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INSIDE ART; A Windfall For the Modern

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The name Thomas Walther may not ring any bells with the public, but to people whose passion is photography, he is something of a legend. For more than 20 years, the German-born Mr. Walther has been quietly but obsessively collecting modernist photography, assembling hundreds of works by every leading European and American photographer of the 1920's and 30's. Not only is his collection well known among photography dealers and collectors, but museum curators have also been courting Mr. Walther in the hope that someday their institutions will get at least part of his prized holdings. Last summer the Metropolitan Museum of Art had a show called "Other Pictures: Vernacular Photographs From the Thomas Walther Collection."

This week the Museum of Modern Art announced that it had acquired photographs Mr. Walther made between the world wars, partly as a purchase and partly as a gift. The Modern was the first art museum to have a photography department and already had a comprehensive collection without Mr. Walther's contribution, but this addition substantially enriches it.

It includes 328 modernist works by about 135 photographers along with 50 pictures from Mr. Walther's collection of amateur snapshots. Experts say the acquisition could be worth as much as \$50 million. In terms of rarity, it is thought to be priceless.

"This is the most important private collection of photographs in the world," said Glenn D. Lowry, director of the Modern. "It is one of the Modern's most important acquisitions of the past two decades."

Included in the acquisition are groups of pictures by masters like Andre Kertesz, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Edward Weston, as well as important works by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen.

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

"This collection is two things at once," said Peter Galassi, chief curator of photography at the Modern. "It has the best prints in the best condition and a whole string of major masterpieces, as well as pictures of exceptional quality by almost unknown artists. It's both adventurous and demanding."

The acquisition helps fill some of the Modern's gaps. It includes 20 vintage prints by Kertesz, whose representation at the Modern was relatively weak, and seven plant studies by Karl Blossfeldt, of whose work the Modern had no examples of at all. There are also outstanding examples of little-known European photographers like Gertud Arndt, Aenne Biermann, Jacques-Andre Boiffard, Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz and Lee Miller. Peter MacGill of the Pace/ MacGill Gallery in Manhattan represented Mr. Walther in his negotiations with the Modern.

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