

THE LEARNING CURVE

The Long Curve: 150 Years of Visionary Collecting at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery

> BY ERIC JACKSON-FORSBERG

The names of some museum benefactors are writ large on the museums themselves: Barnes, Guggenheim, Getty, Albright-Knox. Behind these familiar examples of the “edifice complex,” the individuals who built these collections, piece by piece, are sometimes lesser known. *The Long Curve: 150 Years of Visionary Collecting at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery* illustrates how the institution built a world-class collection of modern and contemporary art through the vision—and dollars—of those whose names are on the building as well as those building the collection behind the scenes.

The exhibition’s name is derived from a pithy statement by Martha Jackson, one of the ensemble cast of collectors profiled. In the late 1960s, she commented to art historian Paul Cummings that one can expect experimental art to take a long time to find its audience. “Art is a long curve,” she observed, echoing the more familiar term “learning curve.” And indeed, the learning curve that modern art demands of dealers, patrons, museums and audiences is really what’s on exhibit here. The Albright-Knox has been incredibly fortunate to have a series of progressively-minded benefactors who have looked into the crystal ball of then-contemporary art and seen the future—or shaped it, as the case may be. Five of these intrepid speculators are profiled in the exhibition: A. Conger Goodyear, Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Martha Jackson, Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, and Natalie and Irving Forman.



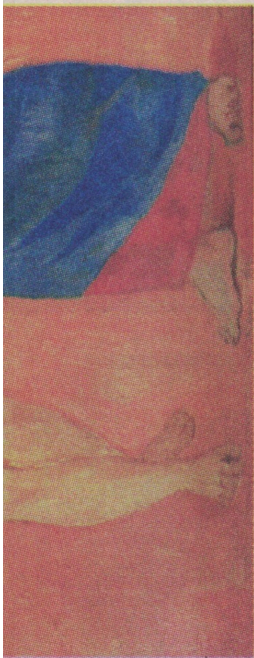
all of which will serve as ambassadors for the Albright-Knox collection as the show travels to other venues.

The lion’s share of space in the exhibition is dedicated to Seymour H. Knox, Jr. In the spirit of the Room of Contemporary Art (which he championed), Knox extended the gallery’s cutting-edge reputation into the post-war years by acquiring early Abstract Expressionist works for the collection—some so new that they were barely dry. In his longstanding association with the gallery, Knox donated more than 900 works, including collection highlights by Rothko, Frankenthaler, Stella, Lichtenstein, and Warhol. One gallery of Knox donations surrounds the viewer with large Abstract Expressionist canvasses—a who’s-who of the New York School, illustrated through some of the most iconic, often-reproduced works from the collection, such as Pollock’s *Convergence*.

Two galleries dedicated to Martha Jackson demonstrate the more personal nature of her association with the artists she promoted. Like Goodyear, Jackson maintained close ties with the Albright-Knox after leaving Buffalo in 1944 to found her legendary gallery in New York. But Jackson’s contributions made a more diverse impression on the collection; she was a pioneer in fostering a global brand of modernism, and was a prominent advocate for women artists. Jackson’s relationship with such artists is evident in the works themselves. Grace Hartigan’s *When the Raven was White* bears a touching inscription: “To Martha, July, ’69, Hartigan.” In an even

The Long Curve, and its satellite exhibition *The Impermanent Collection: The Room of Contemporary Art, 1939-1971*, illustrate Jackson's observation by tracing the gallery's growing reputation as a progressive crucible for testing (and, somehow, preserving) "the new." Jackson's metaphor of modern art's arc from infamy to acceptance to appreciation was presaged in an edition of gallery Notes that coincided with the opening of the Room of Contemporary Art (January 1939): "Acquisitions [of art of our own time] have been rare, for it takes time to test the long range worth of a work of art, and every formal purchase must always be something of a speculation." Accordingly, the Room of Contemporary Art was created to carve out a space where such speculation could be exhibited in a public forum. The room also introduced the radical idea that the work exhibited there would not automatically become locked into a permanent public trust. This offers an intriguing new perspective on the gallery's deaccessioning initiative of 2007 and the unfortunate flap that resulted in the formation of the adversarial "Buffalo Art Keepers" (see Bruce Jackson, "The War Against the Al-bright-Knox," *Artvoice* v6n8, 2/22/07). The Impermanent Collection demonstrates that the gallery set an early precedent for "test driving" artwork before committing to it, with the option to walk away or strategically trade up.

Although he paved the way for the Room of Contemporary Art, A. Conger Goodyear stepped down from the Albright-



A. Conger Goodyear's advocacy for the acquisition of Pablo Picasso's *La Toilette* led to his departure from the gallery's board of directors.

Knox board before the room opened. This parting of ways was precipitated by Goodyear's advocacy for a work that now figures prominently in the Gallery's collection: Picasso's *La Toilette*. Goodyear, who went on to become the first president of MoMA, quipped that he was "quite happy to be ostracized for a Picasso." Long since embraced, the painting is installed dramatically in an inner doorway beyond the first central gallery, where it beckons to visitors. For that matter, *La Toilette* is hung as if to give spatial expression to the watershed moment it represents to the collection: the edgy work that later becomes a familiar favorite. The rest of the Goodyear section of the exhibition demonstrates his talent for selecting sublime modern works that stand out amid a distinguished collection: paintings by Van Gogh, Gauguin, Kahlo and Dali,

more overt dedication, Jiro Yoshihara's calligraphic piece is entitled *To Martha's Memory*. With such relationships dem-onstrated by the artwork, one feels the presence of Jackson perhaps more poignantly than the other donors profited.

The Long Curve's final section exhibits selected gifts of modern and contemporary art from two parties that exemplify a continuing legacy of aesthetic philanthropy: Natalie and Irving Forman, and Giuseppe Panza di Biumo. But as important as these collectors are in complementing the previous benefactors of the Albright-Knox, their gifts of minimal and monochromatic art also serve to push the envelope of "the new." They effectively enhance the "long curve" by extending it into the present. Without this section, the curve might become a terminal, historical artifact itself—the obverse of the modern experiment. In the Forman and Panza galleries, the whispers of "I don't get it" may be more common, but such incredulous comments echo those heard in the Room of Contemporary Art decades earlier.

The Long Curve offers an impressive array of modern and contemporary masterworks, from the endearing, exuberant motion of Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* to Anne Truitt's quiet, polychromatic pier (*Damask*, 1980). But as a whole, *The Long Curve* exhibits something more compelling than any of its individual works: that exquisite moment when art is truly contemporary—the astonishing act of modernism in the making.



CHI-STOCK

A new series of art events debuts

> BY J. TIM RAYMOND

Ralph Sirianni—a friend, artist, veteran, and champion of possibilities in improving one's good nature—invited me to "Chi-Stock," a music and art event held in a large downtown loft put together by his son, Gabriel, featuring Ralph painting *in situ* while the young patrons watched, chatted, and danced. An upright piano served as a bar where drinks were passed over the piano lid from an elevated plat-

form. An atmosphere of family fealty prevailed as Sirianni brushed acrylic on a wall-sized, taped-off canvas.

Chi is the vital life force that stimulates motivation, coming from the original Chinese (*qi*) for breath. Meant to be a series of future events providing a visually ingratiating gathering place for young people, Chi-Stock will feature artists working on installations specific to themes supporting introspection, contemplation, and joy.

Meanwhile in another part of the loft, Bruce Lee held forth in *Enter the Dragon* while a fog machine created billowing plumes before a seated Buddha amid a gathering of tea lights.