

Arts & LEISURE

Unfurling the Hidden Work of a Lifetime

Clyfford Still's Paintings, Locked Up as He Wished, Glimpsed for a Moment

By STEVEN HENRY MADOFF

ON a recent cloudy day the British art historian David Anfam stood outside a warehouse, a long concrete slab with a steel roof on the outskirts of a nondescript suburb, and confided, "I feel like the archaeologist Howard Carter about to enter Tutankhamen's tomb."

The secret cache of art Mr. Anfam had traveled from London to see — 2,393 works, to be exact — has been hidden from public view for decades. Most of it has never been seen by the public at all, thanks to the fierce privacy and bilious contempt for the art world of its creator, the Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still, who died in 1980 at 75. Despite the relative obscurity of the work, art experts estimate that the collection could fetch more than \$1 billion if it ever comes to market, which it probably never will.

The works in question make up the entire estate of this artist. He left behind a one-page will, nearly 95 percent of the work he ever made (he sold or gave away only 150 pieces in his lifetime) and a widow determined to follow his final testament to the letter. The demands were these: His estate could be bequeathed only to an American city, one that would build a museum to serve as a temple to his art and to nothing else. No works could ever be sold. No other artist could ever show a single piece alongside his. All Clyfford Still, all the time.

Most textbooks of postwar American art will tell you how important Still's vast and powerfully austere canvases are in the pantheon. Robert Motherwell described Still's first solo show in New York in 1946 as "a bolt out of the blue." Critics hailed the sheer physicality, soaring presence and soulful sublimity of his abstract pictures. Yet his reclusiveness in later life and the unyielding stringency of his will have not served him well in posterity. Only three big exhibitions surveying his work have been mounted in the last 30 years.

Lately, though, Still and his art have glided back into view. First came word in 2004 that his widow, Patricia Still, after decades spent spurning other metropolitan suitors, had chosen Denver as host of a Clyfford Still Museum, largely because of the overtures from the city's ambitious mayor, John Hickenlooper. Then in November "1947-R-No. 1," a bracing Still painting in red and black, went for \$21.29 million at Christie's in New York: a record for this artist and nearly seven times his previous high just two years earlier. The same month the announce-



Stephanie Kuykendal for The New York Times

The art historian David Anfam, left, with Dean Sobel, director of the planned Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, witness the unrolling of a work by the reclusive artist. Works by Still have been hidden from public view for decades.

ment came that Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture, a rising architectural star, would design the museum, anticipated to open in early 2010. No one knows Still's work better than Mr. Anfam, considered one of the world's premier experts on Abstract Expressionism and the author of the definitive study on Still. Enlisted as an adviser to the museum who will write the artist's catalogue raisonné, he was joined on that brisk winter morning by Sandra Campbell, one of Still's two daughters, who now oversee his estate, and Dean Sobel, the museum's director.

The mood was a mix of excitement and something like relief: this was the first opportunity for a scholar to grasp the full magnitude of what the artist made.

"To me it's just the last great estate of Abstract Expressionism," Mr. Anfam said. "We know all the others — Pollock's, de Kooning's, Motherwell's, Rothko's, Newman's, Gottlieb's, Kline's. And of course in sheer size it is almost unprecedented. Perhaps only Picasso's estate compares."

"Through brute will Still kept almost his entire output intact," he added. "I've been waiting 31 years for this, since I first started writing about him, and finally — pinch me — I'm here."

This reporter was invited to accompany the group on the condition that the location of the warehouse remain secret. Fourteen guards patrol the building and its perimeter night and day,

while a battery of electronic guardians — infrared, motion detectors, vibration detectors in the walls and video cameras — protect its warren of storerooms. Among them is the 2,500-square-foot space that houses Still's work and that the three now waited in front of, as a huge steel rolling door was lifted by an attendant, like a curtain rising to reveal the setting of a play.

Along one wall a 30-foot-long row of wood stalls shielded by sheets of translucent plastic held dozens of canvases rolled up on narrow tubes and wrapped in plastic. Against the opposite wall, a shorter row of racks held

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canvases that had been mounted on stretchers: a rich array from every phase of Still's career, from minor Regionalist-style pictures done in his youth at the end of the 1920s, to paintings from the pinnacle years of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

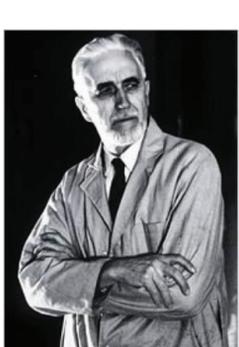
"We have 30 paintings just from the same year as '1947-R-No. 1,'" Mr. Sobel said. Other

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Associated Press

The artist, Clyfford Still, above in 1969. Right, Warehouse art handlers unroll a canvas of his that has spent decades away from public view. Standing behind them, from left, are David Anfam, an art historian; Frederick Schroeder, representing the Clyfford Still Museum; and Sandra Campbell, one of the artist's daughters.



Stephanie Kuykendal for The New York Times

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large pictures propped up around the room — though rivaling the quality of Still paintings in museum collections, Mr. Anfam observed — seemed oddly unassuming, casually arranged under the fluorescent lights hanging from above. Metal flat files held drawers of Still's works on paper: oils, pastels, gouaches, etchings, pen and inks, charcoals and pencil drawings.

More than 700 paintings and 1,200 works on paper were in this single room. (Another room down a maze of halls holds about 400 more works that were in the private collection of Still's widow, who died in 2005, and that will join her husband's in the new museum.) Mr. Anfam gravitated toward a long rectangular table that was laid out with 13 oils from the 1920s to the '40s, tracking Still's evolution from stylized figures to abstraction on a sweeping scale.

As he pored over them, Barbara Ramsay, a conservator working with the Still collection, joined the group. Mr. Anfam stopped in front of an untitled painting from 1937 that was strikingly divided: to the right a schematic figure whose insides are visible; to the left a tubular contraption, the mechanics of human and machine roughly joined.

"It's extraordinarily important," Mr. Anfam said. "You see the way he's transforming the

human form, literally abstracting the human parts in the image so they become like templates. He's making his way here, finding the mental formula for what's going to happen in the major work."

Looking over Mr. Anfam's shoulder, Mrs. Campbell noted the outside scale of the hands. "Hands were important to him, that people did work," she said of her father, who was born in Grandin, N.D., and raised in hardscrabble circumstances in Spokane, Wash., and Alberta, Canada. "There was nothing but church and work," she said. "That had to influence him. What you do with your hands, how you take responsibility for what you make, what you do with your mind. He hated that term 'action painter.' He didn't dance around, throwing paint on the canvas. He had a kind of relaxed precision when he painted. Ideas were all-consuming for Dad."

On an easel near the door was a self-portrait he made at the age of 36. He looks down on the viewer with a handsome, angular face and a cool glance. "Defiant" is the word that came to Mr. Anfam's mind, and then "imperious."

Still's father was a stern, unforgiving man who worked variously as an accountant and a farmer; his mother fed him culture and fueled his imagination from an early age. He grew up to be abundantly creative but inflexible and easily appalled.

He insulted and abandoned old friends — Mark Rothko among them — for any whiff of complicity with pure commerce or consuming neediness. He called galleries and museums "gas chambers." He made grandiose pronouncements like "These are not paintings in the usual sense; they are life and death merging in fearful union." He described himself as a Puritan.

In a telephone interview after the visit Henry T. Hopkins, a former director of what is now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, described calling upon Still in the 1960s: "When you visited him, you weren't allowed to take a tape recorder or a notebook. You were just supposed to listen. He served you one cup of coffee, no seconds. He was like an avenging Protestant minister coming out of the barren lands of the Dakotas to the wicked city. But his railing against the commercialism of the art world even back then was meant to cut a path through a lot of nonsense, and he was true to that all his life."

In the warehouse the group moved on through landscapes, pictures of barrooms and farmers, of rock piles and strands of wheat, of human bodies meditatively rearranged into jigsaw geometric forms. "What we're seeing is a laboratory of ideas," Mr. Anfam said. "It's like a map unfolding, and there's very little to suggest

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he didn't know the way. We're not seeing many paths not taken."

Then came the full-blown abstractions. Leaning against a wall at the back of the room was "1949 No. 1," more than 8 feet high by 6 feet wide, an ocean of red in which black forms have the look of continents. Laid down with a palette knife, the paint is strewn with masses of crusty, built-up surfaces that contrast with smooth areas like glistening planes.

Craggy, jagged and rocky are standard phrases applied to the art, but Mr. Anfam, appraising the picture, said: "This looks less geological than anatomical to me. What we're seeing are the remnants of what was once the living presence of his figures scattered out into the field. He's not drawing on the past anymore. He's on his own."

And so he was. He crisscrossed the country from Spokane to San Francisco to Richmond, Va., to New York over the years to teach and to paint. Wherever he went, he fumed at the art world, refusing to be represented by any gallery by the early 1950s and then packing up his moral outrage and leaving New York permanently for the country town of Westminster, Md., in 1961. There he painted in a barn, rolling up his monumental canvases and storing them away, rarely to be exhibited, sold or even looked at again in his lifetime.

With only two hours left before everyone was due to leave for various airports, the table was cleared to bring out one of the painter's rolls, which actually held two paintings. (Mr. and Mrs. Still often rolled more than one picture on a tube to save space.) This was the day's main event: viewing two mature works that had not been seen since they were put in storage 30 years ago. No one knew what the condition of the pieces would be.

According to Ms. Ramsay, the conservator, about 10 percent of the paintings she has examined so far have significant conservation problems. Some have areas that show "efflorescence," turning foggy in appearance as the pigment migrated out of the paint medium (typically linseed oil) and rose to the painting's surface. Another problem is paint loss: brittle bits have curled and flaked off. And occasionally a canvas shows a slightly wrinkled washboard effect from being rolled up for so long. But those are localized, minor repairs.

"Only 1 to 5 percent of everything we've examined have problems in larger areas of a canvas," Ms. Ramsay said, "and perhaps just 1 percent of the works are unshowable. Considering the way they've been kept in houses and a barn over the years, that's remarkable."

With three of the warehouse's workers on

hand, she gingerly unfurled the roll. Both paintings were in good shape. A big untitled canvas from 1949, known by its catalogue number, PH-17, was a torrent of rust, red, white and black, with a burst of yellow roaring upward at the top.

"There's nothing remotely decorative about it," Mr. Anfam said appreciatively, leaning over the picture. "It's very beautiful in Still's way, but not ingratiating." The other piece, of about the same size, 7 1/2 feet tall by 5 3/4 feet wide, was dated Nov. 24, 1977, on the back. Mrs. Campbell laughed, saying: "Yes, he even painted on Thanksgiving." Made near the end of his life, the work is pared down. Half of its surface is unpainted. The other half is dominated by islands and isthmuses of black, brown and white, with a slender line of yellow rising.

Still once wrote that painting was a way to find revelation and to "exalt the spirit of man." Yet it is clear how personal the struggle was. Mr. Hopkins, the former museum director, recalled an anecdote the painter once told him. "When Still was a small child in Canada, they were digging a well, and they needed someone to go down into it to see the condition of the pit," he said. "They put a rope around his ankle and dropped him down head first."

"He told me he was terrified, but there was

the rope. And I always wondered if those streaks in his paintings, which he called his lifelines, had something to do with that experience. The line there to pull him back up."

As the visit to the warehouse was nearing an end, Mr. Sobel turned to Mr. Anfam and smiled. "So it looks like we have a museum to fill."

The challenging question is whether people will come for repeat visits to see Still's art and only his art. But Mr. Sobel said the enormous breadth of the collection presented promising options. Although the museum will be able to show about 5 percent of what it holds at any one time, he said, "it can draw on thousands of works to produce themed shows, chronological shows, in-depth examinations."

"We can clear the whole museum and just do drawings," he added.

When Mr. Sobel turned to his guests and said that at last it was time to go, Mr. Anfam reached for words to sum up the extraordinary day. "It slowly dawns on you what we've seen here today and what people are going to see — the revision of the history of Abstract Expressionism as the enormity of Still's achievement finally pulls into view," he said. "A picture here, a picture there — you think it's a little trickle in a bathtub, but what you've got is Niagara Falls."



Barbara Ramsay, an art conservator, works with Orville Walker Jr. to unpack a 1949 painting by Clyfford Still.

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