

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*



A ruckus envelops a Rothko at SFMOMA

The reaction during the week since the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art announced the scheduled sale at auction, for an estimated \$35 million to \$50 million, of a major painting by Mark Rothko was quick and strong.

The museum has said that the proceeds would be used “to broadly diversify SFMOMA’s collection.” I take that to mean buying works by women and artists of color, though SFMOMA director Neal Ben-zra has declined to set specific goals in that regard.

Within minutes of the announcement, critics were reacting on Twitter. Tyler Green, host of the popular podcast “Modern Art Notes,” tweeted, “SFMOMA donors/trustees willing to give big bucks for building, not willing to give to more accurately show/tell the story of art history... so SFMOMA decides to sell a Rothko. Not a great look, donors.”

He followed that with a challenge to the museum’s trustees to fund “an initiative that examined, then addressed the art history SFMOMA presents (one that grossly over-represents white men).”

There were positive responses to the SFMOMA announcement, many of the emoji clapping-hand variety. Georgianna de la Torre, a museum consultant and former director of the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, commented on Facebook, “They are addressing gaps in the collection — this money can do great things in that regard, and is perfectly in line with accepted deaccessioning guidelines. It’s a brilliant move.”

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More common, however, were thoughts like those expressed by Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight, who wrote on Twitter, “This is very sad. Dumping a major Rothko because you have others abandons the museum-virtue of collecting an artist in depth.” (SFMOMA might be forgiven for feeling it can’t win with Knight. He also chastised the museum for what he called its “boneheaded move in 1962,” when it acquired the work it is now selling. It got the untitled 1960 work in a trade with Rothko for the artist’s earlier, Surrealist-period “Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea.” That picture is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.)

Others doubted the sincerity of museum leaders, in light of galleries that feature works by Chuck Close and Carl Andre, men accused of harassment and abuse of women. “I hate this idea that ‘diversity’ has to come at the expense of a good Rothko,” wrote Emily Pothast, “especially when @SFMOMA chooses to devote entire rooms to harassers / creeps / possible wife murderers. Makes the reasoning behind this deaccession feel very disingenuous.”

And then there were those who questioned the institution’s collections priorities. Noted San Francisco artist Tom Marioni, always willing to play the curmudgeon, commented on Facebook, “To trade up from Rothko you get Pollock.”

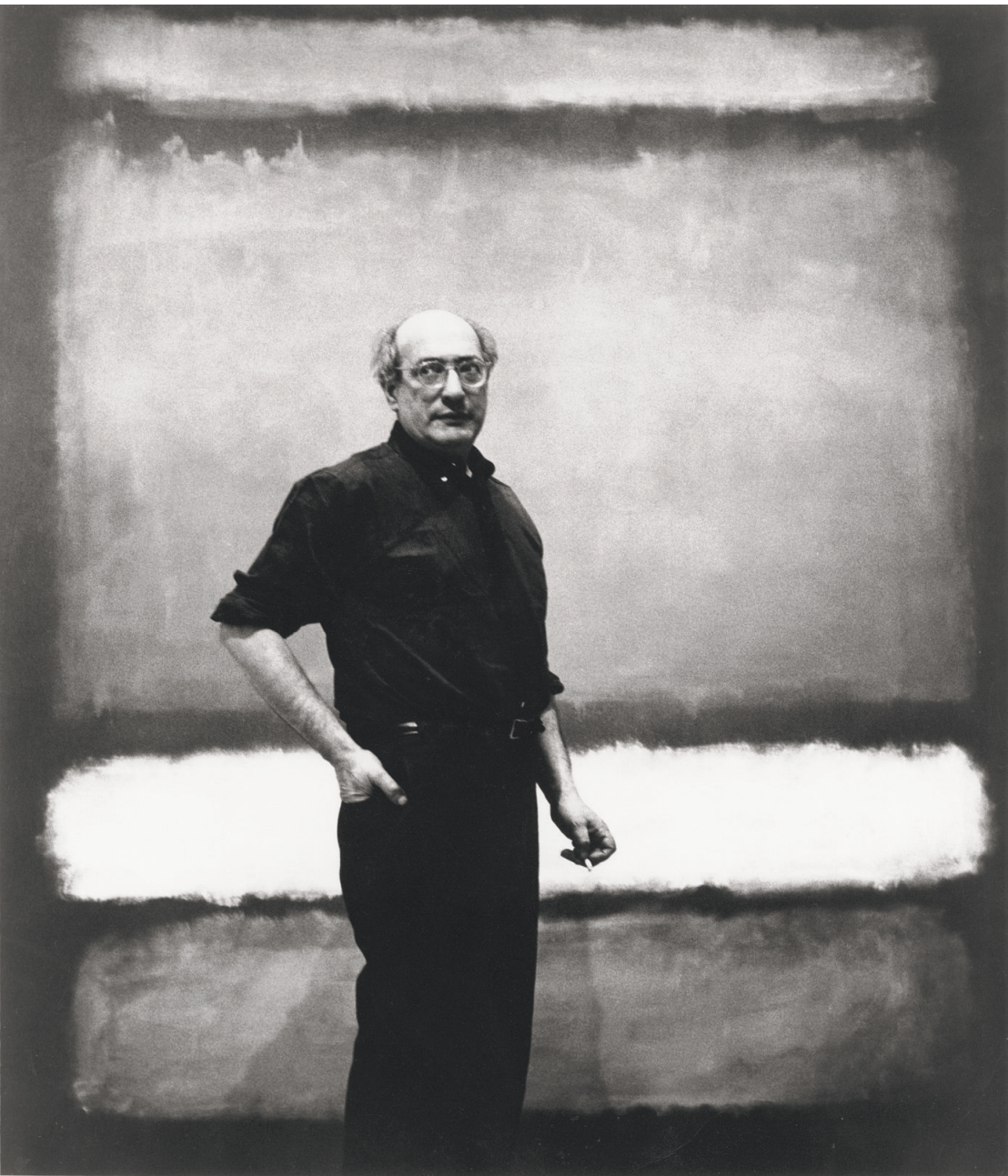
Donn Zaretsky, publisher of the Art Law Blog, is a ceaseless opponent of the strict guidelines museum associations place on the use of deaccession funds (they can only be used to buy works of art that are meant to enhance the collection, and not be sold off to raise money for general operating support or capital needs). He titled a post, “Tell me again about the public trust (1960 Rothko edition).” It was a reference to the argument, correct in my view, that museums have an ethical responsibility to preserve and cultivate collections for the benefit of their communities.

Collections diversity data: Chad Topaz is a professor of mathematics and self-described “data scientist who works with art scholars” at Williams College. After my first report on the Rothko sale appeared, he emailed to say that real data now exist on the diversity of American art museum collections.

In a study to be released shortly, he said, “We estimate that the pool of artists held in the SFMOMA collection is 81.9% male and 86.4% white. Believe it or not, the still-very-low 18.1% women artists in the collection is higher than many of the other museums we studied (for example, MoMA has 11% women).”

The problem, then, is real. The question is what to do about it.

Kaywin Feldman, past president of the Association of Art Museum Directors and newly appointed as the first female director of the National Gallery of Art, said in an email



Regina Bogat 1960

The late Mark Rothko with his “No. 7” in 1960. SFMOMA will sell his “Untitled” from that year.



Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko / Artist Rights Society



SFMOMA

Left: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will keep Rothko’s “No. 14” in its collection. It is considered superior to the work the museum plans to sell. Above: Rothko’s “Untitled” (1955) also will stay at the museum.

that diversity is now a central focus for leaders of American museums. Making it clear that she was not privy to details of the SFMOMA decision, she said, “Museums cannot simply pay lip service to this commitment to diversity; it means making some challenging decisions about our collections, exhibitions and programs.”

Christopher Bedford, director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, wrote in an email, “Museum collections are full of redundancy, much if not all of it reflecting race and gender-based biases in collecting, that in turn reflect broader cultural biases that have struc-

tured museums in this country for over a century.”

In 2017, the Baltimore museum announced that it would sell seven major works to raise money specifically to diversify the collection. He has called the move “canon correction.”

In an article published in June in the British magazine Frieze, he wrote, “Much of the positive but sometimes sensational press around this action pointed to the fact that we opted to sell work by deceased white men to acquire work by men and women of color, both deceased and living. This is true, but only partially by design.”

“Certainly,” he continued,

“the emphasis on buying work by men and women of color with the proceeds from sale is highly deliberate. The fact that we would dispense with valuable work by white males to achieve this objective is itself a function of history and testament to the prejudice that has structured museum collecting.”

Canon correction: So, what are we to make of all this, and of the change SFMOMA seems to have embraced by its controversial action?

It is unquestionable that the painting to be sold is very significant in the art history of the Bay Area. Rothko spent

time here, and his 1946 exhibition at SFMOMA was an important milestone in his career. Open to debate, however, is what might possibly enter the collection that will have even greater historical resonance for our community.

Interestingly, deaccession — the process of removing a work from a museum collection — has had particularly strong effects on the museum’s Rothko holdings over the years. The work now being sold, “Untitled” (1960), was acquired in a trade with the artist that required deaccession of “Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea” (1944), which had been a gift of the great collector Peggy Guggenheim.

And how did San Francisco get “No. 14” (1960), the most significant of the seven Rothko works (five paintings and two drawings) that will remain in the SFMOMA collection? Well, by using funds from the deaccession and sale of Claude Monet’s “The Seine at Argenteuil” (1875), which, because of its date, had been determined by curators to be outside the scope of the museum’s collection.

Few who demand that museum collections be respected as a public trust would say that every object has equal status, and an equally permanent claim. Rather, it is the collection as a whole that should be preserved for future generations. I, for one, have no problem with pruning the tree to promote greater vigor of the larger organism.

Of course, it is easy for observers to say that the museum’s trustees and donors should step up to meet the needs of a diverse audience, rather than require the sale of a significant work. But the collection, as central as it must be to the future of the museum, is but one of many needs. A generous board or donor has every reason to focus on broadening the museum’s base by promoting staff diversity, supporting research efforts, reducing admission fees and myriad other strategies.

Barely two blocks away from its front door, the Museum of the African Diaspora is currently presenting an exhibition of works from the Studio Museum in Harlem that hints at what could be a part of a more diverse future for SFMOMA’s collection. There, works acquired by the Studio Museum for a fraction of their current market value — or given as gifts in recognition of the museum’s support of artists of color — show what is possible when curators of vision make a commitment to the best of what the mainstream has ignored.

SFMOMA’s new collection initiative is hardly in the vanguard of such efforts, but it may keep the museum from falling further behind. And we, the public to whom the museum owes a more holistic, and thus more accurate, picture of art and its history, will be watching closely.

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