

# CHAMPIONING MODERN ART

In 1909, at the age of forty-five, Bliss began building a collection of paintings, drawings, and prints by European and American modern artists. As her passion and expertise grew, she took an active role in promoting the artistic vanguard. In 1913, Bliss provided crucial financial support to the landmark Armory Show. Organized in large part by Arthur B. Davies, it introduced European modern art to American audiences. Alongside fellow New York collector John Quinn, she also advocated for the inclusion of modern art at traditional institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, championing modern art in the United States was hardly a popular cause. Much of the general public, as well as the art establishment, considered modern art ridiculous or even dangerous. Despite these attacks, Bliss was an ardent defender of the work of artists such as Odilon Redon and Paul Gauguin, who, in her words, “have something to say worth saying and claim for themselves only the freedom to express it in their own way.”

# CREATING A HOME FOR MODERN ART

Bliss's art collecting intensified during the 1920s—she started the decade focused on acquiring works by Paul Cézanne and ended it captivated by the drawings of Georges-Pierre Seurat. In 1929, Bliss's growing conviction that New York needed a museum to serve as a home for modern art motivated her to cofound MoMA with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Mary Quinn Sullivan. Bliss served as the Museum's first vice president.

MoMA opened its doors in rented office space at 730 Fifth Avenue (on the southwest corner of Fifty-Seventh Street) on November 7, 1929, just days after the stock market crashed. Its first exhibition was *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*. Bliss was one of the largest lenders to the show, though she lent anonymously. She and her cofounders had successfully argued for an inaugural exhibition of work by these pioneering French artists despite their male colleagues' preference for one featuring Americans. The founders' position was vindicated by enthusiastic crowds of visitors in numbers far exceeding expectations.

# BUILDING A LEGACY

Prior to her death in March 1931, Bliss bequeathed much of her art collection to MoMA. She made the gift conditional upon the Museum's ability to prove its financial stability within three years. The potential of the bequest was clear; one journalist called it a "nucleus round which to build" and "a continuing, living reply to the doubters."

A couple of months after Bliss's death, the Museum organized a memorial exhibition that encompassed the MoMA bequest, composed mostly of paintings by nineteenth and twentieth century European artists. It also featured works she had given to other museums, including Byzantine panels destined for the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Although MoMA fell short of raising the one million dollars that Bliss's executors had stipulated, they agreed to finalizing the gift anyway, given that it was the height of the Great Depression. The Museum marked the occasion with a celebratory exhibition at its new home, a Rockefeller family brownstone located on MoMA's current site.

## FURTHER VIEWING

Bliss's will permitted works in her collection to be sold in order to fund new acquisitions. This enabled the later purchase of Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889) as well as many works that brought the Museum's collection further into the twentieth century. These include Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), Constantin Brâncuși's *The Newborn* (1920), and Salvador Dalí's *Retrospective Bust of a Woman* (1933).

Scan the QR code below to locate these and other works subsequently acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss bequest, on view in the collection galleries on Floors 4 and 5.

