
Politics and Patrons: The Texas Medicis, Jean and Dominique de Menil

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Abstract

It would be hard to overstate the importance of the arrival in 1941 of Paris natives Jean and Dominique de Menil to the history of the arts in Houston. Culminating in the world class Menil Collection that opened in 1987, their influence in Houston as patrons and advocates for modern art is legendary. "Art is ... just like the air one breathes," Dominique believed, "When I arrived in Texas there was not much you could call art—Houston was a provincial, dormant place..." Once they settled in Houston, the de Menils began their patronage of the city in earnest, though wealthy elites were said to have closed ranks against the newcomers. The powerful families of Houston controlled the cultural institutions and were not especially receptive to the modern art they were championing. In spite of the resistance, the de Menils became tireless advocates of Houston's development into a vibrant, modern city. Active in numerous art institutions throughout the city, the de Menils are credited with "...any sign of modernism in Houston today - the glass towers of the skyline, the abstract paintings in museums and galleries, the new music and dance in concert halls - is there largely because of the battle the de Menils waged to challenge and push forward the tastes of the city." Using data from archives and interviews, this presentation traces the challenges and successes of the de Menil's endeavors in Houston demonstrating how new people can bring new ideas into what was a closed, provincial cultural environment.

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