

Pamela Carter-Birken

Duncan and Marjorie Phillips and America's First Museum of Modern Art

SERIES ON THE HISTORY OF ART

Dr. Pamela Carter-Birken carries us behind the curtain of The Phillips Collection to reveal that this treasured museum is not only about the art that dons the walls but also the people who worked to make it both an experience and a home. Through her lively stories, Carter-Birken teaches us that The Phillips Collection has always been a collaborative labor of love, and grief, by an array of collectors, artists, and artist-employees. These include, but are most certainly not limited to, Duncan and his confidant, wife, and business partner, Marjorie [Acker] Phillips. The stories of the laborers who built and lived the mantra of The Phillips offer us a window to one hundred years of history, human connection, and the myriad of overlapping ways in which culture – American culture – emerges, persists, and evolves.

Dr Erika B. Seamon
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Summary

He was born to privilege and sought the world of art. She lived at the center of that world—a working artist encouraged by the famous artists in her extended family. Together, Duncan Phillips and Marjorie Acker Phillips founded The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., the first museum of modern art in America. It opened in the grand Phillips family home in 1921, eight years before New York City's Museum of Modern Art and only a few weeks after they wed. Duncan took the lead in developing the collection and showcasing it. Marjorie kept space and time to paint. Duncan considered Marjorie a partner in the museum even though she was not directly involved in all purchasing and presentation decisions. To him, her influence was omnipresent. Although Duncan's writings on artists and art history were widely published, he chose not to provide much instruction for visitors to the museum. Instead, he combined signature methods of displaying art which live on at The Phillips Collection. Phillips had viewers in mind when he hung American art with European art—or art of the past with modern art, and he frequently rearranged works to stimulate fresh encounters. With unfettered access to archival material, author Pamela Carter-Birken argues that The Phillips Collection's relevancy comes from Duncan Phillips's commitment

to providing optimal conditions for personal exploration of art. In-depth collecting of certain artists was one of Phillips's methods of encouraging independent thinking in viewers. Paintings by Pierre Bonnard, Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, Jacob Lawrence, and Mark Rothko provide testament to the power of America's first museum of modern art.

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About the author

Pamela Carter-Birken is an independent scholar and journalist with an interdisciplinary doctoral degree from Georgetown University. Dr Carter-Birken writes about an array of topics, but always with a perspective on how art and literature affect the human experience. Her work has been published in several national magazines and journals, including 'Museum', 'Social Work Today', and 'Humanities'. She has written about the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art, and her study on the funding of art exhibitions was turned into a white paper for a national committee on the arts and the humanities. Dr Carter-Birken has published on The Phillips Collection in 'Washingtonian' and the peer-reviewed 'Curator: The Museum Journal'. Another peer-reviewed journal, 'Confluence', published her work on individual interpretation and the poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. She has presented at conferences of the Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs and the American Alliance of Museums.

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