Art Libraries Society of North America, 33rd Annual Conference
Hilton Americas, Houston, Texas, April 1-6, 2005

Session II: Oil Patch to Oil on Canvas: Texas Collects
Sunday, April 3, 2005, 10:00 to 11:30 AM

Moderator: John Hagood, National Gallery of Art.

Speakers:


Katherine O’Dell, University of Texas School of Information. “From Private Possessions to Public Privilege: The Legacy of Marion Koogler McNay.”


Phil Heagy, The Menil Collection. “I have to show you this!“: Dominique de Menil and a Surreal Art of Collecting.

Recorder: John Hagood, National Gallery of Art

Summary:

John introduced the session and the speakers to an audience of about thirty-five people. Kristen Regina had conceived the idea for the panel early in 2004, as not unrelated to that year’s conference session at New York, “Expanding the Cannon: Women collectors.” Kristin wanted a panel to focus on Texas, site of the conference in 2005, and to look at common themes like wealth—based on natural resources, specifically in Texas—and how that wealth flowed to art collections and institutions within the state and beyond.

Having shared their papers with one another in advance, the four presenters raised some common threads and tried to address one another’s work in the course of the morning. Some coherent themes, or questions, that arose among them included how inherited fortunes and marriages enabled these philanthropists to establish their material and cultural legacies; how for them, art, spirituality, and support for education coalesced around their social concerns; and how their domestic seats evolved into museums. In Texas, and early in the twentieth century, the collectors propagated a modernism that was historicizing, multicultural, and positivist. Bringing a Colonial Anglo-American taste, or high modernist architecture to Houston, eighteenth-century French and Russian decorative arts to Washington, and modern works to the Texas Hill Country, these collectors re-enacted patterns that arise between imperial and colonial groups. All this took place in the era of nascent American ascendancy after World War I, and in the second wave of feminism that allowed American women not only to vote, but to emerge from the Gilded Age disenfranchisement that had dictated women collect and exhibit primarily in the decorative arts. Texas in its time and place seems to have been a ripe incubator for such developments.

Finally, John noted that each speaker represented an institution worth visiting—three nearby in Texas and one in Washington, DC.
Kristen Regina presented a narrative of the Post family, beginning with Charles William Post, and his daughter Marjorie Meriwether Post (1887-1973). She emphasized how Mr. Post’s business and philanthropic endeavors unfolded early in the twentieth century, in both the upper Midwest and in Texas. Kristen went on to compare Mr. Post’s ideas of civic service and beneficence to that of his daughter. Of his undertakings at Riverside (near Fort Worth) and Post City, he said his mission was to provide each of his workers with the “opportunity to help himself: not charity without self-respect, not doles, not libraries and museums, but a chance to earn that which was coveted.” His daughter, in contrast, made her contributions to the cultural realm during the American Depression, culminating in the establishment of a foundation for the Hillwood Museum and Gardens and its collection of French and Russian fine and decorative arts. As with the other collectors under discussion, her life’s work was anchored in the wealth of her family and her husbands—Edward Close, E.F. Hutton, and Joseph Davies (Roosevelt’s Ambassador to the Soviet Union). At Hillwood, the legacy of the largest and most important collection of Russian art outside Russia continues, complete with facilities open to the public, scholarly activities, local outreach, and a library specializing in Russian and French culture and artifacts.

Katherine O’Dell introduced Marion Koogler McNay (1883-1950), whose namesake museum in San Antonio is a city landmark. McNay’s family wealth derived from her father, a surgeon who struck oil on his Texas property. McNay’s upbringing early in the twentieth century took her to museums across America, and even to the Armory Show in 1913. Her marriages, relatively late in life, to Don Denton McNay and Donald Taylor Atkinson coincided with her travel to Taos, support for students, mansion-building in San Antonio, and her conversion to Catholicism. McNay’s taste in the visual arts was avant-garde at the time, focusing on Modern European painting and Southwest folk arts. McNay brought the first work by Van Gogh to Texas, and the museum continues to grow and flourish around the kernel of her collection and wishes for the city.

Emily Neff, curator of American Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, delivered a talk on the Houston family of Governor James Hogg, and especially his children Ima (1882-1975), Will, and Mike. As the governor led Texas to the national scene politically and economically, she argued, his children worked to establish Texas’ place within an American cultural compass, and to set the direction of each. In both cases, a tension between the regional and national, at a time when both were struggling to establish notions of “American roots,” the Hoggs’ patterns of art collecting—early American furniture, Native American pottery from the Southwest, Frederic Remington, and contemporary European art—was particularly important for “carving out a particular history for a region outside the eastern mainstream that had lived this particular past.” Their broad-minded civic vision led them to help in the founding of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the donation of their home, Bayou Bend, to the Museum in 1957. Museums, for them, were important bearers of culture: a particular culture in their image. As with the other figures under discussion, the Hoggs parlayed family advantages and responsibility into exemplary investment in local and civic communities through far-reaching cultural institutions, while they participated in the patriotism and nationalism of the 1920s. Their particular fashioning of regional identity, (especially vis-à-vis the American east coast) repeated a similar stance of the young United States toward Europe. In the wake of Reconstruction, both father and children helped to determine and to direct the modernity and modernism they brought to both the South and the country at large.
Phil Heagy spoke from long and personal experience working with Mrs. De Menil (1908-1998) herself, and her foundation, recounting her lifetime of collecting, building, and support of arts education. Born in France, Dominique de Menil’s own financial means came from the Schlumberger oil field tools fortune. She and her husband, Jean, avidly devoted themselves to bringing modern European and non-Western art to their home in their adopted Houston. Her very personal passion for the visual arts and making spiritual connections in their variety grew and paralleled her equally phenomenal commitments to educational, religious, and civic life in Houston. Her patronage of artists (like Max Ernst), and architects (like Philip Johnson and Renzo Piano) matched her support for a small army of young scholars and teachers in art history, and an ever-widening circle of museums, universities, and spiritual sites in Houston. Phil reported on the challenges and responsibilities of stewardship for the current generation of Menil Foundation employees, to uphold and extend the vision of the Menils—unique and expansive, as it was innovative.