

MoMA's Public Relations, Alfred Barr's Public, and Matisse's American Canonization

John O'Brian

Volume 18, Number 1-2, 1991

Questionner le modernisme
Modernism in Question

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072981ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072981ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

O'Brian, J. (1991). MoMA's Public Relations, Alfred Barr's Public, and Matisse's American Canonization. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 18(1-2), 18-30. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072981ar>

Article abstract

Depuis 1931, l'année où le MoMA mettait sur pied sa première exposition de Matisse, jusqu'en 1951, l'époque qui vit Alfred Barr publier son imposante monographie (*Matisse: His Art and His Public*) et organiser une autre importante rétrospective de l'artiste, le musée new yorkais s'engageait dans un processus d'institutionnalisation qui allait modifier—d'aucuns diraient « momifier »—sa vocation initiale. D'une simple galerie vouée à la présentation d'expositions temporaires, il allait en effet devenir le dépositaire que l'on sait d'une célèbre collection d'art moderne.

Alfred Barr est le personnage-clé de cette transformation et l'instigateur du canon moderniste qui trouve encore des échos dans les pratiques actuelles du musée. Sa détermination à rassembler un large public pour le MoMA le porta à des initiatives en apparence contradictoires, où des opérations de battage médiatique et des stratégies renouvelées d'accrochage devaient se combiner à la rigueur du scholarship pour imposer une certaine idée du développement de l'art de ce siècle.

La figure emblématique de Matisse paraît avoir joué un rôle de premier plan dans ces stratégies, le Matisse d'avant 1920 qu'une certaine austérité formelle préservait encore d'un hédonisme trop affiché. La dernière rétrospective de l'artiste, organisée par le MoMA en 1992, s'inscrit dans le prolongement du canon matisseén et moderniste élaboré par Barr au lieu d'en produire l'analyse critique.

MoMA's Public Relations, Alfred Barr's Public, and Matisse's American Canonization*

JOHN O'BRIAN, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Résumé

Depuis 1931, l'année où le MoMA mettait sur pied sa première exposition de Matisse, jusqu'en 1951, l'époque qui vit Alfred Barr publier son imposante monographie (*Matisse: His Art and His Public*) et organiser une autre importante rétrospective de l'artiste, le musée new yorkais s'engageait dans un processus d'institutionnalisation qui allait modifier—d'aucuns diraient "momifier"—sa vocation initiale. D'une simple galerie vouée à la présentation d'expositions temporaires, il allait en effet devenir le dépositaire que l'on sait d'une célèbre collection d'art moderne.

Alfred Barr est le personnage-clé de cette transformation et l'instigateur du canon moderniste qui trouve encore des échos dans les pratiques actuelles du musée. Sa détermination à rassembler un large public pour le MoMA le

porta à des initiatives en apparence contradictoires, où des opérations de battage médiatique et des stratégies renouvelées d'accrochage devaient se combiner à la rigueur du scholarship pour imposer une certaine idée du développement de l'art de ce siècle.

La figure emblématique de Matisse paraît avoir joué un rôle de premier plan dans ces stratégies, le Matisse d'avant 1920 qu'une certaine austérité formelle préservait encore d'un hédonisme trop affiché. La dernière rétrospective de l'artiste, organisée par le MoMA en 1992, s'inscrit dans le prolongement du canon matisseé et moderniste élaboré par Barr au lieu d'en produire l'analyse critique.

"A museum can either be a museum or it can be modern, but it cannot be both."

Gertrude Stein

Gertrude Stein's remark about the inherent contradiction of an institution that is both a "museum" and "modern" was reportedly directed at Alfred Barr, founding director of the Museum of Modern Art.¹ If so, the remark must have been made sometime between MoMA's opening in 1929 and Stein's death in 1946. As usual, Stein had a point. Within a few years of its founding, MoMA transformed itself from a non-collecting gallery devoted to temporary exhibitions into the most widely publicized collecting museum in the world. It acquired for itself the institutional patina of a "museum piece." Or, as some critics have quipped, MoMA mummified itself.

In this essay, I want to trace the institutionalization of MoMA from 1931, when the museum organized its first exhibition on Matisse, to 1951, the year Barr published his large monograph *Matisse: His Art and His Public* and mounted his second major retrospective on the artist. In particular, I want to examine the kind of audience Barr imagined for the museum, and the public relations machinery that MoMA set in motion to achieve its proselytizing aims. In addition, I want to use Matisse as the unifying glue (at the risk of stretching the mummy pun) that holds the main body of the essay together. The example of Matisse is instructive not only because Barr and MoMA drew heavily on it to construct their version of the modernist canon, but also because the museum has recently reenacted its enthusiasm for Matisse by organizing the largest exhibition of his work ever mounted (*Henri Matisse: A Retrospective*, September 24, 1992 to January 19, 1993). In the conclusion, I want to reflect on this exhibition as a way of giving contemporary cogency to the historical issues raised in the essay.

Public Relations

MoMA's longstanding media assault in the name of "the modern," with all its real and apparent contradictions, was undertaken at the urging of Barr, with strong support from his trustees (fig. 1). Barr



Figure 1. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of MoMA, with A. Conger Goodyear, President, receiving a document from Cornelius Bliss transferring Lillie Bliss's collection to the museum, 1934.

was the formative shaper of the norms by which the museum operated and of the organizational framework established for carrying out its programs. He had no hesitation, for instance, in making up reading lists to expand the critical faculties of his trustees. He particularly recommended Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, which he described as "one fundamental book, which I think every person interested in modern culture ought to read."² To Abby Rockefeller, his strongest financial backer, he recommended it as "witty and clarifying" summer reading.³ Doubtless Abby Rockefeller and his other trustees already knew a good deal about the leisure class and the "pecuniary" occupations and "conspicuous consumption" by which Veblen characterized capitalist societies. One must assume, therefore, that Barr also wished them to grasp some of the ways in which the museum might turn Veblen's insights to advantage. In particular, Barr may have wished them to understand Veblen's conception of the means by which legitimacy could be conferred on a gallery of modern art in contemporary American society.

An integral part of the museum's administrative structure was the department devoted to publicity and public relations. Early in 1930, Abby Rockefeller donated \$5,000 (at a time when the museum's entire budget was only \$75,000) for Barr to commission a report advising on how the museum ought to proceed with its first fund-raising campaign and membership drive.⁴ The report was prepared by Edward L. Bernays, an innovator in the public relations field and author of one of the first significant books on the subject, *The Engineering of Consent*.⁵ From Bernays' report it was a short step to the appointment of a full-time press agent by Barr. The publicity benefits to the museum could be observed almost immediately. The enormous press coverage given to the museum's exhibition Henri-Matisse in 1931 was almost entirely favorable (thus prefiguring both the 1951 and the 1992 Matisse retrospectives). Despite the scholarly apparatus of the catalogue that Barr wrote to accompany the show, reviewers and critics quoted from it verbatim, using it almost like a publicity release. This seems to have been part of Barr's design, as calculated as the hiring of a publicity agent to ensure that the catalogue was in the right hands at the right time.

Barr's biographer, Alice Goldfarb Marquis, has described her subject's devotion to modern art in ecclesiastical terms, presenting Barr variously as an "evangelist," a "missionary" and a "preacher" for modernism.⁶ Barr's commitment to modern art, she has argued, was equalled only by his commitment to having it recognized and accepted by the widest possible congregation. Referring to Barr's Presbyterian upbringing—his father was a minister in Baltimore, with a bent for homiletics—Marquis remarked on Barr's appointment of a publicity agent for the museum with a nod towards the pulpit. She also added, "Had not Abby Rockefeller's father-in-law hired publicist Ivy Lee to convince the public that John D. Rockefeller was not a penny-pincher robber baron at all, but an enlightened philanthropist?"⁷ The pairing of homiletics and public relations is apt, for in Barr there coexisted an unexampled alliance of scholarship and the hard sell for the purpose of proselytizing modern art. The alliance is represented visually by a photograph of Barr standing, his arms tightly folded, in the middle of some of the museum's best-known works (fig. 2). Which is he: curator, collector, or auctioneer?

Evidence of Barr's instinct for the hard sell appears in a letter written to Paul J. Sachs in 1932, six months after the Matisse retrospective.⁸ Sachs was a close friend and mentor of Barr, a trustee of the museum, and Associate Director of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University. The letter broached the matter of the museum's effort to secure free advertising space on buses belonging to the Fifth Avenue Coach Company. The idea, wrote Barr, had been suggested by "Miss Mandigo, the Museum's publicity agent."⁹ Miss Mandigo had advised Barr that for the plan to work required the support of stockholders and directors of the bus company. Was Sachs a stockholder or did he have any influence with the directors? Barr requested that Sachs let him know, "so that we may arrange to ask for this excellent channel of advertisement."¹⁰

Figure 2. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., surrounded by works of art from MoMA's collection, 1953. Photograph by David E. Scherman.



In the end, the plan did not work out. But clearly Barr was as willing to engage in showmanship on the sides of Fifth Avenue buses as he was to prepare and publish scholarly catalogues like the one accompanying the Matisse exhibition. What is more, his penchant for both—the showmanship and the scholarship—were already evident in the 1920s, before he accepted the position as director of the museum in July 1929. In 1927, after he had delivered a lecture on modern art to a large and skeptical audience at Harvard, Barr conducted a postmortem on his performance. He had failed to balance the requirement for rigor and honesty, so he thought, with the audience's demand that it be entertained. While he had attempted to present himself as "a showman very carefully arranging an exhibition," he confessed to Sachs that he had not been showman enough. Friends had criticized his manner as "cold," even accused him of appearing neutral about his subject. He did not want to titillate his audience with "easy explanations," he said, or allow it to leave "believing it ha[d] understood in an hour's passive listening what takes years to comprehend," but nor did he want it to leave with its prejudices still intact. "Perhaps compromise is the answer," he concluded.¹¹

The particular blend of showmanship and scholarship that Barr endorsed at MoMA, I am arguing, hastened the process of modern art's institutionalization in America at the same time that it hastened the institutionalization of MoMA itself. Certainly, Barr himself did not underestimate the museum's influence. Part of the reason for his confidence may have been the efficiency of MoMA's publicity department. In 1947, by its own estimate, the museum received roughly *ten times as much publicity as any other museum in America or elsewhere*, and more than all other museums in the United States put together.¹² MoMA had statistics to show that over *one hundred and thirty million newspaper and magazine readers in North America* were exposed each month to the information put out by its publicity department. Another *one hundred million viewers of newsreels*

regularly saw reports about its major exhibitions and acquisitions. Altogether, the number of people being informed about its activities on a regular basis, the museum told *Life* magazine, was *two hundred and fifty million, almost double the population of the United States* . . .

As the historical critique of modernism has advanced in recent years, MoMA has rightly become a familiar target.¹³ Hal Foster has observed that “MoMA has long served as an American metonym of modern art, with the history of the one often charted in terms of the space of the other.”¹⁴ Still, there has been very little detailed analysis of just how MoMA has achieved its influential status. For a start, it pays to look through the museum’s annual reports, especially for information published about the publicity department. For example, the section of the 1938 annual report dealing with the activities of this department—the first of its kind in a museum anywhere in the world—was prepared by its manager, Sarah (Sally) Newmeyer. It begins:

News and comment about the Museum were published in an average of 216 *different* newspapers and magazines each month, with an average of 372 insertions (or clippings) *per month*. These figures include 318 newspapers and 51 magazines which had never before published anything about the Museum. The total reader circulation for the year was 493,205,136.¹⁵

The report makes clear not only that the museum was successfully flooding the media with information about its activities, but also that it kept fastidious watch on the reactions and responses to what it distributed.

In a lecture delivered at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1944, Barr asked his audience to consider the existence of a painting that had been recently acquired by a museum. From the context of his talk, most of the audience must have assumed that he was referring to his own museum. Some present may even have imagined a particularly well-publicized work, perhaps *The Blue Window* by Matisse which had been acquired in 1939. The painting, Barr said,

enters the museum collection on a wave of excitement. It has been shipped on approval, committees have debated its merits, the bargain has been sealed. Preliminary studies have been made on its condition, authenticity, history and iconography. It is announced in the newspapers, mentioned on the local radio and reproduced in the bulletin. The *Art News* praises it, the *Art Digest* damns it. It is hung with honor in a special gallery, perhaps accompanied by a seductive [~~crossed out~~] persuasive label. Other museums want to borrow it, and painters want to copy it.¹⁶

By any standard, a celebrated existence is fancied by Barr for his hypothetical painting. It is exposed to almost as much pre-testing and scrutiny, as much publicity and promotion, as any piece of consumer merchandise emerging from the laboratories of Proctor and Gamble. In other ways, too, it may seem to parallel the fortunes of a well-known brand name. “Whether the work of art subsequently lives or dies,” Barr advised his listeners, “depends partly

Figure 3. Saul Steinberg, “Pictorial Comment,” illustrated in *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1947.



on its intrinsic merits, partly on the attentions we are able to give it by our continued interest.”¹⁷

Barr’s concluding observations invite two questions. First, what are we to understand by his confident reference to the work’s “intrinsic merits”? Barr chose not to elaborate in the 1944 lecture on his criteria for determining the merits of a work of art, but he had strong convictions about which works deserved (and which did not deserve) celebrated treatment by a museum and expressed these on many occasions elsewhere. His convictions and apologia are taken up in what follows, particularly as they relate to Matisse. So, inevitably, is the institution Barr shaped according to his views. In due course, MoMA became largely immune to the influence of any single individual, not excluding Barr, but this did not occur until some time after Barr’s responsibilities at the museum were curtailed following his demotion from director to advisory director in 1943.

Second, whose attention is Barr counting on to provide the “continued interest” in the work of art? Is it a weekend crowd jamming into a highly publicized exhibition (fig. 3)? Who is the “we” that will determine whether the work lives or dies? The flatness of Barr’s delivery cannot disguise the plangency of his pronoun. Is that an ideal public he has in mind? If not, then what public (fig. 4)?

Figure 4. Hero Gehr, "Highbrow and Lowbrow Art," illustrated in *Life Magazine*, 4 November 1949. © Time Warner Inc.

The Public Mind

Barr used the word "public" as part of his basic vocabulary for talking about art. It was a fundamental term in his lexicon. The title of his longest and most sustained book, *Matisse: His Art and His Public*, was not contrived at whim. The conjunction of art and public had exercised him from the beginning as a way of emphasizing what he considered to be the significance of art's social dimension. Art did not exist in a vacuum but required a community, and a community demanded responsibilities of its members as great as those confronting the artist.¹⁸

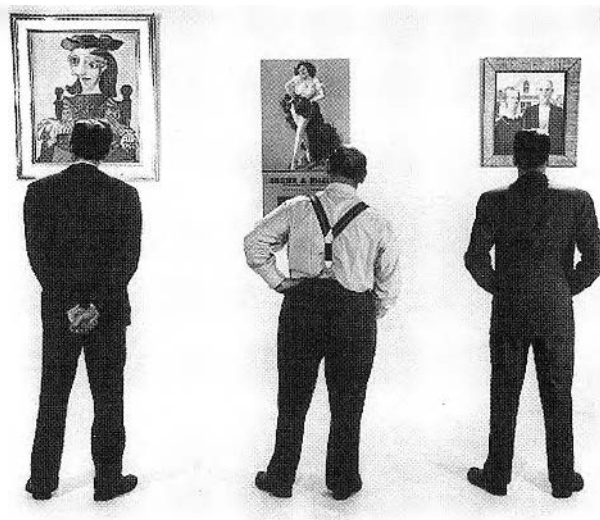
In the book on Matisse, "public" was employed by Barr largely in a descriptive sense. After listing some of Matisse's important early collectors, he wrote:

These enthusiasts were for years the most essential members of Matisse's *public* [Barr's emphasis]. They formed the nucleus, but his public, by which we mean to include all those who responded to his art, was of course manifold. It involved at the beginning his teachers and fellow students, then his colleagues and the first purchasers of his academic still lifes, then little by little the critics who began to see his paintings at the big annual Salons organized by the artists, and then in a modest way the dealers—¹⁹

Barr did not forget the general public, but saved it for last. The "manifold" audience for Matisse's art, he wrote, included "the general public outside the art world [who] first saw his work abroad at the huge international exhibitions of modern art held in Cologne, London, New York, Chicago and Boston during 1912–1913."²⁰ Add all the various components of Barr's public for Matisse together, of course, and you have the essential participants in the "dealer-critic" system defined by White and White and "the institution art" conceived by Peter Bürger.²¹

Barr not only *described* the public for art in his writings, he also *theorized* it. The notion of an art public in an abstract sense, as an entity separate from the interlocking bits and pieces that comprised it, was conceived by Barr in two ways. First, as an ideal body, a community of viewers capable of locating its most acute social bearings in art. And, second, as the widest possible number of people that could be reached and in some way affected by modern art. Behind both conceptions was an educational imperative. Barr took pleasure in looking at art, he once informed Dwight Macdonald, but "in our civilization with what seems to me a general decline in religious, ethical and moral convictions, art may well have increasing importance quite outside aesthetic enjoyment."²²

Barr returned incessantly over the years to the issue of what he called "the pragmatic rhetoric of education" as it applied to art.²³ At MoMA he wanted to balance the "intensive pressure to popularize"—a pressure that he himself applied to the institution—with an absolute need to produce research that met "the dictionary definitions of 'diligent investigation' and 'careful or critical inquiry in seeking facts or principles.'"²⁴ He saw no contradiction in achieving both under the same roof. That is, he saw no contradiction so



long as all channels of communicating information were treated with comparable rigor—"not only the scholarly treatise but also the popular article or book, the classroom or public lecture, the gallery talk, publicity releases, various kinds of reproduction, the film, the museum label, the broadcast and the telecast."²⁵ It may be questioned whether any museum label or publicity release was capable of achieving what Barr desired, but it cannot be doubted that by focusing on all the means of disseminating visual information Barr revolutionized how modern art was seen.

One of the revolutions took place in MoMA's exhibition galleries. Traditionally, paintings on display at dealers' galleries and other museums were hung relatively high on the wall and ordered chronologically. Labels, if any, were minimal. The comparison of an installation photograph of the Matisse retrospective mounted by the Thannhauser Gallery, Berlin, in February–March 1930 (fig. 5), with a photograph of the Matisse retrospective mounted by Barr and held in New York in November–December 1931 (fig. 6), indicates where Barr departed from conventional installations.

Both photographs represent fairly the configurations of the respective exhibitions. The paintings in the Thannhauser installation, illuminated by spotlights attached to a timbered ceiling, are hung against a dark velvet curtain, their bottom framing edges arranged along an imaginary line more or less parallel to the floor. The large *Decorative Nude on an Ornamental Ground* (1926, Musée National d'Art Moderne) is placed slightly below the imaginary line to prevent it poking above the top of the velvet arras, and a small canvas on the right hand side is raised slightly to fit above a bureau. None of the paintings are accompanied by labels, the only clue to their separate identities being small numbered stickers placed beneath each of the works, making reference to a checklist (with prices attached for those interested in buying).

The MoMA photograph shows a radically different format of installation. Barr has not only spaced the works more widely apart

than in Berlin, giving each some sense of individual weight and density, but he has also set them against a neutral, light-colored ground to which are attached descriptive labels. (Just because MoMA was a public gallery did not mean the works in its exhibitions were not sometimes for sale; for Barr's exhibitions there was often a discreet price list, and works were bought by the museum's own trustees.²⁶ Similar practices continue. Two paintings in the recent Matisse retrospective were removed for a period of time during the show to be auctioned off at Sotheby's in New York.²⁷) Most noticeable of all, he has hung *Bathers with a Turtle* (1908, St. Louis Art Museum) no more than forty centimeters above floor level. While the *Bathers* is a much larger work than *Decorative Nude on an Ornamental Ground* (178 x 217 versus 130 x 98 centimeters), and therefore demands some degree of lowering in order to be properly seen, Barr's installation was extreme by conventional standards. The entire exhibition, in fact, was installed at a height lower than was common at the time. Barr was convinced that the eye wearied when constantly required to look up. Many institutions have since followed his example in their installations—though in recent years the height at which paintings are hung has risen again for blockbuster exhibitions, where works would not be visible at all unless raised above the heads of the crowd.

Barr's most notable innovation was grouping paintings and sculptures according to thematic criteria. Where possible he searched out unities of subject and form in the works to guide his installations. Thus, in the photograph, *Woman with a Veil* (1927) is hung as a visual counterpoint to *The Yellow Hat* (1929) on the other side of the doorway, while the bronze sculptures framing the doorway, *The Two Negresses* (1908) and *The Serpentine* (1909), align themselves formally and taxonomically with *Bathers with a Turtle*. These transgressions against the norms of the early 1930s led *The New Yorker* to carp: "We might wish that the show had been hung by that master of artistic chronology, [the dealer] Étienne Bignou."²⁸

Barr's attempts to overhaul and reform how modern art was presented to the public, however, faced greater impediments than supercilious asides from *The New Yorker*. He once expressed the opinion that even his own institution regularly produced texts that amounted to little more than "a kind of superior journalism."²⁹ It was precisely this sort of writing that he wished to avoid in his own work. Most of the time he succeeded, though he once confided to Sachs that he was so pressed for time that he felt he was "coasting on the impetus of [his] few years' work in universities and colleges before coming to the museum."³⁰ Moreover, poor research by others constantly plagued him. *Matisse: His Art and His Public*, he said, began as a short survey of Matisse's art and finished as a heavy volume five times as long because he found "so much obscurity and contradiction and just plain irresponsible confusion in what had already been written about him."³¹ The book was initiated in 1949 (though research for it had been proceeding in a desultory way for years) as an independent project with no deadline for completion, but ended up being finished under enormous pressure to accompany the 1951 Matisse retrospective being organized by the mu-

Figure 5. Installation photograph of the retrospective exhibition, *Henri Matisse*, Thannhauser Gallery, Berlin, February–March 1930.



seum.³² In late April 1951, Monroe Wheeler, Director of Exhibitions and Publications, informed Barr that he had just two months to complete the manuscript. At the time, Barr calculated that he was about three quarters of the way through a first draft (this on a book that ran to 591 pages when it was eventually published in December). "It will be a terrific job to complete the book within eight weeks," Barr responded to Wheeler, "and at the same time give a modicum of time to the collection and the usual budget crisis of spring. For this reason I can give even less time to the exhibition, although I will help Margaret [Miller] as much as I possibly can."³³

Barr's attempt to distance himself from the exhibition was only half-hearted. The pile of letters and memoranda he wrote to the museum staff and others involved with the exhibition indicates his unwillingness to remove himself from the fray of its organization.³⁴ Yet the book got finished and remains a monument of art-historical scholarship. If Barr had had more time, would it have been a different book? It seems unlikely. Possibly the book would not have been finished at all, for Barr was a procrastinator. Like many in the museum (or teaching) profession, he needed the dreadful certainty of an upcoming exhibition or an important anniversary to force completion of his most important projects. In the end, the projects were inseparable from the institution to which he had attached himself.

When it was published, *Matisse: His Art and His Public* received immediate widespread praise. In addition to being reviewed in all the appropriate and usual places, Barr received approximately one hundred and seventy-five personal comments and letters about the book.³⁵ Apart from what the letters say, the sheer volume of them testifies to Barr's (and MoMA's) reputation at the time. The letters themselves also have their own interest. They range from expected bromides, "it is among the greatest books on art that has ever been written" (this from Matisse's dealer, Paul Rosenberg), to tantalizing propositions, "When we really get down to preparing the book on the erotic element in the arts, I hope to get more time with you" (this from Professor Alfred C. Kinsey, the Institute for Sex Research, Indiana University).³⁶ Bernard Berenson, who had published an early

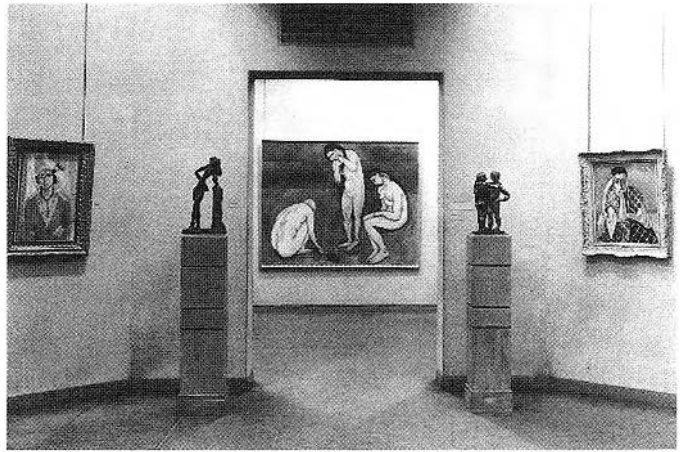
article in support of Matisse's work in 1908, wrote from I Tatti: "There reached me yesterday yr. magnificent and sumptuous volume on Matisse. I shall peruse it with deep interest, roused to fury perhaps, but of a purely ideated, impersonal kind."³⁷ Berenson was just as candid in a letter to Barr's wife, Margaret, ten days later: "To you I can say that he [Barr] performed the operation to perfection but killed the patient."³⁸ The patient, of course, was Matisse.

Barr was far less concerned about killing the patient than about breathing life into the museum-going public. He wanted the public to understand what was vital about Matisse, according to his own lights. Barr drew a radical distinction between the public served by the museum and that served by the university. "Perhaps the university student body," he stated in his Chicago lecture, "may seem varied and undisciplined to their teachers but actually they constitute a homologous body of exceptionally eager men and women. . . ."³⁹ This "homologous body" represented, or came as close as it was possible to represent in practice, Barr's conception of an ideal public within a democratic society. It functioned in an atmosphere where discussion and scholarly research were understood to be fundamental activities, and where critical skepticism was encouraged. The one difficulty, as far as Barr was concerned, was that American universities continued to reject modern art as a field for serious scholarly endeavor. In November, 1941, Barr directly confronted those in academia responsible for harboring prejudices against modernism in the arts. "The cogent importance of twentieth-century art," he wrote in the inaugural issue of the *College Art Journal*, "lies not so much in the greatness of its achievement as in this one simple, obvious and overwhelming fact—the twentieth century happens to be the period in which we are living."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the fact that Barr had been invited at all to write about modern art in the *College Art Journal* signalled that attitudes were already beginning to change. By the mid-1950s, the university's embrace of modernism would make it a full participant in the "institution art" described by Bürger.

Barr saw his difficulties with the museum's public as being of a different order to his frustrations with the academy. Because the museum public was "so much more various and uncontrolled than that of the university," it was extremely difficult to reach it effectively.⁴¹ Barr even characterized it, in a revealing moment, as "a chaos of mind and feeling, inattentive, undisciplined, and irresponsible."⁴² He thought that visitors to the museum might be persuaded to think differently about modern art as a result of special exhibitions and explanatory labels, but he worried that too few of the visiting public stopped to read the catalogues and books for sale in the museum. The size of the engaged public had to be expanded, Barr was convinced, if the museum was to affirm its own "usefulness to a democratic republic during the critical mid-century years."⁴³ He concluded his remarks in Chicago as follows:

Whether or not we believe in the century of the common man the inexorable fact remains that eight or nine million of our fellow citizens will return to civilian life with fresh and critical eyes.

Figure 6. Installation photograph of the retrospective exhibition, *Henri-Matisse*, MoMA, November–December 1931.



And among these millions an elite by the hundred thousand will have missed their normal higher education, with the tolerance and cultural maturity which that helps bring. They are likely to be afraid of civilian life, impatient with what does not seem immediately useful or intelligible to them. At the same time and often without being aware of it they will need what museums have to offer more than ever. This is an overwhelmingly important challenge to our capacity for popular education but it will put an even greater strain upon the integrity and intellectual quality of our work.⁴⁴

The passage rings Barr's familiar themes. The museum has a duty to educate the public, even if the public is not "aware" of its need to be instructed; the museum's educational responsibility is a moral one, requiring it to exhibit and produce work of high integrity and intellectual rigor; all this because art has the special capacity in the public sphere to encourage tolerance and cultural maturity, especially among a susceptible elite.

Barr's equation is between public needs and artistic probity. As Thomas Crow has pointed out in an essay on the collapse of the perceived unity in modernist practice that Barr did so much to promote in America, the equation took definitive form in the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ The Enlightenment conception of the public for art, in which legacy Barr participated, was essentially political at its core. It evoked an ideal public, a standard against which *actual* audiences for art ("inattentive, undisciplined, irresponsible") could be compared. By evoking the ideal public in the ideal civic state, Barr was able to imagine a future in which modern art played an integral and unifying role in the United States.

But how was that to be achieved, Barr kept asking? When millions would be returning from the war and demanding not only jobs but also consumer products and private time for leisure, what should be the role of MoMA? Barr's answer was to employ public relations and showmanship in the name of scholarship and "the proclamation of excellence."⁴⁶ The social critic Russell Lynes was

less sanguine. For him the culture industry in America, with its drive to commercialize art for profit, had become too large a part of the dominant structure to allow for such a strategy. "Too much emphasis is on the sophistication of taste," he wrote in 1947, "on the social and intellectual snobbery of being in the know, of being *au courant*, of being sure that, to put it baldly, there is a measurable difference between good taste and bad taste. . . ."⁴⁷ Lynes's analysis was to prove the more prophetic.

Aesthetic Hierarchies

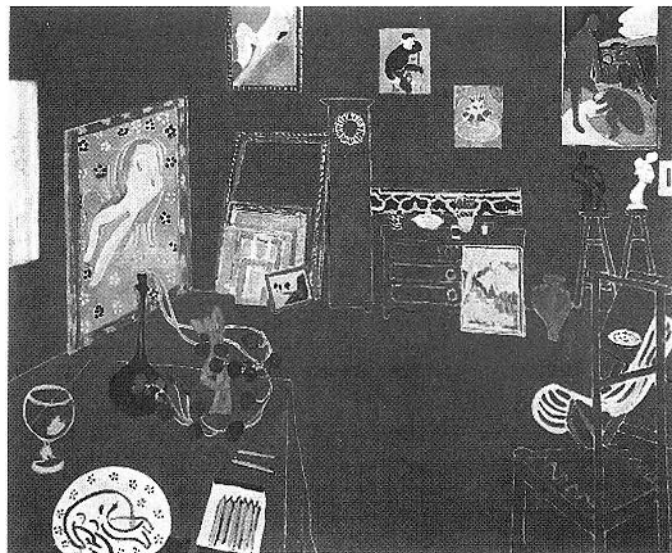
Ported accounts of MoMA's efforts on behalf of "good taste" and its significance in the formation of the modernist canon have been common enough for some while. An article from 1990 on the stature of the museum and its collections is fairly representative of the type, as are the religious and military metaphors favored to emphasize the museum's importance.

The art at MoMA, like the stained-glass windows of a Gothic cathedral, tells a story—it's a historical narrative, a theology, and a guide to right thinking all rolled into one. The museum is the Good Book, chronicling the Good Fight: the struggle of a misunderstood avant-garde against reactionary forces to achieve one radical victory after another. Cubism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism—these were the critical battles in the religious war that's raged for a century or more. The winners are on the walls. The losers—well, who cares about the losers? They're out there somewhere, but not in MoMA.⁴⁸

The paragraph obviously counts as an instance of "MoMA" serving as a metonym of modern art. But more interesting than the narrative the paragraph reinscribes—and make no mistake, it does reinscribe a narrative—is its strategic purpose; it prepares the way for a description of fresher and bloodier battles yet to come, we learn in the article, battles the museum will have to fight if it wishes to maintain its reputation as the Chartres of modern art.

The article is devoted mostly to Kirk Varnedoe, upon whose shoulders the future of the museum is said to rest. Varnedoe became Director of Painting and Sculpture in 1988, succeeding William Rubin, who in the late 1960s had succeeded Barr. "Varnedoe," we are informed, "inherits the mantle in difficult times." Because of spiralling art prices, the museum's acquisition budget of \$2 million annually is insufficient to purchase historically significant work. "More than ever," therefore, "MoMA must depend on gifts and bequests." At the same time it is under "pressure to keep the turnstiles clicking," because admissions now constitute its second-largest source of revenue—with the result that "the hushed and, by today's standards, sparsely attended temple of 'difficult' art" of some years ago is irrevocably a thing of the past. And, most threatening of all to its reputation as "a guide to right thinking," "downtown artists and critics complain that the museum hasn't paid serious attention to contemporary art in 20 years."⁴⁹

Figure 7. Henri Matisse, *The Red Studio*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 181 x 219.1 cm. MoMA, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.



The conclusion drawn is this: "History has dealt Varnedoe a tough hand."⁵⁰ Perhaps, but one should like to know exactly what history has dealt so harshly with the new director of painting and sculpture. If it is the museum's history that is being referred to, some misconceptions need to be cleared up. First, the implication expressed in the article that in the past the museum had enough funds at its disposal to be relatively independent of gifts and bequests in making acquisitions. The reverse, in fact, had been the case. From 1929 to 1935, Barr had an average of less than \$200 a year available for the purchase of works of art, and until well into the 1950s by far the majority of the museum's significant acquisitions depended on the largesse of its trustees.⁵¹ In order to secure donations of important work, Barr advised trustees on purchases for their own collections—with the tacit (and often explicit) understanding that the most desirable objects would eventually be given to the museum. The purchase in 1949 of *The Red Studio* by Matisse (1911, fig. 7), a painting that Barr had been hoping to acquire for some years, was made in the usual way—with funds supplied by a trustee, in this case Mrs. Simon Guggenheim. The matter of advising even became an official part of museum policy. The director was willing, so a 1934 museum *Bulletin* announced, to "offer professional advice . . . by appointment, on modern art" to donors of \$100 or more.⁵²

Second, the article implied there had once been a golden age when the museum's galleries were "hushed" and uncrowded, and when the institution had not been obliged to secure revenue from admissions. There is, in fact, no evidence that such a golden time ever existed. The museum's annual reports and archives indicate that the museum began charging an entrance fee of 25 cents following the opening of its new building in 1939, and that from the beginning, whatever its premises, the museum has always been packed with visitors. Even when the museum first opened its doors in 1929, in rented space on the twelfth floor of the Heckscher Building at

Fifth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street, visitors strained the capacity of the galleries and the elevators to the breaking point. The total number of visitors to the inaugural exhibition, *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*, added up to 47,000 during a four-week run, a figure that predicted the crowds and high attendance that would greet the museum's future programs.⁵³ By World War II, the museum was ranked by American servicemen (who got in free) as fourth on a list of New York's tourist attractions, below only the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center—but two notches above the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see fig. 8).⁵⁴ Given the energy of the museum's publicity department, this may come as no great surprise.

And, finally, there is the implication that the canon as constructed by Barr was uncontested, or at least relatively so. This, too, is a mistaken assumption, particularly in the realm of contemporary art. Barr and the museum were continually called upon to defend their exhibition policies and their additions to (or omissions from) the permanent collection.

In January 1944, to take a widely publicized instance, the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors released a letter to the press attacking the "increasingly reactionary policies of [the Museum of Modern Art] toward the work of American artists."⁵⁵ The letter specifically criticized the museum for adopting "one set of standards for . . . European art . . . and a thoroughly different one for its American selections"; also of sacrificing "seriousness of purpose for publicity."⁵⁶ The criticisms were carefully aimed. Not infrequently publicity did outrun substance, as I have tried to show, and Barr, until he began to pay close attention to the Abstract Expressionist movement around 1950, did disdain American painting and sculpture.⁵⁷ Reviewing the attack in *The Nation*, Clement Greenberg sided with the federation. The museum and its trustees had failed "to discriminate and support those tendencies in art which are specifically and validly modern," he thought, and instead had looked belatedly to Paris for direction.⁵⁸ The museum's affinity for French modernism was also an issue four years later, when the Institute of Modern Art in Boston, which had been founded in 1936 as an offshoot of the Museum of Modern Art, broke away noisily from the parent institution by changing its name to the Institute of Contemporary Art. Even so staunch a supporter of MoMA as Lincoln Kirstein, whose criticisms of Matisse will warrant investigation later, accused the museum at this time of promulgating an injudicious pecking order of modern art. "The Museum of Modern Art has done its job almost too well," Kirstein wrote mildly in *Harper's Magazine*—before excoriating the institution for supporting what he considered to be the "mindless" tradition of French decorative painting.⁵⁹ Even Barr was shaken by this betrayal.⁶⁰

Only in one area did Barr encounter little resistance: the maintenance of painting and sculpture in a position of dominance relative to other media represented by the museum. In principle, Barr rejected the equation in the public mind of painting and sculpture with modern art as a whole, and it was to help counter this misperception that he formed separate departments devoted to architec-

Figure 8. Servicemen's party at MoMA, 1942. Photograph courtesy of the museum.



ture, film, photography and design. In 1940, he even attempted to use the other departments to defend his lack of enthusiasm for American painting and sculpture, "two fields in which America is not yet, I am afraid, quite the equal of France." "But in other fields," he continued, "—the film, architecture and photography, for instance, the United States would seem to be the equal or superior of any other country."⁶¹ This protest, however, could not disguise the fact that Barr's own expertise was located in painting and sculpture, above all in French painting and sculpture, and that his commitment to this field was shared by his trustees.

This is not to say that Barr and his trustees always found themselves on compatible ground. They did not. Barr's relations with Stephen C. Clark, a founding trustee with a large collection of Matisses and an inherited fortune from the Singer Sewing Machine Company, were unusually troubled. It was Clark who as president of the museum in 1943 fired Barr as director. One one occasion, apparently in the 1930s, Clark wanted to donate Matisse's *The White Plumes* (1919, fig. 9) to the museum against Barr's wishes. Barr did not like the painting, declaring it "cheesecake."⁶² In due course, Barr won out over his trustee, and insisted that MoMA direct its collecting of Matisse towards the more ascetic side of the artist's production. I am not convinced that Barr was correct to dismiss the painting in such a cavalier manner. (Certainly the critics John Bentley Mays and Robert Hughes, as I will discuss at the end, would have excoriated Barr for his asceticism.) *The White Plumes* may be cheesecake, but it is cheesecake of a high order that raises issues about art as an eroticized field of practice. Ironically, Clark later reversed his high opinion of the artist, declaring "Matisse is out," and began disposing of his collection, including *The White Plumes*.⁶³ Barr, on the other hand, seems neither to have changed his judgment that *The White Plumes* was a failed painting, nor his conviction that Matisse was one of the premier artists of the twentieth century. Instead, he continued to search out paintings for the

museum's collection that in his opinion represented Matisse at his strongest, for example, *The Red Studio*.

In an abbreviated way, the altercation between Barr and Clark demonstrates Barr's confidence in the genealogies of modern art that he had begun formulating in the mid-1920s and that he finally diagrammed, in 1936, in the now legendary chart published on the cover of the exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art*.⁶⁴ The genealogies also underscore the kinds of distinctions that Barr wished to make within an artist's output.

In the case of Matisse, the consistency of distinctions and viewpoint expressed in Barr's writings is remarkable. It can be measured by the firm line that runs from Barr's 1931 exhibition catalogue, *Henri-Matisse*, to his 1951 book, *Matisse: His Art and His Public*. There is nothing of substance in the catalogue that is not reaffirmed in the book. The periodization of Matisse's work, the division of it into different media, the assessment of its strongest achievements, the nature of the artist's public, the absolute requirement for reliable scholarship—all these are treated in comparable ways. The catalogue could almost function as an introduction to the book, at least with respect to the period up to 1931. Moreover, in all his writings about Matisse Barr reserved his unqualified admiration for the ascetic strain in the artist's work. After the publication of the catalogue but before the book, Barr observed about his own aesthetic preferences that they tended "toward a certain severity, rather than toward a sensual or hedonistic kind of painting."⁶⁵ He explained his preferences by contrasting Picasso with Matisse in a 1947 letter to Abby Rockefeller:

Some kinds of art should be restful and easy—as Matisse said, like a good armchair. Other kinds, like Picasso's, challenge and stimulate us. They are often hard to understand at first but, like our minds and muscles, our artistic sensibilities are strengthened by exercise and hard work. I have never thought of art as something primarily pleasant—but as something which stirs us to fresh awareness and understanding of life—even of the difficulties, confusions and tragedies of life as well as its joys.⁶⁶

Just the previous year, Barr had completed *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (1946), a book written in the aftermath of World War II, in which he was unequivocal about what he considered to be Picasso's achievement. The achievement was the production of a series of "milestones, even monuments, along the highroad of Western art," milestones that issued from "Picasso's anarchic individualism."⁶⁷ By way of example Barr had in mind paintings such as *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907, MoMA), *Guernica* (1937), and *The Charnel House* (1944–1945, MoMA). Obviously, here Barr was insisting on the place and function of art's social dimension. In the final paragraph of the book, he approvingly quoted Picasso as saying, "No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war . . . against 'brutality and darkness.'"⁶⁸

Unlike *Guernica* and *The Charnel House*, Matisse's work resolutely shunned engagement with the social and political. Yet five years later Barr was still prepared to declare flatly that Matisse and

Figure 9. Henri Matisse, *The White Plumes*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 73 x 60.3 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund.



Picasso were "the two greatest painters of our period,"⁶⁹ an opinion that he and MoMA had been offering and defending with varying degrees of forcefulness for two decades. It may be asked how Barr rationalized his antipathy to the hedonistic and sensual with an approbation of Matisse.

The answer, I think, is found in the anecdote about Stephen Clark. The Matisse of *The White Plumes*, in Barr's opinion, was unbecoming company for the Matisse of *Woman on a High Stool* (1914, fig. 10). And even though some of MoMA's trustees and much of its public preferred the former Matisse, Barr intended to see they got the latter. Above all, Barr wished them to deliberate on the paintings executed between Matisse's return from Morocco in 1913 and his first winter in Nice in 1917. To these, he applied such adjectives as "austere," "hieratic," and "funereal." Of *The Italian Woman* (1916, MoMA), he wrote in the 1931 catalogue, "There is an almost forbidding asceticism with its gray tone and angular rigidity."⁷⁰ The choice of language, which was repeated in the 1951 book, is revealing. Barr admired the severe gray harmonies and intellectual rigor—so unlike the Rococo cheesecake of *The White Plumes*—of *Woman on a High Stool* and *The Italian Woman*.⁷¹ Here were paintings that from the very beginning Barr wanted the museum to acquire; as it eventually did, in 1964 and 1977 respectively.

Barr was far less interested in Matisse's painting from the period after 1920. Instead, he focused on the artist's large output of

prints, drawings, cut-outs and sculptures, and on the decorations for the Vence Chapel. Barr's predilections were a decisive factor in how Matisse's work was received in America. They are predilections that continue to be adhered to by MoMA to this day. By the late 1980s the museum had disposed of all paintings by Matisse in its collection executed after 1918–1919, the date of *Interior with a Violin Case*. In May 1988, the museum sold the last two remaining paintings from the subsequent period, *The Pink Blouse* (1922) and *Lemons Against a Fleur-de-lis Background* (1943), to cover the cost of acquiring the bronze sculpture *Large Female Nude* (1923–1925).⁷² The exchange of the two paintings for the sculpture, one must believe, would have met with Barr's approval.

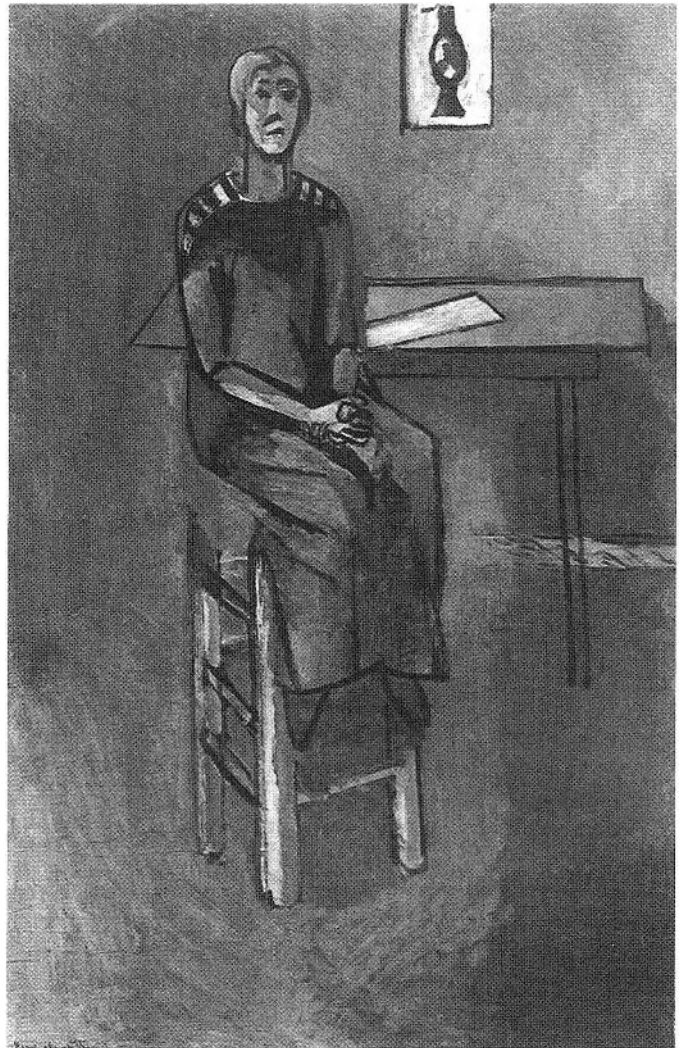
Conclusion

The purchase of *Large Female Nude* occasioned the release of a publicity notice by the museum. From MoMA's earliest days, the press release (and all that goes with it) has been an integral part of the museum's publicity machine during the acquisition of what it deems to be an important work, or during the mounting of what it wishes to promote as a significant exhibition. The recent Matisse retrospective was no exception. The flood of notices released by MoMA's publicity department was commensurate with the size and cost of the exhibition. Over 400 pieces were assembled for it by John Elderfield, the curator, including some 275 paintings, 50 paper cut-outs, and a selection of drawings, prints and sculptures—an array large enough to temporarily displace the permanent collection from the second and third floors of the museum. To pay for the spectacle, MoMA sold more than 650,000 tickets at a record price of \$12.50 each.

It would be reasonable to assume that MoMA justified this massive display of consumptive spectatorship with a cogent rationale for why the retrospective was a good use of its resources. Matisse's place in the history of twentieth-century representation is notoriously under-theorized and one might have expected the museum to argue, for example, that the exhibition was a necessary way to reassess the myths of twentieth-century bourgeois pleasure and the visual form Matisse gave to them. Equally, MoMA could have argued that the exhibition provided the museum and its audiences with an occasion for a self-critical investigation of its own long-standing approbation of Matisse, of its historical role in Matisse's canonization. Since 1931 MoMA has organized more than 40 shows in which Matisse has figured prominently.⁷³

MoMA offered neither of these rationales. Instead, it circulated a justification of the exhibition that was as conventional as a mummy's supine pose. The aim of the show, it blithely declared, was "to reveal the extent and depth of Matisse's achievement and to clarify his identity as a modern artist."⁷⁴ Nowhere in any of the museum's publications and public programming around the show was there any mention of the problems that Matisse presents for thoughtful viewers, the extremes of facility and artificiality that so often seem to overwhelm his work. The huge accompanying catalogue only

Figure 10. Henri Matisse, *Woman on a High Stool*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 147 x 95.5 cm. MoMA.



served to confirm the banality of the officially stated purpose. Elderfield's essay accounted for just 64 of its 480 pages, and the bulk of the catalogue was given over to hundreds of colour illustrations of the works in the exhibition.

According to many critics reviewing the show, this glossy presentation was precisely what our troubled times called for. Instead of being forced "to read a tedious wall text that scolds the hell out of him," wrote Peter Plagens for *Newsweek*, what the viewer needed was "a big shot of Matisse" of the kind presented by the exhibition. "What once would have seemed a conservative idea," Plagens added, as if somehow the exhibition were not precisely that, "now looks timely."⁷⁵ John Bentley Mays endorsed these peculiar sentiments in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. In his review of the show, Mays expressed a distaste for "the logic-jamming, theory-ridden installations of Duchamp's children, and the critical, militant, dissonant doings of Picasso's offspring." Bring on "the ripe female nudes [of

Matisse],” Mays continued, “voluptuously inviting and hence repugnant to the art-world left.”⁷⁶ Mays can bring on all the female nudes he likes, but it does seem worth asking where he got his information about “the art-world left.” Is he saying that Matisse’s nudes have been “repugnant” to left-leaning audiences but not to those on the right? My reading of the literature on Matisse suggests otherwise. Ever since Matisse began to exhibit his work at the beginning of this century, his paintings have appeared just as repugnant to the right as to the left, although the force and tenor of the repugnance has depended on the times. In some periods, such as the late 1930s, Matisse was equally reviled by factions on both sides; in others, such as the present, audiences can find no fault with him. “It would be interesting right now,” wrote Adam Gopnik in the *The New Yorker*, “to hear from someone who passionately, honestly and *intelligently* dislikes everything about the art and life of Henri Matisse.”⁷⁷ Possibly Mays has access to audience research on Matisse that has escaped me.

Robert Hughes, writing in *Time* magazine, chose to dispense with right-left distinctions in his analysis of audiences for Matisse, indicting under the same capacious banner both “puritans” and “ideological nerds.” Hughes wrote:

There are always folk, especially in puritan America, who think pleasure is an unworthy goal of art. Academe is full of ideological nerds who can’t look at a Matisse still life without planning an essay on the gender division of the work force in the Nice fruit market: how about *The Commodified Fig: Reification As Metaphor in Matisse*?⁷⁸

Hughes was correct not to capitalize on left-right oppositions, but mistaken in his analysis of the essay titles being planned by academics. The titles read more like this: *The Commodified Critic: Anti-Intellectualism as Metaphor in American Reviewing Practices*. When academics get around to writing their essays, I am certain that Hughes’ piece will count as *prima facie* evidence of the commodification to which my suggested title refers. So will the pieces by Plagens and Mays.

In Hughes’ terms, I suppose this essay earns me a place in his cast of academic “ideological nerds.” Although my focus has been less on nudes and the recent past than on PR and the first two decades of MoMA’s activities, I have tried to indicate how the museum’s early history has informed its recent exhibition practices and public relations strategies. The 1992–93 retrospective, it seems to me, demonstrates the ways in which Elderfield and the museum’s trustees kept faith with Barr’s and MoMA’s initial enthusiasms—but in a manner so calculatedly conservative that Barr, with his concern for art’s social dimension and a viewing public that might be transformed by art, would scarcely recognize his inheritance.⁷⁹ MoMA cannot have doubted that contemporary audiences would applaud its decision to make a fin-de-siècle spectacle of Matisse. Nor that reviewers would add to the din of approbation. It makes one wonder what Gertrude Stein would say now.

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented as lectures at Northwestern University and the University of Oregon. I am grateful to Serge Guilbaut for suggesting the topic, Rona Roob for facilitating access to the Matisse-Barr Papers at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), William Wood for editing the manuscript, and Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, Michael Leja, Sandy Nairne and Lisa Tickner for offering comments.

- 1 Quoted in Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York, 1987), 287.
- 2 Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 73; Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* was first published in 1899.
- 3 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Abby Rockefeller, 29 June 1933 (Alfred Barr Papers, Archives of American Art [AAA], Roll 3264). The major repository of Barr’s papers is the MoMA archives (see the excellent finding aids compiled by Rona Roob). Many of his papers have also been microfilmed by AAA, and a number of his early letters are among the Paul J. Sachs Papers, Fogg Art Museum archives (FMA).
- 4 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Abby Rockefeller, 25 January 1930 (Alfred Barr Papers, AAA, Roll 3264).
- 5 Edward L. Bernays, “Modern Museum Membership Campaign,” 1930 (Alfred Barr Papers, AAA, Roll 3264). The idea of offering museum memberships was novel at the time, to say nothing of the notion of mounting a membership campaign.
- 6 Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.: Missionary for the Modern* (Chicago, 1989).
- 7 Marquis, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, 130–131.
- 8 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Paul J. Sachs, New York, 21 June 1932 (Sachs Papers, FMA).
- 9 Letter from Barr to Sachs, 21 June 1932.
- 10 Letter from Barr to Sachs, 21 June 1932.
- 11 Memorandum entitled “Apologia” from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Paul J. Sachs, 14 February 1927 (Sachs Papers, FMA).
- 12 The figures and statistics cited in this paragraph are from Roger Butterfield, “The Museum and the Redhead,” *Saturday Evening Post* (5 April 1947), 20–21, 108–109. The redhead referred to in the title was Sarah Newmeyer, MoMA’s director of publicity from 1934 to 1948. She was described as being prepared to “corral anything from a president’s mother to an escort of mounted cops” on the museum’s behalf.
- 13 During the past two decades a large literature has developed around the MoMA and Alfred Barr. It includes: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October*, XXX (Fall 1984), 83–118; James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 189–214; Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum*, XII (June 1974), 39–41; Douglas Crimp, “The Art of Exhibition,” *October*, XXX (Fall 1984), 49–81; Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “MOMA: Ordeal and Triumph on 53rd Street,” *Studio International*, CXCIV (no. 988, 1978), 48–57; Carol Duncan, “Who rules the Art World?” *Socialist Review*, XIII (July–August 1983), 99–119; Carol Duncan, “The MOMA’s Hot Mamas,” *Art Journal*, XLVIII (Summer 1989), 171–179; Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin Black Masks,” in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Wash., 1985), 181–208; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1983); Hilton Kramer, “MOMA Reopened: The Museum of Modern Art in the Postmodern Era,” *New Criterion*, II (Summer 1984), 1–44; Hilton Kramer, Margaret Scolari Barr, and Rona Roob, “Alfred Barr at MOMA,” *New Criterion*, V (special issue, summer 1987); Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York, 1973); Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Alfred H. Barr Jr.: Missionary for the Modern* (Chicago, 1989); W.J.T. Mitchell, “*Ut Pictura Theoria*: Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language,” *Critical Inquiry*,

- XV (Winter 1989), 348–371; Susan Noyes Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The 'Cubism and Abstract Art' Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art," *Art Journal*, XLVII (Winter 1988), 284–295; Irving Sandler and Amy Newman, eds., *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (New York, 1986); and Elizabeth Sussman et al., *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston*, exhibition catalogue (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985).
- 14 Hal Foster, "The Primitive Unconscious of Modern Art," 190.
- 15 Sarah Newmeyer, "Publicity Department," *Annual Report* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 51.
- 16 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Research and Publication in Art Museums," typescript of a paper delivered at a conference on "The Future of the Art Museum as an Educational Institution," the Art Institute of Chicago, 24–25 March 1944 (Alfred Barr Papers, AAA, Roll 3150); published with minor word changes under the same title in *The Museum News* (1 January 1946); reprinted in Sandler and Newman, *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, 205–210.
- 17 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," AAA typescript.
- 18 This section is indebted to Thomas Crow's analysis of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment conceptions of an art public. See his *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, 1985); "These Collectors, They Talk About Baudrillard Now," in Hal Foster, ed., *DIA Art Foundation: Discussions in Contemporary Culture* (Seattle, 1987), 1–8; and "A Republic of Taste," *London Review of Books* (19 March 1987), 10–12, a review of John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: The Body of the Public* (New Haven, 1986).
- 19 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), 11.
- 20 Barr, *Matisse: His Art and His Public*, 11.
- 21 Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (New York, 1965); and Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, 1984).
- 22 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Dwight Macdonald, 1953 (Alfred Barr Papers, AAA, Roll 2180); also cited by Newman, *Defining Modern Art*, 204.
- 23 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 207.
- 24 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 205.
- 25 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 206.
- 26 See Marquis, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, 254–256.
- 27 *Asia* (1946) and *The Red Beach* (1905) were major attractions at Sotheby's 10 November 1992 auction of Impressionist and modern painting.
- 28 "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker* (14 November 1931), 37.
- 29 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 205.
- 30 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Paul J. Sachs, 12 May 1939 (Alfred Barr Papers, AAA, Roll 3265).
- 31 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to A.M. Friend, 13 June 1955, published with other correspondence in "A Continued Story: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Princeton University, and William C. Seitz," Garnett McCoy, ed., *Archives of American Art Journal*, XXI (no. 3, 1981), 11.
- 32 In 1949, Barr began extensive correspondence to gather information on Matisse and on the whereabouts and dates of Matisse's work. The project had been on Barr's mind for some years, for on 20 April 1945 he mailed Matisse several questionnaires: "J'espère que ces questionnaires ne vont pas trop vous ennuyer. . . ." (Matisse-Barr Papers, MoMA archives, Subgroup 1, Series A).
- 33 Memorandum from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Monroe Wheeler, 20 April 1951 (Matisse-Barr Papers, MoMA archives, Subgroup II, Series C).
- 34 See the Matisse-Barr Papers, MoMA archives, Subgroup II, Series C.
- 35 See the Matisse-Barr Papers, MoMA archives, Subgroup 1, Series D.8.
- 36 Letter from Paul Rosenberg to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 21 December 1951, and letter from Alfred C. Kinsey to Barr, 8 January 1952 (Matisse-Barr Papers, MoMA archives, Subgroup 1, Series D.8).
- 37 Letter from Bernard Berenson to Matisse, 12 February 1952 (Matisse-Barr Papers, MoMA archives, Subgroup 1, Series D.8).
- 38 Letter from Bernard Berenson to Margaret Scolari Barr, 23 February 1952 (Matisse-Barr Papers, MoMA archives, Subgroup 1, Series D.8).
- 39 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 206.
- 40 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Modern Art Makes History, too," *College Art Journal*, I (November 1941), 3.
- 41 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 206.
- 42 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 207.
- 43 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 210.
- 44 Barr, "Research and Publication in Art Museums," 210.
- 45 Crow, "These Collectors, They Talk About Baudrillard Now," 2–4.
- 46 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Preface" to Philip L. Goodwin, *Built in U.S.A.*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1944), 8.
- 47 Lynes, "The Taste-Makers," *Harper's Magazine*, CXCIV (June 1947), 490.
- 48 William Grimes, "Kirk Varnedoe Is in the Hot Seat as MoMA's Boy," *The New York Times Magazine* (11 March 1990), 31. Even though the ecclesiastical and military metaphors used to discuss the museum are by now clichés, Barr himself employed the same tropes. Barr once imagined the museum's permanent collection as if it was arranged in a cathedral with twenty-nine bays, each bay devoted to a different school or movement in the history of modern art ("Ideal Collection, 6 March 1941, Alfred Barr Papers, AAA, Roll 2166), and on another occasion as "a torpedo moving through time, its head the ever advancing present, its tail the ever receding past of fifty to one hundred years ago" (Barr quoted from a 1933 brief, "Advisory Committee Report on Museum Collections," MoMA, April 1941).
- 49 Grimes, "Kirk Varnedoe," 32.
- 50 Grimes, "Kirk Varnedoe," 32.
- 51 Information contained in the MoMA's annual reports, 1929–1954.
- 52 Announcement, *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, November 1934.
- 53 Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 65.
- 54 "Report of the New York Defense Recreation Center," cited by Dwight Macdonald, "Profiles: Action on West Fifty-Third Street—1," *The New Yorker* (12 December 1953), 49.
- 55 Cited by Clement Greenberg in "The Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors and the Museum of Modern Art," *The Nation*, 12 February 1944, reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago, 1986), 182–184.
- 56 Greenberg, "The Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors," 182–183.
- 57 In a letter dated 27 November 1950 to Baldwin Smith, Chairman of the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University, about William C. Seitz's proposal to write a thesis on Abstract Expressionism, Barr expressed his conviction that "for the first time American painting is as good, if not better, than painting anywhere in the Western world. . . ." ("A Continued Story," 9).
- 58 Greenberg, "The Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors," 183–184.
- 59 Lincoln Kirstein, "The State of Modern Painting," *Harper's Magazine*, XCVII (October 1948), 50.
- 60 Sandler, "Introduction," *Defining Modern Art*, 32.
- 61 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., memorandum to Dorothy Miller entitled "Re: Bulletin on what the Museum has done in the field of American art," 10 October 1940, cited in Sandler, "Introduction," *Defining Modern Art*, 16.
- 62 The incident is recounted by Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 245.
- 63 Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, 244.

- 64 Barr's chart has been the subject of so much discussion and commentary in the past decade that it has acquired mythical status. Imagining the history of modern art without it is like imagining the history of modern art without the museum that published it.
- 65 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Paul Moscanyi, 29 November 1954 (Alfred Barr Papers, AAA, Roll 2180).
- 66 Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to Abby Rockefeller, 15 January 1947, cited in Sandler, "Introduction," *Defining Modern Art*, 14.
- 67 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 11–12.
- 68 Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*, 250.
- 69 Barr, *Matisse: His Art and His Public*, 10.
- 70 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Henri Matisse* (New York, 1931), 18.
- 71 The phrase "Rococo cheesecake" was given to me by Lisa Tickner, following a lecture at Northwestern University in 1991.
- 72 Reported in Lee Rosenbaum, "The Anxious Acquisitors," *Art News* (March 1989), 149. The two paintings were sold at Sotheby's for approximately \$8 million, which covered the price paid to Galerie Beyeler, Basel, for the sculpture.
- 73 The exhibitions in which Matisse figured up to 1978 are listed in John Elderfield, *Matisse in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 14–15.
- 74 MoMA brochure accompanying the exhibition.
- 75 Peter Plagens, "The Most Beautiful Show in the World," *Newsweek* (28 September 1992), 40.
- 76 John Bentley Mays, "Putting Matisse in Perspective," *The Globe and Mail* (19 September 1992).
- 77 Adam Gopnik, "The Unnatural," *The New Yorker* (12 October 1992), 106.
- 78 Robert Hughes, "The Color of Genius," *Time* (28 September 1992), 68.
- 79 I have expressed this view before. See Lisa Alther, "A Curator Leaves No Matisse Unturned," *The New York Times* (13 September 1992).