

# Nelson A. Rockefeller: U.S. Art Museums and Diplomacy Before, During, and After World War II

by Kathleen Berrin

University of California Irvine



© 2016 by Kathleen Berrin



*Note: This research report is presented here with the author's permission, but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent. Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is an ongoing publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) under the general direction of James Allen Smith, Vice President of the RAC and Director of Research and Education. Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the RAC. These reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, most of whom have received grants-in-aid from the Archive Center to support their research. The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and not of the Rockefeller Archive Center.*

World War II and the early Cold War brought the federal government and U.S. art museums together in new ways, readjusted the definition and status of art in America, and created a new kind of representational diplomacy involving the promotion of “national art exhibitions” that articulated the position of US cultural leadership in the world. This is the working thesis for my forthcoming dissertation “Re-designing the World: American Art Museums and Mid-Century Global Diplomacy.”<sup>1</sup> During the summer of 2016 I was privileged to spend four weeks at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in the Grant-In-Aid Program, working on an important piece of my dissertation that would focus on Nelson A. Rockefeller and his contributions to uniting American art museums and the U.S. federal government through the medium of national art exhibitions as a tool of diplomacy and goodwill.<sup>2</sup>

Nelson Rockefeller’s contributions to national arts policy have been overlooked in both the history of American art museums and in Cold War cultural studies. Historian interests have concentrated on his four-term political career as Governor of New York, or his attempts to win the US presidency that have overshadowed his influence on American art museums. His views on the relationship of art, culture, economics and national security before and during World War II have not been adequately studied. Nelson Rockefeller influenced presidents, museum directors, and Latin-American nations, and helped shape arts policy for the United States at a time when the federal government and US art museums urgently felt compelled to join forces for the sake of international diplomacy and security.

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US federal government had historically shown a significant lack of interest in supporting American arts. During the Depression, this relationship changed when the visual arts program of the Works Progress Administration of the New Deal gave economic relief to out of work visual artists under the PWA (1933-4) and the PWAP (1936-1943). These programs were primarily created as relief measures for artists. But during the 1940s it became

more and more evident that the visual arts were needed for uplifting the American public and for cultural purposes of American nationalism, prestige, and inter-national diplomacy. It was at this time when the federal government saw it would be politically expedient to strengthen the arts and America's national image by working through the structures and programs of existing art museums.

Though many American art museums were patriotic during World War II, the federal government especially depended upon the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington DC and the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) for arts representation. Creating an American arts presence or identity became important nationally as well as internationally; national diplomacy and monitoring citizen taste were the key areas that were necessary to upgrade and spread American democracy. American art museums were vital in this effort and Nelson A. Rockefeller, with his love of art, government connections, and charismatic personality provided a unique liaison between these two complex, nearly oppositional entities.

Abby Rockefeller was a primary founder of the MoMA. Her son Nelson showed an immediate aptitude for the arts and was groomed to join the MoMA Board of Trustees. Between 1931-1948, from the time he first joined the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), to his appointment as Coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), and through subsequent presidential advisory appointments until his first governorship, he exerted tremendous influence over the structure and leadership of MoMA. The OCIAA also had an office inside of NGA. During this early part of Rockefeller's career he was instrumental in catalyzing many art exhibitions between the US and Mexico and South American countries, and utilizing other kinds of related media such as radio, press, and film, which he saw as a kind of positive propaganda. His intent was hemispheric goodwill and national security. For Nelson Rockefeller the categories of commerce, communication, cultural relations, art and social welfare were all intimately related. He had an innate love of Latin American culture and

an empathy and interest in the growing pains of South American countries. He was especially active during an intense period when fascism, followed by communism, was believed to severely threaten the American democracy, prosperity, and hopes for world peace and when these ideologies were penetrating Latin American countries.

My research project was fueled by a curiosity about several interrelated issues. I was interested in Nelson Rockefeller's world-view about art, culture, and economics. I wanted to understand how he negotiated personal interest versus public interest and how he operated with such energy and efficiency amongst the MoMA and South American nations. I wanted to know how Nelson Rockefeller rose through the ranks of influence at MoMA and managed to mediate between art museums and important federal government officials. I was also interested in how one might describe his influence on MoMA institutional policy and on American national art policy. How did art exhibitions in the 1940s and the 50s figure into American national diplomacy? What was the degree of Rockefeller's influence in shaping MoMA's art exhibitions and other major museum projects involving public opinion? What was the nature of Nelson Rockefeller's relationship to MoMA's talented and pioneering Director Alfred Barr? My month-long research at RAC gave me important clues to answering these questions.

The interdisciplinary nature of my topic meant that I had to not only read between the lines, I also had to read between the archives. It was necessary to find and piece together information that was relevant and would substantiate my arguments at hand. The kinds of materials I needed were embedded throughout numerous files at the RAC that needed careful reading and compiling.<sup>3</sup>

Nelson Rockefeller was, in almost equal amounts, a lover of the arts and an innately political animal. This powerful and charismatic man was dyslexic and this figured largely into my research and into my understanding of him as a

person. It mattered to my research because being dyslexic meant he probably had an awkward relationship to the written word, always a problem for any researcher. It figured into my understanding of him as a person because it explained so well his proclivity for the visual. He found ways to compensate for his problems; he did not keep written diaries; he wrote revealing memorandums, particularly in his early years. He put more personal things in writing, particularly before serving as governor but his letters, though sometimes warm and personal, also tended to be politely rote and repetitive. I realized that I might need to rely on information from others with whom he worked or who closely worked for him to put together a fuller picture of where his influences came from and what he considered important. The written documents in files of those he had hired became important to the piecing-together process. Nelson Rockefeller frequently dipped into his family fortune to broker human connections or fill in funding gaps in government or museum budgets. Rockefeller family donations, generated by Nelson into the arts, largely kept the MoMA afloat in key areas that Nelson Rockefeller deeply cared about, and with those donations came power and influence.

The “Addresses of Nelson Rockefeller”<sup>4</sup> were an excellent place to start because they were prolific, persuasive, and given to a wide variety of special interest groups in the US. He said the same thing in many different ways. The urgency of upholding the good neighbor policy and maintaining smooth hemispheric relations meant that the US must guard against fascism at all costs. Because the Axis powers wanted to use all means of propaganda to stir up unrest in Latin American populations, it was important to protect democracy by screening businesses, cinema, radio, and press, and for American citizens to understand fully how Axis propaganda works. Rockefeller strongly believed in breaking cultural stereotypes while at the same time understanding the individual psychology of each Latin American country. Art exhibitions would be a universal language that exceeded the limitations of language and brought foreign peoples together. A thorough understanding of a nation’s art and customs not only

promoted cultural understanding, it also led to post-war riches to the countries involved that would be spiritual as well as material since good cultural relationships usually complemented economic ones.

For many countries, “modernism” was a signpost for national excellence and evolutionary development. Nelson Rockefeller believed in sending exhibitions of contemporary U.S. arts to potential trouble spots in Latin America (Chile, Brazil, Argentina) and also in encouraging and fostering the creation of Modern Art museums in major cities that did not have them in Venezuela, Chile, and Brazil. It was fascinating to see how Nelson Rockefeller worked with local people of influence to create complex institutions on the model of the MoMA in places where fundraising and garnering support was not a common activity. Because such projects often took several years to materialize, it was useful to follow the developments over time that were noted in letters and memorandums. Nelson Rockefeller would often put representatives in the field, such as Chauncey Hamlin or Berent Friele who were sent to Brazil, to give him periodic reports on how things were going on specific projects, to continue to maintain interpersonal relations, or simply to ask his advice. In this way, Rockefeller could continue to guide and monitor developments. He believed that exchanges of art, particularly contemporary art, were a key way to build international alliances and intuitively understand the spirit of a people.

Nelson Rockefeller became interested in Latin America in the late 1930s, first motivated by his family’s business dealings in Standard Oil. In 1939, for example, he met with Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas in an effort to save US oil interests from the expropriation threat and to stop Mexico from selling oil to Germany and Italy. He tried to convince him to follow the example of Venezuela whose citizens were prospering because the government laws there were favorable to US business, while Mexican citizens, to the contrary, were languishing. The President explained how previous negotiators from the US State Department do not speak Spanish and did not understand Mexico’s point of

view. He talked at length about the importance of pride and self-respect being central to Mexican nationalism and negotiations that combined the financial and psychological went back and forth. Valuable insights to Nelson Rockefeller's arguments and positions are found in Rockefeller's profuse notes.<sup>5</sup> Although Rockefeller couldn't change Mexico's expropriation plans, he *did* succeed in negotiating a major art exhibition to bring to America, which was held at MoMA called "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art."

This exhibition took place in 1940 and did a great deal to change America's opinion about Mexico's prestige and promote its great arts traditions from pre-Columbian times to the present. Though Cárdenas could not give up the oil concessions, Rockefeller understood the need to use Mexico's arts as a means of restoring negative or inferior feelings about Mexico. Though politically Cárdenas could not relent on arrangements for oil, a resource of equal importance – Mexico's arts – could alternately be sent as a diplomatic gesture that would hopefully do a great deal to heal the damaged relationship that had occurred between our two countries. It was then that Nelson Rockefeller saw the utility of the arts in producing positive foreign relations. He was later able to sell these ideas to President Roosevelt and subsequently to the State Department when he was appointed the administrator of a new war agency called Office of the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) in August 1940.

The years between 1940-44 were a crucial time when Nelson Rockefeller persuaded the federal government, and within it the State Department, of the importance of national arts exchange. He understood immediately the potential that art museums had to partner with the government and be immensely helpful in orchestrating exchange exhibitions of national arts. These alliances would both educate the American public and help persuade them of the sophistication and humanity of Latin American countries as well as correct misunderstandings that Latin Americans had about the US. Rockefeller's negotiating talents and energy led him to always see the human side of any adversary. He saw how art

exhibitions could help positively mold public opinion and that there were creative ways to bridge international gaps and change cultural attitudes. He felt that America must use art and culture to show the world that democracy works and by creating bridges of understanding and respect that would rise above politics.

Rockefeller enthusiastically catalyzed a series of art exhibitions with Chile, Venezuela, and Brazil. He placed an OCIAA office inside the National Gallery of Art and was able to do a number of projects in that venue. He was able to nearly unilaterally support MoMA's international exhibition program, through the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and political clout, which became very important in the 1940s and the 1950s when the US needed to demonstrate cultural prowess as well as military and economic strength to the world at large. He experimented with using other American museums as well, such as the Metropolitan Museum of New York or the Toledo Museum of Art.

The utility of international exhibitions went well beyond relations with Latin America and Nelson Rockefeller was instrumental in influencing State Department policy in other regions. This led to a number of national diplomacy exhibitions that emphasized the arts and diplomacy of Europe during and after World War II. In 1940, an opportunity came for MoMA to hold an elite exhibition of "Italian Master Paintings" of great works of the Renaissance. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the exhibition would make more sense, could not manage to hold it but Rockefeller convinced the MoMA Board, of which he was president, to have the exhibition, and Director Alfred Barr developed a corresponding aesthetic rationale to justify its presentation. Nelson Rockefeller made the most of the exhibition from a public relations point of view<sup>6</sup> in which he personally orchestrated a delicate international broadcast by the Columbia Broadcasting System to the Italian people, at a time when the fascist government was still in control.



Understanding the importance of public opinion, Rockefeller was a master at orchestrating the politics of exhibition openings and bringing elite people together at major public events for mass visibility. For example, he took full advantage of MoMA's prestige by making sure a reception for top-ranking members of the UN Secretariat took place at MoMA and made elaborate arrangements for press coverage. He was instrumental in getting the Roosevelts to participate in high-level museum affairs such as the grand international opening of MoMA's new building in 1939. He was attentive to presidential interests and needs and arranged for Eisenhower to address the nation on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MoMA in 1954 and speak about freedom in the arts as a basic pillar of liberty in our land. Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the UN also spoke at this event. The program was recorded and broadcast over CBS radio network to the nation at large on October 19, 1954.

Although Nelson Rockefeller was not a prolific writer, he was a careful collector of documents that related to contemporary arts issues of the time. There are many surprising bits of information in the RAC archives since Rockefeller made files on contemporary arts controversies and carefully documented internal debates and political exchanges inside of MoMA. Although he does not take sides, the very fact that he collected this material so profusely indicates that he knew the art scene was changing quickly and that he needed to be able to access these documents to create a knowledge base for himself on a particular issue. The kinds of materials I did not expect to find had to do with dilemmas on how to handle journalists, relations and debates between competing arts institutions in New York, intriguing exhibitions that were seriously considered by MoMA but ultimately did not happen, or how Nelson Rockefeller took administrators whom he had previously shaped or groomed on other Rockefeller projects and then used his influence to get them hired into important positions at MoMA that shaped the programs and priorities of the institution and its policies about international art.

If Nelson Rockefeller can be faulted, it may be for believing that the arts could do so much – that they were the ultimate answer to major cultural disagreements or misunderstandings. He hoped they would seal or buttress shaky foreign relations in a way they never could wholly support, since interpretations of art are a personal nature, arts are multi-referential, and everyone has different opinions about them that can be influenced by personal or cultural factors that cannot be controlled. The 1940s were a curious time when public persuasion and propaganda were being tested. The arts were seen as providing a true or authentic picture; they were not only morally and spiritually uplifting, their veracity and ability to show the character of a nation were believed at the time to be exceptionally sound. All of this came at a time when our nation was urgently concerned with combatting anti-democratic sentiments and proving beyond doubt America’s legitimacy to take its place at the head of the international art’s table.

The extensive RAC collections hold great promise for understanding Nelson Rockefeller’s arts activities and aspiration and charting his influence with premier US art museums and with creating national arts policy and national diplomatic exhibitions. Though he could not be called a Cold War Curator in the strictest sense of the term-- of actually choosing, formatting, or manipulating the art objects (this he always left to the professionals)-- he was a quintessential big-picture coordinator of curators, with tremendous abilities to understand human motivations. He was a mega-administrator or overseer for the arts during a very sensitive national period when the America was casting about for an international arts identity. Because he understood art museums so well and learned the ropes of the federal government through various presidential appointments, he could straddle both of these complex entities and bring them together to help troubleshoot and improve America’s superficial cultural image around the world at a critical time in our nation’s history.

The myriad materials at RAC helped me get a strong sense of the period and of Nelson Rockefeller and his relationships with key individuals. They helped me understand his abilities to absorb complex subjects, coordinate, and vigorously multi-task in order bring diverse people together towards common goals. He was a complex personality with tremendous organizational skills, understanding, and charisma. Delving into the RAC files with the help of archival staff has deepened my perceptions, contributed greatly to the fact-base of my subject, and helped me build an important facet of my dissertation argument.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> University of California, Irvine, Department of History. Expected completion date 2017.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Thomas Rosenbaum, Archivist, at the Rockefeller Archive Center for friendship, help, and support in accessing these materials.

<sup>3</sup> The materials at RAC that I investigated were to be found in at least four places: Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Papers, OCIAA Bound Volumes and Rockefeller Foundation Archives and Grant Files.

<sup>4</sup> CIAA, Volume 1

<sup>5</sup> Trip to South America 1942 III4A, Box 145, Folder 1576.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal III 4L, Box 137, Folder 1349, Italian Masters Exhibition.