

Collecting Modern Art in Hartford: James Thrall Soby, the Wadsworth Atheneum, and Surrealism

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When James Thrall Soby died on January 29, 1979, art critic John Russell remembered him as “a longtime activist in twentieth-century art.”¹ Indeed, Soby (1906–1979) is still best known for his multiple roles as collector, curator, and *éminence grise* in the art scene of his time (fig. 51). At the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where he bequeathed his remarkable art collection including important paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso, he is celebrated for his many significant exhibitions and key acquisitions from the 1940s to the 1960s.

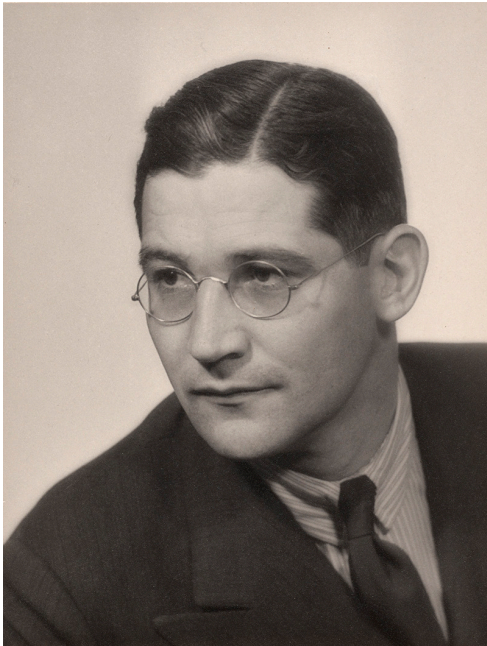
An exhibition organized by MoMA in 1961 showcased his collection and brought it into well-deserved public light.² In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, former museum director and close friend Alfred H. Barr Jr. discussed Soby’s roughly twenty-five-year career at MoMA. He focused on Soby as a collector and suggested that collecting enhanced his connoisseurship and inspired him to write about modern art in various monographs, catalogues, and magazines.³ Barr highlighted Soby’s book *The Early Chirico*, the first monograph in English on the artist, and pointed out that at home Soby “could walk out of his study and see the finest collection of de Chiricos in the world.”⁴ He presented Soby as a discerning collector, a leading art critic, and an accomplished

¹ John Russell, “Obituary James Thrall Soby,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1979, D 19.

² *The James Thrall Soby Collection*, Gallery M. Knoedler and Company, ed., exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961). The exhibition ran from February 1–25, 1961.

³ Rona Roob compiled Soby’s bibliography in John Elderfield, ed., *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century. Continuity and Change*, Studies in Modern Art, vol. 5 (New York: Museum of Modern Art; distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1995), pp. 230–251.

⁴ Alfred H. Barr Jr., “James Thrall Soby and His Collection,” in Gallery M. Knoedler and Company, ed., *The James Thrall Soby Collection* (note 2), pp. 15–20, here p. 16; James Thrall Soby, *The Early Chirico* (New York: Arno Press, 1941).



51 Man Ray, *Portrait of James Thrall Soby*, 1932. Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum.

“museum man.”⁵ Yet Barr barely mentioned one crucial aspect of Soby’s career: his relationship with the Wadsworth Atheneum.⁶

Soby was in his mid-thirties when he started working at MoMA in 1940.⁷ Concurrently, he remained a trustee at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, where he had been actively involved since 1930. Soby and Wadsworth director A. Everett “Chick” Austin Jr. had made a formidable team over the previous ten years, and Soby’s rise to become one of the leading advocates of modern art in the United States cannot be fully understood without a proper assessment of his early years in Hartford.

In Hartford, Soby’s passion for modern art, particularly surrealism, was born. It is where he formed his art collection, cultivated a network of dealers and artists, and wrote the pioneering monographs *After Picasso*, in 1935, and (most, if not all, of) *The Early Chirico* in 1941.⁸ In 1935, after working as a museum volunteer, he was named the first curator of modern art at the Wadsworth Atheneum, and in 1937 became a trustee and adviser to the museum. Most importantly, it was at the

5 Barr, “James Thrall Soby and His Collection” (note 4), p. 16.

6 Ibid., pp. 15–20.

7 Soby had already been a member of MoMA’s Junior Advisory Committee from 1937. Rona Roob, “James Thrall Soby. Author, Traveler, Explorer,” in Elderfield, *The Museum of Modern Art* (note 3), pp. 175–182.

8 James Thrall Soby, *After Picasso* (Hartford: E. V. Mitchell; New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935); Soby, *The Early Chirico* (note 4).

Wadsworth that Soby's activities as a collector, critic, and museum professional evolved simultaneously, complementing one another and, at times, overlapping and even merging. It was this unique *mélange* that prepared him for his later career at MoMA. Due to the city's small scale and because Hartford was his hometown, Soby was able to assume leading positions earlier and more swiftly than he might have in a larger city. Significantly, Hartford and the Wadsworth provide a meaningful case study for better understanding the rapid development and transformation of the modern art scene in America during the 1930s. To help elucidate this history, the present essay examines Soby's multiple activities in the art world, roughly covering the period of his involvement with the Wadsworth from 1930 until his resignation from its Board of Trustees in 1944.⁹

Hartford, the Wadsworth Atheneum, and Chick Austin

Soby's interest in modern art went hand in hand with the cultural transformation of Hartford. Situated midway between Boston and New York, it was small but prosperous during Soby's youth. It was well known as a literary city, attracting writers and poets such as Mark Twain and, later, Wallace Stevens, but most local art collectors had a rather conservative taste. French novelist Marguerite Yourcenar, who lived in the city during the 1940s, described it as "reactionary, chauvinist, and Protestant, with a hint of worldliness."¹⁰ Locals gravitated to paintings by the American Hudson River School, the Connecticut school of impressionists, and French academic paintings à la William Bouguereau. Until the early twentieth century, collectors had neither significant interest in, nor any particular taste for, European art, with the exception of J. Pier-

9 A biography about Soby is still a desideratum. Rona Roob published an excellent introductory essay about his life. She also edited excerpts of Soby's memoirs, titled *The Changing Stream*. Soby worked on his manuscript, which he titled *My Life in the Art World*, between 1962 and 1971. It remains unpublished and is archived at MoMA. For excerpts, see Rona Roob, "The Changing Stream," in Elderfield, *The Museum of Modern Art* (note 3), pp. 183–227. See also Tobias Garst, "Giorgio de Chirico nella collezione di James Thrall Soby," in Paolo Baldacci, Guido Magnaguagno, and Gerd Roos, eds., *De Chirico, Max Ernst, Magritte, Balthus. Uno sguardo nell'invisibile*, exh. cat. (Florence: Mandragora; Palazzo Strozzi, 2010), pp. 241–244; Eric Zafran, "Springtime in the Museum. Modern Art Comes to Hartford," in Eric Zafran, ed., *Surrealism and Modernism From the Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum*, exh. cat. (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 61–134; Pamela Koob, "James Thrall Soby and de Chirico," in Emily Braun, ed., *Giorgio de Chirico and America* (New York: Hunter College; Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 1996), pp. 111–124; and Nicholas Fox Weber, *Patron Saints: Five Rebels Who Opened America to a New Art 1928–1943* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

10 Quoted in Steve Courtney, "Elegant European Called 'Reactionary' Hartford Home," *Hartford Courant*, August 4, 2002. Yourcenar lived in Hartford from 1939–49. During this decade, she collaborated with Chick Austin on a theatrical dance work. See Josyane Savigneau, *Marguerite Yourcenar. Inventing a Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).



52 George Platt Lynes,
Portrait of Arthur Everett
“Chick” Austin Jr., 1931.
Hartford, CT, Wadsworth
Atheneum.

pont Morgan, the famous Gilded Age banker who maintained close ties with his birthplace of Hartford but lived mostly in New York.¹¹

Until the late 1920s, the Wadsworth Atheneum, one of America’s oldest public art museums, was the perfect embodiment of this conservative taste. It had impressive holdings of nineteenth-century Hudson River landscapes, numerous portraits of local dignitaries, and the occasional European old master. The museum was transformed dramatically with the arrival of young director Arthur Everett “Chick” Austin Jr. in 1927.¹² Within a few years, the Wadsworth became one of the leading institutions for collecting modern art in America. Austin’s daring exhibition program vitalized the public well beyond the confines of Hartford. Thanks to his charisma, energy, and taste, Austin quickly connected artists, collectors, and socialites with the museum (fig. 52).

¹¹ Another exception is the Hillstead estate in nearby Farmington, Connecticut, where industrialist Alfred Atmore Pope (1842–1913) displayed his collection of French and American impressionist works.

¹² Arthur Everett “Chick” Austin Jr. (1900–1957), director of the Wadsworth Atheneum from 1927–44. On his life, see Eugene R. Gaddis, *Magician of the Modern. Chick Austin and the Transformation of the Arts in America* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

Austin grew up in Boston and attended Harvard University, where he participated in the legendary art classes led by Paul J. Sachs and Edward Forbes. As a member of the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art he befriended the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the architect Philip Johnson, and Julien Levy, who would later become a prominent art gallery owner. All three played important roles in Austin's effort to transform the Wadsworth into a showcase for modern art. From his student days onward, Austin was a brilliant networker. Although gay, he married Helen Goodwin in 1929, joining one of the most powerful local families in Hartford. The Goodwin family was among the founders of Hartford and closely related to other local patrician families such as the Morgans. At the time of Austin's arrival in Hartford, Charles Archibald Goodwin, Helen's uncle, was president of the Board of Trustees at the Wadsworth. Philip Lipincott Goodwin, another family member, was a daring collector of modern art with connections in New York and beyond.¹³ Shortly after their wedding, the couple built an extravagant new house in Hartford's most expensive neighborhood, surrounded by mansions owned by other family members. In the following years, The Austin House, as it became known, provided an ideal stage for lavish parties where local society mingled with artists, gallery owners, and collectors from New England, New York, and Europe.

Within a few years of his arrival, Austin created one of the most progressive exhibition programs in the United States. Modern art, specifically surrealism, played a crucial role in his effort. During the summer of 1931, Austin saw a Salvador Dalí show in Paris at the Galerie Pierre Colle, probably after being tipped off by his old friend Julien Levy.¹⁴ The show inspired him to organize a survey exhibition introducing surrealism to America. The Wadsworth's "Newer Super-Realism" opened in November 1931 as the first exhibition of surrealism in the United States. It stirred an immediate public response and became an overnight success. Despite its modest size, with just fifty works displayed, Austin gathered an impressive group of artists including Salvador Dalí, André Masson, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Max Ernst.¹⁵ In its wake, Austin continued to conceive of innovative exhibitions. In 1934, he organized

13 Philip Lipincott Goodwin (1885–1958) lived mostly in New York and was a trustee at MoMA. In collaboration with Edward Durell Stone he designed the MoMA building in 1939. For his collection, see Alfred H. Barr Jr., "The Philip L. Goodwin Collection," *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, no. 1 (Fall 1958), pp. 4–12. Barr's article leaves Goodwin's substantial donation to the Wadsworth unmentioned.

14 Zafran, "Springtime in the Museum" (note 9), p. 74. Levy later had a business partnership with Pierre Colle.

15 See exhibition brochure, *Newer Super-Realism*, exh. cat. (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1931). The exhibition opened November 15 and closed December 5, 1931. Deborah Zlotzky, "'Pleasant Madness' in Hartford: The First Surrealist Exhibition in America," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 60, no. 6 (February 1986), pp. 55–61.

the first Picasso retrospective in any American museum and, in the following years, oversaw a series of exhibitions that regularly included paintings by leading surrealists.¹⁶

Austin continuously bought works of art to expand the Wadsworth's permanent collection. One of his most spectacular acquisitions was Serge Lifar's collection of objects from the Ballets Russes in 1933.¹⁷ Lifar's collection comprised paintings, set and costume designs by Léon Bakst, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, as well as numerous paintings and drawings by Giorgio de Chirico, Joan Miró, and Max Ernst. With this collection in mind, he opened the Wadsworth to dance and film, and in the same year tried to bring the Ballets Russes's choreographer George Balanchine to Hartford to form a new school of ballet. This plan failed when Balanchine realized the provincial character of the city, but it nevertheless demonstrates Austin's audacious vision and ambition.

In 1934, artists and art cognoscenti flocked to Hartford to celebrate the grand opening of the new Avery Memorial wing, built after Austin's own architectural designs as the first modern art museum building in America. An extension of the existing main museum, the slick Bauhaus-inspired interior was ideally suited to presenting modern art exhibitions, showcasing the ever-growing collection, and serving as a stage for Austin's extravagant parties.¹⁸

There would have been very little modern art in Hartford without Austin. He was simultaneously a director, choreographer, and actor who reimagined the Wadsworth and introduced Hartford to the latest trends in the arts. However, traveling and socializing incessantly, Austin lacked the focus required of a systematic researcher or disciplined writer; Soby, whom Austin met in 1930, would become both a friend and grow into the role of writer and researcher for him.

Soby as collector of modern art

Born in Hartford in 1906, Soby grew up in a well-to-do New England family. He rarely left his hometown during his childhood, except for boarding schools and a stint at Williams College in nearby Massachusetts. On his first trip to Paris in 1926–27, he discovered works by

¹⁶ Zafran, "Springtime in the Museum" (note 9), p. 89.

¹⁷ Austin bought the Lifar collection from Julien Levy. Already in 1931, Austin had bought Pierre Roy's *The Electrification of the Country* (1930). With this purchase, Roy's painting became the first surrealist painting to enter any American museum collection.

¹⁸ Eugene R. Gaddis, ed., *Avery Memorial, Wadsworth Atheneum: The First Modern Museum* (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1984).



53 Pablo Picasso, *Seated Woman*, 1927, 129.9 × 96.8 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art.

French Romantics, such as Delacroix and Géricault in the Louvre.¹⁹ France would become a lifelong passion for Soby; he returned to Paris almost annually during the 1930s. Back in Hartford, he immersed himself in art history while half-heartedly pursuing a variety of career paths, including a short spell in finance. He also opened a bookstore in downtown Hartford, but ultimately found it unfulfilling.

In 1930, at the age of twenty-four, he started collecting European art, purchasing paintings by Matisse and Derain.²⁰ Supported by Chick Austin, his collection quickly expanded with additions by Daumier, Degas, and other French artists.²¹ In early 1932, however, his direction swiftly

19 James Thrall Soby, *My Life in the Art World*, 2 parts, unpublished typescript, Museum of Modern Art Museum Archives, New York, vol. I, 2, p. 5.

20 Ibid. vol. I, 9, p. 1.

21 In the mid- to late 1930s, Soby worked on a book about nineteenth-century French art. The book was never printed.

shifted when he bought Picasso's large *Seated Woman (Femme assise, 1927)* for \$16,000 from the Valentine Gallery in New York (fig. 53).²² He realized that the market for French nineteenth-century art had become too expensive for him, and refocused his attention on modern art, especially the surrealists and the so-called neo-Romantics.²³ During this time, he acquired his first works by Miró and Dalí, as well as paintings by Masson, Ernst, and Tanguy. Generally, he stayed away from abstract art; instead, he was attracted to figurative art with gloomy themes. Dark waters lurked below the surface of the proper New England gentleman.

Soby bought mostly from the New York galleries of Pierre Matisse, Valentine Dudensing, and Julien Levy. He had close personal relationships with each and had a 49 percent stake in the Levy Gallery, according to Russell Lynes.²⁴ Thanks to his travels, he also worked with European galleries, especially in Paris where he became a regular customer at the galleries of Pierre Colle, Jeanne Bucher, and Pierre Loeb.²⁵ Although he was financially independent, Soby's resources were not unlimited. To accommodate his purchases, he regularly traded older pictures for new works. His frequent trades trace broad shifts in his collecting interests over time. During the 1930s and 1940s, he sold works by older artists such as Juan Gris, Derain, and Matisse to buy less expensive works by younger artists.²⁶

22 "I'm not sure I would have had the courage to buy it if it hadn't been for the enthusiastic support of Chick Austin and Jere Abbott," Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 9, p. 6. Jere Abbott (1897–1982) was the first associate director at MoMA in 1932. The same year he became the director of the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, Massachusetts.

23 "I was at last beginning to realize that I had no business splashing around in the larger tides of the market for 19th century French art. And besides there were modern paintings appearing at the New York dealers during the Depression which I thought better suited to my pocketbook and my growing sense of affinity with works of art produced within our own memory and century," Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 9, p. 5.

24 Lynes states that Soby had a 49 percent business interest in the Levy Gallery, "but stayed in the background." When Soby became a member of the Advisory Committee at MoMA in 1940, he sold his interest back to Levy. Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern. An Intimate Portrait of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 236. In addition, Soby and Levy had a commercial partnership to support the neo-Romantic painter Eugene Berman, from 1932 to 1943. See letter from Soby to Levy, August 28, 1932, copy in Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut. In 1943, Soby disentangled his and Levy's partnership on Berman. See letter from Soby to Levy, March 26, 1943, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut. On December 31, 1937, Levy's gallery owed Soby \$5,000. Soby's soon to be wife Eleanor "Nellie" Howland had loaned the Levy Gallery \$5,000 as well. See Balance Sheet, Julien Levy Gallery, December 31, 1939, copy in Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

25 Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 9, p. 9; and *ibid.*, vol. II, 26, p. 3.

26 Soby, for instance, asked Austin in November 1942 to send his *Still Life* by Juan Gris to Pierre Matisse, "so that I can buy new pictures. The only way I can get anything new these days is to sell something old." Letter from Soby to Austin, November 10, 1942, James Thrall Soby Papers, I. 17, MoMA Archives, New York.

Soby acted quickly when art became available. When he saw the 1935 Giorgio de Chirico show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, he immediately bought four paintings.²⁷ To pay for them, he sold a recently acquired painting by Degas.²⁸ In 1940, after de Chirico's second show at the Matisse Gallery, he traded his *Girl by a Window* (1921) by Pierre's father Henri as part of the payment for three new paintings by de Chirico.²⁹ When objects were not immediately available to Soby, he acted with patience and persistence. In 1930, at the Valentine Gallery, he saw Miró's *Portrait of Mistress Mills in 1750* (1929), a painting that deeply affected him but was not for sale. In the following years, Soby asked for it repeatedly until he was eventually offered to purchase the painting in 1945.³⁰ Due to his overlapping roles as a private collector, part owner of a gallery, and museum representative, it may not have always been clear to his business partners in which capacity Soby acted. However, he did aim for transparency and overall, it seems, prioritized institutional interests over his own. In 1937, for instance, he became interested in Alexander Calder's *Praying Mantis* (1936) and even had it shipped to his home on approval. When he learned of the Wadsworth's interest in the work a few months later, he gave the museum priority, offering them first right of refusal.³¹ The museum purchased *Praying Mantis* in 1938, and it remains an important work in its collection.³² A similar situation played out with MoMA and Balthus's *Joan Miró and His Daughter Dolores* (*Joan Miró et Sa Fille Dolores*, 1936) in 1938, a painting that Soby had under reserve at Pierre Matisse. He left the portrait to MoMA when he learned about Alfred Barr's interest in it.³³

27 In early December Soby bought from Pierre Matisse de Chirico's *The Enigma of the Day* (1914) for \$2,500 and *The Grand Metaphysical Interior* (1917) for \$1,200. In mid-December, Soby bought *The Duo* (1914–15) for \$2,500. See letters from Matisse to Soby, December 4 and 14, 1935, James Thrall Soby Papers, V.D.2, MoMA Archives, New York. Around the same time, Soby bought de Chirico's *The Faithful Servitor* (1916–17); see Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 9, p. 20. Soby considered this group of four paintings by de Chirico as "the central passion of my life as a collector." James Thrall Soby, "Genesis of a Collection," *Art in America*, no. 49 (1961), pp. 68–81, here p. 71. All four paintings by de Chirico are now at MoMA.

28 Soby had bought Degas's painting *Woman Putting on her Gloves* (ca. 1877) from Wildenstein in November 1931.

29 Soby bought de Chirico's *The Gare Montparnasse* (1914), *The Amusements of a Young Girl* (1916–17), and *The Double Dream of Spring* (1915). All three paintings are now at MoMA. See correspondence from Soby to Pierre Matisse, October 30, 1940, James Thrall Soby Papers, V.D.2, MoMA Archives, New York. Compare with Soby, *Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. II, 10, p. 2. Matisse's painting is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

30 Joan Miró, *Portrait of Mistress Mills in 1750*, 1929, oil on canvas, MoMA, New York. See Soby, "Genesis of a Collection" (note 27), p. 71.

31 Letter from Alexander Calder to Austin, March 31, 1938, copy in Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

32 Alexander Calder, *Praying Mantis*, 1936, wood, rod, wire, string, and paint, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

33 Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. II, pp. 26, 6.

Soby in Farmington

With his growing aspirations, Soby needed additional hanging space to display his collection. In July 1935, he acquired a new country home in Farmington, about ten miles outside of Hartford. Shortly after the purchase, he consulted with his friend Henry-Russell Hitchcock to renovate the building and add a modernist wing that included a space he could use as an art gallery (fig. 54). For the display of his collection, Soby wanted a gallery with maximum light control. He described many modern paintings as “night-blooming” and believed they should be viewed in artificial light.³⁴ For the next decade, this newly built gallery played center stage for his collection.³⁵ One of Soby’s first commissions was an enormous wellhead by Alexander Calder for the garden next to the gallery.³⁶ Inside, he commissioned neo-Romantic painter Eugene



54 Photographer unknown, Farmington interior, ca. 1939. Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum.

34 Soby, “Genesis of a Collection” (note 27), p. 71. Soby also pointed out that de Chirico had painted his early works in artificial light. Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 9, p. 20.

35 Soby sold the house in May 1954 to live permanently in New York and New Canaan, Connecticut.

36 Alexander Calder, *Well Sweep*, 1935, standing mobile, New York, MoMA.



55 Photographer unknown, group portrait with Soby and friends. Front row, left to right: Teeny Matisse, Kirk Askew, Jane Cooley, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Lelia Wittler; back row: Iris Barry, Thomas Howard, Helen Austin, Pierre Matisse, Constance Askew, Arthur Everett “Chick” Austin Jr., Paul Cooley, *ca.* 1938. Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum.

Berman to create a series of theatrical scenes in the new dining room adjacent to the gallery.³⁷

More private and reserved than Austin, Soby opened his house to a relatively small circle of friends that included fewer Hartford luminaries, but a stronger contingent from the art world. Here, Soby, Austin, and Hitchcock mingled with artists such as Yves Tanguy and Calder, as well as dealer friends Pierre Matisse, Julien Levy, and Kirk Askew. Museum directors and curators such as Alfred Barr, Jere Abbott, and Iris Barry visited his home.³⁸ An important member of this group was Austin’s former assistant Eleanor “Nellie” Howland, who was working in the late 1930s as assistant to Barr at MoMA. She became Soby’s second wife in 1937.³⁹ Another member was Hartford-born Paul Whitman Cooley, whose father served on the board of the Wadsworth.⁴⁰ From 1934 to

37 Berman’s series of five paintings from 1936 is now held in the Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

38 Iris Barry (1895–1969), first curator of the film department at MoMA, from 1935–49.

39 Eleanor “Nellie” Howland (1905–1999), assistant to Austin at the Wadsworth Atheneum from 1933–36. In 1937, she left for New York to work for Alfred Barr at MoMA. She married Soby in New York on February 12, 1938. In the late 1930s she worked at the Knoedler and Durlacher galleries, as well as for Julien Levy.

40 Paul Whitman Cooley (1907–1974). After his time at the Wadsworth, Hartford native Cooley opened the Moyer Gallery in Hartford.

1944, Cooley worked as Austin's assistant and also collected modern art. His taste closely paralleled that of Soby and Austin; in fact, Cooley owned *Collage* (1934) by Miró before Soby acquired it in 1935 (fig. 55).⁴¹

The Hartford press followed the activities of the Austin circle with avid curiosity. Openings and lectures at the Wadsworth and lavish parties in private homes were often covered in the local newspapers. Throughout the 1930s, Soby and his wives regularly appeared in the society pages, sometimes illustrated with his dashing portrait by Man Ray.⁴² He clearly supported and probably enjoyed the media's interest in him and his collection, for it must have been Soby himself who provided images and detailed information on his artworks and writings. The newspapers presented him as one of the country's most important collectors of modern art and an influential art critic. His latest purchases were duly reported and reproduced.⁴³ Probably thanks to Hitchcock's connections, international magazines covered the renovations of Soby's Farmington home in 1937.⁴⁴

An article in the *Hartford Daily Times* from May 1937 gave local readers a peek into Soby's freshly renovated house and lauded his collection of "modern French art" as the most important in Connecticut. It also described the gallery in great detail.⁴⁵ Three paintings by de Chirico hung along its southern wall, with *The Enigma of the Day* (1914) in the center flanked by *The Seer* (1914–15) and *The Duo* (1914–15). Above the mantle hung a *Double-Self-Portrait* (1933) by Christian Bérard and on the opposite wall, Picasso's *Seated Woman* (1927) (fig. 53).⁴⁶ Paintings by Henri Rousseau, Matisse, and Berman hung on other walls.

Although the paintings highlighted in the article represented only a small part of Soby's collection, the selection clearly reflected his vision of modern art as laid out in the books he wrote around the time the article was published. Soby considered surrealism and neo-Romanticism as the most important art movements of his time; he understood them as a reaction against cubism, as an "authentic romantic revival" that rejected the "architectural" formalism of cubism.⁴⁷ Surrealism and neo-Romanticism were seen as closely related; both "touch the emotions rather

41 Joan Miró, *Collage*, January 20, 1934, corrugated cardboard, felt, gouache, and pencil on sandpaper, MoMA. See Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 9, p. 17.

42 See, for instance, *Hartford Daily Times*, November 29, 1941.

43 See, for instance, Marian Murray, "Hartford Collector Buys Famous Paintings by Modern Artist," *Hartford Daily Times*, January 4, 1937.

44 "House at Farmington, Connecticut: Remodeled by Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr.," *Architectural Review*, no. 81 (January 1937), pp. 19–20; "Farmington, Connecticut. House remodeled by Henry-Russell Hitchcock," *American Architect and Architecture*, no. 151 (July 1937), pp. 67–68.

45 Marian Murray, "4 Art Collections on View," *Hartford Daily Times*, May 8, 1937.

46 Christian Bérard, *On the Beach (Double Self-Portrait)*, 1933, oil on canvas, MoMA, New York; Pablo Picasso, *Seated Woman*, 1927, oil on canvas, MoMA, New York.

47 Soby, *After Picasso* (note 8), p. xii.

than ... the intellect.”⁴⁸ By reserving the entire south wall of his gallery to paintings by de Chirico, Soby emphasized the importance of the artist. In *After Picasso*, Soby described de Chirico as a key precursor to the surrealists and neo-Romantics.⁴⁹ In the same publication, he praised Picasso’s *Seated Woman* from 1927, owned by him, as “a surrealist icon which strikes one with a tremendous and uncanny force. The austerity of his abstractions is retained, but the figure has a psychological power which far surpasses anything achieved by the surrealists themselves.”⁵⁰ It was thus possible for visitors to experience the room as an illustration of his books and an extension of the arguments he presented for the first time in 1935 with *After Picasso*.

One artist, however, was never mentioned in local newspapers and rarely displayed publicly in Soby’s house. Soby was an early collector of Balthus’s work and possessed several particularly provocative paintings. They were carefully hidden away in a vault most of the time, accessible only to his closest friends. Apparently, Soby knew the artist from trips to Paris in the 1930s.⁵¹ In 1934, he saw his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Pierre, where the large painting *The Street (La Rue, 1933)* made a strong impression on him.⁵² In 1937, he bought it through Pierre Matisse for the modest sum of \$118.50 and briefly hung it in his Farmington home. It was the first painting by the artist to enter any American collection. Although it caused a stir among his friends, Soby was concerned about its graphic sexual content and decided to store it away in his vault after neighborhood mothers expressed concern.⁵³ With *The Toilette of Cathy (La Toilette de Cathy, 1933)* and *The Guitar Lesson (La Leçon de guitar, 1934)*, he acquired two even more sexually charged paintings, which he also kept in his vault, accessible only to a small circle of friends.⁵⁴ When

48 Ibid., p. 6.

49 Ibid., p. 4. “The longer I worked on my book [After Picasso/O.T.] the more convinced I became that Giorgio de Chirico in his youth had provided the central starting point both for the reveries of the neo-Romantics and for the affronts to logic of the surrealist painters,” Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 9, p. 19. Eventually, in 1941, Soby discussed de Chirico’s importance in his monograph *The Young Chirico*. This first American publication on the artist praised de Chirico’s “metaphysical” period from 1910–17, while dismissing his later works. Soby’s collection of ten paintings by the artist only comprised paintings from this early period. See also Pamela Koob’s discussion of Soby’s passion for de Chirico, in Koob, “James Thrall Soby and de Chirico” (note 9), p. 116.

50 Soby, *After Picasso* (note 8), p. 97. Soby frequently lent the painting to exhibitions. In 1936, it was shown at MoMA in the landmark exhibition “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism.” In 1939 Barr praised it in the catalogue for his large Picasso show as “one of the most awe-inspiring of Picasso’s figures.” See Alfred H. Barr Jr., ed., *Picasso: Forty Years of his Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art 1939), p. 134.

51 Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. II, 26, p. 5.

52 Balthus, *The Street, 1933*, oil on canvas, MoMA, New York.

53 Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. II, 26, p. 3.

54 Balthus, *The Guitar Lesson, 1934*, oil on canvas, private collection; Balthus, *The Toilette of Cathy* (a.k.a. *Cathy Dressing*), 1933, oil on canvas, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. On Soby as a col-

Soby contributed an introduction to the catalogue of Balthus's first American solo show at Pierre Matisse's gallery in 1938, he was one of the foremost connoisseurs and patrons of the artist in the country.⁵⁵ In the catalogue, Soby quoted and discussed at length Balthus's quip "*Je fais du surréalisme à la Courbet*" ("I do surrealism in the style of Courbet"). Soby took the artist's words at face value and considered Balthus a surrealist.⁵⁶ In Hartford, Soby was not alone in his admiration for Balthus. With the help of Pierre Matisse, Paul Cooley commissioned a portrait of his wife in August 1937 and the following year Austin purchased Balthus's *Still Life (Nature morte, 1937)* for the museum.⁵⁷ With this purchase, the Wadsworth became the first museum to acquire a Balthus. Two years later, Austin bought *The Bernese Hat (Le Chapeau bernois, 1938–39)*, a portrait of Balthus's first wife Antoinette de Watteville.⁵⁸ In an undated gallery leaflet for *The Bernese Hat*, probably written in early 1940, Soby once again discussed Balthus's claim to be a surrealist and introduced him in this way to the larger public in Hartford.⁵⁹ Soby probably played a major role in promoting Balthus in his immediate circle and in Hartford, and Balthus is not the only example of the commingling of Soby's private interests with his activities at the Wadsworth.

Soby at the Wadsworth Atheneum

Only a few months after meeting Austin in early 1930, Soby started volunteering at the museum. He immediately set out to work with Austin and Hitchcock on exhibitions of the neo-Romantics and surrealists.⁶⁰ It was his responsibility to research and write texts, while Austin

lector of Balthus, see Sabine Rewald, "Pierre Matisse et Balthus. Une relation difficile," in Pierre Schneider, ed., *Pierre Matisse passeur passionné. Un marchand d'art et ses artistes* (Paris: Hazan, 2005), pp. 33–44.

55 James Thrall Soby, "Introduction," in *Balthus*, Pierre Matisse Gallery, ed., exh. cat. (New York: Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1938), unpaginated. Soby again argued in 1941 that Balthus was a surrealist. See Soby, *The Early Chirico* (note 4), p. 108. On Soby's reputation as a patron of Balthus, see contemporaneous reviews of the Balthus exhibition: "James Thrall Soby was the first American to glance. Now so many people are glancing that Pierre Matisse had to do considerable hustling in order to be the first to present Balthus officially to an impatient public," Henry McBride, "The Debut of Balthus," *New York Sun*, March 26, 1938, p. 12. In addition to *The Street*, Soby also lent *The Toilette of Cathy* to the show.

56 It may have been Matisse who introduced Soby to Balthus's quip. See letter from Matisse to Soby, January 20, 1938, Box 121, F. 6, Pierre Matisse Gallery Archives at Pierpont Morgan Library. Quoted in Rewald, "Pierre Matisse et Balthus" (note 54), p. 33.

57 Balthus, *Portrait of Mrs. Paul Cooley*, 1937, oil on canvas, private collection; Balthus, *Still Life*, 1937, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

58 Balthus, *The Bernese Hat*, 1939, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

59 A copy of Soby's leaflet is in the object file, Registrar's Office, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

60 Wadsworth Atheneum, "Tonny, Tchelitchew, Bérard, Berman, Leonid," Hartford, 1931; Wadsworth Atheneum, "Newer Super-Realism," Hartford, November 1931. On these exhibi-

conceived of the shows and focused on the hanging and design.⁶¹ Soby eventually became an honorary curator of modern art at the Wadsworth in March 1934.⁶² The same year, he and Austin co-curated the first retrospective of Picasso's work in the United States, to which Soby lent Picasso's *Seated Woman*.⁶³ He also curated smaller shows, filled out with objects from his own collection. In 1934, for example, he presented an exhibition of photographs by Man Ray, the first by this artist in any American museum. Two years later, in November 1936, he staged an exhibition by the Swiss artist Louis Adolphe Soutter thanks to his acquaintance with Soutter's cousin, the architect Le Corbusier.⁶⁴ Most of the drawings exhibited were for sale to support the starving artist who was living in a mental asylum. In his introduction to the exhibition, Soby mentioned "the immense neuroticism of the twentieth century" in order to stress the "primitive" aspects of Soutter, who "live[s] out a tortured old age in a poorhouse."⁶⁵ The exhibition flopped and only the immediate circle around Soby showed any interest and bought drawings.⁶⁶ However, the show drew an interesting parallel with Alfred Barr's "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at MoMA that opened only one month later. In his landmark exhibition, Barr also included works by mentally ill patients.

In March 1937, Soby gave up his curatorship to become a trustee of the Wadsworth and a member of the powerful Acquisition Committee. He was the only one from Chick Austin's circle of friends to join the Board of Trustees. As Austin's ally and an advocate of modern art, he played an influential role beyond the closed doors of the boardroom. The mostly conservative trustees had viewed Austin's embrace of modern art with increasing alarm and by the time of Soby's arrival tensions between the director and board had become palpable. With his relaxed and genteel air Soby worked with Austin to smooth out frictions between conservative board members and progressive ideas, and soon a détente became possible.

tions, see Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. I, 4, pp. 3, 7.

61 Ibid., pp. 4, 3.

62 See *Wadsworth Atheneum Bulletin*, no. 1, January–March 1934, p. 26. Soby is listed as honorary curator of modern art and librarian.

63 The Picasso exhibition at the Wadsworth took place from February 6 to March 1, 1934, showing 137 paintings and works on paper. Soby lent three works in total.

64 Le Corbusier had visited Soby earlier in 1935 and deposited the drawings by his cousin. See Mardges Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America. Travels in the Land of the Timid* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2001), p. 89.

65 James Thrall Soby, "Introduction," in Wadsworth Atheneum, ed., *Louis Soutter*, exh. cat. (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1936), unpaginated.

66 Coincidentally, Le Corbusier wrote an article about Soutter for the surrealist magazine *Minotaure* the same year. See Le Corbusier, "Louis Soutter, l'inconnu de la soixante," *Minotaure*, no. 9 (1936), pp. 62–65.

For some years during the 1930s, the board begrudgingly tolerated Austin's acquisitions of modestly priced modern artists. But these purchases became ever more contentious during the second half of the 1930s. It was Austin's and Soby's goal to create a permanent allocation to modern art. They were eventually successful and several paintings and sculptures were purchased under this special allocation in the late 1930s.⁶⁷ Soby described committee meetings as "stormy polite" when he and Austin tried to persuade the "elder" committee members to buy modern art.⁶⁸ However, the practice of persuasion became obsolete in 1941, when each committee member was given \$2,000 annually at his discretion. Austin and Soby used their stipends exclusively for purchases of modern art. Looking back at this time, Soby highlighted the ongoing struggles within the committee, while also acknowledging the relative success of this practice.⁶⁹

Using his stipend, Soby bought Roberto Matta's *Prescience* (1939) and Tanguy's *The Five Strangers* (*Les Cinq étrangers*, 1941) in the following years.⁷⁰ His most spectacular acquisition, however, was Max Ernst's *Europe after the Rain II* (1940–42).⁷¹ Soby became friendly with Ernst and his wife Peggy Guggenheim when the couple arrived in New York in the summer of 1941, and by early 1942 he had an intimate grasp of the artist's work.⁷² As with the paintings by Matta and Tanguy, he returned to Pierre Matisse to find the Ernst. In his correspondence with Austin, Soby relayed his struggles and lamented Matisse's high asking price of \$2,200 for *Europe*: "I don't mind sticking myself out but spending museum cash seems all very official and final."⁷³ Soby knew the painting

67 See, for instance, the invoice from March 24, 1937, for the purchase of Giorgio de Chirico's *La Maladie du Général*, bought for \$500 from Pierre Matisse, Registrar's Office, object file, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut. See also Gaddis, *Magician of the Modern* (note 12), p. 318.

68 James Thrall Soby, "A. Everett Austin Jr. and Modern Art," in John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, ed., *A. Everett Austin, Jr. A Director's Taste and Achievement*, exh. cat. (Sarasota: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1958), p. 32.

69 Ibid.

70 Roberto Matta, *Prescience*, 1939, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut; Yves Tanguy, *The Five Strangers*, 1941, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

71 Max Ernst, *Europe after the Rain II*, 1940–42, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

72 Also in 1942, Soby was asked to become a member of the Art Advisory Committee for Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. See the press release to the Art of This Century Spring Salon, May 13, 1943, James Thrall Soby Papers, I. 10, MoMA Archives, New York. Art of This Century's exhibition "Masterworks of Early de Chirico" in late 1943 was based on Soby's book from 1941. Angelica Zander Rudenstine suggested that Soby planned and organized the show. See Angelica Zander Rudenstine, *Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice* (New York: Harry N. Abrams and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1985), p. 775. See also Susan Davidson, "Focusing an Instinct. The Collection of Peggy Guggenheim," in Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, eds., *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler. The Story of Art of This Century* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004), pp. 50–89, here p. 73.

73 Letter from Soby to Austin, March 27, 1942, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

well; he had seen it earlier in Matisse's "Artists in Exile" exhibition, for which he had contributed a foreword in the catalogue. Perhaps thanks to his long-standing relationship with Matisse and his recent involvement with the show, Soby was able to negotiate its price down to \$1,400 for the Wadsworth. In his correspondence with Austin, Soby compared *Europe* favorably with Ernst's *Napoleon in the Wilderness*, concurrently offered by the Valentine Gallery for the lesser price of \$800. *Europe after the Rain II* finally arrived at the Wadsworth in May 1942 and was shown with twenty other works as a variation on Matisse's "Artists in Exile" exhibition.⁷⁴ Given Soby's involvement with the former show and his close relationship with Matisse, it is possible that he played a role in arranging the Wadsworth show as well.

Despite these activities, Soby's focus already began shifting toward MoMA in the early 1940s.⁷⁵ In 1940, he was given an office at MoMA, where he worked as director of the Armed Service Program and served on the Acquisition Committee. He collaborated closely with Alfred Barr and was able to build a remarkable career in just a few short years. In 1941, he curated MoMA's monumental Dalí exhibition and also wrote an important assessment of the museum's School of Paris works. This assessment would become integral to Barr's strategy for redirecting the focus of MoMA's acquisition policy. Soby became a trustee of the museum in 1942 and in early 1943 was appointed assistant director. Similar to his relationship with Austin at the Wadsworth, he developed a rapport with Barr and remained loyal to him. In the 1940s he came to the rescue of the embattled Barr on several occasions by persuading trustees to support him.⁷⁶ At the same time, he continued to support Austin at the Wadsworth. When he heard the board had finally forced Austin out in June 1944, he immediately sent his resignation to its president Charles A. Goodwin. Soby elaborates in his letter to Goodwin that his "interest in the Atheneum has always centered on Mr. Austin's activities there. Our sympathies have been so close that I think it better both for the Atheneum and for us if we leave at the same time."⁷⁷

74 "Painters in Attendance," Wadsworth Atheneum, May 22–29, 1942.

75 Soby's extensive collection of Man Ray photographs may serve as a case in point. In March 1939, he mentioned in a letter to the artist his plan to give the collection to the Wadsworth. By January 1941, however, he had changed his mind, and described in another letter to the artist that MoMA was the more suitable place for the photographs. See letters from James Thrall Soby to Man Ray, March 7, 1939, and January 17, 1941; Man Ray letters and album, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. My thanks go to Martin Schieder for bringing the correspondence to my attention.

76 Roob, "James Thrall Soby" (note 7), p. 176.

77 Letter from Soby to Charles Goodwin, June 2, 1944, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

Soby and Dalí

Always eager to befriend artists, Soby's relationship with Salvador Dalí illustrates the way he supported artists through his network and his various roles in the art world. He became an important authority on the artist thanks to his close ties with Austin and the dealer Julien Levy.⁷⁸ During the 1930s, he avidly collected works by the Spanish artist, wrote about him, and supported Austin in purchasing his paintings for the Wadsworth. His enthusiasm for Dalí culminated in his 1941 Dalí exhibition at MoMA, after which he appears to have lost interest in his work.

Soby probably discovered Dalí's work during the Wadsworth's surrealism exhibition in November 1931. Eight works by the artist were included in this show and shortly afterwards the Wadsworth bought the museum's first work by him.⁷⁹ Thanks to the eager support of Julien Levy, the Wadsworth became one of the leading institutions to collect and exhibit works by Dalí in the following years. In 1933, Soby hosted a private screening of Dalí's film *L'Âge d'or* to a packed house in his West Hartford residence.⁸⁰ A short time later, in 1934, Levy lent several more of Dalí's paintings to the Wadsworth, and it was on this occasion that Dalí came to Hartford to lecture at the museum. While Austin bought for the Wadsworth the diminutive *Paranoiac-Astral Image* (1934) from the exhibition, Soby bought *The Ghost of Vermeer* (1934), his first acquisition by the artist.⁸¹ The painting must have held a deep significance for him as he developed a theory about Vermeer's influence on Dalí, which he later published in *After Picasso*.⁸² Indeed, Soby's chapter on the artist in *After Picasso* is the longest dedicated to any surrealist in the book. He lauded Dalí for having "a leading position in Surrealism" and described in detail the Wadsworth's newly acquired *Paranoiac-Astral Image* (fig. 56): "The beautiful grays and blues of the *Paranoiac-Astral Image*, the carefully measured scaling down of figures and use of perspective, the unbelievably fine painting of the boat and figures, make it a picture which even those who distrust the whole edifice of Surrealism can hardly ignore."⁸³

78 Eric Zafran, "I am not a madman,' Salvador Dalí in Hartford," in Dawn Ades, ed., *Dalí's Optical Illusions*, exh. cat. (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 38–61.

79 Salvador Dalí, *Solitude*, 1931, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

80 See *Hartford Daily Times*, December 4, 1933.

81 Salvador Dalí, *Paranoiac-Astral Image*, 1934, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut; Salvador Dalí, *The Ghost of Vermeer of Delft Which Can Be Used As a Table*, 1934, oil on canvas, Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida.

82 Soby, *After Picasso* (note 8), p. 108.

83 *Ibid.*, pp. 111–112.



56 Salvador Dalí, *Paranoiac-Astral Image*, 1934, oil on wood panel, 15.6 × 22 cm. Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum.

During the second half of the 1930s, Austin and Soby continued to borrow Dalí paintings from Levy for exhibitions at the Wadsworth, and Dalí returned to Hartford periodically. He usually stayed with Soby in Farmington, accompanied by his wife Gala as well as his friend Levy, and occasionally James Lord. With *Inventions of the Monsters* (1937), Soby bought a key work by Dalí around this time.⁸⁴ In 1939, the Wadsworth bought *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach* (1938), its grandest and most expensive work by the artist, which was purchased via the Acquisition Committee from Levy for \$1,750.⁸⁵ While all official receipts and bills for this transaction were addressed to Austin, we can assume that Soby played a pivotal role in persuading members of the committee to agree to this unusually costly acquisition. The painting was praised in the *Hartford Daily Times* immediately after its purchase. The writer favorably reviewed the new painting, but recalled “the hoots

84 Salvador Dalí, *Inventions of the Monsters*, 1937, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago. Soby sold the painting to the Art Institute in 1943 via his friend Kirk Askew at the Durlacher Gallery.

85 Salvador Dalí, *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach*, 1938, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

of derision” when Dalí was first shown in Hartford in 1931 and pointed out how he had gained acceptance since then.⁸⁶ Although Soby is left unmentioned in the article, one could add that he had a significant part in Dalí’s rising popularity in Hartford.

It should be noted that Soby was still Levy’s business partner when *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach* was acquired by the museum. However, it is not clear if Soby ever disclosed this to his fellow committee members. While we do not know whether he felt a conflict of interest, it is interesting that he disentangled his business relationship with Levy around the time he became a trustee at MoMA in 1943.⁸⁷

For his grand Dalí show at MoMA in late 1941, Soby reactivated his old network. Dalí trusted him entirely and lent him older works.⁸⁸ The Wadsworth, as well as Julien Levy and Edward James, lent several works. In addition, Soby included five works from his own collection.⁸⁹ He did not curate any other Dalí shows, nor did he buy any other work by him. In fact, during the mid-1940s, he swapped some of his paintings for other artists. In his autobiography, he distanced himself from Dalí’s works of the 1940s and 1950s and bemoaned the short duration of the artist’s creative span.⁹⁰

Coda

By the mid-1940s, Soby had established himself as one of the leading authorities on modern art in the country. Neither an impresario like Chick Austin nor an intellectual like Alfred Barr, Soby became an influential voice on his own terms. None of his singular achievements, however, as collector, critic, or museum curator, explain his authority in the mid-century art world. Soby’s collection was impressive, but how does it compare to Walter Arensberg’s or Peggy Guggenheim’s? Soby’s writings are important, yet some of his contemporaries mocked them.⁹¹ His roster of exhibitions at the Wadsworth and at MoMA is impressive, as well; however, his exhibitions were quickly outdone by the next generation of curators only a few years later.

86 Marian Murray, “Avery Acquires Salvador Dalí ‘Double Image,’” *Hartford Times*, May 13, 1939.

87 On Soby’s business relationship with Levy, see note 24.

88 Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. II, 12, pp. 5–6. James Thrall Soby, *Paintings, Drawings, Prints: Salvador Dalí* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941).

89 Soby anonymously lent Dalí’s paintings *The Basket of Bread* (1926), *The Ghost of Vermeer* (1934), *Inventions of the Monsters* (1937), *Debris of an Automobile Giving Birth to a Blind Horse Biting a Telephone* (1938), as well as his drawing *Nude* (1935).

90 Soby, *My Life in the Art World* (note 19), vol. II, 12, p. 6.

91 See “Books on Art. The Early Chirico – James Thrall Soby,” *Dyn. A Review of Art and Literature*, no. 1 (April–May 1942), p. 51.

What remains significant about Soby's career is his unique combination of roles and positions that intersected and mixed. Who else during the 1930s and 1940s acted as a collector, trustee, curator, critic, and art business owner? And who else was able to talk easily to New England dignitaries as well as artists like Salvador Dalí? Soby was part of a generation of upper-class men and women who rebelled against the old order of their parents. Modern art became a rallying force for this group, especially in the Hartford circle with Chick Austin, Julien Levy, and Henry-Russell Hitchcock. Soby and his friends saw themselves as "allies" battling against the provincial taste and conservative mores of the old guard.

These conflicts became perhaps more virulent in provincial cities such as Hartford where the local upper class consisted of only a few interconnected families. Soby's own establishment background provided him easy access to high-powered circles; collecting art and working at the Wadsworth offered him the ideal outlet for his aspirations. It was through modern art that he grew out of the shadows of his family and became a public figure in Hartford. Moreover, being a member of the Austin circle and a curator of modern art at the Wadsworth probably helped to open doors for him in New York.

Hartford's geographic proximity to New York and the close exchange between the cultural capital and the provincial satellite facilitated Soby's career. During the 1930s the Wadsworth and MoMA were rapidly developing institutions that engaged in fostering dialogue between their trustees, directors, and curators. New York's evolving commercial art scene, with its recently founded galleries that specialized in modern art, contributed to the cultural exchange between the cities as well. Lastly, both New York and Hartford benefited from the arrival of European artists before and during World War II, such as Tanguy, Ernst, and Masson. Many of these artists settled in New York and Connecticut, and invigorated the cultural life of America.

Most importantly, Soby's career would not have been possible without his brilliant eye and strong aesthetic judgment. Chick Austin had introduced him to the arts, but he matured quickly and had the confidence to act on his own. He had an eclectic taste with an emphasis on modern French art. Collecting French nineteenth-century artists may have been conventional around 1930, but Soby soon distinguished himself as a patron of the European avant-garde and particularly the surrealists. While he personally preferred figurative art, he supported the Wadsworth's initiatives to collect and showcase abstract art. Although he selected representative works for museums, he himself often veered toward unusual subjects. In 1945, art critic Clement Greenberg went so far as to accuse Soby of an "obsessional affinity with 'morbid' modern

art.”⁹² Although this characterization was intended as a denunciation of Soby’s taste, many of Soby’s most beloved works from de Chirico, Miró, and Balthus can indeed be best labeled as morbid. This distinctive taste and his sense for friendship and facilitating connections distinguish Soby. As an advocate for modern art, he contributed significantly to the *renaissance of the arts* in Hartford during the 1930s.

⁹² Clement Greenberg, *The Nation*, no. 160 (1945), p. 581.