Forever Directing our Conversation with Art

The Enduring Influence
of Fiske Kimball and Anne d’Harnoncourt

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Living more than a generation apart, Fiske Kimball and Anne d’Harnoncourt shared a passion for the visual arts and were each devoted to making others as passionate about the subject.

With their lives so full, I can only give you today a few highlights of their influence in, around and well beyond Philadelphia. And then I’ll conclude with a few comments about the impact their institutional records and personal papers had on me and the rest of the processing teams involved.
We best know Fiske Kimball and Anne d’Harnoncourt for their long and influential tenures as directors of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Or as it’s more commonly referred to, PMA.
Kimball came to the museum in September of 1925. At the age of 37, the new director already had garnered thirteen years of academic experience at several universities as an instructor, professor and then department head of architecture and the fine arts.
He also was an accomplished architect by this time, having completed nearly twenty residential projects, as well as a published historian of early American architecture.
When Kimball joined the museum, the institution operated as the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art. Its home was Memorial Hall, a building that originally served as the art gallery to the Centennial Exhibition, which was held in the city’s Fairmount Park in 1876.
In 1925, the museum’s iconic home atop the hill in another section of Fairmount Park was still under construction. In fact, the building was very much a work in progress—with just the wings completed, leaving a big gap in the middle that just cried for the continuation of funds to fill in the blank.
For the next thirty years, Kimball worked tirelessly to close that architectural gap and at the same time fill the interior not only with collections of art from Medieval to modern, but period rooms and architectural elements from America to Asia displayed in an evolutionary arrangement that created a “main street of the ages” for visitors to experience.
But let’s step back and examine how Kimball took this suggestion of a building...
East entrance, August 28, 1928, five months after official public opening

West entrance, no later than two months after official public opening of March 27, 1928

to this finished shell...
...and then just half way through his tenure, to this nearly fully furnished interior. Considering the time period, that is an accomplishment worthy of remark.

Kimball came to the PMA smack in the middle of the roaring twenties. It was a time of US prosperity and flappers. A country jazzed in every sense of the word. Until of course the crash of 1929, which ended the roar and ushered in the Great Depression.
While the museum, with its completed exterior, opened to the public a year before the crash, only twenty-two galleries, outfitted with American and European art, were finished at the time. A good portion of the museum’s holdings were still on display at Memorial Hall. There was obviously much to do. But how?

With the City cutting its annual appropriation to the museum in 1931 by 70%, Kimball looked to the federal government. His biggest coup was in getting funds through the WPA, the Works Progress Administration, to cover the cost of the labor needed to continue working on the museum’s interior.
The funding allowed Kimball to hire relief workers once employed in the specialized finishing trades, most of whom had been out of work for five years. Approximately 300 workers from thirty trades toiled within the museum, and by 1937 had completed ten galleries, seven period rooms, the Chinese Palace, and the museum’s west foyer and adjoining corridors.
Far more than those I’ve covered here, Kimball’s contributions to the museum, and in turn to the city of Philadelphia were publicly acknowledged when he was named the 1950 recipient of the prestigious Philadelphia Award. That is the same award bestowed upon another person we’ve heard about today. Leopold Stokowski was the first to receive this honor in 1921.

Kimball’s story would not be complete without mention of some of his work outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Most noteworthy is his interest and work on behalf of historic preservation—a movement he championed in its nascent stage. Kimball acted as advisor or architect on a number of restorations of Colonial and Georgian structures from Nantucket to North Carolina. He was a founding member of the committees to oversee the restoration and maintenance of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg—serving on both for three decades.
Kimball also served from the start on the committee to oversee the construction of the Jefferson Memorial. He was also a member of the committee to select the artist for its full-length statue. Here are some of the more interesting entries, along with the winning submission.
Kimball’s participation in the federal relief programs went beyond the museum projects. He and Mary Curran, who in 1928 had established one of the earliest galleries in Philadelphia devoted to contemporary art, represented the state in the government’s first relief program for unemployed artists, the Public Works of Art Program. The goal of the project was to employ artists to produce art that would decorate public buildings.

Kimball was named Chairman for the Philadelphia area, and at his recommendation, Curran was appointed Clerk, which was the only salaried position. The two oversaw the assignment of work to artists, which resulted in a total of 1,200 works of art in the district. Curran continued to serve as state director of the Federal Art Project, which succeeded the PWAP.
No matter the accomplishments, no one goes through life escaping criticism. And Kimball had his critics.

But none as constant and vitriolic as Dr. Albert C. Barnes, whose art collection was displayed just a dozen miles from Kimball’s museum.
In this draft letter, Kimball conveniently outlines the instances that Dr. Barnes took him and others involved in the museum’s operations to task. There are ten counts in all, occurring in as many years. I’ll just touch on the one that relates back to my discussion of the WPA.
While the press supplied Barnes an ample forum to air his grievances against a good many Philadelphians, the good doctor also published his views himself. On the cover of this bulletin, you’ll see the author is not Barnes. But note the publisher—the Friends of Art and Education—an organization of which Barnes served as president.
All sixteen pages of “Philadelphia’s Shame” chronicle Curran’s alleged misdeeds as head of the relief program. Based on the testimonials of artists and others, she is accused here of favoritism, discrimination, dictatorship, anti-unionism and no sense of aesthetics.
The essay also charges Kimball and the museum of aiding and abetting this, quote/unquote, “stigma from Philadelphia.” “For more than four years,” the author concludes, “the Museum has promoted social disorder and flagrant fascism by keeping the incompetent, autocratic Mary Curran in an official position...This is downright treason, for it is sabotage of the government’s efforts to relieve human distress...”

In full disclosure, I must point out that Barnes was not the only one, nor the first, to air grievances against Curran. In 1935, the Federation of Art Workers protested her handling of artist assignments and not doing enough to exhibit their work. By 1937, the Artists’ Union made its own formal complaint.
The following year, some of its members picketed PMA to protest its two-month exhibition of works by WPA artists. Rather than celebrate a show of their peers, they charged Curran and the museum of favoring some artists over others. Not surprisingly, Dr. Barnes at one point joined the picketers.

The Artists Union published several issues of its own little journal, entitled 1212.
This one coincided with the WPA exhibition. Does that fleshy figure look familiar? It should. It’s Fiske Kimball. Depicted as the discobolus—the athlete immortalized in stone by the ancient Greeks—Kimball is literally slinging the bull. The Grecian reference also alludes to the dubious dubbing given to the museum building at the time of its 1928 opening as “a wonderful Greek garage.”

Did Barnes have a hand in this biting send-up? Perhaps. Kimball thought it hard to see how the Artists Union could finance such a publication unless Barnes subsidized it.

Speaking of the museum building, there’s one other publication, also from 1938, that I’d like to show you.
Note the center headline—actually the sub-headline. It refers to Leopold Stokowski’s opinion that the city’s newly constructed post office has more artistic value than the museum building. According to the maestro, “the post office is light, effective, and American in its conception; the museum is quasi-Greek with hundreds of tiny windows,” providing inadequate light for picture viewing. Et tu, Leopold?
Among the cheers and jeers, by the time Fiske Kimball left the museum, resigning in January of 1955, nearly every interior space of the building was in full operation. More than 180 galleries and period rooms were outfitted for the display of art, and more than thirty individuals were on staff to steward the collection and maintain the museum’s programs and facilities. His was a tenure of nearly thirty years.
Anne d’Harnoncourt served as the museum’s director nearly as long as Kimball—just a month shy of twenty-six years before her unexpected death in 2008. Whereas Kimball was thirty-seven, Anne was thirty-eight years old when she was named director in 1982.
Anne was well-established at the museum before becoming its director. Soon after completing her graduate studies in 1967, she joined PMA as a curatorial assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture. She left in 1969 to become an assistant curator at the Art Institute of Chicago and then returned to PMA two years later to serve as its curator of 20th century painting for the next decade.

The publications you’ve been looking at represent some of Anne’s curatorial accomplishments—exhibitions she curated and other groundbreaking essays she authored, particularly about the revered avant garde artist Marcel Duchamp.
Having received local and national recognition throughout her fourteen years as curator, Anne was named the George D. Widener Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art on July 1, 1982. According to local news accounts, the Museum originally offered the director's position to her in 1979. But Anne declined, explaining that "she was devoted to working directly with the art itself." When she changed her mind three years later, she rationalized that "one doesn't lose one's field, one gains a museum."

During Anne’s tenure, which included taking on the additional responsibilities of Chief Executive Officer in 1997, the museum reached a number of milestones.
There were the blockbuster exhibitions, such as “Cézanne” in 1996. The museum organized the show with the Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Tate Gallery. Designed as a retrospective of the artist’s career, the exhibition featured 170 works and traveled to Paris and London before ending in Philadelphia.
The biggest canvas in the show was *The Large Bathers*, shown here, representing an image Cézanne revisited often. This version belongs to PMA and was purchased in 1937 at Fiske Kimball’s recommendation.

*The Large Bathers*, by Paul Cézanne, 1900–06
82 7/8 x 98 ¾ inches
[also known as *The Great Bathers*]
The purchase was on Kimball’s hit list of Barnes grievances you looked at earlier. The doctor, who owned another of Cézanne’s iterations on the same subject, declared PMA’s to be fifth-rate and at best worth one-third of what the museum paid.

No such controversy kept the crowds away in 1996. More than 548,000 visitors, which was twice the estimated attendance—came to the Philadelphia finale.
The exhibition’s economic impact on the city also exceeded expectations—which as any cultural institution today knows, is an essential element in capturing public funding. By its own calculations, the city expected the exhibition to generate $21 million in tourism. Instead, it took in $86.5. While Anne’s husband Joseph Rishel headed the museum’s curatorial efforts, her contribution was significant on many levels, particularly in strengthening relations between PMA and the City. As Ed Rendell, then Mayor of Philadelphia recalled, "Anne really taught us the potential value of the museum to the city."
Just one year prior, the museum took part in another record-breaking international exhibition, entitled *From Cézanne to Matisse: French Paintings from the Barnes Foundation*. The exhibition marked the first time 80 masterpieces from Dr. Barnes’ collection would go on view outside the Foundation’s Merion, Pennsylvania galleries. A three-year renovation of those galleries served as the impetus for the exhibition, which toured for two and a half years beginning in 1993.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
May 2–August 15, 1993

Musée d’Orsay, Paris  
November 6, 1993–January 2, 1994

National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo  
January 21–April 3, 1994

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas  
April 24–August 16, 1994

Art Gallery of Ontario  
September 17–December 31, 1994

Philadelphia Museum of Art  
January 29–April 1995

Haus der Kunst, Munich  
June 23–October 22, 1995
From January to April of 1995, PMA served as the penultimate stop of the exhibition, which had travelled earlier to Washington DC, Paris, Tokyo, Ft. Worth, and Ontario. The tour ended in Munich, a venue added at the last minute. From all points of the globe, the show was an international success.
As one art reviewer at the New York Times noted, “millions of people, from Tokyo to Toronto, made a traveling exhibition ... into one of the biggest stampedes since the gold rush.” Attendance at PMA was more than 475,000; earning the city a thirty million dollar windfall.

While the public response was certainly amazing, there’s another aspect I find downright incredible... Who would have thought that one day, thanks to Anne d’Harnoncourt and her staff, the paintings acquired by Dr. Albert C. Barnes would one day hang in Fiske Kimball’s museum.
I can only imagine how Kimball and the good doctor would have reacted.
Like Fiske Kimball nearly half a century earlier, Anne d’Harnoncourt was named a recipient of the Philadelphia Award for 1997. Anne shared the award with Jane Golden, another woman involved in the city’s visual arts experience.

Like Kimball, Anne was also a great influence outside of the museum. But in her case, it was global.
Anne served on twenty-four boards or visiting committees, participated in thirty-four advisory, nominating or review panels, and was an active elected member to seven other organizations, two of which were learned societies.

To name just a few...her affiliations included a twelve-year term as Regent to the Smithsonian Institution. From 1982 until her death, Anne served on the Board of Overseers to the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Fine Arts. She also participated in the selection of an architect for the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, and was a member of the international advisory board to the State Hermitage Museum, in St. Petersburg, Russia.
During her lifetime, Anne received more than thirty-five awards and six honorary degrees. On June 4, 2008—just three days after her death—the American flag was flown over the United States Capitol in her memory.

Did anyone ever find fault with Anne d’Harnoncourt?

Perhaps once—in a way that harkens back to a criticism of Fiske Kimball. Do you recall the artists who protested the museum’s WPA exhibition for lack of representation? Anne had a somewhat similar experience as a young curator back in 1976 when she selected the works of 60 contemporary artists for the museum’s bicentennial exhibition. According to a newspaper article published that summer, Anne was “taking the heat” from an artist not chosen, who tried making a public issue of the matter. Typical of her oft-noted diplomacy was Anne’s response: “There is always going to be more good work than a show is going to be able to include.”
Speaking of challenges, I’ll note just a few in processing the institutional records and personal papers of these two formidable figures.

In 2001, as part of a project funded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, a team of three full-time archivists, assisted by four interns, were charged with processing a total of nearly 200 linear feet of Kimball’s records and papers over a 22-month period. Just as an aside, Courtney Smerz was one of those terrific interns who toiled with us. That’s us and Dan Elliott, our library director, crammed into a photo booth at a local restaurant. We were celebrating the project’s completion.
Both of the Kimball collections had been compiled, catalogued and described between 1981 and ’82—well before any processing procedures and guidelines were established for the museum’s archives. Part of our challenge was to deconstruct some of the file organization. Yet at the same time, we benefited from the first archivist’s institutional knowledge and her attempt to make some semblance of the material that previously was scattered across the museum.
In 2009 the Mellon Foundation again provided the means—this time to process Anne d’Harnoncourt’s records and papers. The team for the project, as outlined in our grant proposal, was to be me, assisted by two summer interns. At the project’s outset, the archives held 162 linear feet of Anne’s unprocessed records. The executive offices still had an additional 180 linear feet, most of which was unsorted papers stored under desks, stacked in corners, or stashed in closets. Needless to say, the project, which was funded for thirty months, required more than two interns. Altogether, fifteen part-time volunteers, interns and staff collectively provided the hours of a full-time archives assistant. I dubbed us “Anne’s Army.”
To try to ensure consistency in their work product, I devised very specific sorting and filing instructions for every member to follow. Overwhelming at first, but useful long term.
I was also very fortunate—and forever grateful—that Mellon, in response to the unexpected challenges I outlined in our first interim report, granted additional funding to hire an experienced assistant archivist to work 19 hours a week for one year. With Tanya Brun’s invaluable skills, I knew all of Anne’s fifty-five linear feet of exhibition records would be well processed, with little supervision on my part.
The most significant difference in the two projects was in the handling of the professional affiliation records. Kimball advised on projects that were active fifty years before we ever touched a folder. Anne, on the other hand, was often a long-term board member, advising on issues of policy and personnel. And of course, her files were created just one to twenty years before coming to the archives. The dilemma, therefore, was how could we give access to another institution’s records that we’d perhaps restrict if written on the museum’s behalf?
Upon discussing the matter with Susie Anderson, the museum’s archivist, we determined that I’d consult with the museum’s legal counsel about our contacting those institutions whose interactions with Anne I identified as unrelated to her work as museum director. We decided that I should write to the chief officer of each institution to make them aware of the records and our intention of making the material accessible to researchers if given their permission. We also stated that no response on their part by a specified date would be considered as their consent.

An inventory was attached on which was noted the year or years that the records would be opened for research. Of the twenty-five institutions contacted, thirteen agreed to the files remaining at PMA, eight never responded, and four asked for the records to be turned over to their offices.
In the finding aid to Anne’s papers, I noted the institutions that requested their files as well as her role on their behalf. The cultural impact of Anne d’Harnoncourt, therefore, would not be diminished despite the lack of documentation.
The archives of Fiske Kimball and Anne d’Harnoncourt give lasting evidence of their influence on how we experience art. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to ensure the preservation of that evidence and to share a small portion of their lives with you.

Thank you.