



The William C. Seitz Collection

Author(s): Allen Rosenbaum, John Rewald and Frank Stella

Source: *Art Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Autumn, 1977), pp. 48-51

Published by: College Art Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/776070>

Accessed: 24-08-2017 17:05 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

College Art Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Art Journal*



George McNeil, *Green Forms Dominant*, 1938–39.

as the 1935–37 *Still Life Study* included in this exhibition, the caked and sand-encrusted surfaces have a look and a feel which hovers between 1940s Pollock and Still. Even more startlingly predictive are the paintings by McNeil. *Green Forms Dominant* of 1938–1939, for example, resembles certain of de Kooning's works from the same period. However, the variety of textures, the crude scratchings, and the eccentric hues also look forward to later de Kooning and (in passages) Hofmann.

If these and other pictures by the AAA artists provide an opening into the succeeding decade, with certain works one feels confronted with an odd time-warp sensation of ideas taken up by even more recent artists. Gertrude Greene's *Construction in Grey* of 1939, for instance, is a (mainly) wood relief whose



Paul Kelpé, *Weightless Balance I*, 1937.

odd, clunky rhythms amazingly enough predict (however fortuitously) Frank Stella's most recent pieces. With Paul Kelpé's *Weightless Balance I* of 1937 one is faced with at least the possibility of a real influence upon much later art. At first glance, this looks like an extremely dated piece: geometric solids floating in a Surrealist void. One is more bemused than bothered by the stippled texture (contrary to popular impression, oh, how those 1930s artists loved texture!).

Suddenly, one realizes that the forms, the anti-gravity, the textures—all this is a working out in a '30s painting of many of the properties found in David Smith's *Cubi* series of the 1960s. (Smith was, of course, a member of the AAA; could he possibly have stored up in his prodigious visual memory images of such works by Kelpé as this?)

All in all, this is a fascinating group of artists. One is left with a final, disturbing question: why was it that these artists, with so much going for them, were so quickly supplanted by Pollock, de Kooning, Still, *et al*, as the dominant voices of American abstraction in the 1940s? Though, from looking at this exhibition or at other works by the same artists, it would appear that Abstract Expressionism was but a short, natural step away, few of the AAA group took it. Indeed, almost perversely, those artists such as Mason and Reinhardt who went on to paint even higher quality works in the 1940s and '50s did so in large measure by renouncing (rather than working out of) their 1930s styles. This state of affairs is, perhaps, the most perplexing issue opened up—and left unresolved—by our current knowledge of the AAA. If we now pretty well understand what the AAA was like in the period 1937–41, we still need to learn what exactly happened to these artists, and why.

—Peter Walch

Peter Walch is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of New Mexico.

The William C. Seitz Collection

William C. Seitz (1914–1974) was a remarkably gifted man: an artist, a museum curator of international importance and prestige, a scholar whose contributions to the history of art have revised our ideas about the past and heightened our awareness of the present, and a dedicated teacher who stimulated and encouraged the ideas and talents of the young.

Bill Seitz was a vital and much loved member of the Princeton community, where he lived with his wife Irma from 1949 to 1960. He came to the University as a graduate student, receiving his de-

gree in 1955. One-man shows of Seitz' paintings were held at the Princeton University Art Museum in 1949 and 1950, and in 1953 he joined the faculty of Princeton's Department of Art and Archaeology. During his years at the University, Professor Seitz gave generously of himself as a teacher, historian, critic, and painter.

Princeton is now a beneficiary of the great legacy of affection and esteem in which Bill Seitz was held. Many of his friends, artists and collectors, are giving works of art to the Art Museum in his memory, and an exhibition of those con-

temporary paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints (already given or promised) was held in the Museum from February 19 to April 3, 1977.

On Saturday, February 19, an all-day symposium in honor of William Seitz was held in Princeton in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition. There were talks on 19th- and 20th-century art as well as personal recollections. The speakers, all friends of Bill Seitz, were Dore Ashton, Walter Darby Bannard, John Rewald, James Rosati, Barbara Rose, Robert Rosenblum, William Rubin, George Segal, Gerald Silk, and



Installation view of William C. Seitz Collection at Princeton. Left to right: James Hagan, Anuskiewicz, Cora Kelley Ward, Sidney Guberman, Ray Parker, Rockne Krebs (floor).

Frank Stella. Two of the talks—both personal tributes to Seitz—follow: one by the art historian John Rewald, and the other by the painter Frank Stella, who studied with Seitz at Princeton.

—Allen Rosenbaum

Allen Rosenbaum is the Assistant Director of the Princeton University Art Museum.

I would like to say a few words about myself before coming to the subject of this gathering, Bill Seitz. Let me assure you that this is not self-indulgence but a somewhat personal introduction to my appreciation of Bill.

When I was a teenager, I painted . . . rather poor pictures. I also wrote poetry. What Heinrich Heine could express in one melodious verse, I managed to convey in two pages of clumsy rhymes. My poetry was not simply bad, it was atrocious, and what I brushed on good pieces of canvas was not much better. But my loving mother was convinced that she had borne a great artist who, either as a painter or a poet, would someday enrich the aesthetic patrimony of the world. Fortunately, her son was a little smarter than that. He soon realized that his gifts were barely enough for lifelong mediocrity. And so he decided to combine his two loves: he would write—an activity he not only loved but to which he felt driven—yet he would do so on art, which meant more than anything to him.

I am afraid that in those days I com-

manded a devilish facility of the pen, a dreadful blessing furthered by too much reading of Meier-Graefe. But soon came the days when I was cured of that fatal disease, since I had to learn to express myself in foreign tongues. Nothing is more sobering and beneficial than to have to be economical with words, if only for the excellent reason that one doesn't know too many of them!

My student days in Paris were devoted simply to learning and mostly to research, and also to soaking in the beauties that abounded everywhere. In the field of 19th-century French art, the French themselves were strangely reluctant to spend their days in the uncomfortable Bibliothèque Nationale, to dig through dusty newspapers, or to go to the places where their great masters had lived and worked. Bill found that out when he was preparing his book on Monet and was notably the first to locate some of the artist's motifs.

Without knowing it, the French have learned more from Meier-Graefe than I ever did. They can write brilliantly on their painters without bothering too much about facts or dates, frequently copying each other's mistakes and never seriously hunting for new material. But oh, how elegantly they handle their language!

Of course, work was done altogether differently in those days. "Headhunting" had not yet become a fashion, so no one bothered with "secondary images" in paintings and people did not try to outdo each other in the quest for hidden

self-portraits or likenesses of Hortense in Cézanne's paintings of naked bathers. Nor were we yet obsessed with phallic symbols. We loved pictures without attempting to read anything into them in order to derive—from what we had "read"—the most debatable psychological theories.

To think that I spent many years in Paris without realizing that the Eiffel Tower, which then glowed at night, was actually the undisguised erection of Paris . . . I mean the shepherd Paris, of course, as he is about to present one of Cézanne's apples to La Belle Hélène, that gorgeous creature who was to inspire Offenbach. But then we didn't write papers either by simply warming a seat in the library and accumulating quotable quotes without ever, Heaven forbid, looking at a work of art. Art was something our lives were made of, that we loved with our eyes and hearts instead of seeing in it a pretext for hairsplitting arguments, psychological interpretations, or rehashing of well-known material.

And loving art, we—or I, if you wish—soon found out that those who had written most penetratingly about it, and sometimes also most beautifully, were actually painters. Some were painters first and wrote only occasionally, such as Whistler and Maurice Denis. Others considered themselves painters above all but in reality made their greater contribution in their writings. Among these were Roger Fry and, subsequently, Kurt Badt, also Tony Clark and, still with us, Lawrence Gowing. I cannot say to which of these groups Bill Seitz belonged; suffice it to insist that he was a painter and that to him, as to all the others I have named and many more, art was the basic element of his existence, whether he practiced it or wrote about it.

In one of her letters to a friend, Virginia Woolf describes how, at a Bloomsbury gathering, her sister, who was a painter, left the room and returned with a small picture of a few apples by Cézanne. "Roger Fry," she wrote, "very nearly lost his senses. I've never seen such a sight of intoxication. He was like a bee on a sunflower."

It is Roger Fry's excitement that thrills me, for it is this excitement, this constantly renewed visual enthusiasm that distinguishes the painter-art historian and that was also one of Bill's characteristics. But it does not only mark the sensibility of these men, it also does

something for them: it keeps them from ever being pompous. Think what a lovable man Bernard Berenson might have been if only he had painted and had added to his "tactile values" the warmth and humility of the artist who is truly awed by the achievements of the great.

I won't go so far as to say that art historians *ought* to know how to paint (after all, I myself can't pretend that I do), but I have always felt that those who have put brush to canvas approach art differently, with deeper emotion and clearer perception. They do not look for "secondary images" but—in a mysterious way—they *meet* the artist in his work, understand what he had wanted to do and appreciate how he had reached his goal or at least had come close to it. When I contemplate a Cézanne in the company of a painter, I sense that Cézanne speaks more clearly to him, treats him, so to speak, as a colleague, whereas I am an outsider. How I regret at such moments to have been such a dismal failure in my youth!

Bill did have that capacity, the insight, the gift for excitement, the all-encompassing need for art, the warmth and the humbleness for which I had to go so far back the better to explain whence they derive. In addition to these rare qualities, Bill was a superb scholar. It is impossible to forget how decisively he contributed to the appreciation of the late work of Claude Monet, which had been neglected for many decades. He actually convinced me to change a passage in one of my books in which, he felt, I had not done justice to Monet's series of various subjects, especially the water lilies series. It is impossible not to recall that his monograph on Monet was the first—I repeat, the first—to be written in the English language and that, in its thoroughness, it was much superior to anything that had been published on the artist until then, even in French.

Before Bill put his vast knowledge of Monet between the covers of a handsome book, he had done a tremendous amount of research and had made pilgrimages to practically all the places where the master had worked. He had taken some superb photographs of sites painted by Monet, which provided an extremely interesting insight into the artist's concept and vision. He also accompanied many paintings by superbly lucid comments.

Bill wrote exceedingly well; his descriptions were graphic and poetic. Bet-

ter still, one sensed behind his prose the man who loves art, who gets excited over paintings. And this, if you will allow me to repeat myself, is one of the ingredients that makes a great art historian. Bill's excitement was infectious. That, in itself, was a rare treat as art books go, yet there was more than enthusiasm and deep affection for his subject in Bill's monograph on Monet. Bill was a dedicated scholar, willing to go to a great deal of trouble to check a minute detail, to do the kind of spadework of which the general reader remains unaware.

Of course, Bill had carefully studied the extensive French literature on Monet, which, at that time, still left much to be desired. The artist himself had been fairly careless about dates and many of the interviews he gave in later years contain contradictory statements. Monet's "official" biographer—his friend Gustave Geffroy—whose rambling volume appeared during the master's lifetime, is often incredibly unreliable and vague. Bill used these multiple sources with proper discrimination and also tapped new sources, accumulating countless bits of information that rounded out his general picture and made it more lively. Thus he interspersed his comments with well-chosen quotations from unpublished or little-known documents, supplying all kinds of relevant details. However, he successfully avoided the danger of drowning his narrative in picturesque minutiae. His text flowed unhampered, always logically connecting biographical facts with aesthetic considerations. His step-by-step analysis of Monet's evolution and his evaluation of the artist's place within the Impressionist movement were both fascinating and instructive.

The distinguishing feature of Bill's book on Monet was the author's emotional communication with his subject, supported by impeccable scholarship. I love that volume and I loved Bill for having written it.

I would be lying if I said that I agreed with all of Bill's judgments when it came to contemporary art, that I shared all his admirations, or even always understood his breathlessly vibrant explanations. What mattered, however, was not that our views coincided; much more important was that I always respected his opinions, knowing that they expressed profound convictions. The words "profound convictions" even seem a little trite, since what Bill expressed was total

commitment. It was the same commitment that prompted him to give up a brilliant career at the Museum of Modern Art in order to devote himself to writing, painting, and teaching because these were the activities that mattered most to him. It was his painter's eye that saw better, and deeper, and more intensely than we others see that made Bill such a special figure among art historians. At the same time, it was his infectious enthusiasm, his warmth, and his unpretentiousness that made Bill such an extraordinary human being.

—John Rewald

When you showed a painting that you had been working on to Bill Seitz, his reflexive reply was almost always, "That's interesting," which meant for sure that what you were doing wasn't very good and probably not even really interesting. It meant that what you were doing was painting, and it was not awful or wrong or hideously clumsy, but it was lacking in any special pictorial accent or direction that could really engage him.

You could interest Bill by merely painting and trying hard, but he was always challenging you to do something more. Encouraging and challenging young painters was, for Bill, the natural thing to do, and he did it easily and very well. His special gift, however, was to make this teaching-learning process personal and expansive. Personal attention to bright and gifted young people has become a distorted, almost grotesque cliché, making it seem as if the obtuse and inept need impersonal attention. Leaving the social implications of education aside, Bill did have a wonderful touch with bright and gifted young people. He could take what you did, what was right in front of him at that moment, and deal with it directly, pointing out and putting down what was either wrong or awkward and praising what was accurate and special. But more than this, he was able at the same time to impart to you at that moment a sense of expansiveness and inclusiveness. You could feel the possibilities in an almost fien-dish way: if you improved the painting, if you worked at it and things broke your way a little, you could move out; your painting would become larger in the sense of worth and could find a place alongside the paintings of the past

and the present. Every little remark, every intonation, every shrug was important because painting was important. And Bill always made you feel that painting was important, that if you were trying, you were therefore always close to something good and worthwhile.

There was a funny implication that I don't think I got at the time. The implication was that painting *is* good and worthwhile and that you were lucky and fortunate to be close to something good and worthwhile. If you liked to work at painting and were able to do so, you already had it made, in a sense. The future—success, failure, and all that misery—was still waiting for you, but your worth and the worth of your endeavors was already established. Of course, the kicker here was that you had to really believe it. But that wasn't Bill's problem, and anyway he really believed it. He communicated this belief to you daily and effortlessly, and on top of it all, he obviously lived every moment of his life acting on this belief.

After Bill had given you his overall criticism of "That's interesting" for the painting you were showing him, he would bear down on the details, picking apart the structure, organization, conception, and technical manipulations that went into the painting in front of him. Invariably, he would discover that what was fucking up the painting was the edges. By this, he meant not necessarily only the edges of the painting, but also the edges of every element in the painting and the resulting effect of their individual quality and interaction. Take a painted red line in a late 1940 Hofmann, for example. Bill would be terribly worried about both sides of the line, about how one red edge cut deeply into the background white when the brush first hit the canvas, while the same edge at the spent edge of the stroke was located practically in the same plane as the background, if not on top of it. The

same concern was shown for the other edges of this red line. Where was it located spatially? Was the color really effective when it first touched the blue kidney shape? Was its final interception with a fine magenta line at the bottom okay? This concern for the edges of lines was carried over to a concern for the edges of painted shapes and planes as well. It may seem a bit peculiar, but this is a very effective technique for dealing with and discussing the necessary mechanical aspects of painting, something you can't avoid when you are actually making a painting.

In the end, Bill reinforced my fantasies, giving me a good, confident working attitude and a fine working tool, and he did it very economically with a couple of remarks: "That's interesting" and "Watch the edges."

—Frank Stella

WILLIAM C. SEITZ MEMORIAL COLLECTION

Works Presently Given and Promised June 1977

Yaacov Agam, untitled, agamograph. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George Jaffin.
Richard Anuszkiewicz, *Light Mauve Tint*, acrylic on canvas, 1971. Promised gift of the artist.
Karel Appel, *Portrait of Nina Abrams*, oil on canvas. Gift of Harry N. Abrams.
Walter Darby Bannard, *Skyways*, series of 6 serigraphs, 1969. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Feiwel.
Walter Darby Bannard, *Blind Gathering*, acrylic on canvas, 1974. Gift of the artist.
Will Barnet, *Spokane Counterpoint*, oil on canvas, 1964. Promised gift of the artist.
Max Bill, *Combination*, 4 serigraphs on polystyrol, 1970. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Feiwel.
Norman Bluhm, untitled, acrylic on paper, 1957. Anonymous gift.
Lee Bontecou, untitled, pencil on paper, 1967. Gift of Leo Castelli.
Myron Brody, *Forma Thirteen*, bronze, 1975. Gift of the artist.
Manuel Bromberg, *Cliff Section*, polyester, 1971. Gift of the artist.
James Lee Byars, untitled, paper. Gift of Richard Bellamy.
Varda Chryssa, untitled, ink and crayon on paper, 1967. Gift of Harry N. Abrams.
William Copley, *Mesdames Butterflies*, acrylic on canvas, 1974. Gift of the artist.

Benjamin Frazier Cunningham, *Scarlet Equivalued I*, oil on composition board, 1969. Promised gift of Daisy Shapiro.
Benjamin Frazier Cunningham, *Scarlet Tesseraet*, serigraph on polystyrol, 1969. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Feiwel.
Gene Davis, *South Paw*, acrylic on canvas, 1976. Gift of the artist.
Marcel Duchamp and Jacques Villon, *La Mariée*, etching and aquatint, inscribed "à Alfred Barr, en souvenir d'une longue amitié, Marcel." Gift of Alfred Barr, Jr.
Öyvind Fahlström, *Performing K. K.*, ink on paper. Gift of Harry N. Abrams.
Sam Gilliam, *Elephanta*, acrylic on canvas, 1970. Gift of the artist.
Cleve Gray, *Conjugation #194*, acrylic on canvas, 1976. Gift of the artist.
Stephen Greene, *Recall*, oil and charcoal on canvas, 1974. Gift of the artist.
Sidney Guberman, *Genève Plage*, acrylic on canvas, 1974. Gift of the artist.
James Hagan, *Column VII*, oak. Gift of the artist.
Patrick Ireland, untitled, acrylic on canvas. Gift of the artist.
Jasper Johns, *Decoy II*, lithograph, 1971–73. Gift of the artist.
Craig Kauffman, untitled, plexiglass sprayed with lacquer, 1969. Gift of Best Products, Inc., through Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Lewis.
Rockne Krebs, *XXI 1967*, plexiglass. Gift of the artist.
Seymour Lipton, study for *Empty Room*, crayon on paper, 1964. Gift of the artist.
Seymour Lipton, study for *Ring #2*, crayon on paper, 1964. Gift of the artist.
Robert Motherwell, *Hermitage*, serigraph and lithograph. Gift of the artist.
Alice Neel, *William Seitz*, oil on canvas, 1963. Gift of the artist.
Alice Neel, *Irma Seitz*, oil on canvas, 1963. Gift of the artist.
Raymond Parker, *P30*, oil on canvas, 1960. Gift of Barbara Rose.
Milton Resnick, *Solange*, oil on canvas. Gift of Dr. Max Seigel.
James Rosati, *Shorepoints II*, brass, 1966. Gift of the artist.
Lucas Samaras, untitled, liquid aluminum and objects, 1961. Promised gift of Alicia Legg.
George Segal, *Wall Relief: Torso*, plaster, 1972. Promised gift of the artist.
Hyde Solomon, *Sky and Mountain*, acrylic on canvas, 1973. Gift of Elinor F. Poindexter.
Frank Stella, *Felsztyn I*, acrylic, felt and canvas on canvas, 1971. Gift of the artist.
John Szarkowski, *Stillwater, Minnesota*, photograph, 1949. Gift of the artist.
Tadasky (Tadasuke Kuwayama), #C 181, oil on canvas, 1965. Promised gift of an anonymous donor.
Cora Kelley Ward, *Benefit*, acrylic on canvas, 1974. Gift of Leonard Bocour.
Cora Kelley Ward, *Tom's Point*, acrylic on canvas, 1974. Gift of Leonard Bocour.
Adja Yunkers, *The Sky Hides All Birds*, etching, 1976. Gift of the artist.