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by

Katherine Stephens

May 2018

THE MEDIEVAL MODERN DISCOURSE AND THE ETHOS  
OF THE MENIL CURATORIAL METHOD

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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Art

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art History

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how an obscure exhibition from 1958 called *Islands Beyond: An Exhibition of Ecclesiastical Sculpture and Modern Paintings* is the first visual embodiment in the United States of the early twentieth-century discourse relating medieval art and modern art. The small exhibition inaugurated the newly completed fine arts buildings at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas and was organized by Jermayne MacAgy and Dominique de Menil. Its emphasis on non-naturalistic art, transhistorical juxtapositions, and its clearly spiritual preoccupation came to define the ethos of John and Dominique de Menil's future projects in Houston, including the Rothko Chapel and the Menil Collection. Furthermore, *Islands Beyond* was preceded and substantiated by pivotal contributions to the medieval-modern discourse by the Dominican priest Father Marie-Alain Couturier, Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, and key historians of modern art who were trained in medieval art, like Meyer Schapiro, Alfred Barr and others.

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to express my thanks to my thesis committee: Dr. Sandra Zalman, my thesis chair, for her guidance and support throughout this process and to Dr. Natilee Harren and Dr. Judith Steinhoff for their feedback and encouragement. This project was inspired by the life and legacy of John and Dominique de Menil. Their devout faith, social activism, and initiatives in Houston's art world captured my attention. I began volunteering at the Rothko Chapel within months of moving to Houston two years ago, and it was there, as I stood at the front reception desk flipping through Pamela Smart's book *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection*, that I first read about *Islands Beyond*. While developing and writing my thesis this past year, I had the privilege to work as a Curatorial Fellow in the Menil Collection. I was able to research John and Dominique's collection and work on projects that fortuitously related to my thesis. Among the Menil Collection staff, I would like to thank Lisa Barkley, Michelle White, Haley Berkman, and Jessamine Batario for their interest and encouragement. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their unending love and support.

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## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth-century, modern art and religious, medieval art seemingly stood in ideological and stylistic opposition to one another. Yet, in the early years of the twentieth century, various intellectual discourses emerged to relate modern and medieval art, noting the similarities in the social and economic context and the pictorial styles from the two seemingly divergent periods. Aspects of this dialogue precede the visual embodiment of the “medieval-modern” in a 1958 exhibition in Houston, Texas entitled *Islands Beyond: An Exhibition of Ecclesiastical Sculpture and Modern Paintings*. This exhibition serves as a case study that gives a historical perspective to this early discourse and to the interest in modern and pre-modern sacred art that continues into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, it provides insight into the origins of the Menil Collection’s curatorial ethos, which was formed by its founders, the French-born Houston art collectors and devout Catholics, John and Dominique de Menil. The de Menils were exceedingly influenced by figures like curator Jermayne MacAgy, who curated *Islands Beyond*, curator James Johnson Sweeney, and the French Dominican friar and champion of sacred modern art, Father Marie-Alain Couturier. *Islands Beyond* pays homage to Couturier’s influence and the French Catholic revivalist movement in the early twentieth century, which urged the Church to amend its stances against secular modernity. This advocacy led to greater Catholic ecumenicism and a revival of interest in medieval philosophy, wherein scholars drew connections between medieval and modern art’s denaturalization (i.e. its tendency to be stylized and two-dimensional) and determined

that these stylistic approaches evoked a greater sense of transcendence than naturalistic artworks.

*Islands Beyond* is possibly the first example in the United States where modern, primarily abstract art and medieval art were intentionally brought together in a gallery space, encouraging the viewer to create analogies between the two styles. Fifty-four works, predominantly sculpture and paintings, from a Byzantine Madonna and Child and fifteenth-century Italian saint to works by Paul Klee, Mark Rothko, Josef Albers, and Fernand Léger were exhibited. The analogy between both periods boldly transgresses temporal and cultural boundaries and traditional art historical periodization within the gallery space and evokes an atmosphere where the organizers hoped the spiritual could be universally experienced in both artistic styles and periods. Juxtaposition became a tool where, it was thought, the viewer acted upon the innate urge to relate one's own time and place to another. Within a carefully produced atmosphere, the exhibition organizers imagined that the medieval and modern converged, potentially bridging the historical and experiential disconnect between past and present. These methods, which were formulated early on in *Islands Beyond*, set the precedent for what the de Menils collected and the future projects they undertook in Houston, such as the Rothko Chapel (1971), the Byzantine Fresco Chapel (1997), and ultimately, the Menil Collection (1987). While the show was small and only on view for seventeen days on a small Catholic university campus, it marks a pivotal moment where the intellectual discourse that related the "medieval-modern" could be visualized.

Early discourse in both medieval and modern art history formed simultaneously in America. The two burgeoning fields produced art historians and curators familiar with

both fields, most prominently Meyer Schapiro, a scholar in both medieval and modern art, and Alfred H. Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who trained as a medievalist. They were among the first art historians to formulate and teach Modern Art history courses. For much of their careers they advocated for the often misunderstood avant-garde modern styles and the similarly misinterpreted or disregarded (in Schapiro's case) styles of the Middle Ages. Barr combated the traditional historicizing approaches most museums took towards medieval art, or earlier art in general. For modern medievalists like Schapiro and Millard Meiss, who wrote a pivotal publication on post-Black Death art in Florence and Siena in 1951, it proved almost impossible to not compare their own social, political, and economic context to their interpretations of medieval art. Barr was progressive in his refusal to define modern art. He saw definition as limiting, and since Western art could be placed within a long-lineage, why not relate Hieronymus Bosch to the Surrealists? These scholars' contributions to the "medieval-modern" discourses will be elucidated here, since they built the intellectual foundation for current medieval-modern scholarship and provide a backdrop against which to understand an exhibition like *Islands Beyond*.

While *Islands Beyond* was small and remains relatively overlooked in literature, except briefly by art historian Pamela Smart in *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* (2010), recent scholarship and exhibitions have shown a renewed interest in this transhistorical relationship.<sup>1</sup> Modern art is typically understood

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<sup>1</sup> See these exhibition examples from the artist Per Kirkeby <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2012/01/25/byzantine-and-christian-museum-to-host-danish-per-kirkeby-exhibition/> and from the artist Anselm Kiefer <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-kiefer-anselm-artworks.htm>.

as beginning in the eighteenth century when the Enlightenment and the French Revolution served as catalysts for artists to break from the traditional patronage of the monarchy and Church and to express revolutionary, avant-garde stances in their lives, subject matter, and paint application or choice of medium. Alexander Nagel, in his book *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (2012), uses the Enlightenment as the midpoint for his understanding of the medieval-modern. He considers the medieval broadly as synonymous with all art preceding the Enlightenment when a conception of fine art, art history, and museums did not exist.<sup>2</sup> The examination of medieval art in this thesis will not take such a long view. Nagel's inclusion of the Renaissance, Mannerism, and the Baroque era into his understanding of the medieval diminishes key formal and social characteristics that relate medieval art in the Middle Ages and modern abstract art. Nagel's priority is to create a broad, cross-temporal study that banishes artistic periods and emphasizes the fluidity between the past and present styles. His approach is reminiscent of Barr's understanding of art history as a continuum.

Contrary to the aims of *Islands Beyond*, Nagel claims he is disinterested in the contemporary resurgence of overtly religious content in contemporary art, because spirituality and mysticism is about a "mode of experience and not a historical relationship."<sup>3</sup> Nagel's colleague Thomas Crow, on the other hand, in his book *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (2017) considers how theology influenced turning points in modern artistic production where spirituality is undeniably present. Crow challenges contemporary scholarship that ignores religious traditions in the life or works of artists like Mark Rothko, James Turrell, and Robert Smithson. Amy Knight Powell's book

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Nagel, *Medieval Modern*, 9.

*Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and Modern Museum* appeared the same year as Nagel's. Her premise is that art does not belong to its makers since form transcends the artist's original intentions. She supports this claim by closely examining the relationship between medieval and modern materiality in particular, arguing that once historic objects are in the museum space their materiality can have "liaisons" with objects from other cultures and times. In this context, medieval works can transgress time. Powell takes a careful approach in her "medieval-modern" comparisons. Each chapter examines a medieval scene of the Deposition and is concluded with a short vignette where Powell specifically examines formal resemblance between the medieval deposition and a modern work, ultimately attempting to bridge the historical distance between the medieval world and recent past.<sup>4</sup>

In slight contrast to Powell, Byzantinist scholar Glenn Peers, who curated the 2013 exhibition *Byzantine Things in the World* at the Menil Collection, attempted to revive the life and animism of Byzantine objects. Rather than present them as historicized art from a past civilization, he created intentional "liaisons" by displaying these objects next to modern abstract works to show that older objects continue to have relevance and life today. These specific examples in the current discourse reveal that the interest in cross-cultural and temporal associations between objects within both contemporary scholarship and the gallery space is vital and relevant. *Islands Beyond* serves as a mid-century case study that anticipates this contemporary discourse, while the early twentieth-century art historical discourse from both the secular and religious intellectual spheres anticipates an exhibition like *Islands Beyond*. These early medievalists, modernists, and

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<sup>4</sup> Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 10.

modern religious figures created a foundation for the transhistorical connections between the two periods that continues to be discussed today.

## **A Medieval-Modern Exhibition**

A series of eight flat roofed, brick buildings designed by the modernist architect Philip Johnson flank both sides of the rectangular, grass quad on the University of St. Thomas campus in Houston, Texas. These academic buildings are connected by two-story walkways that run the length of the each side, open to the elements and serving as breezeways and viewing areas. Iron rods support these promenades, their black color contrasting with the pale brown hue of the brick that was used for the majority of buildings on the campus. The library sits at the south end of the Mall. Directly opposite at the north end is the Chapel of St. Basil, boldly distinguished from the rest of the campus architecture with its clean, white stucco, black granite facade, and prominent gold dome (Fig. 1).

**Figure 1:** The University of St. Thomas Campus.



The chapel was designed by Johnson in 1997, almost forty years after he completed designs for the central campus. Its presence next to the earlier buildings demonstrates how Johnson's more reserved stylistic tendencies in the 1950s and 1960s grew into the monumental, sculptural structures of his later career. To the right of the chapel, are the



first two buildings to be completed on the Academic Mall in 1958: Jones and Strake Halls. Jones Hall became the Fine Arts department, and its former second floor fine arts gallery served as the modest backdrop for the art exhibition this thesis will focus on: *Islands Beyond: An Exhibition of Ecclesiastical Sculpture and Modern Paintings* (October 2-19, 1958).

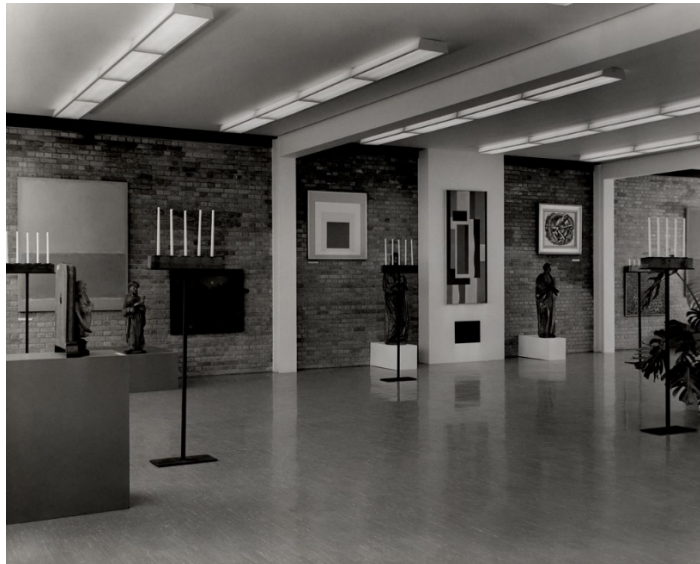
The relative obscurity of *Islands Beyond* within art historical scholarship is most likely related to the mutual obscurity of its surrounding context, the city of Houston and the University of St. Thomas.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the preferred white walled gallery spaces at the time, the university's fine art gallery had low ceilings and half brick, half wood paneled walls, making the exhibition space a relatively unconventional setting (Fig. 2). In addition, it was situated on the campus of a small, newly established university in the city of Houston, which was a relatively young and underwhelming art city compared to New York, Los Angeles or Chicago in the 1950s. The context did not supply the necessary backdrop for subsequent awareness of the exhibition, at least outside of Houston. Today, however, it is possible to determine that *Islands Beyond* is most likely the first known example in the United States where medieval and modern art were purposefully exhibited side by side. For this reason alone, the exhibition deserves further exploration, since it serves as a rare visual example for its time of the "medieval-modern" discourse. Considering the disparity between the two periods, the types of works and artists in the

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<sup>5</sup> *Islands Beyond* is specifically mentioned by Pamela Smart in her book *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); William A. Camfield in his essay "Two Museums and Two Universities," in *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil*, ed. Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 49-73; and by the Rev. George Bernard Flahiff, Superior-General of the Basilian Fathers, author of the introductory essay in the exhibition brochure, however this is not published scholarship.

exhibition were chosen with careful and specific intent. Fifty-four works were on display—twenty-three ecclesiastical sculptures, ranging in date from the 13th to 18th century, and thirty-one modern works by artists like Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Josef Albers, René Magritte, and Mark Rothko (Fig. 2). Eleven of the modern works were painted in the previous year, between 1957 and 1958; nine were painted within the decade, between 1950 and 1956; three between 1947 and 1949; and the earliest modern work was from 1922 with only one other from the twenties and two from the thirties. With twenty works in the show all dating from the 1950s, it is clear *Islands Beyond* emphasized the art of the current moment, most prominently the current avant-garde movements Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. It can additionally be imagined that the majority of the modern works were being seen for the first time by any audience.

**Figure 2:** *Islands Beyond*. Paintings: Mark Rothko, *The Green Stripe*, 1955 and *Plum and Brown*, 1956, Jean Dubuffet's *Texturologie Rose*, 1957, Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square: Expectant* (1958), and Fernand Léger's *Composition Circulaire* (1947) and *Mural Painting* (1924/25).



The exhibition served a three-fold purpose for the organizers. First, it fulfilled practical initiatives on behalf of the University; secondly, the works and atmosphere were

intentionally chosen and designed to produce a sense of spiritual transcendence in the viewer. Lastly, the exhibition's environment and spiritual intent possibly conditioned the viewer's eye to abstract contemporary paintings through juxtaposition with ecclesiastical sculpture. This transhistorical juxtaposition, which defied the more traditional, chronological approaches to art historical interpretation, emerged from the primary organizers of the show, Dominique de Menil (1908-1997) and Jermayne MacAgy (1919-1964). Both women's assurance in creating this visual relationship between ecclesiastical sculpture and modern paintings came from a shared desire to captivate viewers. MacAgy, as the curator, created a moody, ecclesiastical environment that complimented the works giving the possibility for a spiritual experience not only in front of ecclesiastical, medieval works, but in front of the arguably more strange, abstract paintings. Additionally, both women hoped to the viewer would engage with the formal and spiritual qualities of the objects free from didactic influences. For the exhibition organizers, the bold juxtaposition of the medieval and modern allowed for the viewer to possibly be led into spiritually engaging, even transcendent, experience.

For the University of St. Thomas, a Catholic university in Houston's Montrose district, the exhibition had three practical initiatives: to inaugurate Johnson's new buildings, to garner support for the establishment of a fine arts department, and to further develop the "teaching collection." When the Congregation of St. Basil started the university in 1947, their offices and classrooms were in a small cluster of homes in the neighborhood. Nine years later Johnson's campus expansion finally began. In the university's early years, John and Dominique de Menil (Fig. 3), who had already established themselves as major art patrons and advisors in the city, were invited to join

the Social Arts Committee at St. Thomas in 1951.<sup>6</sup> By 1956 the couple had secured Johnson<sup>7</sup> as the principal campus architect and not only offered to fund his services throughout the development process but also purchased the land for the new campus.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 3:** Dominique de Menil and John de Menil, circa 1967.



The exhibition *Islands Beyond* was an important indicator of the university's growth as an educational institution since it marked their physical expansion, and it introduced academic initiatives that Dominique de Menil adamantly encouraged when she joined the newly established Arts Council at St. Thomas in 1957.<sup>9</sup> The Arts Council was formed to

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<sup>6</sup> Josef Helfenstein, ed., *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 277-278. After settling in Houston in 1944, the de Menils officially begin their careers of art collecting when they purchased a Paul Cézanne watercolor in '45. John de Menil joined the board of both the Museum of Fine Arts and Contemporary Arts Association, a committee dedicated to the expansion and display of contemporary arts in the city in '47 and '48. As patrons of art education, both de Menils become involved with St. Thomas in 1951.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-278. Johnson had first worked with the de Menils in 1947 when the couple commissioned him to design their home in the River Oaks neighborhood in Houston. It was completed in 1951 and is one of the earliest examples of International Style architecture in the Southwest. This project was the first of many Johnson would continue to have in Texas.

<sup>8</sup> Camfield, "Two Museums and Two Universities," 55. When the de Menils purchased the land for St. Thomas' campus, they purchased additional land next to the university that would be the future site of the Rothko Chapel (1971) and the Menil Collection (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Helfenstein, *Art and Activism*, 280. The Arts Council held its inaugural meeting on October 23, 1957 to discuss the "absence of a strong art history curriculum in the city."

establish a fine arts department with high caliber faculty. Council members included MacAgy, the curator James Johnson Sweeney, and the Rev. George Bernard Flahiff, Superior-General of the Basilian Fathers in Toronto and the Chairman of the Arts Council, who Dominique de Menil enlisted to write the introductory essay for *Islands Beyond*'s brochure.<sup>10</sup> Dominique de Menil took immediate action, on behalf of the university, towards initiating the art department.<sup>11</sup> In early May of 1958, five months before *Islands Beyond* opened, she offered her and her husband's collection to the university on extended loan with the stipulation it was to be used as a "teaching collection." Eighteen of the fifty-four works in *Islands Beyond* were from the de Menil collection at the university.<sup>12</sup>

The Arts Council needed additional support from outside the small circle of Catholic patrons if the fine arts department was to gain students and recognition. An exhibition marking the inauguration of Johnson's newly designed Jones Hall and Strake Hall provided the opportune moment for St. Thomas to gather support from "non-Catholics to donate to an art department."<sup>13</sup> Dominique de Menil enlisted her friend, director of the Houston Contemporary Arts Association (CAA) since 1955,<sup>14</sup> MacAgy, to organize and curate *Islands Beyond*. The two women worked together throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> *Art and Activism*, 282. Sweeney was still a curator at the Guggenheim Museum while he was on the Arts Council. He became the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 1961 at the request of John de Menil.

<sup>11</sup> John de Menil was not as apparently involved in these initiatives or in *Islands Beyond*, except as a financial supporter and lender to the show.

<sup>12</sup> Camfield, "Two Museums and Two Universities," 55.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56. The inauguration of Jones and Strake Halls included a series of events over the nights of October 3-5, including a blessing by the Bishop of the Galveston Diocese, a reception, a lecture by Sweeney, and MacAgy's exhibition *Islands Beyond*.

<sup>14</sup> See Camfield, "Two Museums and Two Universities," 50-52 for more about the de Menil's involvement with CAA and 53-54 about MacAgy's directorship at CAA.

planning process.<sup>15</sup> MacAgy, as a member of the Arts Council at St. Thomas, was fully aware of the exhibition's practical initiatives. In a letter to Johnson regarding his lending of Paul Klee's *Holy Islands*, a small pen and watercolor work, for the show, MacAgy expressed that the exhibition was a:

...stepping stone to the important issue of establishing...a top flight Fine Arts Department. And also important is the position of St. Thomas with such a department in the general cultural growth of Houston - and you well know how much that is needed here. No one person can do it - it has to be a combination of a lot of remarkable activity. So as one upward mark on the cultural barometer, the October show at St. Thomas is part and parcel of the higher goal.<sup>16</sup>

Practically, achieving this "higher goal" meant gathering not only future financial investment in an art department, but having loaned works from significant galleries and collectors in the exhibition. Through the de Menil's and MacAgy's connections there were twenty-two lenders, including architect Mies van der Rohe and gallerists Alexander Iolas, Sidney Janis, and Marian Willard.<sup>17</sup> By involving these nationally known figures, *Islands Beyond* would ideally elevate an art standard in Houston in both arts education and the caliber of exhibitions and collecting methods in other art institutions in the city.

Beyond the practical purposes of the exhibition, John and Dominique de Menil, who were both devoutly ecumenical Catholics, saw that supporting this nascent Catholic

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<sup>15</sup> "Minutes from the Arts Council Meeting, October, 23, 1957," Menil Archives. A year before *Islands Beyond*, Dominique de Menil suggested the Third Annual Religious Art show be of medieval sculpture and paintings, and MacAgy, also a member of the council, confirmed and offered to begin securing works for the exhibition.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Jermayne MacAgy to Philip Johnson, July 3, 1958.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Iolas, who owned Hugo Gallery in New York, had a huge influence on the de Menils Surrealism collection. He is responsible for over 350 works in their collection, most importantly 30 works by Max Ernst and over 50 works by René Magritte. Dominique was hesitant towards Surrealism at first, but Iolas kept convincing the couple. Today the Menil Collection has the largest private collection of Ernst's work in the world. See Kristina Van Dyke, "Losing One's Head: John and Dominique de Menil as Collectors," in *Art and Activism*, ed. Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 122-124.

university was an opportunity to promote both their burgeoning artistic taste in an environment that shared their faith and their views of the sacred modern.<sup>18</sup> Soon after John and Dominique de Menil left Nazi-occupied France in 1941, Houston became their home due to John de Menil's position as director of Schlumberger Oil, which relocated to Houston from France during the war.<sup>19</sup> Their primary homes had once been in Paris and New York, and while they maintained residences in both of these cities, their new home could not compare to the vibrancy of these art capitals. Led by a strong desire to upturn the provincialism they felt characterized Houston culture at the time, the couple began to take action on a series of projects they believed would elevate Houston's art and architecture, and ultimately broaden the city's engagement in the modern art world.<sup>20</sup> Many of their projects were sponsored through the Museum of Fine Arts and CAA. However, it was St. Thomas that provided a platform where their spiritual convictions could undergird their view that high-quality art elevated aesthetic experience and offered true redemptive possibilities for a viewer. In *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* (2010), Pamela Smart situates the de Menil's projects and personal tastes in art in relation to their overarching promotion of the sacred modern, which Smart defines:

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<sup>18</sup> See Smart, "Aesthetics as a Vocation," in *Art and Activism*, ed. Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 34. John de Menil was born into a Catholic family and Dominique Schlumberger's family was Protestant. The two married in 1936 and Dominique de Menil converted to Catholicism two years after their marriage at a time when she was heavily influenced by the ecumenical, French Catholic intellectual movement, *renouveau catholique*. Dominique de Menil frequently referenced the 1936 lecture on ecumenicism in Paris by Father Yves Marie-Joseph Congar as decisive for her and her husband's Catholicism. Similarly, the de Menil's 1952 tour of two churches in France where Father Marie-Alain Couturier had commissioned works by modern artists like Léger and Matisse eventually led her and her husband to commission their own ecumenical project, the Rothko Chapel, in 1964.

<sup>19</sup> Helfenstein, *Art and Activism*, 276. Schlumberger was Dominique de Menil's maiden name, and it was her family's oil business.

<sup>20</sup> See Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 47, 49, where she speaks about Houston as a cultural desert.

John and Dominique sought to recuperate spirituality while at the same time exercising a commitment to a social activism oriented to the future rather than the past, pursuing a critical project of modernity that would bind the sacred and the modern. Their specific challenge was to create conditions in which faith would have relevance, not as a regressive refusal of modernity, but as a source of meaning that was both resonant and absolute, that would sustain ongoing humanistic innovation across multiple fields and endeavors.<sup>21</sup>

In their passionate advocacy for modern, avant-garde artists and their work, the de Menils remained loyal to the traditions and convictions of their faith. Their projects attempt to synthesize these two trajectories in what Stephen Schloesser, a current Catholic and Jesuit historian, describes as an “off-modern” mentality: a synthesis of both tradition and the present in the hope of a revived, aware, and moralized future.<sup>22</sup> The emergence of the “off-modern” will be discussed later on as its origins are pivotal in understanding the early discourse connecting the medieval and modern periods. However, it is in *Islands Beyond* where the de Menils first address their sacred modern views. The exhibition environment was specifically created to connect works of art from two divergent periods with the hope that both styles, in conversation with each other, would be experienced and understood as having spiritual resonance.

Understanding the juxtaposition of the medieval-modern in this exhibition directly relates to the couple’s view of the sacred modern, as defined by Smart above, and this relationship will also be revisited in further detail when discussing the de Menil’s collecting tendencies. However, it is worthwhile to briefly note that Smart says it is in the couple’s pursuit of projects that attempt to reconcile the sacred and modern, like *Islands*

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<sup>21</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 23. Smart cites Stephen Schloesser’s description of the interwar *renouveau catholique* (Catholic revivalist) movement in France and their attempt to rethink the “modern as off-modern...nostalgic futurism.” See Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris 1919-1933* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).



*Beyond*, where their favoring of premodern art is seen alongside their interest in contemporary art.<sup>23</sup> Today, the couple's aesthetic convictions and their extensive collections of premodern and modern works can be comprehensively visualized at the Menil Collection, which opened in 1987 just a few blocks away from the University of St. Thomas. It is here that the couple's religious and artistic views culminate in what Smart calls the "Menil aesthetic," which "has been attentively crafted...to produce an affecting engagement between persons and objects," in order to ultimately engage in "moral activism."<sup>24</sup> However, in the years before the Collection opened, their ideas were first realized in their projects with institutions like the University of St. Thomas. After *Islands Beyond*, the de Menils remained heavily involved in the life of this small Catholic university until 1969, and with the de Menil's financial support, the University successfully established its fine arts department in 1959.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the couple put MacAgy's name forward as director of the new department and offered to subsidize her salary along with other incoming faculty salaries. They also provided resources for an art library and an exhibition budget.<sup>26</sup>

The couple's friendship with MacAgy (Fig. 4) dates from before 1955, but that is the year the couple encouraged her to come to Houston from San Francisco, where she was already distinguished as the youngest museum director in the country. She chose to

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<sup>23</sup> The term premodern, as used in this thesis, refers to art created before the Renaissance, and for the de Menils that included, aside from Byzantine art, the other dominant areas of their collection: Art of the Americas, Pacific Northwest, Africa, the Pacific, and the Ancient World.

<sup>24</sup> Pamela Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Camfield, "Two Museums and Two Universities," 65. The de Menils transferred their "teaching collection" and resources to Rice University in 1969, and when the university and the de Menils parted ways, "sadness permeated the separation, not bitterness". The separation was mainly due to philosophical difference. The de Menils were becoming more ecumenical in their decisions and wishes, and this made the Basilian Fathers uncomfortable.

<sup>26</sup> Pamela Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 4.

move and became director of CAA, where she curated twenty-nine exhibitions during her four-year directorship.<sup>27</sup> In 1959, CAA did not renew MacAgy's contract.<sup>28</sup> Having already curated *Islands Beyond*, the Basilian Fathers were familiar with MacAgy and, with the encouragement of the de Menils, engaged her as director of their new art department. For five years, MacAgy taught, continued to install exhibitions both on and off campus,<sup>29</sup> and suggested additional pieces to add to the "teaching collection."<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 4:** Jermayne MacAgy at The Trojan Horse: The Art of the Machine, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 1958. Photo: Eve Arnold.



Plans to expand the "teaching collection" had already been promoted in conjunction with *Islands Beyond*. In a letter to Adolph Loewi, a lender to the show, MacAgy mentioned

<sup>27</sup> See William Middleton, *Double Vision: The Unerring Eye of Art World Avatars John and Dominique de Menil* (New York: Knopf, 2018), 386. MacAgy began her masters at the Fogg Museum at Harvard and completed it at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, earning her degree in 1938 and receiving her Ph.D in folk art in 1939.

<sup>28</sup> Pamela Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 51. Smart goes into greater detail about why MacAgy's contract was not renewed with the CAA and, additionally, why she was not offered a position at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 52. In February, 1959, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston hosted one of MacAgy's most acclaimed shows of Pacific Island and African art, *Totems Not Taboo*, that attempted to reveal affinities between the primitive and the modern and was another de Menil sponsored exhibition for the opening of the new Mies van der Rohe-designed addition, Cullinan hall.

<sup>30</sup> The entire collection, which belonged to the de Menils, would eventually be subsumed into the Menil Collection.

that the loaned works being exhibited in the show emphasized the kinds of objects to be added to the “teaching collection,” which foreshadows the emphasis both medieval art, specifically Byzantine, and modern art have in the Menil Collection.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from their friendship, MacAgy’s immersive and theatrical curatorial methods attracted the de Menils, who saw her ability to produce “aesthetic domains” that highlighted “art’s efficacy” as harmoniously corresponding with their own initiatives.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, according to Smart, MacAgy’s “ability to produce enthrallment - along with her verve and charisma,” was, “at the heart of the strong affinity she and Dominique shared.”<sup>33</sup> The suggested “enthrallment” in her exhibitions came from her curatorial preference for theatricality, such as dramatic lighting or the incorporation of props. She also favored thematic hangings, which focused on an idea, material elements, or production methods that related works of art through juxtaposition, creating intrigue and dialogue. Thematic exhibitions, like *Islands Beyond*, differ from the more traditional, historicized exhibitions, which often rely on chronological hangings. Dominique de Menil praised MacAgy’s ability to seduce the viewer into a space and the restraint to let the space be subservient to the work saying, “Each of her installations produced an atmospheric miracle which set the work of art in such a light that it would shine and talk to anyone who would care to look and listen.”<sup>34</sup> In 1964 when MacAgy suddenly passed away and Dominique de Menil assumed MacAgy’s former position as director of the university’s art department and began to curate her own shows, a role that continued in

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Jermaine MacAgy to Adolph Loewi, July 3, 1958, *Islands Beyond*, Menil Archives.

<sup>32</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. Dominique quoted from 1968.

various settings until her own death in 1997.<sup>35</sup> When approaching display methods for an exhibition, it is clear that both women shared similar values when thinking about a show, but foremost was the “production of an aesthetic experience”, which in *Islands Beyond* meant that a specific atmosphere needed to be created in order to emphasize the possibility for a spiritual experience when viewing both the ecclesiastical works and modern works in relation to one another.<sup>36</sup> The relationship of the two was central, so MacAgy utilized juxtaposition and theatrical gimmicks to create the space where the medieval-modern dialogue could unfold within an enhanced exhibition space.

**Figure 5:** *Islands Beyond* with candelabras lit for the opening night.



For seventeen days in October 1958, the exhibition inhabited the second story of Jones Hall in a space used as the campus art gallery until 1970 when it was transformed into a black box theatre. Six, grainy, black and white photos allow for a general comprehension of the exhibition’s display methods and overall atmosphere while also

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<sup>35</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, mentioned on pp. 59-61.

<sup>36</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 7.

reiterating the location on a college campus. The low ceilings, canned lights, linoleum floors, and double leaf, steel doors with an exit sign perched above emphasized the functional, academic space compared to the more familiar display tropes found in a white walled galleries or museum at the time. A mixture of brick, white stucco, and wood paneling make up the interior walls, and natural lighting enters the room from floor to ceiling windows overlooking the quad. The photos suggest that two, most likely connected, spaces were used to display the works. The larger room had a free-standing plinth in the center, possibly the visual metaphor for the “island” in *Islands Beyond*.

**Figure 6:** *Islands Beyond* with "St. Martin and the Beggar" on the plinth, Léger and Albers in the background.



The plinth had enough surface area to display an ecclesiastical sculpture of “St. Martin and the beggar” (Germany, c. 1520), a large potted plant, and exhibition brochures, which are neatly stacked to the right of St. Martin. Fernand Léger’s long and narrow *Mural Painting* (1924/25) hung behind the plinth, in the center of the far wall hung, and was flanked by two wooden, four and half foot tall, fifteenth-century Italian sculptures

entitled *Angels of the Annunciation*. Léger's *Composition Circulaire* (1947) was on the wall to the right of one angel, and its swirling, mechanical shapes created a vortex of movement that contrasted to Josef Albers' simplified progression of the geometric square in *Homage to the Square: Expectant* (1958) to the left of the other angel. *Painted Mural* was one of eleven different iterations Léger made when he was greatly influenced by De Stijl. They remain his most abstract works. *Painted Mural*'s vertical shapes contained both the movement and stillness of the works displayed on either side of it.

**Figure 7:** *Islands Beyond* with crucifix and Rene Magritte's *Origins of Language*.



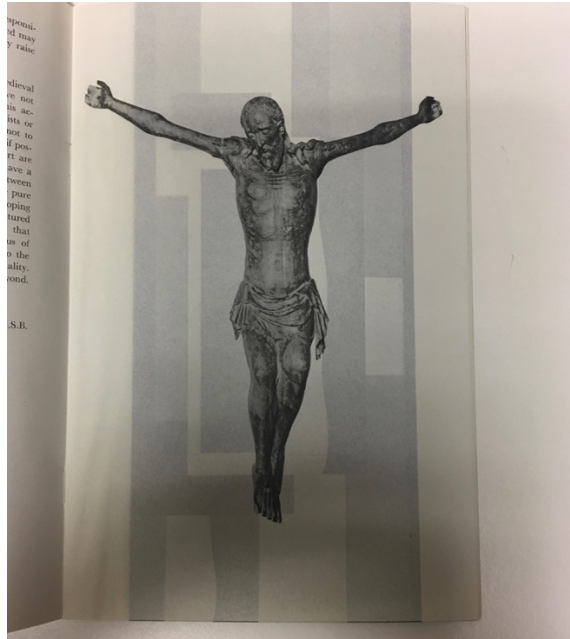
This grouping of works was mirrored by a similarly configured display across the room on the opposite wall (Fig. 7). A five-foot tall, fourteenth-century crucifix was centered high on the wall, Christ's arms almost grazing the ceiling, and René Magritte's *The Origins of Language* (1955) hung directly underneath the cross with a wooden sculpture of the Virgin Mary to one side and St. John to the other. Magritte's painting depicts a carefully formed lone rock in the foreground with the ocean and a large expanse

of sky and clouds in the background. In the room, it could appear that Christ's limp body on the cross floated over Magritte's imagined, yet seemingly earthly world.

MacAgy, who decided on the brochure layout mimics the exhibition's juxtapositions in the catalog, where it is clear she is not attempting to present an art historical narrative, but instead, groups the works to create visual analogies. For example Léger's *Mural Painting* and the fifteenth century crucifix, which hang opposite one another in the gallery are layered on top of each other in the brochure. Christ's body hovers in the white space of the page, his arms extended. His body is on a piece of transparent paper over Léger's mural, which is printed on a solid piece of paper, and Christ's cruciform shape corresponds to the geometric right angles in Léger's mural which is visible underneath. It is clear to see that the close proximity and intentional juxtaposition of the ecclesiastical sculptures and modern works, which hung above, below, to the side, and across the room from each other. Their intimate display was possibly an odd and even capricious juxtaposition of two radically distinct historical eras. However, art historical accuracy was not the exhibition's aim. The display and theatrics embodied an atmosphere that was meant to cultivate a discourse between medieval and modern art's spiritual qualities, which the exhibition organizers thought appeared in their shared flatness, hieratic compositions and otherworldly depictions. Magritte's *The Great Style* (1951) is higher on the wall to the left of the crucifix and to the right is an unidentifiable painting, but possibly a work by Paul Klee. Apart from these inclusions of Surrealism, the exhibition has a clear bent towards abstract modern works. Including Magritte seems incompatible, however, his paintings similarly diverge from naturalism into a generic, representational

style of carefully outlined, archetypal figures and objects. The subject matter reinforces an otherworldly realm, which helps the paintings fit with the overall desire for the show.

**Figure 8:** Interior image from *Islands Beyond* brochure with the crucifix and Léger's *Mural Painting*.



The exhibition committee clearly chose to juxtapose medieval sculpture, rather than medieval paintings, with modern abstract paintings for *Islands Beyond*. There is one photo from the show where an oil painting of Christ's ascension into heaven is propped against an easel in one of the gallery spaces, however, this is the only visible painting from an earlier period. The Council's desire to emphasize sculpture was possibly driven by a desire for spiritual amplification through objects that historically induced a variety of intensified feelings from the medieval viewer. Medieval objects were often held in prayer or kissed, and many were destroyed out of fear of idolatry. Modern abstract art has also been attributed with engendering a variety of emotions from overwhelming peace to rage that has caused many works to be vandalized, like Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* series or one of Mark Rothko's Seagram murals. In his book *The Intelligence of*



*Art* (1999), Thomas Crow addresses medieval representative sculptural objects, saying they “played an essential part as apparitions of a higher reality (that belief caused the work to flourish but could put the physical survival of these objects at risk from iconoclasm and imperil the entire cultural edifice that sustained their exceptional character).”<sup>37</sup> Crow recalls the possible experiences a medieval viewer might have had in front of a medieval devotional object and the risks facing these exposed, often manhandled objects. However, it was the object’s figural representation that gave it power and was seen as igniting or encouraging spiritual feelings and orienting the viewer to worship and prayer. The object reminded them of the mysteries of the other worldly, of their faith.

Crow also alludes to iconoclasm, where iconographic sculpture elicited destructive responses due to the view that the object could function as an idol. Contemporary medieval art historian Herbert L. Kessler has written extensively on spiritual seeing in relation to medieval objects and how a medieval viewer may have reconciled their reality with the other-worldly or the un-representational divine (i.e. a divine reality that cannot be effectively represented in tangible terms). Naturalism in medieval art was often seen as an attempt to copy God’s created nature so was therefore idolatrous. Kessler speaks more to medieval paintings, but he proposes, as Crow does, that idealization, stylization, or illusionistic techniques were intentionally used in certain cases, and more broadly throughout the Middle Ages, to create less naturalistic images. Less naturalism distanced an image from idolatry. Additionally, the materiality of the medieval object—its function, weight, texture, capabilities (i.e. to open or close)

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Crow, *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina), 79.

reminded the viewer that the work was just an object or image, not something to be venerated. In this exhibition, the same power attributed to the medieval object was seemingly attributed to the modern abstract works. It seem to have been the organizer's view that the modern viewer could spiritually engage with modern abstraction as the medieval viewer had with medieval sculptures. The exhibition's juxtaposition of the two periods reinforces the abstract nature of religious belief and how the mind is unable to rationally comprehend the medieval or modern work's full meanings.

**Figure 9:** *Islands Beyond* with candelabras lit. Léger, Mural Painting, 1924/25 (center), Léger, *Composition Circulaire*, 1947 (right), Albers, *Homage to the Square: Expectant*, 1958 (left), and *Angels of the Annunciation* to the left and right.



MacAgy's efforts culminated with lighting effects and other stage-like inclusions. Most prominently, the tall, minimalistic candelabras that illuminate the exhibition space in two photos recall a traditional, ecclesiastical setting (Fig. 9).<sup>38</sup> The modern candelabras are darkly colored and appear to be average human height, distributed around the room in sets of two, one on each side of particular works of art, mimicking the ambiance

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<sup>38</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 63. These candelabras are now used during events in the Rothko Chapel.

candelabras create by a church altar. In a letter from MacAgy to Dominique de Menil in August of 1958, MacAgy said she and Howard (most likely Houston architect Howard Barnstone—a friend and advisor to the exhibition) “had a good session on the designing of the candlesticks,”<sup>39</sup> indicating they were created specifically for *Islands Beyond*. They indicate that a specifically religious mood was desired for *Islands Beyond*. The candles were lit for the opening evening and were meant to enhance the relationship the works had, or were seen as having, to the spiritual. When the candelabras are adjacent to works by Léger, Magritte, or Klee, they shift the modern artworks’ context. Their closeness to the paintings, which seems dangerous when lit, is intimate, recalling the warm, flickering glow of a religious space—a space one would not normally see modern avant-garde paintings. Next to the religious sculptures, the candelabras remind the viewer of the ecclesiastical objects’ original, religious setting and their sacred, devotional purpose for their Christian audience.<sup>40</sup> Their presence associates the modern works with a sacred atmosphere and, more so, with the ecclesiastical sculptures that are already known as having been sacred to Christian communities.

MacAgy incorporated further theatrical elements in the exhibition display to create a specific atmosphere, which, in her mind, should not overwhelm the objects, but enhance them. Aside from the candelabras, she placed five large, potted split leaf philodendrons around, and a few on top of, the central plinth with “St. Martin and the beggar.” The sculpture was encircled by leafy plumage, and while this feature may

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<sup>39</sup> Letter, Jermayne MacAgy to Dominique de Menil, August 1958, *Islands Beyond*, Menil Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Letter, Jermayne MacAgy to Reverend Flahiff, November 5, 1958, *Islands Beyond*. MacAgy says that, “It was a very beautiful opening with the paintings and sculptures lit by a hundred candles.”

distract from the work of art, it also seems to associate the inanimate subject of St. Martin and the beggar with living, organic matter. This possibly allows the viewer to reevaluate the status of this static object. MacAgy only incorporates nature here in the center of the room, possibly in an attempt to surround the central “island” plinth with tropical decorations. Including plant life may have been MacAgy’s continuation of a more common curatorial motif seen in other museums at the time, and it is one that reappears in her installations for *The Disquieting Muse, Surrealism* (January-February 1958, CAA) where small, potted cacti sit on the floor under large, Surrealist paintings, and in *From Gauguin to Gorky* (October-December 1960, MFAH) as well as *Totems Not Taboo* (1959, MFAH), where numerous palm-like plants that create a somewhat tropical atmosphere.<sup>41</sup> MacAgy’s display methods in the gallery space were essential in creating an atmosphere where viewers could engage with the materiality of the painting and sculptures and allow the works to visually seduce them. This seduction was intended to lead the viewer into a transcendent experience, or transport them out of their reality into a different setting, like a chapel with lit candles.

Dominique de Menil held MacAgy’s curatorial methods in high regard and credits her friend as the inspiration behind her own career in curating.<sup>42</sup> She described MacAgy as having magician-like qualities and being a “master at seduction” capable of casting a “spell on practically anything...Nothing was too humble, too banal or too corny to be

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<sup>41</sup> University of St. Thomas (Houston, Tex.), *A Life Illustrated by an Exhibition, November 1968-January 1969*, 35, 45, 47. See the referenced pages for photos of MacAgy’s installations. *A Life Illustrated by an Exhibition*, (November 1968-January 1969) was hosted at University of St. Thomas and honored the work of Jermayne MacAgy, who had passed away four years before.

<sup>42</sup> See Smart, *Sacred Modern*, pp. 59-63 on Dominique de Menil’s career as a curator beginning after MacAgy’s death.

excluded from her phantasmagorias.”<sup>43</sup> Like a stage director, MacAgy focused on dramatic lighting effects, as described with the candelabras in *Islands Beyond*, and was forthright about her use of drama and theatrics when conceiving a space both visually and spatially, describing her intent:

To create an aura, an atmosphere belonging personally to the objects, rather than merely building an edifice against which the objects look well...And yet this is not to say that the settings should not look well...but [they should be] at all times subservient—acting with and always evoking the innateness of the things exhibited (1953).<sup>44</sup>

Her priority in exhibitions is clarified here: the space should complement yet submit to the objects rather than the objects submit to an overwhelming space. From the descriptions of *Islands Beyond*, this priority may seem to give way to theatrics, however, while the candelabras are theatrical gimmicks, they act for the ecclesiastical sculptures, evoking the objects’ original lives as devotional tools. The sculptures’ “innateness” could refer to their spiritual qualities, which are deeply tied to the iconography and the object’s original devotional purpose.

MacAgy’s priority for *Islands Beyond*’s atmosphere to complement the object is complicated with the modern works. How would a viewer understand the “innateness” of an *Homage to a Square* by Albers in this atmosphere? And how do candles enhance a viewer’s understanding of this abstract work? For the organizers, the goal was to create a poetic space not to historicize or periodize the art. In multiple letters between MacAgy and lenders to the show, she expressed how carefully the contemporary paintings were chosen for the exhibition, describing them as paintings of “poetical infinity.”<sup>45</sup> She

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<sup>43</sup> University of St. Thomas (Houston, Tex.), *A Life Illustrated by an Exhibition, November 1968-January 1969*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> University of St. Thomas (Houston, Tex.), *A Life Illustrated by an Exhibition*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Document 07-97, Menil Archives.

expands on this term in a letter to Rev. George Bernard Flahiff, Superior-General of the Basilian Fathers, who wrote the introductory essay for the exhibition catalog, describing the exhibition organizers' hopes for *Islands Beyond*:

Combined with the ecclesiastical sculpture - most of which will be medieval - there will be hung twenty to thirty modern paintings, which will incorporate beautiful color and a kind of limitless or enveloping space. None of them will be "shocking" to the senses, but rather will be extremely seductive. These paintings, as well as the sculpture, we hope will produce an effect of the remarkable world beyond the reality of man. We are calling this exhibition "Islands Beyond." We hope that the sense of infinitude and the everlasting will be projected to whomever will visit this exhibition.<sup>46</sup>

This description is packed with allusive language, however, in sum, the organizers of the exhibition hoped the chosen contemporary paintings lured the viewer into a transcendent experience through their material qualities—color and paint application—which suggested unending, all-encompassing space. The organizers hoped that the object's visual seduction and the complimentary gallery atmosphere would be powerful enough to suspend the viewer's rational conceptions and allow him/her to sense something in the object's inner nature that was related to an otherworldly feeling, which MacAgy seems to equate to a heavenly experience, using words with religious connotations like "everlasting" and "infinitude". MacAgy's priority is to regard the work as a material object. Through its material nature, the work can function as a vehicle for an overall aesthetic experience, where the senses are engaged, rationalities are subdued, and the viewer may possibly have a transcendent experience. The space should only complement the object's possibility to transport its viewer, not supersede it, which was also why MacAgy avoided using didactic labels—in *Islands Beyond* there are only tombstone

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<sup>46</sup> Document 06/0111, Menil Archives.

labels in the brochure accompanied by Flahiff's short introduction. In MacAgy and Dominique de Menil's opinion, interpretation distracted from the viewer's pure, uninhibited encounter with the work of art, and these are views Dominique de Menil carried into her conceptions for the Menil Collection's galleries. This view contrasts with the more typical didactic curatorial approach, which often utilizes labels or chronological hangings that tend to subdue the aesthetic in favor of interpretation.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Sacred Medieval-Modern**

The dominant voices behind *Islands Beyond*—Dominique de Menil, MacAgy, Flahiff, Marie Alain-Couturier, and Jacques Maritain—all contributed differently to the exhibition's embodiment of the "medieval-modern" intellectual discourse. MacAgy created the atmosphere, described above, where the medieval and modern could be encountered, and facilitated the possibility for the viewers' spiritual engagement with the works. While Dominique de Menil's correspondence pertaining to the exhibition is limited, we can surmise that MacAgy's correspondence arguably echoes Dominique de Menil's aesthetic views—this can be seen in the previous quote from MacAgy's letter to Flahiff.<sup>48</sup> MacAgy uses descriptions like "limitless," "shocking to the senses," "seductive," and a "remarkable world beyond the reality of man"—all language that

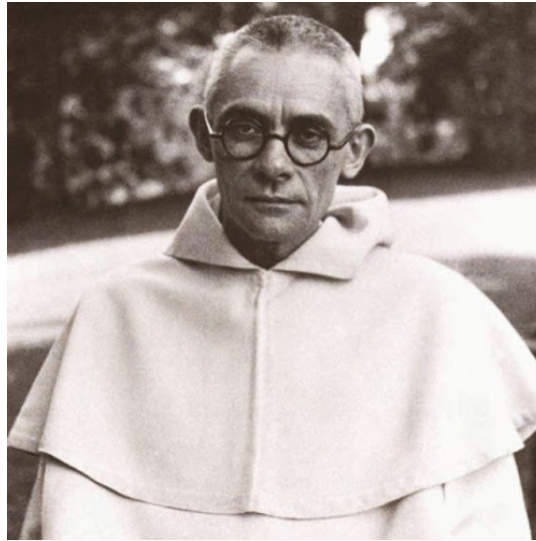
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<sup>47</sup> Alfred Barr, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1929 to 1943, was known to use didactic approaches in exhibitions (i.e. his chart of modern art from the 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition that showed the stylistic progressions in modern art), as a way to educate the viewer about the new modern styles.

<sup>48</sup> The *Islands Beyond* archives in the Menil Collection include photos, logistical information about loans, the exhibition brochure, and minimal correspondence between MacAgy and Dominique de Menil, between MacAgy and lenders to the show and Father Flahiff.

seems to stem from Dominique de Menil's own Catholic beliefs. MacAgy's thematic hangings, theatrical effects, submission to objects, and anti-didacticism remained huge influences in Dominique de Menil's career. However, the latter's views of art as having redemptive powers—not necessarily spiritual redemption as understood in Christianity, but a moral redemption—recast her shows to “serve a very distinctive Catholic aesthetic and moral temperament” that stemmed from her views of ecumenicism.<sup>49</sup> Dominique de Menil was in pursuit of what Smart calls “moral activism,” which best emerged in installations that let the viewer “mutually interrogate” an object and have a “visceral response that would exceed and perhaps subvert, intellectual readings.”<sup>50</sup>

**Figure 10:** Father Marie-Alain Couturier.



This conviction to create a space that gave the viewer freedom to privilege their own response when engaging with work, rather than give way to pedagogical interpretation, stems from MacAgy, however, it was primarily inspired by another key figure in Dominique de Menil's life: the Dominican priest Father Marie-Alain Couturier.

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<sup>49</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 61, 63.



(Fig. 10) His voice dominantly hovers over *Islands Beyond*. Dominique de Menil wanted a quote from the priest to open the exhibition brochure, and translated from French it reads: “With all the morality of the world we will not make an ounce of beauty. With all the truth of the world, we will not make an ounce of beauty.”<sup>51</sup> These words criticize the possibly self-righteous view Couturier thought the Catholic Church was perpetuating—that only the morally upstanding, those who contain the truth (or the Truth) are capable of producing beauty. Couturier’s life, writings, and work attempt to merge the sacred, which can be defined as the Church’s beliefs and traditions, with the profane, being contemporary society. In the introduction to a book of Couturier’s most seminal writings called *Sacred Art*, Dominique de Menil describes the priest’s pioneering approach to modern art when the Church had dismissed it as too secular and his commitment to befriending and supporting modern artists, which is seen most prominently in his commissions for church art.<sup>52</sup> He worked with Henri Matisse on the Vence Chapel (1951), with the artists Pierre Bonnard, Léger, George Braque, George Rouault, Marc Chagall, and Jacques Lipchitz at a church in Assy, France (1950) and Audincourt, France (1951), and with the architect, Le Corbusier at a chapel in Ronchamp, France (1954).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dominique de Menil letter to MacAgy, Aug. 1958. *Avec toute la morale du monde on ne fere pas un atome de beauté. Avec toute la vérité du monde on ne fera pas encore un atome de beauté.*

<sup>52</sup> See Helfenstein, *Art and Activism*, 122. The de Menils said Couturier converted them to the power of art, and while the priest was in exile in New York during the war, the three visited the Museum of Modern Art where Couturier exposed them to Picasso, Mondrian, and others. In 1945, Couturier encouraged the couple’s first three purchases for their collection: a Cezanne watercolor, and a Leger painting and Braque painting. Additionally, his church projects in France ultimately inspired the de Menils to commission the Rothko Chapel in 1964, where Couturier’s sacred modern vision is honored.

<sup>53</sup> These projects received recognition from two consecutive directors at MoMA, Alfred Barr, who considered Léger’s stained-glass windows in Audincourt to be his masterpiece, and William Rubin, who gave a lecture that was eventually published, entitled *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy*. Meyer Schapiro also addresses the church of Assy in his essay “Church Art” (1963) in *Worldview in Painting—Art and Society: Selected Papers* (1999).

For Dominique de Menil, Couturier's words, quoted above, encapsulated what the Arts Council's efforts should be at St. Thomas, and even though the quote does not appear in the final draft of the exhibition brochure, his voice and influence permeates the entire exhibition, especially his emphatic insistence on the "primacy" of "poetry over pedagogy." Couturier argued with his co-editor at the French journal *L'art sacré*, saying "You tell me that the two are not reconcilable; but you know perfectly well that concretely that is not so: poetry is always sacrificed to pedagogy...[F]or once it is going to be the other way round: pedagogy will be sacrificed to poetry."<sup>54</sup> In Couturier's view, didactics would introduce reason, which only inhibit the artwork's ability to speak on its own to the human senses. This stance is made manifest through MacAgy's curatorial methods in *Islands Beyond*'s—the lack of labels, juxtapositions and placement, and theatrical aura were all meant to induce a sense of visual poetry.<sup>55</sup>

It will be necessary to return to Couturier's life and influence, however Flahiff's introduction to *Islands Beyond* needs to be examined since he is the only figure associated with the exhibition who directly mentioned an art historical approach to the medieval-modern in the introduction. His words are the intellectual entry point into this exhibition's relationship to the medieval-modern discourse. Flahiff's own priestly vocation and life in academia are deeply intertwined with medieval studies, however he was not a medieval art historian. He attended St. Basil's Seminary in Toronto and was ordained into the priesthood in 1930, eventually teaching history and art at Toronto's Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies until 1954 when he was elected superior general

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<sup>54</sup> Smart, "Aesthetics as a Vocation," 28.

<sup>55</sup> The limited didacticism is still upheld in the Menil Collection today where there only tombstone labels in exhibitions and the gallery spaces.

of the entire Basilian congregation. In 1957, Flahiff accepted the position of Chairman of the Arts Council at the University of St. Thomas, even though he lived in Toronto and could only travel to the Houston once a year.<sup>56</sup> His position on the council was, most likely, why he was chosen to write the introductory essay for the exhibition, along with his knowledge in medieval history. In the beginning of the introduction, Flahiff reiterated the University of St. Thomas's institutional goals:

The University fondly hopes that graduates who leave its halls may, thanks to adequate knowledge, deep understanding and mature wisdom, be capable of directing the work of their hands and their minds, as well as their very selves, to their own greater good, to that of their neighbor and to the glory of God.<sup>57</sup>

His words not only reminded visitors to the exhibition that *Islands Beyond* was located on a Catholic university campus where there was a clear religious and moral intention for the life and education of its students, but also reminded readers of the unique identity this exhibition had due to its location. This identity was deeply connected to religious traditions and beliefs that informed, as has already been seen with Dominique de Menil, the intent its organizers had for the works of art on display. Flahiff said “It is the prayer of those responsible for the present exhibition that the works of art that are here displayed may not fail their purpose and that the joy afforded by their beauty may raise hearts and minds to a Beauty beyond.”<sup>58</sup> His immediate intent was to clarify that the chosen works should elevate the viewer towards a spiritual experience that was associated with the divine, which he signified by capitalizing the second use of the word “beauty.”

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<sup>56</sup> Minutes from Arts Council Meeting, October 23, 1957.

<sup>57</sup> G.B. Flahiff, Forward to *Islands Beyond*, Catalogue of an exhibition at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, October 2-19, 1958 (Houston: University of St. Thomas), 4.

<sup>58</sup> Flahiff, Forward to *Islands Beyond*, 6.

Throughout the introduction, Flahiff attempted to create an affinity between the University's religious identity and the artwork's capability to access the "invisible realms"—or the religious beliefs that are attached to unseeable truths.<sup>59</sup> As Flahiff addressed the art in the show and connected it to spirituality, he seems to allude to abstract art more, especially when he said, "It is a veritable 'incarnation' of a glimpse of reality that the artist has caught and that he has to express not in a logical statement but only in work of art through a material medium like sound, lines, colors, or masses."<sup>60</sup> This indirect reference to art does not portray reality or express a logical narrative, but points to material as the conveyor of meaning, which is an idea most related to the abstract paintings in the show.

It is through this emphasis on abstract work and spirituality that Flahiff finally alluded to the medieval-modern in the last paragraph. This reinforces that adding scholarship to the art historical discourse of the medieval-modern was not MacAgy, Dominique de Menil, or Flahiff's focus for the exhibition. Instead, as seen, MacAgy and Dominique de Menil seemed more concerned with creating a specific atmosphere meant to induce feelings of spiritualism in the show. Flahiff confirmed this emphasis:

The pieces have not been selected for the value of the paintings themselves, real though this actually is, nor with any thought of illustrating the work of particular artists or of particular countries; they are not intended to instruct and certainly not to distract. They are there primarily to aid in creating an atmosphere, and if possible, to immerse the spectator in the same.<sup>61</sup>

His words show even further that the organizers were deliberately avoiding historical contextualization, chronological sequence, or art historical interpretation. The focus was

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>60</sup> Flahiff, Forward to *Islands Beyond*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 5.

atmosphere. However, since Dominique de Menil approached Flahiff to write the introduction, it could be assumed they were in deeper communication about the art historical meaning of the show. Additionally, it is known Dominique de Menil corresponded and regularly met in person with Couturier and the art historian, Meyer Schapiro, both of whom were influential figures in the early medieval-modern discourse.<sup>62</sup> Flahiff does assure his readers this transhistorical juxtaposition was a choice “made with full deliberation.”<sup>63</sup> Yet it is intriguing that neither MacAgy, Dominique de Menil, or any person in correspondence with MacAgy mentions an art historical connection between the ecclesiastical sculpture and modern artworks.<sup>64</sup>

Flahiff does claim a relationship in the foreword to the catalogue when he says, “Modern art and medieval art are not as far apart as the centuries lead us to believe; indeed they have a greater affinity with each other than either has with the art that went between them. The appeal of both is clearly to the spirit as well as the eye.”<sup>65</sup> While this reference is short and vague, he recognizes that modern art is closer to medieval art than any other period before it, thus alluding to one of the primary connections scholars have made between the medieval and modern periods: their shared tendency towards a visual flatness. Flahiff alludes to both periods’ abstraction and comparisons not only between

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<sup>62</sup> The de Menils heard Schapiro give lectures at Columbia and the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1940s, and John de Menil brought him to Houston in 1957 to speak at the American Federation of Arts along with Marcel Duchamp, James John Sweeney, and others. The couple also reached out to Schapiro for advice on art history faculty for the University of St. Thomas. Eventually Schapiro’s PhD student Bertrand Davezac, whose specialty was in early French medieval art, came to Houston to teach at Rice and was later appointed curator of the Byzantine collection at the Menil. See Helfenstein, *Art and Activism*, 53, 293 about the American Federation of Arts and about Davezac.

<sup>63</sup> Flahiff, Foreword to *Islands Beyond*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> This is just in reference to what is available in the *Islands Beyond* archives at the Menil Collection.

<sup>65</sup> Flahiff, Foreword to *Islands Beyond*, 6.

the formal elements of a medieval sculpture and a modern painting, but also medieval subject matter and the modern viewing experience:

The pure beauty of color in the paintings of the exhibition and the limitless, enveloping space suggested by their abstract forms, far from clashing with the sculptured figures, harmonize instead with the timelessness of the spiritual realities that the religious personages are depicted as experiencing. It was the genius of medieval art in its best periods to rise above the particular and to give to the human figures it represented an ideal and, to that extent, an abstract quality. They are quite at home amid paintings that point them to realities beyond.<sup>66</sup>

Flahiff identified the medieval ecclesiastical sculptures, more precisely, their figural representations, as timeless, which seems to suggest that these objects cross over the periodizing boundaries which so often restricts transhistorical interpretations in art historical scholarship or in exhibitions. Viewing these medieval works as timeless creates an intriguing status of de-contextualization where material and form take precedence over iconography. In this state, the medieval works can be associated more closely with the modern works since both styles have an abstract quality, which those in charge of this exhibition believe can transport the viewer out of his/her own reality. Flahiff's language remained elusive when he claims medieval art had better periods, and, furthermore, when he says that these better periods represented human figures in an ideal, abstract way. It is possible he is referring to Byzantine and Romanesque styles which are more associated with pure, two-dimensional forms in static, hieratic positions.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Flahiff, Foreword to *Islands Beyond*, 6.

<sup>67</sup> See Marian Bleeker, "Romanesque," in *Studies in Iconography* 33, (2012), on Romanesque art's greater two dimensionality and non-naturalistic style. For additional insight on this topic see Conrad Rudolph, "Introduction: A Sense of Loss: An Overview of the Historiography of Romanesque and Gothic Art," in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 1-43; Colum Hourihane, "Romanesque Sculpture in Northern Europe" in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 314-334, and Linda Seidel, "Formalism," in *A Companion to Medieval Art:*

## French Catholic Revivalism and the Stance against Naturalism

Flahiff and Dominique de Menil's aesthetic views stem from a revitalized discourse on spirituality in art and from a revival of medieval philosophical views in the first decade of the twentieth century and prolifically during the interwar years (1919-1933). In France, this revival was called the *renouveau catholique*.<sup>68</sup> A surge of Catholic revivalists, consisting primarily of lay persons, emerged in 1910 in response to Pope Pius X's "pastoral charge" that every priest sign the "Oath Against Modernism", which condemned modernity's liberal progression towards secularism, which Schloesser describes as, "the belief that human beings could control their destiny through scientific rationalism and that social and moral progress were inevitable."<sup>69</sup> Modernity's trust in rationalism as a moral guide, a widely embraced idea since the Enlightenment, led to the Pope's decree in 1910 that Catholics should rise above this modern thinking rather than engage with it. In the 1920s, France was still grappling with World War I's destruction, and in these interwar recovery years notable intellectuals and acquaintances of the de Menils, like the French Dominican friars, Couturier, Yves Congar, and the French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, all key figures in the *renouveau catholique* who began to encourage, with greater urgency, a reconciliation between contemporary society and the traditions of the Church. Schloesser characterizes this "off-modern" tension:

The modern world had excluded religious belief; Catholicism had excluded the modern world. However, by recovering and recasting...the Church's own heritage—Catholic revivalists could re-imagine the

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*Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 106-128.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Post War Paris (1919-1933)* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2005), 9.

<sup>69</sup> Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 9.

relationship between religion and culture. Catholicism and “modern civilization”—eternal and avant-garde, grace and grotesque, mystical and dissonant—could now be seen in categories other than simple competition: form actualizing matter, grace perfecting nature, substance underlying surface.<sup>70</sup>

A group of Catholics were not willing to abandon the rich traditions or doctrines of their faith, but simultaneously desired to engage with modern culture through their writing and art, so they attempted to merge their religious traditions with the secular world.<sup>71</sup> The Church had contended with both the secular and sacred communities for centuries before, and this tension is often represented in the compositional or iconographic choices in art commissioned by the Church beginning in the Middle Ages.<sup>72</sup>

The de Menils embraced the mindset of their fellow Catholic revivalists, ultimately hoping to reconcile the contradiction they saw between religion or the sacred and modernity. In addition, the de Menils were possibly hoping to quell doubt about the legitimacy of modern aesthetics and sell the Houston audiences on modern art. Their keen desire to bridge the dichotomies between religion and culture occurred alongside a broader interest among artists and philosophers to reintroduce spirituality into art in the early twentieth century. Intellectual and theological discourses manifested simultaneously as there was an attempt to justify or explain avant-garde art’s increasing tendency towards abstraction in comparison to other periods’ greater naturalism, and the growing

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<sup>70</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 25.

<sup>71</sup> Georges Rouault is an example of a Catholic artist in the early twentieth century whose subject matter and formal qualities dealt with the sacred and grotesque, the mystical and the dissonant. Stephen Schloesser wrote extensively about these characteristics in Rouault’s art in *Mystic Masque: Semblance and Reality in Georges Rouault (1871-1958)* (2008), as did Rouault’s friend Jacques Maritain in *Georges Rouault* (1951).

<sup>72</sup> The tension between religious and secular is Schapiro’s main focus in his examination of the Theophilus relief at Souillac, which will be examined further later on.



belief among Catholic scholars that non-religious, abstract art could contain spirituality and/or spiritual symbolism.<sup>73</sup>

In addressing the *renouveau catholique* movement, Schloesser points to the mid-nineteenth century as the moment when the modern Church shifted perspectives and began to express negative feelings towards naturalism. There was a generalized view among Catholics that “naturalist realism” (as used in art and literature especially) was a “laicist ideology” (i.e. a secularism that blatantly attempted to distance religion or the Church).<sup>74</sup> Since the Renaissance, the Church had favored naturalism as the preeminent and progressive style, which was due, in part, to the narrower gap between the Church and the secular world, possibly due to feudalism’s demise. The philosophical, artistic, and secular leanings were towards the common man, towards humanism. Now, in the nineteenth century, as the Church, the papacy and general lay communities, continued to witness the lasting repercussions of the Enlightenment and of anti-monarchy, anti-Church, and anti-institution revolutions in Europe, its taste in naturalistic and realistic art began to regress. Schloesser says the secular sphere was dominated by a realist vision that excluded everything that could not be seen, so the Church responded by proclaiming an eternalist vision, which privileged the invisible truths that could not be perceived by

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<sup>73</sup> Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain in *Art and Scholasticism* (1935), and art historian, Wilhelm Worringer in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), address the possibility of spiritualism in abstraction, which scholar Henk van Os says was a specific response to John Ruskin’s view in the nineteenth century that the divine could only be experienced through detailed representations of nature. Additionally, artists like Wassily Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich address and from their metaphysical systems in their writing and artwork, greatly influencing the progression of abstraction and the resurgence of spiritualism in art—a vein of thought and style that arguably led to Abstract Expressionism. See Van Os, “The Black Death and Sienese Painting: A Problem of Interpretation,” in *Art History*, Vol. 4, no. 2, (1981): 239-240.

<sup>74</sup> Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 18-19.

the human eye. As Marxism gained popularity in France in the mid-nineteenth century, Schloesser says there was a vocalized need in art to “depict life’s underdogs, both in violent moments at the barricades as well as during the duller stretches of everyday life,” and thus Realism emerged to represent the darker reality of the working class.<sup>75</sup> Gustave Courbet insisted that art:

Must put away the theological and metaphysical toys of youth: Above all, the art of painting can only consist of the representation of *real and existing* things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting.<sup>76</sup>

Courbet’s realist view was a progressive ideology fed by Marxism and his support of the reoccurring revolutions in France in the mid-nineteenth century. The artist saw abstract thoughts and objects as incompatible with the historical moment when the language of painting needed to represent what was real, tangible, and current in the culture.

In response to the growing emphasis on realism, the Catholic eternalists revived an interest in medieval art and philosophy, which the *renouveau catholique* adopted and both Maritain and Couturier became essential proponents since they viewed the formal and spiritual aspects of medieval art as antecedents to modernist abstraction. Maritain (Fig. 11) was a Neo-Thomist philosopher, who reworked medieval scholasticism into the modern context and praised medieval art for its greater spiritual effectiveness over art from the Renaissance. Like Dominique de Menil, Maritain had converted from Protestantism to Catholicism in his early adult life, and he became a pivotal voice in the

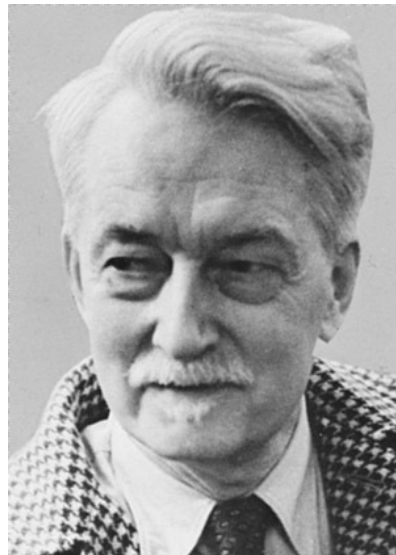
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<sup>75</sup> Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 19.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 19-20. Emphasis Schloesser. See 20-22 for Schloesser’s discussion of Courbet’s view of realism in art and his description of naturalism in literature in the mid-nineteenth century and uses the examples of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Émile Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) as naturalist novels in that they were attempting to show the dark and ugly side of French society.

*renouveau catholique*, through which the de Menils first became familiar with his writing and his most well-known publication, *Art and Scholasticism* (1946), which appeared in its first iteration in 1923. Maritain would argue that the shifting humanistic taste in the Renaissance had diminished the spiritual effect of art by favoring the three dimensional perspective and overly sensuous style, which he saw as theatrical deception: “In the sixteenth century deceit installed itself in painting, which began to like science for its own sake and to give the *illusion* of nature, to make us believe that in front of a picture we were in front of the landscapes or subject painted, not in front of a picture.”<sup>77</sup>

**Figure 11:** Jacques Maritain.



Maritain saw artistic style in the Renaissance as attempting to copy nature by rationalizing its qualities. A Renaissance artist, rather than humbly undertaking an imitation of reality as the medieval artist had done, deceived their audience with literal translations that mimicked the social emphasis on humanism in the Renaissance period. While these views diminish the vast, complex social and artistic contexts in both the medieval and

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<sup>77</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 42.

Renaissance period, the elucidate why these Catholic modernists had to reach back before the Renaissance to medieval art, which had its heritage in the hieratic style of Byzantine art.<sup>78</sup> Maritain viewed the medieval style as “naturally, instinctively, protected against naturalism” since it did not attempt to perfectly imitate nature.<sup>79</sup> Its materiality (i.e. its formal qualities, hieratic compositions, static, monumental spiritual figures) while recognizable were “eternal and unchanging verities, invisible entities inaccessible to sense perception.”<sup>80</sup> Again, while Maritain reduces the multiplicity of style and contextual influences throughout the Middle Ages to all being anti-naturalistic, his language reveals the connection the *renouveau catholique*, especially Maritain and Couturier, made between medieval art and modern, anti-naturalistic, abstract art: both had the ability to transcend the physical reality, the tangible and rationally attainable and to access spiritual, transcendent mysteries.<sup>81</sup> It was believed by figures like Maritain, Couturier, and others that modern artists like Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Maurice Denis, and other Post-Impressionists were bringing modern painting back to pure forms that had been prevalent in the Middle Ages. In this relationship, Maritain, especially, saw

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<sup>78</sup> See Clement Greenberg, ‘Byzantine Parallels’, (1958) in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 167-170. Greenberg wrote the essay the same year as *Islands Beyond*, but it was not published until three years later. He makes specific comparisons between the formal characteristics of Byzantine art and modern art. For a recent examination of Greenberg’s commentary see Jessamine Batario, “What Could Have Been and Never Was: The Intellectual Context of Greenberg’s ‘Byzantine Parallels,’ which will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography*.

<sup>79</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 82-82. Aquinas frequently discussed imitations of nature in his Scholastic writing.

<sup>80</sup> Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 27, 33.

<sup>81</sup> The intellectual review of medieval scholasticism/Neo-Thomism spread into reinterpretations of medieval art in the early twentieth century. Meyer Schapiro even addresses these views towards the end of his essay “Aesthetic Attitudes in Romanesque Art,” in *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1993), 1-38.

hope for reconciliation between modern culture and Catholicism for both had rejected naturalism.<sup>82</sup>

Couturier echoed Maritain's distaste for the Renaissance and advocated for modern artists whose work and life represented virtuous, humble and pure endeavors. For Couturier and, later, Dominique de Menil, purity was exemplified not only in material, but in a spiritual virtue they argued was present in the artist, no matter if that artist was religious or not.<sup>83</sup> When Couturier was ordained as a priest in the Catholic Church in 1930, he had already trained as an artist himself and was becoming vocal in his belief that "only modern art, specifically abstract forms, could revitalize the Church."<sup>84</sup> Couturier was not only calling on the Church to accept the modern artist as capable of creating art for the Church but also advocated abstract art as a form that added appropriate meaning to a liturgical space:

Our church art is in complete decay...It is dead, dusty, academic—imitations of imitations...with no power to speak to modern man. Outside the Church the great modern masters have walked—Manet, Cézanne, Renoir, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Braque. The Church has not reached out, as once it would have, to bring them in. And here we have men who speak directly to people with the same simple power of the great artists of the Middle Ages...These moderns are greater than the sensual men of the Renaissance.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Wassily Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) especially commented on the rejection of Realism and Impressionism. Wilhelm Worringer, in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), related abstraction with the primitive, which became a common view among scholars and a fascination among avant-garde artists. Worringer relates empathy to realism, the dominant style in Europe since the Renaissance.

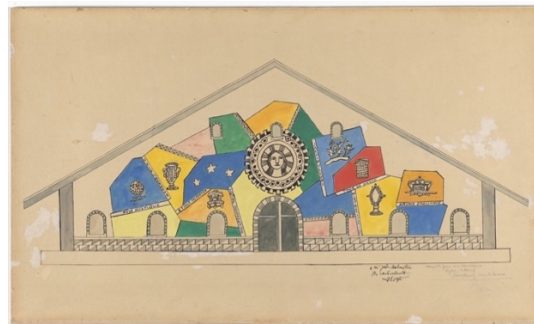
<sup>83</sup> See Marie Alain-Couturier, "Modesty of the Past," in *Sacred Art*, trans. Granger Ryan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 110-119.

<sup>84</sup> Lai-Kent Chew Orenduff, "Father Marie-Alain Couturier and the Sacred Art Movement" (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2002), 2.

<sup>85</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 30.

Couturier is arguing that the modern master does not have to be religious to create works for the modern Church, and he looks back to the Middle Ages as the necessary example for a collaborative relationship between the artist and the Church. As he began formulating his plans and commissioning modern artists for his church projects in France, Couturier embraced abstraction and was convinced “like Kandinsky and Mondrian before him” that abstraction in art, rather than realism or naturalism had the power to spiritually influence a “troubled and chaotic society.”<sup>86</sup>

**Figure 12:** Fernand Léger, *Maquette for the Facade Mosaic of the Church of our Lady of All Grace, Assy*, 1946. MoMA.



**Figure 13:** Exterior mosaic for the Church in Assy by Léger.



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<sup>86</sup> Orenduff, “Father Marie-Alain Couturier,” 3.

Since modern avant-garde artists were those developing abstraction in their work, the Catholic priest reached out to artists like Picasso, Matisse, and Léger, and he acknowledged, in the spirit of ecumenicism, that an artist did not need to share Christian beliefs to have a sense of the spiritual or transcendent in their practice. This view was readily adopted by John and Dominique de Menil, who witnessed his numerous commissions that brought together an artist like Matisse and a chapel project for Benedictine nuns in Vence, France. Couturier collaborated with Fernand Léger twice on two different churches in France (Figs. 12 and 13), and in their correspondence both men expressed their regard for the traditions of the middle ages. They both acknowledged that the projects, a stained glass windows and a large exterior mural, renewed a sense of the “venerable traditions of the Romanesque and Gothic period,” by expressing the spiritual within limited, hieratic formal qualities.<sup>87</sup> Couturier’s most salient observation in regards to this sacred modern project, however, is that some quality of abstraction always had to be present in religious art due to the nature of abstraction in religion itself. His example was the act of consecration with the Host during the Catholic Eucharist, where something bodily and present within the natural order is transferred to the supernatural order.<sup>88</sup> Both Byzantinist, Glenn Peers, who curated *Byzantine Things in the World* (2013), which will be commented on later on, and Crow address another spiritual phenomena that permeated the medieval Church, transubstantiation in the Eucharist. Peers said, “Like electricity, energy passes through matter in the deification of matter...[or like] fire changing water in

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<sup>87</sup> Katia Baudin, *Fernand Léger: Painting in Space* (Museum Ludwig, Cologne: Hirmer Publishers, 2016), 239-240.

<sup>88</sup> Baudin, *Fernand Léger: Painting in Space*, 241.

a kettle...the Eucharist is changed and changed humanity.”<sup>89</sup> This religious, mysteriously abstract belief permeated the medieval social context, the reality of the average medieval man and woman, and it arguably encouraged greater abstraction in sacred images. Abstraction in both the spiritual and material was central to both the medieval and modern Catholic and the modern avant-garde artist, and its emphasis in both realms laid the foundation for the types of objects the de Menils’ first collected and continued to collect.

### **An Emphasis on Abstraction in The Menil Collection**

The *renouveau catholique* movement and its views of naturalism and abstraction and Couturier and Maritain’s favoring of the spirituality in premodern, anti-naturalistic imagery arguably instigated the de Menil’s interest in collecting Byzantine and medieval art. It is clear the de Menil’s early collecting focus was on non-naturalistic styles since the collection is saturated in premodern art, non-Western art, and twentieth century modern and contemporary works. The term premodern, as used here, refers to art made before the Renaissance, so this part of their collection includes the ancient world as well as Byzantine and medieval art. Their extensive collection of non-Western, “primitive,” tribal objects include Arts of the Americas and Pacific Northwest, Africa, and the Pacific Islands. As used in the early to mid-twentieth century, “primitive art” could refer to non-Western art, art by untrained artists, or intriguingly to medieval art since it preceded the

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<sup>89</sup> Glenn Peers, ed., *Byzantine Things in the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 66. See Crow, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art*, 20-30, where he discussed the symbolism of the Eucharist in relation to Chardin’s still lifes and Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 85-102.



secularized modern era, where style is seen as rapidly advancing towards naturalism.<sup>90</sup>

Primitivism, broadly categorized, was a fascination among early modern artists, in France especially, with tribal, prehistoric, early European, and folk art. The interest in “primitive” styles, which included medieval and Byzantine art, grew as many modern abstract artists felt the need to eradicate five hundred years of representational painting and sculpture. For inspiration they predominantly looked back to artistic inventions that appeared in Western art before the Renaissance or to what they considered to be “primitive” styles from non-western cultures.<sup>91</sup> The Menil Collection represents these early twentieth-century interests in the primitive, which corresponds to the de Menil’s interest in abstract modernism, and is made more obvious in the notable absence of artworks from the Renaissance until the nineteenth century.

**Figure 14:** The de Menil’s African art collection on display at the Menil Collection.



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<sup>90</sup> The term premodern encompasses medieval art as well, since it categorizes art made by any culture before the Renaissance, which has been seen by some scholars as the beginning of the modern period.

<sup>91</sup> See Jed Perl’s recent biography on Alexander Calder, *Calder: The Conquest of Time, Early Years* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 327. He describes the unified feeling among avant-garde social circles in 1929 Paris. Artists like Jean Arp, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, Theo van Doesburg, Fernand Léger and others wanted to “totally unravel the symbiotic relationship between naturalistic appearances and artistic inventions that had shaped Western art since the Renaissance.”

Some of the earliest works to enter the de Menil's Collection were from key modern avant-garde artists and from the medieval period, which *Islands Beyond* indicates. Smart begins to elucidate the de Menil's early interest in "primitive" art, which here, arguably includes to the Byzantine and medieval, quoting Dominique de Menil who expressed appreciation for its sincerity and unselfconsciousness: "They are what remains of the childhood of humanity. They are the plunges into the depths of the unconscious. However great the artists of today or tomorrow, he will never be as innocent as the primitive artists—strangely involved and detached at the same time."<sup>92</sup> Smart proposes that the de Menil's as collectors naïvely saw these styles as "pure expressions of tradition and humanity, innocent of the secular rationalism and naturalism ushered in by the Enlightenment."<sup>93</sup> Here again is the view that anti-naturalistic art has more spiritual value, but this interest also shows the couple's passionate pursuit of ecumenism and their "off-modern" sensibilities, both inspired by the *renouveau catholique* movement in France. By embracing premodern art, often un-Christian in subject matter, the de Menil's hoped to show a willingness to create a mutual dialogue with different traditions and often misunderstood or demeaned styles.<sup>94</sup>

The couple's collecting interests were highlighted in *Islands Beyond*, since it is such an early exhibition in their career as collectors. It confirmed that premodern objects were some of the earliest pieces to enter their collection. The Byzantine and medieval collection (Fig. 15) did not fully form until 1985 when Dominique de Menil acquired, at

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<sup>92</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 80.

<sup>93</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 79.

<sup>94</sup> This ecumenical focus in the de Menil's is ultimately embodied in the Rothko Chapel (1971), an interfaith chapel with artwork by a non-Christian artist, Mark Rothko.

the recommendation of her newly appointed curator of medieval and byzantine art, Bertrand Davezac, a collection of fifty-eight Byzantine icons.<sup>95</sup> Former Menil curator

**Figure 15:** Byzantine and Medieval objects on view at the Menil Collection.



Kristina Van Dyke said, in a 2010 essay, that this significant purchase was surprising at the time since Byzantine art had never been a focus of the de Menil's, which she also expressed as surprising given the couple's "spiritually grounded collecting impulses."<sup>96</sup> *Islands Beyond*, however, counters Van Dyke's expressed surprise, since the couple loaned three of their own ecclesiastical sculptures dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for the exhibition. They collected premodern imagery early on, and one purpose of the exhibition was to emphasize the kinds of works that would enter the "teaching collection," i.e. medieval and modern art.<sup>97</sup> Following the *Islands Beyond*, the de Menil's

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<sup>95</sup> Kristina Van Dyke, "Losing One's Head: John and Dominique de Menil as Collectors", in *Art and Activism*, ed. Josef Helfenstein and Lauren Schipsi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 132. Dominique acquired the collection from British Collector Eric Bradley.

<sup>96</sup> Van Dyke, "Losing One's Head," 132.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 131, Van Dyke seems to contradict herself on the page preceding her discussion of the Byzantine icon acquisition, when she describes the de Menil's archaeological interests, when in "1964 and 1979 [they] acquired over eight hundred small objects of daily piety and living from the Byzantine empire of the third to twelfth centuries. Forgoing icons or other objects produced for the Church, as well as monumental imperial arts of the Byzantine period, the de Menil's

interest in premodern work expanded into antiquities and objects from Africa, Oceania, and the Pacific Northwest, collections that now comprise a large portion of the Menil Collection's gallery space. However, it is clear their premodern collecting tendencies began before *Islands Beyond* and continued to parallel their acquisitions in Modern and Contemporary art throughout the following decades.

Thus far, it has been determined that *Islands Beyond* was conceived as a spiritual show and the ideas that influenced and gave this impetus credence were coming from the *renouveau catholique* ideas, in particular, two of its main figures, Maritain and Couturier. Additionally, this spiritual conception introduces the intellectual thinking on how the medieval and modern were usefully merged, ultimately resulting in a redefinition of sacred art. *Islands Beyond* serves as the case study that illuminates how these two periods of art-making were exhibited under the umbrella of sacred art, attempting to draw out the spiritual dimensions of modern art. This next section of the thesis will explore medieval and modern art's simultaneous introduction to the American art world and the scholarship and curatorial methods that directly or illusively addressed and even encouraged a relationship between the medieval-modern.

### **Medieval and Modern Art in America**

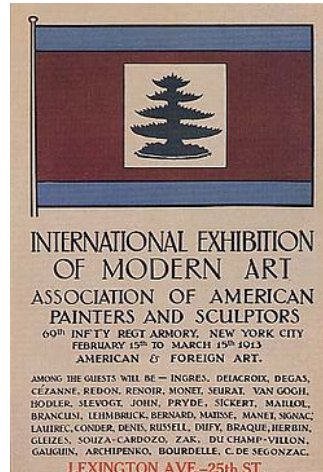
In the second decade of the twentieth century, medieval and modern art were simultaneously introduced to the American public on a large stage in two subsequent events in New York City: the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, also known

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concentrated instead on the art of the merchant class.” These acquisitions, whether icons or banal objects of daily life, show their early interest in the premodern.

as The Armory Show and the opening of two private collections of medieval art to the public in 1914. Both styles were met with a mixture of skepticism, excitement, ambivalence, and distaste from various audiences, as has been argued by Schapiro and Elizabeth Bradford Smith, a medieval art historian at Pennsylvania State University.<sup>98</sup>

**Figure 16:** The International Exhibition of Modern Art or the Armory Show brochure cover, 1913.



Schapiro describes the climate surrounding the Armory Show, saying the exhibition marked a “turning-point in American art” since it was the first time modern, European, avant-garde art had been introduced to such large American audiences (the show also traveled to Boston and Chicago).<sup>99</sup> Avant-garde art had been brought to the United States earlier with pioneering exhibitions by Alfred Stieglitz in his 291 Gallery in New York, where artists including Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Cézanne and Brancusi had some of their first American shows.<sup>100</sup> However, the Armory Show was the most publicized and

<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Bradford Smith, *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting 1800-1940* (Pennsylvania: Palmer Museum of Art, 1996).

<sup>99</sup> Meyer Schapiro, “The Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show,” (1952) in *Modern Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), 137.

<sup>100</sup> Stieglitz opened “The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession” at 291 Fifth Avenue in 1905. It became known as the 291 gallery, and through his connection with galleries in France, Stieglitz had the first shows in America for Rodin and Matisse (1908), Cézanne (1910), and Picasso (1911). Additionally, Stieglitz published a photographic journal called *Camera Works*, which

widely seen exhibition yet. As Schapiro described, “The very scope and suddenness of this manifestation of the new art were a shock that stirred the sensitive more effectively than a dozen small exhibitions could have done,” and furthermore the show “lifted people out of the narrowness of a complacent provincial taste and compelled them to judge American art by a world standard.”<sup>101</sup> Schapiro is most likely acknowledging the repercussions he, most likely, saw in the years following the show as American collectors began to amass large modern art collections and as public taste began to sway towards the avant-garde styles that had already been popular in Europe for twenty or so years.<sup>102</sup>

**Figure 17:** The International Exhibition of Modern Art or the Armory Show, 1913, at the 69th Regiment Armory on East 26th Street.



His words are also reminiscent of the de Menils’ efforts in 1950s Houston to elevate the city’s limited, provincial taste in art to what was avant-garde, and Schapiro seems to be

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became a forum for “modern art and photography” and is where the highly influential excerpts from Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* first became available in English in 1912.

<sup>101</sup> Meyer Schapiro, “The Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show,” 137.

<sup>102</sup> Duncan Phillips and Walter Conrad Arensberg were among the first to start collecting avant-garde artists after the Armory Show. Phillips founded the first public museum of modern art, the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C., in 1921 with an emphasis on artists from Courbet to Post-Impressionism, and Arensberg embraced more radical twentieth-century artists, collecting many works by Brancusi and Duchamp. He eventually gave his collection to the Philadelphia Art Museum.

saying that The Armory Show was attempting to usher in a standard of taste among the general, art-viewing public. There were over 1,600 paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and photographs on view and 300,000 plus visitors saw the show throughout the three cities.<sup>103</sup> It was an undeniably popular show but also unsettling, as it was the first time so many people had been confronted by what Schapiro characterizes as “unfamiliar and difficult” art for the public, like Pablo Picasso’s *Nude* (1910) or Wassily Kandinsky’s *Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love II)* (1912).<sup>104</sup> Schapiro says these new styles were not all received with gusto and acceptance, but with an “extraordinary range of feelings, from enthusiasm for the new to curiosity, bewilderment, disgust, and rage.”<sup>105</sup> These reactions demonstrate the American public’s inability to fully comprehend the accelerated artistic shifts occurring across the Atlantic.

The European art world, before the First World War, was enamored with the possibilities of a new century and this became evident in new artist associations and rebellious manifestos declaring their stances in the new era. Schapiro describes this action as, “a kind of militancy that gave to cultural life the quality of a revolutionary movement or the beginnings of a new religion.”<sup>106</sup> These art movements had the power to affect the kind of social and cultural change that drew some close in comradeship and distanced others by their repugnant stances against institutions like the monarchy and the Church or political/economic systems like Capitalism. In Europe, the avant-garde’s more radical convictions were transmitted to a larger public through publications, Salons, and

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<sup>103</sup> Schapiro, “The Armory Show,” 158. He also notes that 300 works were bought at the show.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 138. Stieglitz, already being familiar with Kandinsky’s ideas, ended up purchasing *Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love II)* at the Armory Show.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 138.

World Fairs, while in America, they were first visualized at the Armory Show. In Schapiro's view, the Armory Show, despite the mixed reactions, succeeded in being a moment that forced viewers to become aware of the new styles of modernity: "art had just undergone a revolution and...much they had admired in contemporary art during the last decades was problematic, old-fashioned, destined to die."<sup>107</sup> Schapiro's rhetoric seems to emphasize that art-making in the modern moment was radically breaking from past modes of style and taste and putting tradition to the test, which differs from Barr's longer view of art history as a continuum.

This early twentieth-century exhibition ushered in a broader visual understanding of avant-garde art in America and was an impetus for shifting the nation's taste towards the new. In the following decades show a general shift in taste with the growth in modern design and modern art collections.<sup>108</sup> Schapiro does say, however, that the loose organization of the show only added to the confusion about modern art, because the Cubists, Expressionists, Fauves, Neo-Impressionists, Symbolists and Classicists were mixed together in strange hangings. Confusion seems to have remained with the mass public; perhaps this is why Alfred Barr, as the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, felt so strongly that a didactic approach was needed to neatly instruct viewers in these stylistic progressions. Barr played a pivotal role in elucidating the new for the American public. His transhistorical connections between art from centuries before and art and design of the moment, seen predominantly in his exhibitions *Cubism and Abstract Art* (March-April, 1936) and *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* (December 1936-January 1937), especially demonstrated his expansive view of modern art.

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<sup>107</sup> Schapiro, "The Armory Show," 136.

<sup>108</sup> Schapiro, "The Armory Show," 138.



**Figure 18:** The J.P. Morgan medieval collection exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1914.



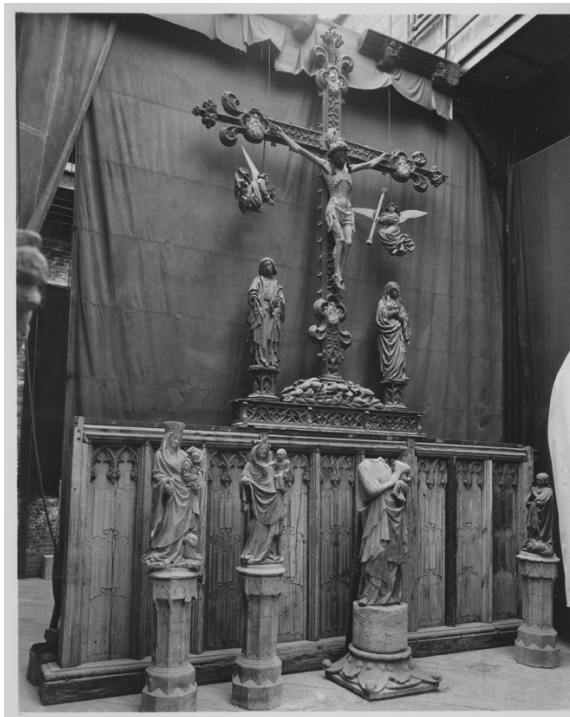
One year after modern art's large scale debut at the Armory Show, there were two exhibitions that marked the "re-introduction" of medieval art to the American public with the opening of finance mogul, J.P. Morgan and sculptor, George Grey Barnard's extensive medieval art collections (Figs. 18 and 19). In February of 1914, The Metropolitan Museum of Art displayed portions of Morgan's extensive medieval collection in the museum, and, in December of that same year, Barnard opened his collection of medieval sculpture and architectural fragments at his personally designed "Cloisters" in Washington Heights, Manhattan.<sup>109</sup> These two collections were among the first medieval art collections in the United States, but they had been relatively inaccessible to the public, as most private collections were at the time. In the accompanying catalog for a 1996 exhibition organized by the Frick Art Museum and the

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<sup>109</sup> Most of Barnard's medieval sculpture collection are in the MET's Cloisters. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. helped the Museum acquire Barnard's Cloisters and most of its contents in 1925. It was clear that a larger building was needed to display the collection, so Rockefeller financed the conversion of 56 acres of land just north of Barnard's museum, which became Fort Tryon Park. Four acres of which was destined as the site for the new museum.

Palmer Museum of Art and entitled *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting 1800-1940*, catalog editor, Elizabeth Bradford Smith traces the fluctuating interest in medieval art, which throughout the nineteenth century, was widely regarded as “Old Master Primitives,” “Italian Primitives,” or “Primitive Christian art.”<sup>110</sup> Studies on the Renaissance art reigned in art historical scholarship, while medieval art experienced wavering acknowledgement and appreciation primarily from small connoisseurial elites.

**Figure 19:** Works from the medieval collection of George Grey Barnard.



While Americans had, ironically, embraced Gothic revival architecture in the mid-nineteenth century, there was a general distaste for medieval art’s inherently religious, specifically Roman Catholic nature and its associations with feudalism’s undemocratic power. Consequently, the “primitive” styles of the Middle Ages were not embraced

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<sup>110</sup> Smith, *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting 1800-1940*, 29.

further by collectors or the wider American public until just before 1900.<sup>111</sup> In the 1890s, Isabella Stewart Gardner began to form a substantial medieval collection in Boston, giving the period new recognition. Gardner's collection was the first significant collection of medieval art in the United States, setting the precedence for Morgan's and Barnard's collections. Practically, medieval art may have gained appeal because it was more affordable at this time in comparison to Renaissance art and, Smith argues, the younger generation of collectors were spending more time in Europe, and thus receiving better exposure to the medieval styles.<sup>112</sup>

Between 1900 and 1920, the shifting attitude towards the Middle Ages and medieval art among the educated elites in particular led to the creation of three of the largest medieval art collections in the United States.<sup>113</sup> Smith says that the American public had never been exposed to this amount of medieval art, which is similar to the Armory Show's exposure of modern art. Granted, the medieval exhibitions were not on the same scale as the traveling Armory Show; however, these successive events undoubtedly had a formative impact on the art world and the museum-going public's general perception of both new and old art.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Smith suggests an intriguing and very possible connection between the Armory Show and these two medieval exhibitions:

It is tempting to postulate that the Armory Show of 1913, by exhibiting more "difficult," nonrepresentational art of the European avant-garde, had

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<sup>111</sup> Smith, *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting 1800-1940*, 30, 55. Medieval art was collected by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (1875) and exhibited by material rather than by chronology or region, a display method borrowed from the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London, whose purpose was "to elevate the artistic taste of the general public and thereby improve the level of craftsmanship in the United States."

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 32.

<sup>113</sup> The collections of J.P. Morgan, Henry Walters, and George Grey Barnard.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

to an extent, prepared the way for a greater understanding of the more primitive aspects of medieval art...If there was any relation between the new fashion for abstraction in modern art and a heightened appreciation of the abstract qualities of medieval art, it was probably on a subconscious level.<sup>115</sup>

Even if, as Smith says, this appreciation occurred on a subconscious level, it is possible that the fresh exposure to modern abstract art at the Armory Show visually prepared the American public to reevaluate, to make comparisons, and to possibly acknowledge the formal differences between medieval art and subsequent periods which embraced more naturalistic representations and greater humanistic compositions. The organizers of *Islands Beyond* were engaging with a similar dynamic in their efforts to create an exhibition environment where viewers could have a visual dialogue with both the medieval and modern styles. The exhibition may have even appeased negative preconceptions about both periods, even if on a subconscious level.

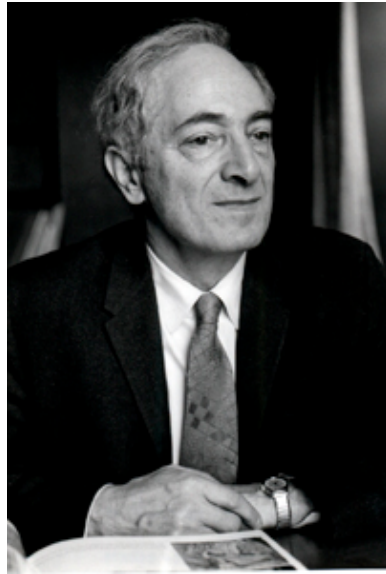
Additionally, the notion that medieval art had primitive aspects was a common perception in the early twentieth century, as seen with figures like Couturier, Maritain, the de Menils. However, medieval scholars would disagree that medieval art lacked naturalism altogether. Certain regions' taste in naturalism and abstraction fluctuate throughout the Middle Ages, and this will be looked at further when analyzing Schapiro and Millard Meiss's writing as related to the medieval-modern discourse. Ultimately, however, both the Armory Show and the medieval exhibitions were events that served to significantly rejuvenate and advance art historical scholarship in both the medieval and modern fields in America.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Smith, *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting 1800-1940*, 114.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas Crow, *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 8. Crow mentions that Schapiro's scholarship is responding to Arthur Kingsley Porter's publication *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* (1923), which was initiated when

**Figure 20:** Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University, circa 1970s.



### **Early Intellectual Discourse and Medieval Modernists**

As the American public became more familiar with medieval and modern art with events like the Armory Show and medieval exhibitions, there was a parallel surge of new scholarship in both art historical fields. In the early twentieth century, modern art history was a burgeoning area, and while some scholarship on medieval art dates from the nineteenth century in the United States, it surged in the first two decades of the twentieth

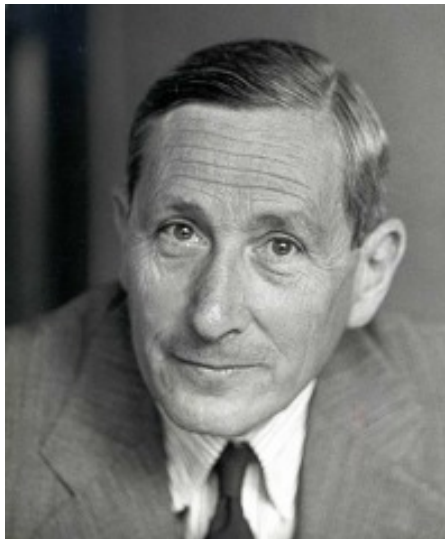
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many medieval monuments around Europe were being destroyed in the First World War. Porter's scholarship was foundational, and he encouraged American museums to acquire medieval objects. In addition he advocated for the expansion of education in medieval art history to counter the "superficial' novelties of Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism." Porter hoped to reignite interest in medieval art, but did so to additionally combat the "individualism" of modern art. While both men were friends and Porter supported Schapiro's contribution to Romanesque scholarship, Crow argues that Schapiro's left winged politics and commitment to both modern and medieval art necessarily advanced Porter's more prejudice, bourgeois interpretation of the Souillac relief.

century. Both fields were experiencing fresh interest from a new generation of scholars. New medievalists were responding to or building upon outdated views of medieval art from their predecessors and the increased interest in medieval art by American collectors. Schapiro (1904-1996) (Fig. 20), who was simultaneously a modernist and medievalist and wrote extensively in both fields throughout his long career, often incorporated his views on modern art's materiality and social context, his understanding of a modern artist's individual expression, and his own Marxist views into his interpretations of medieval art. His interdisciplinary thinking is apparent in his writing on Romanesque sculpture in particular. In his essays on Romanesque sculpture, like "The Romanesque Sculptures of Moissac" (1931), "The Sculptures of Souillac" (1939), and "On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art" (1947), he makes direct and indirect references to his own modern period and its art in relation to the particular Romanesque works he is discussing in the context of the Middle Ages. Schapiro's tendency to apply the social and political atmosphere of his own time is especially noticeable in his essay on the Theophilus relief in Souillac, and his analyses in this essay in particular will be analyzed to show his medieval modern thinking. Millard Meiss (1904-1975) (Fig. 21) was another medievalist in this new generation of scholars who created associations between his own historical moment and the Middle Ages. Most notably, in his seminal, post-World War II publication entitled *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-fourteenth Century* (1951), he briefly compares a move towards abstraction among artists after the Black Death with the beginnings of Abstract Expressionism after World War II. This observation has been scrutinized by subsequent scholars for skewing Meiss's ability to view mid-trecento Italy with a period eye rather

than through his own period's lens.<sup>117</sup> While scholarly rebuttal to Meiss's overall theory about post-Black Death art is valid, it is intriguing to see how his urge to note similarities between disparate time periods did not dissipate among scholars in the twentieth century, and was more recently and extensively employed in Alexander Nagel (2012) and Amy Knight Powell's (2012) publications. Furthermore, certain curators, like Barr and MacAgy did not flinch from these transhistorical, cross cultural connections in their exhibitions.

**Figure 21:** Millard Meiss



Both Meiss and Schapiro employ this medieval-modern thinking in their analysis of art in the Middle Ages—Schapiro more prominently—and their methodologies and interpretations have remained relevant and frequently addressed in subsequent medieval and modern art history.<sup>118</sup> Meiss's interpretation of the stylistic shift in Italy after the

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<sup>117</sup> Henk Van Os (1981) discusses the period eye and Bruce Cole (1983) discusses context and subject matter. Judith Steinhoff (2006) analyzes Meiss's overall theory.

<sup>118</sup> Both Meiss and Schapiro's careers overlapped at Columbia University for nineteen years, and it is tempting to think they discussed their views on medieval and modern art as fellow faculty. Meiss left Columbia in 1953, two years after publishing *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951), and moved to Harvard and eventually

disastrous plague was initially so compelling scholars did not attempt to further analyze and refute his text until the early 1980s.<sup>119</sup> Scholars like Bruce Cole (1983) and Henk van Os (1981) argued that Meiss dismissed key contextualizing aspects of post-Black Death art in both Siena and Florence, like workshop and patronage influences or a work's location in a larger altarpiece scheme or *in situ* context. On the other hand, Schapiro's writing on both modern and medieval art has endured as preeminent examples of visual analysis and social, religious, and political contextualization and are revisited and upheld by scholars today as being a part of the art historical canon.<sup>120</sup> Thomas Crow's analysis of Schapiro's Souillac interpretation in *The Intelligence of Art* (1999) is especially illuminating in regards to Schapiro's Marxist views.

Schapiro and Meiss relate their modern historical moment to their analyses in medieval art. They both look at moments of transition in their regions where style and iconography are, in their opinion, corresponding to changing tastes in society due to economic shifts and religious priorities.<sup>121</sup> Similar shifts in taste, religiosity, politics and economic systems are occurring in the early to mid-twentieth century. These modern shifts are arguably more seismic due to two world wars, but it is difficult to think that both scholars would not reference, even if subconsciously, how art in their time is responding to the modern culture, global wars, Marxism, Communism, Fascism, and the

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Princeton. Schapiro remained at Columbia his entire career. There is a box of correspondence between the two men in Schapiro's archives at Columbia University.

<sup>119</sup> Meiss's view of mid-trecento art in Florence and Siena has been validly reinterpreted by scholars such as Henk van Os (1981) and Bruce Cole (1983).

<sup>120</sup> Schapiro's relevance for understanding Romanesque art today has been examined by Michael Camille in his essay "How New York Stole the Idea of Romanesque Art" (1994) and Erik Inglis in his essay "Meyer Schapiro: Modern Medievalist" (2003). Thomas Crow has also examined the value of Schapiro's essay on the Souillac relief in his book *The Intelligence of Art* (1999).

<sup>121</sup> Meiss theorized that there had been religious shifts in the mid-trecento but that has been re-evaluated by scholars.



increasing autonomy of the artist. While their own time's tension seeps into their work, Meiss and Schapiro use similar approaches to style in their chosen regions of medieval France and Italy to pinpoint what affected changes in taste. Schapiro utilizes intensely detailed visual analysis on the Theophilus relief, as he also does in his essays on modern abstract art in the Armory Show, or on the works of Cézanne, Van Gogh, or Courbet. He championed focused stylistic analysis in order to illuminate greater meaning in complex Romanesque compositions, which was the same way he approached similarly complex compositions in modern art's material construction. He additionally acknowledged the social and political influences upon the medieval and modern works he analyzed.<sup>122</sup> With the Theophilus relief in Souillac, Schapiro discovers and argues that there was an increased secularism in the region which led to more humanistic subject matter and slightly greater naturalistic style, and he concludes the essay by implicitly applying his own Marxist ideologies to this interpretation, relating shifts in this region's economic system in the early twelfth century with a changing emphasis on feudalism in the region.<sup>123</sup>

Meiss, on the other hand, is arguing that Florence and Siena experienced an increased religiosity among their citizens due to widespread feelings of guilt after the Black Death—citizens viewed the plague as God punishing his people for their secular

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<sup>122</sup> Schapiro's scholarship on Romanesque art began early in his career, however similar methods of analysis can be seen in his later essays on modern art and artists compiled in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1982). See Cézanne (1963), Courbet (1941), Van Gogh (1946), Seurat (1958), Picasso (1976), Chagall (1956) and Gorky (1957).

<sup>123</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "The Sculptures of Souillac," in *Romanesque Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 121. Towards the bottom of the page, Schapiro says the relief of Souillac begins to anticipate the Renaissance, because of its slightly more secular representation, which embodies the "most recent attitude of the church to questions and demands posed under a changing feudalism by people of the town."

ways in the years before. According to Meiss, guilt led to less humanistic choices in style—less Giottesque style—and instead returned to an earlier Byzantinist style that was more abstract in form and stricter in composition with the typical hieratic content of frontal and majestic figures—all designs he calls ritualistic.<sup>124</sup> Scholars like Van Os have commented on how Meiss’s theory is implicitly informed by his own post-World War II experience and the emergence of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>125</sup> Meiss’s interpretation of post-Black Death art-making is supported by what he sees as an increased religiosity in Florence and Siena after such devastating casualties, and he thus relates this to what he considers is a similar shift towards spiritual art with Abstract Expressionism.<sup>126</sup> The medieval methods that preceded Meiss and Schapiro often favored iconographical readings to analyze a work’s content. Meiss and Schapiro, however, adopt methodologies that explore how style and content are both informed by the social context, and their scholarship ultimately leads to a greater understanding of how modern medievalists understood and interpreted their field through a distinctly modern lens.

The early stages of modernism explicitly inform Schapiro’s medieval writing, and his life, convictions, and friendships with artists are more widely known and discussed by scholars. Since all these factors help explain his medieval-modern connections, Schapiro

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<sup>124</sup> Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951), 44-45. Meiss addresses this return to the Dugento (13th century) as a “recovery of style” that was a “conscious interest and deliberate selection” not some accidental adjustment. It was a deliberate return to pre-Giottesque painting, which had greater relationships with Romanesque and Byzantine traditions, which is the style Schapiro discusses. This return was believed to be reviving greater ritual rather than narrative style.

<sup>125</sup> Henk Van Os, “The Black Death and Sienese Painting: A Problem of Interpretation,” *Art History*, Vol. 4, no. 2, (1981).

<sup>126</sup> See Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*, 64-66. Meiss describes the state of Florence and Siena in the 1340s and 50s—the momentous nature of the Black Death, the economic hardship before and consequences after, and the rate of mortality. In his conclusion on 164-165, he relates the conflict Boccaccio describes in the *Decameron* to “tensions in contemporary painting.”

and his Souillac essay, in particular, will be focused on in greater length than Meiss.

Schapiro's writings in medieval art were part of what contemporary medievalist Erik Inglis calls a "rehabilitation project" where Schapiro's "analytical advocacy" attempts to justify meaning in what many scholars saw as ignorant and primitive design schemes.<sup>127</sup>

Schapiro adopts this role in his writing on both medieval and modern artists and artworks that many art historians had failed to or did not attempt to understand. He chooses formal analysis as his primary methodology for both periods. Rather than solely use iconographical analysis in medieval art, which had been the preceding scholarly norm, Schapiro employs some of the most thorough visual analysis to be seen in medieval art yet to draw attention to compositions, formal properties, and meaning. For example, in the Theophilus relief, he desires to show how the form and content relate to each other and how their interconnectedness points to certain shifts in the surrounding context. Meiss's method favored a "zeitgeist" reading, so he generalized shifts in taste and style in post-Black Death art and society to overall societal shifts and isolated images from their greater context—where they were produced, who the patrons were, and where the images are located—instead of assessing form, content, and context together with greater specificity. Schapiro not only looks at a work's iconographic meaning or theological symbolism, but the social context around that work.

Schapiro's interdisciplinary approach to medieval art arguably stems from his simultaneous advocacy for modern art and artists. His dual interest in both the middle ages and his own period may have been unusual among art historians when he began his career at Columbia. After completing his doctoral dissertation on the Romanesque

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<sup>127</sup> Erik Inglis, "Meyer Schapiro: Modern Medievalist," College Art Association Website (2003).

sculptures at Moissac in 1929, Schapiro further developed his writing on Romanesque art and in 1937, he published one of his earliest commentaries on modern abstract art called the “Nature of Abstract Art,” which was a response to Barr’s exhibition from the previous year, *Cubism and Abstract Art*.<sup>128</sup> Schapiro wrote extensively on abstract painting, and in 1957, a year before *Islands Beyond*, he delivered an address at the Annual Meeting of the American Federation of Arts, which, because of John de Menil’s persistence, was held in Houston that year. The theme was “The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art,” and Schapiro’s address primarily looked at Abstract Expressionism. It is intriguing to think this writing may have additionally influenced the inclusion of Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still in *Islands Beyond*. Schapiro also dabbled in painting himself and cared to cultivate friendships with artists he encountered in New York, such as Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, Helen Frankenthaler, and later Donald Judd and Allan Kaprow, who were all students of Schapiro’s. Other artists became acquainted with the scholar through his interest in their work. Schapiro championed Barnett Newman, expressing admiration for the artist’s “intelligence, sensitivity, and care”, and encouraged Willem de Kooning out of a rut when the artist was trying to finish *Woman I*.<sup>129</sup> The scholar took Léger to see the Beatus Apocalypse at the Pierpont Morgan Library, which strongly influenced the painter’s works in the 1940s.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> See *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* for the information about Schapiro’s address at the American Federation of Arts.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas Hess, “Sketch for the Portrait of an Art Historian Among Artists,” in *Social Research*, Vol 45., No. 1 (1978): 11-12. Hess looks at Schapiro’s friendships with artists throughout his career and how he intellectually challenged, encouraged, and championed their works—most prominent are his friendships with Abstract Expressionists.

<sup>130</sup> Hess, “Sketch for the Portrait of an Art Historian Among Artists,” 7.

Arguably, these acquaintances and the fact Schapiro was a practicing painter in his own right shaped many of his views on the modern artist as an individual, thinker, and creator. Inglis nostalgically praises Schapiro's dualism: "Imagine: a medievalist, accustomed to working on dead anonymous artists, using his old, old subject to inspire celebrated living artists...the example is an inspiration to medievalists, suggesting that our field and subject is not an obscure academic byway, but can truly speak to the present."<sup>131</sup> Writing in 2003, Inglis' admiration for Schapiro's cross disciplinary approach anticipates what scholars like Nagel, Peers, and Powell contribute to both fields less than a decade later as they revive medieval art and society's relevance to the contemporary moment. Schapiro's scholarship in both medieval and modern art not only examine the formal elements of the works, but how the art in the two periods is inextricably linked to the historical moment, so he additionally uses sociological explanations to advocate for misinterpreted medieval art.<sup>132</sup> For example, with the Theophilus relief (Fig. 22), he guides his readers through meticulously detailed descriptions to argue that what may seem to be an "accidental", fragmented, visual mess of designs are, in fact, all part of a larger cohesive scheme that makes the story of Theophilus intact and understandable. He uses the term "discoordinate" to redefine what earlier scholars may have seen as errors or as a breach in traditional compositional structures.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Inglis, "Meyer Schapiro: Modern Medievalist."

<sup>132</sup> See Linda Seidel, "Formalism," in *A Companion to Medieval Art*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 119-123 for more another analysis of Schapiro's Souillac essay.

<sup>133</sup> Schapiro, "The Sculptures of Souillac," in *Romanesque Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 104.

**Figure 22:** The Theophilus relief, 1120-1135, Sainte-Marie, Souillac.



Additionally, Schapiro implicitly applies his Marxist views to his discussion of content and its relation to the medieval feudal system in the Souillac region where the Theophilus relief was created. The Theophilus portal's composition reveals that this medieval society was experiencing greater secularism (or humanism) than other periods in the Middle Ages. Schapiro's writing on Romanesque art attempts to push back against the common view that medieval art was solely symbolic or religious, and to ultimately show that there were compositional choices that stood in opposition, even if it was visually subtle, to the strict feudal society. He begins to allude to this political and economic preoccupation as he examines how the Virgin Mary's intervention on Theophilus' behalf is the final act on the relief, and while this is a significant moment in the overall narrative, it is a noticeably smaller element. Schapiro argues that the greater compositional emphasis is on Theophilus and the devil. The narrative is focusing on a common layman:

The contingent, the temporal, and inferior are centralized in Souillac; the stationary and elevated are marginal. As a result, the chief formal devices for showing transcendent objects—namely magnitude, stability, centrality, and elevation—are unconnected here...There is, in fact, no fully central

object...the religiously transcendent figure of the Virgin is shown, not enlarged and enthroned, but reduced, unstable, descending, and suspended from an angel's arms.<sup>134</sup>

Schapiro emphasizes the stylistic choices, which minimize the sacred figure's more traditional central positioning or large visual impact, indicates a devaluation of the "hierarchical order" for a representation of an ordinary individual's worldly temptations and religious struggles.<sup>135</sup> When he analyzes the trumeau (Fig. 23) below the main relief, Schapiro alludes to both naturalism and realism in the extremely secular composition of contorted animals, concluding that the "realism of the design corresponds to the powerful reality of representation in the animals, and to the rich variety in the repeated units, which transcends the norms of ornament."<sup>136</sup> Both the relief and trumeau's more humanized composition and emotionally charged, realistic stylistic decisions corresponds, Schapiro says, with secularism in the region.<sup>137</sup> In his analyses of the subject matter and style in Souillac, it is tempting to wonder if Schapiro was relating his own scholarly familiarity with nineteenth-century Realism, an art movement driven by Marxist ideology, with this historical moment in Souillac, where the constraints of feudalism were being challenged and the common man's personal faith was being acknowledged more.<sup>138</sup> Schapiro also suggests that the artist(s) was possibly taking liberties in the relief's arrangement in order

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<sup>134</sup> Schapiro, "The Sculptures of Souillac," 117.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>137</sup> See Marian Bleeke, "Romanesque" in Rowe, ed., *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012), 264, 265. Bleeke uses her theory of "hybridity" to try and diminish the strict binary opposition scholars have made between Romanesque art's greater two dimensionality and non-naturalistic style and Gothic art's increased three-dimensionality and naturalism.

<sup>138</sup> See Crow, *The Intelligence of Art*, 7. In 1939, Schapiro and his wife Lillian traveled to Europe for his research and he published his essay on the Theophilus relief. Crow argues that Schapiro's witnessing the growing German aggression in Europe impacted his interpretation of the relief, and is partly responsible for Schapiro's more heavily implicit Marxism.

to focus on “secular” subject matter where the marginalized, those trapped in feudalism's controlling cycle, have been elevated. He suggests that the social and economic developments in Souillac encouraged greater artistic autonomy, where the sculptor still worked within a religious framework, but was able to articulate more naturalistic forms in his composition.<sup>139</sup> This view seems to be reflective of his understanding that modern artists’ individual expression could take form outside of institutional constraints. Schapiro’s desire to focus on how economic shifts away from feudalism resulted in greater artistic freedom, and how this ultimately affected the style at Souillac undeniably reflects his own preoccupations as an art historian, with Marxist tendencies, living in the modern period.

**Figure 23:** The Theophilus relief, detail of the trumeau.



Meiss’s theory revolves around greater religiosity/spirituality in art, which he also believed re-emerged in the early twentieth century. Both Meiss and Van Os see Abstract Expressionism as being the most spiritual art movement in the twentieth century yet, and

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<sup>139</sup> Schapiro, “The Sculptures of Souillac,” 122-123.



that after the war, the need for “transcendental images” was greater.<sup>140</sup> Van Os, in an attempt to validate Meiss’s comparison to Abstract Expressionism, notes that in the early twentieth century there was an increased religious dimension in art that seemed to correspond to greater abstraction in art, and he references three figures already mentioned in this thesis as pioneers in their analyses of spirituality and abstraction: Jacques Maritain in *Art and Scholasticism* (1935), Wilhelm Worringer in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), and Wassily Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912).<sup>141</sup> Meiss attempts to demonstrate how style reveals religiosity by either comparing two isolated images, one pre-Black Death and one post-Black Death, or focusing on one sole work created after the plague. In chapter one, entitled “The New Form and Content,” in *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, Meiss begins a series of comparisons by first describing the work that is central to his argument, Andrea Orcagna’s Strozzi altarpiece (1354 and 1357) (Fig. 24) in Santa Maria Novella in Florence. For Meiss, Orcagna is the leading figure of the “new style”, which he says is actually a return to older styles, pre-Giotto.<sup>142</sup> Orcagna depicts a full-length adult Christ enthroned in the central field; it is a “majestic” depiction of the Redeemer—frontal, elevated, motionless, looking directly outward with “unfocused eyes.”<sup>143</sup> Meiss says this was not as common a representation in earlier altarpieces. Orcagna also creates tensions among the other figures, the Virgin Mary, St. Peter, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Catherine, by confining their bodies into tight spaces, where movement seems compressed and denied.<sup>144</sup> Meiss uses these

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<sup>140</sup> Van Os, “The Black Death and Sienese Painting: A Problem of Interpretation,” 239.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 239-240. Os says these men were responding to Ruskin’s nineteenth-century view that the divine could only be experienced through a detailed representations of nature.

<sup>142</sup> Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death*, 22.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 12.

observations to lead up to his view that post-Black Death art depicts a guilt-driven zeitgeist in the region—i.e. the plague was God’s punishment on the Tuscan people for their humanism and secularism. He describes Nardo di Cione’s *Madonna* (1356) in comparison to an early trecento Madonna by Giotto to further demonstrate this shift away from Giotto’s emotive, narrative heavy, more naturalistic style. By visually analyzing these two works first, Meiss establishes that the post-Black Death style and iconography is subtly more reminiscent of Duecento style, religious outlooks and artistic conventions.<sup>145</sup>

**Figure 24:** Andrea Orcagna’s Strozzi altarpiece, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



While it is arguably important, as art historians, to take major world events like the Black Death and World War II into account, it is difficult to claim that such events were the sole factor for aesthetic changes. Even though this view is often reinterpreted in contemporary scholarship, it was helpful to Meiss’s argument that many Abstract Expressionist artists, at the time, were seen by scholars as emphasizing spirituality through abstraction. In addition, many Abstract Expressionists like Barnett Newman and

<sup>145</sup> Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* 15, 10. He mentions Orcagna as the leading figure of the “older style.”

Mark Rothko, who Meiss claimed as his favorite modern artist, claimed this spirituality in their works. Overall, however, Meiss's general conclusions discounted contextual influences like patronage, an artist's body of work, audience and location, and overall his analysis of style and its relation to modern art is less convincing compared to Schapiro's approach that implicitly includes his modern views and his approach to modern art.

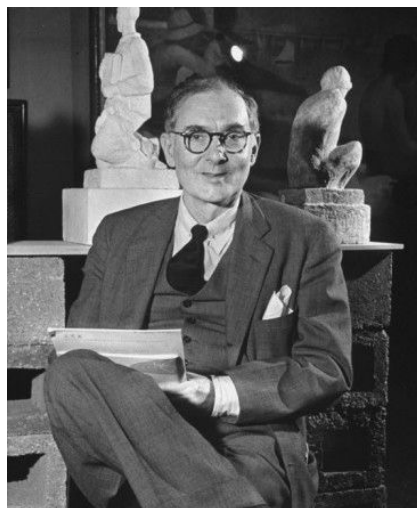
These two modern medievalists, Meiss and Schapiro, are ultimately arguing that shifts in style reveal changing attitudes in a certain region's social culture, and they both happen to be addressing similar shifts from either more religious compositions and styles to greater humanistic and secular compositions or vice versa. Schapiro narrowly discussed a localized zeitgeist, while Meiss more generally addressed the zeitgeist in Siena and Florence, and with similar shifts occurring in their own modern period, it seems inevitable, even if this connection occurred subconsciously, that they would analyze Romanesque and Italian trecento art from their modernist perspectives. Ultimately, their approaches illuminated image-making in both periods and are still utilized or acknowledged today.

### **Alfred Barr and Modern Art as a Continuum**

As Schapiro and Meiss were developing their modern medievalist methods, Alfred Barr (1902-1981) (Fig. 25) was applying his own interdisciplinary views of modern art to his curatorial projects and scholarship as the director of the Museum of Modern Art from 1929-1943. Barr developed his flexible understanding of modern art during undergraduate courses in medieval and ancient art history at Princeton, and he applied

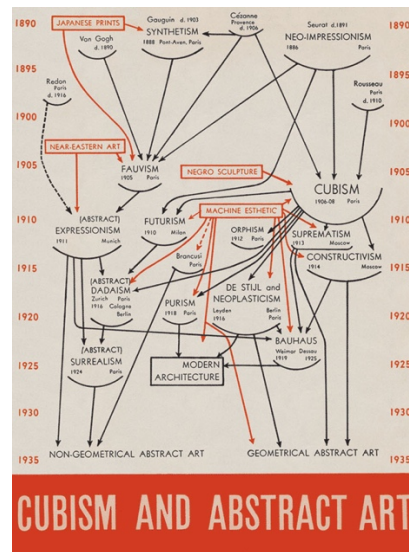
this understanding to his formulation of the first modern art history course, the multi-departmental structure, and the exhibition programs as director and curator at the MoMA. Barr refused to define modern art. He saw definition as a limitation and instead attempted to place modern art within the continuous lineage of western art history rather than claim the various avant-garde movements represented radical shifts in style and social context different from all other times in history. Barr elucidated contemporary art movements and styles to the general public by showing modern art's relevance and vitality as a product of the current moment, but reinforced that its characteristics were not limited to its period alone. He was not opposed to relating modern art to art from a hundred or more years before. In this respect, Barr, Schapiro and Meiss agree. All three men saw their current historical moment as relatable to stylistic, social, and economic shifts of other historical moments. For Schapiro, this was the relationship between Marxism and the decline of feudalism, and for Meiss, this was the relationship between increased religiosity and increased abstraction in art after a global disaster.

**Figure 25:** Alfred Barr, circa 1940s.



Barr explored these transhistorical relationships in his exhibition programs which include notable shows like *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936). In *Cubism and Abstract Art*, he reveals his preference for didactic methods in elucidating modern art to the public by tracing clearer progressions in non-representational art from the late nineteenth-century antecedents to the contemporary moment on his well-known diagram (Fig. 26). Despite his diagram, Barr tended to avoid rigid chronological progressions and was willing to challenge neat periodization. This is clear in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (Fig. 27). Barr's inclusivity is seen in displays of contemporary "Art of the Insane," Folk art, art by children, journalistic art, and films alongside the more neatly categorized Dada and Surrealist styles.<sup>146</sup> He also includes

**Figure 26:** Alfred Barr's didactic chart for the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*.

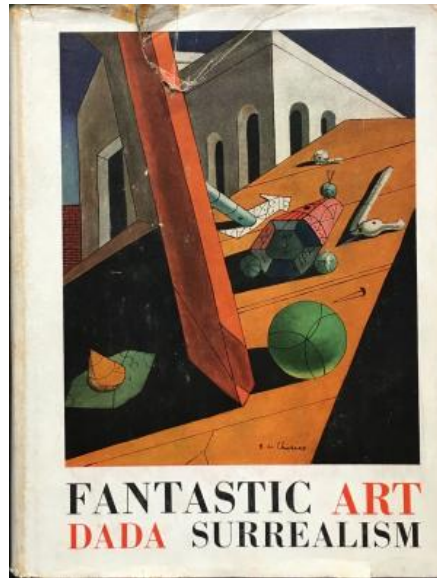


premodern art from the fifteenth and sixteenth century within the category he calls "Fantastic Art". Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Brueghel, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein, and William Hogarth. Barr noticeably skips over the High

<sup>146</sup> Alfred Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936), 282-283. Barr's checklist for the exhibition categorizes the artworks under these titles.

Renaissance in this survey, which suggests that he did not consider it a direct historical influence for Dada or Surrealism.<sup>147</sup>

**Figure 27:** Cover to *Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism* exhibition catalog by Alfred Barr.



Like Schapiro and Meiss, Barr was trained in the 1920s, a time of pedagogical flux in art historical education, and it was in his undergraduate classes in medieval and ancient art history at Princeton that he began to develop his “flexible” view of modern art.<sup>148</sup> When he entered Princeton in 1918 at the age of sixteen, modern art history courses did not exist, so his exposure to art history began in Charles Rufus Morey’s survey classes of ancient and medieval art. Within the first decade of the twentieth century, the popular connoisseurial examination of medieval art began to give way to greater pedagogical approaches, which Morey helped further in 1907 at Princeton when

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<sup>147</sup> This widened his view of art history and contemporary art in his lifetime, including other art movements that did not fit into the neat progression towards full, purist abstraction that other scholars favored, such as Surrealism, Expressionism, Folk Art and so on. One of Barr’s predecessor’s William Rubin was criticized, among other things, for neatly periodizing modern art’s progression towards Abstract Expressionism in his exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and their Heritage* (1967).

<sup>148</sup> See Alfred Barr, *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 1986). “Flexible” is the adjective Barr chose to use to describe his approach.

he created and taught one of the first courses on medieval art history in the country.<sup>149</sup> Sybil Gordon Kantor notes Morey's desire to approach subjects and styles that had received little attention and had less surviving documentation, such as Hellenistic art, "pre-Gothic and so called 'primitive' Italian art," therefore, medieval art.<sup>150</sup> Morey, like most art historians at the time, adopted the same theoretical approaches as Wölfflin and Alois Riegl by broadly exploring how an object was affected by its cultural surroundings, specifically in regards to style. The course investigated the breakdown of the classical traditions and "the subsequent rise of medieval schools under the transforming influence of Christianity."<sup>151</sup> His overall objective for the course was to situate medieval art within a continuous tradition in Western art history by chronologically examining how style responded to the evolving landscape of human experience. Morey's methods in this course solidified Barr's decision to pursue a degree in art history, and Barr would follow Morey's search for "patterns and stylistic order" as he developed his own charts. Barr's view of modern art as a continuum, where the past and present could simultaneously illuminate one another, was pivotal for the early public understanding of modern art.<sup>152</sup> As Barr followed his growing interest in modernism, his training in medieval art history remained influential as he taught the first modern art history course, constructed the

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<sup>149</sup> Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>152</sup> Richard Meyer, *What was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 116. This view is one that recent scholars like Nagel, Powell, and Crow have attempted to reclaim in their associations between past and present art.

multi-departmental structure at MoMA, and attempted to elucidate and evangelize on modern art's behalf as the museum's director.<sup>153</sup>

Barr has been attributed with teaching one of the first modern art history courses in the country, and he chose to title the class “Tradition and Revolt in Modern Painting,” which further indicates his view that past Western traditions were antecedents to the avant-garde painting styles. Compared to his training in ancient and medieval art, Barr's knowledge of modern art was predominantly self-taught. When he expressed his interest in studying and subsequently teaching modern art, Kantor says his teachers were “either ‘querulously resentful’ or ‘wittily condescending’...Mostly they regarded contemporary art as either ‘ephemeral, or too new...too untested by time, or too trivial or eccentric.’”<sup>154</sup> This disregard only encouraged Barr more to focus his scholarship and teaching on modern art, and he began by constructing his modern art course at Wellesley College, beginning in 1927. He insisted that his other course “The Italian Tradition in European Painting” had to be a prerequisite for his modern art course, which emphasizes Barr's view that late medieval and early Renaissance art were necessary to elucidate before a student could approach modern art.<sup>155</sup> Barr went directly from this position into his directorship at MoMA, and his inclusive teaching methods are reflected in his immediate desire to implement a multi-departmental structure at MoMA, creating the first departments of film, theater, and dance alongside design, architecture, drawings,

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<sup>153</sup> In 1929, as Barr was preparing to enter New York University to write a doctoral dissertation on modern art, he was offered the directorship of the new Museum of Modern Art. He would not fulfill the requirements for a Ph.D. until 1946 when he expanded an exhibition catalog on Picasso into a manuscript entitled *Picasso: Fifty Years Later*.

<sup>154</sup> Kantor, *The Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, 33.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.



photography, painting and sculpture within the galleries. Barr's multimedia departments remain one of his lasting influences today.

In the early to mid-twentieth century, when both the medieval and modern were young, progressing art historical fields, both Barr and Schapiro's early scholarly contributions advocated on behalf of both the premodern and modern. Their exhibitions were pivotal for shaping early understanding in both fields among the public and their peers.<sup>156</sup> As seen, Schapiro's Romanesque scholarship re-analyzes medieval art that had been previously misunderstood as compositionally strange, and since modern art shared similarly tended to baffle the public and scholars, Schapiro naturally related many aspects of the two periods. Barr's advocacy stemmed from a strong conviction to correct public misconceptions of modern art and to spread its value, which he attempted to do as a teacher, in his scholarship and in curatorial didactics. His methods as director at MoMA have been described as evangelical. Alice Marquis, in her biography on Barr, says he "...prodded and shamed and proselytized his countryman into embracing his vision of modern art. Wrathful as an Old Testament prophet, he did battle with the ever present philistines and harried them even as they fled."<sup>157</sup> While this language is extreme, it does express the prominence and self-imposed pressure Barr must have felt in his position as a director at the first modern art museum. As director, he must have required him to anticipate the confusion of a museum visitor and attempt to reach a broad audience with little to a lot of art-looking experience. Furthermore, his decisions held powerful sway

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<sup>156</sup> Schapiro was also a member of MoMA's Art Advisory Council during the 1940s and sketched Barr in an Advisory Council Meeting, c. 1943. See the cover of *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, (1986).

<sup>157</sup> Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, 5. Kantor is quoting Alice Marquis from her biography on Alfred Barr: *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.: Missionary for the Modern* (New York: Contemporary Books, 1989).

over the public, and he could possibly change the minds of those who objected to the art he displayed or enhance the understanding of people who readily admitted to not understanding modern art.

Barr's advocacy and desire to educate and enrich is especially clear in his accessible writing, most well-known is his publication entitled *What is Modern Painting?*, published by MoMA in 1943. It demonstrates his pedagogical approach towards an audience "...who have had little experience in looking at paintings, particularly those modern paintings which are sometimes considered puzzling, difficult, incompetent or crazy." He continues that the book "is intended to undermine prejudice, disturb indifference and awaken interest so that some greater understanding and love of the more adventurous paintings of our day may follow."<sup>158</sup> Barr hopes to expel assumptions and preconceived indifference and to ultimately enrich the viewer's life by posing questions, encouraging the viewer to look closely at the colors and forms, and to honestly interrogate the work and to trust their inner dialogue. He asks the viewer to not dismiss the modern works altogether, since "they may help you to understand our modern world."<sup>159</sup> Barr, like Schapiro, believed the complexities of modern society were reflected in the images produced by culture, but Barr expanded this to include art by children and the mentally ill or images that were seen on subway advertisements, in newspapers, or in the cinema. These images corresponded to universal human emotions and to crucial problems in the world and society, like war and fascism, "the character of

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<sup>158</sup> Alfred Barr, *What is Modern Painting?* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 2. This booklet significantly increased public interest in modern art and has been modified in eleven different additions (as of 1986) in English, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish. See Irving Sandler in his introduction to *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, (1986), 47.

<sup>159</sup> Barr, *What is Modern Painting?*, 3.

democracy...the effects of industrialization, the exploration of the subconscious, the revival of religion, the liberty and restraint of the individual,” all of which were realities for Barr’s readers.<sup>160</sup> Barr’s evangelistic approach in this book is to relate art and life for the reader and viewer, to relate image-making of the current moment with cultural and societal occurrences in the current moment.

Barr’s desire to illuminate both the past and present by placing contemporary art within a clear historical lineage of image-making and ideally making it less strange to the viewer relates to the convictions that shaped *Islands Beyond* and the emphasis the de Menil’s placed on the premodern and modern. Early on in his role as director, Barr expressed his desire for the exhibitions at MoMA to include works by “Dutch primitives...mannerists such as El Greco, Paleolithic cave drawings, Boeotian bronzes, T’ang figurines, Russian ikons, Persian miniatures, and 20th century sculpture and painting,” saying that through this work the public will learn to tolerate the strangeness of the contemporary.<sup>161</sup> This emphasis on transhistorical connections is incredibly prescient for the de Menil’s early curatorial and collecting ethos and MacAgy’s own curatorial methods. While the de Menils and MacAgy approached their exhibitions with the intent to create an atmosphere of spiritual or mystical engagement that emphasized the purely aesthetic, infinite possibilities in art, and they did not desire to overly interpret or didactically persuade. Barr did not relate art from 600 years before to art of the moment with the specific intent to create a spiritual experience, but he did desire to enrich the public and elucidate the historical tradition of modern art, in an attempt to show that the

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<sup>160</sup> Barr, *What is Modern Painting?*, 3.

<sup>161</sup> Meyer, *What was Contemporary Art?*, 117.

past and present are not as different from each other as one might think.<sup>162</sup> Without equating both methods, it is relevant to note that *Islands Beyond*, on a much smaller and briefer scale, attempts to achieve a similar outcome as Barr by encouraging a visual discourse between obviously historical and ecclesiastical sculpture and modern paintings. This small exhibition aimed to extend the understanding of both medieval ecclesiastical sculpture and modern painting by bringing them into the same space to be in dialogue with one another and with visitors. Barr's vision of reconciliation between differing periods attempted to expand public understanding of the contemporary. Dominique de Menil, MacAgy, and the other advisors to *Islands Beyond*, including the curator James Johnson Sweeney, sought to reconcile two opposed, often incompatible identifications in art, secular art and sacred art, by relating to divergent styles and periods of art, the medieval and the modern.

**Figure 28:** James Johnson Sweeney at the Guggenheim, circa 1960s.



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<sup>162</sup> Meyer, *What was Contemporary Art?*, 116. Meyer uses Barr as his first case study in a lengthy attempt to reclaim a broader understanding of the “contemporary,” which Meyer sees as a state of being that carries all preexisting art with it.

## Sweeney and the Spiritual

James Johnson Sweeney (1900-1986) (Fig. 28) is an early modernist scholar and curator who serves as an intriguing connection between Barr and Schapiro, the medieval-modern intellectual figures in New York, and MacAgy, Dominique de Menil, and the *Islands Beyond* committee in Houston, who were more concerned with the medieval-modern's spiritual qualities. Like Flahiff, Sweeney served on the Arts Council at the University of St. Thomas even while he was the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim (1952-1960), and while the transcript is unavailable, he flew to Houston to give the opening night address for *Islands Beyond*.<sup>163</sup> Before Sweeney's involvement in Houston, he was thoroughly involved in the early to mid-twentieth-century sphere of scholars who have already been discussed in this thesis for their participation in the medieval-modern discourse, primarily Barr and Schapiro. Beginning in 1935, the three men were in an intimate, intellectual discussion group that Schapiro started and invited Sweeney and Barr to join along with Erwin Panofsky, William Seitz, and others.<sup>164</sup> This forum of medievalists and modernists undoubtedly led to intriguing, cross-disciplinary discussion about both modern and medieval art. In 1948, ten years before *Islands Beyond*, Barr invited Sweeney to participate in another intellectual group discussed the intersection between art and religion in the contemporary world, where discussions included topics

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<sup>163</sup> Sweeney lent Léger's *Mural Painting* from the Guggenheim collection for the exhibition.

<sup>164</sup> Marcia Brennan, *Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass, 2010), 42. Schapiro formed the group with the goal of having informal but critical discussions on contemporary art, and at Barr's insistence, they met in MoMA's library throughout the rest of the 1930s. Panofsky's scholarship was highly influential in studies of iconography in Early Netherlandish and Late Medieval - Early Renaissance painting. Seitz was the first person to receive a Ph.D. in modern art from Princeton University in 1955. He also wrote the earliest text on Abstract Expressionism.

ranging from “ecclesiastical taste, to the historical and psychological issues associated with iconoclasm, to the ‘problem of the work of art as a religious symbol, as a dogmatic symbol, as a focus for devotion or meditation, as a presentation of legend and as secular expression of religious feeling or faith.’”<sup>165</sup> It can be speculated that within these round table discussions key thinkers in art history were engaging with the “problem,” as Barr called it, of the religious and secular, possibly discussing where they met and diverged and, ultimately, how they could be reconciled in the gallery space or in scholarship. Arguably this same thinking was the impetus for *Islands Beyond* and its bold, transgressive connection between medieval ecclesiastical art and modern art. Sweeney’s beliefs and decisions as a curator raise intriguing thoughts that should be considered when looking at a mid-twentieth century exhibition like *Islands Beyond*, and even the most recent example of the medieval-modern in an exhibition like *Byzantine Things in the World*, which was at the Menil Collection in 2013, and exhibited both Byzantine and modern art from the collection.

Sweeney was Catholic like the de Menils and shared their conviction that modern art had spiritual qualities that could be ignited in specifically constructed exhibition environments, as seen in *Islands Beyond*. Sweeney also shared similar rhetoric to Flahiff, Couturier, Maritain, and Dominique de Menil when he espoused that modern art revealed “the unseen through the seen,” so it made the infinite tangible and could potentially give access to the spiritual phenomena.<sup>166</sup> As Director of the Department of Paintings and

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<sup>165</sup> Brennan, *Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum*, 20. The group included a Jewish and Protestant theologian, the modernist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, and other art historians. Sweeney was a himself a Catholic.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Sculpture at MoMA (1945-46),<sup>167</sup> the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum (1952-1960) and, at the appeal of the John and Dominique de Menil, the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (1961 to 1967),<sup>168</sup> Sweeney's curatorial methods attempted to adapt secular museum spaces into "repositories for spiritual experiences."<sup>169</sup> Therefore, similar to MacAgy, he created atmospheres within modernist galleries that allowed for poetically charged and spiritually enthralling viewing experiences where modern works and "primitive" works,<sup>170</sup> which were his other scholarly and curatorial interest performed "a vital spiritual service to man"—uplifted and enriched through their material qualities alone, not through information.<sup>171</sup> This desire to merge the quasi-sacred experience into the modern gallery was one that Dominique de Menil obviously shared, as seen with the intent for *Islands Beyond* and in her and her husband's future projects, including the Rothko Chapel (Fig. 29), the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, and arguably the entire Menil Collection.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> While at MoMA, Sweeney curated solo artist shows like *Joan Miró* (1941), *Alexander Calder* (1943), *Piet Mondrian* (1945), and *Henry Moore* (1946), and he contributed to the exhibition catalog for *Cubism and Abstract Art*.

<sup>168</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 54-59. Smart discusses Sweeney's friendship with the de Menils, how they encouraged him to come to Houston, like they had with MacAgy and Walter Hopps, the first director of the Menil Collection.

<sup>169</sup> Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, 121.

<sup>170</sup> Both Sweeney and MacAgy encouraged the de Menils to collect "primitive" and premodern art of the Americas, Pacific Northwest, Africa, the Pacific Islands, the Ancient World, and Byzantine art, the other primary areas in the Menil Collection besides Modern and Contemporary Art. See Paul R. Davis on the de Menil's collection of African art and Sweeney and MacAgy's influence. <https://www.menil.org/read/online-features/recollecting-dogon/collecting-and-recollecting/in-perspective-paul-r-davis>. Also see the following link for Sweeney's initiatives as director of the MFAH. [https://prv.mfah.org/archives/pdf/mfah\\_directors.pdf](https://prv.mfah.org/archives/pdf/mfah_directors.pdf).

<sup>171</sup> Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, 7, 11.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 213, n. 7. Brennan references Dominique de Menil's foreword in her essay on "Art of Ancient Cultures" in *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (1997), where Dominique reflects on this museum as able to offer spiritual experiences. Additionally, as elucidated here, Pamela Smart's entire text *Sacred Modern* attempts to elucidate this intent in the de Menils and all of their initiatives.

**Figure 29:** The Rothko Chapel, Houston, Texas.



While in Houston, Sweeney conviction that art should have spiritual resonance on the viewer manifested in his curatorial projects where, like MacAgy, he focused the viewer's attention with limited displays or a variety works where visual relationships were made with bold juxtapositions.<sup>173</sup> He curated innovative displays in the new Mies van der Rohe designed Cullinan Hall, often choosing to suspend canvases from the ceiling with wire. For example, in 1966, Sweeney curated a retrospective of Pierre Soulages's large, dark tonal abstract works which hung on the walls and were suspended from the ceiling, so the canvases dangled freely in the center of the galleries, no frames surrounding their edges (Fig. 30).<sup>174</sup> While this exhibition occurred after *Islands Beyond*, it demonstrates Sweeney's own acknowledgment of the medieval influencing a modern artist. Sweeney had known the Soulages for some time and had previously related

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<sup>173</sup> Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, 13.

<sup>174</sup> A letter from Sweeney to Dominique, June 20, 1958, Menil Collection Archives. Dominique de Menil had requested photographs of Pierre Soulages oil paintings from Sweeney with the possibility for his work to be included in *Islands Beyond*. Soulages was not included in the final selection, but his works would have undoubtedly fit within the show's spiritual intent.



Soulages work to the interior space of a twelfth-century Romanesque church near the artist's hometown, which the curator and artist had once visited together. Sweeney notes the relationship between the architecture of the Romanesque church and the black structures of paint strokes in Soulages paint:

I was standing in the back of the church admiring the mystery, power and drama of the vaulted apse, the dark stone and the contrasting shafts of honeyed light, when Soulages said to me, 'It was just here, in this spot, that I decided to be a painter—not an architect, a painter.' And I have never since seen a painting by Soulages without recognizing the memory that seems to me to have been bitten into his creativeness by that experience. And the recognition of it has always helped me to come closer to his work.<sup>175</sup>

Sweeney draws yet another comparison between modernist abstraction and medieval art and architecture. More importantly though, is Sweeney's acknowledgment of the influence this Romanesque space had on the modern artist's work, which Crow sees as a necessary action today among contemporary scholars who tend to disregard influences in an artist's career that relate to religious works or theological ideologies.<sup>176</sup> While the artist may not have adhered to any specific religious ideals, the medieval space resonated and its formal characteristics re-appeared in his abstract paintings. Art historian Marcia Brennan calls the Soulages retrospective the apex of Sweeney's career in mystical exhibitions, where the sparse, white modernist museum space is employed to evoke a similar transcendence associated with the sacred Romanesque church.<sup>177</sup>

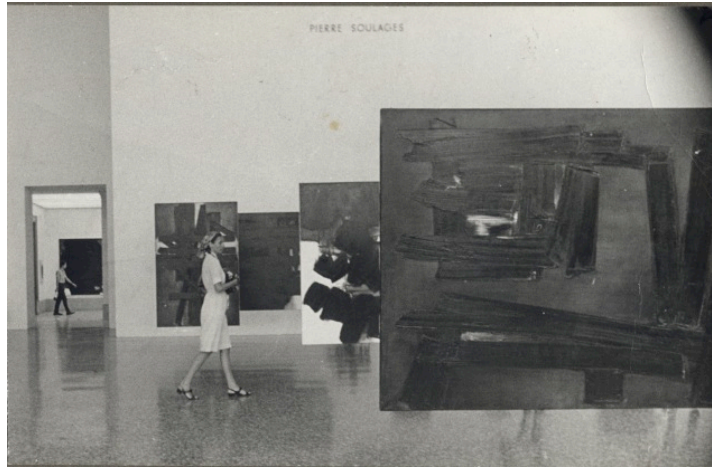
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<sup>175</sup> Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, 122.

<sup>176</sup> Crow's entire book *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (Power Polemics, 2017) discusses this.

<sup>177</sup> Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, 136. Brennan references Ivan Gaskell's analysis of this Soulages's retrospective in his essay "Sacred to Profane and Back Again," in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2003).

**Figure 30:** Pierre Soulages exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 1966.



### **The Medieval-Modern as a Re-Entry to the Spiritual**

*Islands Beyond* epitomizes the Menil Collection's curatorial ethos in its attempt to address the medieval-modern's relation to spirituality and the secular museum space. In the nineteenth century, the secular museum was increasingly related to religious environments and the art within its walls became, as Rosalind Krauss claims, "a refuge for religious emotion...a secular form of belief."<sup>178</sup> Spiritually transformative power was attributed to museums the objects within their walls, and in turn the museums saw themselves as having the power to morally uplift the public.<sup>179</sup> This view of the museum as a repository of quasi-religious fervor waned in the twentieth century, when broader

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<sup>178</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 12.

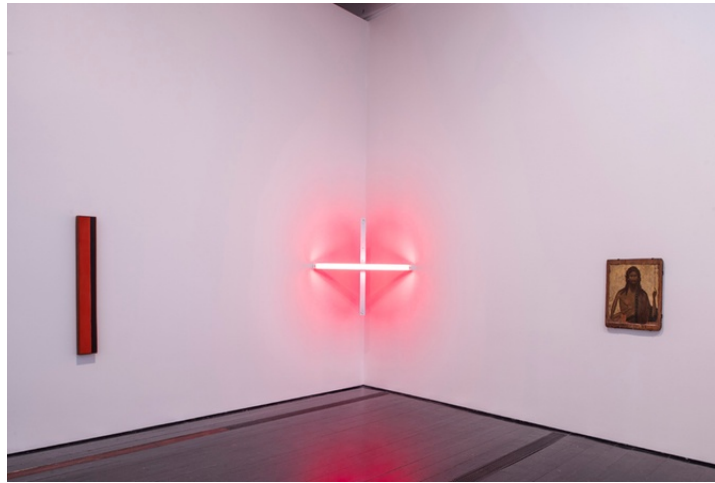
<sup>179</sup> Moral edification was the intent for many museums emerging in the nineteenth century, especially in London, with the National Gallery and Victoria and Albert Museum, and later in Boston with the Museum of Fine Arts.

associations between the museum context and religion or spirituality was avoided or viewed as misguided, and any objects considered sacred were neatly historicized apart from any secular objects. Within this early to mid-twentieth century context, it is clearer to see how progressive Barr's inclusive understanding of modern art and Couturier's sacred modern projects in France truly were. Both men made room for discourse between the past and present, sacred and profane, and medieval and modern. A year before *Islands Beyond* opened, Sweeney and Schapiro both participated in the Meeting of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, which Houston hosted at John de Menil's insistence, and Sweeney gave the introduction to a panel discussion entitled "The Place of Painting in Contemporary Culture," where he expressed how the secular museum space could amplify the aesthetic, spiritual and/or symbolic qualities in modern works.<sup>180</sup> Like the de Menils, Sweeney believed the viewer's taste and imagination could be elevated within the almost religiously persuasive museum space, and a year later, *Islands Beyond* attempts to assert this possibility by exhibiting both the medieval and modern. While the exhibition does not take place in the "secular" museum context but a Catholic university art gallery, it creates the precedence for future Menil exhibitions. Historically religious works have been displaced from their original, religious context, yet rather than become de-sacralized, their purpose as objects made for a specific, devotional intent which reaches back to the Middle Ages, has been revitalized in a gallery environment where the curator has attempted to mimicked an ecclesiastical atmosphere and juxtaposed the works with modern paintings that do occur in secular art galleries to continue transhistorical discourse and to recalls the lasting power of images and objects.

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<sup>180</sup> Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, 22.

**Figure 31:** *Byzantine Things in the World* exhibition at the Menil Collection, 2013. Dan Flavin (center), Barnett Newman (left), Byzantine icon (right).



The legacy of *Islands Beyond*, and its attempt to merge the medieval-modern and the sacred and secular remains present in the Rothko Chapel, which John and Dominique de Menil commissioned in 1964 after the sudden death of MacAgy. This non-denominational, interfaith chapel demonstrates the clear continuation of the efforts for spirituality in modern art that were instigated with early modern figures like Couturier and then embodied in *Islands Beyond*. Most recently, the 2013 exhibition *Byzantine Things in the World* (Figs. 31 and 32) at the Menil Collection revitalized the medieval-modern discourse begun a few blocks away and fifty-five years before with *Islands Beyond*. The exhibition, once again, brings sacred medieval objects and modern works into the same gallery spaces. Byzantine icons, crosses, and reliquaries are in direct conversation with works by the artists Dan Flavin, Willem De Kooning, Lucio Fontana, Donald Judd, Yves Klein and Barnett Newman. The exhibition attempted to resurrect a vitalism or animism in Byzantine and Medieval material cultures once the objects were separated from their cultural surroundings.

**Figure 32:** *Byzantine Things in the World*, 2013. Ad Reinhardt (center), Byzantine objects to the left and right.



While recalling its past life, the exhibition's main attempt was to bestow these objects with new meaning related to the contemporary material culture. Byzantinist scholar from the University of Texas in Austin, Glenn Peers, curated the exhibition, and his main impetus was that Byzantine objects needed to be seen as material objects within our contemporary world, rather than art removed from a 700 year old civilization, "'Art' is a death certificate for Byzantine material culture, because it suppresses all the living, active aspects of these historical things."<sup>181</sup> In the vein of Barr, Peers claims that chronological, didactic and historical displays only reinforce the lifeless existence of these medieval objects as inactive, useless, art of the past. *Byzantine Things in the World* attempts to enliven these Byzantine works by situating them within the active, current lineage of art-making, by acknowledging their influence on artists like Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. Medieval and Byzantine art were centered around the social and religious

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<sup>181</sup> Glenn Peers, ed., *Byzantine Things in the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 28.

practices of acting and looking, which was similarly central to the twentieth-century movement of Minimalism, where the bodily activeness of the viewer is central to works like Judd's *100 aluminum boxes* at the Chinati Foundation.<sup>182</sup> Thus relating and juxtaposing the two styles through analogy highlights the viewer's bodily senses and awareness, and creates an understanding the way Byzantine viewers understood their objects in turn aided the contemporary viewer to more deeply understand the multiplicity of the modern works in this exhibition. A transhistorical exhibition gave the viewer the opportunity for contemporary viewers to embody similar viewing rituals as viewers from over one thousand years ago, "Like Byzantines, we can be constantly alert to things in the world for their transfiguring potential."<sup>183</sup> This exhibition and its related criticism allows, even argues, for a re-examination of medieval visual culture and sacred images through or in relation to a modern visual lens. In the gallery space, the viewer is able to either engage with this re-examination of Byzantine objects or, instead, allow the Byzantine objects to inform a re-examination of the modern objects. Recalling the legacy of *Islands Beyond*, the exhibition merges two distinct times and cultures, the medieval and modern, through analogy and juxtaposition, ultimately relating the seemingly unrelated to form new meanings and ways of viewing art as a continuum.

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<sup>182</sup> See Richard Shiff, "On Knowing an Object," in *Byzantine Things in the World*, ed. Glenn Peers, (Houston: Menil Collection, 2013), for his examination of both Judd and Flavin's works within this lineage and exhibition context.

<sup>183</sup> Peers, ed., *Byzantine Things in the World*, 68.

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