Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller: Muse of the Museum of Modern Art

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Introduction: Blanchette in the Gallery

“The role of women in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has been a vital one from the day the idea was first conceived,” observed David Rockefeller to a small gathering in a newly dedicated gallery on the recently expanded third floor of New York’s MoMA on December 7, 1987. “[And] we are here today to give thanks and praise to [an] amazing and dedicated lady who . . . since she became President of the Museum for a second time in 1972, has probably had a greater impact on the evolution of MoMA both internally and externally than any other one individual.”

The setting, in fact, was the dedication of a gallery designated for abstract expressionist art in whose honor the space was named, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller. Thirty years after that ceremony, thousands of patrons continue to mill through the delicately lit space, some soothed by the muted cardinal color of an outsize Barnet Newman canvas, others stirred by a Jackson Pollack oeuvre, most unaware of the singular influence of the gallery’s namesake on the museum’s history itself.

Born to Blanche and Elon Hooker in 1909 in New York City, Blanchette Ferry Hooker Rockefeller followed a path typical of daughters of newly minted industrial titans at the turn of the century, but one that prepared her for unique service in the world of art. Her father, Elon Hooker, a Cornell University PhD trained in civil engineering, pioneered in the field of electrochemical processing. He founded Hooker Electrochemical, which produced industrial derivatives including chlorinated lime, hydrogenated vegetable oils, and aluminum chloride. Hooker’s educational and professional pursuits made possible his marriage to the former Blanche Ferry, daughter of Dexter Ferry, Sr. (1833-1907), a city father of modern Detroit and patron of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Blanche’s younger brother, Dexter Ferry Jr., presided over the Detroit Institute of Art from 1914 to 1917 and later cultivated its extensive collection of American art as head of the Founder’s Society. The marriage of the Ferry penchant for art and the Hooker acumen for commerce bequeathed an enviable legacy to the four Hooker daughters: Barbara, Adelaide, Helen and Blanchette. What was said of John and
Abigail Adam’s offspring, might also have been rendered by Mr. Hooker with a difference: “I must study politics and [business] that my [daughters] may have liberty to study painting and poetry[,] mathematics and philosophy.”

The youngest of the daughters, Blanchette attended New York’s Miss Chapin’s School, then Vassar College, serving as class president at both, before hitting it off over tennis and horse-riding with John D. Rockefeller 3rd in 1931, less than a year before their Riverside Church wedding on November 19, 1932. She spent the ensuing years raising four children (Sandra, John D. “Jay,” IV, Hope, and Alida) and volunteering in various capacities in greater New York City, including the Museum of Modern Art, where she served as president between 1959 and 1962, as well as from 1972 to 1985.

Blanchette played down the significance of her work on behalf of the MoMA, for which, in 1985, the White House awarded her a Presidential Recognition Award. In reflecting upon her contributions, she deflected attention from the import of her decade-long fund-raising campaign that effectively doubled in size the MoMA’s museum exhibition space, as well as provided for an adjoining residential tower – bedizened with its own objets d’art – that generated income for operating expenses and later acquisitions. “One thing I want you to be very clear about is not to exaggerate my role in the Museum,” she cautioned David Hoffman in a 1986 interview,

[There] seems to be some feeling that I have done something that nobody else has done and the reason is that I got into all of this after my children were grown up and my husband was very occupied . . . and I’ve been able to give an amount of time other Trustees have not been able to . . . And I keep getting upset and people keep saying that nothing would have happened if I had not been there. This is absolutely not true. The key thing that I have been able to do is to be consistent. To go to meetings and to know what is going on.4

Her MoMA peers, however, tended to side with brother-in-law David’s appraisal above. Cesar Pelli, consulting architect of the museum expansion, noted, “Blanchette was the hero of this whole process as far as I’m concerned; she was wonderful . . . getting the building built.”5 Richard Oldenburg’s (MoMA’s director, 1972-1995) assessment surpassed that of Pelli’s. He cited her as one of only two trustees visionary enough to grasp the possibilities of the innovative expansion
plan. He also sized up her influence on the succession of events that led to the MoMA’s late twentieth century regeneration. “Blanchette, of course, was such a spectacularly marvelous person,” he noted,

She was not only marvelously nice and approachable and friendly to everyone, all of that we know, but people underestimated the real intelligence and sensitivity that she had. She was one of the best judges of people I ever encountered, and she could case someone very, very fast as to whether she thought they were really to be trusted or to be furthered along, but she was never antagonistic to anyone. She really had a very good sense of this, whether it was in case of hiring people, or considering trustees, or of approaching donors and so forth.6

Architect Pelli concurred, although more succinctly. “Blanchette,” he revealed in his MoMA oral history, “was much savvier than she allowed.”7

If modest about her contributions, Blanchette left no doubt as to the source of her character and talents. At her memorial service in 1992, son John “Jay” D. Rockefeller IV recalled, “As she would point out, my mother was not a Rockefeller. She was born Blanchette Ferry Hooker, and she was enormously proud of the Hooker family and her mother’s Ferry family from Detroit.”8 For the biographer, this attribution underscores one of the challenges of assessing Blanchette’s legacy. To wit, writing a biography of one of the Rockefeller wives demands a careful balance of understanding the impact of Blanchette’s own formative experiences as well as how the Rockefeller family shaped her contributions to society.

The Blanchette H. Rockefeller Papers

Since by the nature of the institutions themselves archival collections have tended to privilege the activities of men, gathering the materials for a woman’s biography, particularly in the field of arts, is a bit like trying to capture the will o’ the wisp. Indeed, after visiting the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) on two occasions in 2017, I also found it vital to consult collections at Vassar College, the University of Rochester, the Museum of Modern Art, the Detroit Institute of Art, The Bentley Historical Library (University of Michigan), as well as private
collections to gather what I would find at the RAC for a biography of Blanchette’s husband.

Putting the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller papers in their historical context links them to particular moments in Blanchette’s life that correspond almost exclusively to 1) her introduction to the Rockefeller family (after 1931), 2) her role in managing the financial affairs of her parents’ estate, 3) her private correspondence with selected friends and family (primarily Hooker and Ferry family relations), and, 4) her professional activities after her husband’s untimely death in 1978 (which included her involvement with the Museum of Modern Art’s then on-going expansion campaign).

Within this setting, Blanchette’s relationship with her husband is crucial to understanding the nature of record-keeping in the family. John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937) enjoined his son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), to keep a steady accounting of his finances and time. No Rockefeller took up this charge with greater relish than John D. Rockefeller, 3rd (1906-1978), who began keeping a daily journal as a teenager. As a result, I suspect, this is one reason why Blanchette’s daily calendars (housed at the RAC) help us less in assessing the substance of her life experiences than her husband’s detailed diaries (from which an overview of their married life can be extracted). While Blanchette was an exceptional letter writer, particularly when family and close friends were involved, she did not have the same enthusiasm as her husband for punctual and meticulous correspondence. As a result, for example, instead of keeping her own diary account of their early travels to Europe in the 1930s, she stuffed copies of her husband’s notes into her files instead. Likewise, John 3rd faithfully recorded the logistics of their art forays in Europe and Asia years later. It is only after John 3rd’s passing that Blanchette’s papers accurately represent the breadth of her personal and professional activities, including her direct involvement on her and her husband’s behalf as part of the third generation of Rockefellers (which included Abby [“Babs”], John 3rd, Nelson, Laurance, Winthrop, and David).

Given Blanchette’s loyalty to her Hooker and Ferry ancestry, it is not surprising that the collection includes a large number of files related to the historical legacies of her father and mother’s distinguished lines. As attested by Frederic Edwin Church’s glowing tableau of Reverend Thomas Hooker’s (1586-1647) entrance to the Connecticut wilds, Blanchette’s forbearers played prominent
roles in the founding of Hartford, Connecticut as well as the founding and
development of upstate New York. The story for the Hookers began in Thomas
Hooker’s Puritan break from the Anglican Church in seventeenth century England,
while based in his parish at Chelmsford. Thomas Hooker was assigned to the
Anglican Church there and then fled from Archbishop Laud who was driving to
“clean out” the Puritan believers among English ministers. Thomas Hooker fled to
Holland. The Ferry family traced their forbearers back to sixteenth century France,
where Huguenot Charles Ferry fled the country in 1586 for England, from whence
his posterity made their way to the United States. Rochester, with its picturesque
falls and bustling river trade, was a crossroads for the two families. From that hive
of nineteenth century industry, a young Dexter Ferry, Sr. (1833-1907), originally
from Lowville, New York, left to seek his fortune as a bookseller in Detroit, where
he learned accounting by night and invested in a burgeoning seed company on the
side. At the same time, Horace Hooker (1837-1914) and Susan Pamela Hooker
(1841-1928) returned to the Rochester area following the Civil War, where they
settled in the outlying community of Carthage. Susan Hooker, the daughter of Elon
Huntington, a trustee of the University of Rochester, perpetuated the family’s
emphasis on education, writing and lecturing extensively on the region’s history
throughout her life.

Primary accounts in the collection begin with a flourish of documents from
Blanchette’s parents, Elon Hooker (1869-1938) and Blanche Ferry (1871-1956).
There are small glints of the star-crossed encounter between the two at the Vatican
in Rome in March 1895, while Blanche was touring the country with her mother
and Elon was studying on the continent prior to returning to Ithaca to resume
graduate studies. Elon rhapsodizes of his chance meeting with the young lady
(whom he had actually met at Vassar two years earlier), swearing his
correspondent to secrecy. This letter intimates something of the cultural
differences that separated the Ferry and Hooker families at the time. By the 1890s,
Ferry family members were well established boosters of Detroit, where they plied
the international seed market, with side ventures in local real estate in and around
the matrix (then and now) of the city – Woodward Avenue. From their not
insubstantial means Mr. Ferry cultivated a growing interest in fine art.

Elon and Blanche eventually married in 1901, settling down in the Greater
New York City area, from which (between a residence in New York City and a
Elon Hooker emerges from the collection as an unusually well-educated and enterprising businessman who championed Progressive Age reforms in the workplace and society. In these files lie gathered a number of speeches that he gave off the stump as a friend and campaign treasurer of the Bull-Moose candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, in 1912. Hooker expressed strong views on immigration reform, which he supported, and improved labor relations (which he implemented in his own enterprises). Following in the stead of his close friend and former president, Elon, too, gave a discourse in Paris on the virtues of American ingenuity and the merits of cross-cultural cooperation.11

Blanche’s attention to the arts and Elon’s public-minded persona played significant roles in shaping Blanchette’s coming of age, which is captured largely through photo albums and scrapbooks in the collection. The father’s love of sports manifests itself in his daughters’ exceptional tennis skills (sister Helen Hooker is a national champion). A number of letters also convey his affection for his girls, one memorably penned in a note to Blanchette on his sixtieth birthday, soon after she had enrolled at Vassar. “Sixty years ago today,” he wrote, “I was born in the North [Saint] Paul St. home of my grandfather Elon Huntington of Rochester. It seems inconceivable that so many years have passed and so quickly and have still left me feeling in body and spirit so like one of your own generation. Your mother’s beauty and her surpassing charm and character have joined with the gracious and stimulating companionship of you girls in keeping me young.”12

Blanchette’s Vassar years (1927-1931) represent the first period of her life documented to any significant degree beyond scrapbooks. She, like her father and mother, attached high importance to education. This finds its way into her growing estate in Greenwich, Connecticut christened Chelmsford – after one of Thomas Hooker’s English parishes), Elon conceived and managed his growing electrochemical enterprise. Photo albums and a number of scrapbooks provide brief glimpses of the world the Hookers fashioned for their four daughters. As Hooker Electrochemical grew, so did Chelmsford, with its sprawling sylvan forest, cut through by smooth-running streams and enlivened by gardens designed by Mrs. Hooker and tended by attentive gardeners. These gardens (and the scrapbook from which the images are drawn) provide yet another clue as to the importance of aesthetics that Blanche Hooker brought from her own upbringing under the fatherly gaze of Dexter Ferry, Sr., America’s garden and flower seed king.
collection through the meticulous class notes from her coursework at Vassar, including theme papers, which give an early glimpse into her intellectual and artistic interests. Blanchette gave some sense of her devotion to piano in an American Academy of Arts interview in the early 1970s, but here are essays on the works of Wagner (a reflection of her love of German music, confirmed also by scrapbooks of study abroad excursions to the Rhineland between years at Vassar). In the realm of literature, she gravitated towards the Romantics, writing a senior paper on the role of deamons (those inner muses) in the poetry of William Wordsworth. Here one senses also her striving for fulfillment, manifest in her own cultivation of student leadership and the arts. It is those yearnings for purposeful creativity that in later years likely sparked her interest in the visual arts and civic engagement.

If the portrait of Blanchette, to this point in the collection, looks rather traditional, its contents also illuminate more contemporary concerns of the historian as her life shifted from a coming-of-age to adulthood and marriage to John 3rd. There is something of a social and cultural history of the elite in an inventory of their household possessions for the years immediately after their marriage, taken after a break-in at the One Beekman Place residential complex where they lived early on. The art, the books, the accoutrements of their early life together reveal touches of home that they both brought to the marriage. Here a Japanese screen to partition a bedroom (a possession of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller loaned to the newlyweds); there, in the library some German language books, representative of Blanchette’s interests in fin-de-siècle Wagnerian culture.

In the realm of child rearing, Blanchette took to the Rockefeller virtues of philanthropy resource management with alacrity, encouraging her father-in-law to instill the same lessons in her children as he had done for John 3rd. Indeed, Blanchette integrated her own traditions and those of the new family almost seamlessly, always with an eye to their discreet privacy. This, nonetheless, does not obscure completely family life amongst the young Rockefellers. During the early years of World War II, an enterprising British family Blanchette’s family had known for several decades, the Rowntrees, sought out a stateside haven for their children during the conflict. For the next three years, Blanchette and John 3rd welcomed the two Rowntree boys into their family. The nearly hundred and seventy letters exchanged (and catalogued) between 1940 and 1943 give a sense of
Blanchette’s parenting style and how it informs her leadership in the public realm. Kindness was one of Blanchette’s cardinal virtues, but she was also decisive in pursuing a course of action she felt was in the best interest of the two boys, even when consultation with the Rowntree’s parents was not possible. The blending of the two sets of children also offers a glimpse of ordinary life at her Tarrytown country estate, Fieldwood Farm, in the early 1940s.

Blanchette’s relationship with her husband lies at the heart of her life and the files that chronicle her experiences. Like any other couple, they had personal preferences and idiosyncrasies – none more stunning than the floor plans of Blanchette’s art studio house designed by a young Philip Johnson in the 1940s where she often sat alone to look at works of modern art or gather friends to discuss questions of aesthetics. Notwithstanding their individual tastes, what is most striking is the degree to which they collaborated on personal and philanthropic interests throughout the course of their married life. This began early on, in their joint planning of a country estate, Fieldwood Farm, located outside of the Rockefeller estate in Westchester County. If it is difficult to discern Blanchette’s point of view on their early journeys together, correspondence from the estate’s construction addresses both John 3rd and Blanchette’s individual likings for their country. This healthy interplay of complementary interests later enhanced their ability to collaborate on building Asian and American art collections.

Asia stands at the center of the couple’s shared interests. John 3rd’s involvement with the Japanese Peace Commission is well-documented, but less is known about the crucial role Blanchette played as a cultural courier between Japan and the United States in the early 1950s. In the aftermath of her first trip to Japan in 1951, where she dashed about the city while John 3rd remained captive during diplomatic negotiations, it was she that took the initial steps to have a tea garden built in the MoMA court for several years in the early 1950s before its permanent relocation to Philadelphia’s Fairmont Park. But the distinction of who took initiative to introduce another form of Asian culture to an America not too far removed from the Second World War obscures the overwhelmingly collaborative nature of their cultural affinity for Asia. While John delineated social programs to ease population pressures throughout the continent, Blanchette commuted to Columbia University each week to study Asian art and history with leading scholars of the age, including Japanologist Sir George Samson. This mid-life return to the
classroom lasted three years, during which time she completed the coursework (with class notes and term papers as proof) for the master’s degree. Annual trips to Asia, where she applied her newly found knowledge precluded composition of a thesis. From this marriage of complementary interests, Blanchette and John 3rd pooled their knowledge and resources to create the Asia Society, which promoted appreciation of contemporary issues and cultural accomplishments throughout the continent, as well as the JDR 3rd Fund (now managed by the Asian Cultural Council), which uniquely supported the preservation of Asia’s material and performance-based cultural heritage. The Asia Society papers exclusive to Blanchette’s record group, document her full attention to its perpetuation in the wake of John’s passing in 1978.

Blanchette’s papers illustrate the life of a woman who not only shared her husband’s interests, but, as they aged, felt quite at home with the Rockefeller family over successive generations. Following the death of John 3rd, Blanchette found immediate refuge in his sister-in-law Peggy and David’s home. This would be as emblematic as it was reassuring at the time. As the anecdote at the outset of this essay suggests, Blanchette and David Rockefeller carried on a warm professional, as well as personal relationship, as their respective roles at the MoMA expanded in the late twentieth century. At the same time, Blanchette’s friendship with Mary Todd Clark Rockefeller (former wife of Nelson Rockefeller) blossomed. While Blanchette’s papers document trips overseas with the MoMA’s International Council, they also include notes from periodic pleasure trips with Mary to destinations in Europe and the Caribbean. More meaningful are the expressions of support and affection evident in their personal correspondence. Remarkably, we catch glimpses of Mary that are difficult to discern elsewhere in the family’s extended papers.

At the same time, Blanchette threw herself ever more purposefully into creating opportunities for appreciating the arts. Her MoMA files attest to her dignified persistence in cultivating trustees and reliable donors in a new age of uncertainty for private museums, but also corporate donors, in a quest to reach the museum’s capital goal by the early 1980s. At the same time, she supplemented her practical experience gained in presiding over MoMA with increased outreach to national organizations affiliated with museum management, as well as service on prestigious public awards panels. Finally, Blanchette quietly entered the political
realm, urging select senators and congressmen to support public initiatives in the humanities. The dedication of the Blanchette H. Rockefeller Gallery, three years after the museum’s re-opening in 1984, marked the pinnacle of her service to the institution. As her professional obligations receded into the past, she gained international distinction, repatriating Russian works of art to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

In her final years, beginning as early as 1984 (according to family accounts at her 1992 memorial service), Blanchette fought against the advancing effects of Alzheimer’s Disease, a struggle for which she deserves admiration. Only family members knew of its private effects, but surprisingly, she continued to sustain the vibrant network of social relations that in so many ways defined the magnanimity for which she was so well known publicly. For instance, the longest running set of correspondences in Blanchette’s collection spans four decades and records her friendship with Misao Matsumoto, the daughter of her husband’s collaborator at the International House in Tokyo. Misao came to the United States as an undergraduate transfer to Vassar College in 1955, where she studied alongside Sandra Rockefeller, Blanchette and John 3rd’s daughter. Misao took a degree in Childhood Education, and returned to Japan, where she married now renowned architect, Fumihiko Maki, whose recent creation, Four World Trade Center, today graces the Lower Manhattan skyline. They remained in contact until the end of Blanchette’s life (including a posthumous note from Misao to Blanchette). It should be noted, however, that Blanchette hosted a dinner for the pair on the occasion of Fumihiko receiving the Thomas Jefferson Award in architecture from the University of Virginia on February 12, 1990. Said another way, the archives suggest that life in its late stages still held meaningful moments as Blanchette approached the end of a remarkable life. More importantly, she made important decisions during the 1980s that sustained and burnished the institutional jewels of her and John 3rd’s making, including the Asia Society, the International House of Japan, and completion of the disposition of John 3rd’s American Art collection to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.
Conclusion: Reprising Blanchette in the Gallery

Further proofs of Blanchette H. Rockefeller’s aesthetic and civic legacy lie some eighty miles north of the Archive Center. There, at Vassar College, echoes of her Hooker and Ferry family history resonate with the world she forged in marriage with John 3rd. Take, for instance, the Alumnae Guest House, which her mother and Aunt Queene Ferry Coonley funded in the mid-1920s. On-campus one can walk into the sturdy, Normandesque chapel that flanks the entry gates to campus, where Elon and Blanche Hooker would have heard a Roosevelt -- Franklin, in this case, not the more familiar Theodore -- speak at Blanchette’s college graduation in 1931.

But it is in the art museum that we find a fitting symbol of Blanchette’s archival legacy now housed at the Rockefeller Archive Center. Blanchette and her mother donated a number of works to the museum. There is, for example, Jean Leon Gerome’s *Camels at the Watering Place*, which once graced the walls of Dexter Ferry, Sr.’s home in Detroit before its gifting to Vassar on behalf of Blanche Ferry Hooker in 1908. But it is in the final gallery space before exiting to the entryway, that we find the Ukrainian born American Louise Nevelson’s white painted wooden creation, *Dawn’s Wedding Feast Column #*, which was donated by Blanchette to the museum in 1969. The two tapering vertical columns, each delicately constructed of asymmetrical strips of white wood symbolize the complementary roles played by the Hooker and Rockefeller families in shaping Blanchette and her husband John 3rd’s contributions to the world of art in the late twentieth century.

Likewise, the Blanchette H. Rockefeller Papers housed at the Rockefeller Archive Center tell much of the story of complementary means that produced an extraordinary life. An upstart industrialist crossed paths in Rome with the heiress of the Ferry-Morse seed empire, which set the stage for Blanchette’s disciplined upbringing in a world filled with art and a family of connoisseurs who had a public-minded mission to spread the benefits of education democratically. Her marriage to John D. Rockefeller 3rd picked up where her single life had ended. She embraced
a mother-in-law who shared her own family’s interest in art, even the avant garde school of the day, as well as a commitment to educate the public through MoMA, an institution different in size, but not totally in degree from the Detroit Institute of Arts. Her marriage to John 3rd brought her literally to new worlds in Asia that she might not have considered had she not become a Rockefeller. Ultimately, those mid-life encounters with art and Asia set the stage for a legacy of civic service in the name of beauty, which continues to grow to this day just off Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue and 53<sup>rd</sup> Street.
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John Adams to Abigail Adams, May 12, 1780, accessed January 29, 2018, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17800512jasecond; I have restored several of the words scratched out by Adams while writing the letter, including “painting and poetry.”

MoMA History Interviews, David Hoffman interview with Blanchette Rockefeller, Tape 6, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York City, transcription by the author.


Oral History Program, Cesar Pelli, p. 8, MoMA Archives, NY.

“Blanchette Ferry Hooker Rockefeller, 1909-1992,” RFA, RG 53, Series 3, Box 33, Folder 250, In Memoriam – Mrs. JDR Memorial Booklet, Staff,” n.p., RAC.

“Ferry Family Coat of Arms,” RFA, RG 53, Series 1, Hooker and Ferry Families, Box 1, Folder 1, RAC.

See Elon H. Hooker to Ambolea Huntington Cary, June 3, 1895, RFA, RG 53, Series 1, Box 8, Folder 57, “Hooker, Elon H., Correspondence, 1895-1974,” RAC.


Elon H. Hooker to Blanchette Hooker, November 23, 1929, RFA, RG 53, Series 1, Box 8, Folder 57, “Hooker, Elon H., Correspondence, 1895-1974,” RAC.

See, for example, Blanchette F. Hooker, “The ‘Daemon’ in English Romantic Poetry,” May 20, 1931, RFA, RG 53, Box 46, Folder 368, RAC

See RFA, RG 5, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Series 1, OMR Files, Box 1, Folder 3.