THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IS NOT large compared with the Louvre or the Prado. But it has long commanded a disproportionate level of affection. For many of us, MoMA remains a sentimental favorite, the place where we first awoke to the allure of art, where we first espied van Gogh’s starry skies and Matisse’s fresco-size circle of female dancers, those five free-spirited nudes holding hands beneath a cobalt sky. We came away from the gift shop with postcards and posters of Jackson Pollock’s ribbons of tossed pigment and Jasper Johns’s sensuously impastoed targets, pinning them to our dormitory walls, as if to announce that we, too, were art partisans. We were on the side of the new.

When MoMA first opened, in a three-room gallery in November 1953, modern art was viewed by the American public as, more or less, the scrawls of degenerate nut cases. But Alfred H. Barr Jr., the museum’s founding director, was enamored of Picasso and company and regarded the advent of Cubism as roughly tantamount to the invention of the incandescent light bulb. In subsequent decades, he amassed a collection that turned the museum into a peerless repository of avant-garde masterworks. He was also responsible for crafting the history that went with them—smooth, linear march of “isms,” from Cubism and Futurism to Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, that was quickly adopted as the textbook version of art history.

But judged by today’s standards, MoMA was not progressive at all. Women were poorly represented in its galleries, and the works by African-Americans that lodged in our memories, such as Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series,” were tokens at best. Avant-garde art is supposed to be an expression of non-conformity, but the view of modernism propagated by MoMA in some ways echoed the prejudices of its time.

Is it possible, at this late date, to offer a more balanced view of the art of the past 75 years without disrespecting Barr’s famously perspicacious eye? MoMA is attempting that very goal. On Oct. 21, after having closed for a gestation period of four months, a rehoused and reconstituted institution will open to the public. Some changes are plainly architectural. The new building, which you can enter from either West 53rd or West 54th, comes with a wonderfully airy lobby, as well as 47,000 square feet of additional gallery space—most of it located in the new David Geffen (Continued on Page 84)