

*Duncan and Marjorie Phillips and America's First
Museum of Modern Art*

by Pamela Carter-Birken

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What makes a museum “great”? Is it the size or scope or uniqueness of its collection? Perhaps the impressive architecture or a beautiful site? Or the welcoming and inspirational ambiance for visitors?

There are many “great” museums around the world which attract audiences for many reasons. The Louvre Museum in Paris, the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum in New York (just to name a few), which are all famed for their “encyclopedic” collections... but there are also many other somewhat smaller and perhaps less well-known museums of art that, arguably, are as “great” as (if not uniquely greater than) their better known mega-counterparts. Dr. Pamela Carter-Birken’s book, *Duncan and Marjorie Phillips and America’s First Museum of Modern Art*, focuses on one such museum: the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

Many tourists to Washington, D.C., no matter how tenacious they be—or how terribly fatigued they may be—after their requisite visits to the many “mega museums” on the Mall will find a quite different experience at the Phillips Collection. The Collection, first

named The Phillips Memorial Gallery, was originally established in a “home”—albeit a rather grand Georgian Revival residence from 1897—at the Dupont Circle area in Washington, D.C.

This manner of establishing a museum is not without precedent, of course. The residences of wealthy art patrons can eventually become converted into galleries or museums following the wishes of the collectors. There are many examples worldwide of former homes of prominent art collectors that have been converted into museums (the Gardner Museum in Boston, the Frick Collection in New York City, and the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California—just to cite simply a few American examples). But, arguably, not all former residences and collections are as welcoming and engaging as the Phillips Collection has always been. Visiting these former “homes” turned into “museums” ideally gives one the sense that one is “invited” as a welcomed guest, rather than simply as the holder of a timed ticket. So, what specifically makes the Phillips collection so engaging?

Dr. Pamela Carter-Birken’s book offers great insights into the origin, growth, and development of the Phillipses’ art collection and their intentions. Many other American well-heeled art collectors of the early twentieth century had vast resources and wide interests in their acquisitions, but the Phillipses had their own very astute eyes and ideas. Duncan (1886–1966) was a great scholar, and Marjorie (1894–1985) was herself a fine artist. Together, they chose to collect and support “modern” art when it was not terribly fashionable to do so. Indeed, the Phillips Collection (founded as the Phillips Memorial Gallery in 1921) is the first modern art museum in the United States, predating the Museum of Modern Art in New York City by close to a decade.

Just last year the Phillips Collection celebrated its 100th anniversary. It is thus a fitting time to sincerely thank Mr. and Mrs. Phillips for their prescience and enjoy celebrating their remarkable collections. Beginning with a small but notable family collection of paintings which he inherited, Duncan Phillips devoted his attention to expanding the holdings greatly. A gallery built over one wing of the original home was first constructed to serve as a public exhibition space. As the collection continued to expand, the family eventually moved to a new home and the former residence was converted into the core of the museum which we visit today. Later expansions and additions followed in the subsequent decades. The Phillips Collection today remains a vibrant cultural institution and a very special place to visit.

Dr. Carter-Birken's book contains ten chapters clearly organized into two main sections. The first four chapters (Part One: Foundations for Personal Art Encounters) primarily cover quite intriguing background and biographical information on the collectors, while also devoting much coverage to the visionary aesthetics of the Phillipses. Duncan was an acclaimed art critic and a very serious scholar; he was also deeply involved in numerous other arts-related organizations in the United States (he served on the Board of Trustees for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., for example, for many years.) An educator and philanthropist, perhaps Duncan is best described as an inspired and inspirational thinker, with a deep love for the arts, whose intensely personal responses as well as astute scholarship continue to have a lasting impact today.

The initial chapters in Dr. Carter-Birken's book make this case quite convincingly. Wisely, she devotes much careful time in her book to describing both Duncan's and Marjorie's overall enthusiasm for the visual arts in general as fundamental forms of human expression and creativity. What is most interesting for readers to learn from these first several chapters is how the Phillipses looked at the history of art as a continued visual language and a dialogue. Although the Phillipses are now primarily famed as innovative collectors of early modern art, their collecting choices were designed to put older artists into dialogue with the modern, and vice versa. Thus, we find El Greco, Goya, and Daumier juxtaposed with Renoir, Matisse, and Bonnard, along with others of their ilk. Duncan described these as "congenial spirits among the artists from different parts of the world and from different periods of time" (16).

The Phillips Collection has been guided, from its origins, with a strong, clear vision. Far from being simply entrepreneurial supporters of modern art, the Phillipses selected art to collect—and artists to support—whose work and expressions they found especially meaningful or innovative. In forming their collections, they were guided by their policy "*of supporting many methods of seeing and painting*" (15) and by their desire to share their enthusiasms with a wide audience. As Carter-Birken explains, Duncan "was passionate about the power of the artist to create something unique and the power of the viewer to experience it personally" (xxv). Duncan and Marjorie prided themselves on being open-minded and receptive to various forms of art and responses to art. Duncan "never faltered in his message that there is no one way to experience art. He found his own point of view changing constantly and bade others to dismiss

with preconceived notions about works of art” (15). Surely these guiding ideals are what continue to make the Phillips Collection such a remarkable and pleasurable place to visit, experience, learn, and think.

The second section in Dr. Carter-Birken’s book (Part Two: “Six Artists through a Phillips Collection Lens”) is further carefully organized into a series of specific case studies. This manner of organizing was a really brilliant decision. The Phillips Collection contains hundreds of works of art by many different artists, but in these chapters the author wisely chose to focus in on some of the artists majorly represented at the Phillips Collection, who best represent the collection policies and enthusiasm of the original founders. Thus, there are chapters on Pierre Bonnard, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, John Marin, Jacob Lawrence, and Mark Rothko.

These chapters are also especially pleasurable to read because they give one the sense of how much the Phillips Collection was guided by careful thought as well as remarkable scholarship. The Phillipses were great champions of a number of modern artists, acquiring works by several modern artists well before these artists were more widely recognized; further, the Phillipses continued to support these artists after they achieved greater fame. They collected multiple works by specific artists (not just one or two examples) so that the visitor might see and experience a fuller panoply of works of art in related “groups” or simply enjoy more works by the same artist. For example, the Phillipses acquired at least seventeen works by the French Impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard, thirteen works by the Cubist painter Georges Braque and the same number by Paul Klee, at least seven works by Mark Rothko, plus “groups” of many others, including forty-seven works by Arthur Dove.

Dr. Carter-Birken brilliantly chose to focus on some of these selected artists (among many possible others) to provide the reader with a wide but focused range of the Phillipses’ enthusiasms. Her chapters on the artists Pierre Bonnard, Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keeffe, John Marin, Jacob Lawrence, and Mark Rothko not only give readers a great sense of the Phillips’ collection policies but are also replete with carefully crafted details and descriptions. The author’s own descriptions, interspersed with selected quotes from Duncan and Marjorie, are truly beautifully written.

For example, Dr. Carter-Birken writes of Bonnard in her fifth chapter titled “Pierre Bonnard: Unsettling Calmness”: “The paintings of Pierre Bonnard...[have] a phantomlike quality... are not straightforward. His art can unsettle. It can also soothe” (61). In

writing about Arthur Dove, in her sixth chapter, Dr. Carter-Birken describes the “evocativeness of nature and a feeling of place” in Dove’s works (77). Her descriptions of the works of Jacob Lawrence in the Phillips Collection (chapter nine, titled “Despair, Hope, Relevance”) are carefully and sensitively written to convey the importance and social significance of these artist’s works, avidly collected by the Phillipses.

The author has titled her Part Two chapters compellingly well: “Unsettling Calmness” (Pierre Bonnard); “Close to the Soil and the Stars” (Arthur Dove); “Courage” (Georgia O’Keeffe); “A Strong and Bracing Wind” (John Marin); “Despair, Hope Relevance” (Jacob Lawrence), and “A Catalyst for Introspection” (Mark Rothko). These artist-focused chapters (chapters 5–10) contribute so meaningfully to the book and give readers a great sense of the Phillipses’ goals and ideas. Buoyed by Dr. Carter-Birken’s evocative descriptions, these chapters on specific artists give us great insights into the ways in which modern art was perceived in the early modern period and the ways in which we perceive “modernity” today.

My only minor disappointment with this excellent and engaging book regards the illustration program and captioning logistics. The book contains a very nice selection of both black-and-white and color images (quarter page, half page, and full page) interspersed within the chapters. These materials range from archival photographs, documents, and images of works of art that are discussed in the text. Although these selected illustrations are generally and carefully placed in close proximity to where they are discussed in the text, there are a great number of additional art works which are also beautifully described in the text but which are not illustrated in the book. This is completely understandable—the Phillips Collection is replete with magnificent examples, and including images of everything the author chose to describe would have involved a far more extensive illustration program. Even so, readers may find themselves looking in vain for supporting illustrations of several of the works described in careful detail by the author and/or flipping back through the pictures in the book to see if they missed an image.

An easy, traditional way to alert the reader to the presence (or not) of accompanying illustrations is to reference these in the text by wording such as “See Figure X.” This would signal to the reader that an accompanying image is included. When no figure number is referenced, the reader can assume that the described image is not included. Marking this distinction between “described and

illustrated” examples and “described and unillustrated” examples could nicely avoid confusions for the reader reading the illustration program and captioning.

Nevertheless, the author has done absolutely magnificent work in her evocative descriptions of works from the Phillips Collection and elsewhere. And, if illustrations of each and every piece she carefully described were not afforded space in this book, readers can easily access images via the Phillips Collection website.

This brings me to my final point. Dr. Pamela Carter-Birken’s meticulously researched book, *Duncan and Marjorie Phillips and America’s First Museum of Modern Art*, celebrates the vision of these early twentieth-century art collectors whose astute eyes and sensitivity brought and supported “modern” art to diverse audiences in the United States.

If they were still alive today, I can only imagine that Marjorie would be overseeing the website (whilst also finding time for her own painting) and that Duncan would be spending time looking at and writing about “modern art” for the website too.

This book is a great and interesting read! The author has meticulously researched the Phillipses and their collections, both within and beyond the historical context. In this manner the book celebrates the past and future too.