



Dear John and Dominique

Letters and Drawings
from the Menil Archives

August 10, 2012–January 6, 2013

In celebration of the Menil Collection's twenty-fifth anniversary, this exhibition presents a selection of letters and drawings sent to the museum's founders, John (1904–73) and Dominique de Menil (1908–97). Written by artists, scholars, architects, colleagues, and activists, the letters and drawings on view provide a window into the passions and beliefs that ultimately led to the museum's establishment. By showcasing the perspective of those impacted by their relationships, conversations, and intellectual exchanges with the de Menils, *Dear John and Dominique* also reveals how the couple inspired others through their work.

The history of the Menil Collection extends back long before architect Renzo Piano completed the museum's building in 1987. Beginning shortly after John and Dominique de Menil moved to Houston in the 1940s and accelerating with the establishment of the Menil Foundation in 1954, the de Menils participated in an extraordinarily diverse range of activities. In addition to their patronage of art and architecture, for which they are best known, they supported progressive grassroots organizations and political candidates, including congressman George Thomas "Mickey" Leland and the Black Panther Party. They also championed human rights, civil liberties, and prison reform through advocacy, financial support, legal aid, and exhibitions such as *The De Luxe Show*, 1971, one of the first interracial exhibitions of contemporary art in the United States.

As evidenced by their correspondence, the de Menils surrounded themselves with a group of much admired colleagues and confidants who helped shape their understanding of art, from curator Walter Hopps and art historian Alfred H. Barr Jr. to their son-in-law Edmund Carpenter, whose anthropological work led to the creation of the long-term exhibition *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision*, which is still on view in the museum's Surrealism galleries. One particularly important colleague was curator Jermayne MacAgy, especially in terms of the formation of the de Menils' curatorial philosophy. This is reflected in her exchange with Dominique de Menil during the planning stages of an exhibition, which includes a humorous commentary on the difficulty of securing the loan of works of art. Also on view are letters from Father Marie-Alain Couturier, a French Dominican priest well-known as an advocate for the integration of modern art into the Catholic Church. A passionate art lover and one of the de Menils' earliest influences, he introduced the couple to a number of important artists and ideas.

The de Menils' artistic patronage was one of the most important facets of their lives' work and often led to lasting friendships. Over a hundred examples of

correspondence between artists and the de Menils from the 1940s until Dominique's death are housed in the Menil Collection and the Menil Archives. Among them are exchanges with everyone from Man Ray and Max Ernst to Robert Rauschenberg and James Lee Byars, who composed the delicate gold-inked letter on banana leaves on view. The exuberant and colorful letters from Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint-Phalle, however, stand out. Ornamented by sketches, stickers, and confetti, they make up a large portion of the Menil's holdings of letters from artists.

In many ways this exhibition is about the Menil Archives, which is housed beneath the museum's east end. Established in 2000 and run by archivist Geraldine Aramanda, it is a vast treasure trove of documents, correspondence, research, photographs, audio recordings, and films available to scholars, staff, and the public. The material on view constitutes only a fraction of a remarkable depository that tells the story of the de Menils and their dynamic engagement as patrons and activists.

Michelle White

Dear John and Dominique: Letters and Drawings from the Menil Archives is curated by Curator Michelle White and Archivist Geraldine Aramanda.

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Menil²⁵

Voices of the Menil: A Cell Phone Audio Walk

In association with the exhibition, the Menil Collection is pleased to launch this interactive cell phone audio walk. Comprising poems, music, and audio clips pulled from the archives, along with recordings of key figures from the museum's past and present, it provides an illuminating experience of the campus. For more information, a brochure is available on our website and at the entrance of the museum.

Public Programs

Birthday Celebration

Saturday, September 22, 4:00 p.m.

Celebrate the Menil Collection's 25th birthday with cake, music, and more.

North Star: Mark di Suvero (56 min)

and the Short Films of Roy Fridge

Friday, October 5, 2012, 7:00 p.m.

Aurora Picture Show co-presents this screening of Francois de Menil's illuminating portrait of sculptor Mark di Suvero and a selection of short films by the late Texas artist Roy Fridge.

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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