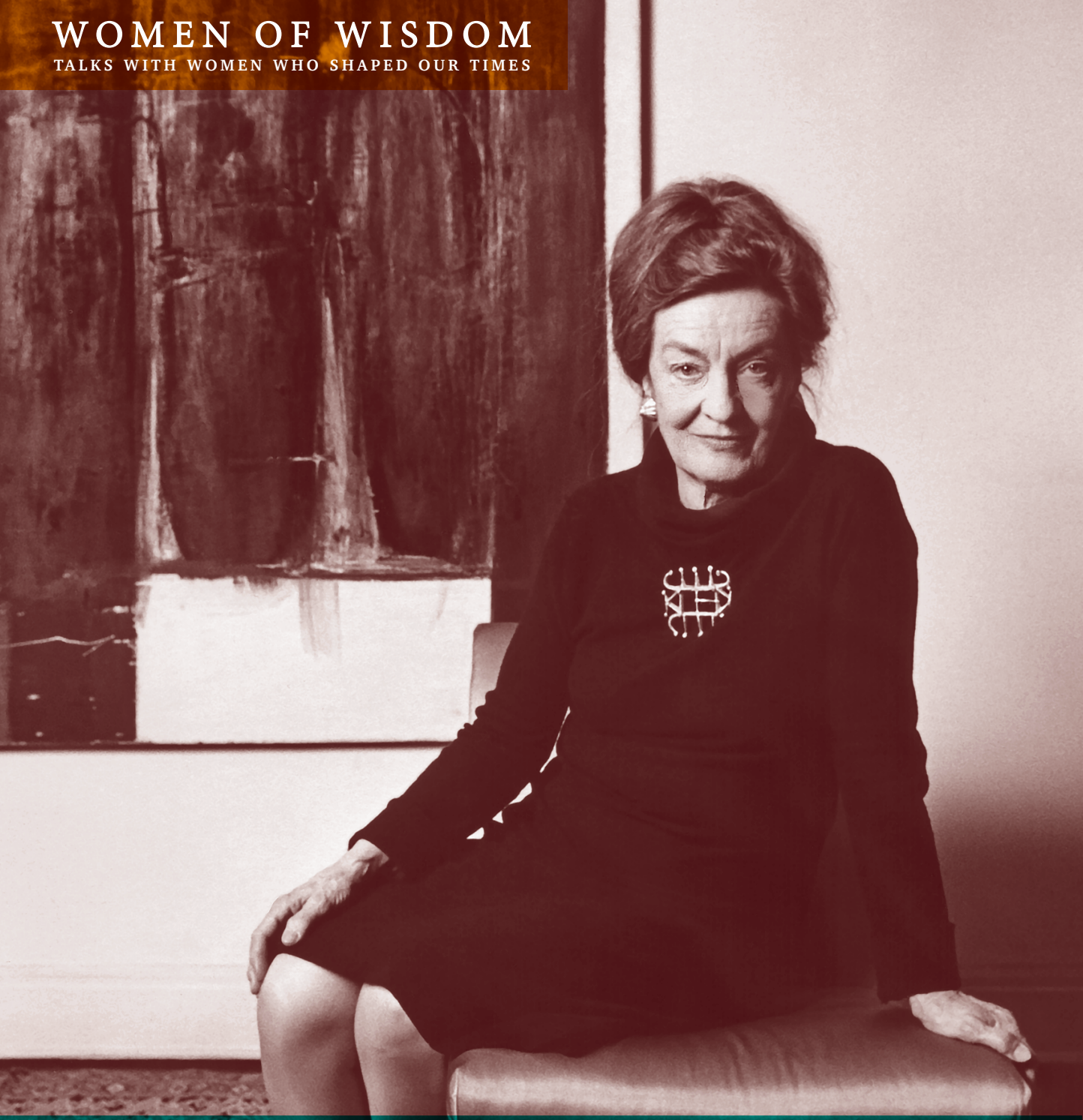
WOMEN OF WISDOM

TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES



Dorothy Canning Miller

By Lynn Gilbert

with Gaylen Moore

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Dedication

To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.

— Lynn Gilbert

Dorothy Canning Miller in her home, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

Dorothy Canning Miller

(born 1904, Hopedale, Massachusetts—died 2003, New York City) became curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art In New York City in 1943, one of the few women curators in the country. She organized a series of six seminal and controversial exhibitions of contemporary American painters and sculptors that introduced the work of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Louise Nevelson, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Robert Indiana to an international art public.

My FAMILY WANTED ME to be an artist, although there were no artists in the family. It was simply that they were interested in art, they liked the idea. I used to draw (horrible drawings they were) when I was a child, so they said, “Obviously she’s going to be an artist,” and I was pushed at it. My father was an architect and engineer, and he went to some trouble to find out which one of the women’s colleges in the East had the best art department, and he picked Smith. I think it did perhaps have the best, and its museum was already outstanding. It offered plenty of courses in drawing and painting and of course I took every one of those.

At some time while I was at Smith I realized I didn’t have what it took to be an artist. I developed a few hand skills and that sort of thing, but somehow I realized, especially later when I got to know some real painters, that it took a great deal more than hand skills. I think my parents perhaps didn’t understand that to be an artist it has to be in your head. It takes a big determination, a big desire, a passion, to become an artist, which I didn’t have. But I certainly did want to work with art.

So I took all the excellent art history courses at Smith and majored in art. Sure, modern art was on the scene and it was proliferating, but Smith hadn’t caught up with the importance of what modern art was going to be and already had become. Smith’s course called Modern Painting started with Rubens and ended with a few slides of Cezanne, early Picasso and Matisse, and Cubism. Those great artists were considered a bit eccentric by certain of my oId-fashioned professors. I can remember one of them saying about Lyonel Feininger: “That was my friend, we were students together, and look what happened to him!” The slide was an early Feininger with a strong Cubist influence. That was the attitude of many of the colleges during the 1920s.

Late in 1925 the Newark Museum started the first museum-training class in this country. It was one year ahead of the famous Fogg Art Museum class. The director of the Newark Museum wrote to the college art departments and asked if anyone would like to join this class after graduation. Nine of us did. One of the most remarkable things at the Newark Museum was its founder and director, John Cotton Dana. He was a very wonderful man, a practical visionary, and a great librarian whose innovations placed the Newark Museum library ahead of many

other institutions with its range and ability to serve the public. I was never sure he really understood art, but he knew it was important. During the 1920s, he put on many exhibitions and raised funds for a collection of modern American painting and sculpture. In addition, he made sure his apprentices were well exposed to art.

In New York at that time the only way to see modern artists' work was by going to their studios. A man named Holger Cahill, who was helping teach our class how to be museum workers, knew all the current crop of American artists, so he would take us to New York and we'd meet those wonderful people in their studios. Cahill could see which ones were breaking new ground. Some of them had studied in Paris, but what he saw was a movement beginning here in New York. It was very exciting to meet those artists and listen to them talk. Here was the real thing, all these experiments going on, the sort of work we'd never heard of in college. I might not understand what I was looking at, but I didn't have any doubt that it was important because Cahill knew it was important and wanted us to see these things.

The Newark Museum class lasted about ten months. Then because the museum was expanding and needed a staff, they hired all nine of us apprentices. We had a deadline a few months away to create a brand-new museum, with three floors, a garden, a junior museum, and a library—all open to the public. The museum had very varied collections, not only modern art but a huge nineteenth-century American paintings collection and all sorts of ethnological collections—Tibetan, American Indian, Oriental, early American. They had acquired these over the years, often by donation, sometimes by purchase. It was great fun for us apprentices because we got such a smattering of everything.

The first job I was given was to set up two empty galleries in the new building. All over the floor were boxes of African Negro art and South Sea Islands material that had been recently acquired. It was wonderful stuff. The director told me, "Here, read about this, then install it and write the labels." Most of the things written about African Negro art were written by French collectors, and in this country by Dr. Alfred Barnes. He had bought a big collection in Paris, the Paul Guillaume collection, and he exhibited it and wrote about it. The only trouble was that Barnes

wouldn't allow anyone into his museum!

When the Newark Museum opened, after a few hectic months, they began using us as models for the costume collection. We were constantly dressing up in Tibetan or Chinese or Victorian clothes and posing for photographs for the newspapers. The newspapers loved the Newark Museum and every week there was a story about its collections, its director, or its apprentices dressed up in costumes. Then we were assigned a special task of "docenting"—guiding school classes, ladies' clubs, and other groups through the galleries and lecturing to them. We were taking as many as three or four big school classes through the museum every day. The groups were really very responsive. They'd never seen a museum like this, or any of this kind of material, but the museum kept us at it so long that we almost died of exhaustion. We begged for mercy and asked them to hire full-time docents, so we could finish our training in the other fields of museum work. But it was a very exciting year because they really didn't have time to train us; they just had to say, "Here, get to work and install these galleries." So that was the way we worked, and fast.

I stayed at the Newark Museum for four years. While I was there, the founding of the Museum of Modern Art was announced in the summer of 1929. My best friend at the Newark and I looked at each other and said, "That's where we must go." We knew it instantly. I felt I'd been at Newark long enough, so I deliberately gave up a perfectly good job during the Depression and went to New York without work. I didn't have a steady job for several years. I did odd jobs, such as cataloging an American folk art collection (now at Williamsburg), cataloging and installing a huge American Indian collection for the Montclair, New Jersey, Museum, jobs that would take a few weeks or sometimes years. I never regretted leaving the Newark Museum because it was so great being in New York.

Alfred Barr was the director of the new Museum of Modern Art. Even though he was only twenty-seven years old, he was the unquestioned expert in the field. He had had a fellowship and had spent a year in Europe, going to talk with the famous artists and see their work, which had not yet reached the museums or even the private galleries here. Barr knew everybody; he was unique at that moment.

In 1932-1933 he took a leave of absence because of illness and Holger Cahill was asked to run the museum and its exhibitions while Barr was away. Cahill called me and said, “Come and help me.” So I became a part-time, dollar-an-hour worker at the Museum of Modern Art.

In the beginning, the staff was very small. It was the director and his assistant, the business manager and his assistant, a carpenter, the guards. Then in 1932, Philip Johnson started the architecture department. He financed it himself. He and Barr put on the first exhibition of modern architecture in this country, “The International Style.”

Nothing could have been more different from the Newark Museum. The Modern was devoted to modern painting, sculpture, drawings, prints, architecture, and industrial design. I worked on a big American show of paintings and sculpture from the Civil War to the present, then on an American folk art show, then on Cahill’s great show, “American Sources of Modern Art.”

I had never met Alfred Barr. When he returned in 1934, I said, “Do you think I could work here?” or something timid like that. And he said, “Yes, I’d like to have you, but I have to get permission from the trustees to hire another staff member.” He later told me that he wanted me because, by then, I’d had ten years of museum experience and he thought it would be nice to get someone who had experience instead of somebody just out of college. So I finally got the job that I’d wanted for so long.

The museum really was a terribly exciting place then. There was nothing else like it in New York, or anywhere, for that matter. Alfred Barr had the most extraordinary mind I had ever come in contact with, and his ideas were very different from those of museum directors of that period. For instance, he realized that if you have a committee choose a show you get a committee exhibition. It doesn’t have a point of view, an individual’s point of view. His first exhibitions at the museum had to be committee jobs, selected by the board of trustees, and he knew that they resulted only in compromises. He firmly believed that one

person should be chosen to do each show, and that person should have complete responsibility for it. That was the principle behind the exhibition program of the museum, including the series of American shows I did later.

The first show I did alone was the WPA (Work Projects Administration) Federal Art Project show late in 1936. It was in a way a report on the first year of the project. The museum trustees decided that I should do the show and should have complete and final choice of inclusions.

Holger Cahill, then my husband, was running the WPA Federal Art Project. I traveled all over the country. In each city every good artist would be on the project, and a great many new, young artists were being discovered. In addition to saving actual lives of artists and turning up many unknown talents, the WPA was extremely important in creating a new public for art. The government projects set up community art centers in cities and towns that had no other form of art activity. In 1935-1936, the first year of the projects, over a hundred of those community art centers were established all over the country. That was the kind of man Cahill was—he could make an extraordinary thing like that happen.

Then, about 1942, the museum's exhibition committee decided to have an all-American show that would exclude New York artists. We all knew the New Yorkers, at least those who were showing in the galleries and museums. But we didn't know about the people who had developed out of the WPA art projects elsewhere. So they let me do that show and let me travel all over the country again to see the projects. There's nothing more exciting to me than looking at all the art activities in this country. I saw there were many regional trends and a general level of great work, some of which had been shown in New York, but most of which was new.

To me, perhaps the most striking regional trend, one of the most successful and most different from any other, was in Seattle, where Mark Tobey was the "old master" and Morris Graves and others of his young age were all on the WPA

project. Seattle had a flavor of its own which was quite different from, say, Chicago. I knew already about Mark Tobey; he had once been in a big group show selected by Barr. Also he was an old friend of my husband's; they had lived in the same house in New York years before. So I went to Seattle and immediately looked up Mark Tobey and saw his work. Then I told him that I'd heard about a new painter on the WPA and I'd seen his work in Washington. That was Morris Graves. I said, "Morris won't answer my letters. I've written to him and begged to see him." Mark said, "I'll get him for you. He was my student." So, sure enough, he set up an appointment.

Morris was really, genuinely reluctant to be "discovered." Without Mark I probably couldn't have got to Morris at all. Morris arrived from his country shack in an old Ford truck. Our meeting place was the basement of the Seattle Museum. In the back of the old Ford truck he had about a hundred of those wonderful pictures, unframed, unmatted, on tracing paper, just thrown in a heap in the truck. He took them out and he was very cross. He reluctantly spread them out all over the floor of the basement. I didn't have to think. One look at all those wonderful birds in the moonlight . . . a quick glance and then I went to work to try and persuade him to send them to New York. "I'm not ready to show," he said. "I'm just beginning." I did my best for fifteen minutes, trying to convince him. Then I said, "All right, let's forget about exhibiting. Won't you just send them to the museum so that I can show them to Alfred Barr and the trustees? They'd be awfully pleased and delighted."

I told him, "I'll be able to sell a lot of these for you," which he could hardly believe, and I said, "How much do you want for them?" He said, "A hundred dollars each." It was a fair price at that time. Then I turned to another young artist, Kenneth Callahan, who worked in the Seattle Museum, and I said, "Do you think you can make him do it? Will you pack them and send them?" He said, "Well, I'll do my best but he'll probably change his mind." But they came. I had to wait six weeks. I thought I'd never get those things to New York.

When I opened the package with Alfred Barr, and there were all those marvelous

pictures, well, everybody in the office just died. Some of our trustees who were on our painting and sculpture committee came rushing in to look at them. There were eighty pictures and we spread them out on the sixth-floor rug before tea time. The trustees and staff all wanted to buy, but Alfred said, "The museum gets the first choice, then Dorothy gets the next choice because she succeeded in getting them here." Alfred chose ten for the museum, then I chose one and then the staff and trustees went to work on them. By the time we got through I'd sold all eighty paintings.

Graves was absolutely stunned, and at last he was pleased. He wrote me a marvelous letter saying, "The grocer here is very much surprised to have my bill paid in full. The bill has been running for eight months." He cited other things like that. After that he was very responsive to us. I think he was convinced that somehow he was ready to exhibit after all and didn't know it. So he was in my 1942 American show.

The museum let me do another American show in 1946, and then one in 1952. Clyfford Still exhibited in the 1952 show. He was a very strange and difficult man. At the time he was with the Betty Parsons Gallery where he'd had three shows by 1950. My husband went to see the last show and called me at the museum and said, "Get right over here quick and see this work." So I ran over. It seemed then very rough, tough, but very sophisticated. It wasn't smooth and elegant like Rothko's. It seemed the rugged expression of a person who'd grown up in the wilds of the West. It was turbulent and eloquent at the same time.

I was selecting people to be in my 1952 show and I'd selected Mark Rothko, who had shown before, quite a lot, and was much better known than Still; of course, Jackson Pollock was in the show and Pollock had become quite famous, but Still . . . I knew he'd refuse to be in the show. He was against a lot of things, like exhibiting in New York, but I asked him one day, "Would you be in this show? You can write whatever you want in the catalog." He said, "You mean I can really write whatever I want to?" I said, "Yes, you can, but I can't send the catalog through the mail if there's anything obscene in it!"

He was terribly nice. He let me go again and again to his studio where he had rolls and rolls of huge paintings and he unrolled them. I looked at maybe a hundred paintings, and together he and I chose about thirty or thirty-five which we took to the museum so we'd have a broad choice in arranging them. We hung his gallery in the show together one evening. He seemed very pleased and I was very pleased. The show was called "Fifteen Americans" and it was impressive. Of all my shows this one had the biggest impact because so much that was new and radical had happened in the six years since my previous show in 1946. Pollock and everybody had blossomed . . . the whole Abstract Expressionist movement. I had about forty artists and I was going mad trying to choose, there were so many very, very good people. Some of them I put in my next show four years after that. It was a terribly exciting moment in New York. I haven't been conscious of any time since then that has been that exciting.

I have a tremendous passion for making a good exhibition. You've got fifteen artists, who's going to be in the first gallery? The order in which you place the artists, that's so important. What you look for and what you try to achieve are climaxes—introduction, surprise, going around the corner and seeing something unexpected, perhaps several climaxes with very dramatic things, then a quiet tapering off with something to let you out alive. There has to be an element of drama in it, at least for me . . . keeping up the interest as you go through seventeen galleries, don't let the interest flag, something new is coming around the corner, it's going to knock your eyes out.

In those old days at the museum, you could do it any way you wanted. You had the whole great third floor of the museum. You'd decide first on the sequence of artists and how to get that drama into it, and then how you could best design the floor plan around the demands of each artist's presentation. With the high cost of everything now, I'm sure they have to use a space that's already there without redesigning special galleries. I could always move the walls and I had my choice of colors.

There was a very tight, rigid schedule, three weeks or even less between the big shows. There'd be four days to reposition the walls, three days plus a weekend

for repainting them, and at the end there'd always be two days and two nights for making the final arrangement of paintings and sculptures, then two more days for the actual hanging. We had marvelous teams of trained men to do all this, our own painters, our own carpenters and our own hangmen, as we called them, who could just read your mind. "I was sure you were going to put that there," they'd say to me. There was nothing more fun for me than arranging a big exhibition. That was my only small claim to creativity.

A lot of the artists we showed had never shown m a museum, although some had shown in galleries, which have a smaller attendance. That was one of the purposes of our shows, to bring new work that we thought was excellent before our huge museum public. Sometimes I was scared. "Fifteen Americans" was supposed to be a very far-out show. I was ready to stick behind my choices, but I didn't know how it would be accepted. I had a twenty-foot wall filled with one big Pollock. I think some of our trustees were worried about what the critics would say. Some of them came and looked at the show the morning before the preview. The president of the board was brought through by Rene d'Harnoncourt, director of the museum, to break it to him gently. I remember this trustee came up to me afterward. I was putting up labels and getting it ready for the preview that night. He said, "Dorothy, it's a wonderful show. I'm crazy about it," and he bought several things from it. Our trustees were a wonderful group anyway, eager to accept new things and to support the staff.

It turned out to be one of the most successful shows of that period. Margaret Barr, Alfred's wife, came rushing up to me at the preview and said, "It's a colossal success." I said, "How do you know?" She said, "The air is electric." It's very funny when you look at those paintings today. This work was shocking to many people. It was too rough and tough. I used to walk through the galleries at crowded hours just to listen to the reactions. People were saying "Outrageous! Shocking!" as they walked from one gallery to another. It's hard to believe things moved so fast then. By putting these paintings in the museum, I think we may have changed the minds of some experienced collectors. As for the general public, I think they always expected the museum to do things they weren't going to

approve of.

One of my chief satisfactions at the museum was this series of American shows. These exhibitions involved some artists who were already known but little appreciated. They also aimed at discovering new people and selling their work to collectors and the museum. I'd say that was the most satisfying thing about my work. One of my most "radical" artists, Clyfford Still, has had a big exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—the final accolade.

The idea of going any higher on the ladder at the museum did not occur to me. I always felt it a great privilege to work with Alfred Barr and the other brilliant people there. I'd had a lot of good training. I was also lucky because I worked with two people who had the best eyes for art that I have ever known, Cahill and Barr. My husband taught me a lot, and there were many things he was quicker at than I was. I'd say, "No, I don't get it yet." But we did agree on a great many things that we liked. We also had a healthy amount of disagreement.

Year after year, Barr and I used to wind up at exhibitions in New York on Saturday afternoons. He'd walk into a gallery full of paintings and say, "Let's each decide which one we like best arid then we'll compare." Well, he'd go just like a bee to the best picture. He proved that over and over again. I might not think it was the best then, but in the end somehow he'd always picked the best.

In the late 1950s, there was a group show at Castelli's, and there was a little tiny painting of an American flag. I said to Leo, "Who did that?" He said, "Oh, he's wonderful, that's Jasper Johns." Some time later Castelli gave Johns his first one-man show. I remember it was a Saturday morning, it was opening day but it was raining. Alfred Barr got there before I did because he lived uptown. He called me and said, "How fast can you get here?" I said, "Twenty minutes if I take a taxi." When I got there he was alone in the gallery. The great variety of Jasper's works was impressive. There were the numbers, the letters, the targets, all sorts of things.

Leo Castelli was very considerate. He left us alone to discuss which ones the museum should buy. We knew we should buy several, the only way to get the

range of the work. They were very inexpensive. After much discussion we decided on four that we should bring before our Collections Committee. We could not give any assurance that they would be bought, but we called Leo out and said, “These are the ones we’d like to have. Will you send them over?” He said, “Fine, would you like to meet the artist?” And poor Jasper had been sitting in a little inner room no bigger than a closet hearing everything we’d said for an hour. He was twenty-six and dressed in a neat business suit, hair cut well, not at all a bohemian New York artist, which he wasn’t, of course; he was from South Carolina. He was too shy to talk to us. Alfred kidded him about something and he couldn’t respond. It was a memorable meeting. Even at that time, the late 1950s, modern art was still new enough so you felt you could show people something they’d never seen before. You don’t feel that anymore. Everybody’s seen everything, because there’s so much more activity, more dealers, more publicity, more artists, maybe three times as many artists today as there were thirty years ago—that’s just a guess. There are thousands more collectors, too. When I first started at the museum, we knew most of the collectors. There were about twelve of them in New York—the big names, Stephen Clark, the Lewisohns, Mrs. Rockefeller; we felt we knew them all. They were all interested in the museum and our board, but it wasn’t until later, I’d say the 1940s, that the vast number of new collectors developed. One might almost say that an enormous mania for collecting developed.

Nobody could possibly count the collectors in New York today. Every house you pass has a collector in it. Some of it had to do with the great increase in the numbers of artists and dealers, as well as with the extraordinary rise in the value of art. I had a lot of fun just buying what I liked, for a few hundred dollars; the Nevelsons, the folk art, the Jasper Johns, the Gorky. I bought a Franz Kline for a thousand dollars and now it’s so valuable I shouldn’t have it here in my apartment, but I just forget about all that and keep on living in my dear little firetrap. It amuses me that they’ve increased so much in value, but I’m never tempted to sell them, I just want to look at them.

I know there is still the possibility of discovering artists today, but you have to weed through an awful lot of stuff you don’t want to see because there’s so much being made and shown.

I have done a good deal in helping private collectors to buy art and I have been fortunate in that they have all bought because they love art. Once in a while someone has called me on the telephone to say, ‘‘I’d like to buy something that’s going to be eight times as valuable.” I say, “Well, I’m not interested. I only buy things myself because I’m crazy about them and I advise other people to do the same. If it becomes more valuable, that’s just good luck.” I don’t help anybody who says he wants to buy for investment purposes, I don’t like that as a reason for buying.

There were too many things about my career that were luck, luck that I happened to get the job at the Museum of Modern Art and that there were such wonderful people there to teach me and help me along. It was a great staff. I did make a risky decision to leave a perfectly good job at the Newark Museum in the depths of the Depression, but New York was always a mecca to me. Even when I was a tiny kid, my first conscious aim was to get to New York because it meant so much excitement, the Natural History Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the lights of Broadway, the Bronx Zoo, all these things. My parents used to tell me that when I was three or four years old, and was angry at something, I would stamp my foot and say, “I will take my suitcase and go to New York.”

I used to get offered directorships or other good jobs in other cities, but I never considered them because I knew the only place where I wanted to be was New York. Here’s where it’s cooking. There’s no other place like it. I wouldn’t live anywhere else. People say, “Don’t you want to retire to your little country house?” I say, “Oh, I’m not leaving New York, good God, no, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

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