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SFMOMA ACQUIRES IMPORTANT WORK BY DAVID PARK
Museum's Largest Acquisition of Work by a Bay Area Artist

David Park (born Boston, 1911; died Berkeley, 1960)

Two Bathers, 1958

Oil on canvas

58 x 50 in.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) is pleased to announce the major acquisition of the painting *Two Bathers* (1958) by Bay Area artist David Park. Purchased through gifts of Mrs. Wellington S. Henderson, Helen Crocker Russell, Mary Heath Keesling, and the Crocker Family, the painting becomes the centerpiece of SFMOMA's Bay Area Figurative art collection. The artwork is currently on view at the museum in the exhibition *Matisse and Beyond: The Painting and Sculpture Collection*.

Two Bathers joins SFMOMA's holdings by Park, which comprise paintings and works on paper that span his career from the 1930s through 1960. The museum's collection includes a 1934 set of biblical-themed prints donated by founding Trustee Albert Bender in 1935, as well notable paintings such as *Boston Street Scene* (1954), *Man in a T-Shirt* (1958), and *Torso* (1959).

Throughout the 1950s, Park made powerful paintings that paired his long-held interests in subjects such as portraiture, interiors, musicians, and figurative landscapes with lush, abstract expressionist paint handling. Toward the end of the decade, in 1958 and 1959, he reached the expressive peak of his powers, reveling in the sensuous qualities of paint to create intensely charged figurative paintings. His late multi-figure paintings of bathers rarely reach the market, and are arguably the most sought after paintings by the artist. *Two Bathers*, created at the height of Park's career, features all of the hallmarks of the artist's greatest works: a painterly bravado, a remarkable command of color and brush, and a vivid synthesis of control and seeming recklessness. While one figure raises her towel behind her, reaching toward an evanescent sky, the other stands in the foreground, elbows jutting provocatively toward the viewer. The figure with towel bears a mask-like face that invokes Picasso. At the center of the painting, the startlingly expressive profile of the foreground figure conveys a humanity that pulses through Park's very best works of art.

Two Bathers has long been privately held. The painting was acquired from the artist by Mr. and Mrs. William Zeckendorf Jr. of New York and later sold to Mr. and Mrs. James R. Patton Jr. of Washington D.C. The Staempfli Gallery in New York showed the piece in 1959, and included it in their memorial exhibition of the

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artist's work, which traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; the Oakland Art Museum; and other national museum venues in 1961 and 1962. Salander-O'Reilly Galleries showed the artwork again in 1987. *Two Bathers* was one of the key late paintings featured in the 1988–89 Whitney retrospective of Park's work organized by Richard Armstrong.

Born and raised in New England, Park initially came west in 1929, at age 17, to study at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. After a semester of coursework, Park moved to Berkeley, where he continued his studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He returned to Boston to teach from 1936 to 1941, after which he lived in the Bay Area for the rest of his life. Park was largely self-educated, but his abilities as a painter and teacher led to faculty appointments at both the California School of Fine Arts and UC Berkeley.

Like many of the most forward-thinking artists of his generation, Park was keenly interested in Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s. Both Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, proponents of the new style, were teaching in the Bay Area at the time. Park was also influenced by local exhibitions featuring the abstract expressionist painters Jackson Pollock (SFMOMA, 1945) and Robert Motherwell (SFMOMA, 1946).

Park painted non-objectively during a brief but intense period in his career, beginning in 1946. Despite his considerable exhibition success with the work, the phase culminated in a legendary trip in 1949 to the Berkeley dump, where he abruptly discarded as many of his abstract canvases as he could fit in his car. Of the few paintings that remained, most were painted over, and very few survive. Park had become dissatisfied with what he considered to be the forced quality of his efforts of the preceding few years and skeptical of the cult that had grown up around Clyfford Still. Yet the interlude of abstraction had invigorated Park's art, and he went on to create figurative work unlike anything he had done in the past. As critic Alfred Frankenstein observed, "The truth is that the figure enabled Park to create the best essentially abstract expressionist works of his life." Friends and fellow painters Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn soon followed suit, and by the mid-1950s, a new Bay Area Figurative art was in full bloom.

Park's art was widely seen before his untimely death from cancer at the age of 49. His work appeared regularly in SFMOMA's San Francisco Art Association annuals from the 1930s through the 1950s, and in countless group shows at venues ranging from local galleries and museums to esteemed national and international venues. In more recent years, Park's work has been seen in greatest concentration in a 1989–90 retrospective exhibition presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Oakland Museum, and in the context of his peers and followers in SFMOMA's 1988–89 exhibition *Bay Area Figurative Art, 1950–1965*, which traveled to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Of the artists associated with the Bay Area Figurative movement, Roberta Smith wrote in the *New York Times*: "No other artist approached the singular achievement of David Park. Having started it all, he remained the painter for whom rendering the world as he saw and felt it had the greatest necessity and yielded the most impressive results."

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