



GOOD OLD MODERN

An Intimate Portrait of
the Museum of Modern Art



by RUSSELL LYNES

mittee which ran the Museum after Barr was fired as Director), had found it advisable to shift the emphasis of the department away from shows to send to other museums and concentrate primarily on shows for educational institutions and especially colleges. Museums which in the 1930s were virgin territory ripe for the missionary shows of modern art from the Museum became after the war collectors and borrowers of such works on their own. There is no question that the Museum's circulating shows had, as William M. Milliken, the director of the Cleveland Museum, said, made an "extraordinary impression" and in doing so had changed the attitudes of institutions everywhere in the country toward what the Museum defined as "modern" and Boston boorishly (from the Modern's point of view) called "contemporary." Surely it had affected a change in the teaching of art history in colleges and the programs of college museums. In 1939 the Rockefeller Foundation had given the Museum a grant to "expand its programs of exhibitions especially prepared for smaller institutions with limited funds," and shows that could be installed in school classrooms, corridors, or even gymnasiums were being shipped out for fees as little as \$10 to \$30. During the war the Museum, as we have noted, worked as much for Nelson Rockefeller as for anyone else, and under contract to the office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs it helped to prepare all sorts of materials of and about the arts for export to Latin America.

The end of the war in Europe did not conclude Rockefeller's official concern with Latin America or with the export of American art. In 1944 he became an Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, a position he occupied for only a year. He was back in New York in 1946 and once again President of the Museum, a job he retained until 1953. During part of this time he also served as Chairman of the International Development and Advisory Board of the Truman program known as "Point Four" for economic assistance to "underdeveloped areas" throughout the world. In 1953 he became Under Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, but before he left New York for this rather temporary job (he resigned in 1954) he had persuaded (if that is the word) the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to make a five-year grant to the Museum for what was formally called the International Circulating Exhibitions Program. The idea behind such a program was to let it be known especially in Europe that America was not the cultural backwater that the Russians during that tense period called "the cold war" were trying to demonstrate that it was. The American State Department's attempts to export our

arts for exhibition had been largely aborted by dissident Congressmen, as we have noted, who could not abide any art more sophisticated than *Saturday Evening Post* covers.

It was with this ukase from the trustees and financial encouragement from the Fund that McCray, who had taken a year's leave from the Museum in 1951 to work in Paris for the exhibition section of the Marshall Plan, shifted the emphasis in traveling exhibitions from domestic to primarily foreign circulation. The Museum now had, and was delighted to have, the whole world (or at least the world outside the Iron Curtain) in which to proselytize—though this time the exportable religion was home-grown rather than what had been in the past its primary message, the importable faith from Europe. In the first year of the International Program, McCray shipped out twenty-five exhibitions, twenty-two of which represented "various aspects of modern American art." The other three were "devoted to the arts of other countries," and were circulated in the United States. Off to Europe, to Canada, to Latin America, and, indeed, to Japan went shows of *Modern American Painters and Sculptors*, of *The Skyscraper*, of post-war architecture, prints, photographs, and in came *The Modern Movement in Italy: Architecture and Design* and *The Architecture of Japan*. It was only a beginning. The Museum also bought the United States pavilion at the Venice Biennale from the Grand Central Art Galleries, which had been built in 1929 for its own shows when they were an artist's cooperative gallery. After the war the pavilion was made available to the Museum, and the shows sent there were selected by Barr and Sweeney and Dorothy Miller. The federal government (which meant the State Department) was not interested in taking it over, and was unmoved by the fact that it was the only pavilion at the Biennale that was not owned by its nation's government. The internationally minded staff and trustees of the Museum were shocked that America should not be represented at this most prestigious, if intensely political, international art show where all the European countries and Russia were blowing their cultural horns while America, in a manner of speaking, stayed home and sucked its thumb. At the moment it seemed essential that the United States be represented at the Biennale by its most sophisticated art institution, and there was no doubt in anyone's mind at the Museum what that was. From 1954 to 1962, without government help, the Museum made itself responsible for exhibitions by distinguished American artists at Venice.

The pavilion was, the Museum has long since discovered, no bargain. It became an expense that the Museum was unable or unwilling to bear,

1954-1962

1954-1962

and though it still owns it, the exhibitions put on there in recent years have been the doing of the National Collection of Fine Arts, one of the many arms of the Smithsonian Institution.

In 1956 the International Program adopted a new face, a new financial structure, a new entity, and a new name. Eliza Parkinson, by that time a trustee for many years, had the idea that the Museum ought to be able to get support for the International Program in much the same way that the Metropolitan Opera got patronage through its National Council. Rockefeller and René d'Harnoncourt worked out a plan with two prongs to it, and asked Blanchette to run it. The first was that the International Program of the Museum should be supported not just by the Museum, not just by New Yorkers, not just by foundations, but that it should be supported by men and women interested in the arts all over America—not many of them, mind you, but a relative few who could afford to put up \$1,000 a year to be members of the council. They were to be carefully chosen and individually solicited. This was to be no mass charity; into it was built (though it was not called that) a basic snob appeal which combined exclusivity with cultural beneficence, one of the aspects of art patronage that is characteristic of our age—but no more of ours than of any other age. Added to this, however, was the ingredient of patriotism: if the federal government won't support a program to tell the world about our arts, it is our duty as concerned citizens to do so. Those who were approached were collectors, men and women known to be concerned with their local art institutions, men and women who fall under that somewhat loose but useful appellation "prominent citizens," who like to be identified with causes, and who get a certain titillating sense of *noblesse oblige* from "lending" their names and appearing at meetings and parties given for their benefit.

Blanchette Rockefeller was the first president of the International Council, and she and Eliza Parkinson, who succeeded her after the first couple of years, spent an inordinate amount of time writing letters to likely candidates for membership, talking with those who came to New York, and convincing museum directors in other cities that the council was not trying to steal their patrons. It merely wanted to involve them in a program to make the American arts known to the capitals (and who knew? perhaps the provinces) of the world. In time the museum directors enthusiastically, it seems, came around. In the first year there were seven members. Now there are approximately 145 members in seventeen countries, producing an income for the International Council of nearly \$200,000.

The council is a separate corporation from the Museum, but no one

would suggest that it is an independent corporation. When the Rockefeller Brothers Fund grant for the International Program for five years was about to run out, a new agreement was reached between the fund, the Museum, and a new corporation called the International Council of Modern Art (there was subsequently a day-long hassle of the members about whether "art" should be changed to "of," and "of" prevailed). This agreement stipulated that the council should be set up as a membership corporation under the laws of New York State. (There are many such non-profit corporations in New York.) This corporation was to aim at a goal "ultimately" of \$160,000 in membership dues. The Museum was to provide the programs under supervision of the director of its International Program (namely, Porter McGray) and these were to be "reviewed and amended" by the council "as it sees fit," but "in keeping with existing MOMA standards." The Museum, moreover, would "undertake all necessary negotiations and arrangements to carry out the Council's plan." In other words, "of" more nearly defined the council's relations to the Museum than "art." The role assumed by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund was to be a diminishing one, starting with a contribution of \$125,000 the first year and decreasing each year so that by the fifth year (1961-62) it would contribute a final \$50,000, and from then on the council would be on its own, presumably with enough members to carry it.

The International Council was less than three years old when Burden left for Brussels and Blanchette Rockefeller took his place as President of the Museum. However, not only had marked successes been achieved by the council's exhibitions, most notably a show of *The New American Painting* which was shown in eight European countries in 1958-59, but there had been ructions in the palace.

The New American Painting, which might have been a rehearsal for the vast show of the New York School that the Metropolitan Museum put on twelve years later for its centennial, was assembled by Dorothy Miller, according to d'Harnoncourt, "at the request of European institutions for a show devoted specifically to Abstract Expressionism in America."² Something was known of these painters, mostly New Yorkers, in Europe, as they had been included in earlier exports of the International Program of the Museum and the appetite had been whetted for more. They were received with the full range of critical en-

² The artists included in the exhibition were William Bazioes, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, J. R. Rorhko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Jr. and Mark Tworkov.

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thusiasm and disgust, but with almost no indifference. A Milan critic said, "It is not now. It is not painting. It is not American." A critic in Rotterdam said, "No matter how subjective their work may be, it has a communicative power because they live under the spell of their time, which is also our time. . . ." The critic for *Le Figeo Littéraire* in Paris asked, "Why do they think they are painters? We would end up by being, I won't say convinced—for the only greatness here is in the size of the canvases—but disarmed if we did not deplore the terrible danger which the publicity given to such examples offers, as well as the imprudence of the combined national museums in offering official support all too generously to such contagious heresies." A reporter from the *Manchester Guardian* who saw the show at the Tate Gallery in London said, "I have never seen so many young gallery-goers sitting down in a silent daze." John Russell, the critic for the London *Sunday Times*, wrote in part, "However often we may have heard of the size, the assurance, the headlong heedless momentum which characterize them all, we are still bowled over by these qualities when we are, as it were, physically involved in them. For involved we are, as if by some vast upheaval, not of Nature, but of our notion of human potentialities."

The result was more than merely appraisal, favorable or unfavorable. It was, in some respects, like the reaction to the Armory Show of 1913. Whereas one London headline read, "This is not art—it's a joke in bad taste" (an almost unmistakable echo of Royal Cortissoz' outburst of forty-six years before: "This is not a movement and a principle. It is unadulterated cheek."), you will find today vast canvases by many of these artists hanging sedately on the walls of the Tate, part of its permanent collection. You will also find them in European private collections and in the stock of dealers in Paris and Milan and Rome. There is no question that early in its career the International Council had achieved its primary purpose—to make Europe, especially, aware of the vitality of American art. D'Hannocourt was moved to say in a reprinting of the catalogue which originally accompanied the exhibition, "For us, our reward is the pleasure of knowing that this exhibition and those before it have won for American art widespread recognition and acclaim abroad."

There was, however, trouble at home—unrest among the staff, and a feeling of uneasiness about the way in which the International Council was getting too big for its boots. The council was not the principal cause of discord. The Museum, although d'Hannocourt was the Director, was still being run by the Coordination Committee, or, if not

run, at least subjected to policies made by that group, which was, as it had long been, d'Hannocourt, Wheeler, Barr, and McCray. Discor-ent bubbled up into what was then called (and still is by those who remember it) "the revolt of the Young Turks." In 1939 Burden decided that to keep peace in the Museum family he should let the staff have a chance to blow off steam, to discuss their grievances against the Coordination Committee, and try to restore the kind of *esprit de corps* which, in spite of routine in-fighting, had sustained the Museum since it first opened. One should bear in mind that this was a considerably underpaid staff of very able young and youngish people and that the trustees were quite aware that "the help" was working for far less than it was worth. To put it in franker terms than the trustees would have put it, the staff was being bilked; instead of being rewarded for their loyalty, their long hours, their expertise, and their dedication with proper salaries, staff members were being parted on the head and given occasional *bonnes bouches*. Burden invited all of the Young Turks, Blanchette and David Rockefeller, and the members of the Coordination Committee to spend a long weekend at his summer place in Maine.

The Young Turks were led by Arthur Drexler, who was, as Eliza Parkinson put it, "terrifically a Young Turk then; by comparison he's almost square now." Standing behind him were Elizabeth Shaw, head of Public Information, Richard Griffith of the Film Library, Emily Woodruff Stone, in charge of Membership and "special events," and Steichen of Photography in spirit if not in fact. None of these departments was represented on the Coordination Committee, they felt strongly that they should have some say in Museum policy, and they had made petitions to the board to let their voices be heard. Mrs. Parkinson put it somewhat differently: "They felt they had to be in on all the decisions. They have to tell us [the trustees] everything. René always talked to everybody, but he always talked to them alone. There had been a lot of discontent. René dominated the Maine meeting, and he let them scream and yell." There were echoes here of the attitude of the trustees toward the Junior Advisory Committee which had resigned some years before in a body because the trustees wouldn't listen to it.

The focus of the principal attack was Porter McCray and the International Council. "I think they were awfully jealous," Mrs. Parkinson said, "because the International Council had become very important and it entailed a lot of travel and they all wanted to travel. He represented the Museum and there were all those parties that they'd hear about. But the fact was that he was setting up a little museum within