

A Surrealist Vision of the Art Museum  
Conventions of Display in the “Witnesses” Room at the Menil Collection

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Approved April 2014 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2014

## ABSTRACT

The display methods of the gallery, "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision," makes the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, unique among modern art institutions in the United States. It is also an anomaly within the Menil Collection itself. The "Witnesses" room is located near the back of the wing that houses the museum's large Surrealism collection. Both objects that the Surrealists owned and objects similar to those they collected are showcased in the gallery by means of an array of eclectically displayed ethnographic objects and other curiosities. Curated by anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, this single-room exhibition seems to recreate a surrealist collection. "Witnesses" is a permanent exhibition within the Menil's Surrealism collection and not an independent wing or gallery. All of the objects contained in "Witnesses" belonged either to the curator Edmund Carpenter or to the de Menils, whose larger collection of ethnographic objects are displayed in separate African, Oceanic, and Pacific Northwest Coast galleries within the museum.

The Surrealists often utilized a heterogeneous style of both collecting and display, which the de Menils also took up. They mixed surrealist art freely with ethnographic and other types of found objects. This style of collecting and display contrasts sharply with the modern display methods that are standard to American art museums, and which are dictated by a hierarchy based on the cultural provenance of each object as high art. This thesis examines Carpenter's "Witnesses" exhibition in the Menil Collection to establish its display as a legacy of surrealist collecting—a close connection which is not seen in the permanent collections of any other art museum in the United States. Thus, by noting and annotating the Surrealists' collecting and display methods that can be located in

Carpenter's installation of "Witnesses," I argue that Carpenter challenges many of the formal qualities typical of museum institutional practices and radically expands its very definition of what constitutes art, even in our own time.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family for their continued support and encouragement throughout this project. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people contributed to development of this thesis. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and thank my advisor and chair of this thesis, Dr. Claudia Mesch, for her central role in this project's undertaking. This thesis would not have been possible without her continued support, guidance, and knowledge. I am grateful to Dr. Thomas Swensen for his participation on my committee and his knowledge on indigenous cultures. I am also thankful to my committee member Dr. Richard Toon, whose insight on museum studies and ethnography allowed me to develop a more dynamic thesis. I am deeply appreciative of my committee members and the many hours they spent helping me to complete this project.

I am greatly indebted to the Menil Collection staff. Susan Sutton, Curatorial Assistant, and Lisa Barkley in the Menil Collection Archives, both graciously allowed me access and insight into this fascinating collection. This thesis would not have taken shape as it did without their cooperation. Dena Woodall, Associate Curator of the Prints and Drawings Department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has been a major source of encouragement and advice throughout this process, for which I am truly grateful.

I would also like to thank Julie Ashley who helped me edit this thesis. And last but not least, I am thankful to my colleagues Kinsey Redd and Heather Findling for their enthusiasm and support throughout this process.

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## INTRODUCTION

The display methods of one of its galleries, “Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision,” makes the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, unique among modern art institutions in the United States. It is also an anomaly within the Menil Collection itself. The “Witnesses” room is located near the back of the wing that houses the museum’s large Surrealism collection. Both objects that the Surrealists owned and objects similar to those they collected are showcased in the gallery by means of an array of eclectically displayed ethnographic objects and other curiosities. Curated by anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, this single-room exhibition seems to recreate a surrealist collection. “Witnesses” is a permanent exhibition within the Menil’s Surrealism collection and not an independent wing or gallery. All of the objects contained in “Witnesses” belonged either to the curator Edmund Carpenter or to the de Menils, whose larger collection of ethnographic objects are displayed in separate African, Oceanic, and Pacific Northwest Coast galleries within the museum.

The Surrealists often utilized a heterogeneous style of both collecting and display, which the de Menils also took up. They mixed surrealist art freely with ethnographic and other types of found objects, such as obsolete viewing devices, outdated pop culture, animal and mineral specimens, and so forth. This style of collecting and display contrasts sharply with the modern display methods that are standard to American art museums, and which are dictated by a hierarchy based on the cultural provenance of each object as high art. This thesis examines Carpenter’s “Witnesses” exhibition in the Menil Collection to establish its display as a legacy of surrealist collecting—a close connection which is not seen in the permanent collections of any other art museum in the United States. By



rejecting the standard definition of modern high art as being Eurocentric and produced by an individual artist, the Surrealists greatly expanded the scope of what is considered art to include found objects, technological devices, and ethnographic artifacts as major categories. Thus, by noting and annotating the Surrealists' collecting and display methods that can be located in Carpenter's installation of "Witnesses," I argue that Carpenter challenges many of the formal qualities typical of museum institutional practices and radically expands its very definition of what constitutes art, even in our own time.

In a letter to artist Roberto Matta, Carpenter described his vision for the "Witnesses" exhibition: "this crowded chamber will be designed to resemble Breton's apartment or your bedroom or any of the other Surrealists' assemblages. Not a cabinet of curiosities or *Wunderkammer*, but an assembly that expands the definition of 'natural.'"<sup>1</sup> Katharine Conley has likened this room to a pre-modern cabinet of curiosities; however, I claim that Carpenter's use of the Surrealists' approach to collecting and display makes "Witnesses" a repressed postmodern exhibition within an otherwise conventional modern art museum. Moreover, cabinets of curiosities were Renaissance-era miniature representations of the world, which was not the aim of surrealist collections or "Witnesses." Instead, surrealist display methods focus on juxtapositions and the creation of analogies between objects that the Surrealists felt aligned with their own vision of a *sur-reality*. This could happen in exhibiting or positioning their own art alongside ethnographic objects that reference visual puns, dreamlike imagery and indigenous mythologies. The Surrealists wanted to break with traditional systems of classification, and their display methods allowed them to draw new meanings and associations between a wide range of objects that were both found and created.

“Witnesses” curator Carpenter was an anthropologist interested in indigenous Northwest Coast and South Pacific Island cultures. He accrued a substantial personal collection of tribal art, which now makes up a portion of the displayed objects in “Witnesses.” Using anthropological terms, Carpenter claims that an object takes value from the culture that produces it, and that outside of this context the object loses its value. He further argues that the Surrealists and structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss believed that objects inherently contain value within themselves regardless of their context.<sup>2</sup> Surrealist ideas influenced Carpenter’s proclivity and interest in collecting and displaying art in addition to his own anthropological writings. Furthermore, his shared interest in this art movement with the de Menils is fundamental to the conception of “Witnesses.”

Published works on ethnographic Surrealism by scholars such as Louise Tythacott, Julia Kelly, and James Clifford are significant sources for my analysis of “Witnesses.” In his book, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Clifford states that “‘cultures’ are ethnographic collections.”<sup>3</sup> He continues:

...since the turn of the century objects collected from non-Western sources have been classified in two major categories: as (scientific) cultural artifacts or as (aesthetic) works of art. Other collectibles—mass produced commodities, “tourist art,” curios and so on—have been less systematically valued.”<sup>4</sup>

Clifford’s classifications are essential to understanding the intentions behind surrealist collecting, which purposely places equal value on objects from all of the categories Clifford references.

The “Witnesses” room highlights key concepts that structure the Surrealists’ methods for collecting and displaying objects, and it begs a number of questions regarding the appropriate display of ethnographic objects in the fine arts museum. An exhaustive analysis of these issues is not within the scope of this thesis; however, in the second chapter I address the significance of “Witnesses” within the current post-colonial discourse on the treatment of ethnographic objects in art institutions. The Menil’s acknowledgment of ethnographic Surrealism and surrealist methods of collection and display within its permanent Surrealism collection—as seen in “Witnesses”—distinguishes the Menil Collection from other American art institutions. Surprisingly, scholars in both art historical and anthropological discourses have largely overlooked this exhibition. The dearth of literature available on this room is puzzling given its unique display and the legacy of the Surrealism movement that it embodies. Conley is one of the few—if not the only scholar who has published works focusing specifically on the nature of this exhibition. Although her focus differs from mine, her publications are nonetheless important to my analysis of “Witnesses.” This thesis contributes to art historical discourse by exploring overlooked issues of modernist collecting and display, along with the legacies of Surrealism that are enacted in the “Witnesses” exhibition at the Menil Collection.

Understanding this distinctive collection requires a knowledge of the intentions and interests of both Edmund Carpenter, the curator of “Witnesses,” and Dominique de Menil, the founder of the Menil Collection. The Menil Collection serves as the fundamental resource for my research, and much of my understanding of this room comes directly from the museum’s object files and its archival documentary, “*Witnesses*”

*and Ted Carpenter*, which was filmed during Carpenter's installation of the exhibition. My analysis throughout this thesis demonstrates that the Surrealists are fundamental as both a precursor for the style of display in "Witnesses," and as a significant intellectual influence on how Carpenter and Dominique de Menil chose to think about objects and collecting.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I explore surrealist exhibitions and display practices as precedents to the collecting and display methods used by Carpenter in "Witnesses." The second chapter analyzes the "Witnesses" room and investigates how the personal relationships that Dominique de Menil and Carpenter had with Surrealists like Max Ernst influenced "Witnesses." In the final chapter of this thesis I compare the Menil Collection to other art museums in the United States in order to establish the uniqueness of display in "Witnesses."

### **Surrealist Methods of Display**

In Chapter One I investigate specific surrealist methods of display and analyze how they contribute to the content and display of the "Witnesses" room. The exploration of the major exhibitions held by the Surrealists is foundational to my research. The primary surrealist exhibition that I examine in this chapter is the 1936 "Surrealist Exhibition of Objects," which was held at Charles Ratton's gallery in Paris, France. This exhibition juxtaposed objects of varying origin and purpose. The Surrealists' objective behind this display was to disrupt the viewer's ideas of what art objects are meant to be. This 1936 exhibition is a primary model for Carpenter's display of objects in "Witnesses," which incorporates the earlier surrealist classification of objects and art, again with the aim of producing new associations in the viewer.

I also examine two exhibitions held at the Surrealist Gallery in 1926 and 1927, respectively: “Pictures of Man Ray and Island Objects” and “Tanguy and Objects from America.” The displays in these exhibitions evidence the Surrealists’ method of juxtaposition of ethnographic objects with “artistic” works by Man Ray and Tanguy. Both exhibitions can be seen as an attempt, through appropriation, to identify Surrealist art and artists with objects from specific indigenous cultures. My analysis demonstrates how these two exhibitions parallel Carpenter’s strategy of display in “Witnesses”; however, I argue that Carpenter’s intention is to highlight the range of objects found in a surrealist collection and the heterogeneous nature of its display. Carpenter’s exhibition emphasizes the Surrealists’ radical expansion of art that questions and destabilizes the standard methods of categorization and display prevalent in Western art museums.

A 1933 exhibition at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, France, displayed some of the estimated 3,500 objects, 6,000 photographs, and 2,000 recordings accumulated by the Dakar-Djibouti Mission that lasted from 1931-33. I explore Carpenter’s ideas on ethnography to determine the degree of influence of the Surrealist Michel Leiris and others on the conception of “Witnesses.” Leiris, an ethnographer with ties to Surrealism, participated in the Dakar-Djibouti expedition and recorded his highly subjective language of his fieldwork and findings; this subjectivity is a rejection of the “scientific” language of ethnography as it is usually practiced. His experiences from this mission bear resemblance to those documented by Carpenter who, as an anthropologist, also often lived among indigenous people while conducting fieldwork. Publications by Carpenter, including *Patterns that Connect*, *Eskimo Realities*, and *Oh, What a Blow the*

*Phantom Gave Me!*, as well as those by Harald Prins, provide detailed information on Carpenter's views and on his experiences as an anthropologist.

French colonialism is a major issue in surrealist exhibitions; it plays a significant role in the Dakar-Djibouti Mission exhibition and in the Surrealists' critical "The Anti-Imperial Exhibition: The Truth about Colonies." Although the Surrealists opposed French imperialism, only colonialism made many of the ethnographic objects in their collections available to them. Additionally, surrealist display methods completely disregard the original culture and intended function of indigenous objects. Carpenter follows the same method of display in "Witnesses"; however, he has somewhat acknowledged the origins of the objects and ironies of their availability in his installation.

In addition to surrealist exhibitions, the personal collections amassed by Surrealist artists are fundamental to Carpenter's exhibition at the Menil. In particular, the collections of André Breton and Max Ernst are the focus of my discussion. Breton's prominent status, along with his collection, and Ernst's close personal relationship with the de Menils, make these two collections especially important to the conception of the "Witnesses" room and its placement within the museum. Surrealist publications, such as Georges Bataille's *Documents*, are another source for the methods the Surrealists used to convey their interest in ethnographic objects. *Documents* often juxtaposes images of high art with low-brow imagery, which is a strategy similar to Carpenter's display of European and modern art alongside ethnographic and found objects in "Witnesses."

André Breton's 1936 essay, "Crisis of the Object"—which was published the same year as the aforementioned "Surrealist Exhibition of Objects"—is an essential publication to this thesis. In his essay Breton argues for a new system of classification

that allows the viewer to ascribe different meanings and irrational possibilities to objects. Breton's views concerning the decontextualization of objects is evidenced throughout Carpenter's display in "Witnesses." There are no wall labels or traditional categorizations of objects in this room. Instead, the viewer is meant to experience the objects based on juxtapositions and analogies that are produced by their heterogeneous display.

### **The Menil Collection and "Witnesses"**

Chapter Two analyzes the formal elements in both the "Witnesses" exhibition and the larger Menil Collection. The chapter discusses that although the Menil Collection is a modern institution that generally separates ethnographic and modern art into separate galleries, "Witnesses" is very unlike the rest of the museum. In its atypical heterogeneous display, "Witnesses" evidences not a modernist view of the art object, but rather a postmodern one. Further, my analysis shows that surrealist thought is fundamental to much of the de Menils' collection and also to the display of "Witnesses." In this chapter I consider Carpenter's work as an anthropologist, his relationship with the de Menils, and how these experiences influenced his vision for "Witnesses." Although this exhibition was installed twelve years after the Menil Collection became public, it establishes a strong, though not consistent, connection between the environment of this museum and surrealist methods of collection and display that are unique to modern art museum practices.

John and Dominique de Menils' legacy of art patronage in Houston, Texas extends beyond the Menil Collection. Originally from Paris, France, the couple moved to Houston in the 1940s and throughout their lives remained actively involved with collecting and with public education about visual art. They participated in provocative

exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum; they founded the art history department at St. Thomas University and the Institute for the Arts at Rice University. In this chapter I explore Dominique de Menil's heterogeneous collecting interests in Surrealism and ethnography, the collecting activities of the surrealist movement that were most relevant to her, and how these concerns influenced her collection. The de Menils' personal collection was dominated by modern art and ethnographic objects that the couple felt held sacred qualities. The eclectic installation of these objects throughout their home reflects surrealist collecting practices along with their display methods.

The de Menils were close friends with surrealist artist and collector Max Ernst. The couple avidly collected his work, and today his art is prominently displayed in the Surrealism galleries and also in the "Witnesses" exhibition at the Menil. Like Ernst and other Surrealist collectors, the de Menils acquired many ethnographic objects, and a large portion of the Menil Collection consists of different galleries that showcase their extensive collections of African, Oceanic, and Northwest Coastal artifacts. Ernst collected objects from Native Americans of the Northwest Coast and of the Southwest, and his personal collection can be seen as a precedent to "Witnesses." The Canadian 1979 exhibition catalogue, *Max Ernst: From the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Ernst* from the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, highlights Ernst's own work and personal collection of ethnographic objects, which he displayed together at his home in Sedona, Arizona.

In the book *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display*, Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke describe the



Menil Collection's approach to display as largely decontextualized and aesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

Although the overall environment of the museum deviates from traditional American art institutions because of "Witnesses," the Menil Collection still generally separates ethnographic objects from modern and European art. The galleries displaying the museum's collections of ethnographic objects let in natural sunlight, include enclosed gardens, and place many of the objects behind glass vitrines. Modern and contemporary artworks, on the other hand, are more conventionally presented in completely separate galleries.

"Witnesses" is understood to be part of the museum's Surrealism collection. It is physically separated from the collections of ethnographic objects and addresses a significant aspect of the Surrealism movement that other modern museums in the United States have generally neglected. The room holds over one hundred objects from Africa, the Pacific Northwest Coast, Islands of the South Pacific, and pre-Columbian Central and South America, as well as found objects, curiosities, and European and modern art.<sup>6</sup> All of the objects contained in "Witnesses" were previously owned by the Surrealists, or, are similar to the types of objects displayed in their collections. Among these indigenous artifacts are kachina dolls from Southwest Hopi and Zuni tribes as well as transformation masks from the Pacific Northwest Coast.

The second chapter otherwise closely examines the unique installation of and juxtapositions of the "Witnesses" gallery. There are no wall or object labels, only numbered medallions that correspond to numbers in an optional information pamphlet available at the entrance. The postmodern nature of "Witnesses" is inconsistent with modern museum display practices that are to be found in the other Menil Collection

galleries. “Witnesses” is postmodern because it juxtaposes modern art and ethnographic artifacts in an aesthetic manner that gives equal value to each object.

The Menil Collection Archives and object files provide important information on the conception of “Witnesses” and the objects displayed in it. This includes correspondence from Carpenter, object provenance, and a documentary film produced during the exhibition’s installation. In this chapter I also address problems highlighted by the display of ethnographic objects in surrealist collections like “Witnesses.” These problems include the issue of restitution for objects acquired through colonialism; of what constitutes an appropriate display of indigenous objects in Western art institutions; and the Surrealists’ involvement with French imperialism. In response to these concerns, I point out that the Menil Collection can utilize “Witnesses” as a catalyst to acknowledge such ethical issues concerning ethnographic objects and colonialism.

### **American Art Museums**

In Chapter Three I discuss how other American art museums’ displays of their permanent collections compare to that of “Witnesses.” The institutions I examine include the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). My examination of these four art institutions points out that while other museums in the United States may possess permanent collections of surrealist art or ethnographic objects—or even both—all of these other art museums intentionally separate their collections based on geographic origin.

Additionally, these museums choose to display Western art in a manner different than their displays of indigenous objects. Western art is presented in a modernist style

traditional of many art museums. Ethnographic objects, on the other hand, are often treated more as artifacts and are largely displayed behind glass vitrines. The type of information provided for ethnographic objects varies significantly from that provided for modern and European art. Object labels for Western works of art specify a particular artist and title, whereas labels for indigenous artifacts state a culture and the type of object. Galleries displaying indigenous objects often include additional wall and object labels that provide more comprehensive information on the cultures and objects in the collection. The Menil Collection also separates its vast ethnographic collections from European and modern art. In this way, “Witnesses” is an installation that is contradictory to the rest of the Menil museum.

In this final chapter I investigate the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston—an institution that the de Menils had close ties with—and discuss how this museum compares to the Menil Collection in terms of its display. Surrealist art at the MFAH is displayed in the Audrey Jones Beck building among its vast permanent collection of European art. Ethnographic objects, some of which were gifted to the museum by the de Menils or are on loan from the Menil Collection, are showcased in galleries in the Caroline Wiess Law building. As in all of the museums I examine in this chapter, the MFAH displays Western art traditionally and ethnographic objects as artifacts.

Like the Menil Collection, the Art Institute of Chicago has one of the largest public collections of surrealist art in the United States: the Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection. Also like the Menil, the Bergman Collection was initially a private collection and was later placed into a public institution. While both collections privately resembled the display of surrealist collections, only the Menil Collection recognizes this

heterogeneous style in a public institution; the Bergman Collection as seen at the AIC represents a secular display of surrealist art, and includes only the modern and surrealist art from their private collection. Further, the Bergman Collection is displayed in the Modern Art wing at the AIC, whereas the museum's permanent collections of ethnographic objects are located in separate galleries on a different level of the building.

In this chapter I also discuss the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, both preeminent American art museums in New York City. The permanent collections of ethnographic objects at the Met were originally a part of the Museum of Primitive Art's collection, with which John de Menil was closely aligned with during the 1960s. The Met more closely resembles the Menil Collection in the diverse nature of its collections; however, its display is very different. Like the Menil, the Met has significant, but separate, modern art and ethnographic collections. The de Menils held the Museum of Modern Art in high regard, and gifted that museum with significant works of art from their personal collection. In past temporary exhibitions, MoMA has acknowledged heterogeneous display methods that mix ethnographic objects and modern art; however, the permanent collection at MoMA focuses only on modern Western works of art.

In his interview with Harald Prins, Carpenter declares that his vision for the "Witnesses" exhibition was to have objects and art "all crowded together, all mixed in, and with medicine bundles and secret boxes and things, and simply call the whole display *Witnesses*."<sup>7</sup> This room is a direct recreation of a surrealist display, and it demonstrates Surrealist philosophy and ideology as a major aspect of the de Menils' personal collecting and display style. The display in "Witnesses" is unlike any other U.S. public Surrealism collection within an art museum; it makes the Menil Collection truly unique.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Roberto Matta from Edmund Carpenter dated June 12, 1998. Courtesy of the Menil Collection Archives.

<sup>2</sup> “Witnesses” *With Ted Carpenter: November 16-17, 2000*. Houston, Texas: Menil Collection Archives, 2000. DVD.

<sup>3</sup> James Clifford, “On Art and Collecting” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 230.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford, “On Art and Collecting,” 222-223.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke, eds., *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 252.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Elliot and Miranda Lash. *The Menil Collection: Art Spaces*. (London: Scala Publishers Ltd., 2007), 32.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Carpenter, *Interview with Edmund Carpenter* interview by Harald E.L. Prins, Text and Tape Recording (New York City, December 7, 1998), 2.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE SURREALIST LEGACY OF “WITNESSES”

The collection and display methods used by the Surrealists in Paris during the 1920-30s formed a precedent to the permanent exhibition “Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision” at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas. In this chapter, I explore early surrealist exhibitions and other manifestations that served Edmund Carpenter as sources for the methods he used in curating the “Witnesses” room. In this chapter I address five major exhibitions that I find to be foundational to the Surrealist movement: “Pictures of Man Ray and Island Objects” (1926), “Tanguy and Objects from America” (1927), “The Anti-Imperial Exhibition: The Truth about Colonies” (1931), the exhibition of the findings from the Mission Dakar-Djibouti at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro or the Trocadéro Museum (1933), and, finally, the “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” (1936). I also look at other modes of surrealist artistic production in which collection and display play a dominant role, such as the Surrealist publication *Documents* and the personal collections held by André Breton and Max Ernst. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of the surrealist theory of the object that also impacted Edmund Carpenter's thinking and planning of the “Witnesses” room; specifically, I look at André Breton’s theory of the object in his 1936 essay, “Crisis of the Object.” While the primary purpose of each of these Surrealist exhibitions and manifestations might vary, all are based upon surrealist theories of the object developed by Breton and others, and also incorporate objects and address themes or methods—such as juxtaposition and shock—that were important to the Surrealists and were also taken up by Edmund Carpenter in the “Witnesses” room. By incorporating the themes and ideas set forth by the Surrealists,

Carpenter destabilizes the usual functions and procedures of the modern art institution. Like the Surrealists, Carpenter demands a radical reevaluation of objects and of our understanding of art itself in the “Witnesses” exhibition.

### **The “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects”**

One of the most significant exhibitions held by the Surrealists was the 1936 “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” in Charles Ratton’s gallery in Paris, France. Ratton’s exhibition displayed objects of varying origin and purpose side by side: surrealist and cubist artworks, Duchampian readymades, animal and mineral specimens, mathematical objects, and various curiosities, as well as ethnographic objects from Oceania and the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Behind the seemingly random presentation of this exhibition the Surrealists intended to provide an experience that would disrupt the viewer’s idea of what constitutes an “art object.” This exhibition would eventually serve as a model for Edmund Carpenter’s display of objects in “Witnesses.”

Charles Ratton was the foremost dealer of “primitive” objects in Paris by the mid-1930s. Held at Ratton’s gallery for one week in May of 1936, the “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” evoked a cabinet of curiosities in its assortment of objects from around the world; it also used glass vitrines like those at the Trocadéro Ethnography Museum to display many of the exhibited objects. One likely goal of this exhibition was to disrupt the viewer’s state of consciousness in order to force a reassessment of the traditional European classification of objects.

The large array of objects displayed together makes this exhibition an important example of surrealist display and a precursor to “Witnesses.” Janine Mileaf states that “the Ratton exhibition...developed the method of juxtaposition as an exhibition

strategy”;<sup>2</sup> for instance, the exhibition showcased indigenous masks from New Guinea alongside Meret Oppenheim’s famous assisted readymade, *Breakfast in Fur*.<sup>3</sup> In juxtaposing ethnographic objects with their own art the Surrealists sought to identify their work and image with the “savage,” as well as to appropriate these objects as surrealist. A method prominent in the Ratton gallery exhibition, the Surrealists continued to use juxtaposition in their displays and exhibitions. The 1936 “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” received greater acceptance than previous surrealist exhibitions and produced subsequent related exhibitions in London and New York, in 1936 and 1937, respectively. The Surrealists considered this a success and marked the exhibition as a turning point for the movement to become more mainstream.<sup>4</sup>

While it is certainly not the only, or even the first, example of heterogeneous collections and their display by the Surrealists, the significance of such a broad scope of presented objects made the 1936 “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” widely influential and well known. Edmund Carpenter was well versed in Surrealist display methods and looked to their collections and exhibitions throughout his career as an anthropologist and collector of indigenous artifacts. In “Witnesses” Carpenter follows the structure of the 1936 “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” by incorporating many different classifications of objects, including a Pacific Northwest Coast hunter’s hat produced by the Alaskan Aleut, a Mickey Mouse kachina doll from the Hopi in Arizona, Polynesian flutes and other musical instruments, modern film apparatuses, animal and mineral specimens, and paintings by Max Ernst, among many other objects.



## The Surrealist Gallery

Another Parisian venue, the *Galerie Surréaliste*, held two critical Surrealist exhibitions: “Pictures of Man Ray and Island Objects” and “Tanguy and Objects from America,” in 1926 and 1927, respectively. Sophie Leclercq argues that such exhibitions were “a means of defining Surrealism through these objects and of forging its identity in particular upon them.”<sup>5</sup> In these two exhibitions, the Surrealists’ juxtaposition of ethnographic objects with works by Man Ray and Tanguy again epitomized the movement’s attempt, through appropriation, to identify their art with objects from cultures that they considered “primitive” in the quest for an alternative reality. Edmund Carpenter’s strategy for “Witnesses” parallels Tanguy’s and Man Ray’s in his aim to recreate the structure of a surrealist display of objects. However, rather than focusing on comparing surrealist art to ethnographic objects, Carpenter’s intent is to showcase the range of objects found in a surrealist collection using a heterogeneous method of installation.

Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky) moved to Paris from the United States in 1921 and became associated with the Dada movement until its dissolution in 1923. Later, after the publication of André Breton’s 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism* he began to follow the Surrealism movement. Through his blurring the line between art and ethnography, many of the themes present in Man Ray’s art prior to his involvement in the Surrealist movement, including his photography of African objects, already fit into the movement’s ideology.

It was during this time that the Surrealists began turning away from African art because they felt it had become too civilized and commercial. Their interest then shifted

toward cultures from Oceania and the Pacific Northwest Coast. Wendy Grossman states that the 1926 Man Ray exhibition, “Tableaux de Man Ray et objets des îles,” the inaugural exhibition of the *Galerie Surréaliste*, “aimed to situate the artist’s work firmly within the Surrealist predilection for Oceanic art.”<sup>6</sup> Organized primarily by André Breton and the gallery director Jacques Taul, the exhibition displayed twenty-four of Man Ray’s works side by side with over sixty Indonesian and Pacific Island sculptures that members of the Surrealist circle lent to the gallery specifically for the exhibition.<sup>7</sup> This juxtaposition within Man Ray’s work mirrors that used in the display for the “Pictures of Man Ray and Island Objects” exhibition. The contradiction between “West” and “non-West,” and the decontextualized presentation of Oceanic objects alongside Man Ray’s uncanny imagery, demonstrates the Surrealists’ intention to create an alternate reality through such disruptive pairings.

Sophie Leclercq brings attention to the exhibition catalogue for “Tableaux de Man Ray et objets des îles.” She argues that while images of the Oceanic objects and photographs taken by Man Ray fill the catalogue, the titles of these objects were “reworked by the Surrealists—such as “Easter Island, the Athens of Oceania”—which testifies to their will to substitute these objects for the classical heritage of the West as well as to sift out new canons and new classics.”<sup>8</sup> The Surrealists commonly used this practice in their writings on art and objects. In her essay “Man Ray’s Lost and Found Photographs: Arts of the Americas in Context,” Wendy Grossman notes that in the 1926 exhibition, “the interplay between words and imagery throughout the catalogue inflects new (Surrealist) meanings into the photographs and undermines any attempt to read them as documentary representations of reality.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, even the exhibition catalogue

demonstrates the Surrealists' attempt to decontextualize and remake traditional classifications of art objects.

Further, Leclercq discusses how the Surrealists' "comments legitimated the presentation of American objects by relating them to realms privileged by Surrealism."<sup>10</sup> In the exhibition featuring Man Ray's work, not only did Surrealists associate their work with "savage" art, but they also appropriated these indigenous objects as a means to define Surrealism. In her book, *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens*, Wendy Grossman explains how many of Man Ray's photographic images during the 1920-30s reference what James Clifford calls "ethnographic Surrealism."<sup>11</sup> Man Ray produced photographs of the ethnographic artifacts in his exhibition at the Surrealist Gallery that "illustrate how the medium was used to Surrealist ends simultaneously to disrupt, exploit, and subvert prevailing notions of its own veracity and are instructive for understanding the artist's subsequent practice photographing African objects."<sup>12</sup> Man Ray's photographs decontextualize the exhibition's indigenous artifacts in a setting that invokes the mystical and the uncanny. Along with the images' accompanying texts, these photographs align with Surrealists' interests in dreams and alternate realities.<sup>13</sup> Man Ray's exhibition imagery challenge photography's objectivity and facilitated the Surrealists' appropriation of ethnographic artifacts.<sup>14</sup> An example of this is Man Ray's 1936 photograph, *The Moon Rises Over the Island of Nias*. This image stages a male ancestor spirit figure from Nias Island in Indonesia—owned by Breton—among a dream-like moonlit landscape; it is also the cover image for the exhibition's catalogue.

The following year, in 1927, the Surrealist Gallery presented the "Yves Tanguy and Objects from America" exhibition. This show displayed twenty-three works by Yves

Tanguy as well as American art including pre-Columbian and modern artifacts from British Columbia. The Surrealists often paralleled these types of indigenous American objects with their own art through their concern for dreams and the unconscious. In *Yves Tanguy and Surrealism*, Karin Von Maur states, “Tanguy’s exhibition in 1927, which was heavily directed by André Breton, marked a turning point in Tanguy’s work which would focus on dream landscape, titles that evoked otherworldly messages and ghostly imagery.”<sup>15</sup> The themes Von Maur references in Tanguy’s art are also prominent in the works of many other Surrealists, such as Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst, and greatly influenced later generations of Surrealists as well as collectors of indigenous artifacts, including Edmund Carpenter. These two early surrealist exhibitions shaped the methods of display used in subsequent Surrealist exhibitions, including the 1936 “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” and “Witnesses.”

In his 1973 book regarding his fieldwork in Canada, *Eskimo Realities*, Edmund Carpenter discusses how the Aivilik Inuit community is largely collective; their visual imagery often portrays both conscious and unconscious states of being. Carpenter claims, “in contrast to images relating to the outer world of the hunt, images belonging to the inner world of dreams and séances are surrealistic.”<sup>16</sup> Carpenter uses the old language “Eskimo” to denote these Alaskan native people. This term is problematic but demonstrates how anthropologists commonly used colonial language during his time. The notion of the unconscious and of alternative realities is a major magnet for the Surrealist interest in objects from specific Native American cultures. These ideas not only influenced the outcome of their own art but also dictated many of the objects the

Surrealists chose to collect and exhibit, which would later impact Edmund Carpenter's exhibition "Witnesses."

### **The Dakar-Djibouti Mission**

Another important exhibition, held at the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro* in Paris, France, from June 2 - October 29, 1933, displayed some of the estimated 3,500 objects, 6,000 photographs, and 2,000 recordings accumulated by the "Dakar-Djibouti Mission." Led by anthropologist Marcel Griaule, funded partially by the French government, and initiated by the Trocadéro, the Dakar-Djibouti mission lasted from 1931-33. One of the primary objectives was to gather material and data for the museum by documenting African cultures and acquiring artifacts to fill in the gaps of the Trocadéro's collection.

Julia Kelly claims that the mission statement for the expedition, "Summary Instructions for Collectors of Ethnographic Objects," "was one of the few explicit extended considerations of what we might now term 'material culture,' ...the exhibition taking up artifacts and manufactured objects as a particular category of thing, whose collection and classification might play a central role in the ethnographic construction of the cultures in question."<sup>17</sup> From a colonial perspective, the goal of this mission encompassed both creating a more complete collection for the Trocadéro Ethnography Museum, and surveying different cultures and material objects more comprehensively. Unlike previous ethnographic research that focused mostly on "othered" cultures that aligned with popular Western aesthetics, the Dakar-Djibouti mission sought out mundane and obscure objects, such as those used in Dogon rituals. Like the ethnographers who participated in this mission, the Surrealists appreciated found objects and displayed them

in their own collections. Therefore, these types of objects also make up a significant portion of Carpenter's "Witnesses" installation.

The Dakar-Djibouti exhibition at the Trocadéro displayed objects acquired during the expedition in vitrines; photographs taken during the mission, placed alongside the vitrines, showed the artifacts being used for their original intended purposes. Staged by Michel Leiris, George Henri Rivière, and other ethnographers, most of the photographic documentation brought back from this mission did not accurately portray the cultures they purported to represent. A documentary photograph taken during the expedition depicts six Dogon men standing in a row and wearing masks reserved for ceremonies and rituals—completely out of context from their intended purpose. The ethnographers sought to investigate all aspects of the indigenous cultures they encountered; however, the mission's objective to acquire objects for the Trocadéro often meant that artifacts were taken out of context and further examined as curiosities.

During his participation in the Dakar-Djibouti mission in Africa, Michel Leiris, an ethnographer who had ties to the Surrealism movement, became aware of the subjective nature of ethnography and immersion into different cultures. His views on ethnography, and his idea that exploring different cultures was a personal experience, led to the subjective nature of his findings. In his 1934 text *L'Afrique fantôme* Leiris utilizes a literary style similar to surrealist texts on the *flâneur* to document his own experiences and feelings during the African expedition, along with his dismay about the methods missionaries had used to obtain artifacts. Ian Walker has commented on Leiris's response to the Dakar-Djibouti mission in his essay, "Phantom Africa: Photography between Surrealism and Ethnography." Walker describes the subjective nature of Griaule's

documentary photographs that Leiris associated with his own personal fetishes and fantasies. Leiris's documentation on the Dogon '*Masque "jeune fille"*' ranges from objective scientific data to his own subjective encounter and sexual feelings about the mask.<sup>18</sup> Tythacott notes that in Leiris's writings "we can trace an encounter with the primitive that shifts from Surrealist idealized fantasy to harsh ethnographic reality," and further suggests that his records from the African expedition incorporate themes of sexual fantasy, childhood, dreams, and the insane—all central to the Surrealism movement.<sup>19</sup> Leiris rejected the idea that anthropological fieldwork is purely objective. Instead, his Dakar-Djibouti mission findings read like a personal diary and focus just as much on his objective study of African cultures as they do on his personal emotions and experiences. In his 1928 novel *Nadja*, André Breton catalogues his experiences while wandering the streets of Paris. Much like Leiris, Breton used documentary photographs alongside his Surrealist text to produce new and subjective meanings to seemingly objective images of the city.

This ethnographic experience links Michel Leiris to Edmund Carpenter who, as an anthropologist, lived among various indigenous cultures while studying the everyday lives of their people. Once Carpenter began engaging with these foreign cultures, he became more conscious of communication-related problems and the ramifications of the presence of Western technology on remote indigenous societies. Carpenter's awareness grew especially prominent from 1969-70, during his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, where he investigated the consequences of introducing photography and film to isolated indigenous tribes. Immersing himself in the cultural life of these Papua tribes, Carpenter began to notice the negative cultural effects of exposure to Western technology, which

Herald Prins referred to as a “cultural upheaval.”<sup>20</sup> Carpenter was hired to advise the Australian government on how to use modern media to reach the isolated tribes of Papua New Guinea; however, Carpenter began to notice that sacred traditions and whole cultures were being compromised—for instance, the Middle Sepik village of Kandangan attempted to replace their mandatory sacred initiation ceremony with a film of the ritual. Additionally, Carpenter realized that the Australian government could try to use this technology to control indigenous people.<sup>21</sup> In his awareness and acknowledgment of the ethical dilemmas that can arise in the course of government-funded ethnographic and anthropologic fieldwork, Carpenter’s experience then parallels that of Leiris.

Julia Kelly argues that “for the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, the object took on the function of an emphatically italicized ‘*witness*’ where the object as a witness was not only a passive subject—studied, inventoried, photographed, and collected—it could also *look back* at the ethnographer-collector.”<sup>22</sup> Many of the tribal artifacts displayed in the “Witnesses” gallery are understood by indigenous people to represent the spirits of ancestors and deities. Carpenter acknowledges the significance and active participation of these artifacts in his exhibition by explicitly addressing this function in its title. In a Menil Collection film documenting the installation of the “Witnesses” gallery, Carpenter discusses the spirits thought to be present in many of the exhibition’s objects. He describes how the Papua New Guinea artifact *Bird in Flight*—whose spirit is believed to come to life and fly away during sacred rituals—would be suspended from the gallery’s ceiling and positioned to face the window.<sup>23</sup> The spirits in many of these objects are called forth by music produced with instruments that are also contained in the exhibition.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Carpenter’s deliberate incorporation of indigenous artifacts in



the “Witnesses” display highlights the conflicts that surround Western art collections and the objects’ ability to witness their appropriation and displacement.

In his essay “Upside Down: Arctic Realities and Indigenous Art,” Harald Prins reflects on how Carpenter came to be fascinated with primitive art in the 1950s while carrying out anthropological fieldwork in Nunavut, Canada. Carpenter felt drawn to what he considered spiritual qualities inherent to the objects of these cultures. Prins claims that this experience eventually affected the manifestation of Carpenter’s 2008 Paris exhibition of these Canadian cultures, “Upside Down”—as well as the installation of his earlier permanent exhibition at the Menil Collection in 1999, “Witnesses.”<sup>25</sup> The mystical presence of the “object as witness,” which Carpenter incorporates into his “Witnesses” exhibition, parallels the Surrealists’ interest in the spiritual qualities of indigenous cultures.<sup>26</sup>

Prins states that “Carpenter realized his vision of how traditional indigenous Arctic art should be displayed [in the “Upside Down” exhibition], emphasizing direct experience with the art and the environment that inspired it.”<sup>27</sup> While conducting anthropological fieldwork in the Arctic, Carpenter experienced the environment’s harsh and disorientating capabilities, its effect on every aspect of daily life, and its significance to the types of artifacts produced by the indigenous cultures of the region. Unlike modern Western art and objects that take on very different forms and functions, many of the practical and artistic artifacts produced by indigenous Arctic cultures are analogous with one another.

The “Upside Down” exhibition gallery space was physically manipulated to eliminate any determinate wall edges; additionally, neon lights produced reflections and

nature sounds were played on speakers as a way to disorient the viewer and echo the Arctic's environment. Carpenter's objective to produce a more engaging exhibition space is also apparent in his earlier installation of "Witnesses." The decontextualized nature of display in the "Witnesses" gallery allows the viewer to construct individual associations and meanings between the objects in the room. Much like Leiris, Carpenter was affected by his personal and subjective experiences with the indigenous cultures he studied, and this concept is central to the purpose and presentation of the displayed objects and artifacts in the "Witnesses" room.

### **"The Truth About the Colonies"**

*L'Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris* (1931), like the Dakar-Djibouti mission and exhibition, has strong ties to the French colonialism of the early twentieth century. Organized by the French government, this exhibition aimed to earn the general population's approval of France's colonialist expansion into territories around the world. Much of the appeal of this exhibition came from French culture's obsession with exotic and primitive objects in Paris at the time. Like surrealist anti-colonial sentiment, ethnography in France during the 1920s and early 1930s was somewhat contradictory. In many ways, ethnography aligned with, and was only possible because of, the colonial interests of the time; however, ethnographers had other motives, which included focusing on the material culture of indigenous cultures. For example, the Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum organized an exhibition contemporaneous with the Colonial Exhibition that also highlighted colonial objects. Due to the anti-colonialist leanings of some of the organizers for the Trocadéro exhibition, such as Paul Rivet and Michel Leiris, this

exhibition differed from the Colonial Exhibition in its intended focus on the objects themselves.

A second 1931 exhibition was expressly anti-colonial: “*La Vérité sur les colonies*,” organized by the Surrealists as a protest against the French International Colonial Exhibition. A group comprised of André Breton, Paul Éluard, Louis Aragon, René Crevel, René Char, Benjamin Péret and Yves Tanguy, “set out to attack colonialism in the guise of Western missionaries imposing their religious beliefs on non-western cultures.”<sup>28</sup> Along with propaganda campaigns and demonstrations, this exhibition was another one of the ways that the Surrealists collaborated with the French Communist Party (PCF) to spread anti-colonial sentiment through a variety of media.<sup>29</sup> The anti-colonial exhibition opened to the public on September 19, 1931, in the Soviet Pavilion originally built for the 1925 *Exposition des arts décoratifs*.

Three distinct segments comprised the anti-colonial exhibition. The first floor provided a general informational display exposing the atrocities of colonialism and the Colonial Exhibition. The second floor included two separate displays, one presenting indigenous objects and the other concerning the USSR.<sup>30</sup> Surrealists Éluard, Aragon and Tanguy curated the display of ethnographic objects, titled “Cultural Problems.” This portion of the exhibition most closely relates to other Surrealist exhibitions. Here, the curators showcased indigenous objects and compared them to Western art. Divided into different categories for African, American, and Oceanic artifacts, the ethnographic objects in this display appeared alongside texts—such as Karl Marx’s sentiment that “a people that oppresses others cannot be free”—that critiqued the process of colonialism by describing how missionaries had mistreated the objects and the people from these

cultures.<sup>31</sup> A sub-section titled “European Fetishes” presented objects, texts, and photographs highlighting this mistreatment—including photographs of exploited indigenous workers and Christian propaganda tools with their adaptations for different races.<sup>32</sup> Mileaf describes the display as exhibiting “a ‘black’ Madonna with a half-nude dancing figure. Between the Virgin and the whore stood an alms begging figure...this ironic comparison mocks the European custom of translating Christian objects of worship into the racial types of tribal people, and suggests that money drives the dissemination of religious beliefs.”<sup>33</sup>

While the Colonial Exhibition aimed to recreate certain cultures, the surrealist exhibition wanted to show an alternative view of colonial life through this juxtaposition of objects.<sup>34</sup> Although the heterogeneous placement of art and objects in the anti-colonial exhibition was visually similar to earlier surrealist display methods, the strong political agenda does not correlate closely to other Surrealist exhibitions in which the intended focus was the appropriation of indigenous objects as a means to redefine European hierarchal codes. Many Surrealist exhibitions were not overtly political in nature—such as the aforementioned Man Ray and Yves Tanguy exhibitions held at the Surrealist Gallery—thus highlighting inconsistencies with the Surrealists’ platform against colonialism in the “The Truth About the Colonies” exhibition. In this protest exhibition, the Surrealists criticize French ethnographic practices that misappropriate indigenous artifacts; however, the Surrealists’ collecting and display methods in other exhibitions demonstrate their own entanglement in French Imperialism. André Breton and Paul Éluard, both prominent Surrealist organizers and contributors to the anti-colonial

exhibition, were also collectors and dealers of these same types of colonial objects. Julia Kelly writes:

Éluard and Breton took full advantage of the increased public interest in African, Oceanic, pre-Columbian and Northwest Coast American objects by timing the sale of their collections at the Hotel Druout for July 1931, coinciding, in fact, with the opening of the ‘counter-colonial’ display.<sup>35</sup>

The Surrealists often sold their collections of ethnographic artifacts in times of financial hardship; therefore, the Surrealists who were partaking in colonial activities and profiting from it further emphasize the contradictions and ethical issues raised by surrealist collecting methods.

French colonialism was central to both the Dakar-Djibouti expedition as well as the critical “The Anti-Imperial Exhibition: The Truth about Colonies.” The Surrealists adamantly opposed colonialism, even though its practice made many of the ethnographic objects they collected available to them. Furthermore, they often displayed these objects without regard or respect for their originally intended purposes. Carpenter follows the same method of display in “Witnesses”; however, he has somewhat acknowledged both the origins of the displayed objects and the ironies of their availability. For instance, in her essay, “What Makes a Collection Surrealist: Twentieth-Century Cabinets of Curiosity in Paris and Houston,” Katharine Conley points out that in “Witnesses” Carpenter used sand to partially cover a set of Australian Churinga stones that are only meant to be seen during sacred rituals.<sup>36</sup>

The display in the “Witnesses” gallery positions four ancestors in an assembly—alluding to their increasing power—as if they had just been uncovered.<sup>37</sup> The Menil Archives documentary on the installation of “Witnesses” shadows Carpenter as he

arranges these Churinga stones within the exhibition. He discusses how the stones are considered spiritual representations of ancestors and are only meant to be visible during sacred rituals. His acknowledgment of the artifacts' spiritual presence, and his conscious naming of the exhibition, demonstrates that Carpenter was trying to distance himself from simple appropriation that is characteristic of surrealist collections.

### **Surrealist Collections**

Exhibitions were not the only means of display where the Surrealists mixed their own art with indigenous objects. Many Surrealists collected and displayed these same artifacts in their own homes. The objects and artworks that constituted the personal collections of such artists as André Breton and Max Ernst, and the heterogeneous manner in which these objects were displayed, demonstrate how Edmund Carpenter's exhibition "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision" is a legacy of surrealist collecting and display methods. Although Carpenter was critical of traditional collecting in the way the Surrealists practiced it—which is made clear by his deliberate use of the word "witnesses"—this exhibition emphasizes their collection and display methods of tribal artifacts.

Arguably André Breton accrued the most important personal collection within the surrealist circle. During his lifetime he displayed it in his apartment at 42 rue Fontaine in Paris, France. Katharine Conley argues that Breton was an avid collector of artifacts and art whose "collection's juxtapositions and recontextualizations allowed for flourishes of automatic expression."<sup>38</sup> In his 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton defines Surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought.

Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”<sup>39</sup> Breton’s heterogeneous display of objects and art can be seen as an attempt to break free from traditional classifications in order to expand and redefine what constitutes an art object.

Breton’s extensive collection included indigenous artifacts from African, Oceanic and Native American cultures, photographs, books, found objects, as well as popular culture, modern art, and animal and mineral specimens, among other curiosities.<sup>40</sup> He exhibited surrealist artworks by Joan Miró, Francis Picabia, Roberto Matta, Giorgio de Chirico, and René Magritte, including collaborative exquisite corpse drawings and Man Ray’s *Danger/Dancer*.<sup>41</sup> Breton displayed his collection throughout his apartment in an eclectic manner that physically covered most of its walls, floor space, tables, shelves, and bookcases. A photograph of a wall in Breton’s apartment from 1960 shows an array of kachina dolls hanging in three rows among assorted indigenous masks and modern paintings; additional objects in his collection cover a table in front of this display.<sup>42</sup> Throughout his apartment, artworks, indigenous masks and larger artifacts hung on walls, books and statues stood on bookshelves, figurines and framed photographs were placed on tables, and other small trinkets filled open boxes and containers.

Like Carpenter’s “Witnesses” exhibition, many of the indigenous artifacts collected by Breton are thought to represent the spirits of ancestors and deities and constitute a living presence. Breton’s placement of these artifacts throughout his entire apartment—whether hanging on walls, or standing on tables, bookshelves or the floor—made them an active part of the viewer’s personal space. Additionally, Breton’s cluttered boxes of curiosities and small objects resemble Dominique de Menil’s *Louis XV*

*Provincial Display Table* in the “Witnesses” gallery—a treasure chest of personal sundry items that she assembled for her bedroom in Houston, Texas. The numerous affinities between the arrangement and types of objects in Breton’s display at home and in Carpenter’s exhibition in the Menil Collection exemplify how this collection is a significant precursor to “Witnesses.”

Breton’s collection was put up for auction in 2003; however, a group of objects displayed behind his desk, known as “The Great Wall,” is now a part of the permanent collection at the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, France. Among this cluttered display of incongruous artifacts are indigenous masks and figures from Oceanic and Pacific Northwest Coast cultures, Marcel Duchamp’s *Why Not Sneeze* and other artworks by Picasso and Miró, an ivory pendant necklace from the Hawaiian islands, a glass vitrine filled with butterflies, and a framed photograph of Elisa Breton.

In 1945, during his time of exile in the United States, André Breton visited Pueblo Indian Reservations in the American Southwest. He became very interested in Native American cultures, the Hopi and Zuni in particular, and acquired several Hopi kachina dolls for his personal collection. Breton believed there was a strong affinity between Surrealist ideals and the philosophy and mysticism behind the mythology and art of these cultures. Breton was also greatly concerned with objects from Oceania. His collection contained an array of statues and masks from this region, including *Uli*, a large wooden ancestor figure from New Ireland (part of Papua New Guinea). Breton prominently displayed this figure—looming over other objects with its oppressive stature—on his desk in the center of the room.



Another surrealist artist, Max Ernst, began collecting objects from the Northwest Coast and Southwest Native Americans during his exile to New York in 1941. He purchased many of these objects from Julius Carlebach's curio shop. In her essay, "Surrealists in Exile," Marie Mauzé discusses the Surrealists' pursuit of ethnographic objects in curios shops while living in New York. Max Ernst was the first Surrealist to discover Carlebach's store and asked him for help in amassing a collection. Carlebach plays a significant role in surrealist collections; he was the middleman between the Surrealists and the Heye Foundation, and he secured their access to the storage room where George Heye was selling duplicates of indigenous artifacts in his collection.<sup>43</sup> In 1946 Ernst and his wife, Dorothea Tanning, moved to Sedona, Arizona, after numerous trips to the area. Samantha Kavky writes, "for Ernst and his Surrealist colleagues, Native American art emerged from a universal 'primitivism' that transcended national, racial, and ethnic boundaries."<sup>44</sup> Ernst's feelings of marginalization as a refugee in the United States led him to identify with Native Americans and to embrace their culture.

In her essay "What Makes Indians Laugh: Surrealism, Ritual and Return in Steven Yazzie and Joseph Beuys," Claudia Mesch addresses Ernst's collection of Northwest Coast and Native American artifacts, which he displayed among his own art at his residence in Arizona.<sup>45</sup> Mesch describes how both the interior and exterior walls of Ernst's home showcased his collection of Native American objects, including a Kwakwaka'wakw house post and Hopi kachina dolls, juxtaposed with artworks by Ernst and Tanning.<sup>46</sup> Ernst displayed many of the indigenous artifacts in his private collection throughout the exterior of his home on Capricorn Hill, alongside his own relief and freestanding sculptures—including his 1948 *in-situ* sculpture *Capricorn*.<sup>47</sup> The remainder

of Ernst's collection of ethnographic artifacts was displayed inside his home among paintings and artworks that both he and his wife produced.

Ernst had a close relationship with the de Menils, and his own artwork represents a significant portion of the surrealist art in the Menil Collection. Additionally, a 1972 cast of Ernst's 1935 sculpture, *Lunar Asparagus*, a suite of four small paintings circa 1949: *Cruel Greenery*, *Colorado*, *Seen Through a Disposition*, and *Ten Thousand Lucid Redskins Get Ready to Make the Rain Laugh*, and his 1935 painting *Celebrations of Hunger* are all displayed in Carpenter's "Witnesses" gallery. Like Ernst, Carpenter recognized mystical qualities in Native American artifacts and displayed them in the "Witnesses" room alongside paintings and sculpture by Ernst and other Surrealists. For these reasons, the objects and arrangement of Ernst's collection can be paralleled to Edmund Carpenter's "Witnesses" and can also be seen as a primary influence on how this recreation of a surrealist collection was constructed.

### **Surrealist Publications**

Surrealist publications, like Georges Bataille's *Documents*, often show an interest in ethnography; Bataille often used the juxtaposition of photographs to shock the viewer and produce new meanings in his journal. James Clifford states that *Documents* "itself is a kind of ethnographic display of images, texts, objects, labels, a playful museum that simultaneously collects and reclassifies its specimens."<sup>48</sup> The content addressed in this publication ranges from high art, film, and photography to ethnography and popular culture—all of which are presented in a heterogeneous fashion with sometimes shocking imagery.<sup>49</sup> Simon Baker has commented on Bataille's concern for contemporary still-life photography, in particular Karl Blossfeldt's close-up images of plants, in *Documents 3*

(1929).<sup>50</sup> In Bataille’s “The Language of Flowers,” Baker states that “rather than opposing Blossfeldt’s practice or critically undermining his work, Bataille turned the photographs to his own pedagogical agenda, radically altering their significance.”<sup>51</sup> By comparing Blossfeldt’s images to sexual organs, Bataille aims to demonstrate how the decontextualizing nature of photography can reveal new meanings between disparate objects.<sup>52</sup> *Documents* frequently positioned images of high art alongside jarring lowbrow imagery; for example, *Documents 6* (1930) includes gruesome images of severed human heads, depictions of angels, and illustrations by surrealist artists Miró and Masson.<sup>53</sup> Carpenter echoes Bataille’s use of disparate imagery in *Documents* by incorporating both high art and souvenir-like objects in “Witnesses.”

Georges Bataille and Pierre d’Espezil founded *Documents* as an outgrowth of the “dissident” Surrealists. This group—which included Robert Desnos, Michel Leiris, Joan Miró, and André Masson—focused on the beauty of transgression and base-materialism rather than follow André Breton’s circle of Surrealists. The journal ran from 1929-30 and “deliberately sought out the ‘most irritating’ material, which had not yet found a place in systems of classification, or had not yet been the subject of scientific research.”<sup>54</sup> The provocative structure of *Documents* introduces material culture through the lens of a wide range of disciplines including artists, professors, curators and ethnographers, many of which had ties to Surrealism.

Subtitles describing the different fields addressed in *Documents* include: *Archéologie*, *Beaux Arts*, *Ethnographie*, and *Variétés*. The incorporation of ethnography as a primary category, listed among more traditional highbrow subjects such as Archeology and Fine Arts, shows the *Documents* editors’ explicit intention to incorporate

indigenous objects into the classic Western canon of art. Through these carefully selected categories, the format and content of *Documents* makes the statement that indigenous artifacts are a relevant form of art and essential to redefining the canon. Much like surrealist collecting and display methods, ethnography does not distinguish between high and low cultures in the way that modern art practices do.<sup>55</sup>

The various categories Bataille presents in *Documents* help reveal the ever closer relationship between ethnography and Surrealism during the 1920-30s. Other surrealist publications also presented photographs of ethnographic artifacts alongside Western text and images. In *La Révolution surréaliste*, Issue 7 (1926) juxtaposes indigenous New Ireland masks with a poem by Phillippe Soupault, and Issue 9-10 (1926) presents a diptych of a kachina doll and a surrealist exquisite corpse drawing.<sup>56</sup> Marie Mauzé notes that Issue 4 of *VVV* (1944) includes photographs of a Yup'ik transformation mask, and the “Amerindian Number” Issue 4-5 of *DYN* includes photographs of Northwest Coast artifacts.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, a 1933 issue of the surrealist publication *Minotaure* served as the exhibition catalogue for the Dakar-Djibouti expedition findings at the Trocadéro. Surrealist publications like *Documents* were not only another method of surrealist display—they also influenced surrealist thought regarding the collecting and display methods used in Surrealist exhibitions. Arguably this influence continued well into the postwar era. In the 1990s Carpenter echoed the fundamental structure of *Documents*—which allows high art to include ethnographic artifacts and pop culture objects—through his eclectic display of modern artworks by Max Ernst, drawings by psychiatric patients, a beggar false face in the likeness of Charlie Chaplin, and a Hopi Mickey Mouse kachina doll, among the other various categories of art and objects in “Witnesses.”<sup>58</sup>

In his book *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Clifford describes the aesthetic of Surrealism as one “that values fragments, curious collections, and unexpected juxtapositions...that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious.”<sup>59</sup> The single most important and unifying characteristic of the Surrealist circle’s collecting, publishing, and exhibition practices is this use of juxtaposition. The Surrealists employed juxtaposition as a technique to fragment and to recode conventional modernist meanings, thereby breaking down traditional European and bourgeois systems of classification. This technique of display arguably influenced Carpenter’s positioning of objects within his “Witnesses” exhibition, which also evokes this surrealist notion of provocative reclassification. In the Menil Collection’s documentary on “Witnesses,” Carpenter explicitly discusses a display—comprised of a beggar false face of Charlie Chaplin wearing a bowler hat, a seventeenth-century punishment mask, and a child’s death mask with a collar and French hat in the shape of a human hand—in reference to the Surrealists’ use of juxtaposition as a way to establish analogies or chance encounters.<sup>60</sup>

### **Surrealist Theorization/Philosophy of the Object**

Several essays and photographs that had been featured in the Surrealists’ journals had to do with their theorizing of the object, or, with developing a new philosophy of the object.<sup>61</sup> These essays and images led up to the 1936 “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects,” and André Breton marks a culmination of this theorizing of the object in his publication of that same year, “Crisis of the Object.” The 1936 exhibition realized the rupturing and redefining of the object that Breton was also advocating in “Crisis of the Object.”

Breton's essay intended to provoke a crisis that would destabilize and expand the way people think about both everyday objects and works of art. In it, Breton discusses the "surrealist aim of bringing about a total revolution of the object"; he argues for a new system of representation, or a new categorization, among objects.<sup>62</sup> He suggests that one method for carrying this out is to place an object out of its intended context in order to defamiliarize it, therefore allowing the viewer to ascribe a new meaning to the object or to construct a new reality.

In the "Crisis of the Object" Breton compares art to science in claiming that, just as the discovery of non-Euclidian geometry in 1870 fractured the previous rules of geometry and opened up a new realm of possibilities, modern art needs to break any barriers that suppress its progress and prevent artists from conceiving of irrational possibilities. Breton argues for a new way of thinking about the purpose of objects that will allow people to disregard traditional modernist systems of classification, thereby opening up an infinite number of possibilities for an object's function and value. One way Breton attempted to do this was through the decontextualized and heterogeneous positioning of objects in his personal collection. Through this display, Breton wanted to free objects from their conventional categorizations to open up new ways of thinking and radically redefine the definition of art.<sup>63</sup> In an earlier essay on Surrealism, Walter Benjamin had foreshadowed Breton's goals in "Crisis of the Object." Writing in 1929, seven years prior to Breton's essay, Benjamin discusses the surrealist aim to redefine the canon of art: "Nothing could reveal more about Surrealism than their canon...the relation of these things to revolution—how the poverty of interiors/enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism."<sup>64</sup> Benjamin calls

attention to the Surrealists' belief in the ability of objects to break down the conceptual barriers Breton discusses in his essay. Breton shares Benjamin's desire for a revolution. He was a member of the Communist party for a time—which is the revolution Benjamin concerns himself with—and he advocated this political stance to other Surrealists; however, the revolution that Breton focuses on in his essay challenges the limiting nature of Western value systems by attempting to expand the way objects are perceived.

Breton, and the earlier essays or images by Salvador Dalí and Brassai, question what an object is, thus refusing to privilege conventional modernist works of high art over other types of objects. In the 3/4 issue of *Minotaure* from 1933, a photo-essay including six photographs by Brassai titled “Involuntary Sculpture,” with captions written by Dalí, depicts close-ups—or decontextualized images—of a rolled up bus ticket, scraps of paper, a curl of soap, a blob of toothpaste, and pieces of bread.<sup>65</sup> Dalí's caption for the photograph of toothpaste reads: “chance formation of smeared toothpaste does not escape delicate and ornamental stereotyping.” This photo-essay reveals the automatic and transformative qualities present in even the oddest material or “objects” and their ability to take on the category or function of high art. By designating these objects as sculptures, Dalí and Brassai demonstrate an early example of the Surrealists' rejection of the modernist system of classification and valuation that predates Breton's “Crisis of the Object” and the “Surrealist Exhibition of Objects” from 1936.

The Surrealists refused modernist categories of the object by elevating traditionally unvalued objects into works of high art. By including new kinds of objects that are not originally intended to be art, such as scraps of paper, ethnographic artifacts, industrial readymades, tourist souvenirs, models by mathematicians, natural specimens,

and scientific objects into the category of high art, surrealist publications alter how society views objects. The Surrealists then reject the entire modern view that different kinds of objects have different value. This concept acts as a theoretical basis of the Surrealists' exhibitions of objects. Carpenter adopts the same radical regauging of the value of objects and of art in his "Witnesses" exhibition.

In the "Witnesses" room, Carpenter decontextualizes objects as one of his primary methods of display. No wall labels or groupings exist to identify objects, or to categorize them by geographic location or time period. Rather, the viewer is forced to participate in the space by allowing the objects themselves to produce some form of emotion or personal experience. Only a pamphlet available outside the room at the Menil provides information about the objects in the installation; numbers in the pamphlet correspond to numbered medallions pinned next to each object. Dominique de Menil opposed the use of lengthy wall texts or the providing of information that would take away from this personal and even sacred experience. As was the case in the surrealist collections that the "Witnesses" room resembles, the aesthetic placement of objects, not their provenance, dictates the installation. Breton's ideas in the "Crisis of the Object" outlined the aims of surrealist exhibitions of the 1930s, that is, their desire to reconceptualize traditional Western classification systems of objects, thereby also transcending Western systems of knowledge. Louise Tythacott states that "in art [the Surrealists] derided the arbitrary bourgeois opposition of function and aesthetic...[in order] to question traditional conceptions of art."<sup>66</sup> Surrealist publishing, collecting and display methods reveal the various attempts made during the 1920s and '30s to use objects to define Surrealism and to redefine the canon of art. Edmund Carpenter was well versed in the Surrealists' views



on indigenous objects and their collecting interests. His permanent exhibition “Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision” constitutes the direct legacy of the Surrealist approach to collecting as well as their display methods, as they were used in Surrealist exhibitions and publications.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Grossman, “Man Ray’s Lost and Found Photographs: Arts of the Americas in Context,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 2 (2008): 130.

<sup>2</sup> Janine Mileaf, “Body to Politics: Surrealist exhibition of the tribal and the modern at the anti-Imperialist exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton,” *RES Anthropology and Aesthetics* 40 (2001): 251.

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Leclercq, “The Surrealist Appropriation of the “Indigenous” Arts” (paper presented at a seminar for Arts and Sociétés, Paris, France, November 23, 2006): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Mileaf, 249. In her discussion, Mileaf comments on how this exhibition attracted the Parisian elite, thus showing a growing acceptance of the movement.

<sup>5</sup> Leclercq, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 95.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Leclercq, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Grossman, “Man Ray’s Lost and Found Photographs,” 125.

<sup>10</sup> Leclercq, 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (1981): 539-564.

<sup>12</sup> Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens*, 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Grossman, “Man Ray’s Lost and Found Photographs,” 123.

<sup>15</sup> Karin von Maur, ed., *Yves Tanguy and Surrealism* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), 29-39.

<sup>16</sup> Edmund Carpenter, *Eskimo Realities* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1973), 180.

<sup>17</sup> Julia Kelly, *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects: Paris c. 1925-35* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 65.

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- <sup>18</sup> Ian Walker, "Phantom Africa: Photography between Surrealism and Ethnography," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 37 (1997): 635-655.
- <sup>19</sup> Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003), 201; 208.
- <sup>20</sup> Harald E.L. Prins, and John Bishop. "Edmund Carpenter: Explorations in Media and Anthropology," *Visual Anthropology Review* 117 (2001-2002): 129.
- <sup>21</sup> Prins and Bishop, 126-29.
- <sup>22</sup> Kelly, 76.
- <sup>23</sup> *Witnesses" with Ted Carpenter: November 16-17, 2000*, Houston, Texas: Menil Collection Archives, 2000. DVD.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Herald Prins, "Upside Down: Arctic Realities and Indigenous Art," *American Anthropologist* 114 (2012): 1.
- <sup>26</sup> Tythacott, 7.
- <sup>27</sup> Prins, "Upside Down," 3.
- <sup>28</sup> Kelly, 32.
- <sup>29</sup> Mileaf, 242.
- <sup>30</sup> Mileaf more comprehensively discusses the details on each of the separate rooms at the "Truth about the Colonies" exhibition in her article, "Body to Politics."
- <sup>31</sup> Mileaf, 247.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> Mileaf, 247-8.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Kelly, 32.
- <sup>36</sup> Katharine Conley, "What Makes a Collection Surrealist: Twentieth-Century Cabinets of Curiosity in Paris and Houston," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 6, no. 1 (2012): 14-15.
- <sup>37</sup> *"Witnesses" with Ted Carpenter: November 16-17, 2000*, Houston, Texas: Menil Collection Archives, 2000. DVD.
- <sup>38</sup> Katherine Conley, "Surrealism and Outsider Art: From the "Automatic Message" to André Breton's Collection," *Yale French Studies* no. 109 (2006): 141-142.
- <sup>39</sup> André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)" in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

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- <sup>40</sup> Tythacott, 43.
- <sup>41</sup> *André Breton*. Directed by Fabrice Maze. Paris, France: Une Edition Seven Doc, 2005. DVD.
- <sup>42</sup> Image and description from Tythacott, 43.
- <sup>43</sup> Marie Mauzé, "Surrealists in Exile," *Collection Robert Lebel* (Paris: Drouot-Richelieu, 2006), 21-22.
- <sup>44</sup> Samantha Kavky, "Max Ernst in Arizona: Myth mimesis, and the hysterical landscape," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 57/58 (2010): 211.
- <sup>45</sup> Claudia Mesch, "What Makes Indians Laugh?: Surrealism, Ritual and Return in Steven Yazzie and Joseph Beuys," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 6, no.1 (2012): 42-45.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 132.
- <sup>49</sup> Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley, Introduction to *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 12.
- <sup>50</sup> Simon Baker, "DOCTRINES [The Appearance of Things]," in *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 39.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> Kelly, 44.
- <sup>55</sup> Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (1981): 130. Here Clifford states, "Ethnography, which shares with surrealism an abandonment of the distinction between high and low culture, provided both a fund of non-Western alternatives and a prevailing attitude of ironic participant observation among the hierarchies and meaning of collective life."
- <sup>56</sup> Leclercq, 3.
- <sup>57</sup> Mauzé, 25.
- <sup>58</sup> Edmund Carpenter, *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2012).
- <sup>59</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 118.
- <sup>60</sup> "Witnesses," Menil Collection Archives.
- <sup>61</sup> Salvador Dalí, "The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment," originally published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* in 1931; and in English reprinted in Lucy Lippard ed., *Surrealists on Art* (NY:

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Prentice Hall, 1970), 87-97; Brassäi, *Sculptures involontaires*, photo-essay originally published in *Minotaure*, no.3/4, 1933, and reprinted in Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 210.

<sup>62</sup> André Breton, "Crisis of the Object," in *Surrealism and Painting* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 280.

<sup>63</sup> The term "modernist" is complex and can signify classification and display methods dating back to the sixteenth century. The term as I use it relates to classification system of objects and art as Eurocentric, and that places higher value on those objects produced by individual artists for aesthetic purposes.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 2 Part 1, 1927-1934* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 210.

<sup>65</sup> Fer, Batchelor, and Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism*, 210.

<sup>66</sup> Tythacott, 2.

## CHAPTER 2

### “WITNESSES” AND THE MENIL COLLECTION

The heterogeneous nature of display in Carpenter’s “Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision” exhibition is not only inconsistent with modern museum practices in the United States; it is also inconsistent with the arrangement of art and objects throughout the other remaining galleries of the Menil Collection. In this chapter, I analyze Carpenter’s installation in the context of the larger Menil Collection. I also investigate how the personal relationships that the de Menils and Carpenter had with Surrealists such as Max Ernst influenced the framework of both the “Witnesses” exhibition and this institution as a whole. My investigation demonstrates that while, overall, the Menil Collection acts like a typical modern art institution in its separation of ethnographic and modern art collections into different galleries, the “Witnesses” gallery is postmodern in its eclectic display of art and objects. The postmodern nature of the “Witnesses” room is significant because it undermines the Menil Collection’s overall organization and destabilizes it as an institution. Postmodern theory questions modernist classifications of objects and calls for a radical redefinition of what constitutes art. “Witnesses” challenges the structure of the modern art museum by rejecting conventional modernist systems of value, categorization, and knowledge as well as modern definitions of art that are the foundation of these institutions. Drawing upon this revolutionary aspect of earlier surrealist collections, Carpenter values very different kinds of objects and artifacts equally in his “Witnesses” installation—a direct contrast to modern museum practices that are followed in the other galleries of the Menil Collection.

This exhibition raises the question of whether Carpenter's "Witnesses" display is a problem or a solution within the debate on how ethnographic artifacts should be displayed and included in the modern Western art museum. Is the display of ethnographic artifacts in Western art institutions inherently problematic, or does "Witnesses" produce an alternative model to current practices? I argue that "Witnesses" acts as both a problem and a solution to this dilemma. In the exhibition's informational pamphlet, Carpenter follows the Surrealists' (re)classification of objects; he thereby constructs a new order to replace the old modern one. By refusing the standard modernist categories of value in the art museum, the "Witnesses" room resolves the problem of value that restricts certain objects from being viewed as art. However, it simultaneously also raises other problems. In following the surrealist categories of value and model of display, Carpenter privileges the Western intellectual who reassembles all of these objects to fit a surrealist vision, which thereby also appropriates and aestheticizes the indigenous artifacts including those in his "Witnesses" exhibition.

"Witnesses" is a permanent exhibition within the Surrealism wing of the Menil rather than an independent collection. All the objects contained in "Witnesses" belonged either to the curator Carpenter, or to the de Menils, whose larger collection includes many more examples of tribal art from the cultures showcased in this exhibition. The majority of ethnographic objects in the Menil Collection do not appear in this small, heterogeneous display, but instead in the museum's separate African, Oceanic, and Pacific Northwest galleries. The dearth of literature available on the "Witnesses" gallery raises questions. Why has this unique room been largely overlooked, both by the museum

and by art discourse? What does the lack of available literature say about the art world's general position toward "Witnesses"; how does inclusion in this unusual display affect the value of the exhibited objects? Further, do viewers perceive similar ethnographic objects differently in the context of the museum's other, more traditional galleries? "Witnesses" incorporates the same types of art and artifacts displayed in the rest of the Menil Collection, but Carpenter curates the room in a manner that explicitly references surrealist collecting and display methods that destabilize modernist definitions of high art.

### **The de Menils in Houston, Texas**

Surrealism and ethnographic artifacts that possess sacred qualities—including those from African, Northwest Coast, Native American, and Oceanic cultures—were the primary interests of avid art collectors Dominique and John de Menil. The de Menils' concern for both modern art and indigenous objects conveys the aspects of the Surrealism movement that they found most relevant and influential when amassing their overall collection. The objects in "Witnesses" come both from the de Menils' original collection and from ethnographic artifacts that Carpenter either personally owned or acquired on behalf of the museum. In this way, "Witnesses" refers to the de Menils' specific interest in Surrealism.

The aesthetic tastes of Dominique de Menil and her husband John are significant to the conception of the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, and to the "Witnesses" installation. Originally from Paris, France, the couple moved to Texas in the 1940s and embarked on a mission to exhibit art there and to educate the public about it. These

activities led to the founding of the art history program at St. Thomas University, the Institute for the Arts at Rice University, the Menil Foundation, and eventually the Menil Collection. Like the Surrealists who challenged French imperialism during the 1920s and 1930s, the de Menils were devoted participants in social activism, actively involved in the human and civil rights movements in Texas from the 1950s onward. They sought to create awareness and to bring about change by making art accessible to the community as a means of education, and they did this by focusing on particular types of art and exhibition methods.<sup>1</sup>

The de Menils' influence on the Houston art scene increased as they involved themselves with local art exhibitions that mixed modern art and indigenous objects. For example, in 1955 the de Menils hired the innovative curator Jermayne MacAgy to serve as the chairperson of the Department of Art History at St. Thomas University, as well as the director of Houston's Contemporary Art Association, for which John had been elected chairman in 1949.<sup>2</sup> In her essay, "The Menil Collection: Houston, Texas," Kristina Van Dyke notes that "in 1959, MacAgy gave Houston its first significant exposure to non-Western, Native American, and pre-Columbian works of art in an exhibition titled 'Totems Not Taboo,' hosted by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston."<sup>3</sup> MacAgy's 1959 exhibition showcased artifacts from "Australia, French Guinea, French Equatorial Africa, and Melanesia" belonging to over forty private and public collections, including the de Menils' personal collection.<sup>4</sup> Approximately one hundred African artifacts made up a significant portion of the works displayed in this exhibition. Doran H. Ross has commented on how "the intellectual climate that prompted the "Relations to



Primitive Art” section of the exhibition had also been part of the environment that inspired the [de Menils] to acquire African, Oceanic, and Native American art at the same time that they were building their...renowned Surrealist collection.”<sup>5</sup> Though John was more interested in African art than Dominique, both shared a concern for the spiritual qualities they found in modern art and indigenous artifacts, and they adamantly grew their collection of these objects.

Beginning in the 1960s, surrealist artworks and artifacts from indigenous cultures dominated the de Menils’ collection. The de Menils acquired many of the ethnographic artifacts in their collection from prominent New York and Paris dealers well known for selling indigenous objects to the Surrealists, including Julius Carlebach and Charles Ratton. The couple sought advice from a small group of trusted friends and colleagues regarding their collecting activities. According to Pamela G. Smart, Dominique de Menil acknowledged that:

...the dealer Alexander Iolas, whom she identified along with [curator Jermaine] MacAgy and [Dominican priest Father] Couturier as the most influential on her practices of collecting and exhibiting art, had drawn the de Menils’ attention to the work of the Surrealists, for which they initially did not care.<sup>6</sup>

These three advisors, Iolas, MacAgy and Father Couturier, all shared an interest in the spiritual nature of modern art and ethnographic objects. This aspect began to play a significant role in the way the de Menils chose to think about art. Additionally, the de Menils’ son-in-law and “Witnesses” curator, Edmund Carpenter was another influence on the couples’ ongoing fascination with tribal objects.

The de Menils' collection primarily echoed the Surrealists' interest in particular indigenous cultures. Their tastes embraced such objects as transformation masks from the Pacific Northwest Coast and Native American kachina dolls, which Surrealists like André Breton, Max Ernst, Paul Éluard, and Wolfgang Paalen frequently collected. Moreover, the de Menils considered their collection an integral part of their everyday lives, and they displayed artifacts throughout their home in a heterogeneous style similar to the personal collections accrued by André Breton and Max Ernst.

### **The de Menils' Relationship with Max Ernst**

The de Menils first encountered surrealist artist and collector Max Ernst in Paris when they commissioned him for a portrait of Dominique in 1934. They later became close friends with him and avid collectors of his work. Ernst and the de Menils shared many acquaintances in the New York art scene of the 1940s. Ernst frequently purchased indigenous artifacts from Julius Carlebach, the same collector the de Menils often used to acquire ethnographic objects for their personal collection. Additionally, the de Menils curated Ernst's first solo U.S. art exhibition, at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, in 1952. In the forward to the Menil Collection catalogue, Dominique de Menil writes, "John de Menil enjoyed the company of artists and he loved to entertain them. He was devoted to Max Ernst..."<sup>7</sup> Today, Ernst's artworks represent a significant portion of the surrealist art in the Menil Collection.

Max Ernst's collection of ethnographic artifacts and modern art was another direct precedent to the "Witnesses" exhibition. While living in the United States, he acquired many indigenous objects, such as a Northwest Coast Kwakwaka'wakw house

figure of Tzonoqua and over twenty Hopi and Zuni kachina dolls, for his personal collection.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, the mythologies and objects of Southwest and Northwest Coast Native Americans, and Southeast Pacific Easter Island tribes, fascinated and influenced Ernst. The recurring bird imagery in Ernst's artwork stems from a childhood incident where the death of his beloved pet cockatoo coincided with the birth of his sister, an event he saw as his first experience with spiritual rebirth.<sup>9</sup> Further, Ernst's depictions of Loplop, his own version of a spirit animal, correlate to the mythological imagery used by many of the indigenous cultures he admired. In his essay "Dada and Surrealism," Evan Maurer discusses how Ernst may have derived his anthropomorphic alter ego from the Easter Island deity Makemake, who also possesses a combination of bird and human-like qualities.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in the catalogue for an exhibition held at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1979, *Max Ernst: From the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Ernst*, Jeffrey Spalding notes that "like Trickster, the raven of Northwest Coast imagery, Loplop is the creator, and brings things to us. He is also the bearer of bad jokes..."<sup>11</sup> In addition to his totemic imagery depicting spirit animals, Ernst displayed many of his and Dorothea Tanning's artworks alongside indigenous artifacts at his home in Sedona, Arizona.

*Capricorn*, one of Ernst's well-known sculptures, further demonstrates the importance of Native American mythology to his own art. In 1948, Ernst produced this concrete sculpture outside of his home in Sedona, and it remained positioned there for many years until its eventual relocation into storage in 1964 for safekeeping.<sup>12</sup> Also in 1964, a set of bronze casts were made of Ernst's *Capricorn*, one of which is owned by the Menil Collection and resides in Houston, Texas.<sup>13</sup> Lucy Lippard states that Ernst

intended for this multi-figure sculpture to symbolize a family portrait of himself, his wife Dorothea, and their two dogs.<sup>14</sup> In his discussion of Ernst's sculptural works, Spalding writes: "What better way can be imagined to embody the concept of dream imagery as concrete irrationality than actually to construct the image in concrete as in 'Capricorn.'"<sup>15</sup> Ernst draws from multiple mythologies to construct the figures in *Capricorn*. Diane Waldman describes the "totemic aspect of the figures" in this large sculpture portraying a bull-headed male figure with a dog on his lap, holding a staff, and sitting on a throne next to a female mermaid figure.<sup>16</sup> Claudia Mesch has discussed how Ernst "references Norse or Greek forms in the king, or possibly horned-goat-headed depictions of the devil in tarot images; and he invokes Cycladic forms in the queen figure on the right."<sup>17</sup> In addition, Lucy Lippard calls attention to the recurring astrological fish motifs in the dog and female figures.<sup>18</sup> These mythological qualities, along with Ernst's placement of *Capricorn* at the top of Capricorn Hill as a sort of guardian figure, empowered this sculpture with the same mystical and living presence believed to be held by the Native American artifacts in his collection.

Max Ernst's personal collection consisted partly of his own artworks: collages, paintings, sculptures, and works on paper. It also included works by other modern and surrealist artists such as Joan Miró, Jean Arp, René Magritte, and his wife Dorothea Tanning. Furthermore, Spalding declares that "an inventory of Max Ernst's collection following his death in 1976 lists 64 ethnological artifacts: 16 Kachinas, 9 Northwest Coast Indian, 28 from New Guinea and New Ireland, 7 African, and 3 Inuit pieces."<sup>19</sup> These pieces included a red cedar Northwest Coast crest pole produced by the Kaigani

Haida in 1870, which Ernst acquired from Julius Carlebach in 1941. Additionally, Ernst obtained most of the kachina dolls displayed throughout his Arizona home from the Fred Harvey Trading Post at the Grand Canyon during a 1941 cross-country road trip.<sup>20</sup> The imagery from this crest pole and the kachina dolls in his collection closely resemble the style Ernst used in many of his own artworks—one rich in visual puns, mystical beings, and dual realities.<sup>21</sup>

Dominique and John de Menil were two of Ernst's biggest champions. The couple shared many of the artist's preferences in the collecting and display of art. In addition, they were passionate collectors of his art; they promoted him through their donation of many of his works to notable art institutions such as MoMA. Ernst's personal relationship with the de Menils, along with the heterogeneous nature and display of his personal collection in Sedona, clearly reveal the influence that specific surrealist collections had on the de Menils' own art collecting inclinations. Further, "Witnesses" curator Carpenter would have known about the de Menils' close relationship with Ernst, making this artist's collection a primary model for Carpenter's exhibition at the Menil; however, further research is needed to establish what objects and artifacts displayed in the "Witnesses" gallery, if any, previously belonged in Ernst's private collection.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Menil Collection as a Museum**

The Menil Collection opened to the public on June 6, 1987; it holds over sixteen thousand objects in its collection. Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke describe how "the overall decontextualized aesthetic approach to display in the museum also reflected and still reflects the de Menils' approach to collecting."<sup>23</sup> John de Menil died

before the Menil Collection was realized; however, Dominique carefully planned for the museum's exterior and interior to provide a spacious and comfortable environment for its visitors, similar to the display of their own home collection. She became highly involved in the museum's management, overseeing everything from the installation of art to the overall atmosphere of the space.<sup>24</sup> Italian architect Renzo Piano designed the museum's main building, which was completed in 1987. Dominique appointed Piano based on his earlier museum designs—and specifically the *Centre Pompidou* in Paris—which deviate from traditional museum structures. Dominique strived to create a calm environment unlike the convoluted organization of many American art museums. Instead of overwhelming the viewer with a large number of objects all at once, the galleries in the Menil Collection show fewer objects and frequently rotate the displays to circulate the vast number of objects in the permanent collection.<sup>25</sup>

The Menil Collection includes one of the largest holdings of surrealist art in the United States. The museum's structure reflects the de Menils' personal interest in surrealist methods of collecting. The main building follows Dominique's vision of displaying her collection in a manner that was similar to its presentation at her home. While it is only Carpenter's "Witnesses" installation that truly reflects the heterogeneous nature of the de Menils' home collection, the museum's other galleries incorporate natural light, interior gardens, and other non-traditional museum characteristics that allow the viewer to have a more personal experience with the art. In addition to the main building, the Menil campus takes up multiple city blocks with manicured lawns,

sculptures, and separate buildings that house the Dan Flavin installation at Richmond Hall, the Rothko Chapel, and the Cy Twombly Gallery.

The modest grey exterior of the main building matches the other buildings owned by the Menil Collection and complements the privately owned homes of the surrounding neighborhood. The entrance to the building leads to a large open foyer that divides the museum into two separate wings. Natural light fills this spacious area, and a single large modern painting hangs on each of its three walls. The visible wear on the dark pinewood floor shows evidence of foot-traffic from the museum's previous visitors. The western half of the museum showcases objects from Africa, Oceania, and the Northwest Coast, and contains the ancient, Byzantine, and contemporary art galleries. The Surrealism galleries, which include Carpenter's "Witnesses" exhibition, reside in the eastern half of the building along with temporary exhibition space and the museum's library.

All of the galleries in the Menil Collection—with the exception of the "Witnesses" room—provide labels denoting each displayed object's artist and title (for Western art) or culture and type (for indigenous objects and antiquities), date, and medium(s). No additional information appears on the printed object labels, nor do the galleries use didactic wall texts. In her essay on the Menil Collection, Kristina Van Dyke states that "Dominique de Menil felt that there was a place for scholarship and text, but the gallery should be reserved for the experience of art, where one's own associations with and responses to the object could unfold in time."<sup>26</sup> Though apparent throughout the entire museum, this approach is especially relevant to "Witnesses," which provides only

optional information to the viewer via numbered wall medallions that correlate to information contained in a pamphlet that is available at the entrance to that gallery.

Antiquities, Byzantine, and medieval objects occupy the first two galleries on the western side of the museum. White-walled and bright with artificial lighting, these galleries display the majority of objects either in glass vitrines or on glass-covered podiums. An open doorway leads to the African galleries, which also have white walls but fill with natural light from the ceiling and from large floor-to-ceiling windows. These windows look out onto two interior gardens, one completely enclosed and the other open to the outside, letting in sunlight. The objects in these two galleries enjoy spacious display areas; some hang on the walls and others rest on podiums or reside in glass vitrines, while larger items stand on the floor in the viewer's space. The Pacific Islands gallery also has large floor-to-ceiling windows. Located on the other side of the completely enclosed garden, the Pacific Islands display looks straight through to the African gallery and presents objects in a manner similar to that of the African section. Additionally, the museum's collection of Northwest Coast artifacts occupies two large glass vitrines in the main hallway leading to the Modern and Contemporary art gallery. Vitrines are noticeably absent in the modern and contemporary art galleries in the Menil Collection, and are only used to display antiquities and indigenous artifacts—except for in the “Witnesses” gallery. Vitrines emphasize the status of ethnographic objects as artifacts rather than art. Natural history and ethnographic museums traditionally use vitrines to display artifacts, and art institutions commonly use them to showcase their collections of indigenous art. In addition to the Menil Collection's selective use of



vitrines, only the galleries of indigenous art incorporate gardens and natural light into their displays. These discrepancies demonstrate how Dominique de Menil spatially and stylistically separated her collections of ethnographic artifacts from modern art in the Menil Collection by suggesting in their displays that indigenous objects are somehow closer to nature.

Located across from the conservation center at the end of the western wing of the museum, the Modern and Contemporary art gallery stands apart from the galleries displaying indigenous objects and is distinguished from the main hallway by having its own entrance. This space, with artificial lighting and paintings and sculpture spaciouly displayed along the white walls and floor of the gallery, is reminiscent of traditional modern art institutions. Galleries in the eastern wing of the museum display the remainder of the Menil's permanent collection of modern art.

The eastern wing of the Menil Collection houses the large permanent collection of surrealist art, along with the museum's library as well as galleries that display temporary exhibitions. Unlike the rest of the museum, the Surrealism galleries have dim lighting and grey-painted walls. The directed lighting in an otherwise dimly lit space projects an element of drama and emphasizes the otherworldly aura present in surrealist works. The object labels share the same grey shade of paint as the walls, and the paintings hang slightly lower than the standard height used by most art museums—as do all modern artworks in the Menil Collection. These galleries prominently showcase the eclectic Surrealism collection accrued by the de Menils, including many works by Max Ernst and

René Magritte. Ernst's commissioned portrait of Dominique from 1934 is among these artworks, further exemplifying the close relationship the artist had with the de Menils.

This unique collection positions a display of a marble skull, two terracotta doves, and a terracotta siren behind glass; the same gallery presents multiple Louis Fernandez paintings. The Spanish artist was a close friend of the de Menils, who collected many of his artworks.<sup>27</sup> Skulls, death, and mortality are recurring themes in his art, including his works at the Menil Collection. The accompanying objects in this gallery reference these prominent themes. Moreover, their placement behind glass constitutes the only vitrine-like display in any of the museum's modern and contemporary galleries other than "Witnesses." At the very back of the Surrealism wing, the gallery that leads to the entrance of Carpenter's "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision" exhibition includes Dorothea Tanning's large furry sculpture, *Cousins*, and a wall displaying various object boxes produced by Joseph Cornell alludes to the Surrealists' frequent use of vitrines.

### **Edmund Carpenter and "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision"**

In a personal letter to Dominique de Menil dated August 27, 1997, Edmund Carpenter writes:

Your interest in the porcupine man, Kuskokwim masks, De Chirico drawing, Mickey Mouse kachina, etc.—all of which were once owned by one or another of the Surrealists—prompted my suggestion of a Surrealists' closet: an assembly of surreal images collected by the Surrealists themselves as 'witnesses' to their own efforts and to the fundamental nature of their overall statement.<sup>28</sup>

Carpenter's "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision" exhibition contains more than one hundred artifacts from indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest Coast, Africa, Pre-

Columbian and colonial Central and South America, and the Islands of the Central Pacific, as well as other found objects and curiosities of the types that inspired the Surrealists.<sup>29</sup> Breton classified these objects as: natural objects, readymade and assisted readymade objects, perturbed objects, and mathematical objects, among others.<sup>30</sup> The majority of the displayed artifacts come from specific cultures that the Surrealists felt carried sacred qualities and that they believed their own art paralleled in some way. Such objects include kachina dolls from the Southwest Native Americans, and masks and costumes from various indigenous tribes.

There are several transformation masks in “Witnesses,” including a mask produced by the Northwest Coast Kwakwaka’wakw in British Columbia that transforms from a killer whale to a human. Transformation masks physically alter in appearance when manipulated. Similarly, Alaskan natives—including the Inuit and Yup’ik—produce masks and headdresses that reveal a co-existence of contraries, such as a whale/human headdress from the Kuskokwim River people that constitutes a whale and a human in a canoe simultaneously.<sup>31</sup> Northwest Coast and Alaskan native masks are primarily used during rituals and ceremonies, and many are thought to possess mystical or sacred qualities. These masks exemplify the Surrealists’ interest in visual puns and the co-existence of dual realities by presenting multiple entities in a single object. In addition to the physical transformative qualities of these masks, Tythacott has commented that masks “transform the body of a dancer, shifting them from one reality to another...they move us out of the everyday, enabling us to become other, non-human, divine.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, a mask not only reveals a dual reality through its physical qualities, but it also allows the

person wearing it to transcend reality. A Haida headdress mask displayed in “Witnesses” is represented on the cover of the exhibition pamphlet and further highlights the importance of these masks in surrealist collections.

The “Witnesses” display also includes Western industrial objects—a camera obscura, a Zoetrope, and other various film apparatuses—that fascinated the Surrealists. These “mechanical viewing devices” fall under a section in the “Witnesses” catalogue that Carpenter entitles “Theater of Light.”<sup>33</sup> Carpenter recounts the major technological advances made in film during the nineteenth century; these modern optical devices manipulate images in different ways and were of particular interest to the Surrealists.<sup>34</sup> The exhibition also includes multiple artworks by the Surrealists themselves—for example, a grouping of four small Max Ernst paintings circa 1949: *Cruel Greenery*, *Colorado, Seen Through a Disposition*, and *Ten Thousand Lucid Redskins Get Ready to Make the Rain Laugh*, and an exquisite corpse drawing by André Breton, Yves Tanguy, and Jaques Hérold.<sup>35</sup>

This room is physically at a remove from the large collections of Oceanic, African, and Pacific Northwest Coast art on view at the Menil Collection. “Witnesses” then is understood to be part of the museum’s Surrealism collection; as such, the gallery addresses a significant aspect of the surrealist movement that modern museum practice in the United States has often neglected. The postmodern nature of “Witnesses” refuses the hierarchy of objects set forth by high art institutions and deviates from common museum display practices in its juxtaposition of modern art, ethnographic artifacts, and industrial and other found objects. The exhibition’s ethnographic features and chronicle of pop

culture and found industrial objects distance the “Witnesses” gallery from modern art museum practices even further. It stands as a repressed exhibition within the Menil Collection, which otherwise keeps the ethnographic objects in question isolated from modern art.

Carpenter’s exhibition is accessible from the Surrealist wing through an open doorway with a pulled back curtain; over the door is a sign reading, “Witnesses.” There are no wall labels in this exhibition; instead, numbered wall medallions correlate with the numbers given in an informational pamphlet that can be found at the entrance to the room. This discreetly placed booklet, written by Carpenter, briefly discusses the Surrealists’ interest in collecting and provides a short explanation for the different types of objects in the gallery. This text also includes information on the artist and title—or the culture and type—date, location, and medium of each object. The text organizes the objects by their surrealist classifications rather than their location in the room.

Carpenter’s categories for the objects in this gallery include: “Spirit Impersonators, Mythic Images, Modern Mythic Figures, Zoomorphic Entities, Theater of Nature, Found Form, Concealed Powers, Invisible Art, Visual Puns, Transformation Masks, Inherent Contradictions, Magical Objects, Coexistence of Contraries, Identical Opposites, A World Elsewhere, Visual Dissection and Reassembly, Miniature Models, Theater of Light, Unworldly Sounds, Drawings By Psychotics, Souvenirs and Fakes, Print Sources, Metamorphosis, Sex, Chance Encounters, and Surrealist Art.”<sup>36</sup> Carpenter has commented on the Surrealists’ interest in “Invisible Art,” such as kachina dolls—stoic on the outside but containing living spirits on the inside—that embody the Hopi phrase, “to

dance in place without moving.”<sup>37</sup> A facsimile of Roberto Matta’s 1969 cube, *Inside Out* (working title), has unseen artwork on its inside panels and is also categorized under the section “Invisible Art.” The objects and artifacts positioned in this room reflect the diverse forms of inspiration displayed in surrealist collections. They expand the definition of art and present objects in a manner that is inconsistent with modern museum practices.

Although many of the objects in the “Witnesses” gallery belong to the de Menils’ larger collection of ethnographic artifacts that is on display throughout the museum, this exhibition differs significantly in structure from the other galleries in the Menil Collection. Katharine Conley discusses how Carpenter’s specific vision makes “Witnesses” feel more personal; she notes that “Edmund Carpenter wrote in a letter to a curator [Menil director, Paul Winkler] that the model for the room “should be Matta’s bedroom, Breton’s apartment.””<sup>38</sup> Painted a darker shade of grey than the other Surrealism galleries in the museum, the “Witnesses” exhibition uses directed lighting to create a more dramatic atmosphere in the dimly lit room. The placement of objects in this room is based on juxtapositions and analogies, and its overall structure encourages visitors to circulate within the exhibition. Eclectically arranged artifacts and art cover the majority of walls, floor space, and even parts of the ceiling. A large podium placed on the floor in the center of the room holds many of the exhibition’s larger standing objects and guides the viewer’s direction around the installation.

Immediately upon entering the room, a vitrine to the right presents the viewer with two documentary photographs, one of André Breton with his collection in his Paris apartment, c. 1963; another shows an auction catalogue of three Pacific Island masks that

were previously owned by Breton.<sup>39</sup> The quote, “All these objects either belonged to the Surrealists or are similar to objects they collected,” also appears on the vitrine. Above the case is a large dance mask from Papua New Guinea, and displayed behind glass are Alaskan ivory and stone figurines and a Hopi Mickey Mouse kachina doll that was given to Carpenter by the American surrealist artist Bill Copley.<sup>40</sup> In the Menil Collection’s documentary, “*Witnesses*” with *Ted Carpenter*, Carpenter provides detailed information on the different artifacts contained in the exhibition and the cultures that produced them.<sup>41</sup> He explains the significance of certain Western pop culture iconography to indigenous cultures, which they frequently appropriate to make their own mythical figures. Mickey Mouse in particular, Carpenter argues, has been reproduced by tribes all over the world—as seen in the Hopi kachina doll and a fake Aztec sculpture displayed in “*Witnesses*.”<sup>42</sup>

Elaborately crafted masks and headdresses used for tribal dances and rituals hang in multiple rows on the wall to the right of the introductory vitrine—two of which were once owned by Breton.<sup>43</sup> Among this display is another glass vitrine containing a tableau of stuffed bird specimens perched on tree foliage, and an artist’s mannequin dating to sometime between the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Natural history and human models fascinated the Surrealists, and this imagery often recurs in surrealist artworks, including Max Ernst’s bird motifs and Giorgio de Chirico’s figures resembling mannequins. At the end of this wall, a window covered by a thick curtain lets in a minimal amount of natural light. The *Louis XV Provincial Display Table*, an opened chest originally assembled by Dominique de Menil for her Houston home, stands in front

of the window. Small miscellaneous curiosities and trinkets, including seashells and old watches, fill this display case. The covered window and personal chest in this corner of the “Witnesses” gallery adds an element of intimacy to the room. Surrealist collections were displayed in the Surrealists’ private homes and studios, and it was Carpenter’s explicit intent that “Witnesses” recreate this environment.<sup>44</sup> Whereas the museum’s separate indigenous art galleries are open and welcome in natural sunlight, the window in the “Witnesses” room is purposely covered, making the space appear more closed off and thereby showcasing the same types of indigenous artifacts in a completely different context.

Carpenter installed a variety of objects on the back wall of the “Witnesses” exhibition, including an Alaskan walrus/wolf duel mask, a Hopi mythical figure mask, and a late eighteenth-, or early nineteenth-century Polynesian *tiki* figure comprised of volcanic stone. Carpenter claims that this last figure was previously owned by Breton but doubts its authenticity.<sup>45</sup> Following this display is another large glass vitrine that covers the entire wall. Miniatures of globes and double staircases that generate “two illusions—that the object is less formidable and that it is simpler,” and various “optical projectors”—innovations of the nineteenth-century that allowed still images to come to life—are among the numerous objects in this vitrine.<sup>46</sup> Also in this display is a documentary photograph of the famous “rabbit/duck” drawing by Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that depicts a visual pun.<sup>47</sup> This illustration simultaneously depicts a rabbit and a duck in a single image. Wittgenstein used this image to explore different ways of seeing. This concept is central to Carpenter’s exhibition; the Surrealists were



concerned with finding new associations and ways of looking at objects that would expand the definition of art, and Wittgenstein's drawing directly relates to their interest in visual puns and dual realities. Carpenter explains that Western perspective only allows the perception of one image or the other—but never both at the same time; conversely, indigenous cultures, such as those in the Pacific Northwest Coast, always see both images simultaneously and believe that one is inherently a part of the other, and vice versa.<sup>48</sup> Much like the masks displayed in “Witnesses” that show a co-existence of contraries, the Surrealists were interested in indigenous cultures that viewed dual images as a single form. Musical instruments, such as a zoomorphic friction drum from New Ireland, are also placed behind this glass wall. According to Carpenter, indigenous tribes often use these instruments to bring the mythical spirits represented by masks and figures to life.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, this display includes a group of souvenirs and fakes that exemplifies many of the early objects the Surrealists collected from flea markets and other junk shops, and they also represent Western material culture made for tourists.

The final wall in this exhibition, which leads back to the room's entrance, features another vitrine that displays small objects from various time periods and cultures. These items include an early nineteenth-century spectacle case depicting admirers viewing the Hottentot Venus, a dance rattle in the form of a raven produced by the Alaskan Tlingit people, a copy after Salvador Dalí's *Venus de Milo aux Tiroirs* miniature from 1979, and a pestle in the form of a phallus from the third-millennium B.C. Laurentian culture. The objects in this case represent a broad spectrum of classifications that include ancient and ethnographic artifacts, modern art, reproductions, and pop culture. It highlights the main

objective of surrealist exhibitions and collections—to expand the idea of what constitutes an art object. It undermines the structure of the modern art museum and challenges Western classification of objects.

Larger works on paper are positioned on the wall above the vitrine, including a mid-nineteenth century engraving, Giorgio de Chirico's 1918 graphite drawing *The Betrothed*, and two ink drawings produced by insane asylum patients. The Menil Collection's conservation department recently discovered that the psychiatric patient drawing in "Witnesses," which depicts a cat and mice inside a baby's pram with nonsensical phrases scribbled throughout the bottom half is, in fact, a reproduction on an invitation for a lecture given by Edmund Carpenter in 1965. This attests to Carpenter's independent interest in the same ideas as the Surrealists, and it demonstrates his refusal of modernist classification systems by displaying a copy of "psychotic art" in "Witnesses" as a worthy art object.<sup>50</sup>

A grouping of large objects placed on a circular podium takes up most of the floor space in the center of the "Witnesses" room. These objects include a large twentieth-century water drum from Papua New Guinea, two Victorian-era souvenir Maori figures, and the notorious *Wildman* costume. The *Wildman*, an essential object in the early planning stages of the exhibition, was referred to as the "porcupine man" in correspondence between Dominique de Menil and Edmund Carpenter.<sup>51</sup> Many of the museum's advertisements for the initial opening of "Witnesses" featured an image of this *Wildman* costume. Carpenter was likely drawn to the uncanny appearance and narrative of the *Wildman*, and displayed this costume in his office for many years before its

inclusion in “Witnesses.”<sup>52</sup> There has been some uncertainty over this object’s culture of origin and its originally intended purpose. While it is now thought to have originated in eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century Germany or Switzerland, this costume presumably represents a folk figure seen in the Vogel Gryff Festival in Basel, but it has also been considered a bear hunting costume.<sup>53</sup>

Suspended from the ceiling throughout the “Witnesses” room are various objects. One is from Papua New Guinea, made from painted bamboo, bark, and feathers, and labeled *Bird in Flight*. During specific ceremonies, this bird was believed to come to life and take flight when its spirit was called forth. The Surrealists were fascinated by the idea that objects could possess mystical powers; this is a recurring theme seen in many of the objects displayed in “Witnesses.” Also suspended from the ceiling is another object that is foundational to the “Witnesses” exhibition: a copy of Roberto Matta’s 1969 cube *Inside Out* (working title). Carpenter personally wrote a letter to Matta asking the artist to help the Menil Collection duplicate the cube for the “Witnesses” installation. The box that is currently displayed in the exhibition is a facsimile of the original—which is on loan to the Menil Collection from Benedicte Pesle. This cube has six outer panels, each portraying a scene of war and violence. Matta sealed the box and the inner panels have never been seen; however, Edmund Carpenter predicts that these interior images represent peaceful and idyllic scenarios.<sup>54</sup> Miranda Lash associates Matta’s cube in “Witnesses” with the Surrealists’ *cadavre exquis*.<sup>55</sup> In the exquisite corpse game, a collective drawing is produced after each individual draws a section without knowing the other parts of the image. Like this game, the unknown interior images in Matta’s cube

create “in some sense a communal experience of blindness.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, Lash states that “in the late 1960s, the artist dedicated himself to creating and displaying works of art that critiqued war,” and that *Inside Out* was exhibited around Europe in the 1970s to raise money for French civil rights causes.<sup>57</sup> The fact that “Witnesses” displays only a copy of Matta’s original cube further demonstrates both Carpenter’s and the Surrealists’ rejection of modernist ideas of the authenticity of the art object.

Despite the occasional replacement or relocation of objects to different areas within the room, “Witnesses” maintains a structure of heterogeneous display that allows the objects and artifacts to be active participants in the space. Carpenter positioned many of the artifacts believed to possess sacred and living spirits openly throughout the room, not enclosed behind glass vitrines. One may consider the objects in “Witnesses” as watching, or being witnesses to, the viewer—while they are at the same time the objects being observed. Katharine Conley quotes William Rubin while arguing that:

The Menils’ name for the Witnesses Room presumably comes from Pablo Picasso's description of the non-Western art he kept in his studio in Paris. "For me," he said in a 1923 interview, "the masks were ... magical objects ... intercessors ... the African sculptures that hang around almost everywhere in my studios are more witnesses than models."<sup>58</sup>

The indigenous artifacts in “Witnesses” are not traditionally classified as high art. For the Surrealists they were a source of inspiration and a way to produce affinities and analogies that open up new ways of thinking and accessing knowledge.

Carpenter had curated exhibitions involving the de Menils, including “Form and Freedom: A Dialogue of Northwest Coast Indian Art” at Rice University’s Institute for the Arts in 1975, prior to the 1999 installation of “Witnesses” in the Surrealism wing of

the Menil Collection. Additionally, he served on the board of the American Indian-Heys Foundation, and perhaps because of this qualification the Menil Foundation hired him to acquire tribal art. Carpenter's relation to the de Menils through marriage meant that he had a personal as well as professional relationship with Dominique de Menil. Van Dyke notes, "Adelaide de Menil and Edmund Carpenter broadened the de Menils' interest in and collection of the arts of the Pacific Islands and Northwest Coast America among other areas."<sup>59</sup> Carpenter's work in anthropology and personal interest in collecting tribal artifacts often paralleled the de Menils' collecting preferences, and explains his interest in this unique installation.

In opposition to anthropological and traditional European ideas of what constitutes art, Carpenter believed that the value of objects does not rely upon cultural provenance, but rather that value is inherent to objects themselves. This is significant to "Witnesses" because Carpenter implemented this philosophy when collecting and curating the display of this exhibition. In *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!: Edmund Carpenter*,<sup>60</sup> Carpenter discusses his anthropological experiences in the Arctic and New Guinea, his interests in media and technology, and his ideas on Surrealism and tribal art. Prins and Bishop state that throughout his life, Carpenter "explored the borderlands between cultural anthropology, visual media, and tribal art."<sup>61</sup> Carpenter lived among the Aivilik community in the Arctic and was a research professor at the University of Papua and New Guinea. Adeline de Menil, Carpenter's wife and the daughter of John and Dominique de Menil, was a photographer who worked with him in New Guinea.

Carpenter notes that the Surrealists did not merely collect ethnographic objects: they also recognized a coexistence of different realities within these objects. The impact of their collections stemmed largely from their juxtapositions.<sup>62</sup> Carpenter's interest in the Surrealists introduced him to new ways of thinking, such as the use of visual puns and the collecting of ethnographic artifacts. These influences are evident in his own publications as well as in "Witnesses." Prins and Bishop state that by "employing a method of visual presentation inspired by the Surrealists, Carpenter used juxtaposition, association, analogy and dislocation to structure the arrangement of ideas in his various books."<sup>63</sup> Carpenter's style of writing and chosen themes reflect James Clifford's term "surrealist ethnography...that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with seen incongruity."<sup>64</sup>

Much of Carpenter's anthropological research involves the art of tribal cultures. In the preface to his book *Patterns that Connect: Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*,<sup>65</sup> Carpenter states that he "juxtaposed data from diverse cultures, periods, continents...in the belief that the proposed analogies are more real than the boundaries they transgress."<sup>66</sup> In *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!*, Carpenter uses puns to explain the effect of Western technology on isolated tribal cultures. In the excerpt, "WHN-1050 Is a Put On. Everybody Put On WHN Radio (Or Else!)," Carpenter explains how media has the ability to "clothe us in information, program us."<sup>67</sup> He states that the indigenous tribes of New Guinea formerly "put on the jungle, wrapping themselves in their environment...Now they wrap themselves in information. Radio reclothes them."<sup>68</sup> The information and style of writing that Carpenter incorporates into his own work

demonstrates his adoption of certain surrealist techniques. As I have pointed out in this chapter, the methods of juxtaposition, analogy, and puns evidenced in Carpenter's writing also can be found in his conception of "Witnesses."

Carpenter and the de Menils' mutual interest in Surrealism and ethnographic artifacts partially accounts for his motivation in curating the "Witnesses" exhibition at the Menil Collection. In an interview with Prins, Carpenter discusses the significance of the surrealist nature and title of his "Witnesses" exhibition:

Well I'm now mounting a show which will be a permanent installation in a Texas museum. The [de Menil] museum [in Houston] specializes in Surrealist paintings. We're going to assemble in 400 square feet about 85 to 90 examples of what the Surrealists call "witnesses." These were witnesses, corroborators to their vision.<sup>69</sup>

Many of the artifacts in the "Witnesses" gallery are thought to possess living spirits. Carpenter felt that these objects were able to witness their displacement in surrealist collections, and therefore, they also became active participants in the Surrealists' revolution. Although the specific motivations of Carpenter and the museum directed the construction of the exhibition, the Menil Collection has produced no subsequent literature on this room. The general lack of attention to this room accorded by the Menil itself is paradoxical given its strong connection to the personal collecting and display practices of the de Menils and the substantial connections it makes to the Surrealist movement.

The de Menils extensively researched the provenance of the artifacts and artworks in their collection. Pamela Smart argues that this research connected to a fundamental attitude:

...for Dominique and John, [it was] a matter of ethics – a task to which one should apply oneself in the training of one's sensibilities – effort was called for, and the acquisition of expertise was just one of a range of

modalities in which this cultivation of an aesthetic disposition was pursued.<sup>70</sup>

Kristina Van Dyke has discussed how the de Menils' library "provides evidence that at some point they began to follow the research of Griaule and his collaborators."<sup>71</sup> This literature demonstrates the de Menils' awareness of French colonialism, which affected the way they chose to acquire the ethnographic objects in their collection. She notes that The Menil Collection Archives hold a large number of object files—many of which the de Menils themselves directly managed—that document the correspondence relating to the acquisition of objects and artifacts in their permanent collection.<sup>72</sup>

The Menil Collection and Carpenter own the objects displayed in the "Witnesses" exhibition, and therefore many have known provenances in their object files. These records evidence the connections between objects in this exhibition and the Surrealists, as well as reveal the channels used to obtain the items. One example is the extensive documentation of the *Wildman* costume. Its provenance dates backwards from a December 6, 1974 auction at the Palais Galliera, where it was purchased by Adelaide de Menil and Carpenter. The file provides further documentation and explains that this costume came with a handwritten note stating that it formerly belonged to the collection of "Adamson (naturalists) who gave their name to surreal seashells." This object file also notes that the *Wildman* costume was illustrated in *Connaissance des Arts* in December of 1970 in an advertisement for the Paris gallery, Beurdeley & Cie. Another written note declares that Beurdeley sold this costume and it eventually was bought by a "Belgian banker, the surrealist collector." This file includes extensive records of correspondence



from Adelaide de Menil and Edmund Carpenter regarding the object's origin, conservation, exhibition history, and references in various publications.

Other object files held by the Menil Collection document provenance in a more formal way, such as the file for the New Ireland friction drum used by indigenous Melanesian people, which dates back to the Adolph Speyer Collection in Berlin. John and Dominique de Menil bought this object in 1971 from the J. J. Klejman gallery in New York; it was subsequently acquired by the Menil Foundation in 1998.<sup>73</sup> These files not only evidence the interesting journey made by many of the objects in “Witnesses”; their detailed nature also attests to Carpenter's, and the de Menils', commitment to learn about the objects in their collection.

### **Issues Raised by “Witnesses”**

Carpenter's “Witnesses” exhibition embodies characteristics that classify it as a recreation of earlier surrealist collections, a retrospect of the Surrealists' display practices, an evocation of a particular collecting style, or an example of display that challenges established categorizations. The way this room is read informs how it is categorized as either pre-modern or postmodern. The range of objects displayed in “Witnesses” certainly echoes earlier collections; however, I argue that this exhibition's explicit rejection of modernist display methods and the modernist categorization of objects, as well as its placement within a modern art museum, positions this room as a repressed postmodern gallery within an otherwise modern environment.

Despite the de Menils' careful consideration of how to place their private collection into a larger art institution, the nature of Carpenter's “Witnesses” exhibition

nonetheless highlights important conflicts that surround post-colonial practices of atonement for objects that were originally appropriated through colonialist imperialism. Carpenter's room draws attention to post-colonial arguments against the appropriation and display of indigenous objects by Western institutions for purely aesthetic purposes. It also poses the question of what an appropriate display for these objects might be. The distinctiveness of the "Witnesses" room as a kind of recreation of a surrealist collection also raises questions about the extent of the Surrealists' involvement with French imperialism, despite their avowed anti-colonial beliefs and their adamant support of anti-colonial activities.

Even though the display in "Witnesses" recreates the methods used by Surrealists and prominent collectors of modern and surrealist art—including John and Dominique de Menil, André Breton, and Max Ernst—it is arguably not the ideal method of presentation for all ethnographic objects in all museum institutions. However, this exhibition constitutes a legacy of these surrealist collections, and it addresses an important aspect of the Surrealism movement. This issue is neither seen nor addressed in any other art museum in the United States. The display closely follows Dominique de Menil's belief that museums are a place for the viewer to have a personal experience with art, and that excessive information should not detract from this. Further, in the Menil Collection's documentary film on "Witnesses," Carpenter states that the Surrealists were not interested in grouping objects by their scientific classification or culture, but instead they were concerned with juxtapositions that produce analogies or chance encounters.<sup>74</sup> Surrealist collections aim to redefine and expand the notion of what is natural. They

constitute new ways of thinking about and understanding objects. By rejecting modernist classifications given to objects, these collections radically expand the notion of what art is.

For these reasons, the “Witnesses” gallery is both a problem and a solution to modernist display methods. By calling the room “Witnesses,” Carpenter acknowledges that these objects have a history that goes beyond their (Western) classification and redefinition in surrealist collections. Further, the living presence that characterizes these objects makes them aware of their appropriation by the Surrealists—making this room anti-colonialist in some ways. This exhibition also acknowledges colonialism, a significant aspect of the Surrealism movement that is not otherwise seen in American museum institutions. On the other hand, in its aestheticizing of the objects on display, Carpenter’s “Witnesses” room still does not avoid problems inherent to the display of indigenous artifacts in Western art institutions.

The Menil Collection already provides visitors with minimal information on the objects and artifacts, along with their significance to the Surrealists, in the optional “Witnesses” pamphlet. The museum could however further address these issues by producing additional literature with information on the culture and purpose of each object. Carpenter acknowledged these issues to some degree in the “Witnesses” installation; by partially covering a set of Australian Churinga stones with sand, he thereby indicates the stones’ original purpose to be seen only during sacred ceremonies.<sup>75</sup> In this way, “Witnesses” could be used a catalyst for the Menil Collection to

acknowledge the problematic aspects of collections like those of the Surrealists within current, post-colonial art historical and anthropological discourses.

Elliot and Lash state that “the Menil Collection has sought to produce a sacred modern, and in a sense it is this sacred modern project, rather than the museum itself, that is its legacy.”<sup>76</sup> Although installed twelve years after the Menil Collection became public, Carpenter’s “Witnesses” establishes a strong, though inconsistent, connection between the environment and structure of this museum and surrealist methods of collection and display. The staging of this connection is unique and unconventional within a modern art museum.

The de Menils’ interest in both modern and sacred art provides the underlying connection between the objects and artifacts in their collection and museum. They strongly believed that modern art, much like tribal art, has an ability to hold spiritual qualities; this played a significant role in their collecting style. This belief in the sacred aligned them with the Surrealists, who also found mystical properties in objects and who, furthermore, employed methods to display their collections that demonstrated this idea. Dominique de Menil made sure to incorporate these concepts into the physical installation and general atmosphere of the Menil Collection, as did Edmund Carpenter in “Witnesses.” Carpenter’s specific intentions in the installation of “Witnesses” stemmed from his personal relationship with the de Menils as well as from his own professional experience and fieldwork as an anthropologist. Understanding Carpenter and the de Menils’ approach to collecting and displaying art and artifacts is crucial when comparing

the Menil Collection and “Witnesses” to other more secular approaches to Surrealism in the United States, such as that of the Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection in the Art Institute of Chicago, and which I will examine in the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> The book, *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2010), discusses the de Menils’ dedication to education and using art as way to expose and educate the public on important contemporary issues. In his essay, “Two Museums and Two Universities: Toward the Menil Collection” (p.68-9), William A. Camfield discusses how human and civil rights issues were prominent themes in the de Menils’ exhibitions at Rice University and the De Luxe Theater in the early 1970s, which highlighted race inequality and American slavery. Additionally, in Pamela Smart’s book, *Sacred Modern* (p.88), she claims that “the de Menils sought to transform affect across a range of social domains, most notably in the fields of social justice, education and architecture as well as art, though under their auspices, all these were inevitably intertwined.”

<sup>2</sup> Kristina Van Dyke, “The Menil Collection: Houston, Texas,” *African Arts* 40, no.3 (2007): 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston website, CAMH.org.

<sup>5</sup> Doran H. Ross, “African Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,” *African Arts* 36, no.3 (2003): 37.

<sup>6</sup> Pamela Smart, “Aesthetics as a Vocation” in *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2010), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Dominique de Menil, forward to *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Mesch, “What Makes Indians Laugh’: Surrealism, Ritual and Return in Steven Yazzie and Joseph Beuys,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 6, no.1 (2012): 42.

<sup>9</sup> M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Evan Maurer, “Dada and Surrealism” in *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, vol. 2*; This essay provides a detailed account of Max Ernst’s use of bird imagery relating to his interest in indigenous cultures.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey J. Spalding, “Paintings, Collage and Prints” in *Max Ernst: From the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Ernst* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1979), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Spalding, 5. *Capricorn* was moved into storage in 1964; however, this publication is over thirty years old and additional research is needed to locate its current whereabouts and who oversaw its relocation.

<sup>13</sup> Image caption in *Art and Activism*, 261.

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- <sup>14</sup> From a quote by Lucy Lippard, “The Sculpture” in Max Ernst Exhibition Catalogue, *Max Ernst: Sculpture and Recent Painting*, ed. Sam Hunter (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966); in *Max Ernst: From the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Ernst*, 36.
- <sup>15</sup> Jeffrey J. Spalding, “Concrete Irrationality: The Surrealist Sculpture of Max Ernst” in *Max Ernst: From the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Ernst* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1979), 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Diane Waldman, “Max Ernst and a Sculpture of Fantasy,” *Art International* 11, no.2 (1967); 42.; in *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1975). 57.
- <sup>17</sup> Mesch, “What Makes Indians Laugh’,”48.
- <sup>18</sup> Quote by Lucy Lippard, from “Max Ernst and a Sculpture of Fantasy,” *Art International* 11, no.2 (1967); 42; in *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1975), 57.
- <sup>19</sup> Jeffery J. Spalding, “Primitive Art from Max Ernst’s Personal Collection,” *Max Ernst: From the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Ernst*, 50.
- <sup>20</sup> Spalding, “Primitive Art,” 50.
- <sup>21</sup> Spalding, “Primitive Art,” 54-55.
- <sup>22</sup> It is significant that a large portion of Max Ernst’s personal collection has been acquired by the Australian National Museum in Canberra Museum, which also requires more research to ascertain the relevant connections between Ernst’s collection, this museum and possible similar artifacts in the “Witnesses” gallery.
- <sup>23</sup> Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke, eds., *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 252.
- <sup>24</sup> Josef Helfenstein, the Menil Collection’s current director, and Laureen Schipsi’s book, *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil*, has been a major source in my research on the background of the de Menils’ collection and the museum’s manifestation.
- <sup>25</sup> Richard Ingersoll, “The Porosity of the Menil Collection,” in *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2010), 146.
- <sup>26</sup> Van Dyke, “The Menil Collection,” 48.
- <sup>27</sup> *Art and Activism*, 176. A reproduction of a letter from Louis Fernandez to his “dear friend” John de Menil, dated June 7, 1959, demonstrates his personal relationship with the de Menils and their trusted advisor Alexander Iolas.
- <sup>28</sup> Letter to Dominique de Menil from Edmund Carpenter dated August 27, 1997; Menil Collection Archives.
- <sup>29</sup> Claire Elliot and Miranda Lash, *The Menil Collection: Art Spaces*, (London: Scala Publishers Ltd., 2007), 32.
- <sup>30</sup> André Breton’s classification of objects in: “The Crisis of the Object,” In *Surrealism and Painting*, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 275-281.

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<sup>31</sup> An explanation of the differences between the nature of Northwest Coast tribes as contained and closed, whereas Alaskan Inuit and Yup'ik tribes are open is provided by Edmund Carpenter in the Menil Collection Archive documentary, *Witnesses with Ted Carpenter*.

<sup>32</sup> Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003), 74.

<sup>33</sup> Term references Sigfried Giedion, *When Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948); Edmund Carpenter, *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision*, (Houston: Menil Collection, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Carpenter, *Witnesses*.

<sup>36</sup> Carpenter, *Witnesses*.

<sup>37</sup> Carpenter, *Witnesses*; "*Witnesses*" with *Ted Carpenter: November 16-17, 2000*, Houston, Texas: Menil Collection Archives, 2000. DVD.

<sup>38</sup> Footnote from essay, Katharine Conley, "Is Reconciliation Possible? Non-Western Objects at the Menil Collection and the Quai Branley Museum," *South Central Review* 27, no.3 (2010). "This quotation comes from a letter to Paul Winkler from 11 April 1999 kept in the Menil archives."

<sup>39</sup> Carpenter, *Witnesses*.

<sup>40</sup> The description of objects in the "Witnesses" exhibition appears in the exhibition pamphlet provided by the Menil.

<sup>41</sup> "*Witnesses*," Menil Collection Archives documentary.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* The Surrealists did not adhere to traditional modernist classification systems. What was important to the Surrealists about this object was that a pop culture icon would be represented by this indigenous culture.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Letter to Roberto Matta from Edmund Carpenter dated June 12, 1998; Menil Collection Archives.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Carpenter, *Witnesses*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> "*Witnesses*," Menil Collection Archives documentary.

<sup>49</sup> "*Witnesses*," Menil Collection Archives documentary.

<sup>50</sup> Information provided by Susan Sutton, a curatorial assistant at the Menil Collection; classification used by Carpenter in "Witnesses" catalogue.

<sup>51</sup> *Witnesses*," Menil Collection Archives documentary.

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- <sup>52</sup> Information found in the Menil Archive object files and documentary film.
- <sup>53</sup> Information found in correspondence between Carpenter and various sources to uncover the origin of this object; from the *Wildman* object file at the Menil Collection.
- <sup>54</sup> “*Witnesses*,” Menil Collection Archives documentary.
- <sup>55</sup> Miranda Lash, “Boxed in: Imagining the Unseen in Roberto Matta's Cube Constructions,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* No. 55/56, Absconding (Spring - Autumn, 2009), 267-278.
- <sup>56</sup> Lash, “Boxed in,” 1.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>58</sup> Quote from Katherine Conley, “Is Reconciliation Possible? Non-Western Objects at the Menil Collection and the Quai Branley Museum,” *South Central Review* 27, no.3 (2010), 40; in William Rubin, “Primitivism” in *20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal in the Modern*, vol. 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 260.
- <sup>59</sup> Kristina Van Dyke, “Losing One’s Head,” *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2010), 134.
- <sup>60</sup> *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!: Edmund Carpenter*, a documentary film directed by John Bishop and Harald Prins, and the subsequent text related to the film have served as primary resources in my investigation of Edmund Carpenter’s construction of “Witnesses.” PDF documents on the DVD: Text from the book *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!*; Annotated film transcript; Harald Prins and John Bishop, “Edmund Carpenter: Explorations in Media and Anthropology,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 117 (2001-2002): 110-129; essay by Bunny McBride; and a 1998 interview of Edmund Carpenter by Harald Prins.
- <sup>61</sup> Harald E.L. Prins and John Bishop, “Edmund Carpenter: Explorations in Media and Anthropology,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 117 (2001-2002): 110.
- <sup>62</sup> Edmund Carpenter, *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974).
- <sup>63</sup> Prins and Bishop, “Edmund Carpenter: Explorations in Media and Anthropology,” 131-132.
- <sup>64</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 146.
- <sup>65</sup> Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Patterns that Connect: Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996).
- <sup>66</sup> Schuster and Carpenter, 8.
- <sup>67</sup> Carpenter, *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!*, 48.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>69</sup> Harald Prins, interview transcript, *Oh, What a Blow the Phantom Gave Me!: Edmund Carpenter*, 1.



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<sup>70</sup> Smart, *Sacred Modern*, 79. Smart discusses in detail the extent to which the de Menils researched the objects in their collection, including ethnographic objects. She states that John de Menil himself largely performed this research until his death, and this research was important to the collection for legality and for making sound investments.

<sup>71</sup> Van Dyke, "The Menil Collection," 40. Further research is needed to find out the specific books in their collection.

<sup>72</sup> Van Dyke, "The Menil Collection," 42.

<sup>73</sup> The Menil Collection graciously provided information from their object files.

<sup>74</sup> "*Witnesses*," Menil Collection Archives documentary.

<sup>75</sup> Katharine Conley, "What Makes a Collection Surrealist: Twentieth-Century Cabinets of Curiosity in Paris and Houston," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 6, no. 1 (2012): 14-15,

<sup>76</sup> Elliot and Lash, 37.

## CHAPTER 3

### MODERN DISPLAY PRACTICES IN AMERICAN ART MUSEUMS

In this chapter I compare the display methods utilized in the Menil Collection's "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision" to those of other public art institutions in the United States, specifically, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. By examining the display practices carried out in the permanent collections of these institutions, I support my argument that Edmund Carpenter's "Witnesses" gallery displays, but also critiques, the uniquely heterogeneous nature of the Menil's Surrealism collection. In "Witnesses" Carpenter critiques conventional art museum practices by rejecting modernist classification and valuation of art; he also produces his own categories of value based on earlier surrealist reclassification of the (cultural) object. Additionally, he identifies the objects in his exhibition as "witnesses" or active participants that are able to observe their (morally questionable) appropriation into such surrealist collections. By doing this, Carpenter acknowledges that that objects in the "Witnesses" gallery have a history independent from Western classification systems. Although surrealist collections elicit their own set of problems, they question standard modernist practices of display; they also challenge these methods. Carpenter uses this surrealist model in "Witnesses" even though he is critical of particular aspects of how the Surrealists approached the collecting and display of objects and artifacts.

While other art institutions in the United States possess significant surrealist or ethnographic collections—or even both—they do not acknowledge surrealist methods of collecting or display. Instead, they separate and categorize works based on their

geographic origin. These collections also occupy physically separate wings within these museums. With the exception of the “Witnesses” exhibition, the Menil Collection also separates its substantial collections of indigenous objects from its displays of European and modern art. The “Witnesses” room, then, contradicts the rest of the Menil museum. It is important to note that the museums I discuss in this chapter have periodically held temporary exhibitions that have positioned modern art alongside ethnographic objects, and therefore included a heterogeneous style of display. However, the permanent structure of these institutions physically separates their collections into galleries based on traditional classifications of the Western art canon.

### **The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston**

Dominique and John de Menils’ deep influence on and active involvement in the acquisition of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston’s (MFAH) collection during the 1950s and 1960s must be taken into account in considering that collection and its many analogous objects with the de Menils’ collection. Even so, the collection and display methods of the MFAH differ from those of the Menil Collection and “Witnesses.” John de Menil began his relationship with the MFAH in 1947 by joining the Accessions Committee. Elected to the Board of Trustees in 1954, he became a member of the Executive Committee in the following year.<sup>1</sup>

John played an active role in hiring James Johnson Sweeney, the MFAH’s Director from 1961 to 1967. He worked closely with Sweeney during his tenure at the museum and advised him on acquisitions of African and Oceanic objects for the permanent collection.<sup>2</sup> The current director of the Menil Collection Josef Helfenstein notes, “when it came to building collections, Sweeney and the de Menils focused on

issues of quality and eclecticism rather than on a comprehensive or systematic mode of acquisition.”<sup>3</sup> This relates closely to the spiritual nature of displaying modern and “primitive” objects in exhibitions held at the MFAH during this time, and to the forty-one artworks donated by the de Menils to the MFAH during Sweeney’s tenure as museum director, which include works by Claes Oldenburg and Jackson Pollock.<sup>4</sup> Helfenstein further states that:

...like many prominent collectors and curators of the era, the de Menils and Sweeney assembled extensive collections of ethnographic and modern art, which they did not hesitate to combine jointly in various shows...thus, in his installations at the MFAH, Sweeney frequently juxtaposed “primitive” artifacts and ritual objects with canonical modernist paintings and sculptures.<sup>5</sup>

The de Menils also donated numerous indigenous objects from their personal collection to the MFAH in a proactive attempt to help the museum build up its permanent collection of ethnographic artifacts. The de Menils are recognized at the entrance of the Caroline Wiess Law building among the other major donors to the MFAH.

The permanent collection at the MFAH currently contains both surrealist and indigenous art; however, the current separation of the artworks into various collections based on geographic origin completely ignores the ethnographic aspect of Surrealism and rejects any surrealist legacy in its display practices. Founded in 1900, the MFAH has impressive holdings that range from antiquities to contemporary art. Regarded as the “largest cultural institution in the southwest region” of the United States, the museum’s collection incorporates art from many cultures, including a substantial accumulation of African, Native American, Oceanic, and pre-Columbian art.<sup>6</sup>

The MFAH's main campus is comprised of two buildings connected by an underground light tunnel designed by artist James Turrell. The Audrey Jones Beck building and the Caroline Wiess Law building house the majority of the museum's collections. The MFAH's permanent exhibitions of modern and European art occupy galleries physically separate from those devoted to the arts of Africa, Oceania, Native America, and the pre-Columbian Americas. Additionally, the separation of the collections into different buildings largely reflects the geographically distinct and separate provenance of the objects displayed. The Beck Building contains most of the museum's European and modern art, whereas the Wiess Law Building houses the MFAH's collections from indigenous cultures.

The surrealist artworks in the MFAH's permanent collection are displayed in galleries on the second floor of the Audrey Jones Beck building among the museum's sizable European Art collection. This collection is arranged in chronological order and ranges from thirteenth-century to mid-nineteenth-century art. Modern and contemporary art is also housed in the Caroline Wiess Law building, but is still physically separated from the collections of art from indigenous cultures. These Western galleries follow modernist art museum practices; they do not position art inside of vitrines, and they do not acknowledge heterogeneous display methods or objects from indigenous cultures.

Civilization and geographic region of origin provide the primary organizational criteria for the displays in the galleries of ethnographic objects at the MFAH; however, aesthetic likeness and functionality also play a role in some of the objects' categorization. The lower level of the Wiess Law building houses a large portion of the displayed Native American collection, and includes jewelry, pottery, and Hopi and Zuni kachina dolls

from the southwestern United States. In this gallery space, which forms the walkway into the building from the James Turrell tunnel, the objects either hang on walls inside glass vitrines or stand inside glass cases placed on freestanding podiums. Ostensibly, the street-level entrance to the Wiess Law building serves as the permanent location for the Oceanic art collection. In practice, large temporary exhibitions often displace this collection save a few left hanging in a glass vitrine on a wall near the coat check and elevator. This gives them the appearance of mere afterthoughts.

A labyrinth of interconnected galleries displaying the African, pre-Columbian, and Northwest Coastal collections, along with the remainder of the MFAH's Native American artifacts, make up the mezzanine level of the Wiess Law building. These permanent exhibits include many objects donated from the de Menils' personal collection as well as others on loan from the Menil Collection—for example, an African *Côte d'Ivoire* anthropomorphic hornbill from the Senufo Poro Society, a Dogon ceremonial water trough from Mali, a pre-Columbian Aztec figure of a standard-bearer, and a Yup'ik wolf spirit mask.

An identical dark green shade of wall paint differentiates these indigenous galleries from the other galleries in the museum. Most of the displayed objects either hang or stand behind glass-covered walls and in large free-standing vitrines that act as partitions, although, a few of the larger objects, such as the de Menil water trough, stand in the middle of the galleries, enclosed by ropes. Object labels providing information on the culture and intended function of each object accompany the ethnographic artifacts in these galleries, offering a small photograph of each item to help the viewer distinguish it from the array of objects in the same vitrine. Additional labels describe many of the

minor cultures and tribes that produced the collected artifacts, while larger wall texts in each gallery provide information on the major represented civilizations. The African galleries also display several photographs depicting the use of objects in their traditional environments as well as a map of Africa designating specific regions of the continent.

In a way, the display methods used at the MFAH treat ethnographic objects as artifacts rather than art, a common practice in modern American art museums and very different from Edmund Carpenter's approach in "Witnesses." This is most evident in the MFAH's inclusion of information on each object's geographic origin and functional purpose. The information provided for each object in the indigenous galleries differs from analogous information that is presented on wall labels for Western works of art, further distinguishing the display of ethnographic objects from the galleries showcasing European and modern art. In "On Collecting Art and Culture," James Clifford examines how museum presentation of ethnographic artifacts is often collective and aims to represent an entire culture. The information provided for these MFAH objects include their original functions and the societies in which they were produced. For example, the object label for a Native American artifact at the MFAH reads: "Hopi, Arizona, *Sio Shalako Kachina*, 1919-1940, Wood, paint, feathers, horse hair, leather thongs, string, and thread, 22 x 16 1/8 x 5 1/4 inches." Additional information explains the spiritual qualities and functions ascribed to kachina dolls by Native American cultures. Works of art, on the other hand, are presented as original compositions that are produced by individual artists for aesthetic purposes. The information included on the object label for a Surrealist painting displayed in MFAH's permanent collection reads: "Joan Miró, Spanish, 1893-1983, *Painting (Circus)*, 1927, Oil on Canvas, 54 1/2 x 33 1/4."

Clifford further discusses the typical classifications given to objects and their ability to shift from “ethnographic object” to “art object” when incorporated into fine art museum collections.<sup>7</sup> While this is certainly true to an extent, and the display of ethnographic objects at the MFAH seems to follow Clifford’s view of representing an entire culture, the indigenous galleries at the MFAH clearly differ from the galleries that display Western art. This difference in the presentation of ethnographic vs. Western objects seems not to display the “shift” Clifford discusses and is apparent in all of the museums I examine in this thesis, including the Menil Collection.

The Menil Collection galleries that contain ethnographic objects are separated from modern European and American art. Further, a large foyer distances the ethnographic objects from the Surrealism collection; yet the atmosphere is markedly different from that of the MFAH. The gallery space and installation of artworks at the Menil create a reserved atmosphere. Information that is provided for each object is limited and allows the viewer to experience the art and appreciate its aesthetic qualities without the distraction of large blocks of information. In addition, many of the objects in the Menil’s indigenous galleries are placed openly on the floor, not encircled by ropes or encased in glass vitrines; this creates a more accessible and interactive experience for the viewer. The “Witnesses” room not only contrasts sharply with the style of display at the MFAH, but also with the majority of the remaining Menil Collection, in its inclusive display of objects from different indigenous cultures while also incorporating the European and modern art that is conventionally isolated from ethnographic “artifacts” in American art institutions.



The de Menils remained prominent patrons of the MFAH during the 1960s. They provided the institution with generous monetary donations and gifted many more artworks from their personal collection.<sup>8</sup> Although they provided the MFAH with a myriad of modern artworks and objects from African, Oceanic, and other indigenous cultures, in its permanent exhibitions that institution chose to follow common modernist museum practices by keeping these works separated from one another in completely different areas of the museum. This differs from the heterogeneous display methods that the de Menils personally preferred; many of the art exhibitions they participated in also utilized heterogeneous display, as does Edmund Carpenter's contemporary "Witnesses" exhibition in the Menil Collection.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at The Art Institute of Chicago**

The Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) is another significant American fine arts museum that deals with both Surrealist and ethnographic art, and it is also relevant to a comparative discussion of Carpenter's "Witnesses" exhibition. The AIC, like the Menil Collection, holds one of the largest public collections of surrealist art in the United States: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection. The Bergman Collection also began as a private collection before its later bequeathment to a public institution. In the introduction to the collection catalogue, *Surrealist Art: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago*, Dawn Ades notes that "in accordance with the example set by the Surrealists, the Bergmans' interests extended to a wide range of objects from many periods and places."<sup>10</sup> The Bergmans personally collected and displayed art in their home in a manner reminiscent of the Surrealists, mixing surrealist

art with ethnographic and found objects. This display method is also similar to that used by the de Menils in their home and by Carpenter in “Witnesses.”<sup>11</sup>

As it is displayed in the Art Institute of Chicago the Bergman Collection includes only surrealist and modern artworks. Only the introduction of the collection catalogue acknowledges that they collected ethnographic artifacts as well. Although the Bergmans employed surrealist collecting methods, the AIC presents their collection as a modern secular display of surrealist artworks. The AIC transplanted the private Bergman Collection into its large and pre-existing traditional art institution. As a secular institution, the AIC collects and displays art based on a didactic structure that aims to expose the public to wide range of cultural artifacts. In the Bergman Collection, the museum follows this same objective organization but allows for minor distinctions between its display and the other modern art galleries. In contrast, Dominique de Menil closely managed the transition of her own collection into a building designed specifically for that purpose. For this reason, the Menil Collection, especially the “Witnesses” room, expresses the de Menils’ ideas and viewpoints on both art itself and their display preferences, whereas the AIC does not communicate the (surrealist) methods and philosophy of the Bergmans.

Lindy and Edwin Bergman were prominent collectors of modern art in Chicago beginning in the 1950s, and greatly influenced Chicago art institutions throughout their lifetimes. Edwin Bergman held a position on the Board of the Art Institute and was a founder of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago in 1967. He served as President of the MCA from 1974-76, and Lindy served on the Women’s Board and Board of Trustees. Further, the couple established the Bergman Gallery at the University of

Chicago where Edwin served on the Board of Trustees from 1976-86. In 1982, the couple founded The Edwin and Lindy Bergman Joseph Cornell Gallery at the AIC and donated thirty-seven works by the artist to the museum; in addition, the Bergmans loaned over seventy other surrealist works to the museum in 1991.<sup>12</sup>

The Bergmans' general interest in modern art and Surrealism, and in Joseph Cornell's work in particular, largely defined their personal collection. They acquired art from leading surrealist artists like Max Ernst's sculpture *An Anxious Friend* (1944), René Magritte's painting *The Banquet* (1958), and Yves Tanguy's object-painting *The Certitude of the Never Seen* (1944). In addition to these surrealist artworks, they collected objects from indigenous cultures, including pre-Columbian and Oceanic artifacts. Today, the Bergman Collection in the AIC holds over one hundred works of art, including pieces by Cornell and Wifredo Lam, an exquisite corpse drawing by Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Max Morise, and André Breton, and other surrealist objects, sculptures, drawings and paintings.<sup>13</sup>

The Bergman Collection's location in the Modern Art wing on the third floor of the AIC—which was designed by Menil Collection architect Renzo Piano—somewhat isolates it from the rest of the museum's modern art collection (emphasized by means of wall partitions). Still, this exhibition follows many of the display practices used throughout this museum: the light brown wood floor, white walls, and the information provided on object labels all echo the other modern art galleries. A wall text at the entrance to the collection provides additional information on the Bergmans, their collecting preferences, and the contributions they made to the AIC and other Chicago art institutions. René Magritte's 1964 *The Tune and Also the Words*, and other surrealist

paintings and works on paper in this gallery, are hung in the same conventional manner that can be found in the museum's other modern art galleries; however, the Bergman Collection display groups the surrealist artworks closer together than is elsewhere to be found in the AIC. Glass walls form showcases for Joseph Cornell's boxes, surrealist objects by Man Ray and Salvador Dalí, and smaller paintings and works on paper. Larger surrealist sculptures occupy freestanding podiums, enclosed in glass vitrines.

The AIC makes use of glass vitrines to display many of the works in the Bergman Collection. These are also used in the two galleries of African and Native American art that are located on the first floor of the museum, along with collections from other indigenous cultures. The presentation of objects in the AIC's galleries that contain ethnographic artifacts clearly realizes the modern structure of the institution: clean-cut glass vitrines and glass-covered walls separate the objects from the viewer. Vitrines played a significant role in the display of many Surrealist exhibitions, including the aforementioned 1936 "Surrealist Exhibition of Objects." In the introduction to the book *Sculpture and the Vitrine*, John C. Welchman states "the vitrine is, first and foremost, a marker of difference...at the same time the vitrine bears with it the proposition that the objects inside constitute a specific class of property."<sup>14</sup> The difference and class designation that Welchman discusses explicates art institutional practices that position indigenous objects as artifacts. The incorporation of vitrines into the Bergman Collection's display is what distinguishes the artworks in this collection from those stationed in the remaining modern art galleries at the AIC. Like the Bergman Collection, the use of vitrines visually distances the "Witnesses" room from the surrounding Surrealism galleries at the Menil Collection; however, Carpenter's heterogeneous

installation of art and artifacts into these vitrines refuses the conventional modernist class distinctions attributed to objects. Modern museums, including the Menil Collection, frequently employ vitrines to display ethnographic objects, and the AIC uses vitrines as showcases for its collections of indigenous objects as well as for many of the surrealist artworks in the Bergman Collection.

AIC director and president, James N. Wood, states that “as museum trustees, Lindy and Ed Bergman believed that intensely private artistic statements should be integrated with larger or more public works of art within a museum’s galleries and should not be segregated by medium, as is common practice.”<sup>15</sup> This statement refers specifically to a loan of seventy-five artworks that the Bergmans gave to the AIC in 1991; along with thirty-seven Joseph Cornell box-constructions they gifted to the museum in 1982 and four additional donations; these items would eventually constitute the Bergman Collection as it currently stands in the AIC.<sup>16</sup> Although the Bergman Collection only represents surrealist artworks from the original collection, the display in the Bergman galleries differs slightly from the museum’s other modern art galleries because it groups works on paper, paintings, sculpture, and surrealist objects together and uses vitrines to enclose modern works of art.

While the Bergmans and the de Menils had similar approaches to collecting and to displaying their personal collections in their homes, the relocation of each collection to a public art institution produced significantly different results. Walter Hopps commented:

Generally, it has been the case that private collections are absorbed into larger collective endeavors. It is the intent of The Menil Collection, even as it becomes a public institution, to preserve and proceed from the characteristics that have been unique to it in its formation.<sup>17</sup>

There are slight differences between the display of art in the Bergman Collection and in the rest of the modern art galleries at the AIC. But overall, the collection's "absorption" into an established secular art institution followed the museum's already established display methods. Dominique de Menil, on the other hand, constructed a specific space for her collection. While many of her display preferences remain visible in the overall environment of the Menil Collection, the heterogeneous style of display in "Witnesses" most closely follows the methods used by the Surrealists, as well as the private installations of the Bergman and de Menil collections in their homes. These methods are not reflected in the Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago.

### **Leading American Art Museums**

Ethnographic Surrealism is sometimes acknowledged and other times ignored in two other leading American art institutions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), both located in New York City. The Met more closely resembles the Menil Collection in the universalizing nature of its encyclopedic collections. Like the Menil, the Met has significant, but segregated, modern art and ethnographic collections; only the "Witnesses" room makes the Menil unique in this respect. MoMA, on the other hand, serves as a standard model for modern art museums in the world but does not address ethnographic objects at all. Instead it focuses on European and American modern art. Although both MoMA and the Menil Collection are modern art institutions, the Menil takes a very different approach to its atmosphere and collection.

## **The Museum of Modern Art**

The de Menils made an effort to associate themselves with the Museum of Modern Art. Between 1949 and 1969 they donated seventeen artworks from their personal collection to the museum, including Max Ernst's bronze sculpture *The King Playing with the Queen*.<sup>18</sup> In a letter to Alfred Barr that discusses the Ernst piece, John de Menil explicitly expresses the couples' appreciation of MoMA.<sup>19</sup> Further, he served on MoMA's International Committee from 1954 to 1973 and on the Board of Trustees from 1962 to 1973.

MoMA currently houses six floors of galleries dedicated to modern and contemporary paintings, sculpture, prints, drawings, architecture, design, photography, film, electronic media, and illustrated books. Since its conception in 1929, MoMA has been an extremely influential modern art museum. The permanent collection does not include art or objects from indigenous cultures; it focuses primarily on the Western canon of art or art from Europe and America.<sup>20</sup>

A brochure published in 1929 highlights MoMA's inclination towards Western art. It states that MoMA's mission is "to establish a very fine collection of the immediate ancestors, American and European, of the modern movement."<sup>21</sup> Although the museum claimed to be international in scope, in the 1948 book *Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art*, MoMA's then-director Alfred H. Barr Jr. presented only one indigenous object among his lists of the categories of art held in the museum's collection: in the category "Folk Sculpture," he included a 1939 totem pole produced by John and Fred Wallace, members of the Haida tribe.<sup>22</sup>

Despite MoMA's record of displaying surrealist art in its collection and of recognizing Surrealism as an important modern movement, there has been an absence of ethnographic Surrealism and indigenous artifacts in its permanent holdings. The museum has, however, showcased ethnographic objects in numerous temporary exhibitions, including its most infamous acknowledgment of art from indigenous cultures, "Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" (1984). This controversial exhibition presented objects from indigenous cultures alongside modern European and American works of art to "evidence" how the aesthetics of ethnographic objects have influenced modern art. Louise Tythacott describes some of the critical response to this exhibition: "[Hal] Foster, [James] Clifford and [Thomas] McEvilley exposed MOMA's ideology of visual modernism as a form of cultural imperialism in which Western criteria of quality are forced upon exotic objects."<sup>23</sup> This debate revealed an ideology at MoMA that devalued indigenous objects and did not recognize them as intrinsically and independently worthy art objects. Instead, from the limited Western perspective of this exhibition, the primary or indeed only value of an ethnographic object comes from its association to modern European or American art.

Although exhibitions like "Primitivism" displayed modern art alongside the ethnographic objects often collected by the Surrealists, and also emphasized the aesthetic qualities of objects rather than their functional purposes, their intent differed significantly from that of the Surrealists or of the de Menils. In contrast, "Witnesses" highlights the aesthetic qualities of both ethnographic artifacts and Western art, and thus suggests that both have equal value. The objective of Carpenter's heterogeneous display in "Witnesses" is not only to invite comparisons of indigenous artifacts to modern art—



which surrealist collections certainly did—but also, and crucially, to acknowledge that each object, indigenous or modern, holds inherent value.

The criticism that has surrounded MoMA’s “Primitivism” exhibition—much like “Witnesses”—raises questions regarding the ideal display for ethnographic artifacts in art institutions. While indigenous objects that are placed into art museums—and classified as art objects—are often displayed more as artifacts in relation to Western art, they still lose their original identification. The nature of the display in “Witnesses” follows this practice by providing no information in the room and by making the objects purely aesthetic. However, in opposition to MoMA’s exhibition, the value of indigenous objects in “Witnesses” is not based on the degree of their influence on modern Western art, but instead the room focuses on each object as having equal and individual value.

### **The Museum of Primitive Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art**

John de Menil also served on the Board of Trustees for the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA) in the 1960s. The MPA, which operated from 1957-1976, held substantial collections of objects from Oceania, Africa, and the Americas. This institution was unique in the United States in its collecting of indigenous artifacts for aesthetic, not anthropological, purposes. A 1962 MPA exhibition displayed objects from the de Menils’ collection, including those from Africa, France, Greece, Iran, North America, Siberia, South America, Spain, and Syria.<sup>24</sup>

Nelson A. Rockefeller, MoMA President from 1939-1941, was also a co-founder of the MPA and donated his collection of tribal art to it. Kate Ezra considers the MPA to have been an outgrowth of MoMA, pointing to the MPA’s location behind the larger museum and the two institutions’ many overlapping staff and board members.<sup>25</sup>

However, the permanent collection at the Met—not the MoMA—absorbed the holdings of the MPA after it closed in 1976. Clarke and Bickford Berzock note that American art institutions began incorporating African Art and other ethnographic objects into their permanent collections in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and that “the collection of the Museum of Primitive Art began to be transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1978, which opened its permanent galleries dedicated to the arts of Africa, the Americas, and Oceania in 1982.”<sup>26</sup> Even though the transplanting of these ethnographic objects into the Met’s permanent collection arguably demonstrates an acknowledgement of their value as art objects, the structure of the museum still physically separates them from European and modern art.

Today the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the largest art institution in the United States. The collection ranges from classical antiquity to modern art, including objects from indigenous cultures, with the galleries housing the permanent collections of art from African, Oceanic, and Native American cultures located on the first floor of the museum. This collection consists of nine galleries grouped together but organized by geographic region. In keeping with display methods traditionally used for ethnographic objects in modern museums, the Met uses vitrines to showcase many of the objects in its collection. Wall labels in these galleries include maps and provide information on the presented objects’ geographic location and cultures, while individual object labels provide information on each artifact. Similar to the other museums discussed in this chapter, the Met employs a modernist approach to displaying objects from indigenous cultures in its collection. This is in great contrast to the simulation of a surrealist collection and display in the “Witnesses” room at the Menil Collection.

This chapter's discussion of the display methods used by major art museums demonstrates how the heterogeneous nature of the contents and display in "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision" make the Menil Collection unique among other art institutions in the United States. I have argued that more than any other public art exhibition in the United States the "Witnesses" room, both intentionally and institutionally acknowledges the surrealist interest in ethnographic artifacts in its method of display.

Dominique de Menil writes, "Great museums are overloaded with masterpieces, each fighting for attention, and we are bombarded with information that distracts from contemplation and remains foreign to the magic of a great painting."<sup>27</sup> The Menil Collection generally follows modern art museum display practices by separating modern art from ethnographic objects, even though the spacious and inviting environment produced by Dominique de Menil allows the viewer to have a more personal experience with this art. The other major art institutions I have examined in this chapter may include ethnographic objects in their permanent collections, or periodically hold heterogeneous exhibitions, but the display practices used in the permanent galleries of these museums keep artworks and artifacts physically separated from each other based on the traditional Western categories of the art canon. Only Edmund Carpenter's "Witnesses" room can be considered a direct legacy of surrealist collecting and methods of display, thus making the Menil Collection truly unique among U.S. art museums.

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Camfield, "Two Museums and Two Universities: Toward The Menil Collection," *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2010), 49-73.

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<sup>2</sup> Josef Helfenstein, introduction to *A Modern Patronage: The de Menil Gifts to American and European Museums* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2007), 22; 31.

<sup>3</sup> Helfenstein, 23.

<sup>4</sup> “Primitive” was common terminology used to indicate indigenous objects for large part of the twentieth century; Helfenstein, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Helfenstein, 30.

<sup>6</sup> See the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston website, [mfah.org](http://mfah.org), *The MFAH: An Architectural History*. The main campus of the MFAH consists of two main buildings: the Audrey Jones Beck building and the Caroline Wiess Law building, in addition to the Glassel School of Art and the Lily and Hugh Roy sculpture garden; the Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens and Rienzi decorative arts collection are located nearby.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on Clifford’s examination, see his chapter “On Collecting Art and Objects” in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Kristina Van Dyke, “The Menil Collection: Houston, Texas,” *African Art* 40, no.3 (2007): 44.

<sup>9</sup> Other provocative Houston art exhibitions that de Menils were involved with include: “Islands Beyond: An Exhibition of Ecclesiastical Sculpture and Modern Paintings,” University of St. Thomas, 1958; “Other Voices: An Exhibition of Artifacts of Religious and Supernatural Beliefs of Other Cultures,” University of St. Thomas, 1962; “A Young Teaching Collection,” MFAH, 1969; “Raid the Icebox 1 with Andy Warhol: An Exhibition Selected from the Storage Vaults of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design,” Rice Museum, 1969; “Some American History,” Rice Museum, 1971; “The De Luxe Show,” De Luxe Theater, 1971. (Information provided in *Art and Activism*).

<sup>10</sup> Dawn Ades, introduction to *Surrealist Art: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997), XII.

<sup>11</sup> Additional research is needed to examine the private displays of the de Menil and Bergman collections in their homes.

<sup>12</sup> See the introduction to the Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection catalogue by Dawn Ades for further information on the Bergmans, their collection, and their contribution to Chicago’s art institutions.

<sup>13</sup> Highlights from this collection include: Wifredo Lam, *Study for “The Jungle,”* 1942; Salvador Dalí, *Imaginary Portrait of Lautréamont at the Age of Nineteen Obtained According to the Paranoiac-Critical Method,* 1937; Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Large Owl),* 1948; Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Max Morise, and André Breton, *Cadavre Exquis,* 1928; Jean (Hans) Arp, *Torso-Kore,* 1958. (Information provided in the Bergman Collection Catalogue).

<sup>14</sup> John C. Welchman, introduction to *Sculpture and the Vitrine* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 2.

<sup>15</sup> James N. Wood, preface to *Surrealist Art: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), VI.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Hopps, introduction to *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from John de Menil to Alfred Barr is printed on page 8 of *A Modern Patronage: The de Menil Gifts to American and European Museums*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> The de Menils were avid supporters of the Museum of Modern Art and gave it great praise; however, they intentionally developed the structure and environment of the Menil Collection to offer the opposite look and experience for its viewers. Both modern art institutions follow many of the same curatorial practices in regards to aesthetics, but Dominique de Menil wanted the Menil Collection to be quiet and relaxing, like her home, allowing the viewer to have a personal experience with the art.

<sup>21</sup> Brochure printed in the book, *Art in Our Time: An Exhibition of Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art and the Opening of its New Building, Held at the Time of the New York World's Fair*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939), 29.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1948), 295.

<sup>23</sup> Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003), 10.

<sup>24</sup> Geraldine Aramanda and Sean Nesselrode, *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2010), 303.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the Museum of Primitive Art, see Kate Ezra's essay, "Collecting African Art at New York's Museum of Primitive Art," in *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display*, 122-149.

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke, introduction to *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>27</sup> Dominique de Menil, forward to *The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 8.

## CONCLUSION

The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, exhibits Dominique and John de Menils' formerly private art collection and constitutes one of the largest public holdings of surrealist art in the United States. Edmund Carpenter, an anthropologist and the de Menils' son-in-law, constructed his permanent exhibition, "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision," in the Surrealism wing as a recreation of a surrealist collection. This exhibition's postmodern nature in an otherwise modern art institution as well as its deliberate inclusion in the Surrealism collection is not seen in any other American art museum, and it makes the Menil Collection unique in this respect. The de Menils' interesting biographies and the museum's distinctive architecture have made the Menil Collection the focus of past art historical and scholarly literature; however, a detailed analysis of "Witnesses" that demonstrates the exhibition's relationship to surrealist display methods and to standard art museum practices has yet to be widely addressed by the Menil Collection or academic scholars. Thus, by analyzing the "Witnesses" room as a legacy of surrealist display, my thesis addresses overlooked issues of modernist collecting and display.

Max Ernst's personal collection and close relationship with the de Menils establishes a direct link between the couples' collecting interests and surrealist collections. More specifically, it shows how surrealist ideas influenced the private display of the de Menils' collection and Edmund Carpenter's anthropological and curatorial endeavors. In a letter to Roberta Matta, Carpenter specifically describes his intent for "Witnesses" to resemble the Surrealists' private spaces, such as André Breton's Parisian

atelier.<sup>1</sup> Carpenter further discusses his vision for the exhibition's conception and its displayed objects through personal correspondence with Dominique de Menil.<sup>2</sup>

The differences between Carpenter's "Witnesses" exhibition and the display methods used in other comparable American art museums' permanent collections further support my argument. The Menil Collection's relaxed and spacious environment is different from that of other art institutions in the United States; however, it chooses to follow the standard art museum practice that separates collections based on geographic origin. "Witnesses" is then inconsistent with the rest of the Menil Collection. Its eclectic and cluttered positioning of high art and artifacts from indigenous cultures among other objects normally deemed unsuitable for museum display—such as souvenirs and seashells—makes "Witnesses" a unique and repressed exhibition within the museum (it is not a coincidence that it is located in a dark corner of the museum). The Surrealists used heterogeneous and non-traditional methods of collection and display to break down the conventional modernist ideas of what constitutes worthy art objects. Their objective was to expand the way art and objects are perceived and understood by challenging the limiting perspective of Western classification systems. Their collections undermine and destabilize modern museum institutions by ascribing equal value to a wide range of disparate objects and labeling them as art, and thus radically redefining what high art might be.

By aestheticizing objects that are not usually considered art, and by placing equal value on these objects in elevating them to high art status, the "Witnesses" exhibition becomes both a problem and a solution for how objects—ethnographic artifacts in particular—are displayed in Western art museums. In this room Carpenter acknowledges

that there are problems with Surrealism's appropriation of indigenous cultures through the collecting and fetishizing of their spiritual objects. But he also recognizes that by defying modernist categories of objects, "Witnesses" provides an alternative display method that rejects this limiting view of what constitutes high art. "Witnesses" then also serves as a possible solution to the problem of the object under colonial control. The exhibition can act as a model or starting off point for other museums to think about expanding the scope of what can be labeled art in their own collections.

The lack of attention that art historical scholars have given to this room begs the question of how "Witnesses" is currently understood. What does it mean for the objects' perceived value when they are displayed in this exhibition, as opposed to their display in the separate galleries containing ethnographic objects in other areas of the museum? Academic scholars have examined the Menil Collection in a variety of contexts; however, "Witnesses" is rarely mentioned or discussed in detail. Collecting and unusual display methods were fundamental to achieving Surrealism's goal of establishing a new classification system among objects. This exhibition's absence from art historical discourse is perplexing given its status as part of the legacy of the well-known Surrealist collections held by André Breton and Max Ernst. This thesis points to an important legacy of surrealist collecting and display in "Witnesses," and it provides an analysis of the "Witnesses" exhibition that is not generally included in literature on the Menil Collection.

Additionally, this thesis can be seen as a foundation for future projects. My examination in chapter three briefly touches on the Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection as it currently stands in the Art Institute of Chicago. A deeper investigation into this



collection brings up questions about its transplantation into a public art institution: Where are the ethnographic objects from the Bergmans' personal collection now; are they displayed in separate ethnographic galleries within the AIC? What does this say about the differences between the Bergmans' personal display methods and its display in a public art museum?

My analysis of "Witnesses" highlights important issues to be explored on restitution and ethnographic objects' ideal display by Western collectors and museum institutions. The widely controversial Paris auction, held on December 9 and 11, 2013, demonstrates how these issues are significant in a current art historical context. Eve auction house organized the sale, which took place at the Drouot auction house—the same institution that held auctions for André Breton's personal collections in 1931 and again in 2003—and included 172 American Indian artifacts, such as sacred Hopi katsinam masks and other revered indigenous objects.<sup>3</sup> A *New York Times* article, "Secret Birds Guide Hopi Indians' Spirits Home,"<sup>4</sup> discusses how this auction caused outrage and sparked legal action from the Hopi tribe, who attempted to prevent the auction from taking place. The Hopi argued that the items for sale "were religious objects that had been stolen many years ago," and they were believed to be "living entities with divine spirits"<sup>5</sup>; therefore, the sale of these items should be illegal. The court ruled in the auctions house's favor and claimed that French law only applies to human remains and not objects.

The United States-based Annenberg Foundation acquired twenty-four objects to return to the Hopi and Apache tribes, and the lawyer representing the Hopi in court bought a mask also to return to the tribe. Although the collectors of the sacred Hopi

artifacts had documentation stating their legal ownership of these objects, the adverse reaction to this auction demonstrates the growing perception that indigenous artifacts are unrightfully collected and displayed with disregard for their cultural significance. This event brings up issues of repatriation for ethnographic objects collected through the channels made available by colonialism and the appropriate forward-looking approach for displaying indigenous objects.

Finally, the scope of my thesis focuses solely on American art museums; however, the display in “Witnesses” more closely aligns with European museum collection and display methods. For example, the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, France, displays a partial recreation of André Breton’s collection from his Parisian apartment. Additionally, the Branly, a large nationalistic ethnographic museum also in Paris, displays its massive collection of indigenous artifacts and provides an example for the different ways ethnographic objects are collected and displayed in museum institutions.

Perhaps the future of collecting and displaying ethnographic objects in Western art institutions should be overseen by the indigenous people they belong to. Regardless of the type of institution, this future needs to include indigenous people in the conversation. “Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision” is significant because it acknowledges surrealist collecting and display methods as an important contribution of Surrealism. While problems remain regarding the nature of this heterogeneous type of collection—one that is both Western and indigenous—“Witnesses” might be used as a catalyst in addressing these concerns and in approaching an appropriate treatment of ethnographic objects in Western art institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Roberto Matta from Edmund Carpenter dated June 12, 1998. Courtesy of the Menil Collection Archives.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Dominique de Menil from Edmund Carpenter dated August 27, 1997. Courtesy of the Menil Collection Archives.

<sup>3</sup> EVE auction house, December 09, 2013 “Art Amerindien” Auction Catalogue, <http://www.auctioneve.com/html/index.jsp?id=17979&np=1&lng=fr&npp=100&ordre=1&aff=1&r=>.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Mashberg, “Secret Birds Guide Hopi Indians’ Spirits Home,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 2013, 1-2, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/17/arts/design/secret-bids-guide-hopi-indians-spirits-home.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/17/arts/design/secret-bids-guide-hopi-indians-spirits-home.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0).

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, 1.

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