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Indigestible Meat

An Important Paul Thek Sculpture Slipped Through Our Hands



Paul Thek, *Meat Sculpture with Butterflies* (1966) (from the series "Technological Reliquaries") © Estate of George Paul Thek, Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York. Photo credit: D. James Dee

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I have never been able to forgive myself for losing the opportunity to acquire a work by Paul Thek for the museum. *Meat Sculpture with Butterflies* (1966) appeared as a fragment of a blackened torso on which very beautiful, colorful butterflies have alighted.

The museum didn't have a Thek in its collection—it still doesn't—so when this work was offered to the museum by Ted Bonin from [Alexander and Bonin](#) gallery in 1995, I became very excited to present it to our accessions committee.

I completely underestimated the lack of familiarity with Thek's work of the committee members. Not only did they not know the artist, they reviled the work. What I saw as an incredibly beautiful, poignant and vulnerable work, they found affronting and disturbing.

At that time, I think it was priced under \$100,000, which isn't an insignificant sum but would not have been a huge stretch for the museum. Today, its value would be at least \$1m—it's an important work of exceptional quality and is now in an important institutional collection in Europe, so it will never again be available.

By missing this work, there is a gap in our collection that will probably never be filled. It's too late: we missed the window. I saw it as a perfect work for the museum. Typically, I try to find the right work for the context of this collection and this community, not just any work by an artist. I felt this was the perfect piece for this museum and for San Francisco. Thek is a crucially important artist of the 1960s, and we had been acquiring other works by 60s artists such as Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman. This work would have been a perfect complement.

The rejection is seared in me. I think about it often and it still gives me incredible pain and sadness. I continue to chastise myself because it really was my error. I simply didn't prepare the committee members adequately.

Usually if I am bringing challenging work to the committee, I speak to members individually in advance of the meeting so they have a fuller understanding of the work and the artist, then I know there is support going into the meeting. I didn't do that in this case and the work had almost unanimous opposition.

I didn't realize how unknown Thek was, or how challenging this work was. The experience shook me into realizing how easy it is to become presumptuous about your own experiences with art. I had fallen madly in love with this work, but I shouldn't have assumed that other people would have at least something of the same experience.