



Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr.) seated at her desk, 1922. Courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Photo: H.T. Koshiba

Some twenty-five years after her marriage to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., son of the wealthiest man in the world, Rockefeller began to form her collection of modern art.<sup>1</sup> Primarily amassed between 1925 and 1935, it was heavily weighted toward works on paper, and Rockefeller had a particular fondness for the work of living Americans. Like Lillie P. Bliss, an old friend of hers, she was also a patron, directly supporting individual artists through acquisitions, commissions, and financial contributions. With her contacts, her knowledge of art, and her family's vast wealth, Rockefeller was able to offer the critical financial backing necessary to create a new museum, and in 1929 she, Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan founded The Museum of Modern Art.

Rockefeller's gifts to the Museum are far too numerous to itemize. In 1935, acting anonymously, she donated \$1,000 for director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., to purchase works with during his trip to Europe that summer with Margaret Barr. The following year she donated \$2,500 for the purchase of work by American artists and \$2,000 for purchases abroad; in 1938 she contributed \$20,000 for acquisitions, to which her son Nelson added \$11,500 in his mother's name, and she renewed this gift in 1939. In 1935 she donated 181 paintings and drawings to the Museum; in 1939 thirty-six works of modern sculpture and fifty-four pieces of American folk art; in 1940 approximately 1,630 prints; and in 1946 ninety-two prints. She was not only generous with her financial support but also had complete faith in Alfred Barr's direction of the Museum. When a purchase fund she had established was used to acquire Picasso's etching *Minotauremachie* (1935), she suggested, "Let's label this: purchased with a fund for prints which Mrs. Rockefeller doesn't like."<sup>2</sup> After her death, in 1948, Barr wrote to Nelson, "Few realize what positive acts of courage her interest in modern art required. . . . She was the heart of the Museum and its center of gravity."<sup>3</sup>

1 For further reading on the life of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, see Bernice Kert, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1993).

2 Rockefeller, quoted in Wendy Jeffers, "Abby Aldrich Rockefeller," *Antiques*, November 2004, p. 124.

3 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., draft letter to Nelson Rockefeller, 1948. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, 1.192. MoMA Archives.