

A&E

ART REVIEW

'Phillips Collects' and viewers enjoy

Museum shares treasures to remind public of its acquisitions

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(SUN ART CRITIC)

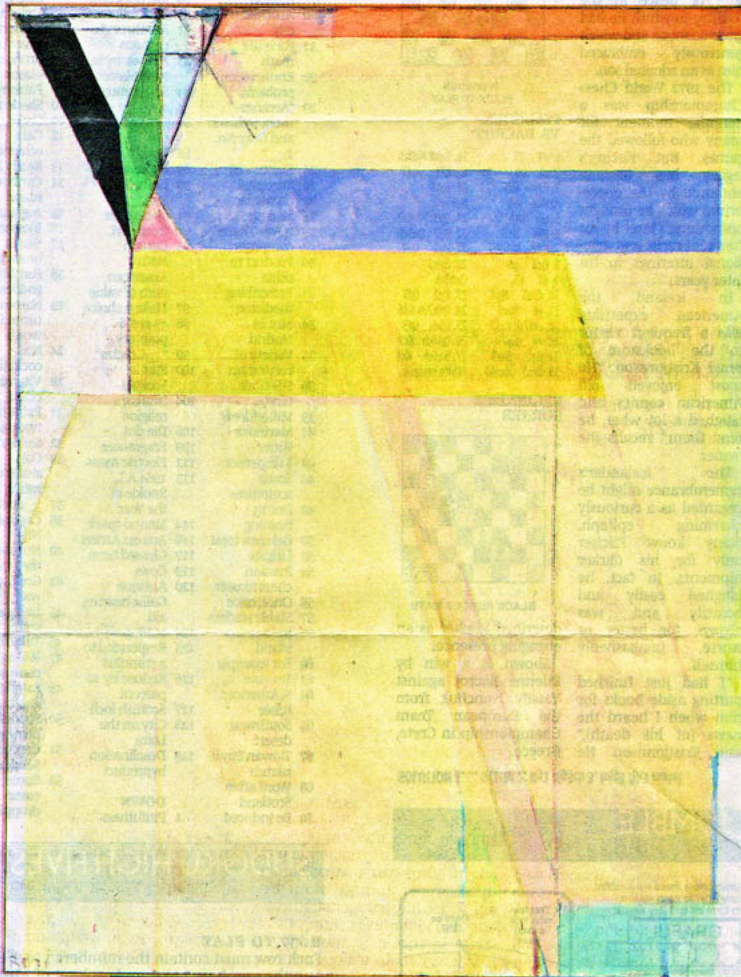
MUSEUM SHOWS SO OFTEN feel like mini-seminars in art history that you almost feel guilty when one comes along that lets you just enjoy spending an hour or so looking at a bunch of really interesting pictures.

The exhibition of recent acquisitions that opened this weekend at the Phillips Collection in Washington is that kind of show, one where you don't have to pore over every label and wall text for fear of missing something important. You just stroll through and enjoy the sights along the way.

Of course, there's a perfectly reasonable curatorial premise behind *Degas to Diebenkorn: The Phillips Collects*, and it's pretty much stated in the exhibition title.

Duncan Phillips, who in 1921 founded the first American museum of Modern art, may have laid the institutional groundwork, but in the decades since his death in 1966, the Phillips has gone right on adding new things to the collection he bequeathed to posterity.

Phillips collected throughout his career and, though he didn't leave funds for his museum to continue making acquisitions after his death, he seemed to assume it would follow the example that he set during his lifetime. He fervently believed that museums had to grow in order to remain vital.



"Ocean Park No. 38" is one of an exciting series of abstract paintings by Diebenkorn.
(COURTESY THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION)

"Many people don't realize that we've always been a collecting museum," Phillips director Jay Gates said last week. "One of the reasons for putting on a show like this is to remind people that we depend on gifts from generous donors to keep Phillips' legacy alive."

The show presents about 120 works by American and European masters, and it includes paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints and photographs from the 19th

century to the present.

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But the show also introduces no less than 28 new artists to the collection, and their names read like a *Who's Who* of postwar American art: Ansel Adams, Elizabeth Murray, William Eggleston, Barbara Hepworth, Harry Callahan and Ellsworth Kelly, to cite just a few.

It seems almost incredible, for example, that an artist such as Adams, whose career as a photographer spanned more than five decades from the 1930s to the 1980s, is only now coming into the Phillips' permanent collection.

I spent a few minutes standing in front of his *Ice on Ellery Lake, Sierra Nevada, California* (1959), which shows a broad S-curve of silvery ice, floating atop the dark waters of the lake where it meets the shore, against a backdrop of craggy mountains shrouded in mist. I was utterly enchanted by its brooding evocation of clashing elements suspended in perfect equilibrium.

The image is one of three Adams photographs in the show, and it hangs in a gallery with works by Callahan, Berenice Abbott, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paul Caponigro and Minor White that showcase the museum's commitment to beefing up its photography collections.

Though Duncan Phillips acquired works in many media, paintings were always his first love. When, in 1923, he bought Renoir's famous *Luncheon of the Boating Party* for the then-unheard of sum of \$125,000, he boasted it was "one of the greatest paintings in the world" and predicted "it will do more good in arousing interest and support [for the Phillips Gallery] than all the rest of our collection put together."

I felt what might have been a similar frisson of excitement for painting as I stood in front of Diebenkorn's monumental *Ocean Park No. 38* (1971), a huge abstract canvas painted in luminous hues of yellow, purple, orange and green.

At nearly 9 feet tall and 7 feet wide, the piece is surely one of the most spectacular works in the show. Diebenkorn painted it while living in California, where he maintained a studio in the Ocean Park district of Santa Monica. And though the image seems wholly abstract, it actually represents the artist's attempt to re-create the emotional impact of the American Western landscape in nonobjective terms through line and brilliant color.

It's the kind of painting that just draws you in the more you look at it. Diebenkorn's method involved drawing directly on the canvas, then correcting and refining his design by repeatedly scraping away portions of the image and painting over his earlier efforts.

The result is a densely layered canvas whose entire surface feels activated by powerful interior forces operating just below the threshold of visibility. It's exciting to look at, even though you can't tell exactly from where its peculiar energy springs. So you just look and look and look. You could spend an hour gazing at it and still feel you hadn't seen it all.

So just go and enjoy. Don't worry about trying to remember the name of every painting or every painter. Sooner or later, something will pop out that you never guessed was there and you'll be hooked — but only if you leave your guilt at the door.

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ON EXHIBIT *Degas to Diebenkorn: The Phillips Collects* runs through May 28 at the Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St. in Northwest Washington. 202-387-2151 or phillipscollection.org.