

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Yale University

In Memoriam: Susan Morse Hilles 1905-2002

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Susan Morse Hilles

1905–2002

JENNIFER GROSS



Susan Morse Hilles at her home in Connecticut, ca. 1963, *A Selective Eye*, exh. cat. (Yale University Art Gallery, 1993–94), 30.

Susan Morse Hilles, a Governing Board member of the Yale University Art Gallery since 1957, died in Boston on the first of January.

Mrs. Hilles, whose passion for modern art and support of young artists led her to defy the common definition of her interests and activities as that of a contemporary art collector, considered herself a lover of art who savored the opportunity to creatively support artists. She collected painting and sculpture not only for her own enjoyment but also to inspire and educate others through the exhibition of contemporary art, and she effected this vision through loans and gifts of art to such institutions as Yale University, Harvard University, Mount Holyoke College, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art. Throughout her life, she also worked in a leadership capacity at a number of museums, including MoMA, Yale, the MFA Boston, the National Gallery, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Wadsworth Atheneum, to make the work of living artists available to as broad a public as possible.

Susan Hilles's interest in art was first nurtured as a student in Boston at the Museum School of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Amy Sacker School of Design. She believed that looking at great painting and sculpture

was the best teacher for developing an eye and appreciation for art. It was not until 1955 that she determined to purchase only the work of living artists. At this time, Mrs. Hilles also limited her expenditure for these works to no more than \$300, a gate that drove her toward the acquisition of the most unproved of newcomers. She acquired the work of the powerful generation of artists that rose to prominence in New York during the 1950s, a decade of promise and energy, including Willem de Kooning, William Baziotas, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, and David Smith.

A friend and adviser whom Hilles particularly admired was art dealer Betty Parsons. It is a little-known fact that for four years Hilles was the inspiration and financial supporter of Betty Parsons's second gallery, Section 11, at 11 East 57th Street. The legacy of Parsons's labor and Hilles's support was impressive, with a roster of exhibitions by such noteworthy artists as Agnes Martin, Forrest Bess, Alfonso Ossorio, Richard Pousette-Dart, Walter Murch, Ellsworth Kelly, and Paul Feeley.

A Selective Eye, an exhibition of paintings and sculpture from her collection, was held at the Yale University Art Gallery from December 10, 1993, to March 6, 1994, and a joint exhibition of selected works from her and Richard Brown Baker's collections

entitled *Two Modern Collectors: Susan Morse Hilles, Richard Brown Baker* was presented at the Gallery in the summer of 1963. Mrs. Hilles gave a number of significant artworks to Yale, including Alberto Giacometti's *Head of Diego*, 1961, Frank Stella's *Ophir*, 1962, and Ellsworth Kelly's *Untitled (Curve XXIII)*, 1981. Her generous contributions to Yale have enriched not only the Art Gallery but also the University's School of Arts and Sciences, School of Medicine, and Library. Mrs. Hilles was awarded a Yale Medal in 1966.

Mrs. Hilles was a trustee of Radcliffe College and also the first woman trustee of the Boston Athenaeum. Her philanthropic interests extended beyond art and education to include the renovation of a French chateau, the creation of the 430-acre Morse Arboretum in Paradise, Nova Scotia, and the founding of a research fund and laboratory at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Hospital, Boston.

Susan Morse Hilles was born in Simsbury, Connecticut, on July 4, 1905. She grew up in Lynn, Massachusetts. In 1930 she married Frederick Whiley Hilles (Yale B.A. 1922, PH.D. 1926), a scholar of the eighteenth century and a professor of English at Yale. She is survived by her daughter, Susan Hilles Bush, and her son, Frederick W. Hilles, five grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.