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# Picasso & Company: The Artists Who (Finally) Conquered America

Hugh Eakin's new book, "Picasso's War," features plenty of cultural heroes and heroines.

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From left, in 1958: Nelson Rockefeller, then a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art; Alfred Barr, the director of museum collections; and Dorothy Miller, head of the museum's international program. Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Ailyn Baum/The New York Times

By Phillip Lopate July 16, 2022

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PICASSO'S WAR: How Modern Art Came to America, by Hugh Eakin

It is almost unthinkable that the now universally acknowledged masterpieces of modern art, such as Pablo Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" or Henri Matisse's "The Red Studio," were scorned by American museums and that wealthy patrons refused to buy even a single canvas by either painter. Though it is a truism that innovative art often finds difficulty at first in being accepted, you would think that at a time when the masters of modern painting were already lionized in Europe, Americans would not be so slow in recognizing their significance. Yet such was the case. Even after the 1913 Armory Show, which is usually credited with introducing modern art to this country, it took another several decades before it was possible to mount a full-scale Picasso exhibit, and years to get the Museum of Modern Art off the ground, much less turn it into the formidable institution it is today. "For nearly 30 years, the effort to bring modern art to the United States was continually impeded by war, economic crisis and a deeply skeptical public," Hugh Eakin writes. "It was a project that might well have foundered, and almost did, but for the fanatical determination of a tiny group of people," whose story he sets out to tell in this fascinating, immensely readable narrative.

The first half of "Picasso's War" is given over largely to John Quinn, an amazingly energetic, cultivated New York attorney who, when not defending writers like Joyce and Synge from obscenity charges, had the prescience to buy up and support the work of all the key members of the Paris School. He was a one-man art boom, investing behind the scenes in risk-taking galleries, rounding up attendees from his extensive social set (including Teddy Roosevelt), and purchasing the best pieces when no one else would. Gotham's stodgy, moneyed class was more inclined to spend huge sums on old masters, but Quinn preferred the work of living artists. A progressive, he was appalled by the know-nothing prejudice of conservatives who linked modern art to Bolshevism and degeneracy — a practice he dubbed "Ku Klux art criticism." His dream was to have his prize collection form the basis of a new kind of museum, one dedicated to modern art. Unfortunately, he died of liver cancer in 1924 at age 54 before being able to accomplish that task, and most of his collection was scattered to the winds. What a catastrophe and a missed opportunity.



Remember the story of Pablo Picasso: admiring "Les Femmes d'Alger" at the Museum of Modern Art, 1939. Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, via Art Resource

Enter Alfred H. Barr, the hero of the book's second half. Seeking to become the first American scholar of modern art, he was offered, at 27, the directorship of the newly formed Museum of Modern Art. This was not the sprawling, prestigious monolith we think of now as MoMA, but a set of bare rooms on the 12th floor of an office building, operating on a minuscule budget. It was November 1929, just after the stock market crash. "It was difficult to imagine a less promising moment to start a new museum of any kind, let alone one devoted to a kind of art whose long-term value was highly uncertain," Eakin writes. The museum's main supporters were a group of prominent society women — Lillie Bliss, Mary Sullivan and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (who had far more adventurous tastes than her businessman husband). Barr, like Quinn, was enamored of living painters, saying he found "art of the present more interesting and moving than the art of the Sung or even of the quattrocento." He was particularly fixated on Picasso, who "had become a sort of talisman for him," and whom he regarded as "the most inventive intellect in modern art." His goal was to mount a large retrospective of the Spaniard, but there were many twists and turns before he could pull it off. Cubism was one sticking point: Most Americans detested it. Another was the difficult, mercurial personality of Picasso himself; still another, the Paris dealers who controlled most of his output. Barr, a purist, wary of art dealers sinking their claws into museum curatorial business, would nevertheless have to learn in time to negotiate diplomatically with Picasso's handlers.

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Here we encounter two more intriguing protagonists: the legendary art dealers Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Paul Rosenberg. Kahnweiler and Rosenberg were both Jewish gallery owners wedded to Paris, who competed for Picasso's favors and tried to evade the rising tide of antisemitism in French society. At first they did most of their business in Munich and Moscow, by far the two places most sympathetic to the avant-garde; but in a sudden reversal, both Germany and the Soviet Union became totalitarian states hostile to modern art, and so the Paris dealers turned reluctantly to the United States market. Barr was quick to trumpet a connection between artistic freedom and democracy, as he worked to persuade his MoMA board to acquire many of the same paintings that had been in Quinn's collection. And now, in 1939, he was finally able to tell the story of modern art as he saw it: "With his usual taxonomic zeal, Barr had arranged the art in an improbably lucid progression of styles and idioms, initiating viewers in stepwise fashion into the new and difficult."

Along the way, we learn considerable amounts about the art market and the transformation of galleries from salon-style hangings one on top of the other, to paintings in simple steel frames in "white cube" suites. Eakin, though not a professional art historian (he is a senior editor at Foreign Affairs), has mastered this material, read a mountain of sources and synthesized them skillfully, and he manages to braid aesthetics with history with personal details about the leading individuals' love lives, adulteries and divorces.

Some of his prose tics are irksome, such as providing thumbnail portraits of each character ("A tall, fair-complexioned man with a sharp jawline, piercing blue eyes, and a prominent forehead in front of a balding crown," etc.), which all start to sound the same; his novelistic, presumptuous inhabiting of historical people's interiority in scenes ("As they glanced at one another around the table, they knew they had not been chosen casually"); and his habit of holding off the name of each new person or painting title until he has given a lengthy description of same ("A small, dark-haired, high-strung man who was not much older than Kahnweiler" and so on for another 10 lines, before he finally lets us know it is Paul Rosenberg).

But once Eakin has introduced all the key figures and set them in motion, the book soars. His achievement is keeping the complex plotline moving, while offering sharp insights and astute judgments. He ends the book in dramatic fashion, tracing Rosenberg's desperate attempt to escape the Third Reich's tightening grip and relocate to the United States via Portugal — fortunately succeeding, with the aid of a warm letter of support from Alfred Barr. By then, modern art had conquered America, Picasso's designs were being adapted into women's clothing, and he had, "apparently overnight, become a mainstay of department store chic."

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Phillip Lopate's most recent publication is a three-volume set of anthologies on the American essay. He teaches at Columbia University.

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