Two Modern Collectors:

Susan Morse Hilles

Richard Brown Baker
cover: Red on Orange by Ellsworth Kelly,

American, b. 1923. Oil on canvas, 43 x 19 inches. Cat. No. 18

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A LOAN EXHIBITION  MAY 23—SEPTEMBER 1, 1963  YALE ART GALLERY
The Art Gallery is honored to present a liberal selection of paintings and sculpture from two collectors who have long been associated with Yale. Mrs. Hilles is the wife of Frederick W. Hilles, Bodman Professor of English Literature at the University, and Mr. Baker is a Yale graduate of the class of 1935.

Both collectors, as their statements here published explain, have devoted themselves mainly to the art of the past decade. Many of the artists included in the present exhibition have now achieved considerable reputations. Some, however, in 1954, when Mrs. Hilles and Mr. Baker began seriously to collect, were unknown or only beginning to become known. A mark of both these collectors, then, is their courage in exploring new modes of expression and their desire to encourage younger artists in a most concrete way—by purchase of their work. The success of this adventurous form of collecting is surely demonstrated by the present exhibition and I would hope that one result of the show, and the stimulation and excitement of the chase implicit in each collector’s statement, will lead others to make similar voyages of discovery.

We are grateful to Mrs. Hilles and Mr. Baker for their generous loans and for their willingness to examine and present for all to read the motives that led them to collect. Our gratitude goes also to the Hartford Atheneum for loans to the exhibition; and to Mr. Stanton L. Catlin who, assisted by Mrs. Wendy Scharf, has edited the catalogue and seen it through the press.

ANDREW CARNDUFF RITCHIE
DIRECTOR
My collection started at the Kraushaar Galleries in the mid-thirties with purchases of paintings by Schnakenberg and Charles Prendergast. Collecting came to an abrupt halt when I asked the price at Durand-Ruel of a small, rather undistinguished Degas. The price was thirty thousand dollars. At that period thirty thousand dollars appeared to be a fortune. It was incomprehensible to me that a painting could be so highly priced.

I followed art trends for the next twenty years by desultory reading and much looking at illustrations in the publications of The Museum of Modern Art. I saw exhibitions in New York infrequently. I had no knowledge of the genus “collector.” I thought paintings and sculpture had always been in museums. I had no doubt that the best paintings and sculpture went automatically to museums either by selection of jury or by gift from the artist.

During this period my husband and I chose and bought several paintings together, the work of friends and acquaintances. A new world opened up for me in 1954, when I was taken by a friend on a tour of galleries in New York. I saw
Seymour Lipton's beautiful show of sculpture. I found that I could purchase a small Lipton sculpture at a price that seemed reasonable to me. I thought my family would accept Sun Dial and I knew the sculpture was a success at home, mounted upon an old green golf trunk as pedestal, when my husband said, "It's lovely." The next day I telephoned Betty Parsons to ask if I might purchase Lipton's bronze Jungle Bloom, a significant and dynamic piece of sculpture now in the collection of the Yale Art Gallery.

In late fall 1954 and early 1955 I purchased paintings by Heliker, Albers and Marca-Relli, chosen instinctively, by feeling rather than thinking. I realized then that I must have some better formula for choosing paintings and sculpture. A purely emotional reaction was not a sufficient reason for buying a work of art.

I thought back to 1925–1929 when I attended art schools, realizing how much my teachers had taught me about design and color in painting. These two qualities plus a third, inner rhythm, seemed essential to me. Design is evident in how shapes are disposed upon a circumscribed ground. Color is a person's own optical view or preference. Inner rhythm or soul sets up an emotional response in the viewer.

Two resolutions made thirty years apart have greatly influenced the contents of my collection. I decided to be selective about museum viewing when I was in Munich in 1924. My aim was to spend more time looking at works of art which had significance for me. To accomplish this aim, I had to train myself to glance at and quickly pass by paintings or sculpture which I judged to be of lesser importance. The discipline involved in spending more time in viewing good or great art proved to be a good education.

My recent resolve of 1955 was to buy the work of living artists. By this resolution I limit the field of collecting, keeping myself free from striving for a representative collection. I also help the artist to earn his living. I enjoy myself playing my own hunches about buying. While an artist is alive, it is impossible to make a final evaluation of his work. Therefore his prices may or may not be reasonable and his work may or may not have staying power for the future. I always hope and think I've bought a "winner."

SUSAN MORSE HILLES
12. Alberto Giacometti, Swiss, b. 1901. Standing Figure. 1956. Bronze, 28½ in. h.
above  30. Hedda Sterne, American, b. Roumania 1916. New York, No. 1–1957. Oil on canvas, \(53\frac{3}{4} \times 37\frac{1}{8}\) in. Lent by the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Gift of Mrs. Susan Morse Hilles.

opposite page

11. Helen Frankenthaler, American, b. 1928. Sea Picture with Black. 1959. Oil on canvas, \(84\frac{1}{2} \times 57\) in. Lent by the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Gift of Mrs. Susan Morse Hilles

right  2. Kenneth Armitage, British, b. 1916. Two Seated Figures. 1957. Bronze, 12½ h. x 16¾ w. x 12 d. in.
24. Kenzo Okada, Japanese, b. 1902. Decision. 1956. Oil on canvas, 67\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 79\(\frac{3}{4}\) in.


opposite page


6. Alexander Calder, American, b. 1898. Muticolore. 1962. Stabile of cut, welded and painted steel, 59 h. x 80 l. x 40 d. in.
above  


opposite page


opposite page


25. Walter Plate, American, b. 1925. Interior No. II. 1958. Oil on composition board, 48 x 60 in.

opposite page

29. Theodoros Stamos, American, b. 1922. Delphi. 1959. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in. Lent by the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Gift of Mrs. Susan Morse Hilles

opposite page


2. Two Seated Figures. 1957. Bronze, 12½ h. x 16¾ w. x 12 d. in. Ill. p. 10.


ERNST, JIMMY. Born Bruhl, Germany, 1920. Studied at several European Craft Schools and served an apprenticeship in printing and typography. First one-man show, Norlyst Gallery, 1941. Group exhibitions include Venice Biennale, 1956;


12. **Standing Figure.** 1956. Bronze, 28½ in. h. *Ill. p. 7.*


15. **T 56/6.** 1956. Oil on canvas, 64 x 48 in. *Ill. p. 3r.*


18. Red on Orange. 1959. Oil on canvas, 43 x 19 in. Ill.: Cover.


Born a New Engander, I am suspicious of collecting—any kind. It breathes self-indulgence. Self-denial is our Puritan goal.

Yet in mid-twentieth century America, not to be a collector may be as sinful as to be one. After all, a collector is an individual who knows and keeps—who cares. By the millions exist non-collectors who can afford but are indifferent; whose demands are not their own but are evoked by advertisers or by customs; who desire rare gadgets, three cars, fine furs—a wealth of fashionable luxuries—without imagining idiosyncratic wants systematically met.

If we had such people only, most of the products society fabricates would be discarded once their novelty passed. In current civilization few artifacts remain practical, necessary or in vogue long. Who but a collector seeks a 1943 Cadillac?

We enjoy at present an economy of surpluses. Consider the fine arts. The daily output of sculptures, drawings, collages and oil paintings must gratify the purveyors of art materials. Only a minuscule fraction of it comes into being wanted. I speculate that not one in a thousand of our living self-styled artists enjoys a following that can be counted on to buy annually as much as one third of his output.

I do not contend that these works should be bought. Like anyone who specializes, I have diminished my capacity to take pleasure in what my experience suggests is bad or mediocre art. I prefer a bare wall to a bad picture.
Yet for the health and enrichment of our society people should go on trying their utmost to create art. As in 1763 and 1863, 1963 will see most of these efforts fail. Those that succeed count; they count very much. The individuals capable of creative power are important people. They merit an appreciative audience. On various levels they require support if their potential is to incubate.

A patron of artists I have not been. It would be beyond my means, and my strength of character as well. A patron disinterestedly underwrites artists—in my definition anyway—, preferably (but not inevitably) good ones. This requires generosity, unusual resources and a serene disregard for the importunities of self-seekers. I do not qualify.

My role has been quite selfishly to collect the works of living and usually little-known artists. I do it because of the joy it gives me. But being aware that greed and vanity father acquisitiveness, I ease my conscience with a rationalization: essentially my activity is a gathering in of unsought surplus.

Contemporary art is habitually surplus. Do not forget the output. I have long been the despair of my sensible friends because I have bought so many pictures. It stands to reason that I must have bought too many. But for every one I have bought I have looked at thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, rejecting, continuously rejecting, yet holding myself responsive to seizure by enthusiasm. I have been part of the interested audience.

Alas, that audience is small. Few are the aficiónados of art by unknowns. Fewer are the buyers. Artists seldom purchase the work of other artists. Sometimes I have wondered whether any but a handful of us cared enough to risk a nickel.

Then suddenly it is the other way around. An unknown catapults into fame; demand is strong; leaping prices declare that art can be among the most valued of all commodities. I have taken satisfaction in several of these windfall developments. 1955 was the year when I first began extensive buying, having from 1949 until then purchased haphazardly and moderately. About 1955 I began to focus on artists who had come to the fore since the end of World War II. As newcomers, their works were less expensive. It was also apparent that an artistic divide had occurred; new, vital forces were at work. In my purchases for 1955 figured Hofmann,
Mathieu, Motherwell, Nicholson, Santomaso, Werner and Winter. In December, from sheer enthusiasm and at somewhat greater cost, I purchased excellent paintings by Jackson Pollock and Jean Dubuffet. It cannot be said that either of these was then unknown, but their paintings could have been afforded at that time by several hundred thousand other New Yorkers who, like myself, could not afford them today. I state this record now as a boast, although I cannot be certain that a quarter century hence it will appear as one.

A controversial painting in this exhibition was acquired for a modest sum in November 1961 when its creator was, to the art world, unknown. For all I then knew, few people besides myself would ever wish to own a canvas by Roy Lichtenstein. Yet in a few months it became apparent that he was a leading practitioner of an approach to art counter-current to abstract-expressionism, a style he had tried and abandoned. The innovating aspects of pop art aroused the press. Today demand to possess Lichtenstein's work extends beyond America. The picture I bought, when I bought it, belonged in surplus; no prestige clung to it. In 1965 a picture by Lichtenstein is anything but surplus.

For a few American artists acquiring an international reputation is now a speedier process than it was for any in 1955. After Pollock's death in 1956 the outer world began to scrutinize New York as a seedbed for art. A consequence of the enlarging market for contemporary reputations is a rise in prices.

One of the fascinations of collecting is that its temptations and demands force ambivalence, inconsistency, deviousness—a hatful of horrid faults—upon the collector. Everyone will notice that I am hardly consistent when I now complain that some artists develop an eagerer buying public than is convenient. I allege that I am concerned mainly to gather in the good neglected works of unknowns. But I am not an altruist any more than I am a patron. I am a collector. My collection needs form; it is intended to present a wide-ranging, high quality view of contemporary art. To accomplish this it must include more than a single specimen of the most vital artists. Vaulting fame and concomitant prices make me pleased (sometimes) on the artist's behalf, but they often push an artist too quickly beyond my means. In 1956, when I bought Franz Kline's *Wanamaker Block*, I acquired one of my outstanding possessions—so majestically powerful a black and white
Kline that for several years I could not believe he had equalled it. So I neglected him. Then one day I realized that his prices had multiplied by six; next he was dead at 51.

Collectors are apt to agree: (a) that collecting is a disease and (b) that they are more unhappy over “big ones that got away” than over duds acquired. I brood sadly over a quantity of excellent works of art that I wanted but did not push myself into buying and over others that I did not then want but suspect today that I should have admired more than I did. Yet some of these may loom more desirably in retrospect than they merit.

A problem is to scrape off layers of extra-visual meaning that accrue with time to a work of art. As the prestige of its creator grows, one tends to examine one’s art more attentively, yet less and less on one’s own. All of us with even a smattering of art education, confronting Rembrandts and Renoirs, Gauguins and Van Goghs, have our vision overlaid by a consciousness of what others have expressed about these artists. Even in a contemporary collection such as mine, individual works soon acquire histories; the reputations of their creators alter. Certain acquisitions that I made only seven or eight years ago—Pollock, Dubuffet and Kline, for example—now awe me in a worldly, as well as a visual, sense.

Scrape away extra-visual factors—the artist’s prestige or personality, for example—and some people are bewildered. They should know that self-reliance and a good eye are the best tools for enjoying art. To learn how good one’s eye is, one must permit it to make decisions—on its own terms.

To feel a stirring enthusiasm, a recognition of the universal in the unknown, a conviction that one is confronting fresh, genuine art, when beholding the creation of a stranger who as yet lacks reputation, is an experience not often available. It is one to seek. When I have it I feel exalted; something has been added to me. The feeling is pure, ennobling. The decision to buy, should my means permit it, is an affirmation that the uniqueness, the quality, expressed by this unfamiliar artist, is recognized by me.

In my early collecting, I lacked the perspective on most artists’ output that has since developed from much gallery-going. I was repeatedly confronted by unfamiliar talents. If immensely taken by a one-man show, my way was to decide
on the best picture in it, regardless of the picture's dimensions or its suitability to any place I might have to hang it. I chose it because I personally thought it the best, calculating that if the artist proved of no consequence, despite my own judgment, at least it was better to have an example of him at his peak; if he emerged into fame, then my choice might eventually be accepted as a masterpiece. From this approach I have necessarily fallen away. Competition, small then, is considerable now. Paintings are made bigger and bigger; some have acquired sculptural dimensions (a stuffed eagle or a porcelain wash basin may project bodily from the surface); prices likewise have mounted till they often seem out of line with older established values. Consequently today, if I am struck at an exhibition by the superiority of a work nine feet high, sixteen feet wide, with fragile projections jutting two feet into the room, and priced at $7,500, I do not buy it. In the first place, I have never brought myself to pay anywhere near that amount for a work of art. Secondly, how could I handle and store it?

Once I am "on the beam" with an artist, his best later work almost automatically entrances me. His individual style has got under my skin. If collectors with big money feel a similar attraction, it becomes impossible for me to buy further major examples of his work, or perhaps any at all.

Surely there are always limitations on a collector's pursuit of the best. From the start I have consoled myself for my many probable errors by the conviction that no one is omniscient enough to perceive definitively which decisions were mistakes. Right and wrong choices must be a matter of opinion. If I had been accompanied by three of the country's most astute museum men on every occasion between 1949 and the present when I have looked at art for sale, and each of us had spent exactly as much, the only certainty is that four quite different collections would have come into being.

The sense of being an individual on one's own amidst a host of debatable possibilities, of willing a choice amongst unique creations, products of the rarest talents of our times, of linking oneself through them to vital imaginative currents, gives excitement and satisfaction to the challenge of collecting contemporary art—justification enough to ease the conscience of this ex-New Englander.

below  44. Georges Mathieu, French, b. 1921. Painting No. 8—1955. Oil on canvas, 35 x 57½ in.


opposite page


right  52. Theodor Werner, German, b. 1886. On Wings. 1952. Gouache and pastel, 35 x 27¼ in.
left  48. Ad Reinhardt, American, b. 1913. No. 18—1956. Oil on canvas, 80 x 32 in.

right  43. Conrad Marca-Relli, American, b. 1913. The Vestibule. 1954. Collage of canvas on board, 49 1/2 x 41 1/4 in.
39. Hans Hofmann, German, b. 1880. The Pond. 1958. Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in.
41. Roy Lichtenstein, American, b. 1923. Washing Machine. 1961. Oil on canvas, $56\frac{1}{2} \times 68\frac{1}{2}$ in.
left  50. Pierre Soulages, French, b. 1919. 3 February 55. 1955. Oil on canvas, 39½ x 29 in.

above  34. William Congdon, American, b. 1912. Piazza San Marco, No. 1—1954. Oil on composition board, 51 x 56 in.

opposite page

above  53. Fritz Winter, German, b. 1905. Composition IV, 1954. Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 29½ x 39½ in.

below  47. George Ortman, American, b. 1926. Cross. 1959. Collage-construction of plaster, canvas, oil and composition board, 48 x 48 in.
49. Antonio Saura, Spanish, b. 1930. Uruk. 1959. Oil on canvas, $51\frac{3}{8} \times 38\frac{1}{4}$ in.

32. Nero ’56. 1956. Collage with oil on burlap, 18 x 31½ in. Ill. p. 44.


60 GLASCO, JOSEPH. Born Paul's Valley, Oklahoma, 1925. Studied University of Texas; Jepson Art Institute and Art Center School, Los Angeles; San Miguel Allende, Mexico; Art Students League, New York. Group exhibitions include Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Brooklyn Museum; Art Institute of Chicago; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; Detroit Institute of Arts; Los Angeles County Museum; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; University of Illinois, Urbana, Indiana University, Bloomington; University of Nebraska, Lincoln; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh International, 1958; Princeton University. One-man exhibitions: Perls Gallery, New York, 1950; Catherine Viviano, New York, annually or biannually, 1951–58, and 1961. Ford Foundation Purchase Prize (1963 Corcoran Biennial).


42. Illumination. 1962. Oil on canvas, 83 x 12 in. Ill. p. 46.


43. The Vestibule. 1954. Collage of canvas on board, 49½ x 41¼ in. Ill. p. 50.


ORTMAN, GEORGE. Born Oakland, California, 1926. Studied California College of Arts and Crafts; Atelier 17; Atelier André L'Hote; Hans Hofmann School. Teaches, School of Visual Arts, New York City. Lives in New York City.


44. Painting No. 8—1955. Oil on canvas, 35 x 57½ in. Ill. p. 44.


48. No. 18—1956. Oil on canvas, 80 x 32 in. Ill. p. 50.


50. 3 February 55. 1955. Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 29 in. Ill. p. 53.


Design by Norman Ives
ERRATA

On page 37, in the biographical note for Germaine Richier, the last sentence, “Lives in Paris.” should read, “Died, Montpellier, 1959.”

On page 41, the first word in line 12, “one’s,” should read “his.”

The painting by Georges Mathieu, illustrated on page 44, is not included in the exhibition. The caption for the Mathieu painting exhibited, Cat. no. 44, is correct as printed.

On page 51, caption no. 39, “Hans Hofmann, German, b. 1880.” should read, “Hans Hofmann, American, b. Germany 1880.”
