Art Market

The CIA Agent Who Became a Visionary Art Collector

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Serious art collecting is never just about buying and selling. Engaging with a rich community of creative people and passionate scholars is often far more enticing for collectors than potential profits. For Richard Brown Baker, a major collector of 20th century art, the New York art world was so thrilling that, after leaving a post at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), he devoted most of the rest of his life to the city's art community. When he died in 2002 at age 89, he left behind one of the country's greatest collections—and thousands of pages reflecting on his beloved milieu.

Baker was an obsessive diaristwho funneled his thwarted writing ambitions into journals that recorded the parties he attended, artworks he bought, and studios he visited. Now housed at Yale University (with copies at the Museum of Modern Art and the Rhode Island Historical Society), Baker's papers reveal what curator Jennifer Farrell called, in the 2011 book *Get There First, Decide Promptly: The Richard Brown Baker Collection of Postwar Art*, "a unique record of twentieth-century American social, political, and cultural history as perceived by one individual who had a Zelig-like ability to be present during notable events and to encounter both famous and infamous historical and cultural figures." (A footnote for this description reveals that Baker once met Adolf Hitler, in 1934.) Ultimately, Baker's story suggests that beyond giving charitably and supporting emerging artists, collectors can be positive forces in the art world by being astute observers and recorders of history—as it happens, opening to opening, studio visit to dinner party.

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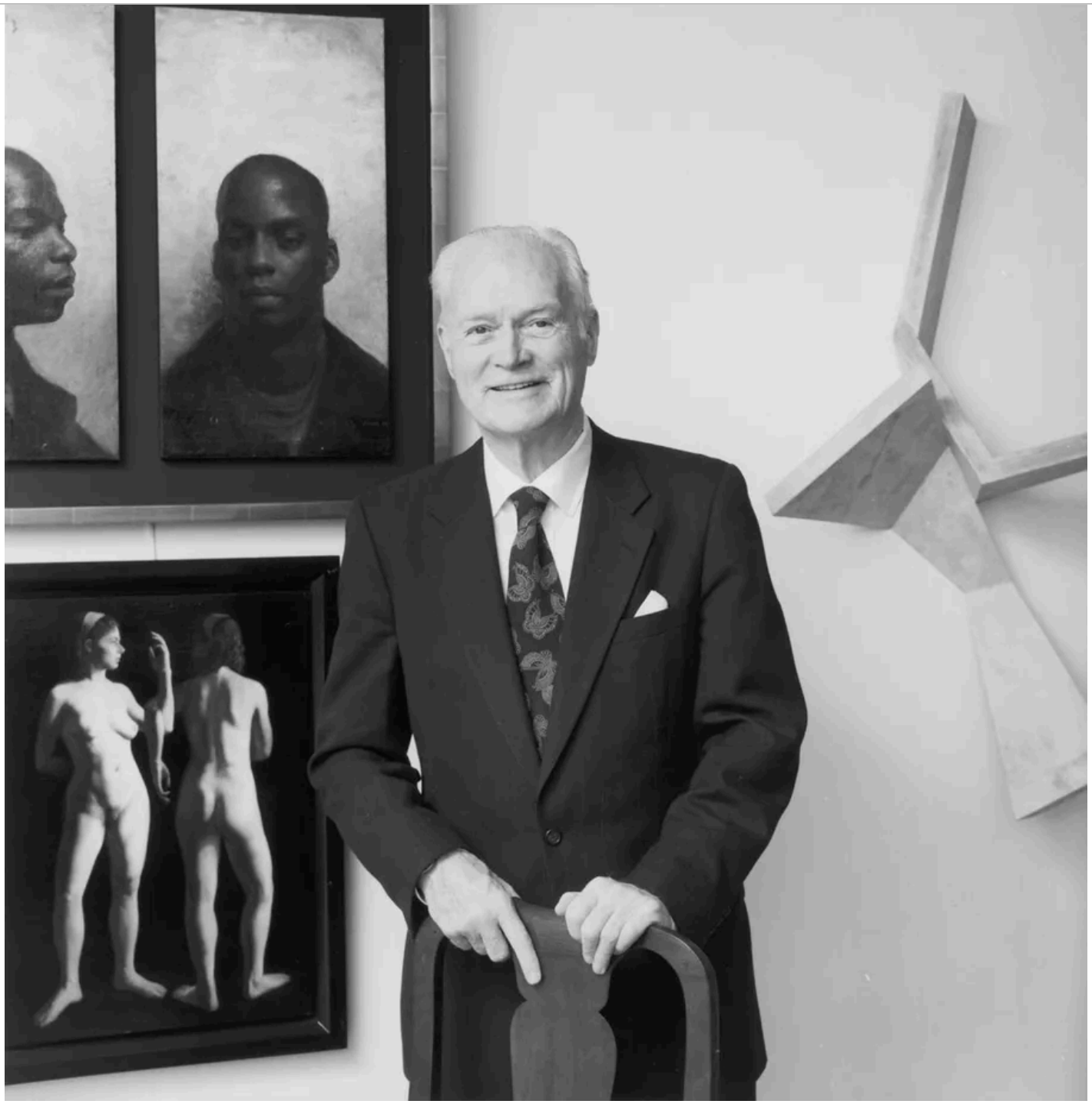

Richard Brown Baker in his New York apartment. Photo © Jerry Thompson. Courtesy of the RISD Museum.

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Baker was born in 1912 to a wealthy Rhode Island family with collecting in its genes. His mother and sister collected stamps, and his parents accumulated antiques. Baker himself began with pennies and pocket watches. At age 11, he started writing journals. After graduating from Yale in 1935, Baker eventually settled in Washington, D.C. Throughout the 1940s, he worked as a research analyst for the Office of Strategic Services (forerunner of the CIA) and the Office of Intelligence Research of the Department of State, then as a foreign affairs officer.

Stationed in Europe during World War II, Baker experienced air raids in London and documented his experiences in *The Year of the Buzz Bomb: A Journal of London* (written in 1944, self-published in 1952). He expressed a strange attitude toward potential peril: “I have a greater willingness to be hit while in my home than in a chance locality, like a cinema, a dancehall, or a little-frequented street....To be obliterated in a bordello or even a butcher shop appears to me to be unfitting,” he wrote.

It’s difficult to decipher exactly what Brown did in the OSS and, later, the CIA. His diaries focus more on the social aspects of his time in Europe than they do on his actual work. In a book about the OSS, he was quoted saying: “We are supposed to be an assemblage of scholars and political analysts, but in fact we are a herd of baffled people under a barrage of silly orders from a top-heavy hierarchy of [illegible]ts.”

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three years later with dreams of becoming a writer. Though he received some commissions, he struggled to publish his work and turned instead toward the art world.

Acute “accumulitis”

Inside the New York apartment of Richard Brown Baker. Photo © Jerry Thompson. Courtesy of the RISD Museum.

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capital" (Richard Brown Baker Diaries, May 7 '56—February 23 '58. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York).

Baker's grandfather, H. Martin Brown, was a bank president and millionaire who left him a significant inheritance. This was more or less Baker's only source of income following retirement from the CIA, though he sometimes sold stocks or received additional funds from his mother. Baker eventually accrued debts with art dealers as he became hooked on collecting. He even equated his "accumulitis" with compulsive smoking—his art purchases became a kind of culturally enriching vice.

Though he'd collected while living in Washington, D.C., Baker's acquiring intensified in 1954, when he started to buy abstract works from the 20th century, beginning with José Guerrero's blocky orange, black, and white oil on canvas *In Transit* (1954). From then on, Baker embraced work by living artists, thrilling at the discovery of emerging talent.

"I am not at all a gambler," he wrote, "but speculating in esthetics is a challenge and an exciting one."

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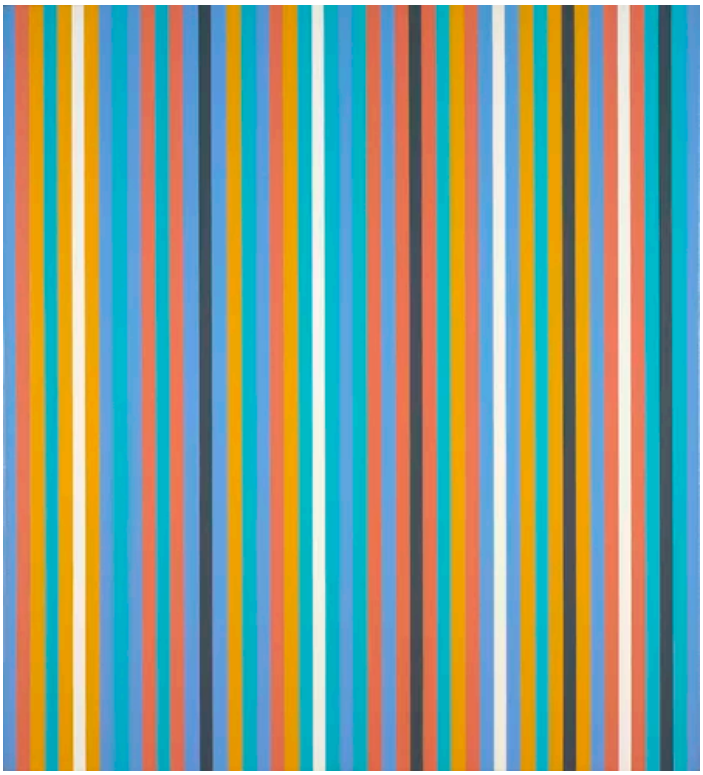
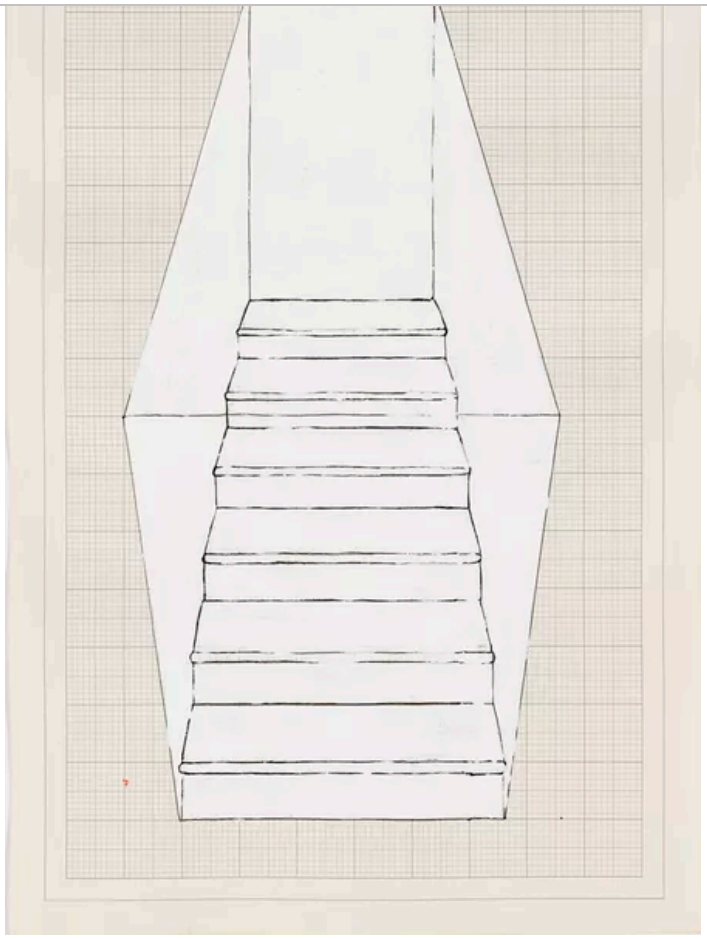


Bridget Riley. *Gather,* 1981. Bequest of Richard Brown Baker. Courtesy of the RISD Museum.



Rachel Whiteread, *Stairs, 6 steps, black,* 1995. Richard Brown Baker Fund for Contemporary British Art. Courtesy of the RISD Museum.

Yet Baker wasn't generating any income for much of his adult life, and his funds weren't as plentiful as those of the other major collectors of his day. Unable to compete for expensive works, "Baker changed the rules of the game in order to suit his strengths, namely, a keen interest in unestablished and generally younger artists developed through frequent visits to galleries, an affinity for smaller pieces and works on paper, and a general independence in regard to his choices," Farrell wrote. He purchased, for example, early David Hockney sketches, an ink-and-graphite Agnes Martin work, and Ellsworth Kelly prints.

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Richard Stankiewicz)—for $200. Soon, Baker's collection included work by major Abstract Expressionists such as Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, and by emerging Pop artists ranging from Robert Indiana to Roy Lichtenstein (according to Farrell, Baker bought the third Lichtenstein to ever be sold). Baker ultimately amassed more than 1,600 pieces of art. He never sold works from his collection, and considered any potential profits from such sales to be immoral.

Baker also had no heirs, so he bequeathed his behemoth of a collection to two museums, one in his home state and the other at his alma mater: the RISD Museum and the Yale University Art Gallery, respectively. At Yale, you can see Andy Warhol's 1964 silkscreen *Electric Chair*; James Rosenquist's painting *Sitting around Screaming* (1962); a suite of Hans Hofmann paintings; and that formative José Guerrero from 1954—all thanks to a very generous former CIA agent. The RISD Museum received more than 300 works from his collection; he also endowed its contemporary art curator position, which bears his name, in 1998.

A collector about town

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Lubaina Himid, *Undo the Knots of Poverty,* 2011. Richard Brown Baker Fund for Contemporary British Art. Courtesy of the RISD Museum.

All the while, as he was acquiring, Baker was also hobnobbing, inserting himself into a vibrant cultural scene. He began one of his journals' most charming anecdotes, from 1959 or 1960, with a bit of gossip, social observation, and scene setting.

"Mr. [Robert] Scull [a notable collector] sent his Cadillac into Manhattan with his personal chauffeur to pick up a group of us at the Leo Castelli Gallery," he wrote. "Illeana, Leo's wife, is ill and hospitalized. An attractive-looking young French woman was Leo's partner for the evening" (Baker, Oct 16, '52—May '56. MoMA Archives, NY).

As the night progressed, artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg arrived late in the latter's white Jaguar. Baker talked to Johns—who defended the work of Frank Stella—and then chatted with Margaret Scolari Barr (the wife of the first MoMA director, Alfred H. Barr) about the time Gary Cooper met Pablo Picasso.

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Baker got a ride back from East Hampton to the city with Johns and Rauschenberg in the Jaguar.

The story doesn't only play to art-world voyeurism and nostalgia, it captures a moment on the cusp of a sea change from Abstract Expressionism to a new Pop aesthetic. It's easy to read Baker's journal entry—and his gravitation toward Rauschenberg and Johns instead of Kline and de Kooning—and imagine a world primed for the rise of Warhol, who debuted his "Campbell's Soup Cans" series a couple of years later, in 1962. The popular image of the artist was quickly transforming, as Baker perfectly captured in his description of Rauschenberg's ritzy car and public relationship with Johns.

Baker's insights also extended to art classrooms and studios. He studied painting with Hans Hofmann, ultimately realizing his skills didn't lie in making, but in supporting. He shared coffee and cookies with Josef Albers, commenting on the spareness of both his work and home. He relished all of his interactions with artists; all of his gallery and museum visits with Stankiewicz and Enrico Donati.

Keeping up with the contemporary

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Yinka Shonibare, *Un Ballo in Maschera (Courtiers V),* 2004. Richard Brown Baker Fund for Contemporary British Art. Courtesy of the RISD Museum.

After Pop art became king in the 1960s, Baker's collecting habits continued to evolve. In the 1970s, he began acquiring significant holdings of Photorealist works by American artists such as John Baeder, Robert Bechtle, and Robert Cottingham.

"Photorealism ended up the strongest suit in Baker's hand at the end of the 1970s," wrote art historian and curator Robert Storr in his essay in *Get There First, Decide Promptly*. Yet Storr also noted the dearth of works by Vija Celmins and Malcolm Morley, as well as a single drawing by Chuck Close, ultimately describing Baker's taste as "oddly exclusionary." By contrast, he lauded Baker for collecting Chicago Imagists such as Jim Nutt, Ed Flood, and Roger Brown accepted by many in the New York art world.

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Hockney, John Bellany, and Bridget Riley; later, he moved on to Christopher Le Brun, Tacita Dean, Damien Hirst, and Tracey Emin. In 2011, the RISD Museum mounted "Made in the UK: Contemporary Art from the Richard Brown Baker Collection," an exhibition showcasing British art from Baker's bequest.

Throughout the subsequent decades, Baker embraced the Neo-Expressionist work of Anselm Kiefer and Francesco Clemente. In the 1980s, he collected a number of prints (by Judy Pfaff and Ken Currie, among others). During the 1990s, he continued his eclectic acquisitions. In her essay for *Get There First, Decide Promptly*, the writer Judith Tannenbaum noted a preference for representational work in the purchases Baker made toward the end of his life. She wrote: "This change of direction was due in part to developments in the art world, which became much more pluralistic in the 1970s, and in part to his own underlying appreciation for craft or technique."

Not all the artists Baker supported have entered the art-historical canon; he bought figurative paintings by Steven Assael, and Kiichi Usui and Max Ferguson made portraits of him. But for Baker, the guessing game about who would stand the test of time was part of the fun. He filled his diaries with ideas about the pleasures and pitfalls of collecting. In May 1956, the artist Paul Brach said to him: "It must be terrible to be known as a collector. Nobody can have any other relation with you" (Baker, Oct 16, '52—May '56. MoMA Archives, NY).

Baker brooded—but he didn't stop. By then, he was too hooked on the people and the objects that possessed what he described as "the creative spark that is the greatest mark of human achievement" (Baker, Oct 16, '52—May '56. MoMA Archives, NY). ■

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