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*Archives of American Art*

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

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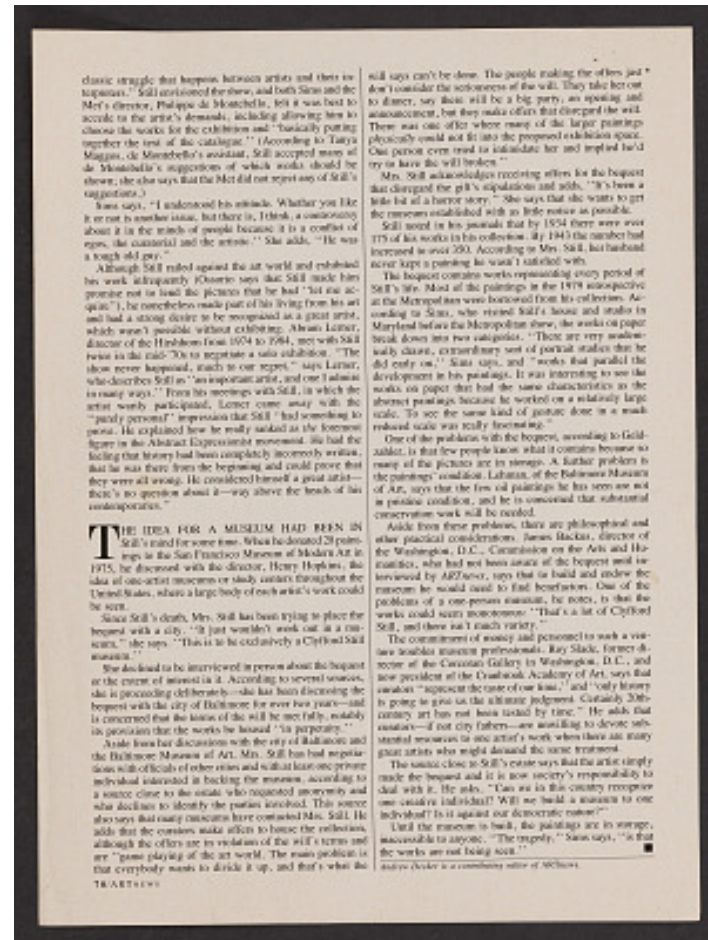
classic struggle that happens between artists and their interpreters." Still envisioned the show, and both Sims and the Met's director, Philippe de Montebello, felt it was best to accede to the artist's demands, including allowing him to choose the works for the exhibition and "basically putting together the text of the catalogue." (According to Tanya Maggos, de Montebello's assistant, Still accepted many of de Montebello's suggestions of which works should be shown; she also says that the Met did not reject any of Still's suggestions.)

Sims says, "I understood his attitude. Whether you like it or not is another issue, but there is, I think, a controversy about it in the minds of people because it is a conflict of egos, the curatorial and the artistic." She adds, "He was a tough old guy."

Although Still railed against the art world and exhibited his work infrequently (Ossorio says that Still made him promise not to lend the pictures that he had "let me acquire"), he nonetheless made part of his living from his art and had a strong desire to be recognized as a great artist, which wasn't possible without exhibiting. Abram Lerner, director of the Hirshhorn from 1974 to 1984, met with Still twice in the mid-70's to negotiate a solo exhibition. "The show never happened, much to our regret," says Lerner, who describes Still as "an important artist, and one I admire in many ways." From his meetings with Still, in which the artist warily participated, Lerner came away with the "purely personal" impression that Still "had something to prove. He explained how he really ranked as the foremost figure in the Abstract Expressionist movement. He had the feeling that history had been completely incorrectly written, that he was there from the beginning and could prove that they were all wrong. He considered himself a great artist—there's no question about it—way above the heads of his contemporaries."

THE IDEA FOR A MUSEUM HAD BEEN IN Still's mind for some time. When he donated 28 paintings to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1975, he discussed with the director, Henry Hopkins, the idea of one-artist museums or study centers throughout the United States, where a large body of each artist's work could be seen. Since Still's death, Mrs. Still has been trying to place the bequest with a city. "It just wouldn't work out in a museum," she says. "This is to be exclusively a Clyfford Still museum." She declined to be interviewed in person about the bequest or the extent of interest in it. According to several sources, she is proceeding deliberately—she has been discussing the bequest with the city of Baltimore for over two years—and is concerned that the terms of the will be met fully, notably its provision that the works be housed "in perpetuity." Aside from her discussions with the city of Baltimore and the Baltimore Museum of Art, Mrs. Still has had negotiations with officials of other cities and with at least one private individual interested in backing the museum, according to a source close to the estate who requested anonymity and who declines to identify the parties involved. This source also says that many museums have contacted Mrs. Still. He adds that the curators make offers to house the collection, although the offers are in violation of the will's terms and are "game playing of the art world. The main problem is everybody wants to divide it up, and that's what the 70/ARTNEWS

will says can't be done. The people making the offers just don't consider the seriousness of the will. They take her out to dinner, say there will be a big party, an opening and announcement, but they make offers that



disregard the will. There was one offer where many of the larger paintings physically could not fit into the proposed exhibition space. One person even tried to intimidate her and implied he'd try to have the will broken."

Mrs. Still acknowledges receiving offers for the bequest that disregard the gift's stipulations and adds, "It's been a little bit of a horror story." She says that she wants to get the museum established with as little notice as possible.

Still noted in his journals that by 1934 there were over 175 of his works in his collection. By 1943 the number had increased to over 350.

According to Mrs. Still, her husband never kept a painting he wasn't satisfied with.

The bequest contains works representing every period of Still's life. Most of the paintings in the 1979 retrospective at the Metropolitan were borrowed from his collection. According to Sims, who visited Still's house and studio in Maryland before the Metropolitan show, the works on paper break down into two categories. "There are very academically drawn, extraordinary sort of portrait studies that he did early on," Sims says, and "works that parallel the development in his paintings. It was interesting to see the works on paper that had the same characteristics as the abstract paintings because he worked on a relatively large scale. To see the same kind of gesture done in a much reduced scale was really fascinating."

One of the problems with the bequest, according to Geldzahler, is that few people know what it contains because so many of the pictures are in storage. A further problem is the paintings' condition. Lehmen, of the Baltimore Museum of Art, says that the few oil paintings he has seen are not in pristine condition, and he is concerned that substantial conservation work will be needed.

Aside from these problems, there are philosophical and other practical considerations. James Backus, director of the Washington, D.C., Commission on the Arts and Humanities, who had not been aware of the bequest until interviewed by ARTnews, says that to build and endow the museum he would need to find benefactors. One of the problems of a one-person museum, he notes, is that these works could seem monotonous: "That's a lot of Clyfford Still, and there isn't much variety."

The commitment of money and personnel to such a venture troubles museum professionals. Roy Slade, former director of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and now president of the Cranbrook Academy of Art says that curators "represent the taste of our time," and "only history is going to give us the ultimate judgment. Certainly 20th-century art has not been tested by time." He adds that curators--if not city fathers-- are unwilling to devote substantial resources to one artist's work when there are many great artists who might demand the same treatment.

The source close to Still's estate says that the artist simply made the bequest and it is now society's responsibility to deal with it. He asks, "Can we in this country recognize one creative individual? Will we build a museum to one individual? Is it against our democratic nature?"

Until the museum is built, the paintings are in storage, inaccessible to anyone. "The tragedy," Sims says, "is that the works are not being seen."

Andrew Decker is a contributing editor of ARTnews.



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