

**The New York Times**

April 18, 2013

# Outsize Barnett Newman, With His Signature Zip

By **CAROL VOGEL**

Barnett Newman had very specific opinions about how viewers should look at his abstract paintings. For a show in 1951 at the [Betty Parsons Gallery](#) in New York, he tacked a notice to the wall that read: “There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.”

Were he around today, he might offer the same advice to Sotheby's when one of his large canvases, “[Onement VI](#),” goes on view there in a preview of the May 14 contemporary art auctions, where it is expected to sell for \$30 million to \$40 million.

Measuring 8 1/2 by 10 feet, this predominantly deep blue canvas from 1953 is the last painting in the artist's Onement series — six abstract canvases that each feature a feathery band of a contrasting color that Newman used to help define the structure of the work. He referred to the device as a “zip,” and it became his signature gesture.

“Onement VI” is the largest of the series, whose name evokes an archaic English word that meant “at one” and for Newman signified his sense of being at one with his work. Only by examining the canvas at close range can viewers appreciate the enveloping washes of vibrant blue and the hand that produced the lighter blue vertical line.

Of the six paintings, four are in museums, including “Onement I,” completed in 1948 and owned by the Museum of Modern Art. Newman pronounced that painting an “artistic breakthrough” because it was the first time he had used the zip.

Officials at Sotheby's declined to identify who is selling “Onement VI,” but dealers say it is from the collection of [Paul Allen](#), a co-founder of Microsoft who bought it privately in 2000.

Some people who have seen the painting say that it has had some conservation challenges. Years ago something spilled on its surface, which has since undergone restoration.

“Several conservators have seen it and said it is in good condition,” said Tobias Meyer, who runs Sotheby's department of contemporary art worldwide. “It is unlined and on its

original stretcher.”

Close readers of auction catalogs will notice a symbol beside the painting's lot number signifying that Sotheby's has what it calls an “irrevocable bid” on the painting. That means that a buyer has already agreed to purchase it for an undisclosed sum but that if someone wants to pay more, the person who made that arrangement with Sotheby's will receive a percentage of the difference between the price agreed upon and what it sells for.

Just a year ago [Christie's sold](#) “Onement V,” from 1952, for \$22.4 million, a record price for the artist at auction. Whether “Onement VI” will top that figure is anyone's guess. “Paintings like this are by the giants of American art,” Mr. Meyer said. “These are irreplaceable objects.”

## THE EARLY RAUSCHENBERG

Stratospheric prices are what tend to stick in the public's mind when they think about major art auctions. But there is a quieter, scholarly side to the business, too. Sometimes the sales include examples of works that offer a window into a bygone era and an artist's evolution. At Christie's on May 15 and 16, four works on paper by Robert Rauschenberg serve as a kind of time capsule.

The works belong to Susan Weil, an 83-year-old artist who was married to Rauschenberg from 1950 to 1953. The two, who met at art school in Paris, remained close until Rauschenberg's death. (Like her ex-husband, Ms. Weil isn't one to retire: An exhibition of her new works opens on May 16 at the [Sundaram Tagore Gallery](#) in Chelsea.)

“Bob gave these to me,” Ms. Weil said in a telephone interview. “They're pivotal pieces. He was very much exploring his own development during those years.”

Created while Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, then romantically linked, were traveling together in 1952 and 1953 to Rome and then North Africa, they are small collages that combine papers and fabric, engravings and tissue paper.

“He literally had a portable studio between Italy and North Africa and brought the collages back with him,” said Laura Paulson, the international director of Christie's department of postwar and contemporary art. “He used materials which he found around him: Arabic newsprint, scraps of cloth, pages cut from books on botany and natural phenomena, often using cardboard from laundered shirts as the basis for the collages.”

They are precursors to the artist's so-called “combines,” a term that Rauschenberg coined because he wanted to “break out of that dead end of something not being a

sculpture or a painting.” The combines, which are among the artist’s most popular works, often incorporated castoff objects like tires, flatware or furniture along with painting.

Among the collages up for sale is “Untitled (scorpion and plant),” which incorporates imagery from antiquated anatomy and zoology books and fragments of Arabic newspapers offering news of Eisenhower’s inaugural address in 1953 and Queen Elizabeth’s early days as monarch. It is estimated to bring \$200,000 to \$300,000. Another is “Untitled (locomotive),” with an engraving of a French steam engine as the central image. It is expected to sell for \$350,000 to \$550,000.

### **A BUSY COLLECTING COUPLE**

Armand Bartos, an architect who died in 2005, and his wife Celeste, who died in January, were highly prominent New York collectors and philanthropists. Mrs. Bartos was a longtime trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, which received major gifts from the couple, including a collection of 340 prints and grants to support film history and preservation.

Now Christie’s is selling what is left of their postwar and contemporary art, prints, African art, 20th-century photographs and decorative works, which are expected to bring more than \$30 million. This trove, too, is a kind of time capsule.

“They started collecting when they got married in the 1950s,” said their son Adam. “My father visited Mondrian in his studio and started collecting classic Modernist paintings. Then he moved into Pop.”

Among the highlights being offered are one of Warhol’s paintings of Mao from 1973, which is estimated to sell for \$3 million to \$4 million, and one of Warhol’s “Flowers” from 1964, which is expected to bring \$6 million to \$9 million. Both will be auctioned on May 15.