

## Alexander Iolas, the Collectors John and Dominique de Menil, and the Promotion of Surrealism in the United States

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In 2014 the Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York organized the exhibition “Alexander the Great: The Iolas Gallery 1955–1987.” The show included works by artists whose careers were linked to the late art dealer and collector Alexander Iolas, especially those associated with surrealism, pop art, and Nouveau Réalisme. The introduction to the accompanying catalogue was penned by Bob Colacello, long-term editor of *Interview Magazine* during Andy Warhol’s lifetime, who recounted the first time he met Iolas through Adrianna Jackson, “a petite but feisty Milanese contessa” and wife of Brooks Jackson, Iolas’s business partner in New York:

“Adrianna warned me that Iolas was a cross between Machiavelli and Pagliaccio, half-diplomat, half-clown, all monster. ... Iolas was incredibly cunning, she would tell me, not to mention capricious, cynical, and more than a little crazy. Of course, in the perverse manner of Italian aristocracy, she saw these as positive qualities, to be admired and respected. ... I finally laid eyes on the legend himself at an opening at the New York gallery, and *Il Divino*—another term Adrianna used for Iolas—certainly lived up to her descriptions, especially visually. ... He seemed to float through the crowd blowing air kisses and waving his hands in little circles, like European royalty. When he found the person he was looking for, in a far corner playing the wallflower as usual, he threw his arms up in the air and exclaimed, ‘Oh, Andy, darling! How wonderful it is to see you!’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Colacello, “I Remember Iolas,” in Vincent Fremont and Adrian Dannatt, eds., *Alexander the Great: The Iolas Gallery 1955–1987*, exh. cat. (New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery, 2014), pp. 9–11, here p. 9.

This fragment is typical of stories about Alexander Iolas, which generally represent him as a character who was as insightful as he was theatrical and eccentric. Today Iolas is mainly known as a gallerist who promoted surrealism in the United States after the Second World War, who was René Magritte's exclusive dealer there and a close adviser to the collectors John and Dominique de Menil. He is remembered for giving Andy Warhol his first and last solo shows (1953 and 1987), and for promoting the French Nouveau Réalistes in the 1960s. The image of the eccentric character is not uncommon in descriptions of successful art dealers,<sup>2</sup> but it fits well with the cult of the individual that is prominent in the art market, which is where interest in Iolas has returned in recent years. This interest has a clear marketing agenda. For instance, the Paul Kasmin Gallery, which in 2014 took the initiative to celebrate the memory of Iolas, sells works by artists once connected to Iolas's galleries—William Copley, Max Ernst, Les Lallane, Jules Olitski, and Andy Warhol. In May 2017, Sotheby's in London held an auction titled "Alexander Iolas. Alexander the Great," offering over 150 items described as "a selection of paintings, sculpture, furniture, prints, and jewellery formerly in the collection of Alexander Iolas, the twentieth-century art dealer whose legacy is credited with defining the careers of the leading artists he championed."<sup>3</sup> Unearthing Iolas as an important, albeit forgotten, figure in a commercial context is, of course, a way of lending additional prestige to the works of those artists he promoted and the objects he owned.

In the case of Iolas, the postmortem representation of him as a persona, with little attention given to historical research into his actual business practices as an art dealer, is facilitated by the fact that there are no business records from his galleries that are accessible to researchers today. The primary sources we have are exhibition catalogues, invitations, interviews with Iolas and others who refer to him, as well as some materials that are scattered between artists' personal archives and have not yet been systematically studied. The bulk of these available primary sources date from the mid-1960s onward, the heyday of his career, even though Iolas started out in 1945 when he became director of the newly funded Hugo Gallery in New York. This absence of gallery records and other documentation from the first fifteen to twenty years of his business activities might be useful for keeping attention focused on his character,

2 Characteristically, the biographer of artist Joseph Cornell presents each of the dealers that Cornell worked with—Julien Levy, Alexander Iolas, and Eleanor Ward—as special characters. Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (New York: Other Press, 2015), pp. 72, 226.

3 Media release, Sotheby's, *Alexander Iolas. Alexander the Great*, unpaginated, [http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/BID/oxox941516/2C2F85F1-21CA-4760-B255-C5744AEBAADC/Iolas\\_Collection\\_PR\\_May17.pdf](http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/BID/oxox941516/2C2F85F1-21CA-4760-B255-C5744AEBAADC/Iolas_Collection_PR_May17.pdf), accessed May 11, 2018.

but it also has a downside in terms of his visibility in art history. On one hand, his friendship and professional involvement with surrealists of all generations is repeatedly mentioned in interviews with artists, professional partners, collectors, and other individuals who knew him (such as Brooks Jackson, William Copley, Arturo Schwarz, and Dominique de Menil).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in the American (art) press of the 1940s and 1950s there are dozens of announcements of shows of well-known and lesser-known surrealists at the Hugo Gallery and later at the Alexander Iolas Gallery.<sup>5</sup> Yet on the other hand, and despite the above evidence, in secondary art-historical and biographical literature about key surrealist artists such as Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, or Roberto Matta, with whom there is little doubt that Iolas had long friendships and professional collaborations, his name appears almost only on exhibition lists. The reason for this must be that we generally miss documentation of these relationships, such as correspondence, records of sales and transactions, and so on, which would help reconstruct historical details.<sup>6</sup>

The only major exception to this general lack of available archive materials and, subsequently, of visibility in secondary art-historical literature of Iolas's relationship to surrealism can be found in the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas. The collectors John and Dominique de Menil met Iolas when he first started out as an art dealer in 1946 and remained his clients for several decades. The Menil Archives include such documents as lists of artworks, records of money deposits, handwritten notes, and dozens of letters from the professional exchanges between Iolas and the collector couple. In addition to this, Iolas handed over to them his correspondence with René Magritte.

4 Interview with Brooks Jackson by Paul Cummings, March 22, 1976, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, available online, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-brooks-jackson-12916>, accessed May 23, 2018; interview with William Nelson Copley by Paul Cummings, January 30, 1968, Archives of American Art, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-william-nelson-copley-12646>, accessed May 23, 2018; Arturo Schwarz, *Interviews and Memoirs*, exh. cat. (New York: publisher unknown, 2014), p. 89; William Middleton, *Double Vision: The Unerring Eye of Art World Avatars Dominique and John de Menil* (New York: Knopf, 2018).

5 The exhibition announcements appeared in *ARTnews*, *Art Index*, and the *New York Times*, among other things. They are too numerous to list here.

6 The loss of a certain amount of records should be linked to: a scandal in the Greek yellow press during the last years of Iolas's life, in which he was, among other things, accused of illicit trade in antiquities (nothing was ever proved); and the rather obscure conditions under which items from his collection were claimed by various individuals around the time of his death and afterwards; as well as inheritance disputes and lootings of his villa. Due to the negative publicity of such events, Iolas's heirs have generally been reluctant to disclose materials that might be in their possession. See Eva Fotiadi, "The Myth of the Collector and His Collection. Art Works, Stories, Objects, Relations of Alexander Iolas," in Asimina Kaniari and Yorgos Bikos, eds., *Museology, Cultural Politics and Education*, Athens, 2014, English translation only available online, [http://www.academia.edu/19580767/Art\\_works\\_objects\\_stories\\_and\\_relations\\_of\\_Alexander\\_Iolas.\\_The\\_legendary\\_collector\\_and\\_the\\_recollection\\_of\\_the\\_legend.\\_English\\_translation\\_of\\_published\\_Greek\\_original\\_](http://www.academia.edu/19580767/Art_works_objects_stories_and_relations_of_Alexander_Iolas._The_legendary_collector_and_the_recollection_of_the_legend._English_translation_of_published_Greek_original_), accessed August 7, 2018.

Largely based on material held in the Menil Archives, Menil Collection publications, and William Middleton's biography of the de Menils, *Double Vision: The Unerring Eye of Art World Avatars Dominique and John de Menil* (2018), the aim of this essay is twofold.<sup>7</sup> First, I will discuss largely unpublished information about the business relations between the collector couple and the art dealer. The de Menils did not merely receive advice and buy artworks from Iolas, as is broadly known—they were also investors in the Hugo Gallery from very early on and provided backing to Iolas in various ways. Moreover, in the communication between the dealer and his client-patrons, which starts in 1946, we come across a different character than the one that dominates post-mid-1960s sources. The latter are more attuned to Iolas's public persona during the years of his professional success. Both directly and indirectly, one can draw information on the motives behind the patronage and the strategies the dealer used to maintain their mutually beneficial relationship. The previously unknown extent of the support given to Iolas's galleries by the de Menils also has further consequences with regard to Iolas's role in the promotion of surrealism in the United States. The second aim of this essay is therefore to demonstrate that any success Iolas achieved in promoting surrealism in the United States must have been intricately linked to his success in convincing John and Dominique de Menil to invest in the surrealist artists represented by his galleries—on one hand, because the de Menils helped him keep his head above water in the 1950s at a time when Iolas's insistence on surrealism weakened his gallery's position in a market that was primarily directed toward American expressionism and other new local avant-gardes; on the other, because the de Menils had the means and the willingness to promote artists in American institutions in ways that exceeded Iolas's range of action.

The two following sections introduce biographical information about Alexander Iolas and his relationship with John and Dominique de Menil. This information is selectively focused on their involvement with surrealism, without elaborating on other important chapters of their involvement with art. There is also little reference made here to René Magritte's close connection to Iolas and the de Menils as this topic is covered elsewhere in this publication. The discussion then turns to details on the relationship between the adviser-dealer and his client-patrons. Attention will be drawn initially to content, namely the largely unpublished documentation in the Menil Archives, and subsequently

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7 The Menil Archives are located in the Menil Collection, and are publicly accessible. The biography of Dominique and John de Menil is also based on the Menil Family Papers, which have restricted access. Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4). The Menil Archives, Houston, Texas (hereafter cited as Menil Archives).

to the efforts undertaken by the de Menils to advance the reputation of surrealist artists in the United States, which, in turn, had a positive impact on Iolas's parallel endeavors.

### Alexander “the Great” and his galleries

Iolas was born to a Greek family of merchants based in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1907. His first career was as a ballet dancer, initially in Germany and later in France and the United States. In Paris he met many visual artists and occasionally posed as a model in exchange for works. He was especially fascinated by the surrealists. According to Brooks Jackson, while Iolas was still a dancer in New York in 1939, he used to live in the same building as de Chirico, Leonor Fini, and Eugene Berman, whose works he later sold.<sup>8</sup> In 1942 he formed a dancing duo with the young Theodora Roosevelt, granddaughter of President Roosevelt. Their eight-month tour of Latin America attracted the attention of the American press. Iolas also acted as choreographer for the duo, and Salvador Dalí designed the costumes for one of his pieces.<sup>9</sup> After returning to New York, Iolas was briefly appointed artistic director of the Grand Ballet of the Marquis de Cuevas, but soon fell out with the Marquis. He decided to abandon the dance world altogether and turned professionally to art.

In 1945 he became the director of the new Hugo Gallery in New York, established by Maria Ruspoli Hugo with the support of Robert de Rothschild and Elizabeth Arden. Maria Hugo, formerly the Duchesse de Gramont, was an Italian aristocrat living in New York.<sup>10</sup> Having exhausted her fortune, she was working at the time for Elizabeth Arden. Her second husband had been François-Victor Hugo, great-grandson of the French writer. Robert de Rothschild, a French aristocrat also living in New York during the Second World War, was befriended by Maria Hugo. They had both been acquainted with the de Menils before the war, when they all lived in Europe. As for Elizabeth Arden's contribution to the gallery, Iolas told David Sylvester that Arden helped secure the lease by signing as a guarantor.<sup>11</sup>

8 Brooks Jackson, “Interview by Adrian Dannatt,” exh. cat. (note 1), p. 75.

9 See, for example, “Theodora Roosevelt plans dancing debut,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1942, p. 28; “Dancer Roosevelt home from Brazil,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1943, p. 16.

10 For information on the founders of the Hugo Gallery, see Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), pp. 290, 305–306.

11 David Sylvester, ed., *René Magritte Catalogue Raisonné*, 5 vol., vol. 2 (London: Philip Wilson, 1992), p. 119.

The Hugo Gallery opened with an impressive party for its inaugural show, “The Fantastic in Art,” in November 1945, which instantly made news.<sup>12</sup> It was a group exhibition organized by the editors of the surrealist magazine *View*. Participating artists included Alexander Calder, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Leonor Fini, Fernand Léger, Pavel Tchelitchew (who had also designed the gallery’s interior), Yves Tanguy, Dorothea Tanning, Ossip Zadkine, and others. Significant later surrealist shows include “The Poetic Theater” (December 1945), which featured Dalí, Joseph Cornell, Tchelitchew, and others; the “Romantic Museum at the Hugo Gallery: Portraits of Women, Constructions and Arrangements by Joseph Cornell” (December 1946), and the group exhibition “Bloodflames” (February 1947). “Bloodflames” was organized by the art critic Nicolas Calas, who also edited the catalogue. The display was designed by Frederick Kiesler.<sup>13</sup> It seems that in these early shows the gallery interior was treated with special care to capture attention, as documented in contemporary sources such as Dominique de Menil’s correspondence with her husband, artist Joseph Cornell’s personal diary, and press accounts.<sup>14</sup> Several solo shows featured European and American surrealists of different generations, including Jean Cocteau, Max Ernst, René Magritte, Leonor Fini, as well as Roberto Matta and Joseph Cornell. Group shows also displayed works by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and others. When William Copley planned to open his own gallery in Los Angeles, Duchamp introduced him to Iolas; the inaugural show at the Copley Galleries in 1948 was a Magritte show, with most of the works shown sent by the Hugo Gallery.<sup>15</sup>

In November 1951 Iolas opened his first eponymous gallery in New York, at 46 East Fifty-Seventh Street. The inaugural show was a solo exhibition of work by Max Ernst in honor of the artist’s sixtieth bir-

12 “‘Fantastic in Modern Art’ Set as First Exhibition. Other Displays Being Planned,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1945; Edward Alden Jewell, “Fantastic in Art at Hugo Gallery. New Exhibition Hall Displays Variety of Unusual Works. Modernists Represented,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1945, p. 13.

13 For an in-depth analysis of “Bloodflames,” see Irini Marinaki, *Nicolas Calas. Critic and Curator*, unpub. PhD diss., London Consortium, Birkbeck College, University of London, January 2011.

14 For example, in the first show, “The Fantastic in Art,” visitors were impressed by the use of flowers and purple curtains as decor. Dominique de Menil described in some detail the function of spotlights on individual paintings and the color of the walls. Kiesler created a total installation that extended to the walls and ceiling. These elements were in tune both with the theatricality of surrealist shows and the gallery display methods of the day (e.g., hanging paintings in front of curtains). On installation shots of the Alexander Iolas Gallery in the 1960s, a white-cube logic is often prominent. Letter from Dominique de Menil to John de Menil, February 18, 1946, Menil Archives, quoted extensively in Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), pp. 306–307. See also Solomon, *Utopia Parkway* (note 2); and Jewell, “Fantastic in Art at Hugo Gallery” (note 12).

15 Toby Kamps, “William N. Copley: The world according to CPLY,” in Germano Celant, ed., *William N. Copley*, exh. cat. (Milan: Fondazione Prada with the Menil Collection, 2016), pp. 26–39, here p. 28. The Copley Galleries opened in 1948; the paintings for the Magritte show had been sent by the Hugo Gallery.

thday.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, despite the fact that the show celebrated Ernst's birthday and the opening of Iolas's new gallery, and also that throughout his career Iolas sold dozens of works by Ernst (the de Menils alone bought forty-two items), the show is often omitted in solo exhibition listings of the artist.<sup>17</sup> In secondary literature the gallery usually appears to have started its operation in 1954 or 1955, with no reference to the 1951 inaugural show. Based on contemporaneous exhibition announcements in the press, one concludes that shows were held regularly at the Hugo Gallery at least until the summer of 1954, while the very last ones took place in 1956. As for the Alexander Iolas Gallery, there is only very sporadic evidence of its existence before 1955. For instance, a solo show by Dorothea Tanning was held from January 14 to 31, 1953, and Iolas sometimes used writing paper with the gallery logo and postal address in his correspondence with John de Menil.<sup>18</sup> One is led to the possible conclusion that Iolas tried to open his own gallery in 1951, but it took a number of years before he could truly move on from the Hugo Gallery and operate a gallery in his own name.

Today, there is an appreciation for Iolas's professional endeavors to support surrealists and non-American artists in New York after the war. Yet this was not always the case—Iolas confessed in a letter to the de Menils in 1962 that during the 1950s he had “just enough to make ends meet” and that his “business was tumbling, running on just one leg only, having missed the jackpot with the boom of the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>19</sup> He attributed his failure to the rise of abstract expressionism

16 The inaugural show of the Alexander Iolas Gallery was mentioned in the press. See “Charities to Gain By Two Art Shows,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1951, p. 29; and “Art to Be Shown in Many Mediums,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1951. It should be noted that both articles simply announced the opening of the new gallery with Ernst's solo show reported among other exhibition openings. When the Hugo Gallery opened in 1945, the *New York Times* immediately published a review of its first exhibition.

17 In the listing of Max Ernst's group shows and one-man shows in the catalogue of Ernst's complete oeuvre, there is no reference made either to Ernst's participation in the Hugo Gallery's 1945 inaugural group show, “The Fantastic in Art,” or the Alexander Iolas Gallery's 1951 inaugural solo show of Ernst's work. There are references to an earlier solo show at the Hugo Gallery (November 7–11, 1950) and to Ernst's 1952 exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Association in Houston, Texas, organized by Dominique de Menil in collaboration with Iolas (January 13–February 3, 1952). Werner Spies, Siegrid and Günter Metken, eds., *Max Ernst Oeuvre-Katalog*, 7 vol., vol. 5: 1939–1953 (Houston: Menil Foundation; Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1987), pp. 375, 373. For works sold by Iolas, see Werner Spies, Siegrid and Günter Metken, eds., *Max Ernst Oeuvre Katalog*, 7 vol., vol. 5, 6, and 7 (Houston: Menil Foundation; Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1987, 1998, and 2005, respectively). For the specific number of works sold to the de Menils, see Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 111.

18 On Dorothea Tanning's show, see *Dorothea Tanning Life and Work*, <https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/867>, accessed May 11, 2018. For writing paper with the logo “Alexander Iolas Gallery, 46 East Fifty-Seventh Street,” see letter from Alexander Iolas to John de Menil, June 23, 1952; letter from Iolas to John de Menil, April 5, 1953, Alexander Iolas Papers, 1946–1987, Menil Archives.

19 Letter from Alexander Iolas to John and Dominique de Menil, November 5, 1962, Alexander Iolas Papers 1946–1987, Menil Archives.

and a rather nationalistic spirit in the American art market that marginalized non-American artists.<sup>20</sup> In the early 1960s new collaborations with young French artists of the Nouveau Réalisme movement, such as Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, Martial Raysse, Yves Klein, and others, proved a clever professional move. From 1963 onward Iolas expanded with branches in Paris, Geneva, Milan, and collaborations with galleries in Rome (Iolas-Galatea), Athens (Iolas-Zoumboulakis), and Madrid (Iolas-Velasco). He worked with artists associated with Arte Povera, like Jannis Kounellis and Pino Pascali. The 1960s and 1970s were his heyday.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the central position of surrealists was not forsaken. Keeping a promise he had made to Max Ernst, Iolas closed all the branches of his gallery the day Ernst died in 1976. Only the New York gallery continued operating until Iolas's death in 1987. It was renamed after his business partner to become the Iolas-Jackson Gallery.

### The de Menils' first contact with Iolas and their initiation to surrealism

Dominique (1908–1997) and John de Menil (1904–1973) moved from France to Houston, Texas, around 1940.<sup>22</sup> John was working for the company owned by Dominique's family, Schlumberger Limited, which specialized in gas and oil extraction technologies and had moved its headquarters to Houston due to World War II. The couple also bought an apartment in New York, where they became acquainted with other Europeans who had emigrated. Among them was Maria Hugo, who initially introduced Iolas to Dominique during the latter's first visits to the Hugo Gallery in February 1946, around three months after the gallery's inaugural show. In a letter to her husband, Dominique spoke of the Hugo Gallery as "Maria's gallery," as she regarded it as a project undertaken by her friend.<sup>23</sup> She comes across as impressed by Maria Hugo's initiative "with only about \$200 in her pocket," by the gallery itself (the decor, the exhibitions), and by her friend's associate, "a Greek, a certain Iolas." In the letter, Dominique informs her husband that she

20 Ibid., and "Fahrelnissa Zeid: City-by-city," <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/fahrelnissa-zeid-22764/quick-read/city-by-city>, accessed May 11, 2018.

21 Characteristically, Middleton mentions a show by Jean Tinguely at the Alexander Iolas Gallery in Paris in December 1964 attended by the French Prime Minister Georges Pompidou: "[C]rowds of onlookers caused traffic jams on the Boulevard St. Germain." John de Menil bought the entire show for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 410.

22 All biographical information about the de Menils comes from Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), unless otherwise indicated.

23 Dominique to John de Menil, March 27, 1946, Menil Archives, quoted in Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 306.

gave Hugo \$1,000, explaining, “Maria had not asked but I thought it was the right thing to do. And that it was something you would have done.”<sup>24</sup>

The couple already had an amateur interest in art, yet they were not fond of surrealism. Back in 1934 they had commissioned a portrait of Dominique from Max Ernst after an acquaintance had introduced them to the artist.<sup>25</sup> They were initially unimpressed by the portrait, coming to an appreciation of it only some time later after discovering it wrapped up on top of a cupboard when they returned to Paris after the war. So, when Iolas first tried to initiate them to surrealism (around 1947–48), they were rather mistrustful. Dominique described surrealism as a very strange world that she felt distant from.<sup>26</sup> They stated that they had bought their first surrealist painting, Giorgio de Chirico’s *Hector and Andromache* (*Hector et Andromaque*, 1918), without being very enthusiastic about it, but trusting Iolas’s judgment.<sup>27</sup> In 1949 Iolas offered them the paintings *Design in Nature* (1917) by Max Ernst and *The Alphabet of Revelations* (*L’alphabet des révélations*, 1929) by Magritte as gifts, and eventually managed to convince them of the importance of surrealism.<sup>28</sup> During the following decades, the de Menils amassed more than one hundred works by Ernst and more than fifty by Magritte, alongside works by other artists including, for instance, Wols and Louis Fernandez, artists represented by Iolas who were virtually unknown in the United States.

From the beginning, the de Menils acquired a lot more than surrealist works from Iolas. For example, a year after the aforementioned gifts, they bought their first painting by Picasso, *Female Nude* (*Femme nue*, 1910), and one by Henri Matisse, *Brook with Aloes* (*Le ruisseau aux aloès*, 1907), and, around that time, works by Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Jean Hugo, and Christian (“Bébé”) Bérard, among others.<sup>29</sup> Today there are around 344 items in the Menil Collection that were either bought from, or offered as gifts (some 56 items) by Iolas.<sup>30</sup> They include

24 Ibid. It is worth mentioning that such a gesture from Dominique of offering money in the context of these friendships was not unique, nor limited to art-related donations. Middleton mentions, for instance, another letter from Dominique to her husband from March the same year in which she refers to helping a mutual American friend of hers and Maria Hugo’s who was also working for Elizabeth Arden. Dominique offered the friend \$250 to help buy clothes, because her income was limiting her.

25 Kristina Van Dyke, “Losing One’s Head: John and Dominique de Menil as Collectors,” in Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi, eds., *Art and Activism. Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 120.

26 Pamela G. Smart, “Aesthetics as a Vocation,” in Helfenstein and Schipsi, *Art and Activism* (note 25), p. 35; Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 314.

27 Smart, “Aesthetics as a Vocation” (note 26), p. 35.

28 Van Dyke, “Losing One’s Head” (note 25), p. 122.

29 Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 300; for Picasso and Matisse’s works, see illustrations in Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), unpaginated.

30 The number is based on a list held in the Menil Archives.

twentieth century art, 132 examples of which are considered as surrealist works, by artists such as Viktor Brauner, Giorgio de Chirico, William Copley, Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, Louis Fernandez, René Magritte, Roberto Matta, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, and Dorothea Tanning; fifty-six antiquities (Greek, Roman, or other); and a few objects from non-Western cultures. The de Menils' biographer Middleton indicates that over a period of forty years, the de Menils acquired over 450 works of art from Iolas.<sup>31</sup>

It is nevertheless important to note that the de Menils had more than one adviser, that they chose not to restrict themselves to only one dealer, and that their interest in art extended beyond, and often contrasted with, the position taken by Iolas and the artists he represented (such as their interest in abstract expressionism). Moreover, as one reads the couple's biography in detail, it becomes clear that they were very keen to develop personal friendships with artists (Max Ernst, for example) and museum curators and directors. They were highly active in sponsoring and organizing exhibitions, as well as university art and art history programs. John served on several museum boards and committees.<sup>32</sup> One can assume that they did not always need an art dealer to keep up with a particular artist's work. At the same time, their professional relations with Iolas proved extremely prolific, long-lasting, and of pivotal importance, especially concerning their surrealist collection.

### The dealer/adviser-client/patron relationship: Records of a mutually beneficial practice

Research into the art market has shown that art dealers very often cannot sustain their businesses from profit alone, particularly at the beginning of their careers and when they attempt to carve a niche for themselves, something that requires investment in exhibitions, publications, marketing, and so on.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore common for dealers to seek an income outside the sale of artworks, either from other business ventures, family inheritance, or from financial "backers" such as collectors, who often have a stake in the business.<sup>34</sup> It is known, for example, that Julien Levy, the first gallerist to be associated with surrealism in New York from 1931, initially located his gallery in a rent-free building

31 Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 312.

32 Ibid., pp. 379, 398.

33 See, for example, Olaf Velthuis, "Art Dealers," in Ruth Towse, ed., *Handbook of Cultural Economics* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011), p. 28; and Deirdre Robson, *Prestige, Profit, Pleasure: The Market for Modern Art in New York in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Garland, 1995), p. 108.

34 Robson, *Prestige, Profit, Pleasure* (note 33), p. 108.

owned by his father, and made his first purchases in Paris with funds he had inherited.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, in 1937, the art collector and museum curator James Thrall Soby, who also had an interest in surrealism and neo-Romanticism, became a major stockholder in Levy's business, enabling the gallerist to move to larger premises.

When Maria Hugo and Alexander Iolas started the Hugo Gallery in 1945, their financial capital was limited. Probably their most significant capital was their broad social circle of artists, intellectuals, and wealthy friends, such as the de Menils. It is often stated that Dominique helped Iolas financially; however, details of the collector's financial contribution to the gallery were rarely mentioned publicly, aside from the purchase of works. Interestingly, people who became close to Iolas in the later, commercially more successful years, openly questioned whether the de Menil's financial backing was actually true.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, as we learn from documents in the Menil Archives and the Menil Family Papers, this claim is more than true: the collector couple clearly stepped in as "backers" of the Hugo Gallery very early on. The earliest documentation to support this is a balance sheet, handwritten by John de Menil, which includes a note about ten shares of the Hugo Gallery, dated September 1945, appearing next to the amount of \$1,000. Further down, there is another note about five shares, dated March 1946, next to the amount of \$500.<sup>37</sup> It is, of course, curious that September 1945 was just two months before November 1945, when the gallery's inaugural show opened, and five months before the aforementioned letter in which Dominique tells her husband of her first visit to the gallery and her donation of \$1,000. The documents in the Menil Archives often don't help us to figure out the correct dates or amounts of money involved; what we can ascertain with certainty is that Dominique de Menil became a stockholder of the gallery very early on as in April 1947 she is recorded as owning 30 shares, more than any other stockholder.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, André Mourgues: "They always say that Dominique de Menil had financed the gallery; not at all, though she did buy a great deal, she would always come a day or so before any exhibition opened." André Mourgues, "Interview by Adrian Dannatt," *Alexander the Great* (note 1), pp. 65–70, here p. 69. Other collectors Iolas developed relations with were Agnelli and Karpidas. He also found a financial backer in the husband of his sister, Niki Stifel.

<sup>37</sup> Balance in the Books, 1945–1951: John de Menil's handwritten balance sheet, September 1945–November 1946, Alexander Iolas Papers, 1946–1987, Menil Archives.

<sup>38</sup> "Hugo Gallery Incorporation Records," 1947–1952: typed list of Hugo Gallery stockholders, April 30, 1947, Alexander Iolas Papers, 1946–1987, Menil Archives. These close business relations between the dealer and the collectors went unmentioned even by curators of the Menil Collection in publications about the beginnings of the collection in the 1940s, probably because the relevant files were sent from the Menil Archives to the de Menil Family Papers in August 2004 and were later transferred back to the Menil Archives in September 2013. For example, in the volume *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* published by the Menil Col-

Various letters show that the de Menils also gave loans to Iolas. In one letter dated October 4, 1947, John de Menil writes that he could continue financing the venture indefinitely, but if the gallery failed to begin selling works, it meant that something was awry with the business.<sup>39</sup> In another letter, from June 15, 1952, de Menil suggests that Iolas buy back four shares that he had sold to someone from Romania, as this person was not actively supporting the gallery.<sup>40</sup> And, if the business went well, de Menil anticipated making a profit from the share value. These letters indicate that at the time Iolas was advising the de Menils about art, John was, in a friendly but straightforward manner, directing Iolas on how to run his business.

In a handwritten letter from August 6, 1949, probably written by Iolas just before he left on a trip to Europe, he states that if anything should happen to him during his travels, everything he owned in his business would pass to Dominique de Menil. It is possible that Iolas wrote this in consideration of his debts to the de Menils, but it is also likely that the de Menils financed Iolas's trips overseas to buy new paintings. We know for certain about one such trip that is described in the collectors' biography.<sup>41</sup> As the story goes, immediately after the war, during a friendly dinner at Maria Hugo's apartment in New York, the de Menils suggested to Iolas that he travel to Paris in search of new work. They felt that there was no longer enough good new work available in New York as since the end of the war European artists who had migrated to the United States had begun to return home to Europe. The de Menils thus financed Iolas's first trip to Paris as an art dealer, and Robert de Rothschild arranged for him to stay at his family home.<sup>42</sup>

In later correspondence we learn that the de Menils provided Iolas with financial assistance to open his own gallery in the early 1950s. They also sponsored museum acquisitions from the Iolas galleries and probably helped him open his European branches in the early 1960s.<sup>43</sup> During these years Iolas continued to inform the de Menils of the works

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lection in 2010, in the passages referring to Iolas's relationship to the de Menils in the 1940s and 1950s, the authors did not use the aforementioned files. Only the couple's biographer, William Middleton, seems to have studied these files, and offers some context to previously unknown aspects of the de Menils' early involvement with the Hugo Gallery.

39 See, for example, *Balance in the Books, 1945–1951*, Menil Archives; letter from John de Menil to Alexander Iolas, with bank receipt, October 4, 1947, Alexander Iolas Papers, 1946–1987, Menil Archives.

40 Letter from de Menil to Iolas, June 15, 1952, Alexander Iolas Papers, 1946–1987, Menil Archives.

41 Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 313.

42 Ibid.

43 On the financial support given to open new galleries, see letter from Alexander Iolas to John and Dominique de Menil, November 5, 1962, Alexander Iolas Papers 1946–1987, Menil Archives. On the sponsoring of museum acquisitions, see *A Modern Patronage: de Menil Gifts to American and European Museums*, Marcia Brennan et al., eds., exh. cat. (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2007).

he sold, payments he received or expected, and expressed his gratitude, now and then reminding them of how broke he was.

In summary, there are many ways in which the de Menils were not simply collectors buying art from Iolas, but were also investors in his business, with Iolas regularly providing updates on the performance of his gallery. The details of this financial support have only rarely been mentioned in public, however, evidence of this can now be found in the resources of the public-access archives of the Menil Collection.

The question arises as to why the de Menils would choose to become so deeply involved with the Hugo Gallery. From a pragmatic perspective, it clearly benefitted their art collection. As shareholders, they were able to purchase works from Iolas's galleries on favorable terms. For instance, Dominique de Menil explained in an interview that she and her husband were compensated for financing Iolas's trip to Europe in the aftermath of the war: "We advanced some money to Iolas so he could buy things, and then when he came back, we reimbursed ourselves by keeping this and that. And his profit was for the gallery."<sup>44</sup> In his letters, John de Menil frequently instructed Iolas to facilitate payments that were advantageous to the couple. From de Menil's casual and unpretentious manner, it appears that this was a matter of routine in their exchanges. We can assume that Iolas gave the de Menils artworks to repay loans, a practice that could at least partly explain his many gifts to the Menil Collection. Furthermore, Iolas also made other purchases on their behalf, such as acquisitions of antique furniture and antiquities, both of which he also purchased for himself. As the de Menils became avid collectors with broad areas of interest, Iolas was shrewd enough to purchase works that he himself thought little of, but whose potential value he recognized. Mondrian was one such case: although Iolas considered Mondrian's work boring, he arranged the purchase of the de Menils' first Mondrian painting (*Composition with Yellow, Blue, and Blue-White*, 1922).<sup>45</sup>

Another motivation was that Dominique trusted the dealer's judgment of quality, and believed that Iolas gave them priority on what he considered the best works. Middleton quotes her as saying, "Iolas was everywhere and nowhere. But he was very interested to build our collection. It was a point of pride that ours would be a great one, so he always kept paintings for us, and since he had a very good eye, they were the best. For instance, we bought one Magritte every year from

<sup>44</sup> Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 313.

<sup>45</sup> For Iolas's opinion of Mondrian's work, see Nikos Stathoulis, *Alexander Iolas* (Athens: A. A. Livani, 1994); on Mondrian's purchase, see Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), pp. 312–313.

him, the one Iolas considered the most outstanding.”<sup>46</sup> One can assume that since Dominique valued Iolas’s opinion, she was also flattered by the priority he gave to her collection in the years when he was doing well. Such models of favoring selected buyers are commonplace in the gallery world, as shown by the collectors’ waiting lists that Mary Boone put together for new works by popular artists in the early 1980s. But the thing that earned his client-patron’s trust most of all was that he made her feel that her collection was for him a matter of personal interest. As Brooks Jackson stated in an interview, “He [Iolas] could charm anyone and especially Dominique de Menil, as they used to say, he could talk the hind off a wooden billy goat.”<sup>47</sup>

The above quote brings us to the issue of Iolas’s character, which was introduced at the beginning of this text as the main focus of his postmortem representations. It is known, for example, that Iolas frequently made flamboyant gestures of generosity, such as gifts, to build up personal relations, to convince, fascinate, and flatter.<sup>48</sup> In the case of the Magritte and Ernst paintings he gave to the de Menils in 1949, his aim was to mobilize their interest in these artists. There are other stories of the dealer pulling out a Max Ernst painting from his bag at a restaurant, or a Cartier watch from a drawer in his bedroom, to offer them as presents when the recipients least expected them.<sup>49</sup> However, with the de Menils he was well aware of when and how it was necessary to put aside his eccentric behavior. For instance, in a long letter in which he asks them to back his gallery expansion plans, he comes across as extremely serious, self-reflexive, taking stock of his failures and explaining his financial situation in some detail, sounding very different from the vain and pompous character we know from his public persona.

### Beyond selling and collecting: The promotion of surrealism in the United States after World War II

Nowhere was the long alliance between Iolas and the de Menils more evident than in their efforts to bring recognition to the importance of European, and especially surrealist, art in the United States after the war.<sup>50</sup> The promotion of surrealist artists in the American market after the mid-1940s is remembered today as one of Iolas’s key achievements.

46 Dominique de Menil, biographical interview by Winkler and Mancusi-Ungaro, quoted in Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 312.

47 Dannatt, *Alexander the Great* (note 1), pp. 75–76, here p. 76.

48 Fotiadi, “The Myth of the Collector” (note 6).

49 Dannatt, *Alexander the Great* (note 1), pp. 65, 91.

50 For John de Menil’s commitment to this goal, see, for example, Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 300.

I would argue that his success in persuading the de Menils about the value of surrealism played a decisive role in that project.

The collector couple trusted Iolas and bought surrealist works during the 1950s when neither seemed to be a safe bet in the New York art market, largely because institutions and the art market at the time showed a preference for American art, such as abstract expressionism and pop art. Iolas showed a strong commitment to surrealism, and this reputation was more harmful than advantageous for his gallery. However, his insistence with the de Menils specifically regarding surrealism proved insightful, as they were not the kind of collectors who would have relied on museum curators, art critics, or dealers to establish the reputation of artists they appreciated and invested in. Rather, they had the financial means and the willingness to promote artists themselves within the cultural and educational institutions of the United States in ways that went far beyond the capacities and practices of Iolas as an art dealer. During the 1950s, the most difficult decade for both Iolas and the European surrealists in the local market, the de Menils sponsored the Museum of Modern Art in New York for the acquisition from the Hugo Gallery of two works by René Magritte, *The Empire of Light II* (*L'Empire des lumières II*, 1950) and *Memory of a Voyage* (*Souvenir de voyage*, 1955); one by Max Ernst, *The King Playing with the Queen*, 1944, cast in 1955; and one by Matta, *The Spherical Roof Around Our Tribe* (a.k.a. *Revolvers*, 1952).<sup>51</sup> During the same period, they frequently lent works, by Magritte and Brauner, for example, to exhibitions in public institutions around the country, and sponsored and organized their own shows, such as a Max Ernst solo exhibition in 1952 at the Contemporary Arts Association in Houston. Furthermore, they donated works to universities, such as the University of St. Thomas and Rice University in Houston. Particularly for these two universities, the de Menils also funded the construction of new buildings, including those housing the departments of art and art history, and the Art Institute at St. Thomas; they promoted the establishment of art history courses and Dominique taught at the University of St. Thomas. From 1969 they started financing the long-term research and writing of the catalogues raisonnés of the works of Max Ernst and René Magritte.

With such projects the de Menils contributed to the appreciation of surrealist artists (among others) in the United States, and of other artists represented by Iolas, in ways that were not dependent upon the art dealer. By means of exhibitions, providing input to art history cur-

<sup>51</sup> See Brennan et al., *A Modern Patronage* (note 43); Middleton, *Double Vision* (note 4), p. 313; and [https://www.moma.org/collection/works?locale=en&utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=de+Menil&classifications=any&date\\_begin=Pre-1850&date\\_end=2018&with\\_images=1](https://www.moma.org/collection/works?locale=en&utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=de+Menil&classifications=any&date_begin=Pre-1850&date_end=2018&with_images=1), accessed August 7, 2018.

ricula, and funding artists' catalogues they brought art in contact with a much wider audience than that of New York galleries and museums, and also intervened in the writing and dissemination of art history. In addition, not only did the de Menils focus on cost-intensive projects that extended the visibility of their patronage, they also maintained meticulous records and archives. As mentioned earlier, Iolas had the perspicacity to bequeath all of his correspondence with Magritte to them, thereby ensuring that these letters did not disappear along with the rest of his gallery records. Thanks to their archiving of their communications with Iolas—as they did with other figures involved in their art-related activities—Iolas's name features in studies on Magritte and other publications relating to the de Menils' surrealist collection, which is not the case for the bulk of secondary literature on the major surrealist artists.

As we can see, the Menil Archives and the recently published biography of the couple (largely based on other, as yet inaccessible, archive materials) reveal previously unknown details about the extent of the de Menils' patronage of the Hugo Gallery and the Alexander Iolas Gallery. It is evident that they supported Iolas almost from the beginning of his dealership (1946) and throughout the toughest period for his business in the 1950s. It can be argued that the dealer's success in promoting surrealism in the United States art market should be seen within the context of the collectors' backing of his gallery, as well as their own efforts to support the movement. Of course, to be able to draw final conclusions regarding the degree of the art dealer's dependence on these patrons, we need to gather further information about his activities during the 1940s and 1950s—a difficult task due to the disappearance of his gallery records. In any case, the financial support provided to Iolas by the de Menils is characterized by patterns of patronage (such as investment in stocks and assistance for relocating gallery premises) that were not unknown in the art market of the time. Nor is it unusual that up until today, despite the commitment of the collectors (and, later, the Menil Collection curators) to archiving and publishing, this aspect of their patronage—the sponsoring of an art dealer—is seldom brought to the attention of outside audiences.