



Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection

Pamela G. Smart

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Renowned as one of the most significant museums built by private collectors, the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, seeks to engage viewers in an acutely aesthetic, rather than pedagogical, experience of works of art. The Menil's emphasis on being moved by art, rather than being taught art history, comes from its founders' conviction that art offers a way to reintegrate the sacred and the secular worlds. Inspired by the French Catholic revivalism of the interwar years that recast Catholic tradition as the avant-garde, Dominique and John de Menil shared with other Catholic intellectuals a desire to reorder a world in crisis by imbuing modern cultural forms with religious faith, binding the sacred with the modern. *Sacred Modern explores how the Menil Collection gives expression to the religious and political convictions of its founders and how "the Menil way" is being both perpetuated and contested as the Museum makes the transition from operating under the personal direction of Dominique de Menil to the stewardship of career professionals. Taking an ethnographic approach, Pamela G. Smart analyzes the character of the Menil aesthetic, the processes by which it is produced, and the sensibilities that it is meant to generate in those who engage with the collection. She also offers insight into the extraordinary impact Dominique and John de Menil had on the emergence of Houston as a major cultural center.*



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