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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

MoMA, the New Edition: From Monumental to Experimental



Exterior of the Museum of Modern Art's planned face on West 53rd Street, showing glass-walled galleries. Access to the ground floor will be free to the public. The galleries incorporate space from the demolished American Folk Art Museum and Jean Nouvel condominium tower. Diller Scofidio + Renfro

By Holland Cotter

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Early on, the Museum of Modern Art developed a snugly tailored origin myth for modern art itself. This was invented by the museum's first director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., and mapped out in a began-and-begat chart of labels and directional arrows. The chart had the operational logic of a computer board, but was programmed for limited connectivity, namely between Europe and the United States, more specifically between Paris and New York. Modernism was a hard-wired Western affair.

By the late 20th century, the MoMA myth had lost credibility. Scholars and artists were revealing Modernism to have always been a global phenomenon, emerging across the world in different places, on different schedules. MoMA had an opportunity to acknowledge this reality when it moved into its newly redesigned

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53rd Street headquarters in 2004, but chose to preserve, with minor tweaks, the old history that had long been its brand.

Now, however, with the inauguration of a substantial expansion next October, the institutional telling of history seems set to change, along with certain other aspects of MoMA's patented way of presenting art.

One thing that *won't* change is the overall chronological sequencing now in place: early Modernism (roughly 1880s to the 1940s) on the fifth floor, mid-20th-century work (1940s-1970s) on the fourth floor and contemporary work from the 1980s onward on the high-ceilinged second floor, with the gallery space on each floor much extended.

But days of strict departmental divisions are pretty much over. Rather than being sorted out by discipline, the collection galleries will be experiments in cross-pollination, with painting, sculpture, photography and design sharing the same turf.

Nor will the display be static. The chronological line is likely to include galleries devoted to specific geographic locations (such as, say, Harlem in the 1940s), to art and poetry in the 1960s, to groups of artists (like those surrounding the poet and curator [Frank O'Hara](#)), or to zeitgeisty themes. A performance space will be inserted into the mix, and space to accommodate large-scale video installations like [Wu Tsang's](#) 2017 "We hold where study," a collaboration by this gender nonconforming artist with the writer Fred Moten and the choreographer Ligia Lewis.

And the permanent collection gallery displays will be changed frequently. The plan is to systematically rotate a selection of art in the galleries on the fifth, fourth and second floors about every six months, with roughly 30 percent of the contents rotated each year. By 2022, MoMA will have incrementally rehung all three floors, effectively executing a full reinstallation. Another three-year cycle will then begin.

The advantages of such switchovers are many. Repeat visitors will have fresh art experiences. New histories will get told. Old canons will start to erode. At the same time, though, MoMA's organizational mettle will be under stress. Big museums are kludgy, slow-moving machines. I suspect the new schedule will keep MoMA staff up late working nights, which, of course, young people can do, no problem. So with luck, much of the shifting and rethinking will be assigned to junior curators energized by the challenge and filled with 21st century ideas, about, among other things, the ethics of determining the cultural breadth of art to be shown.

That those ideas are already taken seriously can be gleaned from the initial lineup of temporary shows announced on Tuesday. "Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction — The Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift" will be a survey of Latin American abstract and concrete art from Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela. Thanks to [Ms. Cisneros](#), some of the artists — [Lygia Clark](#), [Hélio Oiticica](#), [Mira Schendel](#), [Jesús Rafael Soto](#) — are already MoMA fixtures. Hopefully, the show will introduce some new names too.

A second show, a career survey of the African-American artist who now goes by one name, [Pope.L](#), has the potential to put a welcome crack in MoMA's high-polish veneer. In the past, this artist has belly-crawled the length of Manhattan, ingested entire issues of The Wall Street Journal, and created odoriferous installations from baloney and Pop-Tarts. Abject matter — stuff that rots, stinks and oozes — has historically been MoMA's least favorite medium. I look forward to seeing how Pope.L, who once billed himself as "[The Friendliest Black Artist in America](#)," will fare here.

A multiyear exhibition program called "The Studio Museum at MoMA," will be organized by [Thelma Golden](#), director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Its debut offering will be a solo show of paintings — as lustrous looking as watered silk but stealthily political in content — by the young Kenya-born artist Michael Armitage. The show will be installed in a new ground-floor project space open free to the public.

Finally, an exhibition called "[Bettye Saar: The Legends of 'Black Girl's Window](#)," will at least gesture toward putting to rights a longstanding omission. Ms. Saar, now 92, is many decades overdue for a full career retrospective. Disappointingly, the planned show, consisting of 42 early prints by Ms. Saar, is not that. But at least it gives a major artist the solo spotlight on prime MoMA real estate.

Even more significant, in the long run, is the fact that MoMA has acquired the Saar prints for its collection. Acquisition is everything. Short-term shows come and go. Their presence can signal a genuine change in an institutional direction or merely paper over entrenched habits. The only solid gauge of commitment is when something is brought into the collection, and put on view in the permanent galleries. And specific recent acquisitions that will debut when MoMA reopens in October are the surest signs of MoMA's intention to widen its sights.

We'll see the first painting to enter the collection by the Spanish-born, Mexico City-based [Remedios Varo](#) (1908-1963). In addition to being a mesmerizing image — it suggests a high-fashion version of "The Handmaid's Tale" — it adds to the small number of female artists in the museum's sizable Surrealist holding. And there's a newly acquired painting, from the early 1960s by Hervé Télémaque, born in Haiti. Mr. Télémaque, 81, has lived and worked in New York, Paris and Port-au-Prince, and his painting embodies the spirit of three. It has AbEx sweep, Pop verve and an otherness that makes it a world of its own.

MoMA has a treasure in another acquisition, the [1976 "Prison Notebook" by the Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi](#), a sequence of drawings that helped him survive a harrowing six-month political imprisonment in Khartoum in 1975.

An [El-Salahi retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2013](#) never made it across the Atlantic. Maybe the next one will. I'm already eagerly looking forward to the survey, scheduled for the Met Breuer this summer, of the Indian sculptor [Mrinalini Mukherjee](#) (1949-2015). Her fantastic, hemp-woven figure of a female nature spirit, which will be on view with MoMA's reopening, is an exhibition in itself.

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How these works will be contextualized remains to be seen, as — more crucially — does the museum’s follow-up pattern of acquisition and display (i.e., will “expansion” be measured only in square feet or in evolving philosophy?) I don’t trust long-term institutional promises. I trust what I see. And if those newly acquired works are there, on the wall, or on the floor in October, that’s a good sign.