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Civil Rights era masterpiece by Norman Lewis leads acquisitions at Cleveland Museum of Art (photos)



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Alabama, 1960. Norman Lewis (American, 1909-1979). Oil on canvas; 122.2 x 184.5 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

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By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer Follow on Twitter on March 21, 2017 at 12:46 PM, updated March 24, 2017 at 5:26 PM

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CLEVELAND, Ohio - "Alabama," a powerful 1960 abstraction by African-American artist Norman Lewis that evokes the Civil Rights era will soon enjoy pride of place at the Cleveland Museum of Art among works by Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock.

Museum trustees voted late Monday to acquire the Lewis, along with a rare 1799 painting in tempera on canvas of St. Matthew by William Blake, and a circa-1596 ink and wash on paper drawing of the entombment of Christ by Italian artist Giovanni de' Vecchi.

William Griswold, the museum's director, was enthusiastic about all the acquisitions, but especially so about the Lewis, which was installed Friday in the East Wing gallery devoted to Abstract Expressionist and Color Field painting of the 1950s and '60s.

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Griswold called Lewis "a great artist whose work will look spectacular in that space."

He added that: "prior to its acquisition we took the painting into the gallery and it was very clear it would have a transformative impact there."

Wall power

The oil on canvas painting, which measures four feet high by six-and-a-half feet wide, takes its name from the Southern state that was a [key site of conflict](#) during the Civil Rights era.

A museum press release states that Lewis, a native of New York's Harlem neighborhood, "searched for a way to align his interest in abstraction with current events. *Alabama* distinguishes itself as the masterpiece of the series."

Lewis (1909-1979) filled the painting with bold, gestural strokes of black on white to create a flickering pattern that brings to mind a conflagration in a dark forest.

It's been awhile since we've acquired a painting of the significance of the Lewis.



In addition to the painting, which the museum purchased from the artist's estate, the museum acquired two Lewis drawings as gifts from the estate.

"This is great," Griswold said. "We have a real representation of a key

figure at this juncture, and we're all really thrilled about it."

"It's been awhile since we've acquired a painting of the significance of the Lewis."

Important provenance

The Blake painting of St. Matthew, which depicts an angel presenting a scroll to the gospel writer, is part of a series the artist painted for Thomas Butts, one of his chief patrons.

Griswold called the painting, acquired from a London dealer, is "a ravishing thing - very powerful, very moving."

He said it could be placed on view by summer in the museum gallery devoted to English art from the 17th- to the 19th century.

Griswold - a specialist in 16th century Italian drawings - described the de' Vecchi as a study for a painting installed in the 9th-century, Byzantine-era Church of [Santa Prassede](#) in Rome that was redecorated during the late Renaissance.

"Drawings in the 15th-, 16th- and 17th centuries were a means to experiment with solutions to compositional problems," Griswold said. "Given that drawing can be such an intimate form of communication, it allows us to see an artist thinking on paper."

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