

"No Obligations, Only Opportunities"

After 15 years, Kirk Varnedoe leaves the Museum of Modern Art for scholarly pursuits—and time to write about, rather than acquire and exhibit, masterpieces • By Gail Gregg

As pile drivers rattled the usual hush within New York's Museum of Modern Art and as staff members packed for the museum's temporary relocation to Long Island City, chief curator of painting and sculpture Kirk Varnedoe was filling boxes of his own for a different move. On December 31 Varnedoe left the Modern's payroll after 15 years to join the faculty of the Princeton-based private research institution the Institute for Advanced Study.

"It's very hard to think about being separated from these objects," Varnedoe mused during a visit to the painting and sculpture galleries a few weeks before his move; these are the same galleries that he reinstalled early in his tenure as chief curator, a job he inherited from William Rubin. Along with the artists and curators he came to know as department head, Cézanne's *Bather*, van Gogh's *Portrait of Joseph Roulin* (1889), Pollock's *One* (1950), "the great gray Twombly" (*Untitled*, 1970), and many other icons of modern art also became friends of a sort.

Nevertheless, the generous—and prestigious—offer from the institute, where Einstein became the first faculty member in 1933, was too good to refuse: bucolic campus, lifetime appointment, generous salary, housing allowance, funds for research and travel—and no teaching or publishing responsibilities. With his wife, the environmental sculptor Elyn Zimmerman, Varnedoe has purchased a home within walking distance of the local train station, allowing them access to their friends, apartment, and studio in New York. The institute requires faculty to spend six months a year in Princeton, but the other half of the year is a faculty member's own. "We want to hold on to everything we have for the next couple of years—and add Princeton on," Varnedoe says.

First on his list of projects is a series of previously scheduled Mellon lectures to be delivered in 2003 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. But it is a book on three fellow Southerners—Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly—that will have primary claim on his attention. Varnedoe, who hails from Savannah, Georgia, hopes to examine the "very interesting moment in American culture" between 1945 and 1965, when Johns, Rauschenberg, and Twombly came to know one another. Although all three artists are still living, Varnedoe believes that time is of the essence. "Some of the key witnesses are only here for a while."

Varnedoe's association with the Modern will outlast his relocation to New Jersey. With chief curator-at-large John Elder-

field, Varnedoe has curated the "Matisse Picasso" exhibition due to open in 2003 at the museum's temporary facility in Queens; he says he looks forward to collaborating on the installation. And Varnedoe hopes, "if my health holds," that the institute's atmosphere of "no obligations, only opportunities" will allow him to develop other freelance curatorial projects for the museum. Varnedoe, 55, has been undergoing cancer treatment for several years.

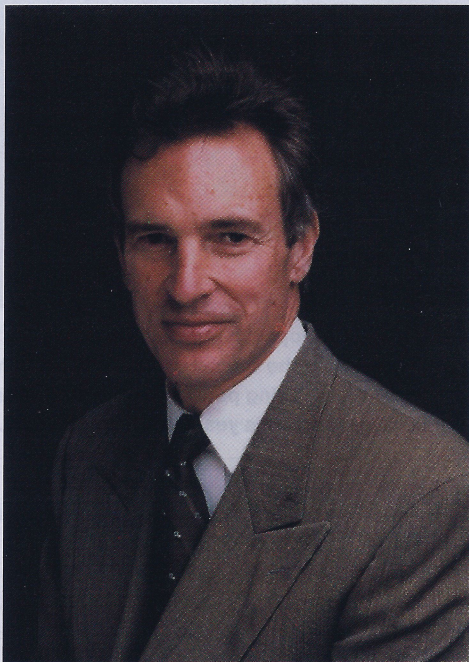
"No obligations, only opportunities" will be very different indeed from the demands of the nation's premier museum of modern art. Negotiations with lenders, the courting of donors, the chase for acquisitions (and the fund-raising for those acquisitions), the design and financing of the museum's expansion, all

have conspired to keep Varnedoe as busy with external challenges as with the rigors of art-historical scholarship.

Varnedoe gives up his post just as the museum is embarking on an ambitious expansion plan that will double its floor space and allow it to showcase contemporary art for the first time. Long criticized for being out of the loop in what Varnedoe terms "recent art," MoMA has argued that its low ceilings and smallish rooms precluded the appropriate staging for large-scale painting, sculpture, video, and installation art. "The whole rebuilding project started as a way to give more space for contemporary work," he says. In fact visitors will now enter the museum at the level of the contemporary galleries—before proceeding to the realm of "classic modernism."

In advance of the expansion, Varnedoe quietly built the museum's collection with works from the past several decades. The public has yet to see many of those acquisitions. Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), James Rosenquist's *F-111* (1964–65), and Ellsworth Kelly's *Spectrum IV* (1967) will be among the centerpieces of these new galleries, due to open around 2005. Rarely exhibited works by Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Ed Ruscha, Neil Jenney, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Elizabeth Murray, and James Turrell will also come out of storage and into public view.

Varnedoe's acquisitions weren't confined to contemporary art, however: he's particularly proud of the "complex" negotiations that secured van Gogh's *Portrait of Joseph Roulin* (1889), Matisse's *Yellow Curtain* (ca. 1915), and Georges Braque's *Atelier V* (1949–50). "His determination is something that probably is not known," says the museum's president, Agnes Gund. "He knows where everything is, the value of the work." She



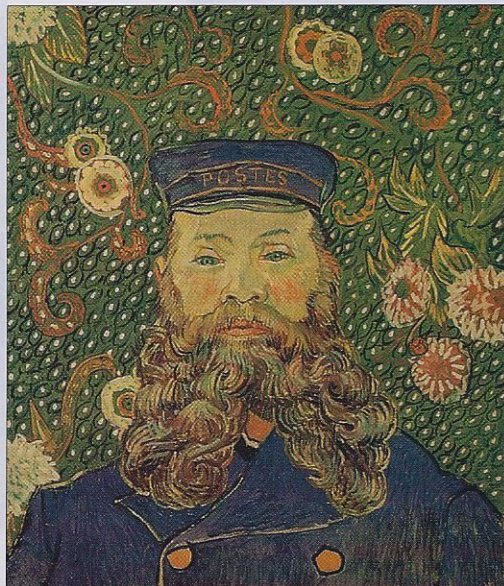
©TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS

Kirk Varnedoe left his job as chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art to take up the scholar's life at the Institute for Advanced Studies.

cites the purchase of a Picasso study for *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), and Salvador Dalí's *Retrospective Bust of a Woman* (1933) as among the "special gems" Varnedoe has unearthed. Securing these treasures in the late 1980s and '90s, when prices for art reached record levels, made his efforts that much more difficult.

Varnedoe's association with the Modern began when he collaborated with Rubin 18 years ago on "'Primitivism' in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." That show, which Varnedoe described as a "dialogue between two artistic traditions," incited a storm of criticism. Detractors claimed that in focusing on the ways Western artists used tribal objects in their work the curators ignored the objects' inherent context and meaning. But Varnedoe's erudition and curatorial skills endeared him to Rubin, securing him an adjunct-curator post at the museum and, eventually, Rubin's own job when he left in 1988.

The youngest son of a Savannah investment banker, Varnedoe fantasized early on about becoming an illustrator. As an undergraduate at Williams College, he was, he says, "very fortunate" to be part of the legendary art-history department that also trained Guggenheim Museum director Thomas Krens and MoMA's director, Glenn Lowry. Varnedoe graduated from Williams in 1967 and received his M.A. and Ph.D. (1972) in art history from Stanford University. He held teaching posts at Stanford, Columbia, and the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, where he first came to Rubin's attention. Movie-star



COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NY

Van Gogh's *Portrait of Joseph Roulin*, 1889, was one of Varnedoe's major acquisitions for the museum.

greatest pleasure at the Modern, Varnedoe says. "I just learned so much being around these folks and hearing them talk about art. It's a pleasure to work with people who are so invested in what they do." These connections inspired his "Artist's Choice" shows, in which individual artists, including Elizabeth Murray, Chuck Close, Scott Burton, John Baldessari, and Ellsworth Kelly, were invited to plumb the museum's collection and curate small shows of their own.

Varnedoe's first exhibition as a Modern curator was the widely decried "High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" (1990), curated with writer Adam Gopnik. In it the two hoped to explore the "story of interchange" between artists and the popular culture associated with their work. The virulence of the criticism surprised the curators; Roberta Smith

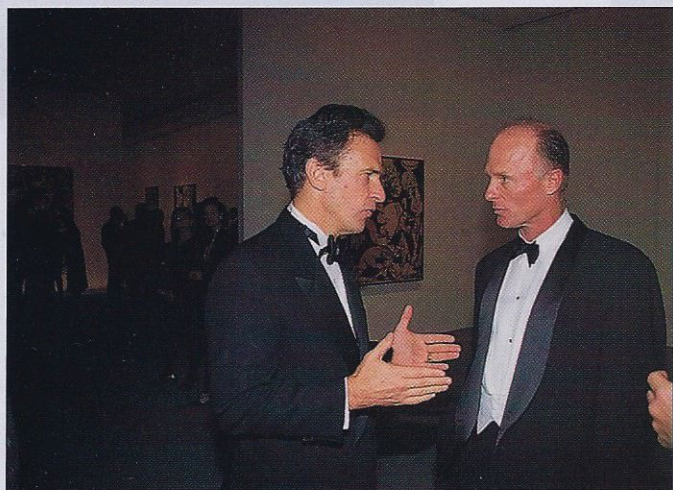
of the *New York Times*, for instance, blasted it as "a textbook case for the maxim that an exhibition top-heavy in masterpieces can still be a disaster." The experience persuaded Varnedoe to drop his plans for a follow-up show that would again focus on "relationships" among artists and cultural ideas. Until the millennial "Open Ends" series that showcased the museum's collection in new configurations, Varnedoe developed primarily monograph-type exhibitions: "Van Gogh's Postman: The Portraits of Joseph Roulin" (2001); "Jackson Pollock" (1998); "Jasper Johns: A Retrospective" (1996); "Cy Twombly: A Retrospective" (1994). These were nearly universally well-received, with Mark Stevens of *New York* magazine writing about the van Gogh show, "I wish museums did more exhibits like this."

The Johns and Twombly shows resulted in lasting friendships with the two artists and a steadfast respect for their work. But the "best ratio of positive achievement to work" came in curating the Pollock show with New York University art historian Pepe Karmel, Varnedoe says. He and Karmel were dazzled by the range of Pollock's pictures once they were assembled at the museum. "When you saw them all together here, the amazing range—of fast and slow, color, viscosity, depth, complexity—took us by surprise. There's no way you can understand how broad a range of possibilities there is within one style."

He envies his successor the "privilege of reinstalling the greatest collection of modern art in the country" in the Modern's new facilities. But the fund-raising challenges of the next few years—exacerbated by the economic fallout from the World Trade Center attacks—will not be missed. And the mission of MoMA has grown ever more complex as the scope of its collection has expanded.

Varnedoe's new position at the institute, where he will replace Irving Lavin, now professor emeritus, at the school of historical studies, provides him different privileges—those of time and freedom. As a museum curator turned resident art historian, he says, "It's an opportunity to be selfish." ■

Gail Gregg, a New York-based artist and writer, last wrote about Amy Sillman for ARTnews.



PATRICK MCMULLAN

Varnedoe with actor and director Ed Harris, at the opening of the Pollock retrospective in 1998.

handsome, with lecturing skills that draw standing-room-only audiences, Varnedoe won a MacArthur Fellowship the same year "Primitivism" opened. Eighteen books—from *Jackson Pollock* to *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern* and *The Drawings of Rodin*—bear his name on the spine.

But it is his associations with the artists that brought him the