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## MUSEUM SEES MAGIC IN CÉZANNE EXHIBIT

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It was a fall day back when Bill Clinton was president and Y2K fears were in the air when Montclair Art Museum curator Gail Stavitsky and museum trustee Adrian Shelby first tripped upon the idea that would end up dominating Stavitsky's professional life for the next decade.

They were talking about Shelby's recent visit to France, where she stayed at some of the places the French painter Paul Cezanne made famous in his work. As they discussed the influence of Cezanne, and how he might have inspired American ex-patriot artists, "the spark of an idea" took hold, Stavitsky recalls.

"It got me very interested in the subject. I started reading ... and there were a few tantalizing mentions of artists, critics, to the American reception of Cezanne. I thought one could really build on this and take it further," said Stavitsky, the museum's chief curator.



*Cézanne Five Apples, 1877-78. COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. EUGENE V THAW*

That spark from 1999 has now grown into the most ambitious exhibition in her museum's history. "Cezanne and American Modernism," officially opening Sept. 13, features 18 works by the French master and 113 other pieces that chart Cezanne's influence on American modern artists and how they helped cement his reputation as the bridge from impressionism to modern art.

But getting from spark to show was challenging, Stavitsky says. Bringing the World Series to Montclair might have been easier.

Things move slowly in the world of art, especially when one of the world's masters is involved. Paintings have to be located and negotiations held — in this case with more than 60 museums and private collectors around the country.

The deals are complex. Private collectors and museums typically loan their art for free, but they have to trust the institution they are dealing with and they require certain conditions and restrictions be met. The institution seeking the loan must make a strong case for why the piece of art it seeks is critical to the show. And it must have insurance, loads of it, a solid reputation, and a sound security plan.

Timing is critical, too. In this case, the first of the 60 lenders signed on in 2002, three years after Stavitsky began her quest. Each agreed to part with the art for more than a year — four to seven years in the future. (The original opening date was 2006, to coincide with the anniversary of Cezanne's death.)

Of course, some things can't be planned.

The exhibition conceived in better times opens in one of the toughest economic downturns the country has seen.

A show this big is challenging for a major museum, but for a smaller one that has never tackled such an undertaking before, it is daunting, like assembling a massive jigsaw puzzle.

"This is the largest show we've ever conceived of and pulled off," said museum director Lora Urbanelli, who notes that the exhibit will use more than half of the museum's space. "We've done shows that are important and special in the past, but nothing at this level."

The museum has turned itself inside out to accommodate the exhibition's 131 pieces, many of them never before displayed together. Dozens of people have been involved in years of negotiations about loans, security plans and shipping arrangements. The exhibit features a scholarly catalogue, itself a major production. The museum has added security and expanded its hours, despite cutting back staff and hours last winter as a result of the recession.

The museum's leaders said they are delighted they tackled a project so audacious.

"If we did a nice little exhibition, people wouldn't come. When you add Cezanne, people come. Cezanne is a huge draw," said Shelby, a Montclair resident who is chairwoman of the museum's board of trustees.

Artistically, the exhibition is groundbreaking for several reasons, said Stavitsky, who is quick with a list:

"The aesthetic and intellectual ambition of the show, its range and depth, the fact that it breaks new ground and covers a subject that has never been discussed before."

Early on in her research, Stavitsky realized the Baltimore Museum of Arts would be a critical partner. The BMA owns many important Cezanne paintings, including "Bathers (1898-1900)," a work previously owned by Gertrude and Leo Stein that hung on the walls of the couple's Paris salon. Many important American modern artists — Max Weber, Morgan Russell, Maurice Prendergast and Marsden Hartley — regularly visited the Steins and would have seen this painting.

"We needed to work with them (because) they will lend us those paintings," said Stavitsky about approaching BMA in 2002, one of the "a-ha" moments in the exhibit's journey. In return, Montclair would contribute seminal modern works from its collection, including Prendergast's "Still Life: Fruit and Flowers." Bringing the works together would emphasize the ties between the French painter and the Americans.

The BMA, which has a publications department, took the lead on the catalogue, being published by Yale University Press. Montclair's staff handled loan and travel arrangements. The exhibit will open in Baltimore next February before traveling to the Phoenix Art Museum, where it will be on view from July through September.

"For a show of this size, to have a partner makes it possible," said Urbanelli. "We split up the duties that would have overwhelmed our staff alone."

The first few years were spent working on the mechanics of Stavitsky's giant puzzle. She began by seeking works that would tell her story and finding amenable lenders who

would agree to let their art be shown.

Wish-lists were created and scratched as she approached both museums and private collectors. Deals were agreed upon, but sometimes they took years to complete. For example, Stavitsky wanted Morgan Russell's "Three Apples," a 1910 painting in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She requested a loan in September 2007, and the museum agreed two months later. The deal was confirmed in July of 2008, and the painting was delivered to Montclair this month.

With a core group of artwork confirmed, fundraising began in earnest in 2004. Six foundations made donations, as did Bank of America and the National Endowment for the Arts, which awarded a \$150,000 grant last year.

Less prestigious but perhaps more important was some help from a new federal insurance program. "We were so proud we won that application," said Urbanelli, who estimated the museum spent \$2 million over five years on the show. "The cost of insurance is so prohibitive. Essentially what the federal government says is this is important, we'll back your insurance for it."

In order to accommodate the exhibition's many pieces, the museum did some major rearranging. It closed the permanent collection galleries and opened a new, condensed installation of the collection — called "Out of the Vault: 95 Years of Collecting at MAM" — in the smaller galleries normally used for changing exhibitions. Only the George Inness and Native American galleries remained untouched by the Cezanne takeover.

In addition, the museum revamped its security plan, hiring a head of security and installing new equipment. It is also



PATTI SAPONE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Corio Sanchez with A.C.E.D Sign and Awning works on the banners for Montclair Art Museum's upcoming show "Cezanne and American Modernism," the most ambitious show the museum has ever presented.

increasing the number of guards from five to 15 and scheduling them in the galleries around the clock.

The museum hopes to reach 15,000 visitors for the four-month exhibition, or about the total gallery visitors for all of last year.

To handle the anticipated crowds, museum hours have been extended one day (it will close only on Mondays through the end of the year) and Thursday evening hours have been added. Special events are scheduled for every Thursday night "to help people make the decision to come in," she said.

Not everything has gone as planned. Earlier this year, the Philadelphia Museum of Art presented "Cezanne and Beyond," a standalone exhibition similar to the Montclair show (but with a focus on later modern and contemporary artists) that created a minor marketing hurdle as Montclair tried to distinguish its exhibit from that one.

A more significant challenge has been the recession, which has hurt the museum and the

larger arts industry. Responding to a budget shortfall from last year, the museum laid off 13 employees, reducing the staff to 44. In addition, the 26 remaining full-time staffers saw their hours reduced by 20 percent.

Despite the grim climate, Urbanelli said the "Cezanne" program was maintained. "We were tempted," said Urbanelli, who became director last January. "We looked at this budget and said good lord, is there anything we can eliminate?"

Urbanelli decided a second party for members could be dropped, replaced by special preview days — Sept. 11 and 12 — that will allow members to see the exhibition before the general public.

The only other thing they nixed? The plan to charge more for the big show, something commonplace in the museum world.

"When the recession hit, we realized that was crazy," she said. "So we are keeping the admission fee the same and, yes, we hope that means more people will come." The museum charges \$12 for adults and \$10 students with ID and seniors.

Though the economy is still sputtering, the big show could end up helping the museum's bottom line. With most of its expenses already paid, the museum can pocket the increased revenue it hopes will come from a bump in attendance.

"We say to each other, in jest but not really, would we have planned this exhibition, would we have dreamed up this exhibition two years ago?" Urbanelli said. "And yet because it was on a track, had lots of momentum, it's almost arriving on our doorstep when we need it the most.

"It's kind of ironic, but it's perfect timing."

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