

COLLECTING COLLECTIONS

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES

What makes a museum's collection significant? Over the course of its 29-year history, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, has built a collection that goes beyond amassing striking, relevant, and unique art objects. Its significance lies not only in its highlights, depth, and breadth, but also in the fact that it is a touchstone for a variety of communities. A museum, at its core, sustains a network of relationships—among collectors, artists, and viewers, as well as the trustees and staff who are stewards of its artworks and spaces. Contemporary art, a category encompassing art production from the post–World War II era to the present, helps us to make sense of the culture in which we live—highlighting its defining ideas, issues, and points of view. An examination of MOCA's collection reveals a history of contemporary artists and movements as well as evidence of Los Angeles's rise as an international art center. It also reflects the influence and appreciation that has developed among the people who have built and visited the institution.

Collecting Collections is structured chronologically, featuring the earliest works in MOCA's holdings as well as its most recent acquisitions. This guide selects a few highlights in the history of contemporary art, as well as formative moments in the institution's growth. Returning visitors may recognize many of the works on display from previous exhibitions. Unlike those of many museums, MOCA's collection has never been installed permanently as a fixed canon, but instead has been presented in diverse and innovative ways by different curators—thematically, historically, singly, and by donor.

1940s–50s

Piet Mondrian's 1939 painting *Composition of Red, Blue, Yellow, and White: Nom III* introduces *Collecting Collections* on the exhibition's entry wall. The lines and colors in this work by one of the key figures in modern abstract painting may be instantly recognizable. It is only through spending time with the artwork, however, that its hand-drawn lines and painstakingly applied layers of oil paint become apparent, creating a rhythm and sense of space that aims for pure form and visual associations without referring to nature or objects. The earliest painting in MOCA's

collection, this work was among a number of important gifts from the Rita and Taft Schreiber Collection. In the Schreiber home, it shared wall space with Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist painting *Number 1, 1949* (1949). An elegant and forceful example of Pollock's groundbreaking drip style, this work, which is installed in the next gallery, has a place of inestimable importance in the museum's collection.

Three photographs by Helen Levitt form part of a series documenting the daily lives of New York residents in the early 1940s. Inspired by both the sociopolitical implications and the artistic possibilities offered by street photography, Levitt used a camera specially outfitted with a viewfinder and lens that pointed 90 degrees from where she appeared to be shooting. MOCA acquired Levitt's photographs, along with those of Robert Frank and other major social-documentary photographers, in 1994 as part of a group of 2,300 images with funds provided by the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation Photography Collection.

David Smith's *Cubi III* (1961) is one of a series of large stainless-steel sculptures composed of geometric volumes. Smith developed his ideas for this series by taping together cardboard

boxes, which were then translated into metal forms with burnished surfaces that foster the play of light. *Cubi III* was given to MOCA in 1989 by Beatrice and Philip Gersh, whose broad-ranging collection charts the development of 20th-century art in microcosm. In this sculpture, viewers can witness early steps toward what would come to be known as minimal art. Like other abstract expressionist works in this gallery, Willem de Kooning's 1952 drawing *Two Women with Still Life* evidences the processes and gestures of the artist as he worked. Abstract expressionist artists did not attempt to create a signature style as a group, but instead aimed to communicate profound, even mystical experiences that would resonate universally while expressing highly individual styles. This and other drawings of the period provided de Kooning opportunities to experiment spontaneously with new techniques and forms—layering, erasing, bringing background elements into the foreground—without the commitment required by slow-drying oil paint.

Marcia Simon Weisman, the donor of the de Kooning drawing, played a critical role in the formation of MOCA. In 1979, the philanthropist was seated next to then-Mayor Tom Bradley at a political fundraiser and, along with former Councilman Joel Wachs, persuaded the mayor to consider Los Angeles as a site for a new contemporary art museum. Weeks later, the mayor's Advisory Committee was formed, setting in motion plans that eventually came to fruition as MOCA, the city's first institution devoted to contemporary art. A founding trustee, Weisman's deep involvement and generosity, including a major gift of 83 drawings, are commemorated through the naming of the museum's Marcia Simon Weisman Works on Paper Study Center.

In the early 1960s, Claes Oldenburg draped plaster-soaked muslin over wire armatures, which he then painted to resemble items available in retail stores. He displayed and sold these works to the public from his New York City studio, a performance space known

as "The Store," in 1961–62. Considered a pop artist, Oldenburg said, "I have always felt the need of correspondence between one's art and one's life. I feel my purpose is to say something about my times." These and other works by the artist are part of the renowned Panza Collection, which became a cornerstone of MOCA's holdings.

MOCA's acquisition of portions of the Panza Collection from Founding Trustee Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo was as controversial as it was important for the museum. Structured as a purchase and partial gift, the acquisition prompted art-world observers to question MOCA for paying a trustee for a collection, albeit one offered far below fair-market value. Their reservations proved to be unfounded, as the art-historical significance and influence of the Panza Collection, with its depth and range, has continued to grow. Its masterpieces include exceptional works by artists Antoni Tàpies, Jean Fautrier, Franz Kline, James Rosenquist, Mark Rothko, and Robert Rauschenberg, many of which are on view here.

1960s–80s

Robert Irwin's series of untitled disk sculptures involve the viewer in a way that differs from Oldenburg's participatory art. Originally a painter, Irwin became increasingly interested in making the edges of his artworks disappear, emphasizing the viewer's perceptual experience. The disk installed here, dated 1965–67, never appears the same due to changes in light conditions, its placement, and the viewer's angle of perception. This work was a gift of the Lannan Foundation, whose in-depth holdings of works by California artists such as Irwin further solidified MOCA's already strong connection to local artists.

Each time it is installed, Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #97* (1971) is newly hand-drawn according to a set of instructions the artist composed. These instructions are the primary material of the work, aligning it with conceptual art and allowing for compositional

variation within certain parameters, so that an infinite number of versions of the drawing may be created. A gift of Kourosh Larizadeh, the work is not treated as a static object, but rather as information open to chance operations and the human hand.

White Plains, a 1975 sculpture by Hannah Wilke, features industrial materials to evoke the body through abstract organic forms. One of a series of such sculptures, *White Plains* is composed of layers of poured and dried latex fastened together with metal snaps. The work is a recent gift from Ruth and Jacob Bloom. Ruth Bloom has served on MOCA's Board of Trustees for 11 years.

John Baldessari's 1986 work *Some Rooms* evidences the artist's interest in experimenting with different framing methods as well as employing found images to question the possible meanings of seemingly banal photographs. The faces of the figures in the center of the composition are partially obscured by Baldessari's trademark dots, leading viewers to wonder what might be hidden or implied by the artist. Originally a painter, Baldessari is a highly influential conceptual artist who has served on MOCA's Board of Trustees since 2000. *Some Rooms* was a gift of the Broad Art Foundation, formed by Edythe and Eli Broad. A business leader whose cultural legacy in Los Angeles includes his tenure as founding chairman of MOCA's Board of Trustees, Eli Broad was also the first donor to pledge financial support to the museum.

1980s–2000s

Like other artists of the period, Kiki Smith explored the functions and limits of the body through poetic and evocative sculptures. Her materials often reference physical fragility, but her works resist simple or predictable interpretations. The untitled sculpture displayed here, a gift from the Lannan Foundation, is from 1989–90 and features 250 molded glass spermatozoa on a square black rubber mat. Larry Clark's photographs may evince the

influence of photojournalism in their subject matter, but they depart from an objective viewpoint by emphasizing the artist's presence as a participant or confidant rather than a detached observer. Now known also as a filmmaker, Clark received early recognition for his groundbreaking photographic exploration of controversial and even illegal activities by teens—drug use, sex, violence—an exploration that began with his own adolescent experiences. MOCA received these photographs, along with 60 other works, as part of the Barry Lowen Collection, which is known for the eclecticism and passionate commitment of its donor. The collection was exhibited at MOCA in 1986, a year after Mr. Lowen's death.

Several drawings by Gabriel Orozco, made between 1992 and 2001 and featuring nontraditional art media and collaged materials such as Mexican currency and airline boarding passes, hint at the artist's interest in ordinary materials and his global focus. Born in Mexico, Orozco exhibits extensively and splits his time between New York, Paris, and Mexico City. His artwork spans a range of photography, video, sculpture, collage, and installations. These works on paper form part of the Blake Byrne Collection, the focus of which is art created after 1950. Its 123 works make it the largest single gift from a private collector in MOCA's history.

Neo Rauch's painting *Quiz* (2002) is typical in scale and imagery of the artist's work. Based in Leipzig, Germany, and known for creating large paintings of dreamlike incongruity—perspectives that don't agree, fragments, unfinished or transparent architecture—Rauch creates characters that appear frozen in a drama whose meaning is ambiguous. He once told an interviewer, "I understand myself to be a director of plays." This work, along with other recent pieces, was purchased through funds provided by the Buddy Taub Foundation, which comprises works by artists from Germany, Sweden, Mexico, and the United States.

Collecting Collections represents unique aspects of MOCA's identity as an institution, its place in Los Angeles, and its role in the international art world. Unlike many museums, its holdings have evolved principally from donations by private collections, allowing the public to access multiple perspectives and points of view within one institution. MOCA has also enjoyed an extraordinary history of support by artists, many of whom have donated their own works, as well as works by other artists, to the museum. Major gifts from artists including Michael Asher, Judy Fiskin, Sam Francis, Ed Moses, and Raymond Pettibon have been featured in MOCA's *Artists' Gifts* exhibition series. *Collecting Collections* offers a special opportunity not only to reflect on and make new connections among the works displayed here, but to convey the museum's profound gratitude for the role it plays in inspiring the development of artists, ideas, and experiences.

—Catherine Arias, MOCA senior education manager/visitor experience

Collecting Collections: Highlights from the Permanent Collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles is curated by MOCA Curator Alma Ruiz.

Collecting Collections: Highlights from the Permanent Collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles is presented by The Jane and Marc Nathanson Family Foundation.

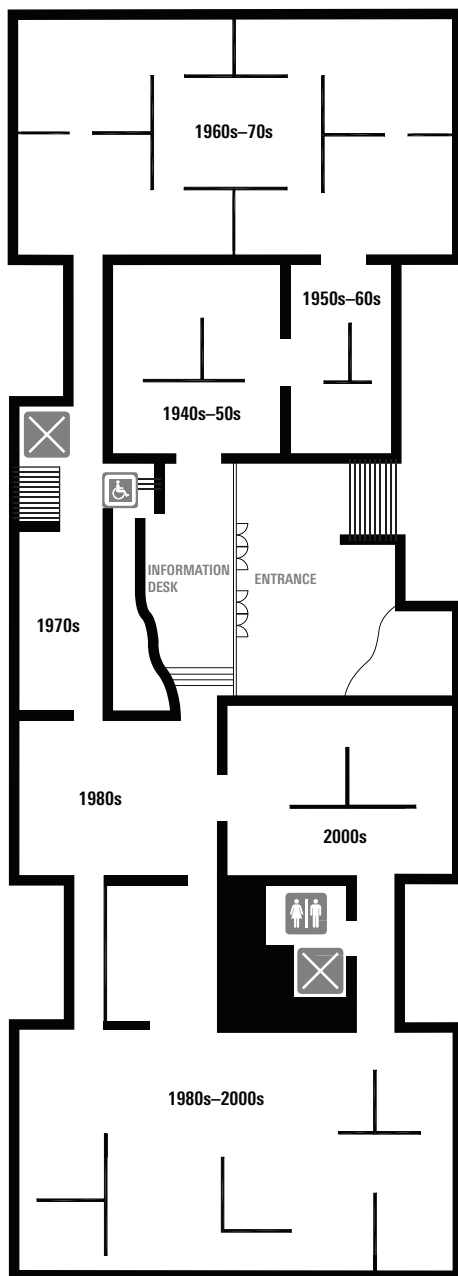
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