An Intimate Portrait of
the Museum of Modern Art

by RUSSELL LYNES

he added, "He was, I say with conviction, the most brilliant person on our staff, at once sensitive and energetic." Barr was very evidently, as he said, "profoundly angry . . . and alarmed about its [McAndrew's departure] effect on the morale of the staff." But by that time it was too late to repair the damage. McAndrew had left the Museum.

So had Nelson Rockefeller. He had gone to Washington to assume the post of Coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, a brand-new bureau created in the summer of 1940 when the war in Europe was about nine months old. Most Americans believed by then that it would be only a matter of time before their country would be a great deal more than peripherally involved. Belgium and the Netherlands had fallen like skittles before the German *blitzkrieg*, and the "saturation bombing" of Rotterdam was a horror never before witnessed by man and a foretaste of a new, all-involving brand of warfare. In May the British, the French, and the Americans held their breath while more than 850 boats of every size and description evacuated 338,000 British and French troops from the harbor of Dunkirk, and their hearts sank when the French Army collapsed in June and Maréchal Pétain presently became the head of a puppet government in Vichy.

Rockefeller's appointment by President Roosevelt as a "dollar-a-year man" was, according to an Associated Press wire story of August 17, "to counter the Fascist influence in Latin America." Rockefeller's qualifications for the job were described as his experience as a director of the Creole Petroleum Corporation, which had its headquarters in Venezuela, the fact that he had "set the Creole company into co-operation with the Government of Venezuela in improving education, health and general social conditions," and that he had built a hotel in Caracas as "a test tube to show the value of Latin America as a land of profitable North American investment." For the moment, in any case, he had no intention of giving up the presidency of the Museum, and the AP story pointed out that "he has sponsored shows of Latin American art in New York. . . . A Mexican exhibition is there now."

Up to that time the Museum had held just one important Latin American show—works by Diego Rivera—though paintings by Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco (of Mexico), and Portinari (of Brazil) had been included in the show with which the new building was opened, and works by some of them had been shown earlier at the Museum. The Mexican exhibition, whose full name was *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, was in the Museum partly as the result of McAndrew's doing. During the summer of 1940 before he left the Museum, he had gone to Mexico for a vacation. An exhibitio[n o]f pre-Columbian Mexican art

had been prepared for the Jeu de Paume in Paris, but the war had started before it was shipped and the show, of course, was canceled. Certainly no one was sending valuable works of art to Europe at that time. Neither were valuable works of art being committed to ships which might be picked off by the torpedoes of German submarines, and so an exhibition of Brancusi sculpture which had been scheduled for the Museum of Modern Art had also been canceled. McAndrew got wind of the Mexican show from Diego Rivera, at whose house in a suburb of Mexico City he had seen photographs of what had been assembled. When he got back to New York he suggested to Barr that what had been assembled for the Jeu de Paume would make an interesting show for the Museum. Barr in turn told Nelson Rockefeller, who found it much to his taste and certainly in keeping with his official efforts on behalf of "hemisphere solidarity." As a result Rockefeller went to Mexico City, taking Dick Abbott with him, and, as McAndrew says, "saw not as much of Rivera and Dr. Medioní [who had helped to assemble the material] as of President Cardenas." The show "grew and grew with Cardenas' blessing (he and Nelson hit it off notably), and soon a huge show, many times bigger than the original, was promised by the Mexican government."

At Barr's insistence, McAndrew went back to Mexico City. McAndrew says, "There was really nothing for me to do, though the real reason was that Alfred feared Abbott would make enemies, and furthermore I knew Spanish." Barr's fears had not been baseless, for, as McAndrew later learned, "Miguel Covarrubias had wired the Museum that Dick must be recalled at once; Miguel said he could not be responsible for his life."

The exhibition when it arrived filled the entire Museum. More than 5,000 pieces were shipped to the Museum from Mexico, and in addition more than 100 objects were borrowed for the show from the New York Museum of Natural History. The Mexican treasures were packed in three freight cars and guarded by Mexican soldiers to the Texas border. From there two Texas cowboys rode the roof of the train all the way to New York, a gesture which suggests the publicity shenanigans of Sarah Newmeyer. McAndrew was in charge of installing the exhibition, which consisted not only of pre-Columbian sculpture but of colonial paintings and sculpture, folk art, and work by current artists. The catalogue was printed in both English and Spanish (partly paid for by the Mexican government and partly by the Museum); Monroe Wheeler went to Mexico to supervise its production.

"It was the last time the entire Museum was devoted to a single

show," McAndrew says. "We even used the garden as a Mexican market and put a lot of the folk art there." Installing it was, moreover, one of the last examples of the carnival kind of morale that made the early days of the Museum so gratifying to those who worked there.

"The Museum was still running on morale rather than on system," McAndrew says. "The morale was terrific. George Valliant of the Museum of Natural History helped us and he would work all night, and there wasn't a girl in the place who wouldn't have cut off her left arm for him. He'd zip them off to the St. Regis [Hotel] for a drink and a sandwich and zip them back. In those days the young people would say, 'We'll sweep the floors for nothing because we want to work in this wonderful, wonderful place,' and we'd have to turn them down right and left. Most of my department came in as volunteers. We were the social center because we were right where you got off the elevator, and when things got too bad for Alfred he used to come in and warm himself."

Five months after he had left for Washington, Rockefeller came to the conclusion that he could not be both Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and President of the Museum, so he resigned the latter job. At about the same time he established "The Inter-American Fund" for the purchase of works of art in Latin American countries. Barr and Edgar Kaufmann went off together to Cuba and Mexico, and Lincoln Kirstein roamed the capitals of South America. In all, they bought fifty-eight paintings and sculptures for the Museum's collections. John Hay Whitney was elected by the board to replace Rockefeller. Whitney, who was then thirty-six, had been a trustee for a decade and his principal interest, as we have seen, was the Film Library. "I shall not diminish my interest in the Film Library," his published statement said, "but hope to participate increasingly in all the Museum's other activities." He was not President for long. In May 1942 he was commissioned a colonel in the Air Force (he wound up in the Office of Strategic Services, General Donovan's intelligence agency) and Stephen Clark assumed the job of President of the Museum as well as that of Chairman of the Board.

Clark's right-hand man was John ("Dick") Abbott, who had been elevated to the position of Executive Director when Mabry was dismissed, and his career was a futile one and not long-lived in (or out of) the Museum. Goodyear, it is said, "took an instant dislike to him," and so it was not until after Goodyear had turned the presidency of the Museum over to Nelson Rockefeller and Mabry had been dismissed that Abbott came into his own. Because of his experience as a broker

in Wall Street he was regarded as a "money man" and a practical operator, and so he was named the Executive Director, whose function was to keep the Museum's daily operations running smoothly and its purse plump. It was he who was also supposed to be the calm center in a storm of temperaments, and as Clark liked him and trusted him and looked upon him, it is repeatedly said, "as a sort of son," his influence in the Museum was exceedingly important for a time—a time, indeed, of troubles. Henry Allen Moe, the director of the Guggenheim Foundation, who became a trustee of the Museum at the behest of his good friend Clark (and has been an important figure in the Museum's councils for many years), remembers Abbott as "a most useful fellow," and says, "He was a good enough administrator, and he was so sensitive to the winds of change that he was a good listening device for all the board members."

It is likely that it was because he was known to the staff as a "listening device" that he was so heartily disliked and distrusted by so many of them. "He treated the staff terribly," one says, and another: "I used to lie awake nights worrying about him. He was the menace of the Museum. Am I the only one who thought of him as a Hitler? He was the very opposite of Monroe [Wheeler]. You always felt this very scheming thing going on. You never knew what he was up to, and he had a habit of insisting that you write a memorandum to him, and he would never answer a single memorandum except by telephone, and then if you would quote him, he'd say he never said that. It suited his purposes, and he never put anything in writing, so you couldn't prove it. It was a very slippery period indeed." These statements were made by two of the Museum's most devoted and efficient staff members, an associate curator and the director of a department, Dorothy Miller and Elodie Courter. Eliza Parkinson recalls Abbott as not so much devious as dull. "Abbott just wasn't very bright," she says, "and you had to be bright in that company." Jimmy Ernst, who saw him with the eye of a perceptive office boy, says, "I thought he was very slick, and there was something aggressive about him born out of a measure of ignorance. Iris was the intellect in that thing."

Iris Barry (Mrs. Abbott) was not only the intellect of the family, she was also the one their colleagues enjoyed and respected. "Everyone liked Iris and didn't like Dick," Allen Porter said, and George Amberg, who was willing to give Abbott his due as an administrator, said, "He was no match for Iris, I dare say. Nobody was."

Abbott's importance in the history of the Museum is slight except as a cat's-paw for wiser and better-intentioned persons than himself.