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An Art Collector Sows Largesesse And Controversy

By GRACE GLUECK

For a man who collects art on a cosmic scale and gives millions to art institutions, Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, a 69-year-old research psychiatrist from New York who's made a fortune in business ventures, has managed to maintain a very low profile. He's not a force on museum boards, he shies away from art world functions, and

steers clear of interviews. Yet with recent big gifts to Harvard, the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum, he is emerging as one of the country's leading art collectors and patrons.

His institutional relationships do not always run smoothly—a falling out with the Metropolitan, for example, has led him to give to the Smithsonian Institution a major holding of Oriental art for which the Met was angling. And in the 1970's, his involvement with the Museum of the American Indian led to a legal inquiry that was subsequently dropped. But a growing number of museums and galleries bear the name of Dr. Sackler, who is known in the scientific field as a pioneer in biological psychiatry.

A man of high-voltage energy who is also described by Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum as "a brilliant visionary," he talks fluently on a vast range of subjects, from biblical archeology to current vitamin therapies. His international spectrum of friends includes the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Linus C. Pauling, the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, the Vatican Secretary of State Agostino Cardinal Casaroli and Qian Xinzhong, Chinese minister of family planning. His art interests are equally eclectic, and he prefers the purchase of entire collections to that of individual pieces. "I collect as a biologist," he says. "To really understand a civilization, a society, you must have a large enough corpus of data. You can't know 20th-century art by looking only at Picassos and Henry Moores."

The Brooklyn-born doctor owns tens of thousands of objects, including more than 400 Chinese ritual bronzes on which scholars at Harvard have just finished an eight-year cataloguing project (a selection of 70 are

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O. E. Nelson

A Shang Dynasty wine container from the Arthur M. Sackler collection.

The Art World and Arthur M. Sackler

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currently on view at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum). The treasure — some of it now donated to institutions, but still regarded by him as part of the Sackler collections — includes Chinese archaic jades (the world's largest collection), Chinese paintings and furniture, European terra cottas, Italian majolica, Piranesi drawings, ancient Persian and pre-Columbian objects and textiles. A curatorial staff of four looks after these riches, and more than ten volumes on them have been issued or are now in preparation.

Not only does he give collections, but museums and galleries to house them. He has pledged \$4 million and 1,000 of his choice Asiatic objects, valued at more than \$50 million, to the forthcoming Arthur M. Sackler Museum for Asian Art at the Smithsonian Institution, to be built on the Mall in Washington, D. C. And he is the principal donor of the \$7.5 million Sackler Museum now under construction at Harvard, to house works from Asia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, part of an expansion project for the existing Harvard art museums, the Fogg and the Busch-Reisinger.

Earlier Sackler donations include the Sackler Gallery for Chinese art at Princeton University, established in the 1960's, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery for Chinese sculpture at the Metropolitan, set up in the same decade with what the museum calls "generous" funds for the purchase of Chinese objects, and the Sackler Laboratories of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University. With his two brothers, Raymond and Mortimer, also psychiatrists, Dr. Sackler gave the Sackler Wing at the Metropolitan, housing the Temple of Dendur, and the Sackler Exhibition Hall, the huge balcony overlooking the Temple, whose construction in 1978 was supported by a \$3.5 million pledge, payable over 20 years.

The sciences and the humanities have also benefited from Sackler largesse. Contributions of more than \$2 million to Long Island University, where he established a laboratory for therapeutic research at the university's school of pharmacy, make him one of the largest donors to that institution. This month, ground was broken for an \$8 million Arthur M. Sackler Sciences Center at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., for which he gave "a significant portion" of the cost, and with his brothers he has helped set up biomedical institutes at Tufts University and New York University, as well as the Sackler School of Medicine in Tel Aviv.

But for all his good works, Dr. Sackler is to most in the art world a figure of some obscurity, an obscurity that he says he encourages so that he can "do things the way I want to do them." Among his donees, some view him with ambivalence, accepting his gifts but disliking their terms. "He's manipulative, I'd say," observes one institutional official. "After his gifts are made, he watches them like a hawk." Yet to others, such as Seymour Slive, director emeritus of the Harvard Art Museums and chief fund raiser for the expansion project, he is "a wonderful man, with a tremendous respect for and understanding of scholarship, and an angel for the patience with which he stood by us," when Harvard officials attempted to call off the building's construction last year in the belief that the \$21.5 received in overall donations provided insufficient backing.

The nerve center of the Sackler activities is a pleasant office on Manhattan's East Side, where on a recent day Dr. Sackler paused to discuss his philosophy of collecting *en bloc*. "I'm a lazy, impatient man," he said with a laugh, "and I don't have enough lifetimes to be able to make the points that I want my collections to make. In each case I want to establish a significant corpus of material to enable scholars to define the esthetic of a school, or to define a cultural horizon. A collection must be more than a sim-

importance of "receptor sites," important in medical theory today.

To finance his medical studies, Dr. Sackler joined as a young man the William Douglas MacAdams advertising agency, of which today he is the principal owner. The agency, which specializes in prescription drug advertising, counts among its clients Pfizer Laboratories, Block Drugs, and Ciba-Geigy Pharmaceuticals. Last year, according to the trade publication, Advertising Age, it grossed \$8.3 million on total billings of \$55.5 million. Through a publications group he owns, he also issues several magazines for doctors, and the biweekly newspaper, Medical Tribune, sent free to nearly 165,000 physicians in the United States — with sister publications reaching altogether maybe a million throughout the world — for which he writes editorials and opinion columns. He has an interest with his brothers in Purdue-Frederick, a drug company that puts out such products as Betadine, a disinfectant; Senekot pills for constipation, and Cerumenex drops for ear wax. And several years ago he became the largest shareholder in the State Street Bank of Boston, on whose board he sits.

Dr. Sackler began collecting art in the mid-1940's, picking his way from

"until the Smithsonian came along with a proposal."

It is this group that is now the subject of controversy between him and the Metropolitan, where his gift to the Smithsonian is seen as a defection. Since 1966, the Met has provided the doctor with a small enclave that now houses thousands of the Chinese works. (The enclave occasioned some trouble in 1978 when the New York State Attorney General's office investigated to determine whether a publicly-funded institution such as the Met should give storage space to an individual's private collection. It found no misconduct on Dr. Sackler's part, but chided the Met for loose monitoring of the enclave and its operations.)

The idea was that material stored in the enclave would eventually be used for a large exhibition of masterpieces from the Sackler Chinese holdings, an exhibition that, though discussed between the Met and Dr. Sackler for years, has never taken place. For their part, Met officials waited for assurance they say was never forthcoming that the museum would eventually receive a substantial part of the enclave's contents (estimated at nearly 10,000 articles) as a gift to bolster its own still weak holdings of works in the early Chinese period. The hope was all

to Dr. Sackler. "The Sackler wing is a generous gift, but also a marvelous deal for the Sacklers," one commented, noting that the \$3.5 million pledged by Dr. Sackler and his two brothers for the wing would provide 20 years of tax writeoffs.

Another sore point is the Vatican show itself. Dr. Sackler says he initiated negotiations with Vatican representatives for a show on "art and faith" to appear first at the National Gallery and then at the Met. Carter Brown, the National Gallery's director and Mr. de Montebello, according to the physician, agreed on joint participation. But the Met, he says, then went on to negotiate its own show.

Mr. de Montebello denies having any part in Dr. Sackler's project. "It's news to me that we were jointly going to organize any show on the Vatican," he says. "After all, it doesn't take any particular genius to think it might be a good thing to show works of art from the Vatican in the United States. It was our proposal that fell on receptive ears."

Still discussed in museum circles is Dr. Sackler's troubled involvement with the Museum of the American Indian, of which his former wife was a trustee, and to which he had given gifts of objects and money, receiving other objects in exchange. In 1975, Dr. Sackler, who had stored works free of charge in a special room provided by the museum, was named a defendant in a suit by the New York Attorney General charging the then director and trustees with allowing "surreptitious and wasteful exchange transactions" of objects from its collection.

The Attorney General's complaint indicated that the museum had no record of payment from Dr. Sackler for objects obtained by him from the museum, and artifacts owned by him were held in the storage room as security for the "debt" he owed. But the complaint was dropped after the Attorney General found that money raised by Dr. Sackler was more than sufficient to pay for objects he had obtained.

Recently, the physician asked to borrow for a touring show objects from the museum that he had given as gifts, and also some that he says he only lent. But the museum, according to Dr. Roland Force, its current director, takes the position that "nothing here of Dr. Sackler's is on loan," and it refuses to consider lending items for the exhibition until Dr. Sackler "indicates that he understands our position." Dr. Sackler's office maintains, however, that the museum has never produced any documents to show a transfer of ownership.

Meanwhile, he is warmly praised at Harvard, which has received as his contribution to the Sackler Museum and its endowment a reported \$10 million (the figure cannot be exactly confirmed, but there is agreement that it represents the largest single financial gift in the history of the university's art museums) and where, since the 1950's, he has supported fellowships, scholarships and research, as well as exhibitions and publications. "He's a wonderful man, extremely generous, and among the major patrons of the arts in this country today," says John M. Rosenfield, acting director of the Harvard University Art Museums.

In the high-pressure arena where he makes his money, Dr. Sackler has also provoked dispute. "He never throws his weight around in a visible way," notes a colleague, "but he's able to manipulate behind the scenes." The overlapping ownership of his advertising agency and his medical publications is considered unusual, and he is credited with silent ownership or partnership in a number of other enterprises. One is the now-extinct L. W. Frolich advertising agency, said to have handled clients whose interests were competitive with MacAdams's; another is MD Publications, revealed in the late 1950's to have given Henry Welch, then chief of the antibiotics division of the Food and Drug Administration, more than \$250,000 in payments for editorial services. Dr. Sackler acknowledges that the late L. W. Frolich was a friend of his, but says he had no interest in the agency. As for MD Publications, he asserts that although he started its well-known medical news magazine, MD, in 1957, and now serves as a consultant to it, the company was owned by his friend, the late Dr. Felix Marti-Ibanez, a Spanish psychiatrist.



Henry Groszkensky

Mr. Sackler, above, with part of his collection; below, a close-up of the object he is holding, a silver-gilt Sassenian rhyton, A.D. 225-650—"To really understand a civilization, you must have a large enough corpus of data."



field to field: contemporary American, pre-Renaissance, post-Impressionist, School of Paris. He made the acquaintance of Oriental art by happening on a small Chinese table at a cabinetmaker's, a discovery that led him to further investigation. "I realized that here was an esthetic not commonly appreciated or understood," he says. His interest was intensified by finding, on a trip to Paris, that a minor post-Impressionist work had reached the price level at which "one of the greatest pieces of stone sculpture in the history of Chinese art" could be acquired. "I got a double benefit: I was able to go further and have the advantage of breaking new ground," he says.

Today, advised in the paintings field

but dashed when Smithsonian professionals went to the enclave and picked 1,000 top-grade pieces for the projected new museum.

The Met is still prepared to take the best of the leavings, however, although at this point it is unclear whether its curators will be allowed to choose from what remains in the enclave or whether it will be removed by Dr. Sackler. "We are grateful for the support he has given us over the years, and we'd be very happy to work something out that would be rewarding for both of us," says Philippe de Montebello, director of the museum. Dr. Sackler says, "I have no comment at this time."

There have been other difficulties

'A collection must be more than an accumulation of

accumulation of objects.'

ple accumulation of objects; it has to have a point of view, and I think it's wise for us to preserve the life work of highly sensitive, truly dedicated collectors. In that sense, I regard myself more as a curator than a collector."

As a youth, Dr. Sackler studied sculpture at the Educational Alliance on the Lower East Side, and later took night courses in art history at Cooper Union and New York University. With a degree from N. Y. U.'s medical school, he began a psychiatric residency at Creedmoor State Hospital in Queens in 1944, and soon became director of research. There and at the Long Island University School of Pharmacy, he, his brothers and other collaborators published some 140 scientific papers, most dealing with how alterations in bodily functioning might affect mental illness. He was the first to use ultrasound for medical diagnosis, and among other pioneering activities, identified histamine as a hormone and called attention to the

new ground, he says. Today, advised in the paintings field by Wen Fong, chairman of the Metropolitan Museum's Far Eastern department, and in other areas by several trusted dealers, he has wound up with what Mr. Fong calls "by far the largest and most important collection of ancient Chinese art in the world." Each of his voluminous collections, Dr. Sackler says, represent his own taste and point of view. "I never dreamt that I'd be able to do what I have; in fact when I started, I thought it was too late. I was collecting the way an average collector would acquire art, mainly to live with. That's gone a long time ago."

His decision as to when to give art to an institution, he notes, "depends on the material. When it comes to the point where it would justify real scholarship, I give it to the place where the scholarship is." He opted to give a collection of etchings and drawings by the 18th-century architect and engraver Giovanni Battista Piranesi, for example, to Columbia University's Avery Architectural Library in the early 1970's because "at the time it was the best place for it." And he notes that "over 90 per cent" of his current holdings in Chinese and Near East material were uncommitted

There have been other difficulties. For one, the doctor is said to have been angered by the Met's decision last year not to go ahead with a proposed exhibition of ancient artifacts from Israel on grounds that some of the material involved would be coming from a museum in territory thought to be disputed between Israel and Arab nations. After an outcry from prominent friends of Israel and the Met, the museum agreed to mount a close version of the show it had originally scheduled, now being organized by the Smithsonian Institution.

Close associates of the physician say that he has also voiced dissatisfaction over what he feels is the Metropolitan's "violation" of its contract with him regarding use of the Sackler Exhibition Hall, in which the Met has installed an espresso bar and shop in connection with the current Vatican show. "I can't comment on his feeling that it's a violation of contract," Mr. de Montebello says. "Our understanding is otherwise."

For their part, Met officials are said to resent what they feel are the restrictive conditions Dr. Sackler places — by means of long, detailed contracts — on the use of galleries donated by him. And they point out that the donations are also advantageous

Dr. Juan María Sanchez, a Spanish psychiatrist.

Yet, for all the ambivalence that his name evokes, there seems to be general agreement on the part of those who know him that Dr. Sackler is a man of enormous intelligence and capability. Linus Pauling sees him as "a man full of energy and a feeling for innovation, a lot like me!" Jean Mayer, the nutritionist and president of Tufts University commends him as "a man wholly oriented toward the future." And the Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Gerald Edelman, at Rockefeller University, lauds his "enormously lively intelligence and imagination. When he's in the room, you don't fall asleep."

Meanwhile, though the physician will be 70 in August, he still maintains a killing daily pace, beginning work at 8:30 A.M. seven days a week, with frequent travel to Washington, Boston and abroad in the service of banking, scholarship, art collecting and scientific projects. "Art and science are two sides of the same coin," he says. "Science is a discipline pursued with passion, art is a passion pursued with discipline. At pursuing both, I've had a lot of fun."

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