THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
A PUBLICATION OF JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Volume 5 Article 18

2024

The Problem of Choosing Art for a Nation: Andrew Mellon, the National Gallery of Art, and the Resistance of Contemporary Art

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Abstract

The National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington, D.C. was founded by former Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon and opened to the public in 1941. From its opening until the 1970s, the Gallery resisted displaying modern and contemporary art alongside the permanent collection. The museum's structure, developed by Mellon, ensured that his artistic preferences were upheld long after his death. This structure systematically excluded modern and contemporary art, as well as artists from marginalized groups. As such, understanding this resistance to modern and contemporary art is essential for understanding the institutional racism and sexism that shaped the Gallery's collection.

Keywords: Andrew Mellon, contemporary art, modern art, National Gallery of Art

The National Gallery of Art (NGA) held its opening ceremonies on March 17, 1941. It had been established by law four years earlier, on March 24, 1937, when the government accepted Andrew Mellon's donation of his art collection and funds.[1] Mellon did not live to see the Gallery open —he died in August 1937, just months after the institution was formally established.[2] However, Mellon was a conservative man, both in politics and artistic taste, and the Gallery he founded resisted modern and contemporary art, particularly abstract art, until the 1970s. It would not be until the 1990s that the Gallery fully embraced modern and contemporary art. This paper argues the Gallery's conservatism allowed it to maintain a "neutral oasis" for its visitors, at the expense of art and artists supposedly deemed politically charged.

For the purposes of this paper, the terms "modern" and "contemporary" will be used as periodizations, rather than as stylistic definitions. "Modern" refers to art created after the final Impressionist exhibition in 1886 and up until 1930, while "contemporary" refers to art created within 20 years of the historical moment in question. For simplicity, "abstraction" in this paper refers to total abstraction—art that lacks any figuration.

This study relied on "highlights" style catalogs to determine the tastes of the Gallery from its opening in 1941 until 1999, as well as oral histories, annual reports, and memoirs. In the process of compiling a "highlights" catalog, the writers made decisions about which artworks to include and exclude. These selections reflect the artistic tastes and values of the NGA and its employees. Therefore, by studying these catalogs, we can analyze those tastes and preferences.

For this study, I selected one catalog from each decade between 1941 until 1999. However, no catalogs before 1976 included both paintings and sculptures, so the catalogs for 1944, 1952, and 1962 include only paintings. To gain insight into the sculpture collection, I also used the 1949 catalog *Masterpieces of Sculpture from the National Gallery of Art*, edited by Charles Seymour, Jr. The three catalogs for 1944, 1952, and 1962—*Masterpieces of Painting from the National Gallery of Art*, *Great Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*, and *Treasures from the National Gallery of Art*, all edited by Huntington Cairns and John Walker—are part of a series, meaning any given painting could appear in only one of the books. Additionally, no catalog meeting my criteria was published during the 1980s. Instead, this study uses the 1984 revised edition of the 1976 catalog *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Particular focus will be placed on comparing the three Cairns and Walker catalogs, as well as the 1976 and 1984 editions of *National Gallery of Art, Washington*.

This study contributes to historiography, as there is no scholarly history of the NGA. The only book dedicated to the history, *America's National Gallery of Art: A Gift to the Nation* by the National Gallery and Philip Kopper (1991), is far from scholarly. The volume offers a glowing review of the museum and its founder but is deeply biased against modern artistic movements. For example, Kopper describes the Bauhaus as having "championed blocks of grimly plain office buildings."[3] The book also lacks sufficient sourcing, relying instead on unverifiable sources such

[1] David Finley, *A Standard of Excellence: Andrew W. Mellon Founds the National Gallery of Art at Washington* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), 53.
[2] Paul Mellon, interview by Robert Bowen, Washington, D.C., July 26, 27 and November 10, 1988, transcript, Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2-3.
[3] Philip Kopper and National Gallery of Art, eds., *America's National Gallery of Art: A Gift to the Nation* (New York, NY: Abrams, 1991), 82.

as conversations with museum employees and vague references to "a variety of press clippings" and "a chance meeting in the Gallery's cafeteria with Brother Patrick Ellis of La Salle University."[4] Given these issues, I have used the book only when its information could be corroborated. I also relied on other primary sources, including the Gallery's annual reports to Congress, archival materials, and oral histories, to construct a reliable history of the NGA.

This study also drew from the most recent scholarly biography of Andrew Mellon, *Mellon: An American Life* by David Cannadine, who is considered the foremost scholar on Mellon. While Cannadine tends to give Mellon the benefit of the doubt, I have taken this into account throughout the study. Whenever possible, I consulted Cannadine's source materials as well.

At the opening of the Gallery, modern and contemporary art were completely absent from the permanent collection. Mellon's policy stipulated that no work could be hung with the permanent collection until the artist had been dead for twenty years.[5] This rule, drawn from European national galleries, reflected Mellon's conservative vision.[6] Of the artworks donated by Mellon to the Gallery in 1937, the latest was *Approach to Venice* by J.M.W. Turner (1844). However, *Approach to Venice* well exceeded the 20-year limit, as Turner had died in 1851, nearly 90 years before the painting was exhibited at the Gallery. Over the following decades, the Gallery would gradually accept more and more modern and contemporary art, but it remained cautious in doing so.

In its early years, the NGA upheld this conservative trend, partly due to its institutional structure. Mellon personally designed the Gallery's framework in House Joint Resolution 217, which enshrined his beliefs in law. According to this resolution, the NGA answered to a board of trustees made up of five general trustees, who were private citizens, and four government employees: the Secretaries of Treasury, State, and the Smithsonian, along with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who also served as the chairman of the board. The general trustees were chosen by the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian and approved by Mellon, serving staggered ten-year terms to ensure stability.[7] There were no term limits for trustees, and all future trustees would be elected by the board, making it a self-perpetuating body. The top four employees—the director, assistant director, secretary, and chief curator—were to be compensated by trust funds established by Mellon, exempting them from civil service regulations. These appointments, too, were subject to Mellon's approval.[8]

Only one of these appointments was made before Mellon's death: that of David Finley, Mellon's longtime personal assistant and friend, as director. The hearings on House Joint Resolution 217 were largely a formality, with little opposition to the bill or to the structure it outlined for the Gallery.[9] The swift passage of the resolution reflected the overwhelming desire

[4] Kopper and National Gallery of Art, *America's National Gallery of Art*, 331-332.
[5] John Walker, interview by Eric Lindquist, Fishers Island, New York, July 27, 1987, Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C, 43.; Finley, *A Standard of Excellence*, 74.
[6] Finley, *A Standard of Excellence*, 74.
[7] H. J. Res. 217, 75th Congress, 1st sess. (March 24, 1937), *US Statutes at Large* 50 (1937): 51-53.
[8] H. J. Res. 217, 75th Congress, 1st sess. (March 24, 1937), *US Statutes at Large* 50 (1937): 51-53.
[9] "Hearing Before the Committee on the Library House of Representatives Seventy-Fifth Congress First Session on H.J. Res. 217: A Joint Resolution Providing for the Construction and Maintenance of a National Gallery of Art," February 17, 1937.

for Mellon's art collection to be made public. Signed into law by President Roosevelt on March 24, 1937, less than three months after Mellon's offer, House Joint Resolution 217 ensured that Mellon's attitudes and preferences would be enshrined in law. As Cannadine writes, "Mellon had no wish to charter his gallery on terms that might be modified over time, subject to political winds, which in his own later experience blew only ill."[10] Thus, the early NGA was deeply influenced by Mellon, despite opening after his death. The most significant representation of Mellon's enduring influence is in the original members of the board of trustees. In 1937, the five general trustees appointed were Donald D. Shepard (Mellon's lawyer), S. Parker Gilbert (Mellon's colleague at the Treasury), Duncan Phillips (a wealthy art collector from Pittsburgher), David K.E. Bruce (Mellon's son-in-law), and Andrew Mellon himself.[11] After Mellon and Gilbert passed away before the Gallery's opening, they were replaced by Paul Mellon, Mellon's son, and Ferdinand Lammot Belin.[12] In 1938, the executive officers were elected: Paul Mellon became serving as president of the board, David Bruce vice president, Donald Shepard secretary-treasurer, and David Finley was formally appointed as the first director.[13]

Notably, none of the ex-officio trustees were elected officials, and positions such as the Secretary of the Smithsonian and the Chief Justice tended to remain filled by the same individuals for long periods, regardless of political administration. As a result, the only way for individual citizens to influence the NGA was through Congressional action or direct activism–of which there is no recorded example, unlike the protests against other art institutions in New York.[14] While political shifts did impact the NGA's board with each presidential election, the Gallery largely remained unresponsive to political changes in its art collection. This allowed the NGA to maintain the appearance of, to use Carol Duncan's term, a "disinterested realm of culture."

The following years continued this trend, though the gap between the creation of artwork and its display at the NGA shortened to around 40 to 50 years. The 1944 highlights catalog, *Masterpieces of Painting*, included the first works of modern art, with the latest being Paul Cézanne's *Still Life* (1890-1894). However, modern art made up less than 5% of the works in the catalog, and none were created after 1900 or were fully abstracted.[15] This "lag" of about 50 years between the creation of artworks and their display continued in the 1949 catalog *Masterpieces of Sculpture*, which included the first 20th-century artwork: Rodin's *The Age of*

[10] David Cannadine, *Mellon: An American Life*, (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2006), 540.
[11] "Report on the National Gallery of Art 1938" (United States Government Printing Office, 1939), National Gallery of Art Archives, https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/About/pdf/annual-reports/annual-report-1938.pdf, 27.
[12] "Report on the National Gallery of Art 1938," 28.
[13] "Report on the National Gallery of Art 1938," 28-29.
[14] Notable examples include the outcry surrounding the exhibit *Harlem on My Mind* for excluding African American voices and the poster campaigns by the Guerilla Girls. For more information, see "'Harlem on Whose Mind?': The Met and Civil Rights - The Metropolitan Museum of Art," accessed March 31, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/articles/harlem-on-my-mind and "Naked Through The Ages," Guerrilla Girls, accessed March 31, 2024, https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages.
[15] Huntington Cairns and John Walker, eds., *Masterpieces of Painting from the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution and New York: Random House, 1944).

Bronze (circa 1900). However, this Rodin sculpture was the only modern work in the catalog, which featured 56 artworks in total.[16]

This trend persisted in the following two catalogs, *Great Paintings from the National Gallery of Art* (1952) and *Treasures from the National Gallery of Art* (1962), though the works included were about 40 years old. The most recent works in the 1952 catalog were George Bellows' *Both Members of This Club* (1909) and Winslow Homer's *Right and Left* (1909), while the 1962 catalog's latest work was Modigliani's *Roma Woman with Baby* (1919).[17] The ten-year gap between the catalogs resulted in a corresponding ten-year expansion in the range of included artworks. The percentage of modern artworks increased slightly from 8.24% in 1952 to 9.41% in 1962; however, both catalogs continued to exclude fully abstracted paintings. The Gallery was gradually moving toward the acceptance of modern artworks—provided they were not fully abstract, as abstraction remained controversial at the time. Interestingly, both catalogs included depictions of ethnic and racial minorities, although these works were politically ambiguous. For example, Bellows' *Both Members of This Club* depicts a Black man overtaking a white man in a boxing match. These works, while provocative, were sufficiently ambiguous to avoid causing outrage and were not created by members of those minority groups, making them acceptable to the Gallery.

The twenty-year policy was formally abolished in 1963, following the death of Chester Dale in December 1962. To acquire his paintings, the Gallery had to agree to accept his entire collection, which included works by living artists.[18] As a result, the Gallery revised its policy, though modern and contemporary art were still not prioritized until the appointment of J. Carter Brown as the Gallery's third director in 1969.

Under Brown, the Gallery began to show more interest in modern and contemporary art. In his first annual report, Brown explicitly expressed a desire to focus on "the old masters of 20th-century art."[19] However, the reality of this vision did not materialize until later, due to the restrictions of the traditional West Building and the slow expansion of the Gallery's 20th-century collection.

Additionally, Brown's predecessor, John Walker, who oversaw the 1976 catalog, resisted the inclusion of living artists.[20] In the catalog's introduction, Walker explained, "In this book I have not, however, included works by living artists. My reason is that the number of such works in the Gallery's collection, still small, is growing at such a rapid rate that the choice I might make at this time could be a representative one."[21] Walker had excluded living artists during most of his tenure as chief curator and director, and it is unsurprising that he continued to resist their inclusion even after his retirement.

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[16] Charles Seymour Jr., *Masterpieces of Sculpture from the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1949).

[17] Huntington Cairns and John Walker, eds., *Great Paintings from the National Gallery of Art* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).; Huntington Cairns and John Walker, eds., *Treasures from the National Gallery of Art* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

[18] John Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1976), 49.

[19] National Gallery of Art, *Annual Report 1970* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1970), 11-12.

[20] Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington* (1976), 49-50.

[21] Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington* (1976), 50.

The latest painting in the 1976 catalog was Pablo Picasso's *Dora Maar* (1941), a work over thirty years old. The only contemporary work included was a sculpture, *Cubi XXVI* by David Smith (1965), which likely found its way into the catalog because sculpture held a lower status in the Gallery at the time.[22] While over 15% of the catalog featured modern artworks, less than 1% was post-war art, even though more than twenty years had passed since the end of World War II. Notably, this was the first catalog to include fully abstract works, though they made up only about 1.2% of the catalog.[23] Despite Director Brown's goals, the Gallery had not yet fully embraced modern and contemporary art.

The East Building's opening in 1978 was a major change in the Gallery's policy on modern and contemporary art. Just by looking at the difference in architecture between the older West Building and the new East Building, it is clear the Gallery's attitude toward modernism had changed. That change went so far as to allow the "Collector's Committee" to commission living artists for the building, including a Calder mobile.[24] Now that the Gallery had a space that suited modern and contemporary art, they were more willing to show such works, and they could better encourage collectors of twentieth-century art to donate.

Although no new catalog was published between 1978 and Brown's retirement in 1992, the revised edition of Walker's catalog, published in 1984, included no changes in the sculpture and drawings sections but did include a brief section of newer paintings, including Mark Rothko's *Orange and Tan* from 1954. For the first time, post-war abstraction entered the catalog, increasing the number of abstract works from 13 in 1976 (1.19%) to 18 in 1984 (1.63%). However, David Smith's *Cubi XXVI* remained the only contemporary artwork, and it was just barely 19 years old.[25] The Gallery had the physical space for contemporary art, but its collection was still limited, and therefore so was its catalog.

In the 1990s, the slow creep of modern and contemporary art into the Gallery was complete and J. Carter Brown's goals were fulfilled under his successor. This is reflected in the 1997 catalog, *A World of Art* by Martha Richler. In this catalog, the latest works are Frank Stella's *The Fountain* and Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 681C*, both from 1993. Over 16.5% of the works in the catalog are fully abstracted.[26] The resistance to modern and contemporary art was finally overcome. Though, percentagewise, less space was dedicated to modern art (just 13.56%), the representation of post-war art skyrocketed from less than 2% in all preceding catalogs to 9.75%. This shift is best exemplified by the new chapter organization: the 12th through 14th centuries share a single chapter, the 15th through 18th centuries each get one chapter, but the 19th and 20th centuries each get three chapters. Modern and contemporary art had shifted from a brief epilogue to the more valued earlier periods to a core aspect of the NGA's collection.

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[22] The sculpture section has black and white photographs, as opposed to the color photographs in the paintings section. Additionally, only 35 pages are dedicated to sculpture, as opposed to over 550 on paintings.
[23] John Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington* (1976).
[24] E.A. Carmean, interview by A.C. Viebranz, Memphis, Tennessee, May 27, 1993, transcript, Gallery Archives, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 34-35.
[25] John Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington*, New and Rev. ed. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1984).
[26] Martha Richler, *A World of Art: National Gallery of Art, Washington* (London: Scala Books and Wappingers' Falls, NY: Antique Collector's Club, 1997).

But why does it matter that the Gallery was so resistant to modern and contemporary art? Firstly, the NGA held a prominent position of power within the art world and wider governmental cultural policy as the Nation's art gallery. NGA employees, particularly the director, held positions of power in Washington, D.C., and the federal government. For example, after the Florence floods of 1966, director John Walker and assistant director J. Carter Brown were chairman and deputy chairman of the Washington Area of the Committee to Rescue Italian Art.[27] The NGA also functioned as a part of the federal government, housing governmental offices and projects like the Inter-American Office and the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, or Roberts Commission, during World War II.[28] The NGA was more than a single museum; it was a cultural cornerstone of the United States government. As John Walker wrote in the 1976 catalog, "the Gallery has been called upon to undertake many of the functions performed elsewhere by Ministries of Fine Arts. These responsibilities have varied from assisting in the design of stamps and inaugural medals to organizing exhibitions offered by foreign governments. The Gallery's creation thus helped to fill a void in the governmental structure."[29] When an institution of such power operates under clear biases, it helps to uphold those biases for more than just the Gallery itself, but also the national conversation about what art has value.

More importantly, excluding this art leads to the exclusion of both artists of color and women artists, as the creation of art became far more available to these groups in the twentieth century. None of the catalogs examined for this study included a single work by a non-white artist. Even though some works did enter the collection, they were not deemed worthy of inclusion in the catalogs by the writers.[30] Women artists were tokenized, with certain figures like Mary Cassatt being featured frequently, while most other artists were excluded. Even after modern and contemporary art were accepted, these groups remained marginalized, and works concerning political issues were entirely excluded. By excluding women and non-white artists, the Gallery established a norm that their art did not have value equal to that of their white, male counterparts. The Gallery's power and influence ensured that that norm had impacted the broader cultural conversation, extending beyond its walls.

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[27] "National Gallery of Art 1967 Annual Report" (Smithsonian Institution, 1968), National Gallery of Art Archives, https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/About/pdf/annual-reports/annual-report-1967.pdf, 356.

[28] "Report on the National Gallery of Art 1944" (United States Government Printing Office, 1946), National Gallery of Art Archives, https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/About/pdf/annual-reports/annual-report-1944.pdf, 30, 32.

[29] Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington*, 1976, 59.

[30] Known artworks by racial and ethnic minorities included: David Alfaro Siquieros, *Self-Portrait* from Andrew W. Mellon Purchase fund ("National Gallery of Art Annual Report 1971" (National Gallery of Art, n.d.), National Gallery of Art Archives, https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/About/pdf/annual-reports/annual-report-1971.pdf, 8.); Henry O. Tanner, *The Seine*, Museum Purchase ("National Gallery of Art Annual Report 1972" (National Gallery of Art, n.d.), National Gallery of Art Archives, https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/About/pdf/annual-reports/annual-report-1972.pdf, 15); Sam Gilliam, *Relative*, from anonymous gift, acquired 1994 (Sam Gilliam, Relative, 1968, acrylic on canvas, overall (suspended [installed] canvas): 304.8 x 411.48 cm (120 x 162 in.)overall (full canvas): 304.8 x 1341.1 cm (120 x 528 in.), 1968.); Alma Thomas, *Red Rose Cantata*, from Vincent Melzac, acquired 1976 (Alma Thomas, Red Rose Cantata, 1973, acrylic on canvas, overall: 175.3 x 127 cm (69 x 50 in.), 1973.).

Altogether, the avoidance of "controversial" art —even if that meant excluding disempowered groups—allowed the Gallery to achieve its goal of creating a comfortable atmosphere for empowered visitors. The Gallery's first director, David Finley, wrote that he believed museums were "one of the few stabilizing forces in a changing world."[31] The Gallery wanted to create an escape from the chaos of the outside world. However, that escape relied upon the exclusion of art and artists that supposedly broke that illusion by virtue of their existence. Ambiguous works like *Both Members of This Club* were permissible but works with more explicit political messages were not. Even in discussions of *Both Members of This Club*, the Gallery avoided commenting on the racial themes of the painting.

This neutrality was also a façade, as the Gallery is an inherently political institution. The board of trustees of the Gallery includes four ex-officio members who are all political appointees, including the Secretaries of State and Treasury. The Gallery is funded by Congress, and the vast majority of its employees are subject to the regulations of civil service. Additionally, the Gallery benefited from and engaged in diplomatic relationships between the United States and other countries, including negotiating exhibitions with foreign governments and hosting dignitaries.[32] Though the Gallery actively worked to appear neutral by excluding contemporary art, this appearance concealed its fundamentally political underpinnings.

The exclusion of contemporary art at the Gallery was symptomatic of a larger phenomenon of traditionalism meant to create a comfortable environment for visitors, especially elite white male Americans. Even when the Gallery accepted contemporary art, it maintained its commitment to neutrality by excluding art and artists whose existence could be deemed political. Once abstraction was no longer as controversial as it had been during the height of the Cold War, it could slowly be accepted, while other art and artists remained controversial and were therefore excluded. In attempting to create the appearance of a neutral museum for the nation, the National Gallery of Art excluded large portions of that nation. Within the marble walls of the Gallery, the ideals of Andrew Mellon lived on—if not his dislike of modernism.

[31] Finley, *A Standard of Excellence*, 177.

[32] National Gallery of Art, *Annual Report 1975* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1975), 12; National Gallery of Art, *Annual Report 1976* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1976), 20-21; John Walker, *National Gallery of Art, Washington*, 59.; John Walker, *Self-Portrait with Donors: Confessions of an Art Collector* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 57; National Gallery of Art, *Annual Report 1954* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1954), 155.

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