

The Museum of Modern Art

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ALFRED H. BARR, JR.,

Biographical Notes

In 1929, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., was recommended for the Directorship of the new Museum of Modern Art by Professor Paul J. Sachs, one of the Founding Trustees of the Museum; the Board of Trustees accepted his choice. Barr, then a 27 year-old Associate Professor of Art at Wellesley College, was teaching the first college course devoted to 20th-century art. Previously he had studied the history of art at Princeton and later at Harvard from which he later received a Ph.D.

In the summer of 1929, before the Museum opened, Mr. Barr proposed to the Trustees the concept of a multidepartmental museum concerned with all the modern visual arts -- architecture and industrial design, photography, film, and theater design, as well as the traditional fields of painting and sculpture, drawings and prints. Thanks to the liberal policies of the Trustees, all these arts had entered the Museum's program by 1935 and were established departments by 1941.

On the Museum's tenth anniversary in 1939, Mr. Barr described its role: "The Museum of Modern Art is a laboratory. In its experiments the public is invited to participate." Mr. Barr has directed over 100 major and minor exhibitions in this "laboratory" and been a key figure in helping to further the purpose of the Museum which he states was "to help people to enjoy, understand, and use the visual arts of our time."

During Barr's directorship, the Museum staff and guest directors presented such pioneering exhibitions as Modern Architecture (1932), Machine Art (1934), African Negro Art (1935), Photography 1839-1937, as well as his own survey shows Cubism and Abstract Art (1936) and Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism (1936), and one-man retrospective shows of Max Weber (1930), Matisse (1931), Edward Hopper (1933), van Gogh (1935-6), and Picasso (1939, 1957 and 1962).

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Mr. Barr was Director from 1929 until late in 1943. After a three year interim, he was appointed Director of Collections in 1947, and although he assumed special responsibility for building the collection of paintings and sculpture, he also supervised in a general way the development of the collections of other departments. The Museum now has over 22,000 objects in its collections in all areas of the visual arts.

Unlike many museums, The Museum of Modern Art has almost no funds from endowment for buying works of art and none at all from budgeted income; its major purchase fund, renewed annually, was established by Mrs. Simon Guggenheim in 1938. Usually about half of the acquisitions are purchases, half gifts. Often, the Museum solicits gifts, seeking a donor for a work it has already selected. Sometimes barter is used: in 1939 the Museum acquired Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, exchanging a small Degas for it. Thus a minor but "saleable" painting was exchanged for one of the seminal works of modern art. Over the years, through his eye for quality, breadth of interests, and knowledge of historic importance, Mr. Barr has helped to make the 20th-century collections of the Museum the most significant in the world.

As its scope and influence increased, the Museum's development and growth, particularly of its collections, were guided by Mr. Barr. But in 1960, when John Canaday of The New York Times called him "the most powerful tastemaker in American art today and probably in the world," Mr. Barr disavowed this description, observing that "The artists lead; the Museum follows, exhibiting, collecting and publishing their work. In so doing it tries to act with both wisdom and courage, but also with awareness of its own fallibility." In conclusion, he suggested that "tastemakers" take to heart Aesop's fable of two flies who, perched upon the axle of a chariot, complacently remarked to each other: "What a dust do we raise."

This modest approach is typical of Alfred Barr: in discussing the Museum's acquisitions policy, under which works are chosen by committee, he stated: "The Museum collects works radically different in purpose, medium, school and generation.

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Who is to say what is really important? The public is often slow to comprehend; critics and museum people are notoriously blind. Even the artist is no sure guide...." And he has also observed that, "The Museum is aware that it may often guess wrong in its acquisitions. When it acquires a dozen recent paintings it will be lucky if in ten years three will still seem worth looking at, and if in twenty years one should survive. For the future the important problem is to acquire this one; the other nine will be forgiven -- and forgotten. But meanwhile we live in the present, and for the present these other nine will seem necessary and useful.... Sooner or later, time will eliminate them."

In 1949, Alfred Barr received an honorary degree from Princeton University, from which he had obtained an A.B. in 1922 and an M.A. in the following year. The citation in 1949 described him as follows: "He is the champion of contemporary things before they become respectable. Receptive to new talents, he in his policies does not disregard traditional values nor assume that modernity in itself is a guaranty of quality. But he does hold art to be progressive, and by exploring new techniques it can help man to come to terms with the modern world. He does not ask of art that it save civilization, but, that the creative energies of our day in this field be honored. And as Beowulf said, when he tacked the Dragon, 'This is not an expedition for a coward.'"

Lloyd Goodrich, presenting him with a citation at the 50th anniversary meeting of the American Federation of Arts in Washington, D.C., in 1959, addressed him as follows:

"To you more than to any other single person are due the foundation and flourishing of a great innovating institution, The Museum of Modern Art, which introduced a new concept of a museum's function in relation to the art of its time, which enlarged the scope of museum activities to include contemporary architecture, design, photography and films, and which has had a profound and far-reaching influence on all visual aspects of American life.

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"In your manifold activities you have always been guided by a high conscience, artistic and personal. A vigilant champion of individual freedom, you have opposed censorship and thought control wherever they occurred, abroad or in our own country. Throughout the years of devoted labor, heavy responsibilities and well-deserved honors, you have retained the complete integrity and the genuine modesty that marked you from the first, and that have earned you the respect and affection of all your colleagues."

Mr. Barr has been immersed in controversy, while at the same time he has achieved world-wide fame as a scholar and critic. He is the author of a number of modern classics, including "Cubism and Abstract Art" (1936), "Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art" (1946; reprinted 1955), and "Matisse: His Art and His Public" (1951). Alfred Frankfurter, the late editor of Art News, reviewing the Matisse monograph in The New York Times, called it, "the best book on a living artist known to this reviewer," and he added that Mr. Barr utilizes "a rare combination of the soundest objective methods of art scholarship, usually reserved for the old masters, and the enthusiastic interpretation generally to be found only in the panegyrics of an artist by a fiery friend." Mr. Barr is also the author of the Museum's best-selling publication "What is Modern Painting?," an introduction that has been translated into four foreign languages and been issued in nine editions since it was first published in 1943. He has lectured in England, Iceland, and the U.S.S.R., as well as the U.S.A., notably the Mary Flexner Lectures at Bryn Mawr in 1946.

On July 1, 1967, Mr. Barr retired as Director of the Museum Collections and was appointed a Counselor to the Board of Trustees. Mr. Barr is an Overseer of Harvard College and Chairman of the Harvard Fine Arts Visiting Committee. He is also active on the visiting committees of the art departments or museums of Columbia University and Princeton University. He served as first President of the Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture from May 1962, to September 1965, and is at present a member of the Board of Directors.

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Alfred Barr has received honorary degrees from the Universities of Bonn (Germany), Buffalo, Adelphi, and Yale, as well as Princeton University. His decorations from foreign governments include the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit from the Federal Republic of Germany, the Chevalier of the Legion of Honor from France, and the Star of Italian Solidarity. In 1962 he received the Art in America magazine annual award, in 1964 the Award of Merit of the American Institute of Architects and, in 1965, the Brandeis University Creative Arts Commission bestowed on him the Special Medals Award for "notable creative achievement." In 1968 he received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts and, in the same year, the New York State Award "for devoted service in behalf of modern art and its public."

Mr. Barr is an advisor of the William and Noma Copley Foundation of Chicago, a member of the Association of Art Museum Directors and of the International Association of Art Critics. He is an Honorary Member of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Mr. Barr has also served on the editorial boards or committees of Magazine of Art, The Art Quarterly, The Art Bulletin, Art in America and Gazette des Beaux-Arts and has contributed articles to various periodicals here and abroad.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1902, the son of a Presbyterian minister and teacher, Alfred Barr attended Boys' Latin School in Baltimore before going to Princeton. He is married to the former Margaret Scolari-Fitzmaurice of Rome, also an art historian, whom he met at the opening night of the Museum's first exhibition. Mr. and Mrs. Barr live in New York City and have one daughter, Victoria.

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.