

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



THE PAINTING AND SCULPTURE COLLECTION

FIRST EDITION

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Contents

List of Colorplates	8
Foreword by Henry T. Hopkins	10
Acknowledgments	12
Introduction by Katherine Church Holland	14
Conservation of a Twentieth-Century Collection by James Bernstein and Inge-Lise Eckmann	29
Highlights of the Collection	31
<i>Essays and Colorplates</i>	32
<i>Documentation</i>	236
Illustrated Checklist of the Collection	259
Index	394
Index of Donors	400
Photo Credits	402

Robert Rauschenberg

AMERICAN, BORN 1925

Collection

formerly

UNTITLED

1953–54

oil, paper, fabric, and metal on wood

80 × 96 × 3½"

203.2 × 243.9 × 8.9 cm

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson

72.26

THE INTRODUCTION IN 1955 OF THE COMMON OBJECT into the realm of art shattered the accepted dominance of Abstract Expressionism, opened the way for a re-examination of the nature of art, and led directly to the rise of American Pop artists in the years following. In the work entitled *Bed* (1955), Robert Rauschenberg assembled a composite of his own bedclothes, applied to it a broad traverse of gesticulated, dripping pigment, and mounted the whole on a wooden support. Termed a "combine" by the artist, the work operated on two distinct and conflicting levels. The object, a bed, clearly retained its original identity, carrying with it a plethora of personal and experiential connotations. Yet this "object" was just as obviously a work of art, for its rumpled surface was clotted with paint consciously applied, and the rectangular format was framed and hung on a wall. The tension set up between these two seemingly distinct worlds, the world of reality and the world of art, elicited an active, open-ended response on the part of the viewer and suggested a middle ground in which a multiplicity of preconceptions and implications co-existed in a rich, questioning ambience.

Bed did not mark the first time that Rauschenberg had incorporated commonplace objects into his art, for collaged elements had frequently appeared in his previous work. In 1949, after spending a year studying with Josef and Anni Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (where he met his later collaborators John Cage, David Tudor, and Merce Cunningham), Rauschenberg had settled in New York and enrolled at the Art Students League. Beginning in 1951 he concentrated on three series of paintings, each based on a single monochromatic tone. His initial series, the "white paintings," consisted of ensembles of rectangles whose undifferentiated fields were painted with flat white house paint; the next series, the "black paintings," incorporated crumpled bits of paper beneath layers of first glossy, then dull black paint. In 1953, Rauschenberg embarked on the "red paintings," in which collaged elements acting as discrete images rather than merely textural interest took on their own life and importance within the painting structure.

Near the end of 1953, Rauschenberg began *Collection*, a major work which in many ways presaged the combines of the coming years. Much as in the collages of Kurt Schwitters, whose work had a vital influence on Rauschenberg, the objects here have been plucked out of the artist's experience and hung on a geometric scaffold. Predominantly red, *Collection* is composed of three adjoining vertical panels traversed by the same number of distinct horizontal bands. A strip of repeated vertical patches marks the lower border, the rectangular shapes defined by swatches of fabric in opaque pinks and primaries. Directly above this is a densely collaged median layered with fragments of printed fabric, newspaper clippings, and reproductions of art objects sporadically overpainted with broad gestures, the liquid paint allowed to dribble freely. Across the top runs an irregularly bounded striation composed of lighter-hued, larger-scaled areas. The uppermost edge is broken by the addition of wooden objects which deny the rectangular format and extend its limits, tentatively moving it into the environment of the spectator.

Entitled *Collection* by the artist in 1976, long after it was completed, the painting is indeed a collection, an assemblage of personal mementos mirroring the facets of a life—the cerebral, the aesthetic, the recreational—expressed as we visually perceive our surroundings, in bits and snatches. Rauschenberg has choreographed these fragments, allowing them the freedom to exist as entities yet unifying them through an underlying geometric structure, a superstratum of pigment, and a consistent emotional tone. KCH

