR THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Sometime in the late '50s I began to think of the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art as resembling a hunter's trophy room; the big game heads were all carefully mounted and displayed, one of each species, Ixex by Lion by Picasso by Braque. William Rubin's recent two-part *Artforum* interview brought a different image to mind. The reinstalled collection was laid out in such a way that the works now seem like colorplates in a book on the history of modern art. There is no necessary reason why the collection should not be arranged in this judicious and didactic way; on the contrary, Rubin justified his decisions brilliantly. But something else is needed to restore to these artworks some sense of the human textures and sensibilities in which they originated.

A studio visit, even without the artist's presence, is enormously different from a visit to a museum. It's a little like the contrast between the African bush and the Central Park Zoo. Had one visited, say, Max Beckmann's studio in the 1940s one might have found a monumental triptych under way near a pair of modest still lifes and a self-portrait. There might have been nearby a group of drawings and lithographic proofs tacked up over a stack of old paintings. One might even have been surprised to find a Beckmann sculpture. The differences of quality, medium and scale would have been great, but each work in each medium would have illuminated the others; the various disparities would have underlined the common threads — Beckmann's sensibility and his personal vision. My example proceeds from the fact that The Museum of Modern Art currently owns a great Beckmann triptych, an early *Descent from the Cross*, a self-portrait, two other oils and four gouaches, plus eight drawings and a sculpture, and close to 250 prints. But because of space limitations and three separate curatorial jurisdictions, only three or four of these works are usually on view at any one time. The rest are in storage (though a few may be traveling in out-of-town shows).

These 260 Beckmann paintings, prints, drawings and sculpture, which formed a natural whole in the studio, have now been separated by the museum, to become items in various art-historical contexts: the Masterpiece of Modern Art, the demonstration of a kind of lithographic technique, the illustration of a moment in the history of German expressionism, and so on. The three or four works we are fortunate enough to see are now located on different floors and in different rooms of the museum. The organic cluster of

an artist's production has been atomized into separate didactic units.

To remedy this situation, without disturbing the Modern's overall structuring of "key" works on the second and third floors, I make this proposal: That the Museum of Modern Art set aside one of the several smaller galleries on the ground floor to house at all times a one-person show of every work in every medium that the museum owns by a particular artist. A rough count produced the names of perhaps 60 artists the Modern owns in enough depth for an illuminating one-person exhibition. If the shows ran for two months there would probably be enough material for the next ten years.

By including every work in every medium, and refusing to edit for quality, the Modern would simply be presenting an arbitrary, warts-and-all portrait of a specific artist. These exhibitions could have no didactic program; the works on view would be solely the result of museum donations or purchases over many years by many people with all the attendant omissions, unavoidable mistakes, and coups. The idea of displaying a Beckmann triptych and a still life (a "minor" work?) on the same wall with a mass of prints and drawings may be distressing to some curatorial minds, but it would reunite works which, after all, share a common origin. The artist would be the message, not the medium.

The first painting acquired by The Museum of Modern Art was *House by the Railroad* by Edward Hopper. The museum owns four other Hopper oils, some watercolors, two drawings and 16 prints — a sizeable Hopper show in any commercial gallery. It would be only one event out of ten years of similar events if the Modern began this exhibition program. Some shows would be small: Van Doesberg with only ten works (and what commercial gallery can presently assemble ten Van Doesbergs?), or Le Corbusier, with 11 works, now spread between the departments of prints, of painting and sculpture, and architecture and design.

Other exhibitions would be large: Masson with over 50 works, Gris with more than 30, Diego Rivera with over 50. Some shows would be heavily weighted in the direction of one medium: for instance, Man Ray with only two paintings, plus drawings, films, an illustration, a poster, magazine covers, a chess set, but over 150 photographs and Rayograms.

Over the years the Modern has made tentative moves in the direction of this proposed series of one-person exhibitions from the collection. Most recently the Miró show was a beautiful attempt, though I wish all the graphics in the museum collection had been

included, even if it had meant doubling the exhibition size. Earlier mini-shows of Schwitters and Rodchenko, for example, were close to this ideal. But my point is that this type of exhibition should be adopted as a permanent method of displaying the museum's collection, in tandem with the careful selection of "masterpieces" on the upper floors. We should be protected from neither the museum's, nor the artist's mistakes. Only from artificial categories.

The richness of the Modern's holdings is overwhelming. Consider a one-person show reuniting the Museum's more than 50 André Massons, or the more than 30 Juan Gris. This, without considering the vast holdings of artists the Modern has collected more greedily — Klee or Matisse or Léger or Ernst. The Modern owns more than 70 works by Arp; about 50 by Schwitters; 12 sculptures and 18 drawings by Gaston Lachaise. The possibilities are dazzling.

There has long been a need for a comprehensive André Derain exhibition in New York. For obscure reasons (perhaps political and historical), Derain has been the only major School of Paris painter from the first decades of this century not to be given a retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in the past few decades. Rouault, for example, was given two retrospectives at the Modern in this period. The Modern could give Derain a one-person show, in keeping with my proposal, from its own holdings, which number 16 paintings and over 115 prints and drawings. (I should note that these figures and others quoted earlier are from recent communications with various Museum of Modern Art curators, and the 1966 catalogue of the collection. What with deaccessioning and recent accessioning, they probably vary slightly from the immediate situation; they probably err on the conservative side.)

Displaying the permanent collection as usual but adding a regular schedule of one-person shows from the collection is a feasible program for a few other museums as well. Imagine the staggering weight of an exhibition of every Rembrandt painting and drawing and etching owned by the Metropolitan Museum. Or every Goya, or every Ingres. Without having researched the matter I can easily think of over 30 artists the Metropolitan Museum undoubtedly owns in sufficient quantity to present in large one-person exhibitions, as various as Dürer, or Boucher, or Fantin-Latour.

The advantages of such a program seem obvious, over and above the esthetic gains. Since the museum in question owns the works, insurance and transportation problems are enormously simplified. There would be no need to print catalogues or to arrange for loans. And the usual hanging in the permanent collection floors would be spiced slightly by the need to replace the "masterpiece" or pieces moved downstairs for the duration of that particular artist's one-person show.

All that need happen, really, is for the curatorial staffs to recognize the importance of reuniting all the examples of an artist's work in their various jurisdictions; that this reconstitution is at least as valid as their more usual roles of sorting and classifying as to quality, medium and so forth. And that ultimately the history of art is concerned with individuals, before movements or special media. ■