



# GOOD OLD MODERN

An Intimate Portrait of  
the Museum of Modern Art



by RUSSELL LYNES



autographed copies of two children's books of his own about Mexico, *The Hole in the Wall* and *Mexicana: A Book of Pictures*. By the time he finished his trip he had seen more of the United States than most Americans, had been courted by many eager mothers who thought it would be nice to marry a daughter to an Austrian count, and had been introduced to the seductive extravagance of Hollywood in its palmy days.

It was in 1934 that he took the part-time teaching job at Sarah Lawrence College and at the same time the supervision of the *Art in America* radio program. By then he was to all intents and purposes, if not yet officially, a citizen of the United States, and in 1937 he became a half-time employee of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the Department of Justice. He had met the Commissioner, John Collier, in Mexico. Collier had been impressed by his knowledge of the Indian arts and with his skill in encouraging them without interfering in their native qualities, and d'Harnoncourt was appointed assistant general manager of a newly organized Indian Arts and Crafts Board. Three years later he was the manager. "One of our objects," he told Geoffrey Hellman, "was to help North American Indians obtain some economic independence through their native crafts. They now earn a great deal that way."

d'Harnoncourt became legally a citizen in 1939, and that same year he put together a large American Indian exhibition at the San Francisco World's Fair. Out of it grew an even more impressive show for the Museum of Modern Art. It was partly paid for by government agencies, and it was d'Harnoncourt's first official act for the Museum. Two months before the show was to be installed he presented to the trustees scale models of three floors of the Museum with each object to be shown in its place. d'Harnoncourt liked to work in this way, and as long as he did installations for the Museum, which was for many years, he always organized them completely in scale drawings, with everything where it would be, its lighting precisely conceived, the backgrounds painted in their final colors. First he drew each object which he had selected individually, then he drew them together in groups, so that he could be certain of their relationships in scale and in context. When he had these juxtapositions determined to his satisfaction, he worked on a floor plan, "providing open vistas between one section and another," as he told Hellman, "wherever there was a close relationship between their contents, and introducing closed units only where unique local styles had developed." He chose the colors against which sculptures or handicrafts or other objects were to be shown "as

symbolic aids," to approximate the light and backgrounds where they were made—the green of the jungle, the white light of the full sun, the red of rocks and tan of desert.

The *Indian Arts of the United States* exhibition made an immediate reputation for d'Harnoncourt in New York as a master of installation. He had displayed more than 1,000 objects with a kind of dramatic lighting that is now not uncommon but was then a revelation not just of his technique but primarily of the quality of the objects. He put up a canvas mural twelve by sixty feet and hung it in a curve from wall to wall; it was a full-scale replica of ancient animal and figure drawings from the canyon walls of Utah. On the sidewalk in front of the Museum he installed a totem pole which could be easily seen from Fifth Avenue, and which must have annoyed the Fifth Avenue Association as much as the Calder mobile had nearly a decade before. There were objects of pottery, of weaving, of basketry, dolls, ceremonial figures, costumes, masks, implements of the household and of the chase. There were Indians in the Museum making sand paintings on the floor, and they would quit when anyone tried to photograph them because, they insisted, their art was of itself a mysterious force "capable of harm when not controlled."

It was not the dramatic effect that d'Harnoncourt was interested in; it was in focusing the visitor's eye on the objects in such a manner that they could be made new and newly visible and be comprehended. "Installation is a very complicated and exciting subject, and it requires humility," he said. "Who comes first, the installer or the guy who's being installed? I never over-emphasize dramatic settings. A museum director shouldn't add to a work of art; he must *not* prostitute the whole thing and finally make a peepshow of it." The effect of d'Harnoncourt's installations has been far-reaching. It has also been abused. Some years after he put on the Indian show he was at a conference of art educators at the Museum's People's Art Center, and he took out after "museum directors who attempt to improve on the beauty of a work of art by an over-ambitious exhibition of it." According to the *New York Times*, "As an example he told of an exhibit of primitive ivory figures. The figures were set in a glass case and were played upon by shifting blue and green lights, causing a grotesque effect. 'If some museum directors like to do that sort of thing,' Mr. d'Harnoncourt said, 'let them use eggs, not works of art.'"

It had taken d'Harnoncourt two years to assemble the exhibition of Indian arts for the Museum and to prepare with Frederic H. Douglas a comprehensive catalogue with many illustrations which is at once a



*d'Harnoncourt*  
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guide to the show and a textbook of its subject. "A representative picture of Indian art in the United States," he called it. Nelson Rockefeller was impressed by the success of the show as he had been earlier impressed by the character of the man, and in 1943 he invited d'Harnoncourt to join the staff of the Inter-American Affairs office as head of his art section. D'Harnoncourt went there on loan from the Department of the Interior, and from then on his career was closely tied to a series of Rockefeller's and to what they regarded as "Mother's Museum."

D'Harnoncourt became officially attached to the Museum staff in 1944 with the curious title of Vice-President in Charge of Foreign Activities and Director of the Department of Manual Industries. He arrived at the fifth-floor offices in 53rd Street at a moment when Barr was in limbo and the staff was in the doldrums. He knew Monroe Wheeler well by then; they had worked together on projects for the Coordinator's office, which, as we have noted, had many contracts with the Museum for exhibitions and films and publications. He also knew Barr well, and had a profound admiration for him which was coupled with a genuine affection. There seems little doubt that Rockefeller, without much difficulty, persuaded Stephen Clark to take d'Harnoncourt onto the Museum's staff with every intention of seeing to it that after a period of apprenticeship he would become the Museum's Director. "Nelson decided very early in his friendship with René," Wheeler said, "that he wanted to make him Director of the Museum, but René was not a modern-art man." One of the trustees said, "It was very cleverly done. Nelson got him in just to be around and get a sense of the place and so that the staff would get to know him."

There was most certainly nothing naïve about d'Harnoncourt, and he must have been fully aware of Rockefeller's plans for him, though a member of the curatorial staff has said, "I remember when René first came I had lunch with him and he said, 'You know, I don't want anyone to think that I'm trying to be Director of the Museum. I'm not an administrator in any sense. It's just not my sort of work.' And I'm sure he meant it."

For several years after Barr was fired the Museum was ostensibly managed by a committee of trustees, with the various heads of departments reporting each to a designated member of the board. It was neither an orderly nor a successful manner of keeping the ambitions and temperaments of the staff in balance, and in 1946 the management of the Museum was centered in what was called the Coordination Committee, of which d'Harnoncourt was named chairman by Rockefeller,

who resumed the presidency of the board that year. The committee was made up of d'Harnoncourt, Wheeler, Barr, Abbott, and Lone Ulrich, who had succeeded Frances Hawkins as Secretary of the Museum. "We met every Wednesday morning," Wheeler recalled, "and all policy was discussed there. René was chairman (I think I must have been vice-chairman; I remember presiding at some meetings), and after a few years of this he was in control anyway, and he'd proved himself sympathetic to every side—everything we wanted to do—and it was that committee at my instigation that recommended to the trustees that he become Director. Of course it was long in Nelson's mind."

The year after the Coordination Committee was organized James Johnson Sweeney became the head of the Department of Painting and Sculpture. He took over from Soby who, when his friend Barr was fired, had volunteered to hold the reins in that department until someone else could be found. Sweeney recalls hearing the director of a European museum ask Marian Willard, chairman of the Advisory Committee, who was showing him around, who was the director of her Museum. "There are seven directors," she replied.

She scarcely exaggerated. During the committee-managed interregnum which lasted from the time Barr was fired until 1950 when d'Harnoncourt was appointed Director of the Museum, no individual was officially in charge, and though many of the staff looked to d'Harnoncourt as the guiding hand, the heads of departments were, not surprisingly, autonomous or, in any case, thought that they should be. The case of James Johnson Sweeney throws some light as well on the trustees' attitude toward "their" staff.

In the *Bulletin* published in January 1945 the Museum officially announced the appointment of Sweeney, "well-known writer and lecturer on modern art," as "Director of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture." It noted that Sweeney had "long been associated with the Museum as a member of its Advisory Committee, and has directed and written the catalog for several exhibitions, *African Negro Sculpture* [1935], *Joan Miró* [1941], and *Alexander Calder Sculpture and Constructions* [1943]." Obviously to reassure Sweeney that he was to be his own boss and make the final decisions about what he exhibited and what the Museum purchased at his behest, the announcement specifically stated that "As director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture he will be responsible for the Museum's acquisitions in those fields as well as in the graphic arts. In a reorganization of the Department . . . there has been a considerable revision of duties, making the department head in the future fully responsible for



fact that the staff had contributed much [sic] to the development of policy and program, it was important to continue such a relationship." It was also decided that no members of the staff might serve on the Executive Committee but they might attend meetings if they were invited; they had, however, no right to a vote. This was decided because, it was said, "Nelson wanted one place to discuss matters without staff present."

Sweeney might have put up with being excluded from the board (though there are those who say he resigned because of it), but when the Coordination Committee was quite obviously organized to exclude him, he gave his resignation to Rockefeller. His decision in all probability made life easier for the trustees of the Museum; he was an "inconvenient" Director—a man, in other words, whose principles took precedence over his trustees' convenience. It was not in his nature to play the game of diplomacy at which d'Harnoncourt and Wheeler were so adept and effective, and if his resignation served the Museum's trustees, it was taken in ill part by much of the art community and especially by a distinguished group of artists who protested politely but firmly in a letter to the *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> The letter said, in part:

The role of the Museum of Modern Art, as leader in public education in modern art, has had in Mr. Sweeney one who is foremost in its interpretation. In the activities of the museum which have specific reference to contemporary painting and sculpture, we feel that Mr. Sweeney's abilities to give meaningful direction are rare. The absence of his knowledge and vision would be a source of great regret to us, and to many others, artists and laymen alike.

Sweeney wrote a measured reply to the *Times* explaining the reasons for his resignation in some detail, and pointed out that when the Coordination Committee was organized, one member of it (d'Harnoncourt) was designated Director of Curatorial Departments, which, he said, "abolished, all save in name and salary," the position he occupied.

The Catholic magazine *America*, whose art column was written by Barry Byrne, praised Sweeney for his stand and for his not being, as it said, one of "the courtier type of persons, adept at the shades of deference to be paid to people of varying importance, financial and

<sup>1</sup> The letter was signed by Stuart Davis, Romare Beardon, Peter Blume, Byron Browne, Paul Burlin, Alexander Calder, Russell Cowles, Ralston Crawford, Arthur Dove, Lyonel Feininger, Louis Guglielmi, William Hayter, Karl Knaths, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Jacob Lawrence, Le Corbusier, Julian Levi, Jack Levine, Loren MacIver, John Marin, Robert Motherwell, Georgia O'Keeffe, Armande Ozenfant, Jackson Pollock, I. Rice Pereira, Abe Ratner, Kurt Seligmann, and Niles Spencer.

social, as these might have weight in the control of a particular museum." Sweeney, however, was by no means lost to the New York art world, nor was his influence diminished, though it was interrupted. In 1952 he became the director of the Guggenheim Museum, a position in many respects better suited to his tastes, at least until he found himself embattled against the temper and temperament of Frank Lloyd Wright, who accepted the job of designing the Guggenheim's new building in spite of his frank distaste for painting and sculpture and, indeed, for any art but his own.

The departure of James Johnson Sweeney may have reduced some tensions at the Museum, but life under the Coordination Committee cannot be said to have been peaceful. The calm with which d'Harnoncourt seemed to endow the surface of the troubled waters was real enough in many respects, but there was rolling beneath which had a way of exploding through at intervals. James Thrall Soby, by then a trustee, took over the chairmanship of the Painting and Sculpture Committee, though not as the department's Staff Director, a job for the time being left vacant. He and Barr got along famously, enjoyed each other's humor (and they both had it), respected each other's taste, and saw eye to eye far more often than not. Soby and d'Harnoncourt liked and admired each other, and the problem of status which had inked Sweeney was resolved by Soby's service on the board. A new member joined the staff of the Museum when Elodie Courter decided not to come back after producing a son. Porter McCray, who had worked with d'Harnoncourt and Rockefeller in the Coordinator's Office and later as director of the Inter-American Office of the National Gallery in Washington, took over as Director of Circulating Exhibitions. McCray had been trained as an architect at Yale (where he had been instrumental in starting a modern-art society), and he came into the Rockefeller orbit through Rockefeller's architect, Wallace Harrison, who had known McCray at Yale and asked him to join the Coordinator's office.

The Architecture Department was in a state, as usual, of transition. After McAndrew left and Philip Johnson was in the Army, the department was run during the war by Elizabeth Mock who had been an assistant to McAndrew. She had been a Frank Lloyd Wright disciple at Taliesin and was then the wife of a Swiss architect, Rudolf Mock. She edited a small book in 1944 called *Built in U.S.A.* which was, according to a Museum *Bulletin*, "the most successful book on

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