

FROM GALLERY TO MUSEUM: THE BLOCK'S COLLECTING HISTORY

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Long before the Block Gallery was established in 1980, there were faculty at Northwestern University who embraced the value of teaching with art. In 1963, the Chairman of Northwestern University's Art Department, J. Carson Webster, wrote a memo to the University's Information Services regarding a major gift of artwork: "We have received the collection of 263 prints, drawings, and reproductions from Mr. and Mrs. Norman H. Pritchard. The collection will be extremely useful for teaching, both in our courses on the history of prints and in our studio courses on the making of prints, due to the presence of various states and impressions of various qualities. Students will be able to handle actual prints and thus carry out more intensive study than would otherwise be possible."¹ As a practical note, Webster added, "These prints are at present kept in Room 201, Centennial Hall."

Webster noted the educational value of works on paper, in part because they can be easily handled and circulated. While mid-century art history methods typically emphasized the study of materials, technique, and connoisseurship, the art world—and university art museums in particular—has changed radically over the past sixty years. The relevance of artworks is no longer limited to art history or studio art courses; artworks can spark vital discussions and bring a visualization of thoughts and ideas to diverse disciplines, offering ways of understanding the past and present.

In recent years, The Block's collection has been a resource for faculty and students in various fields, including Journalism, African

¹ Romare Bearden, *Mother and Child*, from the portfolio *Conspiracy: The Artist as Witness*, 1971. Color lithograph on paper. Gift of Evelyn Salk in memory of her husband, Erwin A. Salk, 2001.20d.

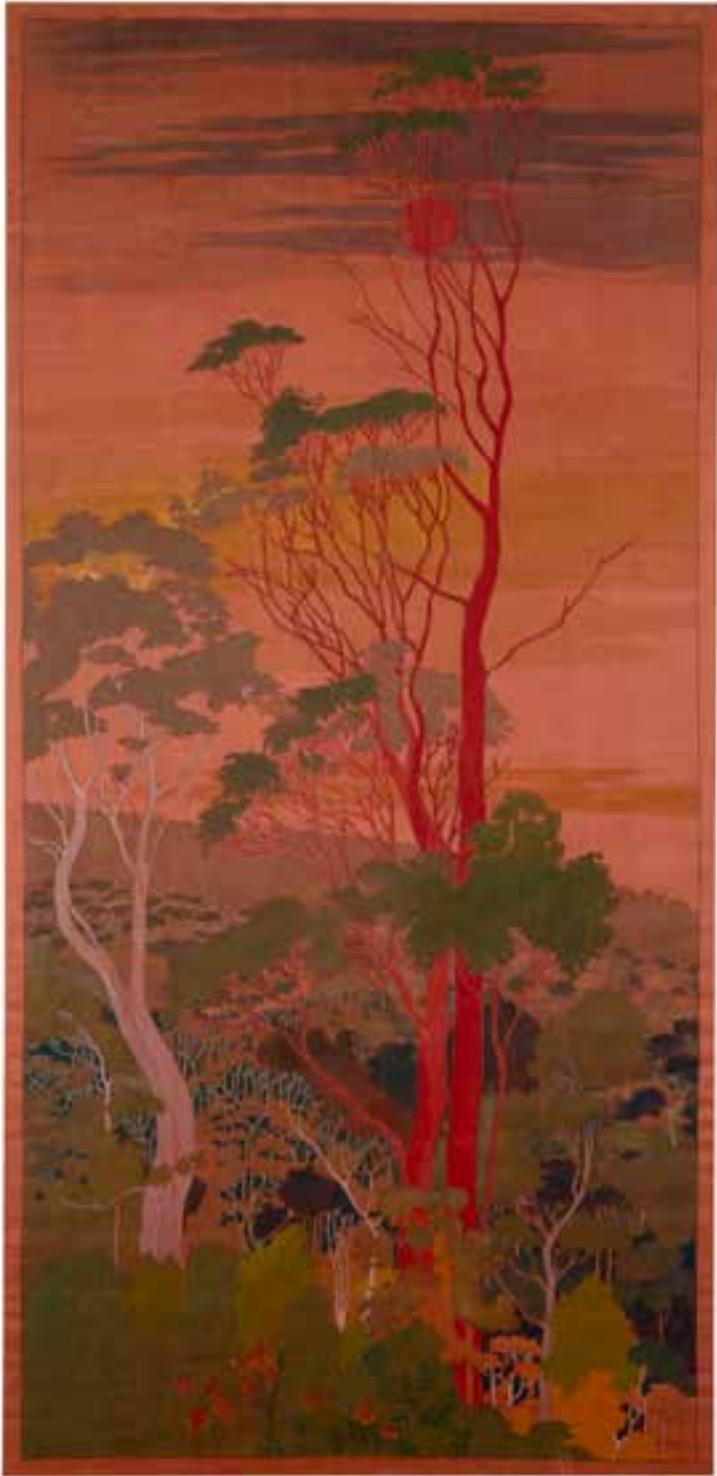
American Studies, Sociology, Materials Sciences, Sound Design, and Computer Science, to name a few. Each academic quarter, classes take place in the Eloise W. Martin Study Center, a former gallery space that now serves as a classroom and facilitates encounters with artworks for researchers, faculty, and students. With limited access to the museum because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21, the curatorial department has shifted its work with students and classes primarily to online platforms, offering guided discussions virtually with works in The Block's collection.

FROM KUNSTHALLE TO ACADEMIC MUSEUM: 1980–2000

Before the Block Gallery, as it was originally named, was founded, the art department organized modest exhibitions that took place in the corridors of campus buildings, and works of art were kept in department closets and brought out for use in classrooms. The Block was intended to provide a public-facing venue for the display of art.² A designated space for temporary exhibitions would be transformative for the campus, enhancing student experiences, while also drawing in members of the community who came to Northwestern's Evanston campus for its renowned theatre and music performances.

Chicago art collectors Mary and Leigh Block donated funds for a one-story building with a single gallery, designed by Loeb Schlossman & Hackl.³ The Blocks' own impressive collection of modern European art was exhibited at the National Gallery of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and as prominent collectors they were profiled in national publications. The Blocks amassed an impressive collection of major paintings by Georges Braque, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Georges Seurat, and others, some of which were eventually sold at auction while others were later gifted to the Art Institute of Chicago, where Leigh Block served as a trustee and Mary Block was a founding member of the Women's Board. As Mary Block remarked in one interview, "It's been a personal campaign of mine for years to get Chicago known for more than its winds or its gangsters."⁴

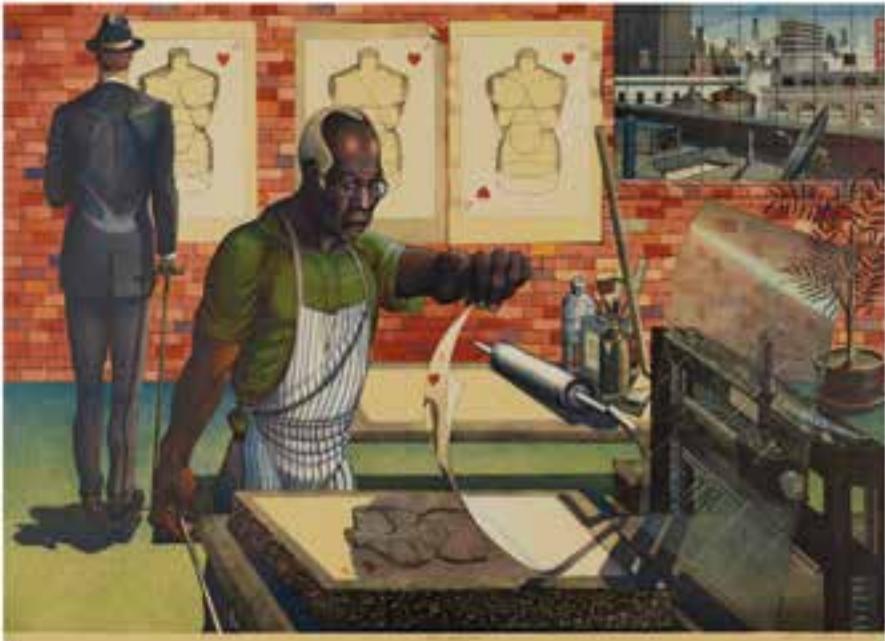
Although the Block Gallery was not established as a collecting institution and had no designated storage at the time, it eventually became the home for a selection of artworks from across campus—from the art department to the law school.⁵ This included the Pritchard gift, as well as the Griffin collection of over a hundred architectural and botanical drawings given to Northwestern by architect Marion Mahony Griffin in 1951 [FIG 2].⁶ Toward the end of its first decade, the gallery's collecting endeavor was solidified around the acquisition of ten sculptures.⁷ Monumental works by Jean Arp, Barbara Hepworth, and Henry Moore, among others, were shipped from the Block family's Santa Barbara home and installed on the



2 Marion Mahony Griffin, *Eucalyptus Urnigera, Tasmania/Scarlet Bark, Sunset, Forest Portrait no. 11*, 1918. Pen and black ink with brush and colored inks and dyes on red silk. Gift of Marion Mahony Griffin, 1985.1.117.



3 Mitchell Siporin, *Workers Family*, from the portfolio *A Gift to Biro Bidjan*, 1937. Linoleum cut on paper. Gift in part from Louise Dunn Yochim, 1997.30.15.



4 Ron Adams, *Blackburn*, ca. 2002. Color lithograph on paper. Purchase funds provided by Christine and William Robb III and Bill and Vicki Hood, 2010.11.

Evanston campus in 1988 in a new Sculpture Garden designed by Chicago-based architect John Vinci.⁸

Another pivotal donation came to The Block through Louise Dunn Yochim, an artist who for many years led the arts curriculum for the Chicago Public Schools. On Yochim's last day before retirement, she passed a garbage can in one of the public school buildings and noticed a bundle of discarded prints with themes of workers, labor, cities, and poverty. Created under the auspices of the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and distributed to public schools for instructional purposes, the works had gone unused for years.⁹ Yochim recovered the prints, and gave them to the Block Gallery in 1992.¹⁰ Two years later, The Block mounted the exhibition *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?* (1994) with the Yochim gift as the anchor. Though at one time nearly destroyed and forgotten, since coming to The Block, the artworks have provided a lens to view the social, economic, and political issues of twentieth-century American life and history [FIG 3]. Most recently the exhibition *The Left Front: Radical Art in the "Red Decade," 1929–1940* (2014), curated by two Art History graduate students, explored the vast network of artists who were members of the John Reed Club, an organization of the Communist Party.¹¹ The Yochim gift was foundational for these kinds of projects, and the museum is recognized for its strength in 1930s American printmaking.

According to the Block Gallery's 1994–95 annual report, collections came to play a larger role in exhibitions: "As it changed from a *kunsthalle* to a museum with a small, but important collection of works on paper and outdoor sculpture, the Block Gallery has developed its collections so as to ensure their uniqueness and their utility in exhibitions and as resources for the university."¹² With several deeply researched projects, notably *Graven Images: The Rise of Professional Printmakers in Antwerp and Haarlem, 1540–1640* (1993), *Stark Impressions: Graphic Production in Germany, 1918–1933* (1994), and *Displacements: South African Works on Paper* (1994), the Block Gallery gained a national reputation for exploring the unique roles prints have played across eras and cultures.¹³ In 2021, in honor of its 40th anniversary, The Block recognized this legacy with the exhibition *For One and All: Prints from The Block's Collection*, co-curated with the 2019–20 Curatorial Graduate Fellow [FIG 4].¹⁴ Looking at three aspects of printmaking—circulation, communication, and collecting—the exhibition illustrated how the collection, though not on permanent view, is a tool for research and for training for the next generation of museum professionals and scholars of many disciplines.¹⁵



5 Ed Paschke, *Compassion*, 1992. Color lithograph on paper.
Gift of Marc and Sharon Paschke, 2019.20.5.

THE COLLECTION EXPANDS: 1990s–ONWARD

Since the mid-1990s, The Block’s collection has grown slowly and steadily at times and with major, transformative gifts at others. At the time of writing, of the over 6,000 objects in the collection, approximately 4,500 are prints. While the majority of artists represented in the collection are white, male, and European or American, in recent years The Block’s current acquisition strategy emphasizes a global perspective that redresses the balance with works by women, artists of color, and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) artists as discussed in this volume by Kathleen Bickford Berzock.

Several early collections-based projects focused on American printmaking workshops—Universal Limited Art Editions, Tamarind Lithography Workshop, and Chicago’s Landfall Press, among others [FIG 5].¹⁶ Enriching these holdings are recent gifts of artworks combining printmaking techniques with other media, such as a Deborah Kass’s *Chairman Ma #21 (Gertrude)* [FIG 6], which borrows Andy Warhol’s well-known technique of combining silkscreen and paint. *Chairman Ma #21 (Gertrude)* also references Pablo Picasso’s iconic portrait of Gertrude Stein in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Works appropriating Western art history to critique its biases and the “masters” that dominate its narratives are another collection strength. Yasumasa Morimura’s *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Gift 2)* is a recent acquisition complementing Kass’s work [PAGE 23]. In addition to critiquing the art historical canon, these artists challenge hetero-normative constructions of gender from their

positions as queer artists by elevating cultural figures who have, themselves, been celebrated for their “otherness.” These works serve as catalysts for discussion of the role of representation in thinking about gender and identity.

In 2000, The Block reopened following a second-story expansion designed by Goettsch Partners’ principal architect Dirk Lohan, creating more space for a permanent collection.¹⁷ Soon after, in 2001, a donation of prints by sculptors enabled The Block to connect two vital areas in its collection.¹⁸

The Block’s objective of bringing artwork into the classroom and classes into the museum is central to its teaching mission. In addition to individual students, several full classes have worked with museum staff in curating exhibitions, notably *Toulouse-Lautrec: Art at the Edge of Modernity* (2015), organized by S. Hollis Clayson and her undergraduate seminar students working with a group of prints by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec that will eventually become part of the museum collection.¹⁹

While prints have been a through-line in The Block’s collection, photography is also a strong part of its backbone. Photographs created under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration and the Office of War Information were early complements to 1930s prints made



6 Deborah Kass, *Chairman Ma #21 (Gertrude)*, 1993. Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas. Gift of Alice and Marvin Kosmin, 2020.5.



7 Peter Moore, George Maciunas performing Nam June Paik's *One for Violin Solo*, Fluxhall, 359 Canal Street, New York City, 1964. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Barbara Moore/Bound & Unbound, 2019.24.1.

under the FAP and the collection has expanded with works by noted Chicago photographers like Dawoud Bey [PAGES 109 AND 73], Alan Cohen [PAGE 111], and LaToya Ruby Frazier [PAGE 115]. Beginning in 2013, The Block received three major gifts of photographs by Edward Steichen [PAGES 65 AND 105].²⁰ Along with works by photojournalists W. Eugene Smith and Bruce Davidson, these groups offer windows into cultural themes that shaped twentieth-century American industry, advertising, consumerism, and celebrity.

Perhaps the most persistent thematic thread in The Block's collection, however, is printmaking and activism. Many of the

FAP artists used printmaking as a tool for social change, emphasizing economic disparities, social and racial injustice, labor issues, and political corruption. Other examples range from the seminal *Rue Transnonain* by Honoré Daumier, a foundational lithograph in the history of activist printmaking that combines theatricality with journalistic acuity, to the eclectic portfolio *Conspiracy: The Artist as Witness* (1971)²¹ that includes prints by thirteen artists, and was organized to raise funds to help with legal fees for the trial of the Chicago Seven in the aftermath of Chicago's violent protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention [FIG 1].²²

BREAKING CONVENTIONS

Its foundation in prints and photographs lends a distinct inflection to The Block collection. The idea that these media are more democratic and accessible than painting or sculpture is inscribed in their very form, as multiples to be experienced by people in different places and times. Given their inherent nature to circulate, prints and photographs have also been important vehicles for communication, often for social critique or raising awareness and as catalysts for change and breaking with the past.

A recently acquired photograph by Peter Moore represents another aspect of The Block's aspirations [FIG 7]. In the image, Fluxus artist George Maciunas performs *One for Violin Solo* (1964), a score written by Nam June Paik. Formally dressed in a suit and tie, Maciunas holds a violin above his head in the moment before he smashes it on the table in front of him.²³ This radical gesture, privileging the action and the idea over the object, visualizes a rupture with convention. Maciunas's rebellious action can also symbolize The Block's history of breaking new ground.

A small but mighty institution, The Block has been dedicated to shattering old narratives in order to tell new stories, and its collection of works on paper plays a significant role in this reframing effort. The Block continues to collect prints and photographs, and to prioritize artworks that can strengthen teaching and learning across disciplines. The Block values artworks and projects that bring opportunities for rigorous research, interdisciplinarity, and new frameworks in order to shed light on the past and present. The collections have played, and will continue to play, a major role in these endeavors and are critical in sparking dialogues and fostering connections between the campus and the museum's broader audience.

NOTES

- 1 Memo from J. Carson Webster, Chairman, Department of Art, to "Information Services," February 13, 1963. The gift included a list with the following breakdown of works: "18 drawings (16 to 19 centuries); 65 old master prints; 2 Japanese prints; 161 modern prints; 17 reproductions; 263 Total."
- 2 Exhibitions took place in buildings such as Scott Hall, a 1940 Gothic-style building that served as the student union for thirty years. Since The Block was founded forty years ago, it has grown significantly. The full-time permanent staff, which began with three people, has increased almost ten times; the building has expanded from a one-story, one-gallery space to a two-story building with 5,600 square feet of display space. In 1998, the name was changed, by approval from the Northwestern Board of Trustees, from the Block Gallery to The Block Museum of Art. A decade later, in 2008, the museum was accredited by the Association of American Museums.
- 3 Leigh and Mary Block set up a trust fund for the university in the late 1960s that was later designated for construction of the gallery. See Alan G. Artner, "Adams, Bard in Block Gallery bow," *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 1980, D15.
- 4 Meryle Secret, "Love of Great Art Builds Impressive Block Collection: Colors of Lifetime Span Marbles to Matisse," *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959–1973), April 30, 1967.
- 5 Soon after the founding of the Block Gallery, its first director, Kathy Foley, hired a research assistant to create an inventory of works of art on campus and in the Northwestern collection. The researcher identified the locations and catalogued works on the Evanston and Chicago campuses, some of which were stored in closets in department offices. Many artworks, including the Pritchard gift and the Griffin drawings, were brought to The Block, although at the time there were no designated storage spaces or facilities.
- 6 The gift came into Northwestern's collection as a matter of strategic diplomacy. Thomas M. Folds was Chairman of the Art Department at Northwestern at the time and also served on the Memorial and Arts Committee, overseeing art acquisitions on the occasion of the university's centenary celebrations in 1951. Folds described making a visit with J. Carson Webster to Marion Mahony Griffin at her north side apartment in Chicago in the early 1950s, presumably to obtain a group of architectural drawings. Together they negotiated the plan for Griffin to give a substantial group of her and Walter Burley Griffin's drawings to Northwestern. Parts of the collection were also given to the Art Institute of Chicago and Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University. With their contribution of a rare and unique body of work from the Prairie School, the Griffins made the museum a destination for researchers and scholars from throughout the United States and abroad.
- 7 Leigh Block donated a group of indoor sculptures to the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, while the outdoor sculpture was gifted to Northwestern.
- 8 While the original sculpture garden was designed by Chicago architect John Vinci, several works have since been moved or moved indoors, notably Joan Miro's *Constellation* (1971) and Arnaldo Pomodoro's *Cilindro Costruito* (Constructed Cylinder) (1969), now in the Ryan Center for the Musical Arts, where they are set against the striking vistas of Lake Michigan visible from the lobby.
- 9 Since the artists had received a weekly salary from the US government, the works were intended to be available to the public and were placed on loan or allocated to public agencies, especially schools, and nonprofit institutions throughout the country.

- 10 “Who Owns WPA Prints,” Transcript of a panel discussion held at the Print Fair (IFPDA), November 4, 2000. The panel was moderated by Grace Glueck, art critic for the *New York Times*, and included the following participants: Will Barnet, former WPA artist; Hersh Cohen, managing director, Smith Barney Asset Management, and print collector; Sylvan Cole, print dealer; Franklin Feldman, lecturer of art law, Columbia Law School; David Mickenberg, Director of The Block Museum of Art; and Francis O’Connor, art historian and WPA expert.
- 11 The exhibition was curated by John Murphy ’17 PhD, 2012–13 Block Curatorial Graduate Fellow, and Jill Bugajski, and traveled to the Grey Art Gallery at New York University.
- 12 *BlockPoints* Volume II, 1995. Of the 138 acquisitions listed in the first issue of the Block Gallery’s annual report *BlockPoints*, 127 were prints.
- 13 Another important example was the exhibition *Brücke: German Expressionist Prints from the Granvil and Marcia Specks Collection* (1988), which combined a rigorous scholarly approach with an emphasis on accessibility. The exhibition was curated by Reinhold Heller and his graduate seminar at the University of Chicago, which also provided a model for working with faculty and students to create original research and excellent content.
- 14 Or “reproducible media,” as an earlier mission statement labeled it.
- 15 Caitlin DiMartino was the 2019–20 Block Curatorial Graduate Fellow and co-curated the exhibition with Corinne Granof, Academic Curator.
- 16 *Printmaking in America* (1995) was followed by the thematically related *Second Sight: Printmaking in Chicago, 1935–1995* (1996).
- 17 Lohan redesigned The Block in a sleek modernist idiom of glass, steel, and limestone that connects the building with the work of his grandfather, Mies van der Rohe, and the great tradition of Chicago modernist architecture.
- 18 Starr Figura, “Pressing the Point: Twentieth Century Prints by Sculptors,” in *Prints by Sculptors: The Rudolph H. and Fannia Weingartner Collection at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art* (Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 2001), 30. The collection was assembled by Rudolph and Fannia Weingartner. Rudolph Weingartner had been Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern.
- 19 The works in the exhibition, part of a bequest to The Block, are from the collection of Irwin and Andra Press. Over the course of the fall 2014 quarter, the students made several visits to their home in Chicago to research and organize the exhibition.
- 20 Collectors Richard and Jackie Hollander donated the Steichen photographs in honor of Morton and Mimi Schapiro in three major gifts: one of forty-nine prints in 2013; forty-four prints in 2017; and forty-one additional prints in 2020.
- 21 *Rue Transnonain* was given to The Block as part of a 2002 gift by Sidney and Vivian Kaplan of over three hundred prints by Daumier, many of which have been used in courses to reflect on the social history of nineteenth-century Europe.
- 22 The project was organized by Pearl Hirshfield, who had been involved in many activist-artist projects, including serving on the planning board of the Chicago Peace Museum. Her papers and correspondence regarding the portfolio are housed in the Northwestern University Archives.
- 23 The photograph was given to The Block in honor of the exhibition *A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s–1980s*, the first major exhibition to explore the work of artist and cellist Charlotte Moorman. At the time of writing, the Peter Moore Photography Archive is in the process of being transferred from the Peter Moore Estate to the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Libraries.