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How the Record-Breaking Sale of a Lichtenstein Painting Changed Agnes Gund's Life

An art collector and patron turns her talents to criminal justice

By Derek Blasberg

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EARLIER THIS YEAR, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted an exhibition called *Studio Visit: Selected Gifts From Agnes Gund*, which featured 55 of the more than 800 works funded or partly funded for the institution since the early 1970s by the esteemed 80-year-old collector, philanthropist and president emerita of MoMA. The show included important pieces from artists such as Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Alice Neel and Kara Walker, most of which were purchased by Gund herself on a half-century-long parade of visits into the studios of contemporary artists.

In July, a week before the exhibition closed, the Fellows of the Harvard Art Museums hosted a private tour and a discussion between Gund and MoMA's chief curator, Ann Temkin. (Gund received a master's degree in art history from Harvard in 1980.) The group, consisting of donors and academics, congregated in the 53rd Street lobby on a balmy summer morning before the museum opened. The first piece in the show was William H. Johnson's *Children*, a 1941 painting that features three African-American kids.

Gund joined the group quietly and alone, wearing a navy-blue silk shift dress with a gold brooch, her hair and makeup immaculately set. When she entered, she made the social rounds, but she didn't become animated until she spotted Esmay Smith, a security guard who has worked at MoMA for more than 37 years. Gund gave her a hug and held her hands while they spoke for several minutes. The moment between a legendary donor and a museum staffer left Smith beaming when Gund returned to her tour.



Lichtenstein's Masterpiece, which Gund sold to create the Art for Justice Fund. PHOTO: ROY LICHTENSTEIN, 'MASTERPIECE,' 1962, OIL ON CANVAS, 54 X 54 IN. (137.2 X 137.2 CM), © ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN

“That’s like my mother,” Smith says. “She treats everyone here the same. It doesn’t matter your color, your creed, if you’re a man or a woman or what you do—she’s with you. She’s a woman of purpose with a huge heart.” Like many of the guards and other staff members, Smith has grown close to Gund, who joined MoMA’s board of trustees in 1976 and served as president from 1991 to 2002. (Smith says Gund receives birthday cards from all the guards every year.) “Do you believe in angels?” Smith asks. “I didn’t believe in them until I met her.”

Gund has devoted her adult life to art collecting and philanthropy. Her first effort to combine the two occurred in 1977, when she founded Studio in a School, a New York-based nonprofit that subsidizes art education programs, after reading that the government would roll back arts funding in public schools. For more than 40 years, the organization has introduced Gund’s artist friends, like Jeff Koons and Clifford Ross, to students who might never have been encouraged to express themselves through the arts. “Aggie’s the best, and her passion for the arts is contagious,” former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg says. “She did an amazing job chairing our Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission, and she knows how to inspire artists

and create great organizations. She is revered as a philanthropist because she is so effective, and she generously supports a wide variety of good work in our city and around the country.” Since the early ’70s, she has supported institutions like The Frick and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts in New York, as well as organizations like the J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles and the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. In 1997, Gund received the National Medal of Arts, the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the U.S. government, from President Bill Clinton. In 2015, she gave a basketball-inspired work by David Hammons to the Cleveland Museum of Art in honor of pro baller LeBron James, who, like Gund, grew up in Ohio, and who played for the Cavaliers. Of that gift, Temkin jokes on the MoMA tour: “We know she’s not monogamous with MoMA, and she gives to other institutions, which is incredible.”

What propelled Gund’s name back to the top of the art press last year was the sale of *Masterpiece*, a 1962 painting by Roy Lichtenstein, which Gund bought directly from the artist’s studio in 1976 and had hung over the fireplace in the dining room of her Park Avenue apartment. The piece, considered one of the most important in Lichtenstein’s body of work, was sold for \$165 million in a private sale organized by New York’s Acquavella Galleries. (The buyer was hedge fund billionaire Steven A. Cohen.) Afterward, the Ford Foundation, in partnership with Gund, announced that \$100 million of the proceeds would be used to create the Art for Justice Fund, a criminal justice organization focused on reducing mass incarceration and reforming the penal system. It was a bittersweet moment for Gund, the organization’s chair and founding donor: She was parting with one of her most beloved works of art for a cause that she felt she had to support. “I have always said that this is what gets me in trouble: I promise more than I have, and then I have to sell things I don’t want to sell a lot of the time,” Gund says while sitting on a cream-colored sofa under a Cy Twombly painting in her home library. (In the dining room across the hall, a Stanley Whitney painting currently hangs where the Lichtenstein once was.) “I was sad to see it go because it held a very important position in my life: I knew the artist; I’m friends with his wife; I lived with it for so long. But this was important to me, and I did it.”

The artist’s widow, Dorothy Lichtenstein, gave the sale her blessing. “That would have made Roy really, sublimely happy,” Lichtenstein says of her husband, who died in 1997. “Aggie is unimpeachable.”

“She is a singular force in the art world and is known for having both a discerning eye and a big heart. Everyone you talk to is going to say that too,” says Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation. Walker and Gund have been friends and philanthropic cohorts for nearly two decades, and when Gund was conceptualizing the fund she called him to see if they could collaborate. Walker remembers discussing books like Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, but it was Ava DuVernay’s film *13TH*, a documentary about the



Leo Castelli, Agnes Gund and Robert Rauschenberg (1989). PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ARCHIVES, NEW YORK

slavery-abolishing 13th Amendment, that spurred Gund into decisive action. “Immediately after she left the theater she called me in tears. For the first time,” Walker says, “she understood fully the legacy of race and racism and the effects on our criminal justice system. She said, ‘Well, I have to do something, I want to make some contribution to helping change the situation in our country.’ ”

The impetus for the fund hit close to home: “It really started because of my grandchildren,” says Gund, who has four children and is known as Nonna by many in her family. Six of her 12 grandchildren are African-American. “I had probably thought about [race inequality] before, but I was never into it like I am now. I visited a number of prisons, and I’ve seen these injustices myself.” According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s website, African-Americans are imprisoned at a rate of more than five times that of whites in this country. Since its launch in June 2017, the Art for Justice Fund has granted \$32.45 million to 68 individual artists or organizations devoted to criminal justice reforms and support of art-

related programs in prisons and is aiming to add roughly \$7 million for 13 new grantees by the end of 2018.

Gund's friend Jo Carole Lauder, the chairman of the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies, remembers when Gund visited San Quentin State Prison outside San Francisco earlier this year. Walker accompanied her, and while on the visit he sent Lauder a candid photo of Gund walking the grounds alongside an inmate. "It's the back of them, Aggie on the left and the man on the right, and it was very moving," Lauder says. "I think that it's something that Aggie cares very strongly about."



Gund at San Quentin State Prison. PHOTO: SAMUEL ROBINSON

New York-based artist Taryn Simon, who photographed Gund for this article, mounted an exhibition called *The Innocents* at MoMA PS1 in 2003, which explored injustices in the American judicial system and documented the earliest exonerations of prisoners through DNA evidence in the U.S. Similar to Gund's mission with the fund, Simon's project sought to expose societal disparities through contemporary art. "The utility of art is abstract," Simon says. "While I don't know that art necessarily changes society, I have seen its failure to effect systemic changes make visible the dysfunction of the systems themselves."

When deciding whether to sell the Lichtenstein painting, Gund called Walker to flesh out the

idea. "Basically, I think she called to ask, 'Do you think I'm crazy?' I knew it would blow everyone's mind. Some people believe strongly that you don't sell art for any reason—even to reform the criminal justice system. But there is something unique about Aggie that has produced this amazingly empathic, selfless woman."

Gund was the second oldest of six children born within seven years in one of Cleveland's most affluent families. As a young girl, she spent a lot of time at the Cleveland Art Museum. "I went

there for lunch because there were sandwiches,” she remembers, “and we weren’t allowed sandwiches at home.” Her mother, born and raised in New England, enrolled her in Miss Porter’s in Farmington, Connecticut, an all-girls boarding school that counts Jacqueline Kennedy and Gloria Vanderbilt as alumnae. Her art teacher, Sarah MacLennan, had a Ph.D. in art history and engaged Gund even after she left her class, sending her postcards from places like the Morgan Library. In addition, her aunt would accompany her to New York City to see various museums, including the Frick Collection, the contents of which Gund memorized after numerous and frequent visits. She says she knew she’d never be an artist, but she reveled in the freedom of expression.



PHOTO: TARYN SIMON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Gund’s mother died in 1955, when Gund was still at Miss Porter’s, so she decided to stay on the East Coast to attend what was then called the Connecticut College for Women and earned a bachelor’s degree in history. In 1963, she married Albrecht Saalfield, an educator and eventually a schoolmaster, and had three daughters and a son. (They divorced in 1981. Gund married Daniel Shapiro, a lawyer, in 1987; they later divorced as well.) In 1976, when Saalfield was head of the Greenwich Country Day School, Gund read an article in the newspaper about how arts programs had been cut from elementary schools and decided at that moment to create Studio

in a School. A year later, the program started with three schools—two in Brooklyn and one in the Bronx—and the next year it grew to include another in Manhattan. Today, Studio in a School is in more than 200 schools and early education centers across the five boroughs of New York City, and through the Studio Institute there are additional initiatives in New York, Memphis, Boston, Providence, Philadelphia and Cleveland. “What’s funny is that we didn’t think the program would make a huge difference,” Gund says. “In a way, it seemed useless: There are so many more schools than opportunities to go into them. But now, when you see the schools that we’ve worked with, there’s just a whole other attitude toward the arts. It makes a big difference in these kids’ lives.” Through Studio in a School, Gund has seen that for some students art

programs, rather than traditional classrooms, are the best environment for them to thrive and express themselves.

Gund was fulfilled by her early work in arts education, but her passion has always been meeting the artists. When her father died in 1966, she started to collect more aggressively. “Aggie never misses a studio visit,” says Diana Widmaier-Picasso, an art historian and granddaughter of the 20th-century artist. She met Gund 20 years ago when the artist Ellsworth Kelly, a close friend of Gund’s, introduced them on a trip to Asia with MoMA’s International Council. “I was the youngest member, and she immediately came and spent time with me,” Widmaier-Picasso says. “Aggie has a voracious curiosity for the human mind and soul. She collects with her heart.”

What’s striking about Gund’s collection at home—she has Philip Guston and Jasper Johns paintings in her living room—is how she discovered artists early in their careers and acquired their work before it was considered valuable (and priced as such). “She doesn’t collect trophies, though some of her works have become trophies,” Marie-Josée Kravis, a friend and fellow MoMA president emerita and board member, explains.

“She allows things to touch her—she sees things and she feels them—and that’s an incredible skill. It gives her the ability to understand artists so well,” says Klaus Biesenbach, who met Gund when he moved to New York to be a curator at PS1 (which later merged with MoMA) in 1996. Biesenbach served as the chief curator at large of MoMA and the director of PS1 before starting as the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in October. Over the past two decades, he has gone with Gund on countless visits to artists’ studios, and he’s still astounded by how quickly she can build a rapport. “Within 10 minutes she will be the best friend of the artist,” Biesenbach says. “I’ll look at them and feel like a person who just walked in 10 minutes ago. I stand there and think, How did she just do that?”

Regarding the Lichtenstein sale, Walker concedes it may appear as another case of a mega-collector cashing in on a savvy investment. But at this point in her life, Gund sells prized works only to create a better world for art itself. “This is about supporting artists—this isn’t about buying pretty pictures. This doesn’t start with the idea, ‘I want to have something expensive on my walls,’ ” Walker says of Gund’s thought process. “The idea starts with, ‘I love artists because they’re critical to making society better. We are a great country because, in part, we have great artists who make great art.’ For Aggie, it’s all about the art.”

Today, Gund frequently lends art from her collection to institutions and works on behalf of museums to acquire pieces for their permanent collections. She says she’d rather bequeath her family an improved societal fabric than a couple of paintings. “The kids don’t get much in comparison to what the museums get,” Gund says of her benefactors. And her daughter Jess Saalfield is fine with that. “Aggie has figured out how to sublimate her guilt of wealth into a powerful force for change. She humanizes the populations she seeks to support, raising their voices above her own,” says Saalfield, a 50-year-old psychotherapist who lives in Western

Massachusetts with her own two daughters. “All of Aggie’s work and passion has shaped my sense of justice, solidified my belief that with privilege comes responsibility, that being an activist is not only worthy, it’s part of who we are. Her legacy is one I am committed to passing on to my own children as well.”



ART HISTORY Agnes Gund in her own earrings and The Row dress. Grooming, Noreen Clarke. PHOTO: TARYN SIMON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“Strangers often approach my children and me to let us know what she means to them,” says Catherine Gund, Gund’s 53-year-old daughter, who is a documentary filmmaker. “It has taken me a lifetime to discover the meaning of her magic.”

Does Walker think another collector will follow Gund’s lead? “I’m not holding my breath for the next \$165 million sale,” he says. “But I do believe that people will be inspired by her.” When the Art for Justice Fund was announced, some of New York’s biggest philanthropists pledged their support, including Jo Carole Lauder; Laurie Tisch, a trustee of the Whitney Museum of American Art; financier Daniel S. Loeb; Brooke Garber Neidich, a Whitney trustee; and Donald Marron, a past MoMA president. And many of Gund’s friends have followed her lead in their own ways: Last spring, one of them auctioned a brooch from JAR, the fine-art jewelry shop in Paris, and donated proceeds to the Art for Justice Fund. (Gund declined to provide the name of

the friend.) The fund is a five-year initiative, and according to Gund, during its first year it raised an additional \$8 million from individual donors and \$8 million from collaborative efforts.

But to Gund, it's not the size of a check that matters. It's the intent. "I know that if you sell a painting for \$165 million, it gets you a lot of attention," she says. "But I've had people give me \$50 or \$300, and for me that's just as important—maybe even more important, because that means it's creating consciousness, and that, paired with generosity, is to me the most meaningful thing there is."