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THE IMPERIAL
ROCKEFELLER

A BIOGRAPHY OF

NELSON A.
ROCKEFELLER

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PS

Chapter XV

ART, THE FAITHFUL
MISTRESS

BOATERS SAILING PAST a coal wharf in Seal Harbor, Maine might well have been astonished to know what lay within that weather-beaten facade. Nelson Rockefeller had converted this unlikely structure on his summer place into a gallery for a half dozen Picasso tapestries and other art treasures. Nelson did not simply collect his art; he lived amid it. When we went over speeches in the living room of his Fifth Avenue apartment, a Matisse looked down on us from the fireplace at one end of the room, a Léger from the other end. On the floor was a rug woven for Nelson by the artisans of Aubusson. The lamp shining over the Governor's shoulder had been designed for him by Giacometti, and was entitled *Lady*. A lamp with a title.

I remember with what cautiousness one of our circle crushed out his cigarettes in an ashtray, in order not to upset a Nadelman figurine of a bull. Small chance. The tiny bull weighed fifteen pounds. We all recalled the luckless tax commissioner who in an earlier meeting had stepped on a cloisonné ashtray that he had set on the floor. The Governor's face had turned white, but he had said nothing. At our next gathering, the cloisonné ashtrays were gone, replaced by plain

glass. In this setting, the only one who looked genuinely at home was Nelson Rockefeller.

I watched Nelson function as art collector only once. The walls of the press office in the State Capitol in Albany were usually hung with Commerce Department posters depicting the joys of the Finger Lakes or the lure of the Adirondack Mountains. One January morning, they presented something fresh. Frank Litto, an Albany artist, had persuaded Bill Ekhof, an assistant press secretary, to allow him to hang his work in the press office. Litto's mixed-media creations fairly leaped from the walls. In the major work, *Funeral Caisson*, Litto had fashioned actual barn boards and links of chain into a stylized representation of the farm wagon and flag-draped coffin that had borne the slain Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., through the streets of Atlanta. *Funeral Caisson* was a huge work possessing the simple dignity and power of the moment it celebrated.

Just before noon, Rockefeller came swooping into the Capitol and passed through the press room, exchanging handshakes and repartee with the reporters on the way to his office. He stopped stock-still before the farm wagon. "What's this? Who did it?" His eyes blazed. Ekhof described Litto and his work.

"An unknown?" Rockefeller seemed to tremble in anticipation.

"I would say so," Ekhof conceded.

"Is it for sale?"

Ekhof said that he was sure the artist could be persuaded, all the while savoring Litto's good fortune.

"I've got a reception for the legislature over in the mansion in an hour. I want to have this hanging there by the time they arrive."

Ekhof raced to the phone and instructed the state's Office of General Services to get a truck over to the Capitol immediately. He then tracked down Litto and told the artist to put on a coat and tie and get over to the Governor's Mansion.

Rockefeller directed the placement of the heavy, unwieldy *Funeral Caisson*. "Let's put it here. No, there. No, farther to the right. Not that angle. Here, this way. Well, not *that* way." He settled on a location at the foot of the center staircase where Litto's work was the first thing to strike the visitor's eye on entering the mansion. When

Litro arrived, Rockefeller took him by the arm and steered him to a quiet corner. They talked animatedly. Then Nelson came over to Ekhof and winked. "He'll sell. See how much he wants. This is going to make the old place into a real people's mansion."

Litro was perhaps an unknown, but he knew the art world. "Look," he told Ekhof, "after Rockefeller buys something, its value automatically increases." He wanted \$10,000 for *Funeral Caisson*. Nelson agreed, but he knew this world too. After all, no dealer had been involved, and a dealer would have taken a third of Litro's price. The artist got a check from Room 5600 for \$6,666.66.

By the time Rockefeller left the Governor's mansion at the end of 1973, his interest in mixed-media folk art had evidently waned. He left the Litro work behind, a gift to the people of New York State.

Nelson's joy in art was genuine, his purest passion, his happiest refuge. His aesthetic was shaped initially by his mother, an early patron of abstract art. His father's taste was decorous and conventional. Junior never could understand those splorches and swatches on canvas that so excited his wife and son.

Where the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art is located today, there once stood the Manhattan town house in which young Nelson grew up. In the Rockefeller family, the MOMA was known as "Mother's museum," since it was Abby's wish and the family's money that created it. "Mother wanted to start MOMA," Nelson explained, "to cut down the time between creation and appreciation, so a Van Gogh didn't have to die in poverty before his work was appreciated. Also, the idea was to help bring some guidelines to the public in a period when the artist is free by his own standards to move in almost any direction."

Nelson was just home from his honeymoon when his mother had him named to the MOMA Junior Advisory Committee. At about the same time, he gave the first hint of a lifelong itch to wed art to profit. With a friend as his partner he formed Art, Inc., to sell hand-painted postcards for twenty-five cents each in the newly opened Rainbow Room atop the RCA building. At a more elevated level, Nelson involved himself deeply in the direction of the Museum of Modern Art, and in 1939, he became MOMA's president. The office was quasi-

dynastic, since subsequent incumbents included brother David and sister-in-law Blanchette, John III's wife. The New York City museum power structure, Nelson later admitted, "was where I learned my politics." He revealed in the world of well-bred Bohemians which the museum opened to him. The attraction of that world continued to elude his father. In 1950, after the museum had been in existence for more than twenty years, Junior finally asked Nelson to drop him from the MOMA mailing list. He just did not have the time for art that baffled him.

Nelson watched over MOMA like a nervous parent. In 1958, he received a call at Room 5600 that fire had broken out in the museum. He was around the corner and onto 54th Street with the first fire truck. He demanded a fireproof suit from the chief and dashed into the smoke-choked building. He was next seen, sweating and grinning, carrying out the imperiled paintings. It was, after all, Mother's museum.

The giants of the art world were not remote deities to Nelson Rockefeller. Rather, they were more like gifted subjects whom a young nobleman admires and patronizes. When his mother died, Nelson wanted a stained-glass window in the family chapel at Pocantico to honor her memory. He approached Henri Matisse to execute the window. The artist agreed to try, but later sent Rockefeller a letter saying that he had failed to find a satisfactory solution. The day after Nelson received the letter, Matisse died in France. "I was terribly upset," Nelson recalled. "He was very fond of me. And I had been very fond of him." Then Matisse seemed to reach from the grave to serve Nelson Rockefeller. A few days later, another letter arrived, written just before the artist's death. In it, Matisse said that he had finally worked out, on a wall of his studio, the solution to the window for Mrs. Rockefeller. There the scheme was found, and Matisse's posthumously completed design now illuminates a window in the Union Church in Pocantico.

Nelson Rockefeller could be spontaneously eloquent about art as with few other subjects. He told a group of art editors touring the Executive Mansion, "We are living in a mechanized society and people are looking for originality of expression. Aesthetics allow one to