The New MoMA Is Here. Get Ready for Change.

The expanded Museum of Modern Art reopens this month, putting Picasso and Monet next to more recent, diverse artists. Will audiences embrace its new vision?

Before moving into its expanded building, curators at the Museum of Modern Art used foam-core models and miniature artworks to prepare more than 60 collection galleries.

By Jason Farago

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Picasso and Braque were looking a little forlorn: unsure of their new home, unsure of their new acquaintances.

It was early September, six anxious weeks from the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. After three years of piecemeal renovations, the museum had shut its doors for the summer, preparing for a top-to-bottom rehang of the world's finest collection of modern and contemporary art, with about 47,000 additional square feet to play with.

Two senior curators were still installing the cardinal gallery, the one with "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," Pablo Picasso's grand, violent painting of five contorted Catalan prostitutes.

For decades, MoMA's curators have paired the aggressive "Demoiselles" (1907) with the smaller, perspective-shattering Cubist works he and Georges Braque painted a few years later. Two of them were here, propped against the wall on foam blocks.

Now, though, Picasso had new company, younger, from across the Atlantic. Ann Temkin, MoMA's chief curator of painting and sculpture, and her colleague Anne Umland, a Picasso specialist, were introducing the "Demoiselles" to a large painting of a race riot by the Harlem-born artist Faith Ringgold. Called "American People Series #20: Die" (1967), it shows white and black Americans, blood-spattered, clinging to one another for safety, their faces contorted in a similar manner to Picasso's damsels.

Ann Temkin, left, the chief curator of painting and sculpture, with Anne Umland, a senior curator. Behind them is Faith Ringgold's "American People Series #20: Die" (1967). Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Ms. Ringgold's "Die" now hangs in the same gallery as Pablo Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907). Another painting by Picasso will be hung later, to the left of "Die."
Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via ACA Galleries, New York Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Ms. Ringgold painted "Die" after countless visits to this museum as a young artist, studying the "Demoiselles" and Picasso's later "Guernica," which hung here before returning to Spain. Ms. Temkin's department bought "Die" in 2016, showing it at first in a hallway — and now the curators were scrutinizing it alongside MoMA's most renowned canvas.

Pairing Picasso with a black American artist from the 1960s would have been unthinkable here 15 years prior; it shatters the museum's chronological spine, and magnifies the colonial and sexual violence inherent in the African-influenced "Demoiselles." But there was a problem: Between these two propulsive canvases, the smaller Cubist works were getting lost.

"They're not happy campers here," admitted Ms. Umland.

Ms. Temkin gave a sigh of agreement. "Can we move these two to the wall at the other end?" she asked. A quartet of black-gloved art handlers hustled the Cubists out of the way.

"Anne and I are in the 'try everything once' school," Ms. Temkin said.

Meet the New Neighbors

How do you convert the archetypical institution of 20th-century art into one fit for the 21st? During a dozen visits to the closed museum this summer, I watched Ms. Temkin and her team of curators polish their new narrative of modern art, and eavesdropped as a huge crew of handlers steered some 6,000 works between galleries and storage facilities. Monets sat wrapped in blankets, while curators positioned stand-in cardboard Brancusis. Contractors, laying down new floors, had a taste for surfer rock; on one afternoon, “California Girls” was blasting.

Henri Matisse’s “The Red Studio” (1911) and Henri Rousseau’s “The Dream” (1910) await new homes.
Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Handlers move Georgia O'Keeffe's "Farmhouse Window and Door" (1929) down MoMA's restored Bauhaus staircase.
Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Technicians experiment with the placement of a cardboard dummy of Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column" (1918), easier to adjust than the heavy original. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The cardboard copies of Brancusi sculptures stand in a former café space that has been reclaimed as a gallery. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

MoMA undertook a major expansion in 2004, but almost immediately upon reopening, curators were thinking about the next. Outside its doors, an endless market boom and the rise of museum-size commercial galleries like Hauser & Wirth and David Zwirner had transformed New York's terrain of contemporary art. Inside, all six of MoMA's department heads had retired, replaced by a new generation of curators, mostly in their 40s and 50s, who were keener on collaboration and intent on unearthing forgotten artists. Audiences complained of overcrowding. Institutions with smaller collections — from the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York to Tate Modern in London — staked their claims to more diverse, more global art histories.

By 2014, MoMA was ready to press reset, and its curators had funds they could rely on, as the museum went from rich to crazy rich. In 2016, MoMA received $100 million from the media mogul David Geffen, whose name adorns a new wing. This year, it received a record gift of $200 million from the estate of David Rockefeller, the philanthropist and banker who died in 2017. (His mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, co-founded the museum.)

The ambitions take form on Oct. 21, when MoMA welcomes you into its new galleries, housed in the lower floors of a supertall designed by Jean Nouvel, as well as new construction where the American Folk Art Museum formerly stood.

If the museum's $450 million expansion, planned by the architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro in collaboration with Gensler is about half the price of the 2004 project, it heralds a far more profound reorientation of MoMA's mission and approach. You will see much more of the nearly 200,000 objects in its collection, but you will see them in changing — and possibly challenging — circumstances.

The new MoMA has binned the Whiggish movement-by-movement logic that William S. Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, Ms. Temkin's predecessors, relied on to classify the art of the last century. Now, some 60 galleries will be reconceptualized on a regular basis, with a third rehung every six months. ("More work for more people, is our motto!" Ms. Temkin said with a grin.)

The rotation starts with 20-odd new spaces in the Nouvel tower. A gallery with Marcel Duchamp's works is conceived around the theme of the ready-made; in April, curators will choose other Duchamps around the theme of chance.

When the museum opens, you'll see Jasper Johns's "Flag" amid earlier fabric experiments by Ruth Asawa and a newly acquired ink rubbing of a SoHo sidewalk by the overlooked artist Sari Dienes.

In six months, say farewell.

The rotating galleries will feature new acquisitions that have diversified and globalized the museum's Euro-American core. The most noteworthy arrivals are almost 200 works of Latin American art from the collection of the trustee Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, debuting in their own mic-dropping showcase.

MoMA's entrance on West 53rd Street features a distinctive new awning. Diller Scofidio + Renfro also eliminated a gallery to create a double-height foyer. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The presentation is still broadly chronological, but features detours, anachronisms and surprise encounters. Photography and architecture, shown in their own discrete zones for decades, now commingle with paintings, drawings, prints and even performance. There are movies projected throughout, even in the hallowed prewar galleries, where pre-1900 French paintings lead to flickering images of the then-young New York subway, shot in 1905 on the then-young technology of film.

Love it or no, this juddering, fluctuating display is the most contemporary feature of the new MoMA, whose collection now offers the sort of fortuitous collisions familiar from digital browsing and searching. But even digitally conditioned audiences may find the constant crosscuts jarring.

"It's moving away from ideas like 'masterpieces' and 'breakthroughs,' to a kind of art history of dispersion," observed Michael Lobel, a professor of art history at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center. "It makes sense from the point of view of contemporary artistic practices. But different kinds of objects have different kinds of reception." The museum's challenge, he said, will be to master that dispersion: "Paintings, or other two-dimensional works, can suffer."

MoMA's elevation of the collection to its center ring wasn't a certain outcome five years ago. In 2014, the architect Elizabeth Diller first revealed expansion plans that called for the erection of a triple-height garage, christened the "Art Bay." The schematics made MoMA look rather like the Shed, her firm's other recent hometown undertaking. They overemphasized large, temporary projects — the museum was then planning a survey of Björk's career that critics savaged a year later — and shortchanged the collection's space.

MoMA heard the disappointment. Ms. Diller redesigned. Now the collection is front and center, to an almost intimidating degree. The larger MoMA will open with just about every gallery devoted to what it owns.

"We as institutions are so trained to treat our temporary exhibition program as the main tent," said Glenn D. Lowry, MoMA's director. "And we made the commitment, financially, programmatically and intellectually, that we're going to shift that. That our main tent is our collection."

A conservator touches up Andy Warhol's "Gold Marilyn Monroe" (1962) before it returns to the galleries. Behind her are works, from left, by Claude Monet, Séraphine Louis and Marc Chagall.

Seraphine Louis/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Marc Chagall, via Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via ADAGP, Paris; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., via Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Jasper Johns, via Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

A conservator lifts the protective film from Jasper Johns's "Flag" (1954-55).
Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Vincent van Gogh's "The Olive Trees" (1889), out of its frame.
Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

A paper conservator inspects Henri Matisse's "The Swimming Pool" before its installation. The size of the cut-outs required technicians to work in this gallery, with paintings by Jackson Pollock, left, and Franz Kline.
The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; The Franz Kline Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Moving Pictures

Suppose you come to see Vincent van Gogh's "The Starry Night," a gem of the collection since 1941. You will find it, as before, in the first gallery on the fifth floor, along with all-stars of 19th-century French painting.

Now, however, canvases by Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin cohabitate with art beyond France, and even beyond painting, such as wobbly bowls and pitchers by the Mississippi craftsman George Ohr, known as the "Mad Potter of Biloxi."

The next room features dozens of early photographs, the subway short, and "Lime Kiln Club Field Day" (1915) — the first feature film starring black Americans, momentously rediscovered in the MoMA archives in 2014. The film's joyous performers offer an astonishing preface to Picasso's "Demoiselles," lording over the next room.

"This sequence? This is a ten-year conversation," said Rajendra Roy, the chief curator of film, watching the subway footage on a pinned-up sheet of paper. "When I arrived, curators would say, 'Oh, I don't know anything about film.' Could I walk in and say, 'I don't know anything about painting?' I could never say that!"

It took a decade of discussions, struggles and experiments before curators refined their new disjunctive, cross-media approach. They studied displays at other modern museums, notably the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. They observed younger visitors interacting with art in new ways, shifting their attention between paintings on the walls and information on their phones. "Whole new generations are learning first to understand the world through an image," said Roxana Marcoci, a senior curator of photography. "It will never be that perfectly contemplative experience anymore."

The Studio, MoMA's new dedicated space for media and performance, opens with "Rainforest V," a sonic

sculpture by David Tudor and Composers Inside Electronics. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Shortly after being appointed painting chief in 2008, Ms. Temkin instituted mandatory weekly meetings, where department leaders would hack out joint proposals. They also studied the demographics of MoMA's visitors, who have grown to some three million annually — even as admission hit $25.

"Nobody in 1970 could have imagined, in their wildest dreams, that level of general audience," Ms. Temkin said. "It was such a narrower demographic that was coming to MoMA, and it was fairly safe to assume a certain level of familiarity with cultural history from the last century. You look at our visitors today, and you know that's not the case."

She recalled giving a public tour and watching the faces of visitors. "I would be talking about 'Fauvism' and then 'German Expressionism,' and I heard the words coming out of my mouth." She recalled thinking, ''This is ridiculous — these people did not sign up for an art history course."

So you won't find the words "Dada" or "Abstract Expressionism" in any gallery titles. Even "Pop" is banished; art of the early 1960s appears in a room titled "From Soup Cans to Flying Saucers."

Galleries instead highlight ideas and epochs, such as "Design for Modern Life," devoted to the Bauhaus and other modernist schools of the 1920s. The gallery blends paintings by Klee and El Lissitzky, chairs by Mies van der Rohe, a Soviet film by Dziga Vertov and reams of printed fabrics and letterhead samples. "Which makes historical sense," said Martino Stierli, the chief curator of architecture and design, "because these people were all doing architecture, painting and everything at the same time."

A view of three new galleries in the Geffen Wing. The yellow box at center represents the “Frankfurt Kitchen” of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky.
Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Dominating the room is an entire kitchen (1926-27), excised from a Frankfurt apartment block and designed for maximum efficiency by the civic architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. “Pretty good!” said a laughing Ms. Temkin, admiring the canny organization of the shelves. “A woman, obviously …”

The Most Fragile Masterpiece

One day this summer I watched as Christophe Cherix, the chief curator of drawings and prints, and his colleague Esther Adler installed a small, staggering new acquisition that would never have had a chance in the “Art Bay.”

On a pair of tables, the curators gently flipped sheets from the “Prison Notebook” of Ibrahim el-Salahi, a Sudanese artist who, in 1975, was wrongfully implicated in an antigovernment coup. Shortly after his release from jail, Mr. el-Salahi filled a notebook with drawings of gates, nooses and his own chest crisscrossed with jail bars.

“This was, for him, maybe the most cherished possession,” Mr. Cherix said. “A very tiny sketchbook.” The museum bought it two years ago; it has never shown it before, and won’t again for a while, because of the fragility of works on paper.

Now the notebook anchors an entire gallery, called “War Within, War Without,” orbiting around themes of violence and internal exile around the 1970s. Half the works here, including a gouache by the feminist artist May Stevens and a self-portrait by the African-American shape-shifter David Hammons, were acquired in the past four years. All these new pieces, said Mr. Cherix, typify “a generation trying to redefine what art can be in a moment when art is not heroic anymore.”

The abbreviated runs in these galleries have encouraged curators to delve into areas MoMA often neglected, including prewar folk art and art from 1940s Harlem.

Sarah Suzuki, a drawings curator overseeing the museum’s reopening, observed that, before, “it might have been hard to see how — I don’t know, Polish posters — could fit into the unidirectional narrative. And this actually opens it up. It’s like, you know what? Let’s do those Polish posters! Let’s not be so wrapped up in where it fits into our big scheme.”

Christophe Cherix, the chief curator of drawings and prints, arranges sheets from Ibrahim el-Salahi’s “Prison Notebook” (1976). The pages will remain on view for 12 months.
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

A detail from Mr. el-Salahi's "Prison Notebook." To prevent fading, the sheets will be rotated over the course of the display.
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

A curator places a mock-up of an arch by the Catalan architects Aurèlia Muñoz and Antoni Gaudí within a model gallery.
Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Roxana Marcoci, a senior curator of photography, watches handlers install Huang Yong Ping's sculpture "Palanquin." Behind them are ten woodcuts by the Chinese artist Xu Bing.
Huang Yong Ping/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Rest assured, MoMA's most renowned objects — Monet's "Water Lilies," Picasso's "Demoiselles" — will surely not disappear.

"I like to say we're not in the business of breaking hearts," said Ms. Suzuki, who did a year's worth of shifts at the museum's information desk, learning which artworks the public wanted to see. (The most requested is Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans," from 1962, though more imperative than any artwork is the location of the bathrooms.)

Go East, Go South

On the second floor, Ms. Marcoci was supervising art handlers on cherry pickers, as they hung a newly acquired sculpture by the Chinese-born French artist Huang Yong Ping. It's a bamboo palanquin, the sort of chair used for transport, its poles draped with dry snakeskin. A colonist's pith helmet is the only indication of its absent occupant.

The chair dangles in a gallery titled "Before and After Tiananmen," exploring themes of modernization and urbanization in the years around the 1989 massacre. It's one of the bolder forays in the museum's contemporary section, which makes heavy demands of American audiences less familiar with Chinese history.

"We're trying to look at this moment in '89, and everything it represents about the changing nature of Chinese society and of Chinese art," said Stuart Comer, the chief curator of media and performance. The era, he added, saw artists in Beijing "really embrace photography, video and performance. We're still just beginning to address China properly."

Nearly every curator I spoke to, when asked to name the museum's most transformative undertaking of recent years, mentioned its in-house global think-tank, Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives. Founded 10 years ago by Kathy Halbreich, MoMA's recently departed associate director, C-MAP was the museum's response to the Guggenheim, the Louvre and others establishing franchises in the Middle East and Asia.

The museum rejected the idea of multiple MoMAs, Mr. Lowry said, turning instead to what he called "self-education." They invited over colleagues from Latin America, Eastern Europe, South and East Asia. More than 60 MoMA curators and researchers took regular trips to India, South Africa or Brazil. They were learning, listening, decentering themselves.

In a large new space overlooking West 53rd Street, Mr. Comer conferred with the artist Sheela Gowda, who'd come from Bangalore to set up a room-size installation, which joins thousands of carved wood figurines with the door jambs of torn-down houses. She is one of four Indian women included in MoMA's initial collection display, and they are joined by artists from Colombia and Argentina, Sierra Leone and Morocco, Poland and Romania.

"We are of our time, inevitably, and we don't want to fight that," said Ms. Temkin a few days later. "We want, we need, to be of it. Matisse said a great painter had to be of his time."

Yet even this nimbler, globe-trotting MoMA has roots. "It's returning to the 1930s aspiration that, over the decades, got more academicized," she suggested. "The open-mindness, the curiosity, the commitment to a multiplicity of disciplines: That was all there in the '30s." She added, "I don't think any of us feel that Alfred Barr, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, would be looking at this and saying it was anything but fulfillment of the founding mission."

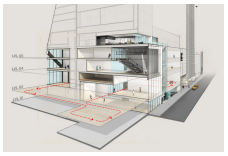
The decade of reshaping was nearly complete. Still, Ms. Temkin had one room to resolve, the Picasso room, whose new inhabitants would express the renewed spirit of a 90-year-old museum.

Along with the "Demoiselles" and the Faith Ringgold, Ms. Temkin had requested a wooden sculpture from the early 1950s by Louise Bourgeois — a grouping of five totems, painted white and light blue, symbolizing the artist and her family. The handlers unscrewed the crate holding "Quarantania, I," removed the gauze wrapping and gently slotted each part onto a plinth. Ms. Temkin got up close to the five abstracted bodies, each one chiming with the five stylized "Demoiselles."

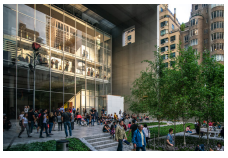
“That’s her spot,” said Ms. Temkin with a note of finality. “Doesn’t she make you happy?” The curator looked at her colleagues. “Perfect,” she murmured. “Perfect.”

Meeting the new neighbor: In a fifth floor gallery, Louise Bourgeois’s “Quarantania, I” (1947-53) now stands between two Picassos, “Boy Leading a Horse” (1905-6) and “Bather” (1908-09).
Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

MoMA to Close, Then Open Doors to More Expansive View of Art Feb. 5, 2019



Last Call: MoMA’s Closing, and Changing June 6, 2019



Will the Renovated MoMA Let Folk Art Back In? June 6, 2019

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