

ART WITHOUT ARTIFICE: THE BIRTH OF THE MENIL COLLECTION

By Emily Zinsitz



The front exterior of the Menil Collection.
Photo by J. Griffis Smith/TxDOT, courtesy
of the Menil Collection, Houston.

Tucked away in the heart of a Houston suburb, among generous green park space and snug, grey-clapboard bungalows, the unexpected is made manifest in the Menil Collection. An internationally-renowned arts destination identified only by a small, inconspicuous sign, the Menil is a recognized Houston landmark that, for all its importance, still bears a remarkable sense of simplicity. With its understated grey and white edifice blending seamlessly into the surrounding neighborhood, the Menil's quiet elegance belies its rich interior: a haven for ancient, tribal, and contemporary art. Despite its unassuming aura, the Menil Collection has garnered a reputation for being both eccentric and exceptional. Possessing a unique aesthetic that succeeds in drawing the public into an intimate contemplation of the artwork itself, the museum does its work sans audio guides, wordy plaques, or crowded walls. Completed in 1987, this corner of Houston was the *magnum opus* of one unconventional, hugely influential Houston couple: John and Dominique de Menil.

Originally from France, the de Menils fled Europe during the Second World War. Dominique followed her husband separately, along with their children, to Houston

in 1941. The daughter of Conrad Schlumberger, a physicist who helped found the oil services company Schlumberger Limited, Dominique grew up in a bourgeois Protestant household, the child of practical, if conservative, parents who did not believe in spending money on frivolous things like fine art and other luxuries.¹ John, meanwhile, the son of a career Army officer, grew up poor, but ambitious, leaving school early to support his family as a banker, while still managing to earn his baccalaureate and graduate degrees in political science by taking night classes.² By the time the couple married in 1931, John was employed as the head of investment services at one of the largest banks in France. However, in 1936 he began to work for the family company, eventually becoming president of both the Middle and Far East and Latin American branches of Schlumberger Limited.³

As a couple, John and Dominique were an intensely dynamic pair: John acting as the lively, opinionated instigator to contrast Dominique's intellectual, understated reserve. In characterizing John de Menil, Calvin Tomkins calls him "a tough-minded capitalist, a bon vivant, and a leftist in the French mold – a man who wanted to right



Dominique and John de Menil, 1967, pictured with *Seated Figure*, Mali, Dogon. Photo by Hickey-Robertson, Houston, courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

wrongs and change society.”⁷⁴ Dominique, on the other hand, has been described by architect Philip Johnson as “a mysterious woman,” exotic and reserved, “yet her strength was so obvious.”⁷⁵ As one of her associates explained, “The phrase ‘steel butterfly’ was coined for her. Behind that fragile, otherworldly façade [was] a complex person of very ambitious reach.”⁷⁶ Together, this couple found their place in Houston, a young, growing city, far from their European roots, and began to make a name for themselves in the Houston community.

At the time of their arrival in the early 1940s, Houston appeared, from an outsider’s perspective, to be an intellectual and cultural desert, a place dominated by the crude capitalistic pragmatism of the region’s newly wealthy oilmen. Certainly, Houston of the 1940s lacked a strong modernist spirit, but it did have an established symphony, the Museum of Fine Arts, and Rice University. Dominique herself described this Houston as a “provincial, dormant place,” lacking the pervasiveness and vibrancy of the European arts scene, but asserted that, far from stifling her, it provided her with the blank slate from which to begin her own collection. Discussing her relationship with the city, she asserts, “I always felt a sort of energy in Houston. I always felt that what didn’t exist would happen within a couple of years. I always felt things were possible.”⁷⁷ Thus, she and John began their patronage of the arts in Houston, setting out to expand the city’s artistic horizons and draw Houstonians into the world of the modern art.

Taking up this mantle, the de Menils soon became a fixture in the Houston arts scene, becoming involved with both the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) and the Contemporary Arts Alliance (CAA), later dubbed the Contemporary Arts Museum. John de Menil served on

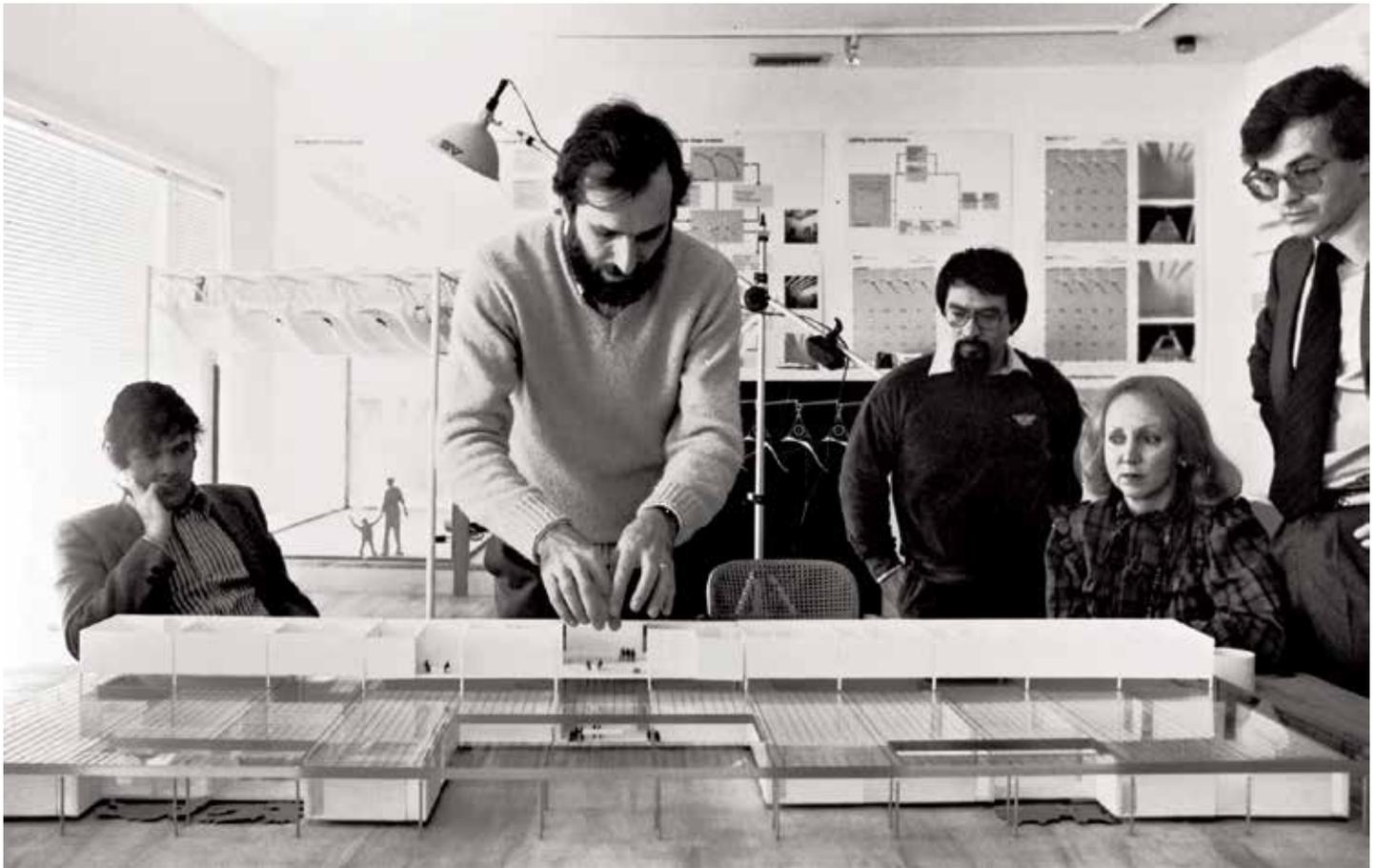
the boards of both organizations as Dominique became engaged with various museum committees, always acting with an eye to the improvement and expansion of Houston arts culture.⁸ As Vance Muse, director of communications for the Menil, described their involvement, “They administered something like the shock of the new. They helped bring modern ideas to this part of the world. I think they saw the good and potential of Houston – the great generosity and ambition to make the city an interesting arts center.”⁹

In 1955, the de Menils coaxed curatorial visionary Jermayne MacAgy into becoming the first professional director of the CAA. It took MacAgy hardly any time to begin making her mark.¹⁰ With innovative contemporary instillations, such as *The Disquieting Muse: Surrealism* and *The Trojan Horse: The Art of the Machine* gracing the Houston stage, the city finally began to garner national attention in the arts world, winning the prestigious honor of hosting the convention of the American Confederation of the Arts in 1957.¹¹ With such momentum, the MFAH, with the help of John de Menil, recruited and installed internationally renowned James Johnson Sweeney as the MFAH’s new director in 1961, a man who previously directed the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Proud of Houston’s new artistic icons, John de Menil wrote candidly to *Houston Town & Country*, “What city in this country can boast to that equivalent?”¹²

Beyond their work with Houston museums, the de Menils further developed their attachment to the city’s artistic advancement by becoming involved with local universities – first the University of St. Thomas, and, later, Rice University – developing outstanding programs in art history. Founded by the Basilican Fathers in 1947, the University of St. Thomas became the special beneficiary of de Menil enthusiasm and funding in the 1950s and 1960s, as the couple lent significant aid to the fledgling school, first in real estate and architecture and later in the university’s educational programs.¹³

Driven by a desire to expose students to truly great works of art, Dominique de Menil established a “teaching collection” of exceptional art pieces hosted along with numerous temporary exhibitions, to educate art students by broadening their aesthetic experiences. Under the guidance of Jermayne MacAgy, who came to head the university’s new art department in 1959, Dominique began developing as a scholar and curator in her own right. When tragedy struck in 1964 with MacAgy’s unexpected death, Dominique assumed MacAgy’s projects herself by creating new art exhibitions for the students and larger public.¹⁴ It was during this time, springing out of their significant forays into arts education and museum leadership, that the de Menils first conceived of devising a new forum for housing and displaying their own prodigious collection.

Accumulating more than 10,000 objects by the 1970s, the de Menils had begun collecting art seriously nearly thirty years earlier, under the guidance of French Dominican priest, Father Marie-Alain Couturier. Speaking of his influence, Dominique wrote, “Father Couturier relieved me of my latent Puritanism I had inherited as a tradition. For many years I felt that purchasing art was a



Peter Rice, Rezo Piano, Shunji Ishida, and Lois and Georges de Menil viewing the museum model, Menil Foundation, Houston, 1982.

Photo courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

slightly bad action, too pleasure seeking, too hedonistic. Father Couturier made it almost a duty to buy art we could afford.”¹⁵ And buy they did. Over the course of the next several decades, John and Dominique de Menil began purchasing modernist and surrealist art, particularly favoring Max Ernst and Rene Magritte, turning later to abstract expressionist and contemporary art, with heavy accessions in Mark Rothko and Andy Warhol. However, ancient pieces along with tribal art also fascinated them, and by the mid-1980s, Dominique began collecting Byzantine works as well. Thus, the collection formed in a somewhat eclectic manner, not as a comprehensive anthology of the history of art, but as a pointillistic array, featuring impressive depth in certain schools of art, and complete lack in others. Describing her approach to collecting, Dominique explained, “My policy of buying is to have no policy. There is no special theme for the permanent collection because you don’t buy with ideas in your head.”¹⁶

Instead, she maintains that the collector makes decisions on instinct, adding, “When you love something you just buy it – if you can afford it.”¹⁷

From the beginning of their collection, however, the de Menils did not consider their acquisitions in terms of possession or property. Instead, they intended to share their discoveries, which they did wholeheartedly through public exhibitions and the teaching collections at St. Thomas and Rice Universities. Ultimately, though, they understood that such individual programs could not truly showcase all that

they had amassed, or fully express the aesthetic ideals to which they aspired. Thus, the idea of a museum to house their collection in Houston began to take root as the best and only means to secure their legacy and maintain the integrity of their vision.

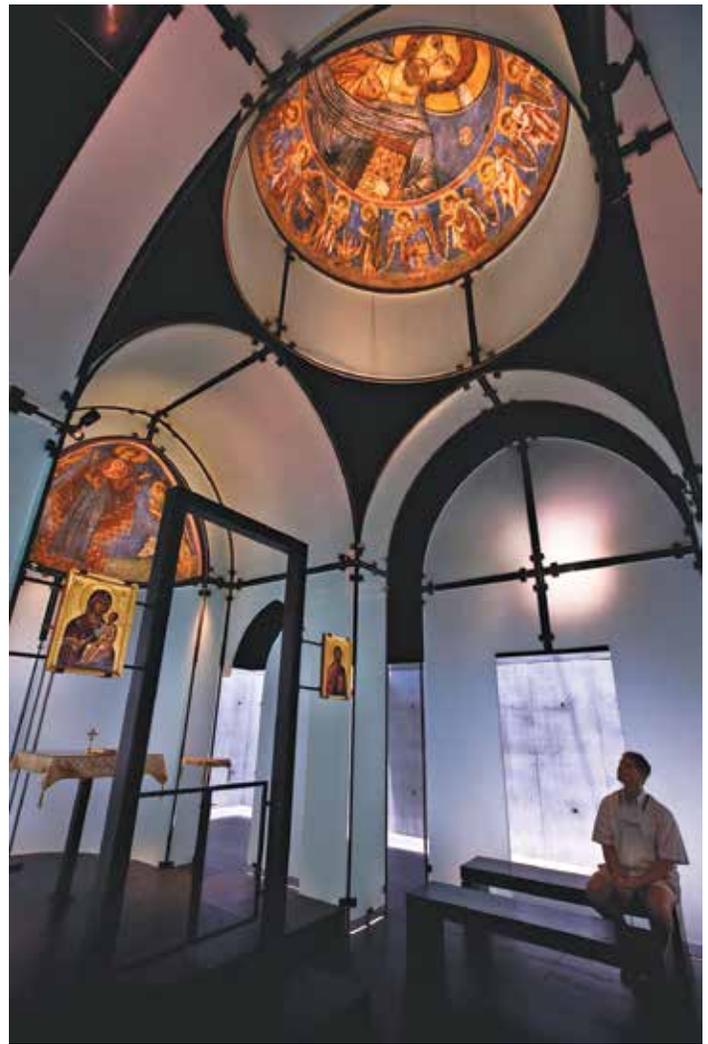
In 1972, John and Dominique began to make overtures to architect Louis Kahn indicating their interest in building a museum in Houston’s Montrose neighborhood.¹⁸ In 1973, Kahn created preliminary drawings for the museum, but the project ended abruptly with his death in 1974, leaving Dominique in the lurch. In the wake of John’s death the year prior, this fresh obstacle deflated Dominique’s enthusiasm for the project she began with her husband, and for the next five years she shelved museum discussions entirely. However, talks renewed in 1979, first with local architect Howard Barnstone, then with art curators Paul Winkler and Walter Hopps, before Dominique, with the help of her consultants, found the architect and partner for her great endeavor: Italian newcomer, Rezo Piano.¹⁹

Acting under Dominique’s oft-quoted instruction to create a building that is at once “small outside and big inside,” Piano began designing a technologically complex structure that appears deceptively simple. Long and flat, the museum seems to sit parallel to the ground, giving off an air of lightness despite its clear size. For illumination, Dominique was intent on utilizing natural light, so Piano installed wide windows which expand to height of the ceiling, and long, graceful metal ‘leaves’ along the roof and

walkways supported by tall, white metal columns lining the outer portico. One of the major technological innovations of the construction, the leaves let in sunlight to illuminate the interior galleries, while curving precisely in such a way to cut the harshness of the Texas sun and diffuse the heat of its rays.²⁰

In the same understated way, Piano also ensured that the interior of the museum was quietly impressive as well. Appearing as a single story building from much of the exterior, the museum interior actually has five different levels, which accommodate the “treasure house” of stored art as well as rooms for framing and conservation alongside exhibition spaces, thus blending the museum’s several functions in an uncommonly egalitarian way. In essence, Dominique’s museum expresses its luxury in the details, which never seek to overwhelm the observer, but, instead, blend seamlessly into the harmonious whole. Describing his aesthetic aims for the project, Piano explains, “You don’t want to compete with the art, and you still want to give character to the museum; you have to work on the immateriality of the museum – light, vibration, proportion.”²¹ Thus, Piano and de Menil created a space designed to center focus inward, a masterpiece of modesty, calculated to cede attention to the artwork for which it was built.

However, such an elaborate construction had its difficulties. Most notably, the funding required to build such a museum (over \$21 million) was monumental, necessitating outside contributions to ensure its completion. Complicating the funding situation further, falling oil prices in the mid-eighties caused Schlumberger stock prices to take a dive precisely when Dominique required the money to finance the building process. Luckily, the Houston Old Guard willingly came to her aid, recognizing the cultural significance such an instillation would have in their city and trusting Dominique’s vision to create something truly exceptional. Both the Cullen and the Brown Foundations offered \$5 million contributions to the endowment, which, along with several other contributions from local families, compensated for over half of the building costs.²² In the end, the museum would not have been possible without the



Interior of the Byzantine Fresco Chapel.

Photo by J. Griffis Smith/TxDOT, courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.



Nelson Mandela and Dominique de Menil touring the galleries in the Menil Collection, Houston, 1991.

Photo courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

generosity and good faith of the Houston community, as it stepped up to give back to a woman who had played an integral role in the development of Houston culture.

After more than a decade since its initial conception, the Menil Collection opened to the public on June 4, 1987. International artists and dignitaries along with much of the Houston community came during the opening week to take part in the festivities and see the culmination of Dominique’s efforts. What they found was a museum experience unlike its predecessors in the art world: a space dedicated solely to cultivating a spiritual connection between the art and the viewer. Describing the experience, Vance Muse observes, “It’s so welcoming and so simple that it has an almost intimidating effect on some people because they’re so used to banners and a turnstile and a bookstore and all this kind of activity that brings you into a museum.”²³ Instead, he explains, “It’s a very direct experience with the work of art – little or no text is on the wall. It’s a very emotional, contemplative experience.”²⁴

Indeed, in arranging her museum, Dominique followed in the footsteps of her mentor, Jermayne MacAgy, and made a point to hang the artwork lower than usual, allowing viewers to encounter works directly, without having to stare upward at the art as though it were on a pedestal.²⁵ Further,

she did not organize her collection historically, but chose, instead, to exhibit her art pieces on a rotating basis, thematically. Walter Hopps, the Menil's first director, explains this choice, saying, "[The collection] presents an important alternative regarding the meanings of art and culture, one that runs counter to the conventional chronological exposition of Western art...With such material, it has not been possible nor has it been desired to present a developmental picture. Rather, the links are conceptual, iconographic, and formal. The collection's *raison d'être* suggests the profound ties between aesthetic and spiritual values among peoples of diverse times and places."²⁶

In a way, it is almost impossible to imagine that Dominique's vision, manifested in such a perfectly tailored environment, would not receive international recognition. As the chips fell, it has done exactly that. In the first years after the museum's completion, the Menil produced an outstanding series of exhibitions along with scholarly catalogs to accompany them, several of which toured around the world to other museums. Such exhibits include *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, a collection of Rauschenberg's more obscure early work, and *Magritte*, a major retrospective of the artist's oeuvre.²⁷ Beyond exhibitions, the museum also expanded its art conservation department, receiving grants in 1990 and 1996 to fund post-graduate fellowships and two full-time conservator positions. Finally, the Menil hosted several lecture series from visiting curators, artists, and art historians, encouraging lively intellectual conversation to help cultivate a deeper appreciation for the art.

Despite the success of her museum, Dominique's work was not finished. In the last years of her life, she began to build small, independent galleries near the Menil campus to house single art pieces or artists, creating thoughtfully structured environments in which to view the works in perfect conditions. The first of these constructions, designed by Rezno Piano and completed in 1995, was the Cy Twombly Gallery, which, at the time, was the only permanent museum gallery devoted to one living artist.²⁸

Following this creation, Dominique commissioned a modernist chapel, designed by her son, Francois de Menil, to house two Byzantine frescoes on temporary loan from the Church of Cyprus, which she had rescued on its behalf. In correspondence with her son, she emphasized the importance of building a separate structure to preserve the "intangible element, which is the frescoes' spiritual importance and their original significance," asking him in his designs "to restore the sacred fragments to their original spiritual function."²⁹ Completed in 1997, the chapel housed the frescoes until March 2012 when they were returned to Cyprus. The museum installed Dominique's final commission, three Dan Flavin fluorescent light pieces designed specifically for Richmond Hall, a year after her death, serving as a fittingly grand conclusion to her immense contributions to the museum and the city of Houston.

With the loss of such a charismatic and visionary founder, the Menil Collection has risen to the challenge of preserving the standards of excellence set by Dominique. Muse explains, "When a founder has such a strong personality, it puts us in a unique position. It's about understanding the



John de Menil at "Through the Porthole," University of St. Thomas, 1965. Photo courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston.

aesthetics of an unusual place. You have to make sure that the people here understand the Menil aesthetic, but you don't feel that this ghost is looking over your shoulder."³⁰

Under the leadership of museum director Josef Helfenstein, the permanent collection has grown to over 17,000 works of art, and the museum continues to host unconventional and innovative productions augmented by strong scholarly research for which the Menil has built an international reputation.³¹ Even more impressively, it has done so within the bounds of a fairly modest endowment. Vance Muse acknowledges, "There's a myth of Menil wealth, down to the magma, but it's not the case. [We have] a very nice endowment, but compared to other museums, it's a fraction. It's all the more remarkable that we do what we do."³²

The Menil Collection stands today as a living testament to the great aspirations of John and Dominique de Menil, a physical legacy of beauty and complexity offered freely and eagerly to the people of Houston and the world as a space for innovation, contemplation, and spiritual awakening. In this way, it has more than fulfilled what the Menils set out to accomplish. As Dominique recounts, "[John] used to say: 'We do what others won't do.' This is not just a provocative remark. It is a whole program... It would be exhilarating if within the limited means of this foundation we would encourage ideas capable of making a breakthrough, works of a redeeming quality and far reaching consequences."³³

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