REVEALING THE HIDDEN CLYFFORD STILL

Hundreds of Still’s paintings were sealed off from the public for years while ominous rumors about their condition circulated. Now, in preparation for the opening of a museum dedicated to the artist, experts can finally see how the works have held up and what kind of treatment they need.

BY SYLVIA HOCHFELD
NOT LONG AGO A GROUP OF CONSERVATORS converged on a warehouse in rural Maryland. They had come to look at the paintings in Clyfford Still's estate and to talk about what kind of conservation treatment the works would need after having been rolled up and stored for so many years.

The group was brought together by Barbara A. Ramsay, director of conservation services, ARTEX.

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Paintings from 1943 to 1946 being prepared for transport to the new Clyfford Still Museum.
The artist's daughters Diane Still Knox (left) and Sandra Still Campbell.

Dean Sobel, director of the new museum.

Head estate conservator Barbara Ramsay making a point.

Fine Art Services. She has been involved with the estate since 2004, when Still's widow, Patricia, requested an initial condition survey of the paintings. Ramsay and her team—Pamela Betts, Kristen Loudermilk, and Peter Nelsen—are unrolling the paintings, analyzing their condition problems, and stabilizing them so that they can be transported safely to the new Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, scheduled to open next year.

Will Shank, the former chief conservator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art who cared for the Still collection there for 15 years, flew in from Barcelona, where he now lives. Tom Learner, senior scientist at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, and Susan Lake, collection manager and chief conservator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., were also present. They were joined by Dean Sobel, director of the new Still museum, and by the artist's two daughters, Diane Still Knox and Sandra Still Campbell. This reporter had been invited as well.

As we were driving up to the nondescript building that houses the conservation lab—we were asked not to disclose its location—it was impossible to imagine what awaited us. In the back of the building, behind offices where people sat at computers, was a long corridor lined with paintings leaning against the wall or propped on easels, most of them only recently stretched for the first time since Still rolled them up. Ranging from a small, conventional rendering of a pile of rocks to enormous Abstract Expressionist masterpieces, they traced the entire course of Still's development. In a high-ceilinged storeroom, about 650 rolled paintings were stacked vertically in a rack against the wall; others lay on tables while the canvases, deformed by rolling, settled back into flatness.

It was breathtaking to be surrounded by Still's blazing colors and fantastic shapes. His representational works of the mid-1930s were a shock: farmers like human beasts of burden with horselike, featureless faces and elongated, skeletal hands. From painting to painting, the figures became more and more abstract, gradually transforming into flickers and spurts of flame. Each painting offered a new revelation.

Still kept almost all of his paintings. About 95 percent of them were in his estate when he died in 1980, at the age of 75. He allowed almost no one to see these works, and after his death his widow sealed them off from the public and from scholars. Ominous rumors about their condition have circulated for years. When Andrew Decker wrote about the estate for ARTnews (February 1986), the late William Rubin, who was director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, told him, "It's an absolute scandal," referring to the deterioration of the paintings in storage (which Rubin hadn't seen).

It was obvious to us that the paintings were in good condition. Ramsay told us that the rumors were baseless. "The vast majority of the paintings we have seen so far are in astonishingly good condition, almost pristine condition," she said. "We were very surprised by that; we weren't sure what to expect." She and her team have examined 169 paintings and have treated 55. "Most paintings," she said, "require only reduction of canvas deformation and stretching, plus a light surface cleaning. Others need varying degrees of local consolidation—reattachment of lifting paint—and minimal infilling and inpainting of losses."

In some ways, Shank said, these paintings are in better con-
dition than the ones that have been hanging in public all these years. They have not been handled. Their colors have not been faded by exposure to light and air, as is the case with some of the San Francisco pictures.

Learner agreed. “It’s quite an irony that these paintings that have been left rolled up for most of their life and are untouched by conservators are in wonderful condition,” he said. Still’s techniques and materials pose no particular problems, and “the conservation issues that are coming up are very standard.”

Even so, Shank added, he was surprised that the stored paintings have survived so well. “Rolling paintings is something you do only if you absolutely have to,” he said. “The fact that all these paintings were rolled and that some of them were rolled together did give one pause. Rolling is usually a temporary condition for a painting—something you do only long enough to get it through a small door from one large room to another.”

“Still had only so many stretchers,” his daughter Sandra said. “He had to roll up the paintings so he could do the next work. There were surges of energy in the months that he could paint. The artist worked in the barn of his farm near Westminster, Maryland, and it was not usable in winter. ‘He had to go to the next and the next. The works evolved from one to another.’”

But Ramsay said that Still did it right. It’s counterintuitive to roll a canvas with the paint layer facing outward, as he did, but in fact it’s much safer. Still rolled as many as eleven canvases together, with nothing in between, around a cardboard tube or, in a few cases, a metal drainpipe; he then secured the roll with masking tape, wrapped it in plastic sheeting, and stored it vertically. When Ramsay and her team unrolled the canvases, they discovered that some paint layers were still tacky.

Still wasn’t working in a sterile environment, and Ramsay’s team found debris on the paintings’ surfaces: bits and pieces of wood, grass, and straw; hairs; and even a fingernail clipping.

These rolls eventually took over the Still house in New Windsor, Maryland, where the couple had moved from the farm. The late art critic Katharine Kuh described the large, white-columned house, next door to a funeral parlor, as “filled to capacity with multiple rolled canvases, each identified by Pat with a small sketch of the original.” In her memoir, My Love Affair with Modern Art, Kuh wrote that “only a cramped section of the kitchen” was “reserved for sociability.”

During the winter Still worked on paper. “He would have a creative surge in the middle of a cold winter,” Sandra said, “and he would go to Woolworth’s and buy a stock of construction paper and go into what we called the piano room, where there was a table.”

Patricia kept the paintings and drawings in the house until 2003, when she began to fear the possibility of fire and moved them to a safer location. She died in 2005.

Still sold fewer than 100 paintings—enough to allow his family a modestly comfortable life. He made two large gifts to museums, presenting 31 works to the Albright (now Albright-Knox) Art Gallery in Buffalo in 1964 and 20 paintings to SFMOMA in 1978. In 1986 Patricia gave ten paintings from her collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which had
organized a Still retrospective in 1979. The conditions of all three gifts were strict: Still's paintings had to be exhibited together in one room. They could not be shown alongside the works of other artists. They could not be sold or lent to other museums.

Ramsay said that about 40 paintings are in private collections and a slightly smaller number are in other museums. The rest—825 oil paintings and 1,575 works on paper (including Patricia's estate)—will soon be traveling to Denver. The drawings are almost unknown, and Sobel said that many are masterpieces.

The value of the whole is impossible to estimate because so many of the works are unknown. Still's paintings rarely come on the market: a large canvas from a prime period, 1947-R-No. 1, probably completed in 1952, was sold at Christie's New York in 2006 for just under $21.3 million.

Still's techniques and materials were traditional. He was very concerned that his paintings last, his daughter Sandra said, so he used only materials he thought had been tested by time. He never used acrylics.

Ramsay has initiated a collaborative research study with Lake and Learner on "the actual materials used by Still, how these materials were used, and how they have aged."

Sandra recalled that Still would spread out a canvas on the floor and swab on hot rabbit-skin glue sizing with a mop. He was tall and had long legs, so he could reach quite a large area. Ramsay said that the later paintings have no other ground, which is fortunate because the surface is thin and flexible and can be rolled more easily without cracking.

Still almost always prepared his own paints from powder pigments and boiled linseed oil and applied them with palette knives. He seldom used a brush. His paint layer, Ramsay said, is lean, with a lot of pigment and not much oil. She described it as unusually sensitive and difficult to treat. There is, for example, the risk of darkening the matte areas during the consolidation of loose paint or the removal of the masking tape Still used to secure the rolls. Solvents have to be chosen and applied with extra care.

Efflorescence—a crusty or powdery deposit on the surface—is a problem in a number of the paintings, Ramsay said, and can be quite disfiguring. Learner and his colleagues at the Getty will be investigating this phenomenon, and Ramsay said her team will wait for more information before they try to deal with it in more than a few extreme examples.

Still oiled or varnished his paintings—a practice that Ramsay said was confirmed by correspondence between the artist and the owners of the works. He didn't like them to get "too dry," and would varnish or revarnish them as they were being put on exhibition, a practice that horrified curators.

Sandra remembers being at the Whitney when Still revarnished a painting there. "The conservators watched him all the time," she said. "It was that big, beautiful burgundy. It dried in a triangular shape." Still went out and "bought spar varnish, and he said, 'You're going to need a second coat.' They were petrified. My guess is that they never did it."

Ramsay said these coatings pose a problem. They were not always applied over the entire surface of a painting, and it is not evident which areas were treated or how much saturation the artist intended. Some paintings have developed disfiguring coatings that even Still might not like now. And how dry is "too dry?" Ramsay said she hopes that the artist's notes in his archive, which is sealed until next year, will shed light on his intentions in general and for specific works.

"Our basic approach across the board is minimal intervention," Ramsay said. "We don't want to impose more of ourselves on these paintings than we need to."

It's really an amazing collection in that it hasn't been out and handled and treated at all, so we recognize the responsibility we have to do as little as possible."

One of Ramsay's biggest problems is putting the paintings on stretchers. "It seems simple," she said, "but it takes us almost longer than anything else. The sheer size of many of the works makes stretching a challenge. Most of the paintings have approximate dimensions written on the back, but they
don’t coincide with the painted image or the fold lines from previous stretching. So we are looking very closely at fold lines, if they exist, and at photographs of the paintings when they were stretched previously.”

Some of the paintings have never been mounted on stretchers, so they don’t have fold marks. Sandra said that Still would staple a canvas to a plywood wall if he ran out of stretchers.

The problem for Ramsay is to determine the edges of these paintings. This is an aesthetic judgment as well as a practical one, and it’s a decision not often left to conservators.

“We have to make decisions about how much of the painted design we are going to show,” Ramsay said. “Normally we would want to show as much paint as possible, but in these paintings you can introduce a whole new field of bare canvas if you show every little bit of paint along an edge, and then you’re changing the composition—and you can’t do that. So in many cases there is the sacrifice of a small amount of the painted edge. If you look at the paintings that were stretched by Still or at least while he was alive, they almost always do have paint that goes at least a quarter of an inch around the fold onto the tacking margins.”

“He didn’t want edges,” said Sandra. “He always accounted for that little extra fold-over.”

“It drives us crazy,” Ramsay said with a laugh. “In the end, we have to make the decision.”

“Mr. Outside himself” is what Thomas Hess, writing in ARTnews in 1969, called Still. More than most artists, Still claimed to be self-created, independent, free of influences. Born to Canadian parents in 1904 in Grandin, North Dakota, he grew up in Spokane, Washington, where his father was an accountant, and on the family homestead in Alberta. When he was 20—a self-taught artist but not yet a high-school graduate—he went to New York and enrolled in the Art Students League, but he thought his first class was a waste of time and left after 45 minutes. He found the museums and galleries equally disappointing. Museums, he later wrote, were “comfort stations” and “supermarkets” for people not seriously interested in art.

Disillusioned, he went back west, earned a master’s degree at Washington State University—his thesis was on Cézanne—and taught art there until 1941. During the war years he worked in the Oakland and San Francisco shipyards, then taught in Virginia at the Richmond Professional Institute. From 1946 to 1950 he was an instructor at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute).

Still visited New York in 1945 and was introduced to Peggy Guggenheim by Mark Rothko, whom he had met in California. She gave Still a solo show at her gallery, Art of This Century, in 1946, and Betty Parsons gave him three shows between 1947 and 1951. In 1951 he terminated his relationship with galleries and began to represent himself. Still moved to New York in 1950 and lived there until 1961, when he bought the farm in Maryland. In 1969 he sold 44 paintings to Marlborough-Gerson Gallery in New York, which exhibited them.

Still emerged in the ’50s as, in Hess’s words, “one of the strongest and most original contributors to the rebirth of modern art in America.” That description wouldn’t have pleased the artist, who saw himself not only as the strongest and most...
original but as a heroic figure whose achievement surpassed the realm of art.

The galleries of the ’40s and ’50s, with their “gas-chamber white walls,” were nothing but “sordid’ gift-shoppes,” Still wrote in the catalogue for his Met retrospective in 1979. But in two of those galleries—presumably Art of This Century and Betty Parsons—was shown one of the few truly liberating concepts man has ever known. There I had made it clear that a single stroke of paint, backed by work and a mind that understood its potency and implications, could restore to man the freedom lost in twenty centuries of apology and devices for subjugation.”

In 1959 Still held a retrospective at the Albright, with 72 paintings chosen by himself. In a letter to museum director Gordon Smith that was printed in the exhibition catalogue, Still made even larger claims for his art. After lamenting the corruption of institutional culture and describing his own lonely journey to the “high and limitless plain” where imagination “became as one with Vision,” he quoted William Blake and then warned, “Therefore, let no man undervalue the implications of this work or its power for life;—or for death, if it is misused.”

With the eloquence of an Old Testament prophet, Still poured out his loathing for the art establishment; critics, curators, collectors, dealers, and other artists were all the objects of virulent denunciations. He didn’t give his paintings titles because that would have encouraged the interpretations he deplored. He disliked group exhibitions because they put him in the context of other artists or suggested that he was part of a school. When curator Dorothy Miller persuaded him to participate in the landmark “15 Americans” exhibition at MoMA in 1952, he insisted that his works be shown in their own room.

Sandra Still Campbell shares her father’s attitude toward the museum. “The night before the opening,” she said, “he went up there and looked, and Dorothy Miller was showing one of his works halfway into someone else’s room. And he had to go in there and get it back: ‘Don’t do that! Give the artists the chance to be seen for who they are.'”

We paused to admire a large, somber painting leaning against the wall of the conservation lab: black with a flicker of orange at the left edge and a whisper of bare canvas dividing it vertically down the center. This is the second version of a painting—known as 1951–52—that was in the “15 Americans” show and is now in the Art Institute of Chicago. “The Modern wanted to buy one of his works, but they didn’t want that one,” Sandra said, referring to the picture in Chicago. ‘And he said, ‘This is the breakthrough painting; this is the important one.’ This is the one they should have bought. The Modern didn’t have the courage to buy break-through paintings. They played safe.” (Still told his friend John Stephan to buy the work, and Stephan made a partial gift of it to the Art Institute.)

**Clifford Still’s will** was one sentence long: “I give and bequeath all the remaining works of art executed by me in my collection to an American city that will agree to build or assign and maintain permanent quarters exclusively for these works of art and assure their physical survival with the explicit requirement that none of these works of art will be sold, given, or exchanged but are to be retained in the place described above exclusively assigned to them in perpetuity for exhibition and study.”

“Can you imagine any city father who would build a mu-
Still never named his paintings. Here, 1957 J No. 2.

seum to anyone, except maybe Babe Ruth?" Charles Millard, then chief curator of the Hirshhorn, asked Decker in 1986.

Denver acquired just such a city father in 2003, when Mayor John Hickenlooper assumed office. Not long afterward, Hick-

enlooper learned about the Still estate from Patricia's nephew, Curt Freed, a doctor who lives in Denver. Freed, head of the

division of clinical pharmacology and toxicology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, is a prominent expert on

Parkinson's disease and stem cells.

Freed told ARTnews that he saw Still's work for the first time on a visit to New York when he was nine years old. He remem-

bers that he was awestruck by it. He sug-

gested to Patricia that Denver might be a pos-

sible home for a Still museum, and in 1999, with Patricia's permission, he called Dianne Perry Vanderlip, then curator of modern and contemporary art at the Denver Art Museum, and asked her—out of the blue—if the mu-

seum would be interested in some sort of af-

filiation with the Still collection. Vanderlip

was very interested. In 2000 she and mu-

seum director Lewis Sharp went to Maryland to meet Patricia, along with representatives of then—Denver mayor Wellington Webb. A donation agreement was in the works, but negotiations fell through. Freed says Patricia didn't feel that the language of the agree-

ment "was wholehearted enough about the independence of the museum."

Talks resumed in 2003, after Hickenlooper's election. Freed took him to meet Patricia in 2004, and immediately afterward Hickenlooper began assembling supporters for the project, including business executive Christopher Hunt, who became the new museum's board chair-

man. So far $17 million has been raised toward the capital campaign goal of $33 million.

The museum was designed specifically for Stills works by architect Brad Cloepfil of Alli-

ed Works Architecture. "The proportions of the galleries are based on the way that gen-

eration of artists was used to seeing their paintings," Dean Sobel said. The spaces will be "more intimately scaled than we are ac-

ustomed to—not so grand and soaring."

Daylight is another important consideration, he said, "given the texture and the variances of surface in Still's paintings. Incandescent lighting doesn't help in understanding Still's tactile surfaces." The donation agreement specifies that the museum can have a small shop but no restaurant or auditorium.

And so, to the surprise of many, Still will have things his way: almost his entire life's work will be kept together in a single location in perpetuity.

More than any other artist, Still insisted on controlling the fate of his paintings. He seldom allowed them to be exhibited, and then only under strictly limited conditions. He wanted them sold only to collectors who he believed had "insight into the values involved." He ordered Betty Parsons to "allow no one to write about them. NO ONE," because his "contempt for the intelligence of the scribblers I have read is so complete that I cannot tolerate their imbecilities."

As a result, Still has not been granted the scholarly scrutiny devoted to other important American artists. But when his works and his archive are accessible in the new museum, that situation will change. People will be "scribbling" and interpret- ing and undoubtedly writing things he would consider imbe-

cilic. The art establishment he hated so much will be paying a lot more attention to Clyfford Still.