

The Merrill C. Berman  
Collection at the  
Fundación Juan March

# Credits

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**Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969):  
An Avant-Garde for the Proletariat**

Fundación Juan March, Madrid (October 7, 2011—January 15, 2012)

**Vladimir Lebedev (1891–1967)**

Museu Fundación Juan March, Palma

(February 22—May 26, 2012)

Museo de Arte Abstracto Español, Cuenca

(June 15—September 9, 2012)

**Photomontage between the Wars (1918–1939)**

Museo de Arte Abstracto Español, Cuenca (March 2—May 27, 2012)

Museu Fundación Juan March, Palma (June 13—September 8, 2012)

Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, Canada

(October 15—December 16, 2012)

**The Avant-Garde Applied (1890–1950)**

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**EDITING**

Michael Agnew

**EDITORIAL COORDINATION AND PRODUCTION**

Deborah L. Roldán, Exhibition Coordinator; Jordi Sanguino, Publications

**TRANSLATIONS**

Dutch/English: Sarah Demeuse

German/English: Russell Stockman

Russian/English: Erika Wolf

Spanish/English: Deborah L. Roldán

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Guillermo Nagore Ferrer

**TYPOGRAPHY**

Halsey (Joshua Darden)

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Cover illustration: *Cassandre. L'intransigent. Le plus fort*

[The uncompromising one. The strongest], 1925. See page 195



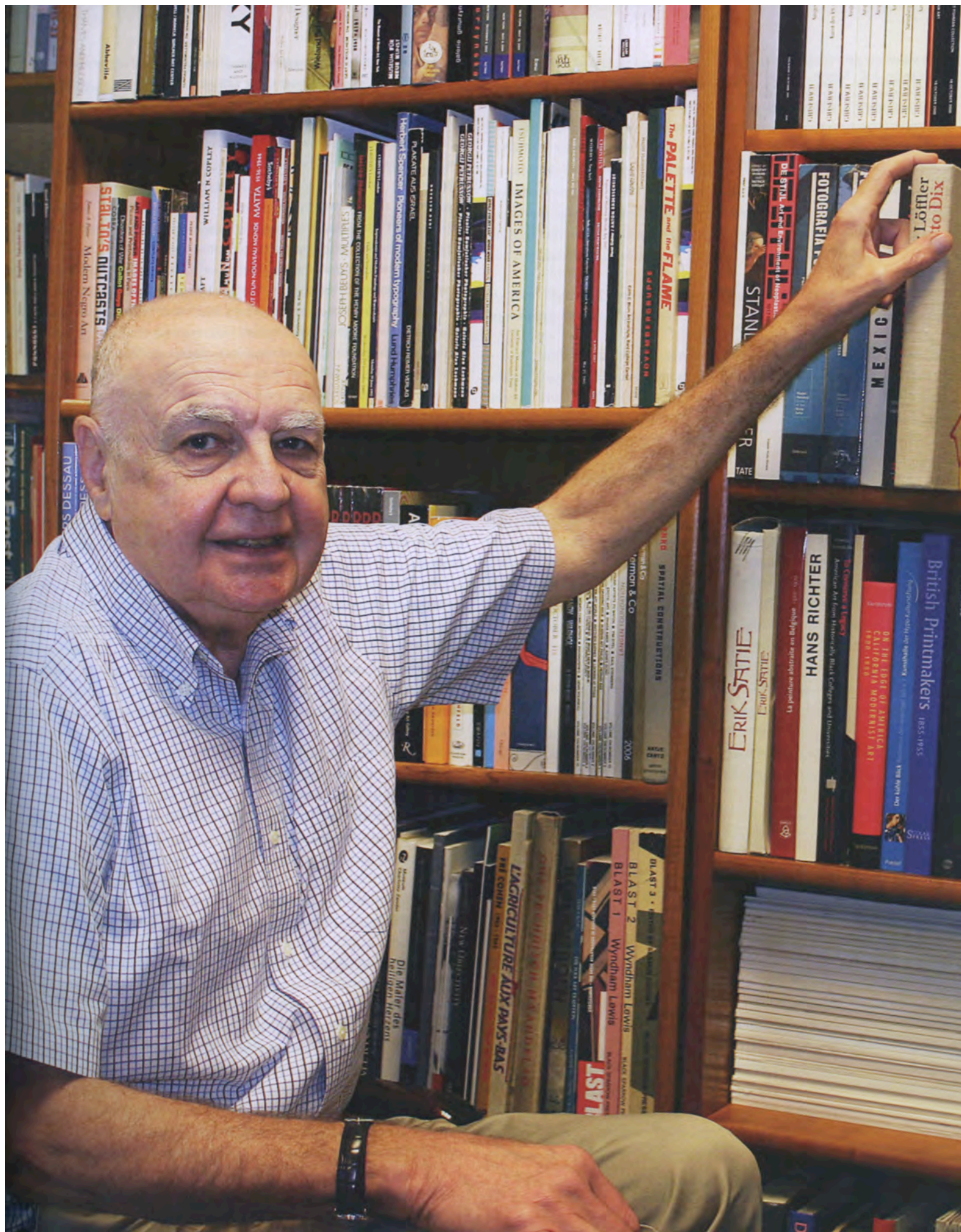
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Doing  
the Right  
Job is  
Never  
Ending

**AN  
INTERVIEW  
WITH  
MERRILL  
C. BERMAN**

”







This interview was conducted at the Fundación Juan March, Madrid, in November 2011 by Manuel Fontán del Junco (MFJ) and Deborah L. Roldán (DLR), and transcribed by Lukas Gerber. It was revised and expanded by Merrill C. Berman and Deborah L. Roldán in July 2012.

**MFJ: Let's start at the beginning, the origins of your collection or rather the origins of your collecting.**

Well, I was exposed to typographical and graphic material in junior high school because I took a course in printing and moveable type. Also, I went around with my father in the 1940s and '50s following political campaigns and came across political material that was very colorful—you know, three-color typographies. This had nothing to do with the study of art because it was all combined with political campaigning in terms of content and graphics; so somehow or other I headed in that direction and began collecting between the ages of twelve and sixteen. It wasn't too much later that I began to combine that knowledge with what I then knew about art. Between 1967 and 1974, I started collecting paintings, first Post-Impressionism. I was exposed to that type of material in Paris because a cousin of mine introduced me to an important dealer who was in touch with many famous collectors like Norton Simon and Samuel Josefowitz. That dealer then introduced me to Abraham Adler at Hirschl & Adler in New York City. I started moving in the direction of collecting paintings but it was all about self-education through reading about art history and searching for the best examples of paintings in galleries and museums. I expanded my scope from Post-Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Photorealism. In the late '60s and early '70s I became friendly with the dealer Alan Stone and, as a result, I acquired more recent works: several Gorkys, a Pollock, a de Kooning, three Richard Estes, and several Thiebauds.

I realized in 1972 that I was running out of gas financially in terms of my ability to acquire true masterpieces, great paintings. I was competing against the super wealthy and was getting priced out of the market. So it made no sense to continue collecting at that level. It was fun; it was great; it was an amazing learning experience. In any case, I was forced to change course after I was decimated in the bear market of 1973-74. I had to reverse course and sell off my paintings collection incrementally. Fortunately or unfortunately, I have some experience changing direction through force of necessity. I had to deal with sending four kids to college. Luckily, I had the collection, which became a vehicle for restoring my resources. It wasn't that easy to sell some of the paintings in those days, the mid '70s, especially the Gorkys. Abstract Expressionism was a fairly emergent field so I was basically breaking even on those works. I was just grateful that I had that collection and was able to restart. So in the '70s, or 1974-75, at the same time I was phasing out the Gorkys, the Richard Estes (one went to the Toledo Museum, another to the Hirshhorn), since the collecting bug was part of my DNA, I started over with more affordable material.

My financial low point came just as Art Nouveau and Art Deco posters and objects were being rediscovered. These items were entering the Paris market along with posters by artists such as Cheret, Privat-Livemont, Mucha, Lautrec, Grün, Steinlen. I learned that posters by these artists were affordable and, as a result of exposure to this material, I restarted my collection in the fields of graphic design and poster art. I met dealer colleagues in Paris, New York, and the rest of Europe, i.e., Holland, who were specializing in material of this kind and carrying out important work in the area of posters, such as Reinhold Brown Gallery, Barry Friedman, and the Fivel brothers.

While in Paris in 1974, I came across an important Bauhaus poster by Herbert Bayer, titled *Section allemande*<sup>1</sup> and I said, "My god, this is a totally different aesthetic. This is great." It was a true modernist piece, consisting of typography, photomontage. It was a revelation. So I purchased it.

And with the help of these colleagues, I then moved into the fields of Vienna Secession and German Objective design.

**MFJ: When did you begin collecting Russian works?**

I was building up my library at the same time, and the only thing I had to go on was the MoMA catalogue<sup>2</sup> as well as a few others on the history of posters. There wasn't that much and the museum community was not very interested. In fact, some of this material they were actually hostile to—I'll get back to that in a minute—but at that same gallery where I saw the Bayer, I came across a group of thirty Russian posters. I think they came from a Belgian Communist museum. Among them were five Gustavs Klucises. And an Aleksandr Deineka, *Transforming Moscow*,<sup>3</sup> which was extraordinary. I had to learn more before making any acquisitions so, once back home, I called Mildred Constantine, who was the design curator at MoMA, to get her opinion. I said, "What's your opinion of the artist Klucis, his political photomontages?" She said, "You should concentrate on the film posters and not the political typography and photomontage." She was not at all interested in the Russian avant-garde political and typographical material and especially not the Bolshevik and Socialist Realist material. This was the Brezhnev era—art people were intimidated by images of Lenin and Stalin, especially Stalin. This was way too heavy, so I was told to just stay from it and that it was secondary in terms of importance. So I said to myself, "This can't be right." I was ever the contrarian. I said, "This is fantastic stuff and it was not that much money." So, I bought the collection. And, you know, that was one of the most important bodies of works that I was ever to come across and the condition was wonderful. I didn't see that much Russian material in those days. In the late 1970s and early '80s, you'd see this material sporadically. A dealer in Holland had found another collection of twenty or thirty pieces, through contacts of his. At the time, people were trickling out of Russia to different cities like Cologne, London, Paris, and New York. These people had either been collectors themselves in Russia or were "permitted," so to speak, to deal in this kind of material. It was still an occasional flow.

In the meantime, I had built up a network of European avant-garde dealers; I quickly realized the importance of avant-garde graphic design, both posters and ephemera, sometime around '78, '79. A group of Russian film posters came to my attention through Exlibris and Reinhold Brown. There were some great Stenbergs (they were the ones I included in the *20th-Century Poster* exhibition<sup>4</sup>), Prusakovs, and one Rodchenko. These had come from Piet Zwart, the famous Dutch designer, who had stored them under his bed. Since he was in frequent touch with the Russians and had a left-wing orientation, he received this material courtesy of his relationships. Later on, his family sold it to dealers and I purchased many of them. They had very high prices at the time. They were in mint and unmounted condition. It was the first time I ever saw Russian film posters and I knew I needed them.

By now, I had built up a true understanding that I was supposed to be heavily focused on avant-garde material of all kinds, meaning drawings, maquettes, ephemera, and photocollage. I realized that the museum community was way too segmented by departments and by areas. At MoMA, they did not have much of a budget and interest in this kind of material. They were more committed to paintings and drawings. I did have competition in various arenas along the way. I was able to move aggressively against private collectors who were more sporadic and had less commitment and were hampered by the vagaries of the economy. I was consistent and relentless.

**MFJ: And the real competitors were other private collectors? Not museums, not institutions?**

A few institutions. MoMA got a few things. The Stedelijk got a few things. They were more focused on Cassandre; the Stedelijk loved Cassandre. They had their Dutch material. For MoMA, posters were a part-time consideration. The MoMA architecture and design collection was led by people with an architectural bent.

**MFJ: And earlier movements?**

Yes. I kind of dropped the ball on the Viennese Secession but not before I got some really good pieces. I also got the Macintoshes, which was in competition with private collectors. I constructed some early building blocks, but my aesthetic, it was hard to maintain my aesthetic with the decorative Viennese material, while also thinking avant-garde, Russian, Bauhaus, ephemera, photomontage. It was hard to make the transition sometimes, back and forth, because you're thinking of trying to get some important Russian, German, and Swiss material and you overlook the decorative posters and design. I made a few mistakes along the way by selling off earlier material to finance my avant-garde obsession. But, en route, I realized I could do a transformative job, that I could build a preeminent collection, as good or better than any other world-class museum. That I could possibly be number one [laughs]. That was a goal. To be number one.

**DLR: So your collecting path was clear?**

I realized I had to intensify my focus on the books, ephemera, drawings. Some of the true gems of the whole period were small items that were ephemera: books, tiny things, postcards, brochures, cards. Along the way, in the '90s, I realized I had to fill in the great figures of the period, the graphic work of artists like Walter Dexel, Georg Trupp, Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko. It wasn't too much later that I came across a collection of very important Polish avant-garde books, which was the Anatol Stern library. It was headed for the Polish national library, the Getty, or Yale, and luckily I purchased it. But I failed in the Italian Futurist area. I was preempted because I was having a difficult time in the market, and the Getty acquired a major portion of Lucia Marinetti's collection. In that era, the Getty Museum was acquiring intensively; they had a lot of money. There were certain dealers who were devoted to them. I mean, not everybody was out to help me.

**DLR: I remember in the '80s there were dealers that would go straight to the Getty before they offered items to anyone else, because the Getty paid way above market value.**

Yes, I had to get around these dealers and build up contacts and find resources on my own. I located people in Germany who were friendly to me and were able to find the material I wanted. For example, I was able to get a key Joost Schmidt poster.<sup>5</sup> I was so anxious and excited about having this piece that I remember keeping it in a tube in my hotel, covered, under lock and key, I was so scared of losing it.

**MFJ: These are your cold war stories [laughter].**

And we aren't even talking about Russia yet; this was strictly the German and Western material.

**MFJ: So, then, tell us about Russia.**

Russian material was a different animal, a totally different animal. In the early years purchasing was spotty in major world cities. There were seamy characters involved. There was a so-called count in Europe, a professor in Paris. The latter was in league with another collector-dealer and had relatives in the upper echelons of the Red Army and was "permitted" to go in and out of the Soviet Union periodically. We had a good relationship until he tried to recruit me for espionage purposes.

Then later on, in Berlin in the mid-'80s, a market developed around Natan Fedorowski, a magnetic figure, around whom many Russian émigrés clustered. I bought a great deal of material from him, posters, maquettes, photos, etc. At around the same time, I did a major exchange with Galerie Gmurzynska in Cologne, of an important Bart van der Leek—which is now in the Paris city museum—for several important photocollages and drawings by German and Russian masters. It was only when the Soviet Union fell in '91 and particularly after that, between '91 and '96—especially during the Yeltsin years—that the Russians started to deplore their Communist heritage, and museums and families began selling, and things flowed out of the country. They were looking for hard currency, looking to survive during those difficult years. There was an underground railway that developed between Russia and the rest of the world wherein Russian material entered international markets through dealers and auctions.

**MFJ: Did you buy then, directly from them?**

No, not really. I still went through the international dealer network. Some people from the West became very active, three people from Holland, several from the United States, and many from European cities. A strong market developed for Russian film posters and, at the same time, there was little or no market for Russian political photomontage and original collages and maquettes. With all this material coming out, I was able to acquire political and other posters that collectors didn't relate to. I worked the seams in between the film poster collectors and dealers who were trying to offload non-film posters; they were grateful to have me as a buyer of last resort. However, I did manage to buy important Stenbergs and Prusakovs and the occasional Rodchenko. I had only one



Rodchenko until the late '80s, and it wasn't until the '90s that I was able to purchase good Rodchenko graphic design.

I was always intent on finding collages and photocollages. I was especially attuned to the second-tier names because I had unfortunate authenticity experience early on with big names like El Lissitzky. I ran into fakes two or three times and I decided not to fool around with Lissitzky, not to buy any supposed Lissitzky originals. One of the reasons that I was 90% focused on printed material was because of the authenticity issue. This emerged as a result of my experiences with El Lissitzky. Graphic design and applied art was a primary field for me. I really had an excellent feel for second-tier artists like Elena Semenova, Konstantin Vialov, Nikolai Dolgorukov. I also managed to find major original works by Liubov' Popova, Aleksandra Ekster, Gustavs Klucis, and others. It was mind-bogglingly wonderful.

**MFJ: How is it now? Highly professionalized?**

No, you don't see the flow. I mean I was also working the auctions in London and you saw things come up, like Natan Al'tmans. No one at the auctions was focused on these mainstream but lesser-known works of graphic design. But I was. I had to pay real money for occasional masterpieces that came up through art dealers and the auction markets. That maquette by Popova in the Deineka show?<sup>6</sup> That was expensive then, because it came from the Costakis Collection auction in London, but there were others. And they were stellar. Fantastic material, and museums never really collected Russian photocollages or the photography based things like the ones featured in the Deineka and photomontage shows, the Klucises, for example.

You have all these different iterations and no one collected iterations, like the Edward McKnight Kauffer BP series,<sup>7</sup> which came up for auction when BP, the oil company, sold off their entire archive. I went up to a fourth-floor gallery in New York—it was 95-degree-day in August—and saw this catalogue for a September auction. Sotheby's Olympia London was selling off the BP/Kauffer archive, so I asked a colleague, who was familiar with this material, to come down from Ireland and he did the bidding for me. We purchased phenomenal Kauffer originals from the BP archive.

And remember, I was covering design from many different countries, by various designers, French, German, Polish, Hungarian. Fortunately, the rising market for great avant-garde books permitted me to sell certain duplicate rarities to fund further acquisitions because other collectors and institutions had entered the market and escalated prices. Some of the areas that I've expanded into include Scandinavian avant-garde, which I've undertaken while re-educating myself on early Austrian, German, and Secession material. A major opportunity emerged when the huge and important Albertina poster collection was restituted to its rightful owners and placed on the market.

**MFJ: And Japanese?**

Well, I augmented my Japanese holdings in a major way when a graphic arts professor sold me his seminal Japanese graphic design collection. His name was Richard Thornton. I was fortunate enough to be able to buy the whole collection, some 500 works. At this point, I believe I have the most important collection of Japanese graphic design between 1950 and 1990 outside of Japan.

**MFJ: And American?**

I was simultaneously collecting American graphic design from the '30s to the '90s, designers like Lester Beall, Paul Rand, the WPA artists. It was a vast territory. No one was acquiring all these different avant-gardes, all these different contemporary fields. I had to make frequent, aesthetic transitions. I was also collecting German Neue Sachlichkeit paintings, drawings, and prints. The interest in the Weimar Period stemmed from my parallel interest in what was going on in Europe in the '20s. Also, I felt I had to stay vibrant in initiating new collecting areas. I couldn't sit there and be static and boring. I had to keep moving. If you don't move, you lose the zest and once you lose that zest, you're dead. I was always highly opportunistic and competitive but it has become more of an Internet auction world. However, I am still finding undiscovered areas and niches. I'm also trying to promote the field. There's still a lot to tell. The new generation of curators isn't like those from the '70s. They like integrating their curatorial and personal interests, all disciplines of collecting. Today's art people all want context. They adore the political stuff. They're no longer afraid of Lenin and Stalin imagery.

**MFJ: Tell me about the people who were important for you, friends, masters, curators, people you respect.**

I always liked to interface with museums and collectors. I traded with the Stedelijk. They were a great source. I was very close to the curators Ada Stroeve and Carolien Glazenburg, and was able to make exchanges with them. They were very weak in Russian. They knew what they wanted but, like so many curators, they had bureaucratic and budgetary limitations. And the directors of the major Dutch and German museums were more interested in post-World War II avant-garde art. They deemphasized their own graphic design traditions.

**MFJ: The political content of art was very important to you at the beginning of your activity as a collector because you studied political science.**

Yes, I had studied totalitarianism and twentieth-century history at Harvard, and was especially interested in the first half of the twentieth century. Weimar, World War II. In other words, the Russian field. I knew I was doing the right thing. I mean, there were campaigns against Hitler. I was always more exposed to the left wing than the right wing, but there was unbelievable stuff even from World War I. We haven't even discussed that material, but I have a great deal from that period.

I was attempting to fill in the gaps from the whole field of information graphics, as well, which is an exploding field that is in the process of being rediscovered because of its relevance to the area of branding and logos. Everybody is now realizing this is a hot territory. Columbia University is inquiring about information graphics. Libraries are searching for it. I've come to learn about the many libraries and archives all around the world, especially in the United States. These college libraries have budgets and no matter the state of the economy, they move ahead. Yale's library is very smart and very aggressive, as is that of the University of Chicago. These libraries are definitely focused on avant-garde art and ephemera.



There's also a lot of rediscovery of American material from the twentieth century, cause-oriented and graphic design material. These are areas of emphasis for me as well. Doing the right job is never ending. It's never ending [laughs]. I mean it's ending, because I'm 74 [laughs].

MFJ: **Speaking with you, I have the feeling that you don't want the collection to be splintered.**

Yes.

MFJ: **To collect is something deeply rooted in humanity. Collecting is something related to our essence somehow...**

Yes, but you have to have a certain kind of..., I don't think it's such a healthy thing to be a collector. You have to be compulsive. You make sacrifices in other areas, so I don't think it's necessarily a sign of good health [laughs].

MFJ: **You are your collection and your collection is somehow identified with all your best characteristics.**

I just was fortunate in having all the qualities, the eye, and the historical grounding. You are either lucky that way or you're not. And I went through many ups and downs. I couldn't compete with the big heavies. I had to be in my own niche because I couldn't compete with the mainstream art collectors. I had to build a mental edge and vision only because I was looking five to ten years down the line, like a curator. I wasn't just a collector. I was a chief curator with a shadow museum. Martin Friedman, former director of the Walker Art Center, when he came to my home, after looking around said, "This is too important for you to have; this doesn't belong here."

MFJ: **You are a museum without being a museum...**

It's a shadow museum. One full-time person, and a couple of part timers...

MFJ: **It's not a virtual museum, because it exists really, I mean physically...**

And the people who help me with it contribute significantly to it in their own way, photographing works, maintaining the databases, but no one has knowledge of all the names, the field, the eye, the pieces, except for me. But, it's a very dangerous thing to become cocky and arrogant. You have to maintain a certain humility, which allows you to keep doing the job. Like a squirrel, you've got to keep digging.

MFJ: **And any discoveries for you in the last five to six years?**

I've gotten some early things. The Hannover group, artists such as Erich Wegner, Grethe Jürgens, Carl Grossberg. I've never done much with that kind of material, but it fills in the gaps in the areas of Dada and Neue Sachlichkeit.

DLR: **What do you want to happen to your collection? What should be your legacy?**

I'd like to keep these central movements of graphic design together. The works on paper and maquettes. Everything from the Vienna Secession, from Macintosh through the Bauhaus, some Futurist. All the posters and graphic design should stay together because it's the most comprehensive collection of its kind. The great material has disappeared from the markets. And if it comes up it is recognized as very, very important, so I don't think you could ever do this again, so I'd like to have it stay intact. The rest of the collection, the paintings, even the Dada collages, they're great but they don't need to be with this group of works. My contribution has been in other things, the Schwitters graphic designs, the notebooks full of Schwitters, Zwart, and Schuitema material.

MFJ: **Klucis?**

The great Klucis collection. All those works that MoMA never looked at, and now realize they missed out on buying. The Stedelijk, the Swiss museums, they don't have any of it.

MFJ: **And now it's too late.**

Yes, the Russian material isn't flowing.

MFJ: **Let's talk a little bit about that legacy. And if a museum wanted it?**

I would have no problem with that. The problem is in the valuation of the works, not in the wanting. MoMA wants it. The Israel Museum wants it. Washington's National Gallery of Art would be happy to have it. Will they value it properly? This collection is solid. It isn't spotty. It's great. It's tiptop. It's world class. It's the best of its breed. Will it ever be valued properly? Never. So it should stay together at the very least.

DLR: **Is that something you would like to have happen?**

Well, if I can afford to let it go I would, if only because of the exhibitions and scholarship it would generate.

MFJ: **Speaking of exhibitions, now there are excellent ones devoted to graphic design, to avant-garde typography. But at the beginning of your career as a collector there were very few.**

Yes, there were a few early on. MoMA did the *Word and Image* catalogue of posters from their collection in 1968. The Stedelijk tried to do a good job. The Japanese came in to the market and there was a museum in Osaka, the Suntory, with a director who did a fantastic job on posters. There was also a very assiduous private Japanese collector who tried to emulate my collection. So it wasn't a completely neglected field. I can't claim to be alone.

DLR: **No, but fifteen years ago, comparing the number of loans requested of you...**

It's also technology, the Internet. They can Google me, Google Klucis and my name might come up, so the point is...

MFJ: **...things have become more accessible.**

The collection is accessible. The technology, the opportunity, it's different. And that has to do with the fact that the more you do, the more others know you. I stepped in early on as a lender to pivotal, groundbreaking exhibitions like *Art into Life* in 1990, and the Guggenheim show in '92.<sup>8</sup> I was always in the wings. Luckily, I did a very good job collecting Russian works between '89 and '97.

In addition to the extraordinary collaboration that has resulted in four exhibitions at three different venues here at the Fundación Juan March, over the past thirty years I've lent to no fewer than twenty-nine exhibitions in thirty-eight cities in nine countries, among them the Tate Modern, London; MNCARS, Madrid; MoMA, New York; National Gallery, Washington; Guggenheim Museum, New York; and IVAM, Valencia.

I suppose that is my legacy as well, availing myself of these opportunities to share my collection with the world.

#### NOTES

1. Herbert Bayer, *Section allemande. Exposition de la Société des Artistes Décorateurs. Grand Palais, 14. mai-13. juillet* [German Section. Exhibition of the Société des Artistes Décorateurs. Grand Palais, May 14–July 13], 1930, exhibition poster: photolithograph, 62 1/4 x 46 1/4 in. (158.1 x 117.2 cm). See CAT. 9 [Photomontage] in the present catalogue.
2. Alan M. Fern, *Word and Image: Posters from the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: MoMA, 1968).
3. Aleksandr Deineka, *Prevratim Moskvu v obraztsovyi sotsialisticheskii gorod proletarskogo gosudarstva* [We Will Transform Moscow into an Exemplary Socialist City of the Proletarian State], 1931, Moscow/Leningrad: IZOGIZ, poster: lithograph, 57 x 82 in. (144.8 x 208.3 cm). See CAT. 155 [Deineka] in the present catalogue.
4. *Posters: The 20th-Century Poster, Design of the Avant-Garde* exhibition opened at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1984, and traveled to Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; Saint Louis Museum of Art, Missouri; Dayton Art Institute, Ohio; Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York; and Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Quebec, Canada. It was accompanied by an illustrated catalogue (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984).
5. Joost Schmidt, *Staatliches Bauhaus Ausstellung. 15. Aug.-30. Sept. 1923, Weimar* [State Bauhaus Exhibition. Aug. 15–Sept. 30, 1923, Weimar], 1923, exhibition poster: lithograph, 27 x 19 in. (68.6 x 48.3 cm). See CAT. B65 [Avant-Garde Applied] in the present catalogue.
6. Liubov' Popova, maquette for poster, *Da zdravstvuet diktatura proletariata!* [Long live the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!], 1921, collage: ink, watercolor, pencil, cut paper, 8 x 9 3/4 in. (20.1 x 24.9 cm). See CAT. 10 [Deineka] in the present catalogue.
7. Edward McKnight Kauffer, photograph for maquette for poster, *BP Ethyl Anti-Knock Controls Horse-Power*, ca. 1933, gelatin silver print, 6 x 8 1/2 in. (15 x 22 cm); maquette for poster, *BP Ethyl Anti-Knock Controls Horse-Power*, 1933, photocollage: photograph and gouache on cardboard, 21 1/2 x 30 1/2 in. (54.7 x 77.8 cm); *BP Ethyl Anti-Knock Controls Horse-Power*, 1933, advertising poster: lithograph, 30 x 45 in. (76.2 x 114.3 cm). See CATS. 48–50 [Photomontage], respectively, in the present catalogue.
8. *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914–1932*, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle (Summer 1990). *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (March 1–May 10, 1992); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (June 5–August 23, 1992); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (September 25–December 15, 1992).