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Max Ernst, portrait of Dominique de Menil, 1934.

Dominique de Menil had extraordinary talents that she used with grace and wisdom in the fields of art, religion, human rights, and education to enrich the world. As she often reminded us, many of her activities would not have been possible without the material gift of inherited wealth. But, as everyone knew, that wealth would have been of little consequence without her internal gifts of character.

The magnitude of Dominique's accomplishments was so great that any effort to reflect upon her life seems insufficient. I offer here a few observations and personal experiences with the hope of indicating bits of a far bigger, richer whole.

One feature that characterized Dominique from our first meeting was the element of surprise. In 1963, my wife, Ginny, and I traveled from Yale (where I was a graduate student) to New York to meet someone described only as "a patron of the University of St. Thomas in Houston." We speculated about a Texan with a *pied-à-terre* in New York, but the reality was far from our speculations. We encountered Dominique de Menil in an East Side townhouse filled with an eye-opening collection of art. She was charmingly ill-at-ease, gracious, and, at the end of the meeting, concerned about our late return to New Haven without dinner. Accordingly, she packed what we came to call the "First Brown Bag Lunch" — a grocery bag of sandwiches, fruit, and French

to Jerry MacAgy. As we drove on toward Memphis later that day, the dreary, flat land of eastern Arkansas was miraculously transformed into a Magritte world — his blue sky and puffy white clouds; crisp, basic forms and trees in a row. In our family lore, we refer to this experience as "The Apotheosis of Arkansas." Dominique continued to work her exhibition magic for another 30 years.

She directed the details, too, as was manifest when I first observed her designing a "simple" program and accompanying announcement. Never had I seen anyone so exacting about everything from the conception of the program to the wording and design of the announcement; from her concern for the audience to the effect of her standards on her co-workers. It was a veritable course in graphic design, communication, and management for the staff, as well as for local printers and photographers.

Some of the work took place in the de Menil House on San Felipe, and that home was another surprise. It was an understated Philip Johnson building — on the front, a long low, unadorned brick wall punctuated only by a plane of glass containing the front door and a small strip of windows, high up to the right of the door. It did not look at all like what one expected of a wealthy family in the River Oaks section of Houston. That doorway led into an exquisitely proportioned foyer, installed with art and furni-

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cheeses that provisioned us for two days.

Subsequently, I accepted the position at St. Thomas. But we had hardly unpacked before the death in February 1964 of Jermyne MacAgy, the Art Department chair who first recruited me. In the aftermath of that shocking event, Dominique was appointed chair of the department. She assumed Jerry's projects with little experience in exhibitions or administration, insofar as I knew. Wondering how my new job would work out, I found that her surprises continued. The first pending project Dominique took over was an exhibition of the work of René Magritte for the Arkansas Art Center in Little Rock. On the trip north to receive my Ph. D. from Yale, Ginny and I stopped to visit the exhibition. It is riveted in my memory. In matters of conceiving and installing exhibitions, Dominique clearly possessed the magic that had attracted me

ture but open on the left to a glass-walled interior garden that provided a glimpse through to the living room beyond. That living room — an ample yet intimate space — was also filled with art and furniture, including an inviting ottoman in the center of the room and a desk piled high with diverse publications on art, literature, philosophy, and religion. This home was a serene, intimate museum-library-garden, where one could share John and Dominique's excitement over a recent acquisition or browse among the art and books.

On other occasions, the de Menil House was an electric gathering place for civic and business leaders, artists, writers, clerics, politicians, and civil rights activists. At that time, in the mid-to-late 1960s, the burning issues in politics and human rights revolved around the war in Viet Nam and racial integration. Domi-



© Paul Henze, courtesy The Menil Collection
The Menil Collection, 1515 Sul Ross, Renzo Piano architect with Richard Fitzgerald and Partners, associate architects, 1987.



Interior, de Menil House, 3363 San Felipe, Philip C. Johnson Associates, architects, Landes Gore and Cowell & Neuhaus, consulting architects, 1950. Dominique and John de Menil broke with tradition becoming pioneering patrons of modern architecture in Houston.

nique and John worked unremittingly for peace in Viet Nam and for social justice in America, opening their home to people of good will from every community in the city during scores of local and national campaigns. They were among the first to perceive the potential of young Mickey Leland, urging him to run for Congress and providing both moral and financial support as he developed into a beloved representative for this city and a symbol for the national Black community. But they also supported Citizens for Good Schools, Barbara Jordan, Eugene McCarthy, Ann Richards, and many others. This devotion to human rights and social justice evolved into a global effort in 1986, when Dominique joined former president Jimmy Carter in establishing the Carter-Menil Awards.

In the context of the truculent 1960s, art was all the more susceptible to question as a luxury for the elite. More than once, I observed Dominique address questions about justifying expenditures for the arts. Such questions, though received as earnest, were seen as naive. She did not regard art as a discrete entity but as an integral part of life. To set art aside during times of trial was, for her, tantamount to suspending faith, justice, or the quest for knowledge under the same conditions. Art and religious faith were inseparable in the de Menils' project for the Rothko Chapel; art and social justice came together in the project for the Deluxe Theatre on Lyons Avenue and in the multi-volume study *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Art and education were synonymous in numerous de Menil undertakings.

Dominique had enormous respect for scholarship and teaching. She would abandon almost any task at hand to grapple with a knotty French-English translation or a puzzling question of interpretation. And she and John built a program of art history, film, and photography in a city that theretofore had no such programs. When I joined that fledgling pro-

gram at the University of St. Thomas, we had one three-drawer metal cabinet of slides, one case of books, and, a little later, a handful of cameras. We moved to Rice University in 1969 with seven faculty members in art history, film, and photography, a well-equipped Media Center, approximately 20,000 books, and 20,000 slides. We merged handily with Rice's largely studio art department, while Dominique founded The Institute for the Arts at Rice. The latter provided her the vehicle and the space (the Art Barn) to continue at Rice a program of exhibitions and publications, the Print Club (to encourage and enable private collecting), and the tradition of visiting artists and scholars established at St. Thomas. The opening exhibition at Rice was a memorable show from the Museum of Modern Art titled *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*. Visiting artists and scholars included Magritte, Ernst, Duchamp, Tinguely, Matta, and Warhol, film makers Roberto Rosellini and Jean-Luc Goddard, and art historians Rudolf Wittkower, George Heard Hamilton, Robert Goldwater, Leo Steinberg, Charles Sterling, and Robert Rosenblum.

In addition to the *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, the de Menils completely underwrote catalogue raisonnés for Max Ernst and René Magritte, and they provided invaluable assistance for countless additional studies by supplying free bed and breakfast in their homes in Houston, New York, and Paris for students, professors, and museum curators from around the world. As one recipient of that generosity, I looked forward to breakfasts that might include a Catholic priest from Lebanon, a graduate student in art history or anthropology from California, and a curator from the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

This incredible traffic of artists, students, religious leaders, and scholars was a stimulus for Dominique, not a drain. However, in her openness to people of

all cultures and callings, she did have a bias for people who could teach her something, nourish or enlarge her. That nourishment could come in many forms — through knowledge or examples of courage or faith or love — and from anyone. The giving of it was fostered by Dominique's ability to personalize her moments with others, conveying the gratifying experience of being responded to as an individual, unencumbered by reputation or by stereotype as a member of some group, class, or profession. That warmth functioned with Goran Milutinovic as naturally as with Andy Warhol. After her first meeting with Andy Warhol, Dominique conveyed to me with a few words and a radiant face that she was grateful for the opportunity to discover that Warhol was a person of sympathy and integrity.

Goran was a Yugoslavian student in England who wrote us to ask for a scholarship. We had no scholarships at that time, and he had a mediocre record, so I turned him away. But he persisted (later he revealed that my response was the only one received from letters to over 200 schools), and Dominique decided to gamble on him on the basis that anyone so determined must have something worthy of cultivation. A gangling, sweet-natured, lethargic guy showed up who fared poorly the first semester. However, he was so likable that each professor went out of his way to help Goran, and he improved substantially in energy and grades the second semester. At the end of the year, the art historians were congratulating themselves on the effectiveness of their extra work with Goran when Dominique firmly announced that Goran's progress was her doing. "I've been giving him vitamins," she said. Goran went on to graduate and do good work in film making.

On the face of it, this is simply a sentimental story of "Goran's Scholarship," but on a deeper level, it illustrates Dominique's far-reaching concern for the people around her. She was sensitive to their needs and helped, whether that meant vitamins, a morale boost, or professional counseling. She likewise had a keen eye for talent and character. She kept in touch with some students and later called on them to take on major jobs. This included Paul Winkler, a student from St. Thomas days, who was recruited to shepherd the construction of The Menil Collection building and, later, to serve as its second (and current) director.

Of all the de Menils' accomplishments, the most celebrated is The Menil Collection, a museum that encompasses their extraordinary art collection and the Renzo Piano building that houses it. The Menil Collection is at the center of a campus with the Rothko Chapel, the Cy Twombly Gallery, and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel set amid open green spaces and outdoor sculpture. These Menil structures are surrounded by bungalows of the 1920s and 1930s acquired by Dominique to protect the immediate residential context of the museum in a city without zon-

ing. The Piano building is a product of prolonged thought and research. It is meant to be inviting, accessible, and compatible in scale and materials with the neighborhood. It is also designed to offer, on a public scale, the serenity and intimacy of the de Menil home. Like that home, the museum building is long and low, with an elegant glass-walled foyer and a big ottoman for rest and conversation. Again, like the home, there are interior gardens and walls of glass (for the conservation lab, the frame shop, kitchen, and library) that open the "white box" of the museum providing natural light and a connection between inside and outside and between the staff and visitors. Every feature of the interior — architectural detail, lighting, and installation, without explanatory labels — is intended to foster direct, personal contact with the art objects. In this rare museum, art reigns. The Menil Collection is not a monument to the architect or to the de Menils, but a place for a personal collection that more than merits the attention given it.

The de Menil art collection is selective and personal, freed from a concern to be encyclopedic. It has notable strengths in 20th-century art, especially Surrealism; Byzantine art; and the arts of Africa and Oceania. There are also smaller but striking alcoves and vitrines of Northwest Coast art; the metal work of migratory peoples; Celtic objects; and Cycladic sculpture. Many individuals have contributed to the formation of this collection — Father Marie-Alain Couturier, family members, friends, and curators of the museum — but the vast majority of the works is the product of decisions by John and Dominique themselves, and many observers have sought to identify the taste that informs this remarkable collection.

Like others, I feel that there is a spiritual basis to Dominique's collecting which is easier to sense than to articulate. A striking number of works originally had a religious function, and most still convey something of that original purpose. Or, when the works are not manifestly religious — as in most of the Surrealist objects — they deal with mysterious, irrational realms of experience that share something of the truth and power of art with a religious function.

Dominique de Menil did not begin her adult life or her art collection with a vision of The Menil Collection, the Carter-Menil Awards, the Rothko and Byzantine Fresco chapels, and the arts programs at St. Thomas and Rice. She did, however, accept her gifts, her passions and power, and, with them, the expanding opportunities and responsibility to make of them a tangible legacy. It is our good fortune to have not only this legacy but the example of her committed life. ■