ALMINE RECH

Lillie P. Bliss and the Birth of the Modern

Nov 17, 2024 — Mar 29, 2025 | The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, NY, US

Without Lillie Plummer Bliss, MoMA would not be the museum it is today. A century ago, when modern art was generally met with suspicion or ridicule, Bliss fought for an artist's right to create work in new and experimental ways. In 1929, after many years of energetic advocacy for modern art in New York, Bliss, together with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Mary Quinn Sullivan, founded The Museum of Modern Art.

Fascinated by the work of artists such as Paul Cézanne, Georges-Pierre Seurat, and Pablo Picasso, Bliss built a remarkable collection of paintings and works on paper by them and many others. When she died at sixty-six in 1931, just two years after MoMA opened, Bliss left a will instructing that a large part of her collection be given to the Museum. Until then MoMA had primarily been a place for presenting temporary exhibitions. Her visionary bequest officially established the Museum as a collecting institution, forever changing the course of its history.

Nearly a century later, Bliss's singular contribution to the history of modern art in the United States remains under-recognized. This is partly explained by the measures she took to maintain her privacy: at the end of her life Bliss requested that all her personal papers be burned. Her extraordinary legacy, in contrast, endures. This exhibition illuminates this crucial figure through archival documents from MoMA's first decade and, of course, the works of art that she loved.

The Museum of Modern Art announces 'Lillie P. Bliss and the Birth of the Modern', an exhibition focusing on the collection and legacy of Lillie P. Bliss, one of the Museum's founders and an early advocate for modern art in the United States. On view from November 17, 2024, through March 29, 2025, the exhibition, which marks the 90th anniversary of Bliss's bequest coming to MoMA, includes iconic works such as Paul Cézanne's The Bather (c. 1885) and Amedeo Modigliani's Anna Zborowska (1917). The exhibition, which will feature about 40 works as well as archival materials, will highlight Bliss's critical role in the reception of modern art in the US and in the founding of MoMA.

'Lillie P. Bliss and the Birth of the Modern' is organized by Ann Temkin, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and Romy Silver-Kohn, co-editor with Temkin of *Inventing the Modern: Untold Stories of the Women Who Shaped The Museum of Modern Art*, with Rachel Remick, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

When it opened in 1929, The Museum of Modern Art was a destination where visitors could see groundbreaking temporary exhibitions, but it did not have a significant collection. Just two years later, when Bliss died, she left approximately 120 works to the Museum in her will. In an effort to ensure the Museum's future success, Bliss stipulated that MoMA would receive her collection only if it could prove that it was on firm financial footing within three years of her death. In 1934 the Museum was able to secure the bequest, which became the core of MoMA's collection. This included key works by Cézanne, Georges-Pierre Seurat, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Modigliani, Odilon Redon, Marie Laurencin, and Henri Matisse, as well as a selection of paintings by Bliss's friend, the American artist Arthur B. Davies. Bliss's bequest also allowed for the sale of her works to fund new acquisitions, facilitating the purchase of many important artworks, including Van Gogh's The Starry Night, which will be featured in the exhibition. Other favorites wholly or in part funded through the Bliss bequest, such as Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, and Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans, will be on view in the collection galleries.

At the end of her life, Lillie P. Bliss instructed her brother Cornelius Newton Bliss Jr. to burn her personal papers, making it challenging for future generations to recognize the essential part she played in the history of modern art. The exhibition will showcase archival materials from MoMA's Archives and other collections, reconstructing Bliss's life before MoMA, including her passion for music, her involvement in the Armory Show of 1913, and her interactions with fellow collectors and artists. It will also highlight Bliss's critical role in MoMA's founding, and her continued impact on the Museum going forward, through scrapbooks, journals, photographs, and letters.

"It has been a joy to explore the life and work of this courageous woman whom we have known as little more than an important name. We are eager to share our discoveries, and to shine a spotlight on Lillie Bliss for the first time since 1934, when MoMA organized an exhibition to celebrate the new bequest," says Temkin.

The exhibition is presented on the occasion of the release of *Inventing the Modern: Untold Stories of the Women Who Shaped The Museum of Modern Art*, a revelatory account of the Museum's earliest years told through newly commissioned profiles of 14 women who had a decisive impact on the formation and development of the institution. Inventing the Modern comprises illuminating new essays on the women who, as founders, curators, patrons, and directors of various departments, made enduring contributions to MoMA during its early decades (especially between 1929 and 1945), creating new models for how to envision, establish, and operate a museum in an era when the field of modern art was uncharted territory.