

MoMA Sells Rare Masterpiece, Reuniting Rockefeller Treasures in Houston

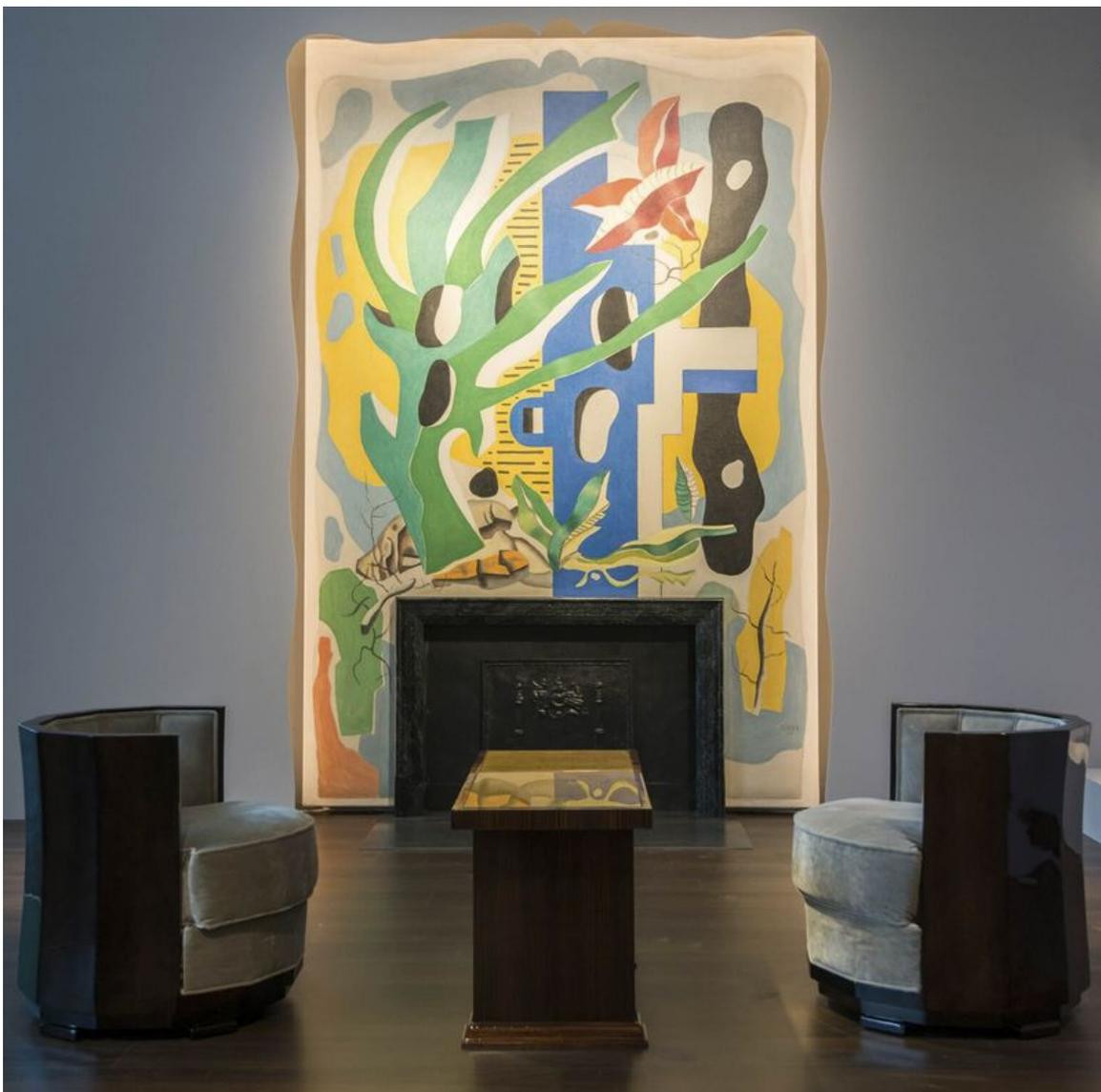
The \$6 million, 10-foot-tall canvas will rejoin a sister mural by Matisse.

By **Katya Kazakina**

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- A Fernand Léger mural was offered for \$6 million at Art Basel
- Companion piece by Henri Matisse is on loan to Houston museum



The Léger painting at Basel. *Courtesy of Galerie Gmurzynska*



Nelson Rockefeller. Photographer: Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone/Getty Images

In 1938, Nelson Rockefeller, the 30-year-old scion of one of America's greatest banking families, commissioned two modern French painters to decorate the fireplaces in his penthouse on Fifth Avenue.

The two murals—one by Fernand Léger, another by Henri Matisse—may soon reunite.

Earlier this month, Léger's over 9-foot-tall canvas was a showstopper at Art Basel, the world's largest modern and contemporary art fair.

The work, depicting a plant-inspired abstract motif in primary colors, was consigned by the Museum of Modern Art and had the asking price of \$6 million, according to Galerie Gmurzynska, which offered the work and even built a fireplace maquette to display it.

Another major U.S. museum quickly placed the artwork on reserve, pending the approval of the board in September, said Mathias Rastorfer, Gmurzynska's president. He declined to disclose the sale price. Typically, museums may receive a 10 percent to 20 percent discount on the secondary market deals.

"It's one of those unique situations that you can do only at Art Basel," he said. "You can bring, for the first time, a work of that provenance and place it with another museum."

That lucky institution is the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, that has had the companion Rockefeller Matisse mural on display for almost three years.

"The Rockefeller Léger stopped me in my tracks at Art Basel, and I am delighted that our colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art are willing partners in making this masterpiece available to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston," Gary Tinterow, director of the Houston museum, said in an email.

Rare Sale



Henri Matisse, *Le chant* (1938). Photographer: Will Michels/The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Lewis Collection, © 2017 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

While museums often sell art from their collections at auction, finding pieces consigned by a significant museum at an art fair is rare.

“In my experience, most museums use the auction process because it provides greater transparency,” said David Norman, a private art dealer and former co-chairman of Sotheby's Impressionist and modern art department. “However, sometimes museums also place works privately” with dealers if they have clients willing to pay higher prices.

While finding a work from a museum collection is atypical, major art fairs attract scores of museum directors, curators, and trustees. Representatives of more than 300 museums and institutions attended Art Basel this year, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York; Center Pompidou in Paris; London's Tate; the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul; and the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

“People bring such good work here,” said Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, during Art Basel's VIP opening on June 13.

MoMA said that the sale of the Léger is unrelated to an ongoing capital campaign for its \$400 million expansion, toward which billionaire Steven Cohen just contributed \$50 million. The project aims to increase its exhibition space by 30 percent and be completed in 2019.

“We sell artworks for the sole purpose of refining the collection and raising funds for new acquisitions,” Ann Temkin, MoMA's Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis chief curator of painting and sculpture, said in an email. Rockefeller, who served four terms as New York governor, gave the Léger to MoMA in 1977.

Selling it in Basel “seemed a wise course to follow, given the highly specific nature of the work,” she said, mentioning its decorative aspect as the mantelpiece. It was not the first time MoMA sold art at a fair, she added.

Tale of Two Mantels



The Léger in Rockefeller's penthouse. Courtesy of Galerie Gmurzynska

Rockefeller moved into a penthouse on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 62nd Street in 1934, according to the family historian Peter Johnson. By 1940, a third floor was added, expanding the digs to a 32-room triplex filled with modern art, African jewelry, and metal furnishings designed by Alberto and Diego Giacometti.

Wallace K. Harrison, an architect known for such projects as the Metropolitan Opera House and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, outfitted the place with wood paneling à la Louis XIV. A grand living room had two fireplaces, with ample surrounding space for ornamentation.

“Wally designed two fireplaces in the living room with space for great murals around them, and our friends Henri Matisse and Fernand Léger accepted commissions to undertake the murals,” Rockefeller would recall in *The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection: Masterpieces of Modern Art*. “Matisse did the mural in Paris from full-scale drawings of the fireplace, but Léger came over to New York and actually did the painting in the apartment. I used to watch Léger with fascination as he painted and the details of the mural unfolded.”

Rockefeller liked Léger’s mural so much that he asked the artist to do additional pieces for the circular stairwell and the hallways on two floors.

“Léger was a wonderful human being, and we remained friends until his death,” Rockefeller wrote. The banking scion gave the Léger to MoMA in 1977 and the Matisse in 1976.

The Matisse companion mantelpiece, *Le Chant* (1938), depicting four women singing and listening, is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, lent by billionaire Joe Lewis.

“Of course, we are very excited at the prospect of reuniting the Léger with the Matisse, which the Lewis Collection has generously lent to our museum,” Tinterow said. “But the Léger stands on its own as a magnificent painting, redolent with historic associations—Nelson Rockefeller, the early years of the Museum of Modern Art, and Léger's work in America. I am looking forward to presenting this proposed acquisition to the trustees in the fall.”

The Matisse was also earmarked for sale to raise money for the museum, according to Bill Beadleston, a prominent art dealer who purchased it from MoMA for \$440,000 in the 1970s.

“I bought it from MoMA years and years ago,” he said in a telephone interview.

“Rockefeller had an extraordinary collection, and occasionally he'd sell a piece to raise cash. This was a masterpiece.”

Beadleston sold the work to financier Saul Steinberg. “It was not a slam dunk,” he said. “At the time most people collected easel-size paintings.”