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Heller

BEN HELLER
1071 SIXTH AVENUE
NEW YORK 18, N.Y.

December 4, 1963

Mr. Alfred Barr
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53rd Street
New York City, N. Y.

6 December 1963

Dear Mr. Barr:

Dear Ben:

The enclosed are with the compliments of Mr.

I wonder if possibly there may have been some confusion in the Heller family since a beautifully gift wrapped package appeared on my desk the day before your secretary's letter arrived with two more packs of Wilkinson's. Much as I should like to be probably sole owner of four such treasures I feel really an imposition on your generosity.

All of this came about by my thanking Judy and I think you and asking one of you for the address so that I could order some blades myself. Now you have given me enough blades to last for the next year but time will pass and, if it's not too indelicate to ask, I would still like to have the name of your source of supply, even if he's a smuggler or bootlegger.

Sincerely and gratefully,

Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

Mr. Ben Heller
1071 Sixth Avenue
New York 18, New York

AHB:rr
encls.

Signed Dec. 10 - and once written I've
~~discovered~~ learned that the
Drugstore opposite the Museum
has them! I'm returning you
2 packs. Thanks again

Cl.

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Heller

rd STREET
E 5-8900
EW-YORK

BEN HELLER
1071 SIXTH AVENUE
NEW YORK 18, N.Y.

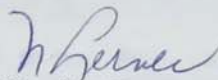
December 4, 1963

Mr. Alfred Barr
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53rd Street
New York City, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Barr:

The enclosed are with the compliments of Mr.
Heller.

Very truly yours,



N. Lerner
Sec'y to Mr. Ben Heller

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

NEW YORK 19

Heller

11 WEST 53rd STREET
TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900
CABLES: MODERNART, NEW-YORK

file
July 28, 1961

Mr. Alfred Barr
Greenboro, Vermont

Dear Mr. Barr:

Although I hate intruding upon you in Vermont I thought you would like to know that somewhat anticlimactically after the many talks in advance, Bob Rosenblum cabled me that he was unable to undertake the essay for the Heller catalog. Ben Heller has therefore suggested that Bill Seitz write the piece, and I trust all will now go well. However, like the inevitable black cloud on the horizon, Elaine Lustig, who is designing the catalog, tells me that she needs to have the final copy of all text in hand no later than August 11. Is that possible for you?

Sorry to bother you with this, and I hope it doesn't interfere unduly with your vacation.

Please give my greetings to Mrs. Barr. Our children are both going to the Fieldston Day Camp, apparently loving every second of it, and we have her generous efforts on our behalf to thank for this blessing.

Best regards,

Waldo

Waldo Rasmussen

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
NEW YORK 19

11 WEST 53rd STREET
TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900
CABLES: MODERNART, NEW-YORK

August 4, 1961

Mr. Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
Greensboro
Vermont

Dear Alfred,

I just received the draft of Ben Heller's piece for the catalogue on Thursday. A copy of it is enclosed.

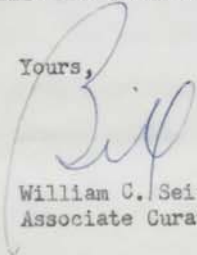
I find it embarrassingly crude, but do not see how one can affect it much by any small changes. One point of view, I suppose, is that what he says has nothing to do with what we say, but I do not want to tell Waldo to go ahead with it on any basis until you have read it. I would have telephoned you today except that I know how pressed you are at the moment and thought you would want to see it before commenting in any case.

If you do not want to go ahead with it as it is or wish to make major changes in it, will you call me right away? I shall be working with Heller in my office Monday, from 1:00 on, and it would probably be better if the call did not come at that time.

If I do not hear from you we shall continue with routine editing and perhaps the removal of a few quotation marks.

Hoping that will have a chance to get some rest,

Yours,


William C. Seitz
Associate Curator

WCS:sjk
enclosures

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Of course, no collector likes to be called one. There is something about the word and its use which denies a real love of art, which imputes the meanest motives to the activity. But what else can one call that continuing accumulation of objects and experiences, that ever spreading desire whose contagion spreads into almost every part of your life, whose virulence destroys prudence and discretion, whose passion creates a will and a world of its own?

I cannot today tell why I wanted to buy our first painting although I remember very clearly the circumstances. I cannot fathom at all my willingness to spend a major portion of our resources although I can readily understand how I came to be interested in early 20th century painting. But once started, once committed, once caught up in an interest in modern painting and ancient and primitive sculpture, I became so deeply obsessed by these involvements that they not only went far beyond anything I could have imagined, they often became a burden from which I wished to be released. Collecting has led me, driven me into experiences that were, that are crucial to my life.

My wife and I became involved in contemporary painting more despite *primitive works of art* [objects] and antiquities than because of them. This may seem strange, given the history of 20th century art, but, for us, one of the most meaningful qualities about these sculptures has been the sense of belonging radiated by them, a feeling that each work of each artist was needed and understood by its culture. It was our idea that the contemporary artist was a superb technician but that he had been thrust by society to its outermost edge and had, therefore, little contact with his fellows. Wandering around museums and galleries we could not help seeing contemporary work; it affected

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|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
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us, but with little indication of depth or permanence. We found it brilliant, hard, surface, brittle, and attributed its effect partly to our continuous looking, partly to its being the art of our time which sensed, as we did, some of the characteristics of pace, confusion, loneliness and struggle present today. Despite our skepticism and resistance we bought a few paintings. The experience was not a happy one for the paintings did not hold up, they seemed to lack the validity of the other things we had at home. And so we let them go.

Nevertheless we kept on looking. We couldn't help ourselves. Somehow the paintings, insistent, gave off sparks that moved us, that forced us to continue, that made us react. We began to consider the possibility that some of these sparks were more than transient and that we, not the paintings, had been at fault. Perhaps we had selected poorly; perhaps we had not been ready or able to see what was there to be discovered. And so we persisted, looked and looked again; we questioned, questioned not just what we saw but why, why it was so important to us to find out, why it was so necessary to see and study, to contact the creative experience of the past and present. Slowly (about four or five years) I came to understand what I wanted, why I wanted; slowly I gained confidence in my "eye". I remember looking at a Rothko for several months (then there was time and quiet to contemplate) and worrying because I found it too beautiful. It was too pretty, too sweet; I "knew" that modern art was problematical and that anything "soft" would fade. I did not look at the painting for several months until, one day, three months later, I asked to see it again. It shone! My first instincts had been correct. I sent it home and we have been in love with it ever since. (Unfortunately this canvas could not be shown here as it is travelling in a Rothko show [currently] touring Europe.)

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

I would like to mention another experience related to the purchase of a painting. We had been looking for some time for "our" Pollock. During a visit to East Hampton I took the bull by the horns and, nervously I admit, called Jackson. He invited us to visit with him and his wife, Lee Krasner. After chatting for a while in the house, we were invited into the studio and, there, upon the wall was the giant canvas "One". We looked at many paintings that afternoon, but always my gaze returned to "One". I was stunned by it. It was, of course, too big for us, but so intense was the experience, so excited were we, that we asked if we could buy the painting. How pale are the words buy and sell! How inadequately they describe the feelings which are finally consummated in a purchase! Buying "One" was an act of faith. It involved all of us: Jackson and Lee, my wife and I. It was more money than we had spent on any work of art; it was more than Jackson had ever received for a painting. All of us knew this and were glad of it. "One" was also, I believe, the largest contemporary painting to go into private hands, and it was important for people to know that such a work could be hung in a home. But most significant to us were, naturally, the private, not the public effects. Buying a painting of "One's" size meant that we would have to live up to the work, that we would have to enlarge our living space to do it justice, that we would always have to have that kind of space. Its size proportionately increased the amounts of sarcasm, criticism and rejection we received for Jackson because it was so inviting a target, was too big to be ignored. But most important of all was the day to day living with a creation of such dominance: Paul Brach once called it "a window on the world". It was the first of our truly large paintings and from it we learned how penetrating, changing, enlarging and vital such an experience can be. From its acquisition we came to a new understanding of the import of an act, of risk. Through it Jackson and I became friends.

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| The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY | Collection: | Series.Folder: |
| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Because of Pollock and Rothko, because of the other American painters, my wife and I found that our initial ideas about contemporary painting were both inadequate and inaccurate. We found the recent American painting experience to be rich and varied, to include an extraordinary range of feeling. To us these painters were not so much a group or movement as a series of individuals whose work had a depth and range of feeling convincing at the highest level. Each time we went to Europe we went to see the old masters; we went to the Prado, the National Gallery, to Colmar, to Bruges. We tried to keep our minds open, to make them like blank negatives, sensitive to new impressions. Each time we wondered how the paintings at home would look after this severest of "taste tests". And each time they looked beautiful; each time they gave us equivalent pleasures.

While in Europe, or in New York, we looked at the work of the European contemporaries. Without trying to be chauvinistic or "Americana" collectors only, we simply could not get the response from the Europeans with three exceptions: deStael, Dubuffet and Giacometti. Of these Giacometti has always moved us the most. I mention this because people are so interested in the "why" of a collection, what you don't have as well as what you do. They seldom realize that a collection happens to you, that it takes its own course and shape. We sold or traded our Braque, Soutines, Miró, etc. to make way for new experiences. It wasn't that we had "outgrown" them, as someone once suggested (for how can you outgrow beautiful paintings?), but we wanted new experiences and were simply unable to afford both. In a way it can be said that the old laid the way for the new and I cannot be sad at this because we retain the impressions, the experiences of these first works, and at the same time have the excitement, the challenge of the new. Similarly, we have not stopped at the American "old masters" but continue to look at, speculate about and buy the work of a variety of newer (and often younger) painters.

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| The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY | Collection: | Series.Folder: |
| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Collecting has been good to us. It has taken us many places; it has shown us new worlds. It has introduced us to people from all over the world; it has given us friends whom we would never have otherwise met. We have had fun watching the twists and turns of the market, anticipating the new myths, the re-examined heroes. We have gained a knowledge of the peoples of the past. Through this contact we know more of the differing and similar ways man has tried to meet the questions and problems of his existence. We know the pleasure of the aesthetic emotion. Most of all, we have learned something of the process itself: that mysterious procedure unknown before, random during, logical after the fact; sometimes directed, often directing; a force which may need to be bullied or coaxed, which erupts at times and places of its own choosing in spite of or in response to a call; a flow which has its own life, its own justification, which is its own world. Through it I have gained a new knowledge of the world, a sense of life's rhythm, a knowledge of myself. Through it my life has been and will be richer than it could ever have been if it had been deprived of this imaginative world.

One last thing. More than owing these artists a great personal debt more than having many for good friends; I know something of their commitment to their life and work, of its burdens as well as its rewards; I know of their loneliness, pain and fears, of their patience, stubbornness and desperation. I know, too, of my need for their work. I salute their struggle.

-- and their achievement

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Ben Heller Collection
C/E 61 29

PREFACE

There are larger collections of American pictures of the ^{[Late 1940's and} 1950's both in private and public hands but nowhere, neither in a Museum nor in a dwelling, have I seen a gallery of recent American paintings to match the big living room of Ben and ^{x Judy} Judith Heller. There a grand array of imposing canvasses, interrupted by windows looking over Central Park and a few monumental primitive sculptures, creates an effect somewhat overwhelming but very beautiful.

Much has been written - and with good reason - about the courage, the all-out commitment, the moral intensity of the American action painters. Something of their spirit affects a few of their patrons. I have rarely known an amateur more deeply and intensely involved in his collecting than Ben Heller. Enthusiasm tempered by critical anxiety and patient, empirical study mark his passionate search. In this pursuit ^{+ Judy} Judith Heller has been a responsible partner. The superb quality of their ^{+ [Shel, Kline]} pictures by Pollock, Rothko, Newman, Gottlieb and the others are their reward. Quality, yes, and grandeur too, for most of the painters here represented are at their best working in large scale. The Hellers were among the first collectors to accept this inconvenient circumstance, not as exceptional but as normal. Even in their former and smaller apartment they accommodated or, more precisely, domesticated canvasses which only a few years before seemed enormously too big for the ordinary New York interior.

Their collection has placed a certain burden on Mr. and Mrs. Heller. New York has five public museums (and will shortly have a sixth) more or less concerned with twentieth-century art

x Ben Heller's suggested changes

xx Mr. Solry's suggested change

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|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Ben Heller Collection

C/E 61.29
Preface*xx [at a given moment]*

but in none of them can one count on seeing a really representative collection of recent American painting particularly by those still controversial artists who have won fame and influence to a degree quite unprecedented in the history of our country. Critical lack of space is a serious factor in this sad state of affairs - and so is the constant demand from abroad to lend abstract expressionist paintings. In any case, when a visitor, American or foreign, or even a New Yorker, asks where he can see the best accessible collection of American action paintings in New York one's first thought is the Heller's apartment.

Mr. and Mrs. Heller have been generously hospitable to a steadily increasing number of visitors but it is not easy for any household to suffer such continual invasion of privacy. Their predicament, though flattering to their taste and judgment, has contributed to their decision to offer the better part of their collection for a tour among museums in other American cities. But this is not their only reason. They are interested in younger artists as well as the now established painters whose reputations date back ten or fifteen years. They need some wall space to try out more of the new painting of the sixties. However they are moved primarily by their belief that other communities may welcome a chance to see their pictures.

Abstract expressionism or action painting, like all powerful movements, has inspired so much bitter debate and generated so vast a body of mediocre and bad imitators that it is particularly important now to see it at its best. Mr. and Mrs. Heller offer

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|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY | Collection: | Series.Folder: |
| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Ben Heller Collection 3
C/E 61 29
Preface

an opportunity to do just that. The Museum of Modern Art, which in the past has imposed so frequently upon their generosity for loans to its International Program, is now delighted to send on tour in our own country these magnificent American paintings.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
Director of the Museum Collections
The Museum of Modern Art.

cc: Mr. Heller
Mr. Soby
Miss Miller
Mr. Seitz
Hecht
Rasmussen

...the historical aspect of this exhibition remains; it gives striking, if not exhaustive, evidence of both the movement and the underlying principles of the new relation, in evidence that range from fine and characteristic to masterful and sublimed. Among these a group of pictures, the most undoubtedly great four individual works to consideration of their affiliation for what others...

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a copy of Heller preface is in A.H. Barr's
file "BARR: MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS"

Jane Welles
30 June 1970

*Heller
about*

1.

large drawing Summation, of 1947; the most recent is Rothko's Four Darks on Red, of 1958. The decade bracketed by these dates is unique in American art history: they were years when a new kind of painting, as startling abroad as it was at home, blossomed, withstood storms of public and critical abuse, and became so hardy it could not be uprooted. When an exhibition of the new American painting organized by The Museum of Modern Art toured European countries in 1958 Will Grohmann, historian as well as critic, observed that "for the first time in the history of art, personalities are emerging that are not influenced by Europe, but, on the contrary, influence Europe, including Paris."^(1.)

To suggest that any one collector's choices, knowing though they may have been, can adequately typify abstract painting in the fifties would of course be false: the Heller's selections were personal and empathic, not statistical. Hofmann, Tobey, Bazilotes, Brooks, and Francis, for example, are not represented; Pollock, Rothko, and Newman dominate the walls. Yet, these special conditions recognized, the historical impact of this exhibition remains; it gives striking, if not exhaustive, evidence of both the appearance and the mediating principles of the new painting, in examples that range from fine and characteristic to masterful and sumptuous. Among such a group of pictures, the mind unconsciously moves from individual works to consideration of their affinities for each other.

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|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
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*Suits' paper
to Heller
about*

As a basis for discussion, therefore, it should be worthwhile to isolate, not systematically, but following a path of associations unimpeded, a few complements abstract painting in Mr. and Mrs. Heller's New York apartment has not been included in this exhibition, nor has work by the younger generation of American painters. But incompleteness, we hope, is compensated for by concentration: the earliest work in the exhibition is Gorky's large drawing Summation, of 1947; the most recent is Rothko's Four Darks on Red, of 1958. The decade bracketed by these dates is unique in American art history: they were years when a new kind of painting, as startling abroad as it was at home, blossomed, withstood storms of public and critical abuse, and became so hardy it could not be uprooted. When an exhibition of the new American painting organized by The Museum of Modern Art toured European countries in 1958 Will Grohmann, historian as well as critic, observed that "for the first time in the history of art, personalities are emerging that are not influenced by Europe, but, on the contrary, influence Europe, including Paris."⁽¹⁾

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

As a basis for discussion, therefore, it should be worthwhile to isolate, not systematically but following a path of associations unhampered, a few qualities they have in common, and some in which they differ.

Monumental scale, or--as both Mr. Heller and Mr. Barr have emphasized--sheer expanse of canvas, separates certain of these canvases from the easel pictures of the past, and perhaps also those of the future. (Pollock's One measures over seventeen feet, and Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis almost eighteen.) The counterpart of size, and what dramatizes it, is their radical abstractness and relative emptiness. It is as if, having abandoned the careful shading and representation that in the painting of the past gave an illusion of reality in a stage-like space, these artists were forced to enlarge the picture surface proportionately, adding to flat extension the dimensions that were lost when deep recession was sacrificed. But for them, abstraction relates to content as well as form. With perhaps the exception of Reinhardt, they have denied an interest in geometric abstractness as a goal. Rothko, Still, and Newman have publicly, and with brutal lack of equivocation, detached themselves from the European development toward purism that began with Cézanne and culminated in the last European works of Mondrian. Their simplicity of form is a sharp break with what Newman calls "the grip of geometry" and "a canopy of triangulation."⁽²⁾ Starkness of image can be the corollary of intense feeling, of drama as timeless as that of Oedipus or Moses, of an aggressive assertion of the self, or of a subjective immersion of the ego in the extent and power of nature: an immensity of feeling characterized by Robert Rosenblum as "the abstract sublime."⁽³⁾

In addition to unprecedented scale and a new subjective abstractness, Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, and Guston have given a new emphasis to the

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

3.

lines and the ingratiating dove gray, black, tan, and chocolate browns of Cas
activity of painting--a final stage in the elevation of process to the level
are the outcome of an explosive activeness within an artist who, just at the
of subject matter. The idea of painting as process, with its accompanying
time when the technique of drawing was beginning to die, was associated by
existential and biological references, was never posed more sharply than in
Clement Greenberg as "world" and "ethic," related to Walker and Melville
New York after 1945. Today the idea of painting as physical gesture has
been so cheapened by journalistic cant and counter-cant as to be temporarily
and stridently. It is heartening to know (as we discovered when the canvases
of van Gogh emerged unharmed from years of commercialization, distortion, and
sentimentalization) that intrinsic value can remain intact. To look again
at de Kooning's Woman, Wind and Window or Village Square, monumental despite
their small size, is to witness at first hand a transformation, through skill,
vertical runs of paint, some unintentional, they are totally without the
sensibility, identification and structural sense, of gesture into object; to
see sensibility maintained, like a ball bouncing on a fountain, at a vital
morphological center bounded by the forms of architecture, breathing bodies,
nature, and geometry. The soft bulks of Gorky's Summation, powerfully
delineated in his sure line, are even more voluptuous than de Kooning's shapes,
and the structure that controls them is less cubist. For Gorky, however,
the automatic method of Breton was primarily a loosening of sensibility,
mind, and eye--a means of finding a new morphology; for de Kooning it became
(at one pole of his activity) a manner of painting. The fluid style, which
in modern art was initiated by Goya and Delacroix, continued by van Gogh,
German expressionism, Soutine, Mandinsky, Miró, and Masson, had its ultimate
outcome in the dance, drip, and flow by which Pollock evolved paintings like
One and The Blue Poles. Because of the shock of his radical method it was
at first difficult to see the striking images that resulted. Today, as Ben
Heller says, it is hard to remember, while admiring these sumptuous wall
paintings, the process of their formation. It is easy to forget that the taut
it, would resemble fire. For one who has watched Pollock's work emerge from

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

4.

lines and the ingratiating dove gray, blue, tans, and chocolate browns of One are the outcome of an explosive catharsis within an artist who, just at the time when the technique of dripping was beginning in 1947, was described by Clement Greenberg as "morbid" and "Gothic," related to Faulkner and Melville whom he cites "as witnesses to the nativeness of such violence, exasperation and stridency."⁽⁴⁾

The gargantuan brush gestures of Kline's superb Untitled Diagonal originated outside the picture space, to collide at precisely the right point. Stripped of the deduction of color, the great black strokes crash like thunder; The impeccable adjustment of dark patterns to light, and the vertical runs of paint, seem unintentional; they are totally without the effete attention to tasteful arrangement that marks the work of followers.

One must look to the painting of China and Japan to find artists who have expected as much of the brush as have the Americans of the fifties. Smashing and extroverted in the works of Kline, brushstrokes for Guston are records of search. They proceed slowly and powerfully, but often almost fearfully. Like de Kooning and Gorky, Guston remains in contact with tradition. The awkward, scratchy strokes of his ink drawing of 1953, like the "unraveled hemp" of Sung and Yuan painters, came from a dry and irregularly spread brush. The image they form, however, is vignettted and ordered like certain water colors of Cézanne, and it seems to describe a detail of landscape. In the rich pigment of the paintings, weavings of such strokes result in a more abstract image, and their reference is more psychological. Were it not for its center of concentration, the effect of the earlier canvas, Zone, could be described as "impressionist": it creates an effect of light, that is to say, with broken brushstrokes; but the light is internal, almost mystical; a pale but suffused red that, if it were not cooled by the fog that permeates it, would resemble fire. For one who has watched Guston's work change from

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

5.

year to year the two canvases here, of 1954 and 1957, are like moments in a continuous process in which individual works (to use the title of the later canvas) give seismographic "evidence" of unending experience. The unresolved striving of the central shapes in Evidence is matched by the heaviness of their reds and browns; blackened and dulled by complements, they seek to locate themselves within a field of muddy gray that, materialized inertia, presses around them. The long twisting strokes move painfully, as if directed by the hand of a surgeon performing an operation on himself.

Motherwell has written eloquently on the process of painting, on the burial of accidents beneath obliterations and corrections, and on the joyous stimulation offered by pigments and papers. His Collage, of 1949, demonstrates the finesse with which he can give order to random roughness, controlling torn edges and splotted paper by judiciously placed ruled edges, and by adjustments recalling cubism and Matisse. Close to each other in tone, but loosely laid over each other, soft white rice paper, wrapping paper, and paper painted with ochres and tans, state the tangibility of the surface. The 1954 Wall Painting also represents Motherwell at his best. Its black shapes, too domatic and active to remain abstract, impinge, destroying an ochre band by a mechanism like humanized clockwork. His ability to moderate tragic subjects ^{of} an intentional abandonment of métier by discipline and elegance points to a theme of ^fconfronted contradiction inherited, in part, from dada, and operative in de Kooning's indecision, the ambiguous morphology of Gorky, and also in the work of Rotko, Reinhardt, and Gottlieb. The creation of an organic art by means of geometric elements, for example, was an avowed aim of Tomlin. As his Painting #15, his last, makes clear, he was more civilized,

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more involved with taste than the other postwar painters, with color as beauty, and with tone as relationship. Opposition and dichotomy, crises of existence for de Kooning, in Tomlin's painting are esthetic considerations. Curving and free lines and strokes alternate with plus-and-minus rhythms reminiscent of Mondrian, and adjustment of color, structure, and value is infinitely subtle.

It is characteristic of the painting of the fifties that forms originally born of emotion and self-assertion seem finally to relate to nature, giving the subjective process of their conception an analogy with natural processes. Pollock's One, contained by the whipped trajectories of its black lines, is dynamic both visually and as gesture. It can remain flat or become spatial in conformity with the location and sensitivity of a spectator. Pollock was deeply involved with nature--with the sea, near which he lived on Long Island, and with the open spaces of his native Wyoming. To him the title One was a recollection of the sense of harmony with the world that he felt as a boy and later lost, but which returned to him while working on the large dripped paintings. To discover thickets, grasses, or other natural references in these immense canvases is not, therefore, to falsify programmatically abstract art.

Clifford Still's work has led more than one observer to see the topography and grand scale of eroding mountains, glaciers, or other desolate and forbidding terrain. Number 2, 1949, the only ^{painting} canvas by him in the Heller Collection, magnificently demonstrates the sublimity of his abstraction, which makes no reference whatsoever to cubism or to any other aspect of European tradition. The sullen red that covers this canvas, untouched by the brush, has been pressed flat and clotted with a palette knife. The torn black shapes

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

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that appear on it (or in it, for the red can look like a viscid liquid) are geographic: they resemble the Netherlands, Indies, the Phillipines, or some other island group. Behind the canvas surface, darkening the graying the sea of red where they appear, are shapes already flooded by the awesome rise of the innundating fluid. This metaphor perhaps carries naturalization too far, for seen again, these adjacent areas, their harsh edges painted now from one side and now from the other, imply neither overlapping, recession, or, oddly, even flatness. Such an imaged response, however, in the gigantic forms and ineluctable processes it suggests, sets the scale and, in terms of nature, the power emitted by this work.

To associate Newman's uniformly covered abstractions with nature, it may seem, would be to overextend even a metaphor. Adam is a placement of three red verticals on a warm ground. The eighteen-foot Vir Heroicus Sublimis is an expanse of red interrupted by five bands varying in tone and width. Yet, against these verticals, the hot expanse can confront an audience by its emptiness and boundlessness. Expanse and emptiness are realities; like the mysticism of Plotinus, Eckhart, or Taoism, works like these force us to face the meaning of nothingness, of the void. Vir Heroicus Sublimis, Rosenblum says, "puts us before a void as terrifying, if exhilarating, as the arctic emptiness of the tundra." (5.)

Rothko is richly represented here by six beautiful and major canvases. In that each contains two, three, or four soft-edged rectangles of color that cross the composition horizontally, one picture resembles another. But it is precisely this rigorous limitation of image that brings about their unprecedented dominance and their difference from each other. They function between what Max Kozloff calls "Rothko's stunning combination of Puritanic

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

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restrictions and lavish self indulgence," (6,) and between other opposites including movement and immobility, surface and depth, dramatic content and spare abstractness. Feelings which range from gayety and brightness to tranquility, from drama to curdled and inchoate depression, saturate the browns and pinks, bright or muddy crimsons, mustards and vermillions, earth greens, and unnamable grays and blues of the superimposed bars. No painter has ever packed such a varied repertoire of moods into as simplistic--though endlessly nuanced--a manner. Rothko paints with modulated color areas; but once kindled to life by a willing spectator, their flat surfaces can become translucent or transparent, light up from within, or cease to exist. By their relation to each other space is established, readjusted, and subsequently, as vision changes, is revised. Veils or mists of tone, revealing or obscuring, can become as massive as blocks of concrete.

The new American painting, it is apparent, has both native and international roots and attachments. In contrast with artists such as Gorky, de Kooning, and Motherwell who continued, altered, or augmented the postimpressionist tradition, others, especially Rothko, Newman, and Still, set themselves against it. By unilateral pronouncements, and by castigation of the normal give and take of the art scene, these three are established on high places erected by their indomitability as well as by their works. Such sureness of mission was necessary during the years in which universal rejection gradually shaded into controversial adulation. It was the boldness of these three, and of de Kooning, Kline, and the other leaders of ^{the fifties} abstract painting, and their readiness to violate traditions and challenge canons of taste, that enabled them to establish and consolidate the international status American painting has now attained.

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Ben Heller Collection
C/E 61 29

PREFACE

There are larger collections of American pictures of the 1950's both in private and public hands but nowhere, neither in a Museum nor in a dwelling, have I seen a gallery of recent American paintings to match the big living room of Ben and Judith Heller. There a grand array of imposing canvasses, interrupted by windows looking over Central Park and a few monumental primitive sculptures, creates an effect somewhat overwhelming but very beautiful.

Much has been written - and with good reason - about the courage, the all-out commitment, the moral intensity of the American action painters. Something of their spirit affects a few of their patrons. I have rarely known an amateur more deeply and intensely involved in his collecting than Ben Heller. Enthusiasm tempered by critical anxiety and patient, empirical study mark his passionate search. In this pursuit Judith Heller has been a responsible partner. The superb quality of their pictures by Pollock, Rothko, Newman, Gottlieb and the others are their reward. Quality, yes, and grandeur too, for most of the painters here represented are at their best working in large scale. The Hellers were among the first collectors to accept this inconvenient circumstance, not as exceptional but as normal. Even in their former and smaller apartment they accommodated or, more precisely, domesticated canvases which only a few years before seemed enormously too big for the ordinary New York interior.

Their collection has placed a certain burden on Mr. and Mrs. Heller. New York has five public museums (and will shortly have a sixth) more or less concerned with twentieth-century art.

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Ben Heller Collection

C/E 61 29

Preface

but in none of them can one count on seeing a really representative collection of recent American painting particularly by those still controversial artists who have won fame and influence to a degree quite unprecedented in the history of our country. Critical lack of space is a serious factor in this sad state of affairs - and so is the constant demand from abroad to lend abstract expressionist paintings. In any case, when a visitor, American or foreign, or even a New Yorker, asks where he can see the best accessible collection of American action paintings in New York one's first thought is the Heller's apartment.

Mr. and Mrs. Heller have been generously hospitable to a steadily increasing number of visitors but it is not easy for any household to suffer such continual invasion of privacy. Their predicament, though flattering to their taste and judgment, has contributed to their decision to offer the better part of their collection for a tour among museums in other American cities. But this is not their only reason. They are interested in younger artists as well as the now established painters whose reputations date back ten or fifteen years. They need some wall space to try out more of the new painting of the sixties. However they are moved primarily by their belief that other communities may welcome a chance to see their pictures.

Abstract expressionism or action painting, like all powerful movements, has inspired so much bitter debate and generated so vast a body of mediocre and bad imitators that it is particularly important now to see it at its best. Mr. and Mrs. Heller offer

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Ben Heller Collection
C/E 61 29
Preface

cc: Mrs. Parkinson Miss Pearson
Mr. d'Harnoncourt Miss Frost
Mr. Barr
Mr. Selz
Mrs. Shaw
Mr. McCray

Heller

Handwritten: Heller
AHB file

an opportunity to do just that. The Museum of Modern Art, which in the past has imposed so frequently upon their generosity for loans to its International Program, is now delighted to send on

Mr. Etour in our own country these magnificent American paintings.
111 Central Park West
New York 17, New York

Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
Director of the Museum Collections
The Museum of Modern Art.

Dear Ben:

I should like to make formal acknowledgement of your and Judy's extraordinary generosity in offering your ravishingly beautiful collection to the Museum to circulate to other American institutions from the summer of 1961 to September 1963. Our progress in scheduling this exhibition has been slow but it has now advanced to the point where we are ready to proceed.

As we anticipated, the size of your paintings and the resultant costs of preparation and transportation have exceeded rental fees beyond the reach of all but a few museums. Most institutions which can present an exhibition of this scale fix their schedules at least a year in advance, and it has been impossible so far to establish a schedule that would begin with Mr. Heller. In offering the collection, we have been especially Mr. Selz to place it in the outstanding success of our leading Miss Miller. At the same time we have sought those institutions Mr. Seitz the showing of a collection of such astonishing character and quality would establish standards for future public collections.

As I have told you, neither Boston, Washington, Philadelphia, Richmond nor Houston have seen their way clear to subscribing. To date we have established the six first bookings listed below, and we are in contact with three other museums for the remaining dates.

- October 15 - November 12, 1961: Art Institute of Chicago
(open dates: December 6 - 31, 1961)
- January 22 - February 25, 1962: Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati
- March 15 - April 10, 1962: Cleveland Museum of Art

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

HELLER

cc: Mrs. Parkinson Miss Pearson
Mr. d'Harnoncourt Miss Frost
Mr. Barr
Mr. Selz
Mrs. Shaw
Mr. McCray
Mr. Rasmussen
Miss Dudley

*Please return
AHB files*

March 27, 1961

Mr. Ben Heller
151 Central Park West
New York 23, New York

Dear Ben:

I should like to make formal acknowledgement of your and Judy's extraordinary generosity in offering your ravishingly beautiful collection to the Museum to circulate to other American institutions from the summer of 1961 to September 1962. Our progress in scheduling this exhibition has been slow but it has now advanced to the point where we are ready to proceed.

As we anticipated, the size of your paintings and the resultant costs of preparation and transportation have established rental fees beyond the reach of all but a few museums. Most institutions which can present an exhibition of this scale fix their schedules at least a year in advance, and it has been impossible so far to establish a schedule that would begin this summer. In offering the collection, we have been especially anxious to place it in the outstanding museums of our leading cities. At the same time we have sought those institutions where the showing of a collection of such astonishing character and quality would establish standards for future private or public collections.

As I have told you, neither Boston, Washington, Philadelphia, Richmond nor Houston have seen their way clear to subscribing. To date we have established the six firm bookings listed below, and we are in contact with three other museums for the remaining dates.

October 13 - November 12, 1961: Art Institute of Chicago
(open dates: December 4 - 31, 1961)
January 22 - February 25, 1962: Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati
March 13 - April 10, 1962: Cleveland Museum of Art

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| The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY | Collection: | Series.Folder: |
| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Mr. Ben Heller

- 2 -

March 27, 1961

April 30 - June 3, 1962: California Palace of the
Legion of Honor, San Francisco
June - July, 1962: Portland Art Museum
August - September 30, 1962: Los Angeles County Museum

We expect to learn very soon whether it is possible to arrange a booking before the Chicago showing for this late summer. As soon as this is established we can proceed with the schedule of assembly and preparation. In anticipation of this, it is most important to authorize the restoration recommended by Riportella as outlined in his report, a copy of which was sent to you.

As I told you in our telephone conversation, the invariable policy of the Museum has been to request the owner to assume costs of restoration which are necessary because of the inherent nature of the work of art and which serve primarily to enhance its value and permanent security. Thus, we would ask you to assume the costs of recommended restoration for the three Kline paintings which need new stretchers, double lining, cleaning, filling and inpainting losses and special surface coatings. This would also apply to the mounting of the large Newman Vir Heroicus Sublimus on a new stretcher. We would assume the costs of all special framing necessary for travel and for the glazing of the large Gorky Summation. If you are agreeable to this arrangement, I hope we may arrange for Riportella to begin work on the pictures at your earliest convenience. We shall also ask him to examine the two Rothko paintings which you lent to the recent exhibition and to recommend any repairs necessary.

I am naturally somewhat concerned by Riportella's report on Pollock's One, 1950 lest it affect the inclusion of this painting in the exhibition. One and Blue Poles have naturally been key works in influencing subscribers to commit themselves to the exhibition, and the deletion of One might seriously alter the exhibition's circulation. As Mr. Riportella's report indicates, the cracking condition and cupping in One is caused by the nature of materials used by Pollock and will inevitably progress, regardless of whether or not the painting travels. Since the painting traveled extensively without damage in Brazil and in Europe, its condition cannot necessarily be considered as unsafe to travel. We would of course exercise every care in its handling. However, this must be your own

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| The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY | Collection: | Series.Folder: |
| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Mr. Ben Heller

- 3 -

March 27, 1961

carefully considered decision.

In discussing the collection with both René d'Harnoncourt and Alfred Barr, and also with several of the exhibitors, it was felt that the overall impact of the exhibition would be greater if we concentrated solely on the more spectacular "masters" generally represented in large size and by more than one work. We would recommend therefore that the works by Vicente, Sander, Graham and Fine, as well as the two fragile Cornells, not be included in the exhibition. I should also mention to you that in scheduling the exhibition, several of the museums have expressed some concern as to whether you were contemplating the sale of the collection within the foreseeable future. I hope I have been correct in assuring them you were not. In any case, it would be desirable for you to indicate that you intend to hold the collection virtually intact for at least one year following the conclusion of its circulation.

You will note that the last showing requested by Los Angeles extends until the end of September 1962. I do hope that you are willing to make the collection available for this period which would mean that the paintings would be returned to your apartment not later than the end of October. As you know, we had very much hoped a showing could be arranged at the Museum this summer but this has been pending for some time in deference to a showing of the Adele Levy Collection which has now materialized. If it is still acceptable to you, we should like to explore later possibilities in the Museum's schedule before approaching other New York institutions.

Finally, as a last detail, we have discussed the catalog with all of the exhibitors who are most enthusiastic at the prospect of one similar in character to the Soby Collection catalog at Knoedler's. We propose if possible individual critical comments on the separate paintings in the collection and a general foreword by one of the leading spokesmen for the abstract-expressionist school. We would welcome a brief introduction by you expressing your personal point of view as a collector.

I must apologize, Ben, for bombarding you with these many details but I am sure you understand the necessity of our receiving their confirmation at your earliest convenience.

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Mr. Ben Heller

- 4 -

March 27, 1961

Meanwhile, let me again express my personal thanks and the gratitude of the Museum for your and Judy's continuing generosity.

With affectionate greetings to you both.

Sincerely,

Porter A. McCray

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cc: P. McCray
B. Seitz

HELLER

Mr. Ben Heller / Page 2 / July 1, 1961.

although this wording does not concern quality, I July 1, 1961
wishes to send the Cornellians your because their fragility.

Dear Ben:

If you are not satisfied with my proposal and would prefer I have just returned from two weeks preparation for a series of long-postponed lectures I must give in Iceland, leaving this Monday. After I return toward the end of July I shall have to follow my doctor's orders and go away for six weeks during which I had planned to lay out the new illustrated catalogue of the Museum Collection of Painting and Sculpture which has been out of print for about ten years.

I bore you with my future biography by way of explaining why I cannot do a preface for the catalogue of your collection in any way comparable to that which I wrote for Jim Soby's exhibition. Much as I should like to do what you have asked, I really do not feel that I ought to do so.

I would suggest the following solution subject to your approval: I would be glad to write a couple of brief paragraphs by way of appreciation for your collection and its importance in and to New York. This could then be followed by an introduction to the collection with reference to the artists and pictures themselves by Bill Seitz, the Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture exhibitions here at the Museum. Although Bill is best-known at present for his excellent book on Monet and the exhibition of Monet here, he is very familiar with the "New York School" and has written about it extensively in a masterly doctor's thesis for Princeton which I had the honor to sponsor. In other words, I think he would do a very good job of verbal presentation of the works of art to the public in the other cities.

Though I am sure that none of us here would want Bill Seitz to do this preface if you were against it, I hope that you would take my recommendation, and that Judy would also approve it.

I have asked Bill about this job in a tentative way. He said he would be glad to take it on although he would need to come to see and study your collection briefly before he could write.

There is one matter which Porter and Bill and I feel strongly about. That is the wisdom of keeping to the original plan of the exhibition perhaps with the additional inclusion of Cornell but without the five artists on the so-called "B" list. I think the impact and generally speaking the quality of the exhibition would be definitely diffused if the "B" list were to be included. Also,

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| The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY | Collection: | Series/Folder: |
| | AHB | I.A.514 |

Mr. Ben Heller ./ Page 2 ./ July 1, 1961.

BEN HELLER
1071 SIXTH AVENUE
NEW YORK 18, N.Y.

although this warning does not concern quality, I do think it
unwise to send the Cornellsen tour because their fragility.

If you are not satisfied with my proposal and would
prefer that I withdraw entirely please do not hesitate to say
so and reopen the matter with Porter.

Mr. Alfred Barr
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53rd Street
New York City, N. Y.

Sincerely,
AHB

Dear Alfred:

Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

Porter and I discussed at length the other day the traveling
show of our collection. We went over a variety of details,
among them the catalogue.

He me ~~Mr. Ben Heller~~ you would probably be too busy to write
the fo ~~1071 Sixth Avenue~~ discussed other possible "candidates."
New York 18, New York
I find, ~~discussed~~ has elapsed, that I am deeply
disappointed at the possibility of your not doing the forward
because somewhere along the line I had come to think that you
would, not because of anything anybody said but because it
would be so appropriate.

(Dictated by Mr. Barr but signed in his absence.)

I cannot, of course, claim any such lengthy relationship with
you as, for example, Jim Soby (I mention this because we
originally discussed a catalogue like Knoedler's for his show),
but our relationship extends over a longer period time span
than you might think - as I - as have so many - cut my visual
eye teeth at The Museum as well as, I believe, having gotten
my second and third year medals there.

I know how busy you are and how many responsibilities you
have and I, therefore, am hesitant to ask - and hope I am not
out of line in doing so - but I do wish you would see if you
could not find the time to do our introduction as it would be
more significant to Judy and myself if it were by you than any-
body else.

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BEN HELLER
1071 SIXTH AVENUE
NEW YORK 18, N.Y.

June 23, 1961

Mr. Alfred Barr
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53rd Street
New York City, N. Y.

*Copy would
be needed
Sept 1.*

Dear Alfred:

Porter and I discussed at lunch the other day the traveling show of our collection. We went over a variety of details, among them the catalogue.

He mentioned that you would probably be too busy to write the forward, and so we discussed other possible "candidates." I find, however, after a day has elapsed, that I am deeply disappointed at the possibility of your not doing the forward because somewhere along the line I had come to think that you would, not because of anything anybody said but because it would be so appropriate.

I cannot, of course, claim any such lengthy relationship with you as, for example, Jim Soby (I mention this because we originally discussed a catalogue like Knoedler's for his show), but our relationship extends over a longer period time span than you might think as I - as have so many - cut my visual eye teeth at The Museum as well as, I believe, having gotten my second and third year molars there.

I know how busy you are and how many responsibilities you have and I, therefore, am hesitant to ask - and hope I am not out of line in doing so - but I do wish you would see if you could not find the time to do our introduction as it would be more significant to Judy and myself if it were by you than anybody else.

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Mr. Alfred Barr

- 2 -

June 23, 1961

Please forgive me if I am being too forward in this, and if you are in truth so busy, please feel free to say no.

I hope you had a good vacation.

Sincerely yours,



BH:nl

Ben Heller

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Date June 30, 1961

Preliminary Check List

To: Mr. Barr **Re:** Ben Heller Collection
From: Porter A. McCray Title

Dear Alfred:

I believe Ben Heller has written you urging you to write a brief introduction to the catalog being issued to accompany his collection on tour. He has also been asked to write a brief piece from the point of view of the collector. We are therefore anxious just to know whether you will be willing to undertake this task and if so to determine the length of introduction you prefer to write and when you can furnish us with the copy. We have looked into our production schedule for the catalog and find that all copy should reach the printer not later than August 15th. The proposed format of the catalog calls for a printed page accommodating approximately 450 words or 2800 characters. The choice of number of pages would be your decision. We have retained Elaine Lustig to design the catalog.

The collection's first showing is at the Art Institute in Chicago opening on October 13th. It then goes to Cincinnati, Cleveland, Portland, San Francisco and Los Angeles. You may recall from the copy of my letter of March 27th to Ben that after discussing the character of the choice with you and Rene our proposal was to circulate those works on the attached mimeographed list "A". Ben accepted this at the time but now after having discussed the matter of the addition of the lesser artists with many of the exhibitors wants to add list "B" (attached) to the show. I would appreciate your opinion on this last matter.

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| ADOLF GOTTLIEB | Painting | 60-1/2 x 80" |
| ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG | Painting | 78 x 110" |
| ADOLPH GOTTLIEB | Paint | 96 x 60" |
| CLIFFORD STILL | Painting #7, 1959 | 71-3/4 x 68-7/8" |
| HENRY WATSON YINLOU | Painting #15, 1951 | 66 x 70" |

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| The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY | Collection: | Series.Folder: |
| | AHB | I.A.514 |

LIST "A"

A

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Circulating exhibition: COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. BEN HELLER

Preliminary Check List

| <u>Artist</u> | <u>Title</u> | <u>Dimensions (Height precedes width)</u> |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| JACKSON POLLOCK | <u>Echo</u> | 92 x 85-3/4" |
| " | <u>One</u> | 106 x 209-3/8" |
| " | <u>Blue Poles</u> | 83 x 192-1/2" |
| MARK ROTHKO | <u>Painting #10, 1953</u> | 76-1/2 x 67-1/2" |
| | <u>White, Red and Mustard</u> | 92 x 66" |
| | <u>Painting #27, 1954</u> | 81 x 87" |
| | <u>Earth Green</u> | 90-3/8 x 73-1/2" |
| | <u>Browns</u> | 92 x 76-1/4" |
| | <u>Four Darks on Red</u> | 102-1/8 x 116-1/2" |
| BARNETT NEWMAN | <u>Adam</u> | 95-5/8 x 79-5/8" |
| | <u>Queen of the Night</u> | 96 x 18-5/8" |
| | <u>Vir Heroicus Sublimus</u> | 96 x 21 1/4" |
| | <u>Small Untitled Oil</u> | 10 x 18" aprx. |
| FRANZ KLINE | <u>9th Street</u> | 59-3/4 x 78" |
| | <u>Painting #2</u> | 81-1/8 x 107-1/2" |
| | <u>Untitled "Diagonal"</u> | 60-1/2 x 83" |
| ARSHIIE GORKY | <u>Summation</u> | 78 x 101" |
| ADOLPH GOTTLIEB | <u>Burst</u> | 96 x 40" |
| CLYFFORD STILL | <u>Painting #2, 1949</u> | 91-3/4 x 68-7/8" |
| BRADLEY WALKER TOMLIN | <u>Painting #15, 1953</u> | 46 x 76" |

2/27/61

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| | AHB | I.A.514 |

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"A cont'd

| Preliminary Check List | | Page 2. |
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| AD RHEINHARDT | <u>Blues</u> | 108-1/4 x 39-3/4" |
| JACK TWORKOV | <u>Transverse</u> | 72 x 76" |
| ROBERT MOTHERWELL | Collage | 47-1/2 x 35-1/2" |
| | <u>Wall Painting #4</u> | 54 x 72" |
| PHILIP GUSTON | <u>Zone</u> | 46 x 48" |
| | <u>Evidence</u> | 64-1/2 x 67-3/4" |
| | <u>Drawing</u> | 13-3/4 x 16-3/4" |
| | <u>Drawing</u> | |
| WILLEM DE KOONING | <u>Women, Wind and Window</u> | 23-3/4 x 35-1/2" |
| | <u>Black and White Oil on Paper</u> | 19 x 25-1/2" |
| JOSEPH CORNELL | <u>Medici Boy</u> | 18 x 11 1/2 " |
| | <u>Hotel d'Etoile</u> | 22 1/2 x 12 5/8 " |

2/27/61

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"B"

LIST "B"

Smaller items suggested for circulation by Mr. Ben Heller in his letter of June 5, 1961

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| PERLE FINE | <u>Collage</u> | 26 x 39 1/4 |
| | <u>Collage</u> | "smaller" than above |

| | | |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------|
| JOHN GRAHAM | <u>Drawings</u> | 21 3/4 x 17" |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------|

| | | |
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| EARL KERKHAM | <u>Oil</u> | "small" |
|--------------|------------|---------|

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| LUDWIG SANDER | <u>Oil on Paper</u> | 24 1/2 x 19" |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------|

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|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|
| ESTEBAN VICENTE | <u>Small Collage</u> | 14 x 10 1/2" |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|

June 30, 1961