

The Museum of Modern Art

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A TREASURY OF MODERN DRAWING

THE JOAN AND LESTER AVNET COLLECTION

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SEVEN DECADES OF DRAWING ON VIEW AT MOMA

A TREASURY OF MODERN DRAWING: THE JOAN AND LESTER AVNET COLLECTION, the largest and one of the most important bequests ever received by The Museum of Modern Art, will be on view in the first floor d'Harnoncourt Galleries from April 28 through July 4, 1978. Organized by William S. Lieberman, Director of the Department of Drawings and author of the accompanying catalog*, the exhibition contains 180 drawings by 100 American and European artists.

The Joan and Lester Avnet Collection, formed between 1960 and Mr. Avnet's death in 1970, spans the first seven decades of this century. It includes works ranging from the Symbolist drawings of Kupka and Delville to works by American, British and Australian artists of the late 1960s. In the catalog's introductory essay, Mr. Lieberman explains that the Avnet collection was assembled with The Museum of Modern Art specifically in mind: "For instance, the Museum owned no work in any medium by the Belgian Symbolists and its representations of Kandinsky and Hannah Hoch were also weak. The drawings by Delville and the two watercolors by Kandinsky and Hoch were acquired with the thought that they would eventually help fill the lacunae in the Museum's holdings. Similarly Mr. and Mrs. Avnet chose drawings by British painters working in the decade 1909-1919: Lawrence

*A Treasury of Modern Drawing: The Joan and Lester Avnet Collection.
By William S. Lieberman. 120 pages, 84 illustrations. \$6.75
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Atkinson, Vanessa Bell, David Bomberg, Roger Fry, Spencer Gore, Duncan Grant, Wyndham Lewis, John Nash, Walter Sickert and Matthew Smith. Only two of these artists have been previously represented in the Museum's collection. Also, many of the images in the Avnet Collection relate to works in other media already owned by the Museum."

The richness of A TREASURY OF MODERN DRAWING: THE JOAN AND LESTER AVNET COLLECTION and the visual pleasure it affords can only be hinted at by any listing of the artists and works included. But Mr. Lieberman notes that "Four diverse aspects of Mr. Avnet's collection may help to define his personal taste. First, he was interested in a representation of British artists who worked during the first two decades of the 20th century and whose drawings he considered as 'a group'. Second, he liked designs for theatrical productions - which, as drawings, he insisted must be as dramatic as the productions themselves. Third, his choice of American artists was very much his own, idiosyncratic, and he wished to make it as varied as possible. Fourth, he was fascinated by sculpture, and he collected many drawings by European sculptors that are preparatory to finished works."

In addition to the British artists of the years 1909-1919 already cited, Cubism also from the same decade is represented in the Avnet Collection by Braque, Picasso, Leger and Gris. The influence of Cubism on other painters working in Paris and New York is reflected in drawings by Gleizes, Kupka, Marcoussis, Metzinger, Picabia and Weber. Similarly the impact of Cubism on art elsewhere in Europe can be studied in drawings by Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists in England, Mondrian in Holland, and Feininger and Itten in Germany.

Artists of the School of Paris account for more than one-third of the exhibition and include Balthus, Chagall, Matisse, Modigliani and Rouault. German and Expressionist artists are also represented, notably portraits

by Corinth, Kirchner, Klee and Meidner, all drawn before World War I. Later drawings by Expressionist artists include examples of Beckmann, Hofer and Kokoschka.

Each of the five Picassos in the Avnet Collection reflects a different and important moment in his development. The earliest is Two Nudes, a charcoal study for the Museum's painting of 1907. The Mill at Horta, a watercolor of 1909, is seminal in the evolution of Picasso's Cubism. Burning Logs, an image unique in his art, was drawn in wartime France and has been frequently included in exhibitions organized by the Museum. Two sheets were drawn by Picasso when he was 85: Figures, a personal allegory, and The Pool, a witty salute to Ingres' painting The Turkish Bath.

The diversity of A TREASURY OF MODERN DRAWING: THE JOAN AND LESTER AVNET COLLECTION is further suggested by its variety of drawings done since 1945. Among these are works by members of the Cobra Group, Alechinsky, Appel and Lucebert. Younger British and Australian artists selected by the Avnets include Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, Patrick Procktor, Brett Whiteley and Fred Williams. The Collection also contains works by several Americans, and Pollock, Rothko and Johns appear in superb examples. There are also drawings by Delvaux from Belgium, Lam from Cuba, Orozco of Mexico, and Poland's Studnicki. A majority of the 30 drawings by Jean Dubuffet in the exhibition are from various series he composed from the mid-1940s, when he resumed painting, through 1961.

"Mr. Avnet's interest in sculpture was special," notes Mr. Lieberman, and for his collection of preparatory drawings by sculptors he chose works by Barlach, Bourdelle, Brancusi, Cascella, Chillida, Epstein, Gaudier-Brzeska, Giacometti, Gonzalez, Lipchitz, Moore, Nadelman and Paolozzi.

Another special interest of the Avnets was the performing arts, and they collected designs relating to several ballets and plays. Notable

among these is Leon Bakst's The Firebird, his most celebrated costume for Diaghilev. Also in the Avnets' group of drawings for the theatre are black-and-white drawings by Hans Bellmer for a production of Alfred Jarry's notorious Ubu Roi and Oskar Schlemmer's watercolor that summarized his mechanical ballet, The Figural Cabinet. In 1969 the Avnets acquired Jim Dine's drawings of the previous year for a dramatization of Wilde's novel The Picture of Dorian Gray. The production, planned in London, was unfortunately canceled, but Dine's designs vividly suggest the excitement of the projected costumes and decors.

"Lester Avnet likes to remember that, in 1929 as the Museum first opened its doors, its first acquisition in any medium was a drawing, the gift of Paul J. Sachs, whom he never knew but whom in temperament he so very closely resembled," recalls William Lieberman in his catalog introduction. "Sadly, he could not witness the inauguration of the Museum's separate Department of Drawings with its own curatorial committee in 1971. He had, however, often urged the establishment of such a department devoted to works on paper, which share similar problems of curatorship, conservation and display. On the eve of a fiftieth anniversary, Lester Avnet would have considered it particularly appropriate that The Museum of Modern Art announce the acquisition of his collection and the subsequent exhibition A TREASURY OF MODERN DRAWING: THE JOAN AND LESTER AVNET COLLECTION."

There will be a PRESS PREVIEW on Wednesday, April 28 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

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