

The Museum of Modern Art

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FIVE RECENT ACQUISITIONS

The first oil painting by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944) to enter a museum collection in New York City will go on view at The Museum of Modern Art April 22 in a show of Five Recent Acquisitions. The Storm, painted in 1893, is from a period universally agreed to be superior to Munch's twentieth-century work in both pictorial and psychological values. Not more than one or two such paintings are still to be found in private hands and thus available to any museum outside Norway which, for some time, has forbidden their export.

"This acquisitions show of works by Munch, Laurencin, Bonnard, Matisse and Rouault is distinguished not only by its quality but by the fact that each of the five pictures was purchased or solicited as a gift in order to fill a particular need or lacuna in the Museum Collection," according to William Rubin, Director of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture. The exhibition, on view through June 22, complements the showing of new acquisitions by contemporary painters incorporated last autumn in adjacent galleries where work dating from the 1950s is regularly on view.

Two Women (c. 1935) by Marie Laurencin, a fine example of her middle style, is the first painting by this outstanding twentieth-century woman artist to enter The Museum of Modern Art Collection. Three other acquisitions, Bonnard's Still Life (1946), Rouault's Calvary (1930), and Matisse's Notre-Dame (1914), fill particular needs in the Museum's already outstanding collection of works by these artists. The Bonnard is the first work of the artist's late period to be acquired; the Matisse is the Museum's first example of a theme that is a recurrent motif in Matisse's imagery, and is one of his most prophetic works in its unusual and highly abstract handling; the Rouault Calvary fills a particular iconographic need in the Museum's collection of that artist's works.

Notes by Mr. Rubin on each picture follow:

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FIVE RECENT ACQUISITIONS
NOTES BY WILLIAM RUBIN,
DIRECTOR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

Edvard MUNCH: The Storm. 1893. Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 51 1/2". Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. Irgens Larsen and Purchase, 1974.

Acquisition of Munch's The Storm is the culmination of a quest that has occupied the Museum for many decades. Munch's paintings of the 1890s, which are universally agreed to be superior to his later oils in both their pictorial and psychological values, are extremely rare outside Norway; indeed, The Storm was one of not more than two or three such paintings to be found in private hands. Norway has for some time forbidden their export.

The Storm was painted at Aasgaardstrand, Norway, a small coastal town where Munch spent his summers from 1889 until 1904 in the company of many members of Kristiana's (Oslo's) artistic and literary Bohemia. According to Jens This, an art historian and friend of Munch, it was begun the day following a particularly violent summer storm. Munch chose to paint a moment at the beginning of the storm. The tree in the center bends under the pressure of the wind; a young girl in a virginal white dress -- also a protagonist of The Dance of Life and other Munch paintings of the period -- runs onto the foreground jetty that divides the rocky embankment at the right from the edge of the sea in the lower left. Psychologically disturbed by this eruption of nature, she raises her hands to her ears to shut out the sound. This gesture also figures in The Cry, famous as both a painting (1893) and a print (1895). There, as here, the pathos depends upon the fact that the sound cannot be shut out because it is less an external phenomenon than an interior awareness of a highly sensitive being to the "scream of nature," to use the phrase Munch inscribed on the print. Left of the girl in white in The Storm, a group of other maidens reacts to the sudden manifestation of the violence of nature in a quite different way. They form a circle, and their gestures suggest a ritual dance or rite of nature in the collective spirit of "dances at a gathering."

The poetry of The Storm is enhanced by its predominantly blue and purple tonality (suggesting the early evening hour) and by the mysterious effect of the lighted windows of the house in the middleground (a frequent motif in Munch's imagery). The contouring of the foreground is soft, and the application of pigment demonstrates a watercolor-like fluency, a facture also characteristic of the exquisitely realized night sky. In the silhouettes of the houses and foliage of the middleground we see the more summary contouring and flatter shapes characteristic of Munch's graphic style.

Munch repeated the composition of The Storm in a blue and black woodcut of 1908-09 (Schliefler #341), where, as was Munch's practice, the image was reversed.

Henri MATISSE: Notre-Dame. 1914. Oil on canvas, 58 x 37 1/8". Purchase, 1975.

In 1895 Matisse took an apartment at 19 Quai Saint-Michel. Looking left from his studio window, he could see the Pont Saint-Michel and the Louvre; looking right, the Petit Pont and Notre-Dame. From the time of his occupancy

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until he left this address in 1909 Matisse painted so many images of both these views that the development of his style can almost be measured through them alone.

In 1913 Matisse returned to 19 Quai Saint-Michel and the following year painted two large pictures of about equal size looking towards the cathedral through his open window. The two could not be more different. The first (Collection Dubi-Mueller, Soleure) is a realistic, deftly sketched picture in which the oils are used with the textural consistency of watercolor and in which the coloring and charm of the scene anticipate the work of the artist's Nice period. The Museum's Notre-Dame is vigorously brushed, its surface enlivened by a bold scumbling and its drawing dominated by powerful black architectonic lines whose scaffolding testifies to Matisse's ability to absorb Cubism without imitating it.

The image is radically simplified. At the top a squat, block-house-like cathedral is presented devoid of its architectural and sculptural detail. The tops of the towers and the left of the facade contain a "shading" created by scratching the wet paint with a pointed object, probably the wooden end of the brush. This exceptional technique is not unrelated to the more arabesqued scratchings in the Portrait of Mlle. Yvonne Landsberg (Philadelphia Museum of Art) also painted in 1914.

Aside from the cathedral, the upper part of Notre-Dame contains only an abstract indication of trees and shrubbery -- a patch of green -- accompanied by its "shadow." The remainder of the picture is formed by the sparse scaffolding of black contour lines that traverse the predominantly blue surface. On the right, a vertical that parallels the frame indicates the wall of Matisse's building. In the lower right corner a line suggests the frame of the open window, above which slight traces of the balcony grill are visible. Forming incomplete triangles with the vertical that indicates the wall, a long and a short diagonal traverse the composition. The shorter represents the left bank of the Seine to which is anchored the Petit Pont schematically indicated in the center by two horizontals, an arc and a vertical. There is no indication of the bank of the Ile de la Cité as the needs of the composition led Matisse to carry the longer, main diagonal of the picture from the patch of green along a path that actually falls in the middle of the river.

The nuancing of the blue is extraordinary throughout. The scumbling permits areas of pinks and ochres to warm and to qualify the blue painted over it, while the black is used (as Matisse observed in his writing) to cool the blue. In the brilliance and daring of its drawing, the economy of its abstraction, and the assertive liberty of its scumbled technique Notre-Dame is an exceptional, almost unique work in Matisse's oeuvre, and in its handling and conception adumbrates much that would happen in painting half a century later.

Georges ROUAULT: Calvary. 1930. Oil on board, 41 x 29 1/2". Promised gift of Richard S. Zeisler.

Although the depiction of the Crucifixion is central to Christian iconography, it entered the imagery of the twentieth century's lone major Catholic painter only after his career was well established -- and then in a very unusual form.

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From his beginnings as a member of the Fauve circle until the time of the First World War, Rouault preferred to communicate his religious feelings through images of unjust judges, prostitutes and tragic clowns. His first Calvaries -- and these were relatively few -- all date from roughly the period of the World War. After that, the image disappears from his art until 1930 when its return is marked by this beautiful and monumental version of the theme.

As in Rouault's earlier versions, the hands and feet are segmented by the frame so that the wounds are not shown (which is entirely contrary to canonical requirements of the Catholic Church). This later led the art historian Edgar Wind to characterize Rouault's art as "almost anti-sacramental." But the image is probably less meant as a visual account of the Crucifixion than as a private devotional icon. And the very segmentation that eliminates the wounds, thrusts the Christ and his cross forward, outside the space of the two figures to the sides. The latter -- usually identified as the Magdalene and Saint John -- seem much less actors in a narrative scene than surrogates for the private believer.

As in all Rouault's work of this period, dry brushing and scumbling builds up a crust of pigment, the rawness of which acts as a metaphor for the flesh of the Crucified Christ. Patches of saturated yellows, oranges, reds and greens are contained and set off by rough and intentionally awkward contours of black. This effect, which has wrongly been attributed to the influence of stained glass, actually constitutes a "primitivization" of the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt, whose art constituted Rouault's point of departure in its devotional spirit as well as its style.

While richly impastoed, this Calvary of 1930 does not suffer from the almost relief-like laying on of paint that overburdens many later Rouaults. By the same token, its composition retains that simplicity and bold gestalt which strengthened the artist's earlier work and which was to dissolve into fussiness in many of his pictures of the period of World War II and thereafter.

While the Museum has four Rouault oils and a number of watercolors, this major Calvary will be the first image of the Crucifixion by the century's leading religious painter to enter its Collection.

Marie LAURENCIN: Two Women, c. 1935. Oil on canvas, 18 x 21 1/2". Gift of Mrs. Rita Silver in memory of her husband, Leo Silver, 1974.

Marie Laurencin is unique among women painters in making the feminine not only the exclusive subject of her art but, in a sense, the substance of her style. Two Women is a fine example of her middle style, which obtained from about 1925 to 1940 (she died in 1956). Two bust-length views of young women are separated by the petals of a giant flower (which replaces a third figure common in Laurencin's tripartite compositional type of this period). As consistently in her work after 1920, the figures exist in a languorous, pseudo-classical world which might be considered a personal paraphrase of the "rose-water Hellenism" of Puvis de Chavannes. In her attempt to isolate the quintessence of the feminine, Laurencin has been compared to Sappho, but the ambience of her pictures is nearer to that of nineteenth century Parnassian poetry.

As in other works by Laurencin, Two Women is infused with a relaxed sensuality -- the figures' postures and the floral symbolism -- that only

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hints at explicit sexuality. A certain coolness and detachment are implied by the prevailing silvery tonality of the painting, and the way whites and greys are mixed into the roses and greens of the fleshtones and costumes. The diaphanous quality of the latter not only characterizes the young women but reinforces the almost watercolor-like transparency with which the softly brushed oil paints are handled. Areas of colors are not clearly bounded (Laurencin had eliminated contour drawing in the early twenties) but seem to overlap one another as in an aquarelle.

Two Women is the first work by Laurencin to enter the Museum's painting and sculpture collection.

Pierre BONNARD: Fruit Basket Reflected in a Mirror. 1946. Oil on canvas, 18 1/4 x 28". Promised gift of Mr. and Mrs. David Rockefeller.

Completed some months before Bonnard's death in January, 1947, Basket of Fruit Reflected in a Mirror synthesizes the dispersed and seemingly "random" touch and patterning characteristic of Bonnard's last years with a powerful architectural impetus more frequently found in his work of the nineteen twenties and early thirties. In its transparency this still life bears witness, in an intimate way, to that visionary clarity which Bonnard, like Matisse, enjoyed on the eve of his death -- a phenomenon not unrelated to the ethereality of Mozart's Requiem and Shakespeare's Tempest.

The fruit and the objects reflected from the tabletop in particular are realized with a loose facture, built up impressionistically from isolated sensations of color entirely independent of contour drawing. One is reminded of a definition which Bonnard formulated late in life according to which a picture is "a series of spots that are joined together." The reduction of the entire visual world to sensations of color is emphasized by the fact that neither the mirror frame nor the buffet table visible below it -- both of which are imaged directly -- have more solidity than the motifs imaged from their reflections.

The intuitive, improvisational qualities exemplified by the touch throughout the work, and by the realization of the fruit and objects, are intensified by the foil of the rectilinear mirror-frame. While Bonnard often included picture frames and framed mirrors within his images as architectonic devices, nowhere do they constitute so insistent a series of frames-within-the-frame as in the Basket of Fruit.

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