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## **Celebrating 175: Subject File, Still, Clyfford, 1954-1986**

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Clyff also wanted to have his works together. He wanted to keep them all as one great collection."

Mrs. Still acknowledges that the terms of the bequest are unusual but adds that few other artists have "saved most of their paintings and have been willing to donate them." She would not comment on the value of the bequest. Martha Baer, Christie's New York specialist in contemporary art, who appraised the Still estate in 1980, declined to state the appraisal total but said that if all of the paintings in the bequest were placed on the market at once, they would not bring more than \$29,000 apiece. This would amount to a total value of approximately \$18.8 million. Several New York art dealers say that the bequest has no monetary value because the works will never be on the market. Two major Still oils, however, were sold at a May 1985 auction at Sotheby's, fetching \$797,500 and \$577,500 respectively for a 1954 and a 1948 work. A 1955 painting offered at a Sotheby's November 1985 auction remained unsold, but the closing bid was \$525,000. And that same month an oil was for sale at the Marisa del Re Gallery in New York for \$1.1 million. The oil paintings in the estate, if assigned a value of \$633,000 each (based on an averaging of the prices of the three aforementioned paintings) and discounted 37 percent because of their estate status, in accordance with Internal Revenue Service valuation procedures, would be worth \$299.2 million. These figures assume all the paintings in the bequest (which have not been seen) are of comparable quality.

Reaction to the bequest among curators varies widely. Michael Auping, chief curator of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, says that Still's idea for the museum is "absolutely brilliant in predicting a kind of holistic attitude in art - it's a huge break from the isolated masterpiece: the idea of an existential development, that his life unfolds in his work. At the same time, it was taken to such an extreme."

"It's not going to happen the way Clyfford Still envisioned it," says Henry Geldzahler, curator of the Metropolitan's department of 20th-century art from 1967 to 1977 and commissioner of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs from 1978 to 1982. "I think Still's memory would be honored by making four or five gifts from the estate to different public institutions]."

The cost of building and maintaining a museum or of converting an existing building to house the collection has been a major obstacle. Still's estate did not provide an endowment for the museum, so the cost would have to be borne by the city accepting the bequest or by philanthropists.

In conjunction with the Baltimore Museum of Art, the city of Baltimore has been negotiating with Mrs. Still to place the bequest there. Jody Albright, director of the Mayor's Commission on Art and Culture, says, "We want the collection to stay in Maryland. The question is in meeting the terms that are acceptable to Mrs. Still."

The negotiations are in some ways awkward, according to Albright, because neither she nor the director of the Baltimore Museum, Arnold Lehman, has been allowed to see all the works of art, some of which are rolled rather than on stretchers.

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At Albright's request, in the early 1980s Lehman drew up an estimate of the museum's cost, plus costs for endowment, staffing and conservation facilities. The total came to \$310 million to \$13 million," Lehman says, adding that these figures were based on the assumption that not all the

paintings had to be shown at once, that the works would be placed in a facility adjacent to the museum and that real estate would not have to be purchased.

Mrs. Still envisions the museum on a single scale. She has drawn up an architectural model of a 25,000-square-foot building, projected to cost \$2 million, that would accommodate museum offices, storage, conservation facilities and exhibition space. "I'd think that around 75 [works] should be seen [at a time]," she says, which would allow the entire collection to rotate over a 10-year period.

If the bequest were to be real, it would establish the precedent of a publicly funded one-person museum. Several museums devoted to the work of a single artist do exist in the United States, among them the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the Charles M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana. The Russell Museum, however, presents exhibitions of other artists' works, and the Dalí Museum was supported by a combination of public funds, matching grants and money from Mr. and Mrs. A. Reynolds Morse, whose collection is housed at the museum. The Isamu Noguchi Museum in Queens in New York City was funded by Noguchi himself.

"It's tremendously curiously bequest," says Charles Wilentz, chief curator of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. "Can you imagine any city father who would build a museum to anyone, except maybe like Ruth? It's a kind of sobriety, in a way, when you create a museum, and I don't think many cities would want to be in that position."

The aforementioned curator who asked not to be identified says that Still wrote the bequest, in part, to suit such advocacy. "He wanted [his work] to be publicly acknowledged."

No one describes Still as an easy person, and some curators feel that it will be a generation before Still's bequest can be viewed objectively. Auping of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery says, "If you read many of the things Still wrote, his attitude, which can be interpreted as arrogant or brilliant, clouds the issue. The will is a legal extension of his whole attitude."

Still always had a low regard for the art world. On November 1, 1951, he wrote to Mark Rothko: "Circulation and effort are what I allow work to fall into accepted patterns of exploitation. . . . [My] view of the present chaos in the galleries, museums, and studios . . . the public domain is, and always has been, not a wall to drink from, but a cesspool of frauds and poisonous men." And in "An Open Letter to an Art Critic"—a letter Still wrote in 1959 but that remained unpublished until it appeared in *Artforum* magazine in 1965—he said, "It has always been my hope to create a fine place at which while all ideas can triumph, politics, ambition, and commerce, it will perhaps, always furnish a hope. But I cannot believe that somewhere there may be an exception."

STILL WAS BORN IN GRANDIN, NORTH DAKOTA, in 1894, and his family moved a year later to Spokane, Washington. His boyhood was spent in Spokane and in Alberta, Canada, where his family had a home-making studio. He studied art informally and in 1923 went to New York, where he was consigned by the old masters at the Metropolitan. He also enrolled at the Art Students League, where, he said, he was a student for 45 minutes before leaving. In his journals he recorded, "The canvases

the museum's cost, plus costs for endowment, staffing and conservation facilities. The total came to "\$10 million to \$15 million," Lehman says, adding that these figures were based on the assumption that not all the paintings had to be shown at once, that the works would be placed in a facility adjacent to the museum and that real estate would not have to be purchased.

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