

The McCall Controversy: A Look into Art and Politics of 1940s Memphis**Amy Aughinbaugh****2011 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies**

In 1943, the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery (now known as the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art) made its first major purchase by buying slightly fewer than 40 paintings¹ from the private collection of a St. Louis utilities magnate, Warner S. McCall. While initial press in expectation of the event from both of Memphis' major newspapers, the Press-Scimitar and the Commercial Appeal, was highly favorable, several months after the exhibition was installed the Brooks began receiving critical remarks concerning the quality and authenticity of the collection from the Press-Scimitar newspaper. On the other hand, its competitor, the Commercial Appeal, rather quickly took to the defense of the Brooks, thus beginning a dynamic press war lasting several months that never fully reached a resolution (as neither paper ever conceded the point). The local vendetta briefly grew to become a national scandal, when the negative press reached Time Magazine in an article from March 6th, 1944, entitled "Memphis Muddle."²

Superficially, the Press-Scimitar raised some valid arguments in questioning the collection since the lot indeed contained a handful of low-value paintings; however, as is perennially common with media coverage, the issues at hand concerning the McCall purchase were far more complicated than the cursory, scurrilous glance presented by the Scimitar. Even without full knowledge of the politics and motivations behind the purchase, the Commercial

¹ Most contemporary newspaper reports state the purchase contained 38 paintings, but the museum's current files only contain records of 36 artworks. The purchase also included various art objects of minimal import.

² "Memphis Muddle," *New York Times*, March 6, 1944, accessed July 28, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,774838,00.html>

Appeal deftly defended it,³ arguing more effectively than the Scimitar which quietly put the story to bed without formally rescinding its negative statements. Recent research into this purchase reveals the multi-faceted angles to the public story presented in the press and the untold evidence behind the published story of the McCall collection. After questioning why the Scimitar initiated the smear campaign, evaluating the credibility of its claims, and chronicling the McCall's political baggage and benefits, the inevitable conclusion to the McCall controversy is that, past or present, the purchase has always had undeniable value.

What is the McCall Collection?

Warner S. McCall, born in 1873, was a multi-millionaire utilities operator based out of St. Louis, Missouri, who enjoyed privately collecting European art. McCall was not formally educated in art though he did amass a collection containing some of the most venerable names of the Old Masters including works by “Peter Paul Rubens, Jean Francois Millet, Anthony Van Dyck, and Sir Thomas Gainsborough”.⁴ Enjoying substantial purchasing power and without a limit to his taste, Warner McCall gathered a formidable collection that could rival that of his more well-known contemporaries such as William Randolph Hearst, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and the soon-to-be highly significant Samuel H. Kress.

Unfortunately for the Brooks, Mr. McCall did not appear to be the most scrupulous collector in that he did not always make purchases with strong provenance records. This would eventually become a problem for the Brooks Museum as their registrars attempted to complete the histories of the paintings, especially in the wake of World War II. Most of the paintings in his collection for sale, however, had at least partial provenance records and he worked through

³ The Appeal published one article admitting some negativity concerning the collection, but even spun that story with a positive slant. See footnote 38 to reference this article.

⁴ “McCall, Warner S.,” Frick Collection Archives Directory, last updated December 20, 2010, accessed July 28, 2011, <http://research.frick.org/directoryweb/browserecord.php?-action=browse&-recid=7241>

established art dealers such as J.F. Douthitt, the Newhouse Galleries, and the King's Galleries in London who were obligated to honestly authenticate works. Mr. McCall did not concentrate his collection upon particular regions, eras, or styles and it was thus fully stocked with a wide range of genres.

Warner McCall first opted to sell a portion of his collection in 1941 in order to "facilitate settlement of his estate" as he and his wife were approaching old age.⁵ The initial sale of his collection took place in the Kende Galleries which were run by the Gimbel Brothers in New York City. As the original catalogue for this sale was lost in a fire in 1977, not much is known concerning the specifics of the sale except that it never successfully occurred. Again, according to newspaper reports, the collection was incorrectly advertised which caused enough controversy to prevent its sale at auction in New York.⁶ That is not to say, however, that the collection did not come to New York much venerated and respected. Its proposed sale at auction in the Kende Galleries followed on the heels of two of the most significant sales in New York at the time: the Hearst collection and the McKay collection. McCall's gatherings were likewise seen as one of the most "outstanding" private art collections in America at the time, and when it arrived in New York Mr. McCall's complete holdings were reportedly worth \$5,000,000.⁷ In short, though the McCall collection gathered some notoriety in New York, it also gathered significant interest.

Memphis and the McCall

It likely was this interest that spread the news of a McCall collection sale to Charlie Rentrop, a professional wrestling promoter with ties to St. Louis and to Memphis. Rentrop, in

⁵ "Store Will Offer \$5,000,000 of Art," *New York Times*, October 12, 1941.

⁶ See below for additional information.

⁷ The vast discrepancy between the NYT estimate of \$5,000,000 and the Memphis purchase price which was \$30,000 can be explained in that the New York McCall sale included more works from his private collection. Presumably, \$5,000,000 was the estimated worth of McCall's entire holdings.

"Store Will Offer \$5,000,000 of Art."

turn, informed his friend John B. Vesey of the Memphis Parks Commission that the utilities magnate in St. Louis was looking to sell. As mentioned earlier, the dynamics of the McCall purchase are multi-layered and impossible to convey in a strictly linear fashion. Therefore, at this juncture, I will recount the story of the McCall as it appeared in the Memphis newspapers and various other public sources. Later, after presenting and assessing the public battle, I will color the issue with fuller tones by describing the unspoken (more precisely, the unpublished) aspects of the controversy.

According to the story as it was conveyed by the Memphis press, the city park commissioners under which the Brooks Gallery functioned had received word of a valuable collection up for sale. The Brooks Museum, though in existence since 1916, had never made any major purchases for its galleries. In fact, in its first 27 years it had collected a measly 21 artworks which implies that the gallery was deliberately attempting to slowly acquire works.⁸ The museum was however a highly popular local and tourist attraction as a result of the stunning traveling art exhibitions which it put on with great success including exhibits such as a van Gogh retrospective and a highly popular National Salon of Photography in early 1943. In any event, this bold action of attempting to acquire not just one, but nearly forty works of significance at once, was a new direction for the Brooks.

On the same day, July 24th, 1943, both local papers reported that the Memphis Parks Commission had recently taken an option on a number of paintings from the St. Louis McCall collection. The Commercial Appeal stated that the city was looking at 28 works whereas the Scimitar did not list a number, but a price. They claimed the city was interested in paying

⁸ According to Rhodes Institute fellow, Anne Weems, the gallery “was collecting slowly due to two factors – relying on works to be gifted because they didn’t have the funds to purchase and the Brooks was trying to establish a high standard from the beginning (the jurors rejected a number of proposed gifts).” For more information on the early collection at the Brooks Museum, see “The Origins of a Permanent Collection: An Account of the Early History of the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery under the Direction of Florence McIntyre” by Anne Weems.

\$38,000 for the collection, yet included a statement by Vesey saying that the number was “a way off.”⁹ The Commercial Appeal followed up the next day to offer an editorial opinion that “Now is the Time to Buy.”¹⁰ The paper points out the cultural, economic, and political opportunity in the “extremely valuable” collection by extolling the importance of a city government’s job to invest in “cultural advancement.”¹¹ It specifically addresses the acceptability of making the purchase in the midst of war time by explaining that “Memphis is soundly managed and is in good financial condition,” thereby lauding city officials while tacitly acknowledging the use of taxpayers’ money, conveniently avoiding actual use of the contentious phrase.¹² With finality, the editorial concludes by arguing that making the McCall purchase at this time would be an absolute business bargain, reasoning in a rational though unsupported statement that “after the war, [the collection] will unquestionably command much higher prices.”¹³

From that initial press until mid-1944, the McCall was regularly featured in Commercial Appeal dailies and weekend papers. It next appeared in both major papers on August 17th when the Brooks Museum officially announced the acquisition. The Commercial Appeal, however included a substantial article about the “Old Masters” coming to Memphis whereas the Scimitar relegated the purchase by focusing on “varied objects” which comprised a mere sixth of the purchase value and had been given to the Pink Palace (then known as the Memphis Museum).¹⁴ The Scimitar does not degrade the value of the purchase though and it in fact calls it “almost priceless” but it curiously shifts the focus, and therefore the glory, away from the Brooks

⁹ “Consider Paintings for Brooks Gallery,” Memphis Press-Scimitar (hereafter cited in footnotes as PS), July 24, 1943.

¹⁰ “Now is Time to Buy,” Commercial Appeal (hereafter cited in footnotes as CA), July 25, 1944.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “City Art Purchase Includes Works of the Old Masters,” CA, August.17, 1943; “Pink Palace Gets Additions,” PS, August 17, 1943.

purchase toward the side-effect correlational benefit to the Pink Palace, giving the secondary museum almost equal credit in the deal.¹⁵ The Scimitar then remains silent on the acquisition until the opening exhibition at the Brooks whereas the Commercial Appeal printed two more stories, on August 21st and 22nd, praising the “excellent buy” as “one of the South’s finest.”¹⁶ The latter article was a full-page spread that discussed the insurance value of the paintings at \$100,000 and highlighted most prominently two canvases by Anthony van Dyck and Peter Paul Rubens – both were and are very significant names in the annals of art history. Those canvases would also be the two most highly contentious artworks from the collection, not coincidentally, because of their evident historical value and due to the fact that the Commercial Appeal chose to hang the utmost praises upon the high-profile paintings. For the time being, I will postpone a detailed discussion of the values of these and other works until the narrative reaches the point at which the Scimitar first began to question the collection. It is important to note, however, that the Commercial Appeal laid out explicit monetary values for the McCall pieces as early as August 1943, yet the Scimitar chose not to probe the issue until months later in February 1944.

The McCall collection opened for public exhibition, perhaps ominously, on October 31st, 1943. In accordance with previous patterns, the Press-Scimitar released a curiously ambivalent story about the McCall opening while the Commercial Appeal published three separate articles leading up to the exhibition. Though the McCall was fully open to the public on the 31st, the Brooks had two private receptions on the 28th and 29th as is common practice for museums in general. The first reception was highly exclusive for “city officials, Brooks League Members, and the press” while the second was an invitation-only event for local, ambiguously identified

¹⁵ “Pink Palace Gets Additions.”

¹⁶ “An Excellent Buy,” CA, August 21, 1943; Robert Talley, “Art Comes to Memphis,” CA, August 22, 1943.

“art lovers.”¹⁷ In its press release from October 27th, the Scimitar mentioned only these two private receptions and dedicated one of five paragraphs in the short blurb to a description of the table and its decorations for the second reception. The Commercial Appeal on the other hand wrote an article for each reception, never missing a chance to extol the purchase and featuring in the second article a large photo of the aforementioned van Dyck portrait painting.

The Scimitar, clearly unenthusiastic (yet notably not yet patently suspicious), of the collection then dropped the story for the next three months. But the Commercial Appeal? I suspect my reader by this point can predict its behavior. The publication kept the McCall story alive by printing about it once a month in November, December, and January into the following year.¹⁸ The Appeal was at least creative about its coverage, varying the stories from recounting the high volume of visitors attracted to the museum as a result of the McCall display,¹⁹ to the fact that nearby museums and institutions were seeking the attractive collection for loans,²⁰ to a story replete with a photo of “famous masterpieces added to the walls of the Brooks” which were not put out during the original opening exhibition.²¹ In short, the Commercial Appeal persisted with unrelenting positive coverage of the McCall collection purchase, while the Press-Scimitar responded to it with polite yet restrained interest. All of this, however, was about to change as the Scimitar prepared to launch a head-on, no holds barred assault.

The First Attack

¹⁷ “Lovers of Art, Artists will be Guests at Brooks,” PS, October 27, 1943.

¹⁸ For a full comparative list of Memphis press publications on the McCall collection please see the document in this essay’s index which outlines dates and titles of every available article on the Brooks and the McCall between July 1943 and June 1968.

¹⁹ The number was 2500 in one week according to the article: “Paintings at Gallery Attract 2500 Visitors,” CA, November 7, 1943.

²⁰ “Loan of Art Exhibit sought by 16 Towns,” CA, December 10, 1943.

²¹ “Famous Masterpieces Added to Walls of Brooks Gallery,” CA, January 2, 1944.

On February 11th, 1944, Clark Porteous, a confident, seasoned staff writer for the Press-Scimitar who later made an impact as a civil rights supporter when covering the Emmett Till trial in 1956,²² published a front page diatribe attacking the authenticity of the McCall. Porteous begins boldly with, “What evidence does the city administration have that the McCall art collection bought in St. Louis is worth the \$30,000 it cost the taxpayers?”²³ This is the first publication which avowedly stated the purchase cost of the collection, having corrected this from the Scimitar’s early speculation of \$38,000. Porteous immediately invokes Memphis city Mayor Walter Chandler’s name who would have naturally overseen the public acquisition, but who had not been previously fingered in the press as directly related to the McCall purchase. Mayor Chandler appears in Porteous’ article as overly defensive and reactionary when it states that the official apparently “became angry” at the reporter and shouted, “That’s like questioning the chastity of a virtuous woman!”²⁴

According to the article, the question of authenticity first arose when a Russian ex-patriot noticed that the documentation corroborating a supposed coronation robe of a certain Czarina Alexandra (which was among the “varied objects” given to the Pink Palace mentioned in the Scimitar’s August 1943 article) was actually not written about the dress at all.²⁵ The note “had nothing to do with the dress but spoke of the genuineness of napkins and a coverlet going over a communion cup.”²⁶ This was disappointing surely, but even Mr. Porteous’ own article concedes that the objects given to the Pink Palace were of little significance as compared to the purchase

²² “Reporting Civil Rights: Timeline 1942-1973: 1955,” Reporting Civil Rights, copyright 2003, accessed July 28, 2011, <http://reportingcivilrights.loa.org/timeline/year.jsp?year=1955>.

²³ Clark Porteous, “The Mystery of the 38 Paintings: If Some of them are Genuine, How Many?,” PS, February 11, 1944.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Pink Palace Gets Additions,” PS, August 17, 1943.

²⁶ “The Mystery of the 28 Paintings.”

of the actual paintings and were “more or less thrown in for good measure.”²⁷ Nonetheless, from there Porteous’ investigation branches out to the canvases at the Brooks galleries, opinions upon which he exclusively draws from one Dr. Wilhelm Valentiner of the Detroit Institute for the Arts. Mr. Porteous refers to Dr. Valentiner because he knew the Brooks had already consulted this authority prior to purchasing the collection. However, rather than focus upon the certifications that Dr. Valentiner provided for the Brooks, Porteous details every possible source of doubt raised by the art curator. For the record, Valentiner’s previous invocation occurred in the Commercial Appeal article, “Art Comes to Memphis” from August 22nd, 1943, where the reporter cites Dr. Valentiner’s certification of the Rubens in which he states that he considers it “a fine portrait... of which there are very few examples.”²⁸

Porteous comes down on the other side of the fence, referencing a lengthy interview with Dr. Valentiner who was less convinced by the other paintings in the collection. Aside from confirming Valentiner’s authentication of the Rubens, the article uses his words to disparage seven paintings from the McCall purchase.²⁹ Through Porteous, Valentiner says that “most of the McCall pictures are ‘pretty bad’ but two or three [unidentified paintings] are excellent.”³⁰ Porteous does not prove however that most of the paintings are of poor quality because he only specifically discusses seven out of the 38 reported paintings in the collection, and even then he uses only Valentiner’s commentary as a source. Porteous at least appears to have tried to talk to other experts, namely Arthur Kocian, a St. Louis art dealer, and Meyric Rogers, a former director

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Robert Talley, “Art Comes to Memphis,” CA, August 22, 1943.

²⁹ For a catalogue of Dr. Valentiner’s comments along with certifications and opinions from other relevant experts, please see the index.

³⁰ Clark Porteous, “The Mystery of the 38 Paintings: If Some of them are Genuine, How Many?,” PS, February 11, 1944.

of the St. Louis City Art Museum, both of whom refused to comment. Porteous then merely speculated that they must have “questioned the genuineness of the collection.”³¹

Porteous furthermore skirts a glaring weakness in Valentiner’s expertise concerning the McCall collection. Based upon the condemning article itself, it seems that Valentiner has never actually encountered the McCall paintings in person. Valentiner’s introduction to the collection happened when the Brooks Museum consulted him prior to making the purchase by sending photos of three of the potential buys. These images were the Rubens, a painting by Memling (which is now recognized as not by him but instead by a follower of van der Weyden) which Valentiner rightly doubted, and a Clouet (now listed as by the school of Clouet) which Valentiner also believed was fake. The Brooks additionally has undated certifications from Valentiner for two small portraits by Sofonisba Anguissola (a major female Italian Renaissance painter) that had not yet been mentioned in the press. When degrading the van Dyck portrait and the Raeburn painting, Porteous quickly says that Valentiner inspected the work “from photographs.”³² That evidence in combination with the fact that the Brooks has no record of a visit from Valentiner in order to inspect the purchase implies that all of the paintings questioned by the Press-Scimitar article were sent as photos to Valentiner. Keep in mind, most photos at this time would be in black and white, therefore further removing a painting from its context and from an accurate assessment of its authenticity.³³ Also, all of the paintings mentioned by Valentiner (aside from the Memling and the Clouet of which he already had photos) were from the exhibition catalogue of the McCall purchase or had been highlighted in previous Commercial

³¹ Ibid.

³² Clark Porteous, “The Mystery of the 38 Paintings: If Some of them are Genuine, How Many?,” PS, February 11, 1944.

³³ Granted, due to the difficulty of travel at the time, photographic authentication – though still imprecise – was a much more acceptable practice in 1944 than it is now. Also, it is possible that Valentiner visited the McCall sale when it visited New York, but he never mentions of this possibility in all his interactions with the Memphis press which decreases its likelihood.

Appeal reports. Valentiner was merely responding to press photos and a catalogue sent to him by the Scimitar who was looking for controversy.

Also conveniently evident in Porteous' article is a likely reason for Valentiner's bias against the collection. Having said that the Brooks sought his consultation where he believed that two out of the three paintings he saw were poor choices, Valentiner then seems rebuffed saying, "I don't see why they ask my advice, then don't follow it."³⁴ The logical answer to his lament is that John Vesey and Louisa B. Clark, the then director of the Brooks who also went to inspect the purchase in St. Louis, had seen the other 30-plus paintings in the collection and understood its combined value to be worth \$30,000. Porteous' article, though critical and scathing, upon careful reading also does much to inadvertently point out the flaws in his argument. In the caption under a picture of a painting from the collection with the article, Porteous asks again, "What proof, Mr. Mayor, do you have to refute the questioning of the genuineness of this painting?"³⁵ There is however a better question to ask: what proof do you have, Mr. Porteous, to refute the inadequacies of this article?

So Begins the Press War

After Clark Porteous' charge, the balance in coverage between it and its rival paper began to even out, with biases clearly apparent. The Commercial Appeal responded the next day, February 12th, with an irate "Maestro Vesey" defending the authenticity of the collection like a cowboy swooping into town to save the day.³⁶ "Booted and spurred," Vesey shot back in no uncertain terms, identifying Dr. Valentiner as "the villain in the drama" without directly

³⁴ Clark Porteous, "The Mystery of the 38 Paintings: If Some of them are Genuine, How Many?," PS, February 11, 1944.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Maestro Veseyirate at Slur on Oils—'Bargain,' He Says," CA, February 12, 1944.

attacking any of the art historian's statements.³⁷ Early on the paper correctly points out that a purchase of nearly 40 works almost always naturally contains a few less than priceless canvases, and then uses Vesey's words to propose some values on the Rubens (\$25,000) and the van Dyck (upwards of \$50,000) which together would be worth more than twice the purchase cost.

Following up the next day in the Sunday paper, presumably in order to provide a quote from Dr. Valentiner who was unable to be reached for comment in the Saturday article, the Commercial Appeal wrote another story still in defense of the collection. Valentiner did not back down, offering an equally "very poor" opinion to the Commercial Appeal as he did to the Press-Scimitar.³⁸ The Appeal also recognizes that Valentiner may have felt slighted by the Brooks' rejection of his advice prior to the purchase, intimating that he is lashing out with his negative attacks.

Rejecting Valentiner's statements, the Appeal backs up their hero Vesey's defense with quotes from Leo Marzolo, a Chicagoan who restored the McCall paintings after purchase. Said Mr. Marzolo concerning the collection, "It is very fine" and "Memphis is very fortunate... [to have] made a wise purchase."³⁹ Thus the party lines were drawn.

The very next day, editorials came out in both papers.⁴⁰ The Press-Scimitar bluntly asserts that Memphis bought the "Wrong Pictures" while the Commercial Appeal sweetly opines whether Memphis gained "Art, Or Beauty, or Both?"⁴¹ The full title of the Press-Scimitar article was "The Wrong Pictures, Even if Good" which indicates that in the article immediately following its attack on the McCall, the Scimitar is already slightly backing down. Now instead of questioning the authenticity of the works, the Scimitar tries to cover all of its bases by saying

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Art Expert Sticks to Story: 'City Bought Poor Collection,'" CA, February 13, 1944.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Art, or Beauty, or Both," CA, February 14, 1944.

⁴¹ "Art, or Beauty, or Both;" "The Wrong Pictures, Even if Good," PS, February 14, 1944.

that they were not a valuable enough purchase. The Scimitar wonders if “it is the business of a municipal museum of art to buy pictures which [do not already have universal appeal.]”⁴² It preposterously suggests that the museum should have bought works that were equal in fame to paintings such as the Mona Lisa, Whistler’s Mother, or “landscapes by... Homer” (forgetting that the McCall purchase did indeed include a landscape by none other than Mr. Winslow Homer).⁴³ The Scimitar essentially would have preferred that the Brooks Museum had spent a fortune on one work, rather than negotiate a steal on a fortune’s worth of forty canvases. Underlining its real point in the conclusion of the editorial, the Scimitar again addresses the city government, paralleling the purchase of art from a utilities magnate with over-priced utilities charges in Memphis: “Does the city government with the money flowing in from surcharges... [have] money to throw away on hobbies?”⁴⁴

Presenting the polar opposite view, the Commercial Appeal waxes poetic that “education of any sort comes [at a high cost]” and paints the controversy in its stereotypically heroically dramatic prose.⁴⁵ This paper also softens its approach, but toward a more logical direction acknowledging that newsmen and citizens alike have very little expertise by which to judge the quality of artwork other than based upon the joy experienced while looking at it. It humorously admits that the controversy is above most Memphians’ heads and notes that while the audience waits “with only a modicum of breathlessness,” “lots and lots of folks who have seen the pictures have been delighted with them.”⁴⁶ On the cultural value of the McCall purchase, the Appeal justifiably asserts that there is no doubt.

⁴² “The Wrong Pictures.”

⁴³ “The Wrong Pictures, Even if Good,” PS, February 14, 1944.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Art, or Beauty, or Both,” CA, February 14, 1944.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The press battles continue from then until late April, bouncing back and forth across local news pages almost as readily as coverage of World War II. The art critiques and defenses actually embodied more antagonistic gusto than the war coverage since the fighting overseas was almost universally supported across the nation. On February 15th, the Scimitar published an editorial cartoon succinctly summarizing the conflict with its most blatant charge yet against the politicians involved in the purchase.⁴⁷ The Appeal counters with a downright theatrical article about “Battling John” beating his number one critic Valentiner to a pulp in a metaphorical boxing match.⁴⁸ Thinking it had pushed the Scimitar into submission by the latter’s silence on the matter, the Appeal taunted its competitor on February 27th with an article about the popularity of certain Brooks exhibits. The Scimitar jabbed back gently on March 17th and on April 3rd with two articles: one reprinted from the St. Louis Star Times about the “Fakes and Lemons” bought by the suckers in Memphis and an original article reminding citizens that critics were “Still Cool on [the] City’s Art Purchase.”⁴⁹ In the meantime, the Press-Scimitar was actually just biding its time and readying its arsenal for its second and more lethal full-on attack that was to be published on April 21st, 1944.

The Most Notorious Attack Ever Unloaded on an Art Collection

With a foreword reading like the prologue to a primetime television exposé, the Press-Scimitar, which was limited in its last attack by its inability to bring the expert to the art, this time called upon an expert at the source. Speaking through their New York correspondent, Helen Worden (an “intimate of leading figures in the literary and art world”), the Scimitar

⁴⁷ “Editorial Cartoon: Theme Song,” PS, February 15, 1944. I have included this cartoon in the image index because it neatly summarizes in one square the argument I have been relaying for the past dozen pages. I will discuss its visual content more thoroughly near the end of this essay.

⁴⁸ “Battling John’s’ Typewriter Drives Valentiner into ‘Ropes’,” CA, February 16, 1944.

⁴⁹ “Fakes and Lemons: The Memphis Art Question (St. Louis Star-Times),” PS, March 17, 1944; Sarah Lowrance, “Critics Still Cool on City’s Art Purchase,” PS, April 3, 1944.

decided to ask New York how it felt about the McCall collection.⁵⁰ Why they were surprised by the negative reaction we cannot be sure because their paper had already reported⁵¹ that the attempted McCall sale in New York had not gone off due to controversy. As a result of a misrepresentation in the New York papers where Dr. Valentiner was incorrectly quoted as certifying the so-called Memling attribution which he in fact disputed, the New York scene was pre-disposed to mistrust the entire McCall collection. Focusing upon critics in New York rather than the actual owners of the collection in St. Louis also speaks to the Scimitar's intentions with this piece; they knew that invoking New York's name alone would give authenticity to their accusations since the Big Apple was and is the center of the American art world.

In her article, Worden claims to have spoken to "20 or more" New York art critics and that they collectively refer to the McCall purchase as the single "most notorious lot of second-hand art ever unloaded on a museum."⁵² She begins by offering three different conspiracy theories, a detail of one story revealing a key feature of the McCall sale: Mr. McCall wanted to sell the paintings in question as a whole unit, not one work at a time. This will prove critical in debunking a major assertion of the Scimitar's thesis.

Of the twenty (or more!) experts she talked to, Worden only identifies two and anonymously references a third who hurriedly reads off a selection of the disputed works, dismissing them each with no more than ten words. One of the named experts is Major Hiram Parke of the Parke-Bernet Art Galleries who actually declined to comment on the matter. He first expressed exasperation at the mention of the topic, as was probably natural for most dealers

⁵⁰ Helen Worden, "N.Y. Critics Call McCall Pictures 'Second-Hand Art': 'Most Notorious Lot Ever Unloaded on a Museum'," PS, April 21, 1944.

⁵¹ Clark Porteous, "The Mystery of the 38 Paintings: If Some of them are Genuine, How Many?," PS, February 11, 1944.

⁵² Helen Worden, "N.Y. Critics Call McCall Pictures 'Second-Hand Art': 'Most Notorious Lot Ever Unloaded on a Museum'," PS, April 21, 1944.

at this point since this relatively routine museum purchase blew up into a scandal that refused to die. The Major refused to say anything more, admitting that the McCall was “a collection about which we [at my galleries] know nothing.”⁵³ After Parke, Worden interviewed Dikran Kelekian, an international art dealer. With almost bafflingly counter-intuitive logic at this point, Helen Worden refutes her own argument again with her first featured quote of Kelekian who says, “\$30,000 for 38 paintings isn’t too much.”⁵⁴ He goes on to argue that a collection purchased at bargain prices likely has a reason for being so cheap; the reason he suggests is that the paintings were not very valuable, yet he does not indicate an awareness of the previously reported statement that Mr. McCall wanted to unload the collection in order to make a quick profit. While Kelekian is right to say that buyers should be wary of offers that are too good to be true, he was apparently unformed of the other logical reasoning behind Mr. McCall’s clearance sale. The issues surrounding the attempt to sell in New York actually provide more of a basis to conclude that when Warner McCall could not sell his collection there, he likely lowered the price for a future patron which would turn out to be the Memphis Brooks. Kelekian also echoes the aforementioned Scimitar suggestion that the museum should have bought one exceedingly valuable work in favor of many canvases varying in quality. After speaking to her experts, Worden includes a section about the authority of Dr. Valentiner and how his reputation precedes him in New York to the point that “he is their law.”⁵⁵

The rest of the full front-page article deteriorates into mystery and conspiracy. She reports upon rumors that the paintings came into the States through a phony art ring of dubious English con men. Painting a lurid picture “over whisky and sodas in a fashionable hotel suite,”

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Helen Worden, “N.Y. Critics Call McCall Pictures ‘Second-Hand Art’: ‘Most Notorious Lot Ever Unloaded on a Museum,’” PS, April 21, 1944.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Worden repeats gossip that these men slipped in to the U.S. in 1929 with a cache of carefully executed copies of famous works. They then apparently turned profits on these paintings through a complicated variation on an age old bait-and-switch scheme. As if that yarn was not unbelievable enough, Worden's anonymous source then argues on a hunch that most of the McCall paintings were probably purchased through these criminals—whose warrants for arrest are still out, says her source.

And finally, in case the smoke and mirrors and dramatic intrigue were not enough, for good measure Helen Worden concludes with yet another theory that perhaps all the paintings in the McCall collection were honest studio copies. Authentic in the way of time period and art historical tradition, this theory would devalue the paintings because it would strip them of the luster of associations with more famous Old Masters. Worden's article leaves its reader wondering: was the McCall purchase merely cheap, fake, or cloaked in a shroud of mystery so deep that New York's finest themselves could not solve the case? Or was the intrepid reporter simply trying to sensationalize a story that had riveted the Memphis press and sold many papers while doing it for months on end?

Rest assured, Worden is certain of one thing, that “the McCall collection [has] value as decorative art.”⁵⁶ She then reiterates one last time in her final paragraph that in the end it would have been best for the Brooks to buy just one world-famous masterpiece rather than such a confusing mess. The Scimitar never recognized that this suggestion stood in direct opposition to McCall's insistence that he sell the collection as one unit.

John Vesey as one might expect did not take kindly to reading these attacks in his morning newspaper, especially after he believed the story may have finally been put to rest. He

⁵⁶ Helen Worden, “N.Y. Critics Call McCall Pictures ‘Second-Hand Art’: ‘Most Notorious Lot Ever Unloaded on a Museum,’” PS, April 21, 1944.

released a statement of defense the very next day on April 22nd to both local papers. The Commercial Appeal published a two-column article of decent length, whereas the Scimitar finally dedicated a respectable amount of space to the defense of the McCall by writing a two-column, slightly longer article about Vesey's statement. Vesey found the same discrepancies mentioned earlier about Helen Worden's cited yet unnamed experts and avers that "while we regret that some mythical New York art critics and dealers do not approve of our purchase, the pictures are going to stay in the Brooks Gallery for the pleasure of thousands who will come to view them in the future."⁵⁷ He also addressed concerns raised about missing provenances for some of the paintings from Worden's article, explaining from where Mr. McCall bought his art prior to selling it to Memphis. Though provenance for all of the paintings is not known, most of the works, especially the most significant paintings, have substantial provenance histories easily found in their individual accession records which the Brooks files on every work entering its collection.⁵⁸ The Commercial Appeal predictably offers a positive spin on the Vesey defense and focuses its article on the standing offer of \$30,000 Mr. Vesey said had been bid for the collection from an unnamed benefactor thereby corroborating its purchase price. The Scimitar includes this information as well, but with a more skeptical tone, interrupting its own article with a teaser for an editorial in the same paper entitled, "Let's Sell the McCall Collection."⁵⁹ In any event, John Vesey made the stance of the Memphis Parks Commission imminently clear: that they would not sell the collection, that Memphis had received "more than its money's worth,"

⁵⁷ "Defense by Vesey of Deal for Pictures," PS, April 22, 1944.

⁵⁸ These accession records can be easily accessed in the Brooks Museum registrar's office or in the Rhodes College art department archives.

⁵⁹ "Defense by Vesey."

and he also implied that he would no longer tolerate attacks on it.⁶⁰ His posturing evidently worked because the story dropped out of both papers entirely for the next 24 years.

Legitimate Proof

Ridding ourselves of rhetoric and recycled news, what is the truth behind the authenticity of these McCall paintings? Admittedly, a full analysis of every canvas in the collection is beyond the scope of this paper; even a detailed personal investigation into just one major work would be under-researched considering time restrictions and readily available resources. Luckily, the Brooks Museum engaged in its own investigation as it would have naturally done, especially in the light of the McCall's preceding press controversy. This investigation helped produce authentic certifications for most of the McCall paintings, based upon actual, unbiased evidence.⁶¹

In 1951, the Brooks Museum called upon Dr. W.G. Constable from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, who was a former director of the National Gallery in London, to come to Memphis and personally inspect the collection in the interest of providing certificates of authenticity. The Brooks additionally sought suggestions from him about which paintings to put up for sale. It is not clear why the Brooks waited eight years to make this call, nor is it entirely obvious why they decided in 1951 that it was the time to certify. It speaks to the comfort the museum had with its purchase that they did not immediately look for certifications in 1943, having done some checking into the collection prior to purchase.⁶² The museum also had some immediate assurances from Leo Marzolo, the restorer for the McCall collection, who highly praised the

⁶⁰ "City Rejects Offer of \$30,000 for Much-Discussed Pictures," CA, April 22, 1944.

⁶¹ To avoid tedious reporting, a detailed catalogue of all attributions and certifications from the Brooks files can be found in the index. For even more specific information, researchers can contact the Memphis Brooks registrar's office.

⁶² See page 8 where Clark Porteous references Dr. Valentiner as a source of advice on the McCall purchase.

works he saw in 1943.⁶³ It is likely that the Brooks Museum sought some verification of the collection in the interest of impressing soon-to-be-donor Samuel H. Kress, who became publicly involved with the Brooks just a year after Dr. Constable made his visit—though the Kress Foundation had been in communication with the Brooks since as early as 1937.⁶⁴

The two most controversial paintings of the affair were undoubtedly the Peter Paul Rubens' *Portrait of a Lady (Possibly Eleanora, Duchess of Mantua)* and Anthony van Dyck's *Portrait of Queen Henrietta Maria*. The great unsung hero of the McCall controversy was a beautifully understated pastoral, *Reading by the Brook* by Winslow Homer.⁶⁵ Despite all the paintings he attacked, the McCall collection's top critic absolutely adored the Rubens' portrait. In a Brooks file dated April 20th, 1920 (which pre-dates the purchase by many years meaning that Valentiner interacted with the painting well before it became entangled with the McCall controversy), Valentiner not only verifies but extols the painting as a great work. He considers it "of special interest since works of this period by the artist who already had a considerable reputation in Italy are very rare," and also notes that it is "in an excellent state of preservation."⁶⁶ Perhaps before he had reason to be biased against the collection, Dr. Valentiner was able to evaluate its authenticity more judiciously. Interestingly, however, Dr. Constable was not nearly as impressed by the portrait. In his certification which he provided on May 18, 1951, he believed the canvas was "at best a studio piece on which Rubens worked" and it was at least definitely "of

⁶³ See a quote from Marzolo on page 12, cited in footnote 39.

⁶⁴ Letter from Samuel H. Kress Foundation (Samuel H. Kress, President) to Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, December 20, 1937.

The influence of the future Kress gift was another major contributing factor to the reasoning behind the McCall purchase which I will explain after first offering commentary on some of the most significant paintings involved in the purchase controversy.

⁶⁵ For convenience, I have included slides of the three paintings in the image index.

⁶⁶ Letter from Harlow Donovan Jr. to Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Feb. 11, 1949.

the period [of Rubens' study in Italy]" which made the piece rarer.⁶⁷ Thusly, though Dr. Constable was not overwhelmed by the piece, he did state that he believed Rubens had some hand in its production. That assertion combined with Valentiner's report gives credence to the painting's authenticity. Forty years later, in 1992, the Rubens painting, which still hangs in the Brooks Museum galleries, was subject to a research project by a student intern, Lacey Taylor, who investigated the painting in much greater depth and concluded that it was more than likely that the Rubens portrait was in fact by his own hand.⁶⁸ Moreover, the Brooks painting file also contains a receipt of sale to Warner McCall for the painting which clearly lists its purchase value to be \$32,000. The Rubens' one drawback is that it lacks an extensive provenance record; information of previous ownership is only recorded back to the gallery from which Mr. McCall bought the canvas. The analysis of this painting alone debunks the entire McCall outcry of wasted funds and worthless canvases. Even a brief assessment of the Rubens portrait accession file proves that the McCall purchase yielded an astounding bargain on a rare masterwork.

The van Dyck royal portrait is even easier to certify with confidence because, aside from a short smear from Dr. Valentiner in the *Press Scimitar* (he said it was probably just a "workshop picture"), the painting has two glowing certifications and two recorded approximate values of \$20,000 to \$35,000 in the late 1920s.⁶⁹ It has also been widely recognized by contemporary academics as unquestionably authentic and has been repeatedly included in modern exhibitions and publications concerning the famous Flemish master.⁷⁰ Dr. Constable verified this work as "undoubtedly by van Dyck" and "a charming example of his work in good state [which]...

⁶⁷ Authenticity certificate for *Portrait of a Lady* by Peter Paul Rubens from Dr. W.G. Constable to Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, May 18, 1951.

⁶⁸ Lacey Taylor, "Portrait of a Lady," (curatorial intern research paper, 1992). Photocopy, registrar's office files, Memphis Brooks Museum.

⁶⁹ Clark Porteous, "The Mystery of the 38 Paintings: If Some of them are Genuine, How Many?," PS, February 11, 1944.

⁷⁰ Information on each of these instances is noted on the van Dyck's lengthy accession record.

should be retained and exhibited.”⁷¹ Adding to that, the van Dyck painting has an interesting history which not only adds value to the work, but also helps to authenticate it. This portrait, a profile view of English Queen Henrietta Maria from her right side, is a member of a set of three portraits: one a profile view of her left side and the other a frontal view. These paintings were commissioned by her husband King Charles I as studies for the Italian sculptor Bernini to use when producing a bust portrait of the queen that the king also planned to commission. Bernini eventually refused the commission which left the portraits with the queen, one of which eventually made its way to Mr. McCall. In addition, the portrait’s journey to McCall’s private collection and then to the galleries at the Brooks is completely recorded by provenance records, leaving no doubt as to its authenticity. The Brooks file accession record has information on every previous owner of the painting starting with Queen Henrietta Maria herself. A painting with this stature was undoubtedly bought for a steal in the midst of the 1943 purchase. As with the Rubens, a quick skim of the van Dyck painting file also immediately disproves the controversy which needlessly plagued the McCall purchase.

Also, quietly lurking in the background of the entire fiasco is the unassuming, stunningly beautiful 16 x 23 inch landscape by Winslow Homer. Reported by his own daughter as Mayor Chandler’s favorite painting in the entire collection, the Homer drew literally no reference in the drama surrounding its purchase.⁷² Overshadowed by the larger, more imposing canvases by Old Masters of historical figures, the Homer painting received almost no attention for the decades before and after the press debacle. Though works by Homer were recognized as valuable (as evidenced by the Scimitar’s reference to them in “Wrong Pictures” from 2/14/44), its absence

⁷¹ Authenticity certificate for *Portrait of Queen Henrietta Maria* by Anthony van Dyck from Dr. W.G. Constable to Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, May 18, 1951.

⁷² Lucia Outlan, interview by Amy Aughinbaugh, July 6, 2011, transcript, Rhodes College art department archives, Memphis, TN.

from the drama was largely a function of popular taste. At that time in American history, Homer's body of work did not wield the same powerhouse reputation as that of Renaissance and Baroque masters like Rubens and van Dyck. Consequently, *Reading by the Brook* emerged from the McCall controversy entirely unscathed. Unblemished and rightfully so, this work was never questioned for authenticity, has a reputable provenance history, and has been in general high-demand for museum loans and publications since the 1970s.⁷³ Today it is one of the highlights of the Brooks Museum holdings, gracing the cover of the permanent exhibition catalogue. Yet again, the Homer painting's monetary and cultural value today and historically in 1943 far outweigh the fears surrounding the initial purchase of the McCall collection.

Paintings Worth Losing

For the sake of fairness, there were purchases from the McCall collection that proved to be either misattributed, non-valuable, or both. Two large canvases which were reportedly by Austrian court painter Martin von Meytens later turned out to be more likely by Georg Desmarees, his student. The Hans Memling *Virgin and Child* which Valentiner correctly doubted now lists as by a follower of van der Weyden (this new attribution comes thanks to the advice from Dr. Constable's 1951 visit.) All in all, of the 19 paintings from the original purchase which the museum still retains, seven have different or broader attributions (as in attributions such as by a follower of Thomas Lawrence rather than only by Thomas Lawrence). The Brooks also de-accessioned the works with the most doubtful attributions or paintings that were deemed to be of the least value. For example in 1989 and 1996, the Brooks sold two purported Reynolds canvases and two suspicious Gainsboroughs from the McCall collection without much ado.⁷⁴

⁷³ More recently, the painting had to be re-certified due to an issue with pricing the painting for insurance coverage. It retained its attribution without difficulty.

⁷⁴ Not surprisingly since all four of these canvases proved to have incorrect attributions.

For the most part it seems that the bulk of the de-accessions carried out by the Brooks were largely based upon Dr. Constable's certifications or lack thereof from May 18, 1951.

That is not to say however that the Brooks was eager to unload the works. They in fact did not sell a single McCall canvas until 1961 in a sale to Hugo Dixon of today's Dixon Gallery and Gardens. Two others canvases sold in 1962 to Monseigneur Kearney of Immaculate Conception Catholic church in Memphis.⁷⁵ Dixon gave his purchase, *Madonna and Child* by Sano di Pietro, to St. George's Episcopal Church in Germantown where it still sits in repose today, honored as the only canvas in the church's sanctuary with its own special file in the church offices.⁷⁶ The Kearney de-accessions still presumably exist in the storage spaces of Immaculate Conception, but as yet this researcher has not successfully contacted anyone at the church with knowledge of these purchases or paintings.⁷⁷ Two other paintings appear to have been sold privately in 1961 and 1963, whereas the rest of the 14 de-accessioned works were unceremoniously sold in lots in 1983, 1989, and the aforementioned Reynolds in 1996.⁷⁸ Also, based upon certification from other experts such as Evelyn Joll of Thos Agnew and Sons who additionally saw several of the McCall canvases, Dr. Constable's certifications of authenticity or otherwise correctly adhered to the general consensus of the art world.⁷⁹

Why then, the Controversy?

⁷⁵ Of the 36 McCall records there are three paintings which are not in the current Brooks collection nor are there records of these paintings being de-accessioned. For more information on these elusive works see the index.

⁷⁶ As it turns out this file offers a new mystery for further research. Though Dr. Constable thought very little of this work and it was sold to Hugo Dixon for \$400, in an undated, fragile typewriter document from the St. George's file an unidentified source appraises the painting to be worth \$25,000.

⁷⁷ In the very least, the paintings are not obviously displayed anywhere in the cathedral or its surrounding office hallways. (I know this having searched the building myself.) The search for these paintings is a worthy future research project.

⁷⁸ Only the 1996 Reynolds sale is specifically recorded to have been sent to a Sotheby's auction, but it is assumed the others were also sold at auction.

⁷⁹ With the notable exception of the two non-Reynolds portraits which Constable believed to be "definitely by Reynolds." Please see the de-accession/sale records in the index for more information on this and Evelyn Joll's certifications.

Without the foresight of future research which would eventually debunk the Scimitar's sweepingly negative opinion of the collection, the reporters of 1943 and 1944 had other reasons to take sides on the McCall issue. As has been outlined above, the Commercial Appeal undeniably supported the purchase whereas the Scimitar unfoundedly and bombastically denigrated it. Fortunately, the Scimitar left none too subtle hints as to why it felt the art purchase merited such controversy. I refer here for the second time to the editorial cartoon from the Press-Scimitar's February 15th, 1944 publication, and for the first time in this art history paper I am glad to take a moment to engage in visual analysis.

The cartoon panel entitled "Theme Song" includes four figures, two of which are textually identified as John Vesey and a representative image of a taxpayer. The other two figures are caricatures of Memphis mayor Walter Chandler and his political machine boss Edward H. Crump.⁸⁰ The innards of E.H. "Boss" Crump's machine politics is another story unto itself, and Chandler's professional and political association with Crump is undeniably a fact of history.⁸¹ In the very least, many Memphians in 1943 had the distinct perception that Mayor Chandler was just another figurehead for Boss Crump who had dominated Memphis politics for nearly two decades.⁸² In the cartoon panel, Boss Crump's caricature is not only the highest figure in the visual field (thereby giving him a certain type of dominance), he is also edged up close behind Mayor Chandler, literally looking over his shoulder at the painting in his hands. While Crump surveys the purchase more watchfully than respectfully, Chandler looks dopyly stumped by the object in his hand, and the viewer can only read the back of the object which

⁸⁰ For comparison images see the portrait photographs of Chandler and Crump in the image index.

⁸¹ For more information on the Boss Crump machine, read "Mayor Crump Don't Like It" by Wayne Dowdy.

⁸² The website Memphis History.org sets the dates for the rise and fall of the Crump machine to begin in 1927 and end in 1948 after the senatorial election of Estes Kefauver: "E.H. Crump," Memphis History.org, copyright 2005-2001, accessed July 28, 2011, <http://www.memphishistory.org/Politics/TheMayorsofMemphis/Biographies3/EHCrump/tabid/245/Default.aspx>.

states the purchase price of the Brooks canvases: “city’s \$25,000 McCall Collection.”⁸³ The taxpayer, a white male older gentleman in a bowtie and a lapel tailcoat is relegated to the background, addressed by no one in the frame with both politicians’ backs to him as he stands alone, utterly duped. Even a mute question mark appears in a thought bubble over his head. And in the absolute foreground of the painting is the smug John Vesey, pacing back and forth singing the theme song referenced in the cartoon title and reading a note tossed to the floor from Dr. Valentiner, the “expert [who says] Rubens, van Dyck not worth over \$8,000 or \$10,000.” The song John Vesey sings is a variation on the lyrics of a well-known, popular children’s song from the early 19th century called Reuben and Rachel.⁸⁴ The words Vesey wistfully utters are a hope that Dr. Valentiner would be “transported far beyond the Northern Sea” and therefore no longer around to aggravate the McCall controversy. In short, this cartoon indicates that the Press-Scimitar viewed the McCall purchase as a Crump machine plot to steal and waste taxpayers’ money while the editorial depiction simultaneously makes the Parks Commission and city administrators look weakened by the Scimitar’s dogged reporting (i.e. revealing that scandal via their hero, Dr. Valentiner). It is yellow journalism at its finest.

More specifically, the Scimitar coverage was yellow journalism blatantly directing its attacks at E.H. Crump, thus beginning a discussion of the larger purposes behind the Press-Scimitar and the Commercial Appeal newspapers. The editors-in-chief of the respective papers were Edward J. Meeman⁸⁵ and Frank R. Ahlgren. Both men were highly respected journalists with decorated careers who would go on to eventually be honored several times by their city.

⁸³ This price of \$25,000 excludes the \$5000 spent on the various objects given to the Pink Palace.

⁸⁴ It is a good bet that even contemporary readers are still familiar with the melody of this tune today, it apparently having never left the consciousness of American society. You can find a .midi file of the tune here: <http://www.musiclegacy.com/MIDI/Reuben%20Reuben.mid>

⁸⁵ Rhodes students and Memphians alike may recognize this as the avid philanthropist who donated his money and his legacy to several surviving landmarks including the Meeman Center for Lifelong Learning and Meeman-Shelby Forest State Park.

Though Frank Ahlgren did not have any immediate ties to Ed Crump and Walter Chandler that would prove to be a reason for his paper's defense of the McCall, according to conversations with Chandler's daughter, Lucia Outlan, the Appeal in general tended to be "more favorable on [my father's] side."⁸⁶ In addition to that, the competing newspapers "were never going to be on the same side [of any argument]".⁸⁷ It was common practice between the two publications to squabble persistently on every news-worthy story. So if the Commercial Appeal came out with strong support for the McCall purchase—as it indeed did—the Press-Scimitar was motivated to find a reason to disagree, as did also predictably follow.

Press-Scimitar editor Meeman had another good reason to turn the McCall purchase into a question of political corruption because he made no secret of his dislike for Boss Crump's behind-the-scenes puppet master governing style. In one of his writings, Meeman accused Crump of robbing Memphis children of the ability to "breathe the air of freedom" because of the latter's rock solid hold on the business and government of the city.⁸⁸ Crump was also openly antagonistic toward Meeman, once being involved in a plot to obliterate Meeman's reputation by attempting to falsely charge him as a homosexual.⁸⁹ Meeman's greatest triumph over Crump occurred in 1948 when Meeman's paper helped elect a liberal democrat, Estes Kefauver, to the U.S. Senate as a representative for Tennessee. The election was a nasty battle between Kefauver and Crump, and Meeman's paper received the lion's share of credit for helping to oust Crump and boost support for his opposition.⁹⁰ In 1944, Meeman evidently aimed to take down Crump by inventing a corruption scandal and then implicating him in the "Theme Song" cartoon.

⁸⁶ Lucia Outlan, interview by Amy Aughinbaugh, July 6, 2011, transcript, Rhodes College art department archives, Memphis, TN.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Clark Porteous, "The Two Eds of Memphis—Meeman and Crump," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, vol. 14, (Memphis: West Tennessee Historical Society, Dec. 1991).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Lucius E. Burch, "'The Real Jewels on his (Meeman's_ Crown,' According to Burch," *PS*, April 19, 1961.

Ironically however, there is no other evidence that Crump had anything to do with the purchase; on the contrary Lucia Outlan notes that Boss Crump was never involved with it at all.⁹¹

Summarily, the political motivations of the Scimitar's attacks, desiring to use the McCall purchase as a conduit to governmental upheaval, were inflated and entirely misdirected.

The Kress Twist

After the press problems and political punditry, there is one final layer to the McCall purchase which proves once and for all why money spent on several works was more important than buying just a single masterwork as the Scimitar repeatedly suggested should have been done. Samuel H. Kress' name first entered household usage in the early 1900s as he opened several franchises of low-price, high-volume convenience stores across the country. He became a force in the art world soon after that as a dedicated and generous collector who began lending and gifting art from his extensive collection in the 1930s. His impact upon American art appreciation and education is immeasurable in that he donated the bulk of his collection to the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 1941 and at the same time began to plan a regional gift program which would provide top quality permanent collections to several museums throughout the United States. It is no coincidence that less than two years after the birth of this initiative that the Brooks Museum starting looking to buy from McCall.

In order to earn gifts from the Kress Foundation, museums had to prove that their existing local museums already exhibited a vested interest in "the establishment of [a public city] art collection" which is why the Memphis Brooks decided to make its first large collective art purchase. Eventually the museum would go so far as to add a whole new wing to the galleries in order to suit the strict Kress Foundation specifications. Considering that the construction cost of

⁹¹ Lucia Outlan, interview by Amy Aughinbaugh, July 6, 2011, transcript, Rhodes College art department archives, Memphis, TN.

the 1952 expansion was \$250,000, the \$30,000 investment in artworks necessary to impress Kress and his associates is pennies by comparison.⁹² Unfortunately, for John Vesey and Mayor Chandler, the men were not able to publicly discuss the Kress twist when defending the McCall purchase in 1944. For one thing, the promise of a Kress collection coming to Memphis was not official until 1952 and before that Memphis was legally obligated to keep the preparatory negotiations private.⁹³ The city officials were however keenly aware of the hope of a Kress gift during the McCall purchase and did have it in mind when choosing to buy. Says Lucia Outlan on the issue, her father “made a specific decision as mayor of the city because he wanted [the McCall purchase] to be a possibility to open up to receive the Kress collection gift.”⁹⁴ This is why one painting, even one untouchable masterwork, for the Brooks would not have been an appropriate buy in 1943 because the museum needed to expand its permanent collection enough to earn priceless future gains from Samuel H. Kress. Eventually, the \$30,000 bargain from 1943 partially netted Memphis an even cheaper, additionally valuable donation less than a decade later.

The McCall Finally Gets its Due

On June 13, 1968, the Commercial Appeal gingerly submitted one last article to the public concerning the firestorm that had divided newsmen 24 years earlier. Reservedly but confidently, the paper announced “Art Bonanza Proves Critics Wrong.”⁹⁵ It goes on to summarize the conflict, including references to all the major players: Vesey, Valentiner, Constable, and even the lesser mentioned figures such as Leo Marzolo and Mrs. Clark. It also

⁹² “Our History, Ever Heedful to the Future: A History of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art.” Memphis Brooks Museum of Art press office.

⁹³ For more details on the Kress gift to Memphis, see “The Small and Large of It: The Struggles of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art” by Hannah Gysin.

⁹⁴ Lucia Outlan, interview by Amy Aughinbaugh, July 6, 2011, transcript, Rhodes College art department archives, Memphis, TN.

⁹⁵ K.W. Cook, “Art Bonanza Proves Critics Wrong,” CA, June 13, 1968.

quotes Helen Worden's "notorious" article from 1944, but finally declares it to be rubbish.⁹⁶ The estimated value of the McCall purchase in 1968 inflated four times over the initial purchase price to \$135,000 with the van Dyck itself reportedly worth \$50,000 and the Homer between \$20,000 to \$30,000.⁹⁷ This article was met with no opposition from the Press-Scimitar or otherwise.

The 1943 McCall collection purchase by the Brooks Museum was in many ways a routine business deal between a man and a city earnestly desiring to bring cultural enlightenment to its citizens. The scandal that followed the purchase was far from normal considering the outcry over patently false condemnations. Unfortunately for the history of Memphis and the Brooks however, negativity persists in the cultural consciousness more easily than the diffusion of a trauma which is why the legend of the McCall controversy still exists today. But the combination of public press, private investigation, Memphis politics, and art politics which brewed the issue also help definitively prove history's blunder. The McCall collection of the Brooks Museum of Art not only healthily matured as a monetary investment, the cultural and educational impact of the artworks contained in this local gallery are and have always been of immeasurable value to the Memphis community.

⁹⁶ Helen Worden, "N.Y. Critics Call McCall Pictures 'Second-Hand Art': 'Most Notorious Lot Ever Unloaded on a Museum'," PS, April 21, 1944.

⁹⁷ K.W. Cook, "Art Bonanza Proves Critics Wrong," CA, June 13, 1968.