



H. W. JANSON AND THE LEGACY OF MODERN ART  
AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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This catalog was published in conjunction with  
an exhibition at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York  
March 12–April 6, 2002  
and at the Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis  
August 30–December 6, 2002

Support for the exhibition was provided by  
the Hortense Lewin Art Fund and Yeatman Art Fund  
of Washington University

Editor: Jane E. Neidhardt, St. Louis  
Designer: Martin Schott, New York  
Printer: Dolan Wohlers, New Jersey

Co-published by Washington University Gallery of Art,  
St. Louis, and Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York

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Gallery of Art was done by David Ulmer and Robert Kolbrener unless other-  
wise noted.

Library of Congress catalog card number 2002141119  
ISBN 1-58821106-1

Front and back covers:  
Artworks in the Washington University Gallery of Art collection  
(cat. nos. 1–20)

Spine:  
Horst W. Janson, 1935  
Reproduced from "Horst Woldemar Janson," by Lise Lotte  
Müller, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 46, no. 4 (1983)

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Sabine Eckmann

*with contributions by*

Bradley Fratello

George V. Speer

*and*

H. W. Janson

Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis  
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York

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**CENTENNIAL ADDRESS**

H. W. Janson

## CENTENNIAL ADDRESS

H. W. Janson

*The following address by H. W. Janson was delivered in 1981 on the occasion of the centennial celebration of the Washington University Gallery of Art in St. Louis. Janson's tenure at Washington University, from 1941-1948, included serving as curator, from 1944-1948, of what was then called the Washington University Art Collection. He was instrumental in forming the collection of modern art that is now considered one of the finest university art collections in the country.*

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Washington University [Gallery of Art] and fellow St. Louisans. We have not lived in St. Louis for, to be exact, thirty-three years, but St. Louis is nevertheless an important part of our lives. Three of our four children were not only conceived but born in St. Louis, so we often have occasion to think back to those strenuous but interesting years. I hope you will not mind if my informal remarks this evening are occasionally tinged with sentiment, because it is not often that one has a chance to return to the place of one's activities as removed by such a historic stretch as thirty-three years from one's present environment and activities.

Of course, the reason why I might be a suitable speaker tonight is the comparatively brief but nevertheless perhaps not insignificant role that I played as curator of the University Art Collection, and some of you may be interested in hearing a little more about the events that transpired between 1945 and 1947. Those are the years during which the contents of what has so kindly been called the Janson room were assembled, and you might like to know how all this was made possible.

Actually, I myself had only very recently reverted to the Department of Art and Archaeology. When this story started, during the war itself, I was teaching physics for the army here on the campus (and that was a tough schedule: twenty-three hours of course contacts a week and no vacations). However, in 1945, I resumed what I considered to be my particular calling. We were just getting used to the idea that the war was over and normal life was slowly returning. To me, normal life meant not only resuming research and teaching in my own field, it also meant that I became aware of the existence of the Washington University Art Collection. I did so by reading certain labels in the City Art Museum [now known as The Saint Louis Art Museum], because attached to certain paintings there were labels saying that they were on loan from the Washington University Art Collection. So I became curious and started wondering, Now, just what is in this art collection? Why is it invisible except when you read it on the labels of certain works of art on display in the City Art Museum?

I found out that there was a great deal to the Washington University Art Collection, but most of it was in storage. For some of it, in fact (as you might know), storage was perhaps not less than what it deserved. When I look back at the things that we decided to sell in the fall of 1945, I visualize shelves and shelves full of beer steins. Somebody had collected beer steins and given the whole collection to the University. Apparently, between 1881 and 1945, there was no screening committee that decided whether a given work of art or collection of artifacts was suitable for a university art collection. Whatever was given was gracefully accepted, so we fell heir not only to this herd of beer steins, but to an equally large collection of English nineteenth-century china. This of course has a certain interest for specialized collectors but little "educational" value, you might say.

Then there were a lot of paintings of varying degrees of merit. While I was familiarizing myself with all these materials, my good friend Charles Nagel, then acting director of the City Art Museum, told me that they were planning to kind of weed out the holdings of the Museum and to quietly, or as quietly as possible, sell off things that they regarded as not wholly desirable—or maybe below the standard that they would like to see among the collections of the City Art Museum. I seized the opportunity and persuaded the University administration that we ought to join into this action and sell the less desirable aspects of the University Art Collection along with the undesirables from the City Art Museum, and thus accumulate a fund from which we might purchase those things that were not at all represented in the collection—namely, twentieth-century art. That is essentially what I accumulated as a result of this sequence of events.

We first of all had to agree on what was to be sold, so a committee was formed to make such a list . . . . Then, when—in a local auction as well as in a New York auction—we found ourselves the happy possessors of \$40,000, we made up a list of desiderata.

Those were still the days when the battle for modernism was being fought. It had not yet been won, as it was back in the 1960s. You might say from then on modern art has been so generally accepted that we are now beginning to experience a reevaluation of the things that we despised back in the 1930s and '40s. Some people have asked me, If you had to do it all over again, would you have sold all the things that you sold then?, and I must confess that there are maybe a handful of paintings that I would not include in the sale today, but I still would have sold the Remington [Frederic S. Remington's *A Dash for the Timber* (1889; fig. 33)], which brought the record price of \$23,000 at the time. This was such a sensation that it even made *Time* magazine, with a picture of the painting. They evidently thought it was absurd that anyone should pay \$23,000 for a painting by Remington. Today, of course, the painting would bring something like a quarter of a million. On the other hand, many of the pictures that we bought with the money from the Remington would now bring not just a quarter of a million, but proba-



Fig. 33

Frederic S. Remington (American,  
1861–1909)

*A Dash for the Timber*, 1889

Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 84 1/8"

Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas  
1961.381



bly ten times as much, so that in terms of purely financial gain, one can certainly justify the sale. But quite apart from all that, I never did think of Mr. Remington as a genuine western artist. (My skepticism was borne out when we moved to New York in 1949, because it so happened that we bought a house in New Rochelle, one of the suburbs of New York, practically next door to the Remington "ranch." That is where he lived and that is where he painted his western pictures.) He is still very much in fashion among Oklahoma oil millionaires—that is why his prices have kept up as well as they have—but in terms of the development of twentieth-century art, his significance has not increased over the past thirty years, it seems to me.

I must say that of all the things we were able to buy in 1945 and '46, I am proudest perhaps of Pablo Picasso's *Glass and Bottle of Suze* (1912; cat. no. 16) and Juan Gris' *Still Life with Playing Cards* (*Draughts Board and Playing Cards*) (1916; cat. no. 9) because they are classic works of cubism. The Picasso collage, one of the very earliest in this technique of 1912–13, is called after the label which is taken from the bottle of an aperitif named Suze, and there is in fact a bottle-like shape to which the label is attached. The whole thing is formally a still life, but it is of course not the significance, or even the relationship, of the objects that matters, but the redefinition of pictorial space that makes this such an exciting object to behold. Unfortunately, the strips of the newspaper have of course turned brownish in the course of the years, and no power on earth can possibly bring the original color back, so we have to make certain allowances in retrospect—but on the whole the condition of this Picasso collage is no better and in some respects no worse than that of any other collage of the same age.

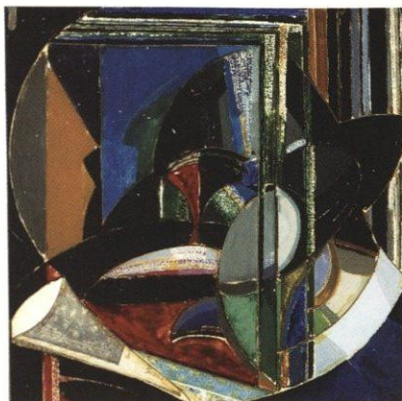


Fig. 34

Joseph Stella (American, 1877–1946)

*Man in the Elevated (Train)*, 1918

Oil, wire, and collage on glass,

14 1/4 x 14 3/4"

Washington University Gallery of Art,

St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale

Fund, 1946

In 1916, another Spaniard, Juan Gris, produced *Still Life with Playing Cards*. This is an oil, and obviously constructed along very much the same lines [as Picasso's *Glass and Bottle of Suze*], but with a kind of austerity and classical precision of form that are only hinted at in the rather more tentative composition of shapes in the Picasso collage. There is, I think, no better painting by Juan Gris anywhere. There are others, two or three perhaps, that I would agree are as good, but none that are better. This is something that one cannot hope to achieve very often, and I will not make such a claim for many of the other things that we bought at the time. After all, we only had \$40,000, and while that was quite a heap of money in those years, it was nonetheless a rather limited amount. We would easily have spent it all on one object, or maybe two or three, but what we wanted was to get as many really worthwhile things as the market would permit. I had to stop thinking about anything that cost more than \$5,000 because that would have been too large a share of our total capital. You see, most of these things actually cost, well, on the average around \$1,000. Some were cheaper; some were more expensive. The most expensive thing, in fact, was the Juan Gris. That's the one object that cost all of \$5,000; everything else was less.

The Georges Braque still life [*Nature Morte et Verre (Still Life with Glass)* (1930; cat. no. 2)], although it is not a major painting by the artist, is a fully representative example of Braque's version of cubism of the 1920s, and *Man in the Elevated (Train)* (1918; fig. 34) is an equally representative and highly original example by an Italo-American painter—in fact, the only painter then working in America who can be associated with futurism—namely, Joseph Stella. In this context, I think of it also as a still life, but it turns out that the official title of the painting is *Man Riding the Elevated*—that is, the elevated railway in New York, which of course has since been torn down. One looks for the man, and I must confess in a certain difficulty in locating him. The whole thing is a rather complicated construction on glass—that is, in part it is collage applied to glass—a piece of paper from a sort of art catalog that has been carefully clipped out and pasted onto the glass; the rest is simply oil paint painted on the back of the piece of glass to give it a unified shiny surface. Many of the forms are, in fact, separated from each other by care-

fully laid thin wires to keep the outlines strictly separated and smooth. There is in this picture a kind of dynamism that is a full reflection of the futurist style on the other side of the Atlantic. The painting was done in 1918, so that it was only a few years younger than the older works in this style, and the choice of subject, even though we have difficulty spotting the man in the elevated, is quite typical of futurism, which always prided itself on its willingness—in fact, its determination—to celebrate the dynamism and beauty of modern life, as against the dead past which it officially abominated.

With Theo van Doesburg's *Composition VII: The Three Graces* (1917; cat. no. 20) and Paul Klee's *Überbrückung (Transition)* (1935; cat. no. 11) we enter another aspect of twentieth-century art. At first glance they seem to have perhaps more in common than they actually do, because both of them are composed of abstract shapes. The painting by van Doesburg is clearly the more severe of the two, since it consists entirely of rectangles in the primary colors of blue, yellow and red, plus white on a black ground, and also all the forms are arranged along vertical or horizontal axes. That the painting should be called *The Three Graces* must be taken in a metaphorical sense. You have your choice. There are various verticals here that seem to relate to each other. The point, of course, is to strip the artist's language down to its bare essentials. Had we had the money to buy a Mondrian, I would have preferred to, but a van Doesburg was so much cheaper, and almost the same thing for us, that I opted for this picture. It is also, I think, a nice illustration of what one artist may legitimately do that none of his successors can permit themselves to do. A critic once remarked that the first poet to compare the lips of his beloved to a red, red rose was a genius, but the second poet to do so was a goddamned fool. Anyone who would take his lead from paintings like this, and work in this way and in this vocabulary, surely would make a fool of himself. Nevertheless, we here have a classic statement of this extreme formulation that tries to purge art of all elements that do not refer to themselves but to the outside world.

*Überbrückung (Transition)* is by Paul Klee, a very well-known German-Swiss artist, and while the forms here are equally abstract, it has a title that seems to be more in genuine relationship to the forms themselves. There are elements which suggest landscape forms: mountains, maybe a lake [down at the bottom], the sky [up at the top]. There is kind of a transition between elements in the center, so the painting has a kind of drama, a coherence of interlocking shapes that makes the whole thing rather more explicit than any reading you would dare to attempt of the van Doesburg painting.

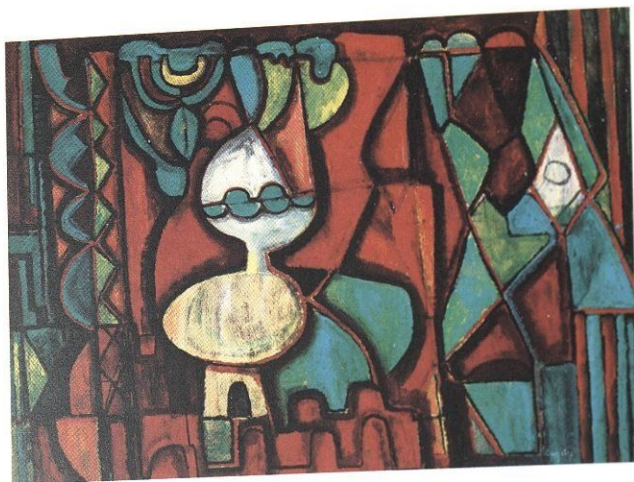
In the case of Max Ernst, one of the major masters of surrealism, I was particularly lucky. I would not want to claim that *The Eye of Silence* (1943–44; cat. no. 7) is the best Max Ernst there is, but I think it is one of the dozen most important Max Ernst paintings anywhere. Max Ernst at that time was working in this country. He had come over at the very last moment when Europe was falling to the Nazis, and undoubtedly the kind of dream landscape that he creates in this picture had something to do with his

experience of the American west—which he loved and in which he traveled extensively. He often implicitly or explicitly referred to these landscape experiences in the west. I remember one painting he did at the time which he entitled *The Colorado de la Meduse*—referring, of course, to *The Raft of the Medusa* (*Le Radeau de la Méduse*, 1819) by Théodore Géricault, but making the Colorado out of the plain radeau. While this is a case of verbal punning, there is a great deal of visual punning going on in this picture called *The Eye of Silence*, in which there is not one eye; there are a good many eyes. It is sort of a collective eye of silence that stares at us. Practically wherever we look there is an eye to respond to ours. Then there are the powerful abstractions in a kind of lake that occupies the lower center of the picture and the great rock structures that seem partially natural, partly sculpted (some of them look like giant petrified octopuses). You can rearrange your imagination as you interpret the painting; it is full of what you might call purposeful ambiguities—that is, ambiguities of a particularly poetic sort. If you simply abandon yourself to whatever responses are evoked in your mind by this painting, you could easily spend hours in front of it. It is a painting of incredible richness.

Another surrealist who is perhaps as important in his own way as Max Ernst (although his work does not have the interpretive richness and variety of Ernst) is Yves Tanguy, who always imagined some endless atmospheric plane, as he does in *La Tour Marine* (*Tower of the Sea*) (1944; cat. no. 19). Here a plane sort of recedes into infinity and is populated at intervals with these monuments, these structures, that are very precisely defined in three-dimensional terms. The light, too, is a very precise light, almost like the light on the moon, but there is no atmosphere to soften the blackness of the shadows. If you look at a form you can see the shadow is as clear, as precise, as substantial as the form itself. Here again, I do not want to claim that this is the best Yves Tanguy there is. There are larger and more ambitious works, but it is a very beautiful example of Yves Tanguy's work.

The third major surrealist that I wanted very badly to have in the collection is yet another Spaniard, Joan Miró. Here I was very fortunate indeed. I would say that *Peinture* (*Painting*) (1933; cat. no. 15) is the second-best Miró—the best being the companion to this painting, which is in the Museum of Modern Art and is a tiny bit better than this one. But I think this is a classic statement of what Miró had to say when he was at his richest and his most harmonious, both in terms of color and in terms of these biomorphic shapes which appear to contract and expand as you look at them.

Of course, the collection, we felt, could not be limited to the great Europeans; it should also include younger artists, especially younger artists from the new world, and there are two examples. One is a still life by William Baziotes (*Still Life* [1945; fig. 35]), who was just coming into prominence and who has since then more than fulfilled his promise, I believe. (The collection has since acquired another later picture by the same artist, *Night Form* [1947]). The other is *Lion and Horse* (1942; fig. 36), a work by what



*Fig. 35*  
William A. Baziotés (American, 1912–1964)  
*Still Life*, 1945  
Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 47 1/2"  
Washington University Gallery of Art,  
St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale  
Fund, 1946

*Fig. 36*  
Rufino Tamayo (Mexican, 1899–1991)  
*Lion and Horse*, 1942  
Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 46 1/2"  
Washington University Gallery of Art,  
St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale  
Fund, 1946

© State of the artist in support of Fundación Olga  
y Rufino Tamayo, A.C.

*Fig. 37*  
Philip Guston (American, 1913–1980)  
*If This Be Not I*, 1945  
Oil on canvas, 42 1/2 x 55 1/2"  
Washington University Gallery of Art,  
St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale  
Fund, 1946  
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I consider the most impressive living Mexican painter, Rufino Tamayo, who often works with sort of primeval experiences. The subject here actually has a very long history: lions have been attacking horses in painting and sculpture ever since ancient Roman times, but rarely has it been done with the kind of force that you see in a painting like this. Here, especially in his choice of colors, which has really no counterpart anywhere else, some quintessential Mexican quality seems to me to come through that makes this painting an important one to own and to contemplate.

Then there is yet another aspect of twentieth-century art that had to be represented in our collection—what you might call the expressionist aspect, to which *Les Artistes mit Gemüse* (*Artists with Vegetable*), or *Four Men Around a Table* (1943; cat. no. 1) by Max Beckmann very clearly belongs. It

is a self-portrait with friends, painted just two years earlier [than when Washington University acquired it], while Beckmann was still leading a sort of underground existence in the Netherlands during the war. *If This Be Not I* (1945; fig. 37) is by Philip Guston, who at that time was actually teaching at the Washington University School of Art. Its style is transitional in the very curious development that the work of Guston has undergone. He died only very recently. I must confess that I don't understand his most recent phase, yet in a painting like *If This Be Not I*, he is clearly trying to work with the socially conscious vocabulary of the WPA era—but to broaden it into a kind of general poetic sensibility that says something about the human condition without attaching it to a specific set of social circumstances. So the painting is full of these—you might call them neurotic or you might call them poetic—ideas that have somehow been shaped into a rather complicated kind of universe. One might have similar thoughts about the symbolic aspect of the four friends in Beckmann's *Les Artistes mit Gemüse*, each of whom has an attribute: a fish; a great big root vegetable (a sort of giant carrot—the kind of root vegetable that people had to live on in Holland when there was a near starvation condition at the end of the war); Beckmann himself has a mirror; and the fourth man has something which I am not quite sure what it is, but it was also undoubtedly meant to be a meaningful subject. And the four friends are related in a way that goes beyond the accident of their being together or the accident of their friendship.

We also wanted some sculpture, and the few pieces of sculpture that I was able to buy constitute perhaps a broader range of the possibilities of that medium than is demonstrated by the paintings. One of these pieces is the Sepik River, New Guinea wood carving [*Homme Oiseau (Man-Bird)* (c. 1900; fig. 38)]. I did not buy it from a dealer in "primitive" art; I bought it from the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, a gallery run by one of the sons of the painter Henri Matisse and long-established as one of the chief dealers in twentieth-century art. He had this piece because he had fallen in love with it many years earlier, and I had a hard time persuading him to part with it, although it turned out not to be terribly expensive. It is, I think, the best piece of New Guinea sculpture in any American museum, and quite unforgettable in the way in which the spirit of the dead here suddenly takes off soaringly in the shape of a bird that grows from the head of this ancestral figure.

*Reclining Figure* (1933; fig. 39) shows a reclining woman by Henry Moore, who, of course, had established his prominence in the 1930s as an English experimental sculptor of extraordinary daring and precision. I liked this particular piece as against others that were available at the time because it was Moore's first piece in reinforced concrete; he was trying a new medium. The Washington University Art Collection has had a good deal of trouble with this piece from a purely material point of view; it is apt to be damaged. It was, in fact, damaged a couple of times when it was out on loan. There are certain built-in instabilities here that make it somewhat of a trial to own, but just because it is the first of its kind



Fig. 38  
*Homme Oiseau (Man-Bird)*, c. 1900  
 Sepik River, New Guinea  
 Carved polychrome wood, 48 x 43 1/4"  
 Washington University Gallery of Art,  
 St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale  
 Fund, 1946



Fig. 39  
 Henry Moore (British, 1898–1986)  
*Reclining Figure*, 1933  
 Reinforced carved concrete,  
 17 x 30 1/4 x 12 1/4"  
 Washington University Gallery of Art,  
 St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale  
 Fund, 1946  
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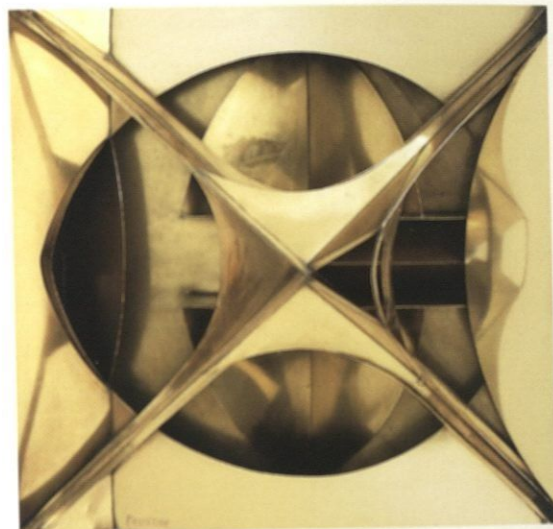


Fig. 40  
 Antoine Pevsner (French, b. Russia,  
 1886–1962)  
*Bas Relief en Creux (Sunken Bas Relief)*,  
 1926–27  
 Relief in brass and bronze,  
 23 1/8 x 24 1/8 x 13 1/8"  
 Washington University Gallery of Art,  
 St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale  
 Fund, 1946

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it is a kind of landmark in the history of modern sculpture, and that's why I felt very lucky that we were able to get it.

A third piece of sculpture, which is very different indeed from the other two, illustrates yet another possibility. *Bas Relief en Creux (Sunken Bas Relief)* (1926–27; fig. 40) is a constructivist work by Antoine Pevsner, a Russian and the brother of Naum Gabo, whose name is perhaps even better known as a master for things of this kind. This is a work that you can look at while it is either hanging on a wall or

lying on a table, and I've never been able to make up my mind which is the more appropriate way of looking at it. One might interpret it, if one wishes, as the model for some architectural fantasy—some very elaborate version that goes beyond the famous St. Louis Arch in the boldness of its architectural imagination, but it remains here on a small scale. Obviously, it is a splendid display for the equivalent of solids and hollows which work against each other, into each other, in a great variety of ways, and the highly polished material—brass—brings out these qualities in a rather memorable fashion.

I'd like to say, in conclusion, a few things about other experiences I have had with university art galleries and about the function that I think university art galleries ought to have in the context of a college or university. Some of the university or college art museums that exist today can look back on a history even older than that of the Washington University Art Collection, although one hundred years is a very respectable record indeed. Back in 1881, I think, you could have counted the number of institutions of higher learning that had an art collection on the fingers of one (possibly mutilated) hand. Since then, of course, they have grown apace, but there are still a good many campuses where the real importance of such a collection as an educational resource is not fully appreciated. I've always regarded one aspect of whatever missionary work I can do in my field not only is to advocate the establishment of the university art collection where none exists now, but to plot out its educational value and to address how it really ought to be used. It is difficult to lay down the law in this respect because that depends very much on the local situation, on the local resources—whether there are important art collectors and important art public in the area, which in a small college town very often is not the case, unlike in major cities like St. Louis and New York.

New York University, you'll be glad to note, also has an art collection that is considerably younger than Washington University. New York University at one point was offered the [A. E.] Gallatin collection of modern art, known at that time as the Museum of Living Art. And as late as 1940 (that was before I came to New York University), no one was a sufficiently strong advocate of modern art to persuade the administration that this was an invaluable collection, so Mr. Gallatin finally took the whole thing away from the University and gave it to the Philadelphia Museum [of Art], where it is conspicuously on display to this very day.

Some fifteen years later, some people at New York University, including myself, felt that something ought to be done to expiate this colossal sin of omission and indifference, and we have since built not only an art collection but also a university art gallery which is flourishing and which the administration is now beginning to realize is a major source of favorable public relations. It has practically no competition around Washington Square, where it is located. The Whitney Museum of American Art once used to be on Eighth Street, but since it moved uptown there is really nothing of this sort in our area. The Grey Art



Gallery, named after the kindly old lady who helped us establish the Gallery, represents not only an important enrichment of the neighborhood, but to an even greater extent an educational enrichment for a whole variety of students—not only students in the Department of Fine Arts, but students in Education, and of course the entire undergraduate community—who have a chance to study works of art at close range such as they would not have in a museum—especially not in New York, where every museum is so conscious of the importance of packing in numbers that you often simply cannot get even close to the works of art.

In contrast with that, the university art gallery provides an environment where you can really confront a work without facing the competition of thousands who want to do exactly the same thing at exactly the same moment. If you take courses in the history of art, then you should be given the opportunity to actually handle the works in a seminar room. You should have a chance to really become acquainted with the work of art as a physical object. You should learn how one can tell a genuine Rembrandt etching from even the most masterful imitation of such an etching, and you should learn that such imitations exist that are so good they are printed only on paper with a special watermark (which, of course, cannot be eliminated, otherwise the world would be fooled by reproductions of Rembrandt etchings that are to all but the most experienced eye indistinguishable from the original). This does not mean that it is not important to distinguish the two: it makes it doubly important to tell which is the real McCoy and which is only an approximation. It is experiences of this sort that can mark a student for life: suddenly something awakens in him when he handles an object that cannot be awakened in any other way.

So let me conclude by wishing the Washington University Art Collection a happy second hundred years. I will not be around to help you celebrate at the end of that period, but at least my good wishes are with you.

*This address has been edited for brevity and to fit the print format. It was transcribed by M. Todd Hignite and Ivana Salander, 2000–2001.*