
Marjorie Cohn’s latest volume addresses the collecting career of St. Louis Post-Dispatch publisher Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. (1913-1993) in a generously-illustrated biography of the man in relation to his art, a collection he began with a Modigliani at college in 1936 and cultivated throughout his life.

The advantage of examining someone born into a newspaper family is that one will likely find a well-documented life, and though it is inevitable, the reader will experience some difficulty keeping all of the Josephs straight in the early chapters. The work progresses mostly chronologically. As works are collected, color illustrations satisfy the reader as the acquisition satisfied the collector. Relevant contextual departures from the chronology abound, such as stories of newspapers, museums, sales, society, and politics.

The author has served the Harvard Art Museums in the capacities of curator, conservator, and acting director, and accordingly Classic Modern becomes the story of the Fogg Museum as well as of Pulitzer. It is one of a number of works she has written on collectors, and though different in tone, somewhat resembles Lois Orswell, David Smith, and Modern Art (Harvard University Art Museums, 2002). Pulitzer’s contributions along with Orswell’s form the core of Harvard Art Museum’s collection of twentieth-century art. Both works introduce the reader to the collector as a young child, to find there the nascent connoisseur. Both explore the collector’s psyche, present his thoughts on what he is attempting to form in a collection, and both works ring entirely true of the individuals and collections studied – Orswell more eccentric, Pulitzer more disciplined.

It is a formidable volume, densely written, containing 375 pages of text and illustrations, fifty-seven pages of endnotes, and a twenty-one page index. It is more coffee-table book than commuter reading. While Classic Modern is not intended to serve as a catalog of Pulitzer’s collection (a four volume set was published over the years) one notable omission from the work is a simple “Chronology of Ownership” listing the works and acquisition/disposition dates, as is included at the end of Cohn’s work on Orswell. The only additional flaw could be named in the silver text on the spine. It may prove difficult to read when a library removes the dust jacket, as the cloth is light.

Classic Modern and is a model of the collector’s biography and is recommended for art museum libraries, libraries supporting graduate-level study in art history as well as collections on philanthropy. Naturally, it may be of particular local interest to readers in St. Louis.

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