

## **Connoisseur, Curator, Educator—and Publisher: Merrill C. Berman, The Collector Reinvented**

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To honor its acquisition of 324 works on paper from the Merrill C. Berman Collection, The Museum of Modern Art mounted an exhibition titled *Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented, 1918–1939*. The verbal pattern of that title inspired the one that heads this essay dedicated to the collector Merrill C. Berman, himself. On his own, he has “reinvented” the role of the art collector.

Berman admits that the collecting bug has always been part of his DNA. As a teenager going around with his father following presidential campaigns, he gathered political memorabilia—posters and stickers distributed by the candidates. After graduating from Harvard in 1960, where he had studied political science and history, he did well enough as a research analyst for an investment banking firm to begin collecting art. Although, by the early 1970s, he owned work by Chaim Soutine, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, and Willem De Kooning, among others, he felt he was self-educating and focusing on investment aspects of collecting rather than collecting creatively. This cautious, risk-averse approach and a severe subsequent downturn in the stock market forced him to deaccession his entire collection in 1973–74. He then looked for new, but meaningful and affordable areas to explore.

### **CONNOISSEUR**

Initially, Berman returned to his old interest in American political memorabilia. He also started to take an interest in European decorative posters. He took multiple trips to Paris over several years in search of examples of Art Deco, Art Nouveau, and Vienna Secession posters. One of these trips presented him with the *coup de foudre*, the discovery that set him on the path from which he never looked back: the

opportunity to acquire a collection of thirty avant-garde Russian political propaganda posters that made striking use of typography and photomontage. The group included posters by artists including Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969), Vasili Elkin (1897–1991), and Gustav Klutsis (1895–1938). The pairing of visual innovation and political history always had a special appeal for Berman, but what he saw in these works was politics in a new key. The posters brought home the fervor and utopian aspiration of the Russian Revolution through the visual vocabulary of the avant-garde. The Constructivist layout, the use of photomontage, and bold typography spoke of a new world to come.

This was the mid-1970s, however, and few people were focusing on this material. Before making this transformative purchase, he sought reassurance from Mildred Constantine (1913–2008), a curator at The Museum of Modern Art. Although she was an expert on Russian film posters, she discouraged him from taking on Soviet political imagery.

He had some other qualms. He was aware that, at the time, Madison Avenue galleries had little interest in design or typography. And uniqueness/rarity was what most collectors were after, not multiples made for mass-consumption. Nevertheless, he was convinced that he was seeing “fantastic stuff.” And it was still reasonably priced. He took the risk.

Looking further, Berman realized that it was not only in Russia in the 1920s that artists were breaking traditional boundaries. He discovered that De Stijl artists in the Netherlands and members of the Bauhaus in Germany, among others, were intent on transforming the modern world and recognized no boundaries between “art” and “graphic design.” They deployed the vocabulary of the avant-garde to transform advertisements, posters, and the ephemera of everyday life. He added to the collections some of the finest examples by the German artists Kurt Schwitters, Walter Dexel, and Herbert Bayer in Germany and, in the Netherlands, the work of Bart van der Leek and Piet Zwart, among others.

## **CURATOR**

Having decided to focus on this material, Berman took an unusual stance for a collector. He was not going to invest in the field with the idea of resale. Money for the collection would come from his day job in finance. That way he could form a museum-like archive over time. In the process, he learned as much as he could from dealers and curators in the United States and abroad and built his own research library. He began to collect both horizontally—covering a great range of artists—and vertically—adding materials that elucidated particular objects, such as related maquettes, drawings, and ephemera. When he pursued items, or groups of items, it was as both a scholar and a collector.

The pursuit, of course, depended on the whims of the market. He had arrived too late for some fields; early Italian Futurism, for instance, had already been discovered. On the other hand, with the fall of the Soviet Union, an incredible windfall of Russian avant-garde materials came his way in the early 1990s. The serendipity of what emerged in the market kept him sharp. Unlike a traditional museum curator, he did not need institutional permission to take the leap when a unique opportunity arose. When Polish avant-garde publications and posters became available, for instance, they were relatively unknown in the West but Berman recognized their particular variation on Russian experiments and acquired both posters and periodicals.

A major coup for the collection was the sale by British Petroleum of their archive of commissioned work by the eminent Anglo-American designer E. McKnight Kauffer (1890–1954). Berman came upon the listing in an auction catalog by chance, contacted a friend to bid for him in London, and added some brilliant originals by the designer to the collection.

“I always wanted to avail myself of opportunities to share my collection with the world,” Berman has noted, and, gradually, the museum world, both in the United States and abroad, caught up with his

collection. A new generation of curators were interested in presenting art within its cultural context and recognized the historically misleading disciplinary division between avant-garde art and design.

According to the collection website, in the last few years, works from the Merrill C. Berman Collection have appeared in twenty-three exhibitions in thirty-eight cities in nine countries. The long-negotiated sale of 324 pieces to MoMA in 2018 led to a major [exhibition](#) in 2020–2021 and a sumptuous accompanying [catalogue](#).

## **EDUCATOR**

With the growth of the internet over the past ten years, Berman has been able to expand the collection's outreach into the public sphere. He has a representative, ever-expanding website ([mcbcollection.com](http://mcbcollection.com)), Instagram presence ([@merrillcbermancollection](https://www.instagram.com/merrillcbermancollection)), and, for those in the know, a series of curated e-mails that constitute mini-exhibitions and publications in their own right (one can subscribe at <https://mcbcollection.com/home/newsletters>). One was dedicated to the surprising subject of avant-garde letterheads.

## **PUBLISHER**

In 2014, Berman launched a program of researched and annotated publications that can be read as PDFs on the website or ordered as printed books. There are monographs on individual artists, books dedicated to avant-garde groups and movements, and new compilations inspired by the evolution of the collection itself.

These compilations, enhanced of course by the rich range of illustrations available, add another dimension to the collection. They explore hitherto unexamined relationships between groups of artists, or direct attention to lesser-known historical connections within a movement. The most recent publication *Jewish Artists, Jewish Identity 1917–1931* by Alla Rosenfeld, Ph.D., the collection's Research

Consultant for Russian and Eastern European Art, brings together interwar Jewish artists in Russia and Central Europe who bridge the worlds of secular modernity and Jewish tradition. Of course El Lissitzky and Marc Chagall are star examples of this moment, but here they share the stage with lesser-known artists who have their own take on modernizing the Jewish experience. A real surprise in this group is Issachar Ber Ryback (1897–1935), who weaves Jewish references such as Hebrew lettering into complex Cubist compositions. And his depiction of a shtetl synagogue that sits in a surrealist undulating landscape is a haunting image of its imminent disappearance.

Another such overview in a completely different vein was *Black Self-Empowerment*, which was published during the COVID lockdown in 2021. Subtitled *From 'The Crisis' to the Black Panthers, 1920s–1990s*, it illustrates visually, but subliminally, the growing anger of the black population over decades. The decorous covers of the *The Crisis*, a periodical launched in 1928 with the subtitle *A Record of the Darker Races*, begins the story. It concludes with the unforgettable snarling beast—the Black Panther.

This publication is given an introduction by Merrill C. Berman, himself:

*The history of new, radical art in the twentieth century and the history of struggle for social change, equality, and human rights are inexorably linked. This principle has long guided my curatorial and collecting practice. It is reflected in my focus on areas such as the Russian Revolution, Spanish Civil War, American Anti-War, and Pride. I acquired portraits, paintings, and political works by Black artists and activists over many years [...]. Recent events prompt us to present this modest survey, which offers a historical context, a sense of déjà vu, and simultaneous feelings of frustration and hope. The some one hundred works presented here are just a sampling of the Collection's broader holdings in this area.*

Proving how prescient his collecting has been, this section of his collection was acquired by the Getty Research Institute earlier this year.

Beyond the terms—connoisseur, curator, educator, publisher—which define the multiplicity of roles taken on by Merrill C. Berman in his years of collecting, the one that encompasses all of them is that of visionary. Like no other collector, he has worked single-handedly for almost half a century making of acquisition an opportunity for the enlightenment of others.