Audio Tour Stop #90
Duncan Phillips speaks about crafting a personal collection in a lecture in 1961

The Phillips Collection, founded by me as a memorial to my brother in 1918, has during the 43 years under my directorship been known successively as the Phillips Memorial Gallery, The Phillips Gallery, and now as The Phillips Collection. The chief purpose is to exhibit and interpret the paintings which my wife, Marjorie Phillips, and I have purchased and which we wish to share with all open-minded people.

It is The Phillips Collection’s diversity and its unity as a personal creation, which gives to our institution its special character. Our emphasis is on the art of our own time, with our masterpieces of earlier times as inspirational and source material. Art is personal, not only to the creative artist, but no less to the creative collector who conceives and composes the collection of artistic personality even as a painter conceives and composes his paintings. The Phillips Collection has always been so personal in its choices and so intimate in its atmosphere.

Centuries and nationalities are mixed in our gallery so that old and modern paintings can be brought together to be relevant and significant in some new context, some new contrast or analogy. So the visitor to our old house on a residential street, where the collection is always on view and frequently with a new look, discovers that he can enter the minds and experiences and expressive idiosyncrasies of others to the profitable enlargement of his own taste and cultivation of his open-mindedness.

The collection has grown and changed, but all within the severely limited space of the same old Washington house where the idea for it was born. In our unpretentious, disarmingly domestic, frankly undistinguished setting, there are many obvious disadvantages and even dangers, but at least there is a sense of art lived with, worked with, and loved.

AUDIO TOUR STOP #75
Museum Director Dorothy Kosinski discussing Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s Luncheon of the Boating Party

Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s Luncheon of the Boating Party captures a moment in modern French life at the end of the nineteenth century. When Renoir painted it, new technologies and cultural reforms were transforming the lives of many middle-class citizens. With the newly established weekend, city dwellers had Sundays off from work. Many took advantage of the expanding railway networks, which had turned pastoral towns outside of Paris into convenient destinations. Luncheon of the Boating Party is set at the restaurant of the Maison Fournaise, located in the village of Chatou on the River Seine, west of Paris. The Maison Fournaise offered a variety of leisure activities from boating and fishing, to strolling in the countryside and dancing.

Renoir includes people he actually knew from different social classes in the painting. Artists, writers, and actresses mix freely as they mingle on the restaurant’s terrace. Notice the girl holding the dog.
in the lower left corner of the work. She is Aline Charigot, a seamstress and hat maker, who would later marry Renoir. Leaning on the railing behind her is Jules-Alphonse Fournaise and his sister Louise-Alphonsine. Children of the proprietor, Jules-Alphonse operated the boating rentals and his sister managed the restaurant. Other friends of the artist are also included; wearing a top hat towards the back of the painting is Charles Ephrussi, an art critic from a well-to-do family of bankers. In the lower right corner of the artwork, the impressionist painter Gustave Caillebotte sits backwards in his chair smoking a cigarette. He is seen talking to the actress Angèle Legault and writer Adrien Maggiolo.

Impressionist painting techniques animate *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. Renoir creates the impression of a spontaneous or fleeting moment by using individual brushstrokes to build up the landscape in the background and marks of brilliant color to capture the sense of shifting light on the balcony. Let your eyes meander across the painting and notice the vivid touches of red and yellow that Renoir uses to animate and unify the scene. Can you see the peculiar brushstrokes above Jules-Alphonse’s straw hat?

X-rays have revealed that Renoir didn’t originally include the striped awning in the painting. The overworked brushstrokes show that when he added the canopy, Renoir had to adjust the position of the hat. It’s interesting to think about how the painting would have been different if he hadn’t enclosed the scene under the awning.

The scale and complexity of this figure painting, the evidence of Renoir’s many careful changes indicate the importance of this work to the artist. When Duncan Phillips purchased *Luncheon of the Boating Party* in 1923, he called it “one of the greatest paintings in the world,” and he was confident that visitors would travel from around the globe to experience it. Today from the vantage point of the 21st century, we still appreciate this magnificent painting as one of the indisputable masterpieces of French Impressionism.

**AUDIO TOUR STOP #77**

Curator Renee Maurer on the creation of the Rothko Room

The Rothko Room, Photo: Robert Lautman

In 1951, artist Mark Rothko explained, “The reason I paint [large works]...is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience... However you paint [a] large picture, you are in it.” Rothko wanted his paintings to be encountered “in a more domestic scale” and The Phillips Collection seemed the most natural environment to exhibit his work.

Duncan Phillips had always intended to devote an entire gallery to a single artist’s work, and by 1956, he was searching for a Rothko. In 1957, Phillips held the museum’s first group show to include a Rothko and from this exhibition the painting Green and Maroon from 1953 was acquired, which is hanging on the wall opposite the entrance into the gallery. That same year Phillips declared, “I often wish we had room for another Rothko. For such a man I would make room.”

In 1960, Duncan and Marjorie Phillips visited Rothko at his New York studio to select paintings for the artist’s first solo exhibition at the museum. From this exhibition, Phillips acquired the canvases *Orange and Red on Red* from 1957, hanging on the right of the window, and *Green and Tangerine on Red* from 1956, hanging to the right of the door. Phillips also began preparations for a room of Rothko’s paintings.

The Phillips Collection’s Rothko Room opened in 1960 as the first public space devoted to the artist’s work and featured three of Rothko’s paintings. It was completed in 1966 with the installation of *Ochre and Red on Red*, which is currently
hanging at the far end of the room. Rothko took an active interest in developing the room; he even suggested the placement of a single bench inside it.

The realization of the room fulfilled Rothko’s dream of creating an environment, where the sheer scale and saturated color of his paintings could provoke responses from viewers. The artist admitted that the Phillips was his favorite of all museums and visited on several occasions. Many encounter Rothko’s work for the first time as a visitor to this room. It has inspired thoughtful installations in museums around the globe.

**AUDIO TOUR STOP #82**
Educator Paul Ruther on Jacob Lawrence’s *Migration Series*

Jacob Lawrence’s *Migration Series* is one of the museum’s most famous works of art. However, when Duncan Phillips purchased it in 1941, the series creator Jacob Lawrence, a 23-year-old African American artist, was relatively unknown. Each of the work’s 60 panels was numbered by Lawrence and accompanied by a caption that he wrote. Phillips purchased the odd-numbered panels, the remaining half is owned by New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

*The Migration Series* tells the story of African Americans who, like the artist’s own parents, journeyed from the South seeking better lives in the North. This movement of nearly one million African Americans, is known as the Great Migration, and occurred from approximately 1916 to 1930. In the early panels of *The Migration Series*, Lawrence describes the causes and effects of this mass movement through his portrayal of migrants leaving the rural South to escape injustice, discrimination, poverty, and segregation. In the later panels, he evokes the migrants’ sense of hope on their journey north and the realities of their new lives there.

Identify one color, black, for instance—the first color Lawrence applied—and consider its effect throughout the series. Lawrence also used the basic elements of shape and line to achieve cohesion, so 60 individual scenes function as one work of art. Lawrence often reduced his subjects to basic geometric forms. Consider how he uses triangles in repetition to create a sense of flow and energy. Observe how he uses diagonal lines to create a sense of movement and momentum. These qualities use basic artistic elements to make the work accessible to a variety of audiences, suggesting a universal message about a collective experience.

Despite the variety of scenes, many elements, such as color, pattern, shape, and line remain similar. Each panel, whether vertical or horizontal in orientation, is an identical 12x18-inch size. Lawrence uses a very similar palette throughout the Series and applied one color at a time for all 60 panels.

**AUDIO TOUR STOP #79**
Educator Margaret Collerd on the history of The Phillips Collection and the Music Room

The Phillips Collection’s story begins with a family: 11-year-old Duncan Phillips, the future founder of The Phillips Collection, his brother James, and their parents moved from Pittsburgh into this house in the late 1890s. Duncan and James were best friends. They began collecting art when they were in their 20s with a yearly stipend of $10,000 that
they requested from their family. Between 1917 and 1918, two devastating events occurred within the Phillips family: Duncan’s father, Major Clinch Phillips, died unexpectedly, and then, little over a year later, James died during the Spanish Flu Epidemic. Duncan Phillips went through a period of deep depression, saying, “There came a time when sorrow all but overwhelmed me. Then I turned to my love of painting for the will to live.” He decided to open his home to the public as an art museum in 1921 so everyone could experience what he called “the joy-giving, life-enhancing quality of art.”

This room was added in 1907 as a present for Duncan and James when they graduated from Yale University. It was originally the family’s library and game room complete with a piano and pool table. See if you can find the year 1907 carved into the fireplace. Also, look for an artist’s palette and paint brushes, reflecting the brothers’ passion for art. Today, this room is used for concerts, which is why it is called the “Music Room.”

Take a look around this gallery and you’ll notice different kinds of art from various time periods and countries hung near each other. Rather than display works chronologically, Duncan Phillips wanted paintings to be placed in interesting ways to create “visual conversations” between works. He hoped that visitors would discover new visual worlds while in the comfort of a homelike setting.

Let’s explore this Phillips’s idea of “art in conversation.” As you look around this room, try comparing artworks. Do they have anything in common? Are there similar colors, lines, shapes, or styles of brushwork? Do they complement each other? For example, can you find a quiet, calming painting placed near a very active one? Now let’s imagine if the paintings could actually converse, what do you think they would say to one another?

**AUDIO TOUR STOP #86**

**Artist Wolfgang Laib on his work Wax Room: Where Have You Gone—Where Are You Going?**

Here this is a very, very small room, but it has a very beautiful concentration and intensity, which when you come into a wax room it’s like coming into another world. You are enclosed with your own body by this beeswax, which is not man-made. I think it’s going to somewhere else, to another world. I think that is what a wax room is about.

We applied this beeswax nearly like plaster directly to the wall. It’s like one piece. It will be there permanently; you can’t take it away. To do this is a very beautiful process with the smell, with the material of the beeswax, which you can really feel what this is about, so I don’t have to explain this. I think what is important is that it’s not me. It’s much, much more than myself and I think this is the secret why this is so powerful.
Here in the sculpture courtyard of The Phillips Collection are two works of distinctively different aesthetic sensibilities that use the same traditional material—bronze. The untitled bronze on the garden wall is a site-specific work that the museum commissioned Ellsworth Kelly to create. One of the greatest American artists of the postwar generation, Kelly has spent more than 60 years exploring elegantly distilled forms that record optical experiences and illusions in both painting and sculpture. He finds endless inspiration in his observations of the natural and man-made world—like a curve in the hill of a landscape, the shadows cast by trees, or the spaces between architectural elements.

Early on in his career, Kelly wrote that the “pictures should be the wall—even better—on the outside wall of large buildings...[they] should meet the eye—direct.” Kelly’s dialogue between sculpture and painting is elegantly realized in the deceptively simple form which he devised for the Phillips garden wall. Although it weighs nearly 1,000 pounds, Kelly’s sculpture is pure magic in the way it defies gravity and floats on the wall.

The artist, who oversaw the work’s installation, very deliberately chose to mount it at an angle. See how this careful positioning allows the organic curve to give energy and lightness to the massive bronze. Think about why the artist chose to make the sculpture a flat, non-reflective black surface. Notice, too, how Kelly has precisely defined a curved edge on the slightly smaller form cantilevered off its larger sibling. Observe how that edge captures the changing light and alters our experience of the work, depending on time of day and weather.

By contrast, the life-size bronze entitled Dual Form near the doorway into the museum is firmly earthbound. Created by Barbara Hepworth, one of Britain’s foremost 20th-century sculptors, Dual Form reveals a sensuous handling and color to its surfaces. Hepworth’s mature work was inspired by the rugged landscape of St. Ives, a picturesque seaside town in the southwestern region of England, where the artist moved at the outbreak of the Second World War. There Hepworth spent a lifetime exploring relationships of light and form and movement in her sculpture. She once explained that “no sculpture really lives until it goes back to the landscape.” Dual Form, an abstract, free-standing bronze of two related shapes reveals Hepworth’s ongoing exploration of “holes” and piercings to reveal interior space within the sculptural mass. Observe how Hepworth uses simple, geometric shapes with varied surface color and texture. Notice how she also uses the changing natural light to animate shadows, penetrate the solid form, and emphasize the sensuous surface and color of the bronze. How does the scale of Hepworth’s sculpture engage with the viewer? Think about the contrast with Kelly’s pictorial sculpture, which emphasizes one primary view, versus Hepworth’s Dual Form, which reveals new views and relationships as we walk around it.