

# Dr. Arthur Sackler: Art and Frustrations

By Lon Tuck

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WASHINGTON — One of the motivating forces of art collectors, said Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, a psychiatrist who should know, is frustration. "When some people are frustrated, they go out and buy a new hat, or a tie. When I have, I have gone out and bathed myself in something truly beautiful. So my collections are in a sense the measure of my frustrations."

Sackler, who just turned 73, over the years has acquired tens of thousands of objects in an extraordinarily diverse and intensively thorough set of collections. There is the fabled Asian collection (long coveted by several major museums), but there are also enormous holdings in Piranesi drawings, Italian majolica, European terra-cotta, pre-Columbian objects and textiles. Sackler is, said Thomas Lawton, head of the Freer Gallery here, "a modern Medici."

Next May the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, of Oriental art, will open on the quadrangle behind the Smithsonian Castle in Washington, giving the Sackler collection the same visibility as those of Charles Lang Freer and Joseph Hirshhorn, whose similarly personal galleries lie on either side.

Who is this man who has also made major artistic bequests to Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, and in two instances, New York's Metropolitan Museum.

There are many sides to Arthur Sackler, who lives in a palatial Fifth Avenue apartment in New York that he shares with his considerably younger wife, Jill, an arts patron herself with a special interest in music. His art is simply the most visible. The three-page, single-spaced résumé he sent before the interview was meticulously grouped into three categories: "In Science," starting with his service as research director of the Creedmoor Institute for Psychobiological Studies from 1949 to 1954; "In the Arts," starting with his work on Columbia's Advisory Council of the Department of Art History and Archaeology from 1961 to 1974; and "In the Humanities," beginning with his 1967 sponsorship of a symposium

on "Early Chinese Art and Its Possible Influence in the Pacific Basin (published in two volumes)."

Among the more visible fruits of his patronage are the Sackler Institute of Graduate Biomedical Science at New York University (his alma mater); the Arthur M. Sackler Center for Health Communications at Tufts; the Sackler Wing at the Metropolitan Museum (built to house the Temple of Dendur); and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard, which opened last year to critical praise for its striking design by the British architect James Stirling.

At the top of the first page Sackler categorizes himself as "physician, researcher, publisher." There is no mention of his fortune, estimated in the Forbes magazine 400 list as "\$175 million plus" and made mostly in medical publications and advertising.

But with all his interests, what motivates Sackler as a collector? Is it really, as he suggested, just impulse? "As much as love," he replied with a beatific grin. Some collections, he said, are "statements" and others merely "interior decoration. The acquisition of a great aesthetic statement is a work of art itself, an act of passion. And in so far as passion is not controllable, it constitutes in significant measure an act of impulse. I have mentioned the role of discipline in collecting. You heard me say that I consider science a discipline with passion, and art a passion for discipline. I don't believe that there can be any creativity without passion. Because I think all great art has enormous emotional content: a message of the Creator, conveyed within the language of his medium."

Few dates have been darker for the august Metropolitan Museum of Art than when it became known that the Metropolitan would not, as assumed, get the cream of the Sackler Oriental collection, which was going, instead, to the Smithsonian. About 5,000 of Sackler's Asian pieces had been stored at the Met for 16 years.

Asked if he was disappointed in the loss of the Oriental collection,



John McDonnell/The Washington Post

Sackler in gallery being built for his Oriental art.

the Met director Philippe de Montebello said: "The disinherited always have that view."

The collection that got away from the Met is, said the Freer's Lawton, "the largest collection of Chinese art that I know of in private hands."

Lawton has chosen 153 of them for the Sackler Gallery in Washington. They were chosen to complement the collection of bronzes at the Freer, which has one of the world's great collections of Shang dynasty (circa 1523 to 1027 B.C.) bronzes.

Sackler gave Lawton carte blanche to go to the Met's Sackler enclave and, in effect, loot his collection for the new gallery. "It was a heady experience, by any standards," recalled the Freer's director.

In addition Sackler agreed to contribute \$4 million to construction of the \$75-million installa-

tion under the quadrangle, and to donate 1,000 objects from his Chinese holdings.

One hallmark of Sackler the collector is his reluctance to acquire pictures "in isolation."

"I collected, for instance, three paintings by Picasso done on the same day, and they were absolutely fascinating because you were able to see the evolution of the solution to a particular problem — which you would never see if the three were lifted out of context."

He also tells of acquiring a pair of paintings by Modigliani and by Diego Rivera: "They were very interesting. Modigliani and Diego were living together in Paris and were sharing the same studio. The painting I bought by Modigliani was of a lady in a necklace. And in Diego's painting, he had encompassed elements from this

painting, including the hair, into a Cubist creation of his own. And there you can see the interaction."

Brooklyn-born, he started as an art student. "I went to Cooper Union at night. So I had a chance to be exposed to teachers. But unfortunately I early in life realized [my] limitations. But while I was going to premedical school, I was taking art courses."

Starting with his residency at Creedmoor State Hospital in Queens, Sackler, his two brothers — also psychiatrists — and other collaborators published more than 100 papers in the new field of biological functioning and its effect on mental behavior.

Coincidentally, he was laying the foundations for his fortune with shrewd investing in the pharmaceutical industry. In the early 1940s Sackler joined a leading medical advertising agency, William Douglas Mc-Adams Inc., partly to help finance his psychiatric career. In 1947 he bought it, and still owns it. Then Sackler went into medical publishing. He owns several publications, most notably the biweekly Medical Tribune, which makes millions from medical advertisers, goes free to 165,000 physicians in the United States and also circulates in other countries.

Sackler's collecting began in the 1940s when he started frequenting galleries and museums and getting to know the artists.

Some of Sackler's ideas on age and the character of creativity have changed over the years. "I used to think that creativity was limited by age. But the more time passes, I have come to realize that creativity is not that age-restrained. There are fascinating examples, in terms, let us say, of scientists such as Linus Pauling. Or a choreographer, Martha Graham. We are talking in terms of 85 to 90. People who still come up with the most creative solutions. In both cases, I think you will find a residual development of irreverence. Not for great achievements. But for conventional wisdom. I once asked Linus Pauling, 'What is the role of heresy in science?' And he looked at me and said, 'Arthur, isn't heresy the source of all real progress?'"