

# Inside Art

By Carol Vogel

## Met's Nautical Mural Has a Return Voyage

For nearly two decades some patrons of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's old first-floor restaurant liked to perch at the bar so they could take in the lustrous splendors of its big Art Deco mural.

The cognoscenti knew they were gazing upon "The History of Navigation," the gilded-glass mural that once lined the walls of the first-class grand salon of the ocean liner the Normandie. Donated to the Met in 1976 by the New York collectors Irwin R. and Linda Berman, the work was so large that it was never shown in its entirety. The most anyone saw were 28 panels that hung over the bar before the restaurant closed in 2002 to make way for the expanded Greek and Roman galleries.

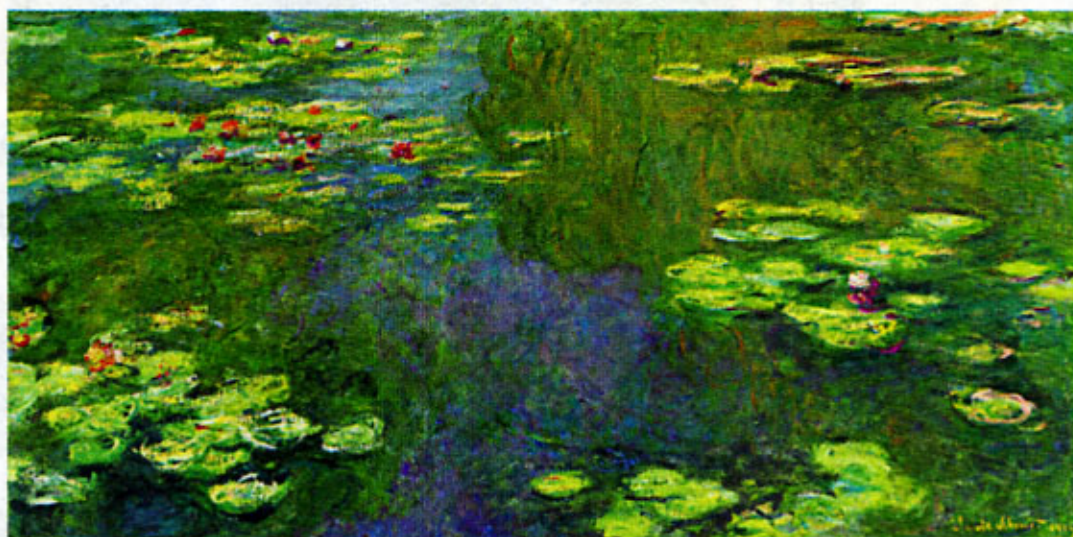
Beginning on May 16 all 56 panels will go on view at the Met as the centerpiece of "Masterpieces of Modern Design: Selections From the Collection," which runs until mid-October. It will be the first time all the panels will be seen since they graced the Normandie. (The liner sank in the Hudson River in 1942.)

Installing the mural was a challenge. Curators had to carve out part of the ceiling in a first-floor gallery so the 20-foot-high panels could be fully displayed.

Designed by Jean Dupas, a fashion illustrator and painter, and manufactured by Charles Champigneulle in 1934, the mural represents the height of Art Deco extravagance. Each 40-pound panel is fashioned from reverse-painted gilded glass through a technique called verre églomisé. The scenes were painted in black and varying pastel colors and applied to the back of plate-glass panels. Gold, silver and palladium leaf were then laid atop the paint and sealed in place with a canvas backing.

The stories depicted are detailed with serpents, mythical creatures, majestic ships and wavelike patterns.

The ocean liner sailed regularly between Le Havre, France, and New York from 1935 to 1939. The United States seized control



A 1919 "Waterlilies" painting by Monet from the collection of J. Irwin and Xenia S. Miller.

of the ship after war broke out in Europe and in 1941 decided to transform it into a troop carrier. The decorations were being stripped when sparks from an acetylene torch ignited life preservers in the grand salon and fire spread through the ship on Feb. 9, 1942.

Tons of water pumped into the ship by fireboats caused it to list and then capsize. The Normandie lay at Pier 88 for 18 months until it was finally raised, towed away and sold for scrap.

Luckily, the panels had been removed before the fire. Though they survived the wear and tear of being at sea, time has taken its toll. "Some of the backing as well as metal leaf had lifted from the glass," said Lisa Pilosi, a conservator at the Met. A restoration team has been working on the mural panel by panel.

The museum expects the mural to attract naval buffs as well as art and antiques lovers. "There are a lot of ocean-liner fanatics," said Jared Goss, a curator in the museum's 19th-century, modern and contemporary art department. "Since it was taken down from the restaurant in 2002, people keep calling and asking, 'What happened to the Normandie panels?'"

## Miller Collection Sales

While the big spring auctions of Impressionist and modern art

were unfolding this week in New York, experts at Christie's and Sotheby's were busy finalizing consignments for an important round of sales to be held in June in London. Christie's has snagged what may be the season's biggest collection: 17 works from the estate of J. Irwin and Xenia S. Miller of Columbus, Ind. The group is valued at around \$80 million.

Mr. Miller, the chairman of the Cummins Engine Company, who died in 2004, and his wife, Xenia, who died in February, were fierce believers in the transformative power of art and architecture. They helped turn Columbus into a showcase for modern architecture by supporting renovations of historic buildings and projects by architects like Eero Saarinen, I. M. Pei and Kevin Roche.

The couple's house, designed by Saarinen, was filled with paintings by masters like Monet, Matisse and Picasso.

"My parents didn't call themselves collectors," Will Miller, the youngest of their five children, said. "Both Mom and Dad felt powerfully that art was an essential part of a life well lived."

Paintings by Matisse, Bonnard, Chagall and Picasso will be among the offerings, auctioned on June 24. One of the most important, however, is a late Monet "Waterlilies" painting, one of a series of four that

Monet executed in 1919. (Another is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum.)

"They are signed, dated and have been considered among the most important works from Monet's late period," said Guy Bennett, a director of Christie's Impressionist and modern art department worldwide. Christie's predicts the painting will sell for around \$35 million.

## Egglestons to Bay Area

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has acquired a group of 40 dye-transfer prints by William Eggleston dating from 1969 to 1971. The photographs — portraits, landscapes, still lifes — are images of life in places like Tennessee, Louisiana and Mississippi, and were first shown in 1976 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

"Until Eggleston, color photography was not taken seriously," said Neal Benezra, director of the San Francisco museum. "It was the stuff of fashion." He added, "This group really strengthens our collection of contemporary photography, giving it a great context."

Joshua Holdeman, an expert in 20th-century art at Christie's, sold the prints. While neither Christie's nor the museum would say what it paid, photography experts estimated that the group is worth about \$4 million.