GOOD OLD MODERN

An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art

by RUSSELL LYNES

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about the same time Soby acquired a part (49 percent) interest in Julien Levy's gallery, but stayed in the background. Levy was the only dealer in New York handling the Surrealists then; indeed, as Soby says, "he was as close to being an official surrealist himself as one could come without signing one of André Breton's guidelines to the surrealist faith." His association with Levy was Soby's only commercial participation in the art world, and he sold his interest back to Levy when he became a member of the Advisory Committee of the Museum in the late 1930s.

Soby was a good choice to take on the Armed Services Program; he was energetic and well organized. He and Barr had become good friends and greatly admired each other's qualities and opinions. Soby, moreover, had a talent for working with people younger than himself; his manner was easy and friendly, he put on no airs and graces, and he had the gift of humor. He was, he says, glad to find something "an aging art critic" could do for the war effort.

The program that evolved was partly therapy, partly exhibitions, partly morale-sustaining, and partly making the Museum's facilities and talents available to Nelson Rockefeller and his Office of Inter-American Affairs. Soby worked with Army Special Services to get art materials into camps for the use of men in uniform. He arranged for the use of the Museum's garden for parties for soldiers and sailors. (At one of them, he writes, "I remember that in the middle of one of her most famous songs Miss [Gracie] Fields stopped abruptly, cast a baleful look at the life-size nude bronze of St. John the Baptist, and shouted out, 'Such a brash young man.' She then went on with her song.") He managed to get together an exhibition on the uses of *The Arts in Therapy* which was praised by the Surgeons General of the Army and the Navy, and to set up a national competition for new designs and objects to be used in occupational therapy.

The Museum held a long series of exhibitions that related to the war effort in a considerable variety of ways. There were shows of *Wartime Housing*, of *U.S. Army Illustrators*, of *Anti-hoarding Pictures by New York School Children*. A very ambitious photographic exhibition called *Road to Victory* was selected by Edward Steichen, then a lieutenant commander in the Navy, and mounted by the ex-Bauhaus designer Herbert Bayer, with a text by Steichen's brother-in-law, the poet Carl Sandburg. Everyone, it appears, was impressed. Jewell in the *New York Times* called it "the season's most moving experience." Carlyle Burrows in the New York *Herald Tribune* said it was "a show of inspiring purposes . . . a declaration of power and an affirmation

of our will to win the war. . . . At every stage in a spectacular tour of the second floor galleries there is a dramatic spot with a compelling message." And even the *Daily Worker* was impressed and reported, "It is the most sensational exhibit of photographs that ever was shown in these parts. What a country to fight for!"

Besides the exhibitions having to do with the war, there was also business as usual at the Museum, and the public seemed to appreciate it. Briefly after Pearl Harbor, attendance at the Museum dropped off, but within a month it had climbed beyond the levels it had sustained before the war. Men in uniform were admitted to the galleries and to the film showings without charge, and many found refuge there. In August 1944 Soby and Victor d'Amico, who was in charge of the Museum's Education Department, organized an art center for veterans, a project in which Abby Rockefeller had a particular interest. "Men who have served in the Army, Navy, Marines and Merchant Marine," the announcement said, "are invited to sketch, paint, or model under the guidance of skilled artists and craftsmen." D'Amico says: "I asked one fellow why he had taken up art and he said, 'Well, I just came back from destroying everything. I made up my mind that if I ever got out of the army and out of the war I was never going to destroy another thing in my life, and I decided that art was the thing that I would do." Another man said to d'Amico, "Art is like a good night's sleep. You come away refreshed and at peace." The program was such a success that it lasted for four years.

In the garden of the Museum at the end toward Fifth Avenue a Garden Canteen was installed, with "garden chairs and tables under umbrellas," with a cement dance floor and ping-pong tables. There, under the aegis of the Salvation Army, young ladies from the Junior League sold sandwiches, doughnuts, and coffee "at cost" to servicemen and their friends (the "public" was not admitted).

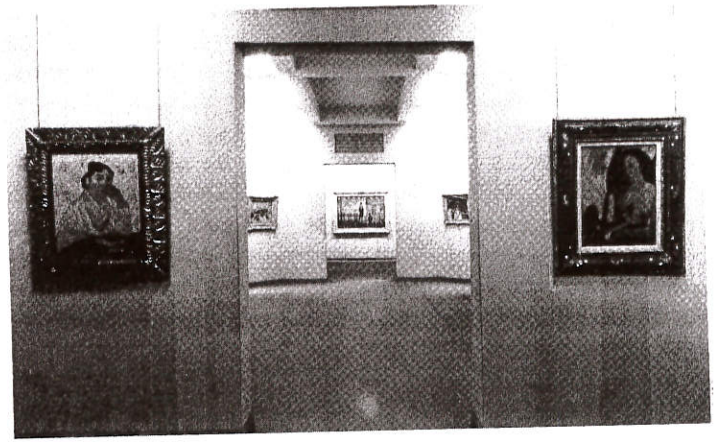
In a sense the Museum was a minor war industry, and, like other such enterprises, entered into contracts with the procurement bureaus of the federal government. Its product was cultural, to be sure. It executed thirty-eight contracts with the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, the Library of Congress, the Office of War Information, "and other agencies" before the war was over, and the contracts added up to $1,590,234. It put together nineteen exhibitions of contemporary American painting which Nelson Rockefeller's office shipped around Latin America; it conducted an industrial-design competition; it adapted documentary films to be shown in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries. It ran a hemisphere poster competition,

analyzed enemy propaganda films, and put together architecture and photography exhibitions for London, Cairo, Stockholm, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and so on and on. Obviously, Rockefeller was its biggest customer, and Monroe Wheeler from the Museum worked in Washington as a part-time consultant to the Coordinator's office during much of the war.

The six years between the opening of the Museum's new home on 53rd Street and the collapse of the German Army in 1945 were in a great many respects the most turbulent of the Museum's history. If there was a single stabilizing element in these years of unrest, it was the war itself. It was the one thing that the staff and the trustees seemed to agree on. There was no question that the Museum had a role to play in its own special corner of the war effort. There was also no question that a good many of the staff had to play roles closer to where the action took place. Jock Whitney, as we have seen, left for the Air Force. Beaumont Newhall had joined the Navy, and Allen Porter was in the Army; they were both members of the dedicated central corps of the Museum's staff. Elliot Noyes, who had come in as Director of the Department of Industrial Design after McAndrew left, was in the Pentagon designing gliders. Paul Magriel, who briefly was the Curator of the Dance Archives, a department set up at the behest and by the generosity of Lincoln Kirstein, had joined the Army.

There had been a great many more exhibitions in the Museum related in one way or another to the war than I have mentioned here. There was, moreover, a program of musical events which started in 1940 with a *Festival of Brazilian Music* held in the basement auditorium at the same time that the paintings of the Brazilian artist Portinari were hanging on the walls upstairs. By April 1941 a Music Committee had been organized and Carleton Sprague Smith was its chairman. With Louise Crane, the daughter of Mrs. Murray Crane of the trustees, as its sponsor, the committee presented a series of "coffee concerts"—jazz, *Four Saints in Three Acts* performed by the original cast as an oratorio, several evenings of Latin American music, and "concert swing"—and, as Miss Crane says, "They were as successful as the capacity of the auditorium allowed." In February 1943 the committee presented "one of the earliest public performances by John Cage of his prepared piano," and the following month Virgil Thomson, then the music critic of the New York *Herald Tribune*, started a series of five *Serenade Concerts*, the proceeds from which went to the Mu-

"The Adamantine Ladies" (left to right), *Mrs. John D. (Abby) Rockefeller, Jr., Miss Lizzie P. Bliss, and Mrs. Cornelius J. (Mary) Sullivan, conspired in May 1929 to found a museum for their "outrageous" modern art.*



The Modern's first exhibition was paintings by van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Seurat in galleries on the twelfth floor of the Hecksher Building.