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## MOMA VISITORS FALL, MET MUSEUM'S RISE, LED BY BLOCKBUSTERS

By Philip Boroff

Attendance at the Museum of Modern Art dropped 11 percent last season to 2.8 million, as the previous year's marathon motionlessness of Marina Abramovic and designs from movie director Tim Burton proved to be hard acts to follow.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, admissions rose to a record 5.6 million last season, buoyed by the wild outfits and accessories of the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen. Both museums have released annual reports and financial statements for the year ending in June 2011.

"We may be seeing a return to the era of the blockbuster," said Lisa Dennison, a Sotheby's executive and former director of New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

The ups and downs at New York's two largest art museums underscore how general-interest spectacles can boost attendance. The Met's 1978 King Tut exhibition, sometimes credited as the first museum blockbuster, remains its most popular, with 1.3 million visitors. The 660,000 people who saw "Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty" made it the 141-year-old museum's eighth-most-popular exhibition.

The Burton show, which ran from November 2009 to April 2010 and included drawings, paintings and sculptures by the director of "Edward Scissorhands," was MoMA's third-most popular ever, with 810,511 visitors.

That contributed to a record 3.1 million visiting MoMA in 2009-2010. In addition to Abramovic (who sat without moving for seven hours each day) and her team of performance artists, many of them nude, the season included the work of South African artist William Kentridge and photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson.

### **'Secret Is Balance'**

Dennison described MoMA's acclaimed 2010 Matisse show and the de Kooning retrospective that closed on Monday as more demanding of viewers than the "experiential" Burton exhibit.

"There is a temptation to do exhibits that are crowd pleasers or blockbusters," she said, speaking of museums generally. "The secret is balance."

Attendance is key for administrators, she said: It affects box office and revenue from food, retail and membership. "When I was at the Guggenheim, we looked at attendance every week," she said.

The Met and MoMA appear to have bounced back from the recession, according to their financial statements. The Met, which cut 14 percent of staff in 2008-09, had a \$1.3 million operating surplus last season. Membership income rose 7 percent to a record \$25.5 million. It's taking over the Whitney Museum of American Art's uptown outpost for at least eight years, beginning in 2015, when that museum moves to new quarters in the city's Meatpacking District.

Harold Holzer, a Met spokesman, said there's renewed emphasis in showcasing its permanent collection. He noted that the renovated Islamic art galleries reopened in November. A new American wing opens Jan. 16.

### **Looking to Expand**

MoMA, with a \$2.7 million surplus last season, bought the building of the neighboring American Folk Art Museum (78380MF) to expand. Kim Mitchell, a MoMA spokesman, said results last season matched the museum's expectations. It projects attendance to be little changed this season. Both museums raised prices 25 percent last year, to \$25. The Met's admission is "suggested," while at MoMA Friday nights are free and teenagers 16 and under don't pay unless in groups. MoMA also offers an online discount.

While pointing out that museum admissions have generally risen in New York in recent years, Mitchell said the institutions "continue to be a strong value, especially when compared to more expensive cultural options such as Broadway theater and the performing arts."

MoMA's investments gained 17.5 percent in the year ending in June 2011 to \$748 million, its annual report said. The Met's portfolio advanced 20.1 percent to \$2.6 billion. U.S. endowments and foundations gained an average 20 percent in that period, according to Wilshire Associates, a consultant.

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