

The Hirshhorn's Harvest: Improving On the Hirshhorn

By Paul Richard Washington Post Staff Writer

Nov 18, 1986;

Art

The Hirshhorn's Harvest

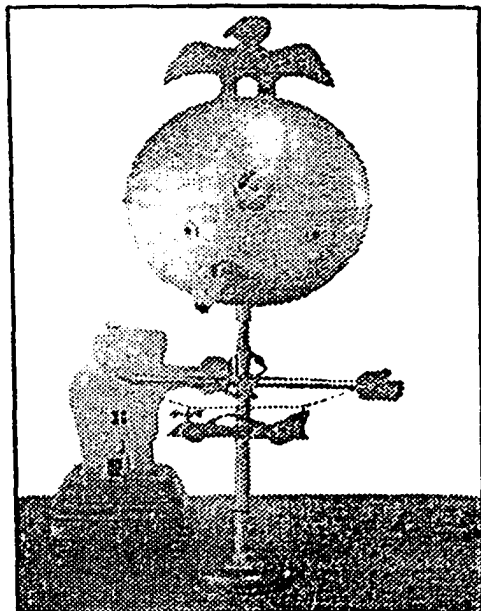
By Paul Richard
Washington Post Staff Writer

In "Recent Acquisitions: 1983-1986," which opened yesterday at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, we see a good museum getting even better. The late Joseph H. Hirshhorn—who eventually gave the nation more than 11,000 objects—assembled art ebulliently, unsnobbishly and well. But because he bought insatiably, and sometimes repetitiously, the collection that he gave us is ragged at its edges, though splendid at its core.

It was not set in concrete; Hirshhorn understood that. He knew that it would need to be pruned, enlarged, improved. That job, this show makes clear, is now well under way.

Hirshhorn, a New Yorker, often overlooked other regions of the country. James T. Demetrian, the museum's director, has been working to correct that. He has purchased worthy objects by H.C. Westermann and Leon Golub of Chicago, by Siah Armajani

See ART, D9, Col. 1



H.C. Westermann's "Brinkmanship."

Improving On the Hirshhorn

ART, From D1

of Minnesota, by Edward and Nancy Kienholz of Hope, Idaho, and by such Californians as Robert Irwin, Richard Diebenkorn, John Altoon and Robert Arneson. Robert Stackhouse and John Van Alstine, both of whom have done much of their finest work in Washington, also are represented in the show.

Hirshhorn had his doubts about minimalism. Demetrios, in consequence, has acquired a grid sculpture by Sol LeWitt and a fine symmetrical color field painting by the late Paul Feeley, "Bengula" (1964).

While the founder often chose curious, minor things (their variety is one of the great delights of his museum), Demetrios believes it is his duty to aim for major objects. Of the 45 works on view, a number are enormous. Frank Stella's "Quaqua! Attacati La!" (1985) from his "cone and pillar series" is 13 feet high. Golub's "Four Black Men" (also 1985) is nearly 16 feet wide (one reason that this picture is so eerily disturbing is that one of its protagonists has two left hands.) "The Book" by Germany's Anselm Kiefer is the largest work of all. It is 18 feet wide, so wide, in fact, it had to be sliced down the middle before it could be shipped. Though the cut, it seems to me, insults that dark and moody painting, it remains a most impressive and moving work of art.

The Frank Stella, the assemblage by the Kienholzes, Deborah Butterfield's metal "Horse" of 1985, the early disk by Irwin, the 1985 Armani, the small sculpture by Westermann, the life-size nude by William Beckman, LeWitt's white grid and especially Jean Dubuffet's "The Hunt for the Two-Horned Creature" (1963) also are significant additions to this city's holdings of contemporary art.

Though Kiefer, Wiley, Irwin, Westermann, the Kienholzes and others represented are new to the museum, Demetrios has not been aiming just for "firsts." He also has been buying in close sympathy with Joe Hirshhorn's gift.

The museum has owned a hard sculpture by Claes Oldenburg, a crisp "Geometric Mouse," since 1975. It now owns, as a complement, one of Oldenburg's soft sculptures, "Soft Engine for Airflow, With Fan and Transmission" of 1966. The just-acquired early Diebenkorn "Berkeley No. 22," of 1954, greatly strengthens that artist's representation in the permanent collection. The Frank Stella does the same.

Hirshhorn, an immigrant, made a point of buying art from other countries. Demetrios has continued that tradition. He's acquired fine pictures by the Romanian-born Israeli Avigdor Arikha, Scotland's Steven Campbell and Spain's Isabel Quintanilla.

Donald Sultan's "Plant, May 29, 1985," done in tar and fabric, is another winner. Wiley's "Acceptable Levels" (1985) and Yvonne Jacquette's "Three Mile Island, Night I" (1982) also deal with pollution.

Also worth noting are Walter Murch's prophetic still life of 1950, and Andy Warhol's "Nixon," orange eyed and glowering.

I could have done without the painting by Tom Wesselmann and the abstraction by Jack Bush—but both of these are gifts. Buying contemporary art for a museum is, at best, a risky business. Demetrios, so far, has picked his objects well. Joe Hirshhorn, I'm convinced, would have liked this show. It closes March 1.