



## The New York Cultural Center

# Days Are Numbered

# For a

# White

# Elephant

By JOHN CANADAY

The New York Cultural Center, nee the Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, was recently pronounced dead, following a lifelong illness, shortly before its 11th birthday. A group of friends unwilling to accept the pronouncement — and determined to apply artificial respiration — have been instructed to cease and desist during an extended wake preceding the official burial date of June 30, at which time there is just a chance that the body will be turned over to them for resurrection.

In the meanwhile, the white marble building on Columbus Circle, which opened on March 20, 1964, will continue to house the remains while offered for sale at \$6-million.

The plain truth is that the Center was licked from the moment of its inception under the aegis of Huntington Hartford, a sporadically conspicuous figure on the peripheries of the jet set, the publishing world, the real estate business, and the culture boom. As the Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, the first of its two misnomers, the center was born with congenital defects from which it never recovered in spite of changes in name and direction.

Hartford originally wanted to name his gallery the Huntington Hartford Museum of Modern Art as a declaration of his loathing for the kind of modern art that the Museum of Modern Art — the real one — fostered. He regarded that museum as the archfiend in the propagation of abstraction and other obscenities. Today it is indeed apparent that the Modern was over-fertilizing its garden. But at the time, it was still the museum that had established "exciting" as an adjective of esthetic description, while its best exhibitions were scholarly elucidations of the history and current state of art in the 20th century.

The Modern was a formidable target, with the biggest money backing its policies without questioning them, and the most conspicuously beautiful people cramming its exhibitions without examining them. In those days there was a lot more money around and the beautiful people looked a lot better than they

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do now. In creating his own museum of what he called modern art, Hartford attacked the fortress with the puniest of weapons—or, rather, with no weapon at all. He wanted to wipe out everything from Cubism to Fauvism right on through the New York School, which was then in its heyday, but he had nothing to offer as a potential gap-filler for the 50 years of invention that he wanted us to forget.

Pop art, the only anti-abstract movement then nascent, would not have been to Hartford's taste (whatever his taste was) even if he had known of it. Nor did his collection give any hint of the revival of serious interest in 19th-century Salon painting which, since then, has produced a number of important exhibitions in this country, England and France. Looking back to the opening of the gallery with Hartford's collection on view for the first time, one wonders what was there.

It was a collection without focus or unity. The paintings were not so much realistic as they were non-abstract, an utterly negative emphasis. At this moment, without a catalogue at hand for reference, I can remember only a large Doré landscape and a fine early Toulouse-Lautrec study of a male nude that, in spite of residual academic overtones, looked adventurous in the company it was keeping. Hartford later put it up at auction and achieved the impossible by losing money on it at a time when prices were zooming, thus setting a kind of record—but again negative.

Then there was the building. Designed by Edward Durell Stone in a weak moment and occupying a curiously restricted site on a kind of traffic island on Columbus Circle, it rises from a kind of defoliated Venetian

Gothic arcade at street level to a height which, under New York's building code, demanded so much elevator and stairway space that the exhibition galleries were reduced to boutiques clustered around palatial escape routes.

In a large museum, the discovery of a small gallery comes as a delight. You can even find these little sanctuaries tucked away in the Louvre. But there is something claustrophobic about a multi-storied museum made up entirely of small spaces. A large exhibition in Mr. Stone's inflexible palazzo had to be broken up not only from floor to floor but divided into thirds on each floor, with no gallery of a size to accommodate a large, spectacular painting gracefully—or theatrically.

It did not take Hartford long to discover that his white tower was also a white elephant—an inevitable metaphor—and he must have wished that it could sink into the ground just as its Venetian prototypes are sinking into the Adriatic—but faster. The substrata at Columbus Circle, however, are as sound as Hartford's conception and Stone's architecture were faulty. There was a pleasant little theater where old movies could be shown in the basement, and an excellent restaurant (which deserved a better fate) on the top floor, but everything in between was an embarrassment.

In 1969, Hartford reached an agreement with Fairleigh Dickinson University and the Dickinson family trust—fatally abrogated as of this June—by which they became the major contributors to the museum's operating expenses under its second misnomer, the New York Cultural Center. The name has had more to do with the Center's subsequent difficulties than is recognized. At once pretentious and ambiguous, it is a name

that insinuates official City sponsorship where there was none, while "Cultural Center" declares a polar position in the city's life that this fringe institution had neither the means nor the know-how to approach. The boutiques were somehow kept filled, but the exhibitions had the uneasy air of stopgaps. Each new one seemed a desperate and probably penultimate expedient.

Yet "fringe" and "boutique" are clues to the kind of service this misbegotten institution could have performed. Within the past year the director, Mario Amaya, has concentrated on unpretentious exhibitions intended to supplement rather than vie with those in the major museums. Their success, while ironic at this point, at least gives the Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art and New York Cultural Center a touch of dignity on its deathbed after an otherwise semi-farcical history. This history, combined with the present time of economic distress, was evidently too much for Fairleigh Dickenson to take, in spite of recent improvement.

Resurrection? C. Henry Buhl, chairman of the group interested in preventing the museum from closing on June 30, has made a statement to the press expressing his committee's distress at the cease and desist order, and his surprise that the Board of the Center decided to put the building on the market through a real estate agent. His committee's proposal was that it might raise the funds to buy the building—although for considerably less than \$6 million. At present, Buhl's hope lies in the possibility that the building cannot be sold for \$6 million, or even for a good deal less. Then the present Board may have no alternative but to strike a deal with the Buhl committee. ■