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The Good and the Less Good

A critic's take on the museum's facelift



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907)

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New York's [Museum of Modern Art](#) believes bigger is better. Following its nearly two-decade-long embrace of architectural supersizing, a quick rundown of MoMA's [newest renovation](#) puts into perspective both the museum's expansion and its recent curatorial reboot.

Four months and \$450m after temporarily closing in June, the most recent chapter of MoMA's makeover is ready for its close-up, opening to the public on 21 October. Kicked off in 2004 by Japanese architect [Yoshio Taniguchi](#) at a cost of \$425m, the museum was subsequently enlarged in stages, starting in 2014 by the US firm [Diller Scofidio + Renfro](#), in collaboration with [Gensler](#).



The most recent chapter of MoMA's makeover is ready for its close-up. Here, an interior view of the Blade Stair. Photo: Iwan Baan. Courtesy of MoMA

For its 2019 relaunch, the museum has updated its slicked-back corporate image with a host of luxury mall amenities: a new canopied entrance on 53rd Street, a revamped lobby, a vast basement gift shop, free street level art displays, a sixth-floor terrace café run by Danny Meyer, and a total of 102,000 additional sq ft of space—47,000 of which is dedicated solely to exhibitions of the MoMA collection.

Mostly located in the new [David Geffen Wing](#) beneath 145 super-high-net-worth apartments housed inside [Jean Nouvel's](#) 53 West 53 “supertall”—the term itself charts the global development of billion-dollar skyscrapers—these same galleries paradoxically play host to the museum’s most inclusive move in nearly a century: MoMA’s opening of its permanent collection to majority minority America and the world.

Leaving behind an adherence to a beads-on-a-string rosary of “isms”, this new MoMA has made room for a more expansive history that features objects—many of them recently acquired—made by women, African Americans and Latinos, as well as art from Africa, Asia and South America. The museum’s recent bro-hug of multiculturalism, which actually feels more like a retrofit, takes place within an institutional envelope brimming with Gilded Age 2.0 privilege. How else to describe an expansion largely paid for by mega-moguls?

Inside the museum, the rough outline of MoMA’s once unabashed tale of heroic modernism lives on, albeit tweaked here and there by shadings of contemporary “difference”. Rather than organizing its holdings by disciplines, MoMA has adopted an integrated approach that shuns official mention of movements—those pesky “isms”!—while frequently breaking with chronology to allow for the inclusion of works by artists not historically favored by sex (male heterosexual), race (white European) or geography (the US and Western Europe). The idea resembles, not so accidentally, similar overhauls at rival museums, like London’s [Tate Modern](#) and Paris’ [Centre Pompidou](#). It is also long overdue. In theory, what’s not to like?



MoMA’s newest renovation puts into perspective both the museum’s expansion and its recent curatorial reboot. Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night* (1889). Image courtesy The Museum of Modern Art

In practice, the museum’s at times dexterous, often tactical swapping of art objects results in a few fireworks, but just as many misfires. The juxtaposition of [Pablo Picasso's](#) *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), the painting that launched a thousand jangly portraits, with [Faith Ringgold's](#) white riot of a painting, *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), sends

sparks—along with echoes of Ferguson and Hong Kong—flying throughout the museum’s tony fifth floor. On the other hand, a second room containing works by [Marcel Duchamp](#), [Man Ray](#), [Francis Picabia](#)—it relays the story of the “[Readymade in Paris and New York](#)”—includes a wan [Beatrice Wood](#) poster, along with trace elements of “Where’s Waldo?”



MoMA has made room for a more expansive history that features objects made by women, African Americans and Latinos. Here, Tarsila do Amaral’s *The Moon (A Lua)* (1928). The Museum of Modern Art, New York

As the permanent collection advances, so does curatorial box-checking: [Van Gogh](#)’s *The Starry Night* (1889) shares space with [George Ohr](#)’s “Mad Potter of Biloxi” bowls; [De Stijl](#) and [Suprematist](#) painted abstractions with [Sherrie Levine](#)’s Reagan-era appropriations of the same. One possible conclusion to be drawn is that MoMA’s burdensome inclusiveness has arrived hampered by a conspicuous curatorial tic.

Viewed charitably, the museum can alternately be seen to be making up for lost time. Still, the experience makes for strange viewing: when I arrived at [Claude Monet](#)’s *Water Lilies* (1914-1926), I found myself automatically searching for the requisite object that could constitute the room’s obvious outlier (thankfully, there were none).

According to MoMA’s recent literature the museum currently allows for approximately 2,400 works to be on view at once, around 1,000 more than previously. But the institution’s commitment to greater inclusion does not stop there. Recently, the museum announced that it plans to swap out a third of its collection—held in galleries located on floors five, four and two—every six months. What that augurs for October 2020 is anyone’s guess, but bets are that tourist favorites *Desmoiselles*, *Starry Night*, *Water Lilies*, along with [Andy Warhol](#)’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (1962) and [Jasper Johns](#)’ *Flag* (1954-55), will remain, with works cycled in and out to complement the narratives conveyed by those marquee properties.



Tourist favorites like Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* (1914-26) will remain, with works cycled in and out to complement the narratives.

Which begs a thicket of questions. Does canonical modernism still carry the day at MoMA? Are the museum's current efforts at inclusion profound or skin deep? What about the museum's non-tourist favorites? A partial answer is that the institution will have its work cut out in adapting to the anti-formalist, largely oppositional narratives that characterize the art of global alterity.

That observation reasonably leads to another, perhaps more fundamental question: can an institution like MoMA, corporatized from stem to stern, elevate the narratives of, say, [Lotty Rosenfeld's](#) video of a political action staged inside Pinochet's Chile, or [Martin Wong's](#) epochal painting of a derelict Lower East Side corner, *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983), into becoming the *Desmoiselles* and *Starry Night* of the 21st century?

The answer, I fear, lies in an opportunity MoMA squandered at the start of the millennium. That was in 2002, when the museum closed its flagship Manhattan space to open a temporary outpost it christened [MoMA QNS](#). Forced by the Taniguchi construction to decamp to an old factory in Long Island City, the museum reshuffled its collection, and partially, though temporarily, threw off its buttoned-down mission. Two years later, on the 75th anniversary of its founding, the museum shut the doors on that adventure, returned to its staid steel-and-glass 53rd Street digs, and doubled down on becoming a corporate behemoth.