

MUTUAL BENEFICIARIES

ARTISTS TRADE WORKS WITH ONE OTHER FOR REASONS OF FRIENDSHIP OR EVEN RIVALRY — AND TO SAVE MONEY

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PICTURE BY
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Currency of
generosity:
Hayden Kays,
left, and Jake
Chapman, right

incent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns — they are among some of the greatest masters who have swapped works of art with their contemporaries. For some, it was a mark of mutual respect, the extension of an exchange of ideas; for others, a mutual rivalry. Or both. As a tradition spanning centuries, swapping continues today. Jake Chapman, one half of the Chapman brothers, has just agreed to swap certain pieces with Hayden Kays, a pop artist who borrows imagery from mass culture and whom Chapman describes as “acerbic, witty, shallow and subversive... quite brilliant”.

The Chapman brothers have courted controversy over the years, not least in defacing original prints by Francisco Goya. Jake jokes about swapping with Goya, acknowledging that the 18th-century Spanish master might be turning in his grave. He says he has swapped with “lots of different artists”, mentioning Damien Hirst — “prints and all sorts of stuff”.

Describing such deals as “a currency of generosity rather than value”, he adds: “There’s something quite nice about an exchange with artists. I’m not particularly interested in buying art. The possessiveness about buying art seems a bit strange to me. I also have a slight aversion to having art in my house.”

So what does he do with received artworks? “I’ve got a huge toilet, which is where all good art should go.” He insists he is being serious, adding: “It’s much better to be haunted by other people’s mistakes than your own. The last thing you want is a bunch of malevolent objects which memorialise your failures.”

Victoria Williams, director of the Cob Gallery, London, where Kays will exhibit this spring, says: “It’s amazing for so established and well-recognised an

‘IT’S ABOUT MUTUAL RESPECT AND CREATING A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THEIR WORK AND THE WORK OF THEIR PEERS’

artist as Jake [Chapman] to be recognising Hayden... and swapping.”

Kays can pick whatever he wants, Chapman says, having himself chosen one of Kays’ sculptures, “This Is Not A Brillo Box”, a variation on Warhol’s iconic “Brillo Soap Pads” boxes.

Matt Wrbican, chief archivist of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, says the American pop artist swapped art throughout his career: “Warhol’s collection of other artists’ work was enormous, and he saw his own art as a currency.”

“Jasper Johns has said that in 1964 Warhol traded one of his first Brillo box sculptures with him. Warhol chose a drawing by Johns from the ‘School Days’ series in exchange. Kenny Scharf says that, in the 1980s, he received one of Warhol’s 1964 self-portraits in exchange for his painting ‘Mad-Glad-Man.’”

Britain’s foremost pop artist, Peter Blake, recalls exchanging works with his contemporary David Hockney in the 1960s. In return for his portrait of Hockney, which the latter later donated to the Tate, Blake got Hockney’s “A Rake’s Progress” etchings. Such exchanges, Blake says, are usually a mark of “mutual admiration”.

Beyond admiration or rivalry, today especially there is an obvious monetary advantage of swapping — avoiding the substantial costs of agents, auctioneers and so forth.

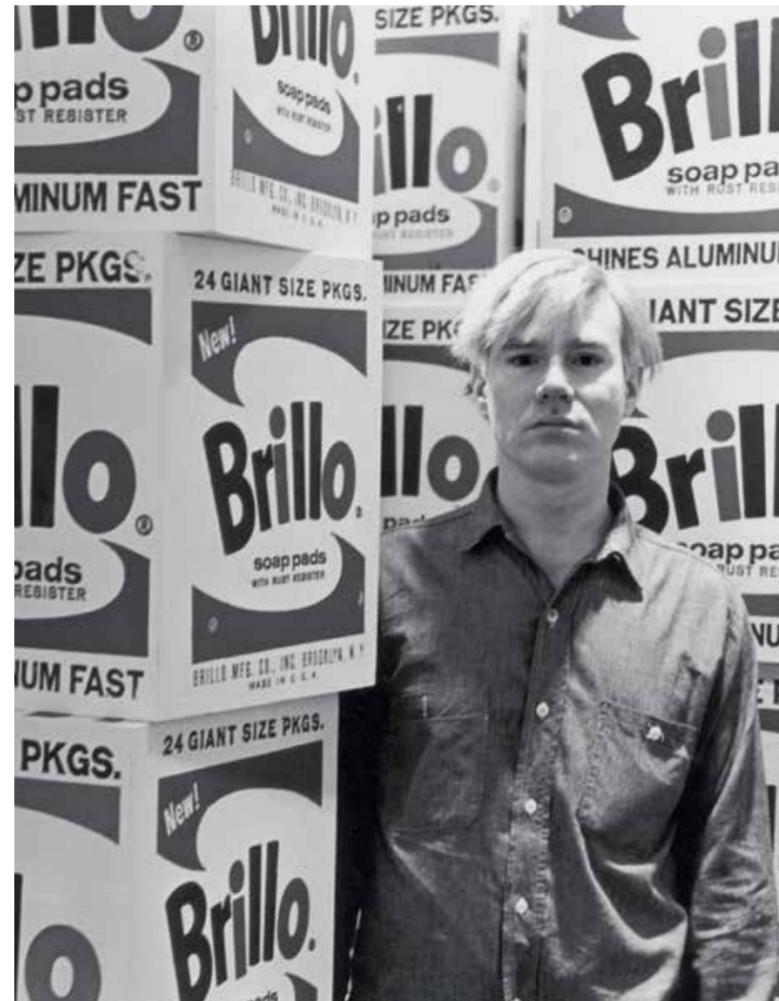
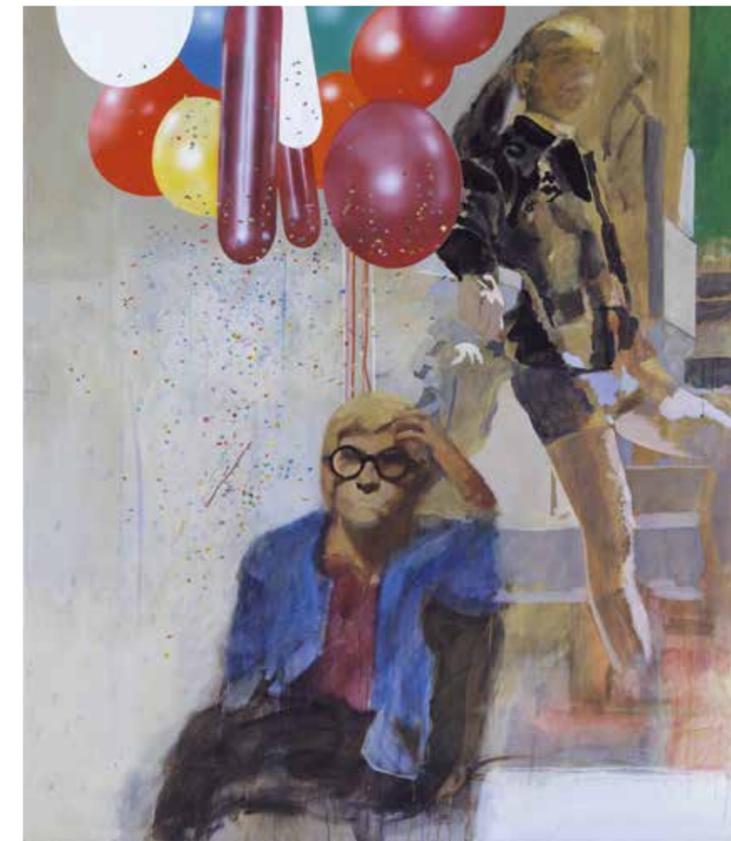
Blake has also swapped with Hirst, who once suggested they give each other literally everything they created. As Hirst produces so much more, they abandoned that idea.

Blake is among artist-collectors featured in an exhibition, *Magnificent Obsessions*, at the Barbican Art Gallery in London, which also includes an untitled open cube by the American minimalist Sol LeWitt that he once swapped with Hanne Darboven, the German minimalist. What LeWitt got in return is unclear.

The catalogue notes: “Collecting was a form of dialogue with other artists and [LeWitt] generously continued to trade works throughout his career, including with emerging and lesser known artists.”

“It’s about mutual respect and creating a dialogue between their work and the work of their peers,” says the exhibition’s curator, Lydia Yee.

Philip Hook, senior director of impressionist and modern art at Sotheby’s, the auction house, believes artists exchange their art partly to shine with their peers: “One has always assumed it is an imprimatur of quality because artists, being rather self-regarding, would want to give another artist something that made them look rather good.” ▶



Collectors’ pieces: clockwise from left: Andy Warhol and his “Brillo Soap Pads” boxes; Edgar Degas’ “Mr and Mrs Manet”; Peter Blake’s “Portrait of David Hockney in a Hollywood Spanish Interior”; Hockney’s “Death in Harlem” from “A Rake’s Progress”

PHOTO: FRED W. MCDARRAH/GETTY IMAGES; © PETER BLAKE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. DACS 2015; DAVID HOCKNEY. “DEATH IN HARLEM”, FROM “A RAKE’S PROGRESS”, 1961–1963, ETCHING, AQUATINT, 19 1/2 X 24 1/2, EDITION OF 50, © DAVID HOCKNEY

‘[SWAPPING] TENDS TO BE A PRACTICE AMONG ARTISTS WHO ARE MAKING THEIR WAY RATHER THAN THOSE WHO ARE ESTABLISHED’

But that was not the case with Picasso and Matisse, according to a 1933 account by eccentric American author Gertrude Stein. Recalling a 1907 exchange between those titans of art she described as “friends but enemies”, she claimed each chose a picture “undoubtedly the least interesting either of them had done. Later each one used it as an example of the weaknesses of the other one.”

Matisse exchanged a portrait of his daughter, Marguerite, for Picasso’s “Pitcher, Bowl and Lemon”. Although one account suggests Picasso and his friends hurled fake darts at the Matisse portrait, art experts dismiss Stein’s account. Picasso himself denied it.

Certainly any rivalry was matched by admiration, with Matisse once saying “Picasso sees everything” and Picasso observing “there is only Matisse”.

Van Gogh and Gauguin were to have a fraught relationship, but they sealed their friendship initially with an art exchange. Art historian Belinda Thomson says both these artists had struggled to sell their work: “[Swapping] tends to be a practice among artists making their way rather than established. Van Gogh

seems to have given Gauguin a choice of two paintings of ‘Sunflowers’... the slightly earlier ones of sunflowers gone to seed.” One of them today is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In return, Van Gogh received Gauguin’s glorious painting “On the Banks of the River at Martinique”, now in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Gauguin wrote to Van Gogh in 1887: “You will find at the framer in Rue Fontaine a painting that I have delivered for you (for our exchange). If you do not consider it suitable, let me know, and come and choose yourself. Forgive me if I do not come to collect your paintings myself.” The following year, Gauguin wrote: “Your idea for an exchange, to which I haven’t yet replied, appeals to me, and I’ll do the portrait you want, but not yet.”

That year, Van Gogh also wrote to his dealer brother Theo about a swap with Gauguin: “I have just received the portrait of Gauguin by himself. My portrait, which I am sending to Gauguin in exchange, holds its own, I am sure. When I put Gauguin’s conception and my own side by side, mine is as grave, but less despairing. Someday you will also see my self-portrait, which I am sending to Gauguin, because he will keep it, I hope.”

Gauguin also swapped with Edgar Degas. Gauguin received one of the pastel dancers in return for his still life painting, “The Mandolin (On a Chair)”. Degas noted it down in his inventory as an “exchange”.

“The advantage for Gauguin was that he could exhibit this still life [as belonging] to Monsieur Degas, so it upped his profile, being able to say it belongs to a well-known artist like that,” says Thomson.

Van Gogh was constantly urging his brother Theo to organise exchanges of his [Vincent’s] work with other artists and this sometimes succeeded (Emile Bernard, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Armand Guillaumin) and sometimes did not (Georges Seurat was one of several who declined), says Sir John Leighton, former head of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and now director-general of the National Galleries of Scotland. He adds that there are “countless examples across the centuries of artists exchanging works”.

“There have been some famous occasions when an exchange has gone disastrously wrong,” he says. “One thinks of the portrait of Manet and his wife by Degas that the latter gifted to the sitter, who promptly mutilated the picture by slicing off the — perhaps unflattering — image of his wife.”

Degas later told his dealer: “I left without saying goodbye, taking my picture with me. When I got home, I took down a little still life he had given me. ‘Monsieur,’ I wrote, ‘I am returning your “Plums” [painting].’

Earlier artist exchanges included Albrecht Dürer and Raphael. Karen Serres, paintings curator at the Courtauld Gallery in London, says: “Dürer sent Raphael a self-portrait — untraced — as a symbol of his admiration. In thanks, Raphael sent Dürer several drawings by his hand. One drawing has been identified: a study of three nude men, by Raphael [today in the

Albertina in Vienna], which bears an inscription and a date, 1515, in Dürer’s own hand. Long thought to be a preparatory work, it has been shown to be a finished drawing, probably made especially to be sent to Dürer.”

There is obviously a fine line between exchanges, gifts and purchases. Nico Van Hout, curator of the Rubens and His Legacy exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, says Rubens owned several paintings by his assistant Anthony van Dyck, and several by Adriaen Brouwer, whom he rescued from prison: “But we guess he mostly paid [them], rather than swapping.”

In June, Tate Britain in London will stage a major retrospective on Barbara Hepworth, one of the most influential sculptors of the mid-20th century, including a 1932 painting by her second husband, Ben Nicholson, given to her, although the reciprocal work is unknown.

Chris Stephens, the gallery’s head of displays, recalls a story told to him by the abstract artist Terry Frost, who was at the start of his career when Nicholson visited his St Ives studio and was impressed enough to suggest a swap: “That was amazing from someone who was very established to someone just starting. They did a swap. Then Terry got his first London exhibition and Ben had to say: ‘You better have the picture back — it’s too good not to be in the show.’ So they swapped them back again. Terry had lost his Nicholson.” A rare instance of a swap in reverse. ①

Magnificent Obsessions: The Artist as Collector, runs at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, until May 25

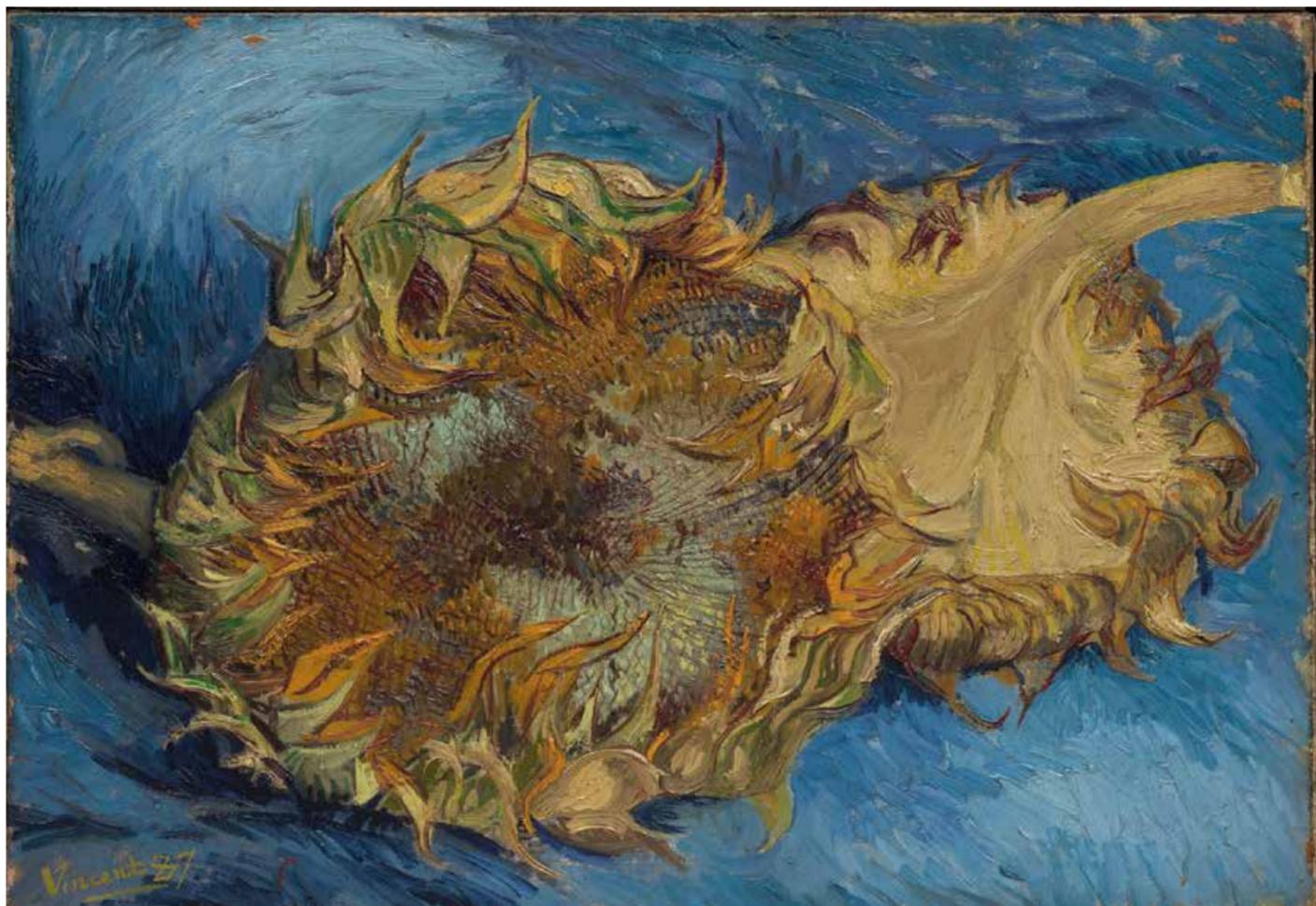


PHOTO: VINCENT VAN GOGH, COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



Seal of friendship: an 1887 “Sunflowers” painting by van Gogh, opposite, and Gauguin’s “On the Banks of the River at Martinique”, left