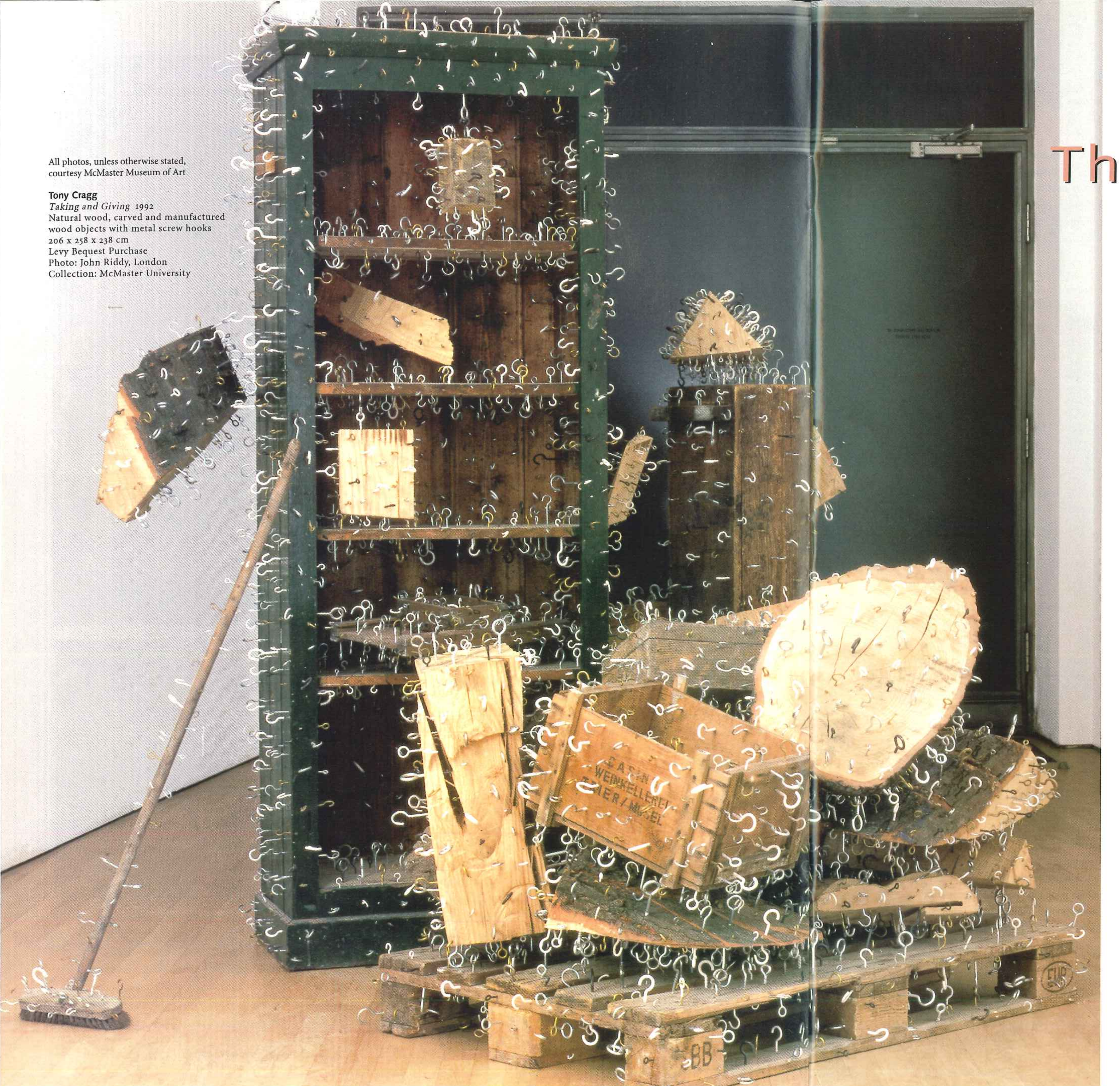


All photos, unless otherwise stated,
courtesy McMaster Museum of Art

Tony Cragg
Taking and Giving 1992
Natural wood, carved and manufactured wood objects with metal screw hooks
206 x 258 x 238 cm
Levy Bequest Purchase
Photo: John Riddy, London
Collection: McMaster University

The Legacy

When he died, Hamilton's Herman Levy left McMaster Museum of Art $15.25 million. Spend it in five years, he said. Sarah Hampson considers a life lived and a collection left behind.

Herman Herzog Levy, 1964, Hellenic tour, Levy Fonds, McMaster Museum of Art

On display on the first-floor of the McMaster Museum of Art is a sculpture by contemporary British artist Tony Cragg. Among other things, it is composed of crates, boxes, a broom, a standing bookshelf—humble objects that have been stacked together, then adorned with hundreds of metal screw hooks. The effect is a shimmering aura, a visual hum that charges the space and snags our capricious attention. I like this sculpture. I have stopped to look at it several times now, standing in the opposite corner, examining it from a distance.

The Cragg sculpture is entitled *Taking and Giving* and it is part of *The Levy Legacy* exhibition, which celebrates the life and generosity of Herman Herzog Levy, O.B.E., a Hamilton philanthropist, businessman and art collector who bequeathed $15.25 million to McMaster University, one of the largest gifts of its kind to a cultural institution in Canada. He also gave a twin gift to the Royal Ontario Museum. Both bequests came with specific instructions. In the ROM's case the $15.25 million was to be spent for purchases of Chinese sculpture and ceramics within five years. For McMaster University, the guidelines were clear as well. Spend the money, within five years, on non-North American art only.

Elsie Levy, *as an adult, spent six months of every year in a flat in Mayfair, playing bridge and visiting friends. . . . People remember the clever jewellery settings she designed.*

Herman Levy was an interesting man. He was what people call a character, and not just because he was old and had slipped, as we all eventually do, into those decades in which we care less about conformity, figuring out how we belong, and more about individuality, recognizing and respecting who we have become. Aside from bequests to personal staff, family, friends and other institutions, the largest part of his estate went to McMaster University and the ROM. (He had also, seven years before his death, made an *inter vivos* donation of his personal collection of European paintings, prints and drawings to McMaster and his Chinese ceramic collection to the ROM.) He had no heirs. He had never married. Neither had his only sibling, a sister, Elsie Olga Levy. All their lives they resided together in a house built by their father. When I heard those first few details of Herman Levy's life, they stayed with me, the way a comment or an event can stick to your mind like a bur.

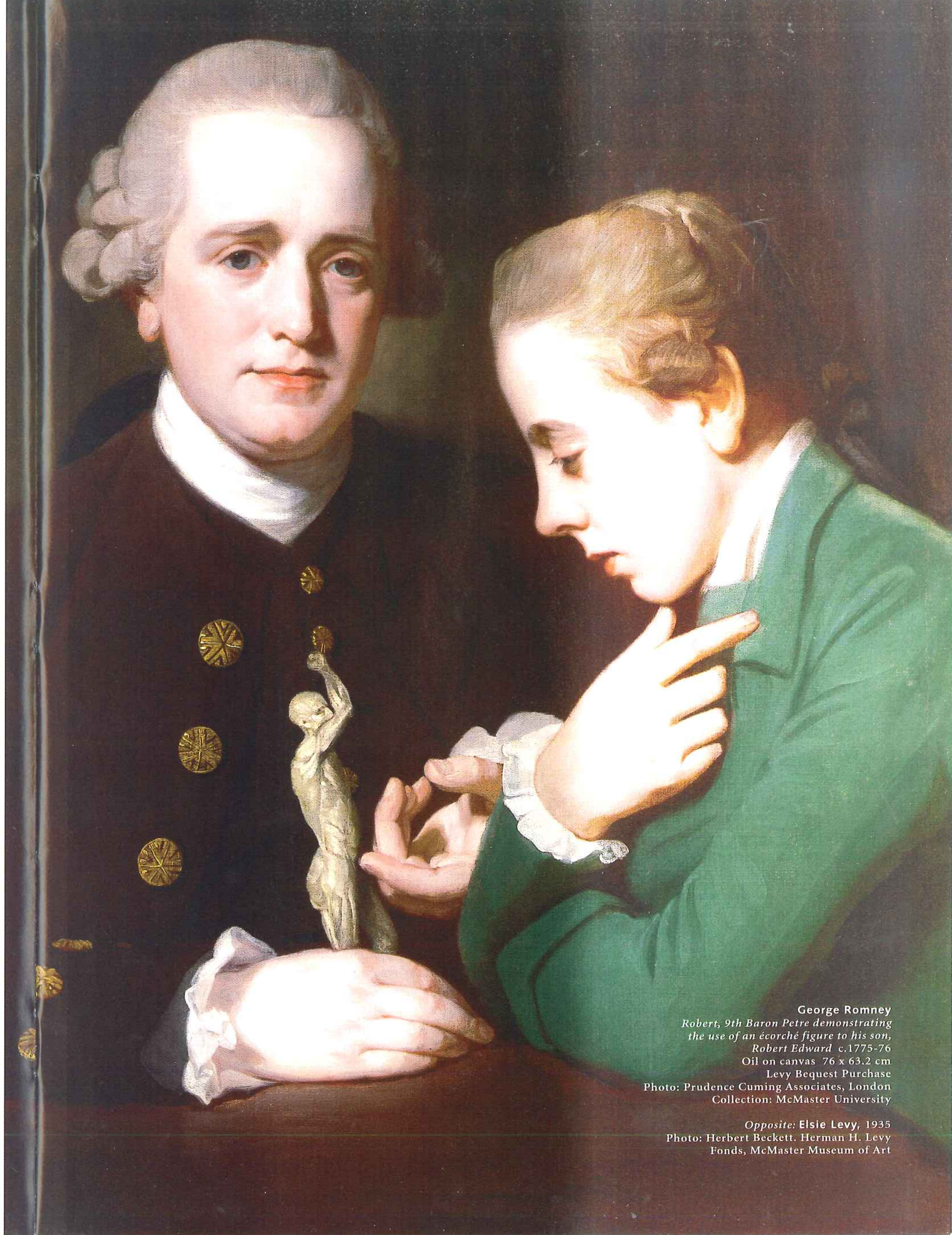
I began to ask people about him, and in all the conversations I had, whenever my questions turned to the subject of his personality and these friends or acquaintances of his would try to find the right image, they would eventually settle on a description of his smile. Sometimes they would start by talking about his diamond importing and jewellery manufacturing business, and how his grandfather had founded it when he came to Hamilton from Germany in 1857, or they might mention his intellectual acuity, that he didn't suffer fools gladly, but almost always they would say something about his smile.

It was a reflection of his vitality they would explain, of his quick and curious mind, and it would come upon his face suddenly, whenever he heard or learned something that interested him. Then, upon further reflection, some might describe his other smile, a sly and knowing grin, sudden as well, but accompanied by a look in his eyes that suggested he was tolerating someone's ignorance out of magnanimity. While these descriptions were made for my benefit, to help me see Herman Levy and to include me in a circle of fond memories, they served in fact to exclude me. Writing biography is like looking at a picture of yourself as a child, I think. It involves nostalgia, a longing for something, some understanding or experience, that cannot be fully recovered, only glimpsed.

"Please save this card for me.
Am sending to Hamilton as I've an idea that you'll be there before the card.
Hope to see some fine stuff tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Best, H."
Note written by Herman Levy to his sister, Elsie Levy, on a postcard depicting The Mother's Advise *by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. Sent from Kunstverlag, Wolfrum, Wien. April 11, 1951.*

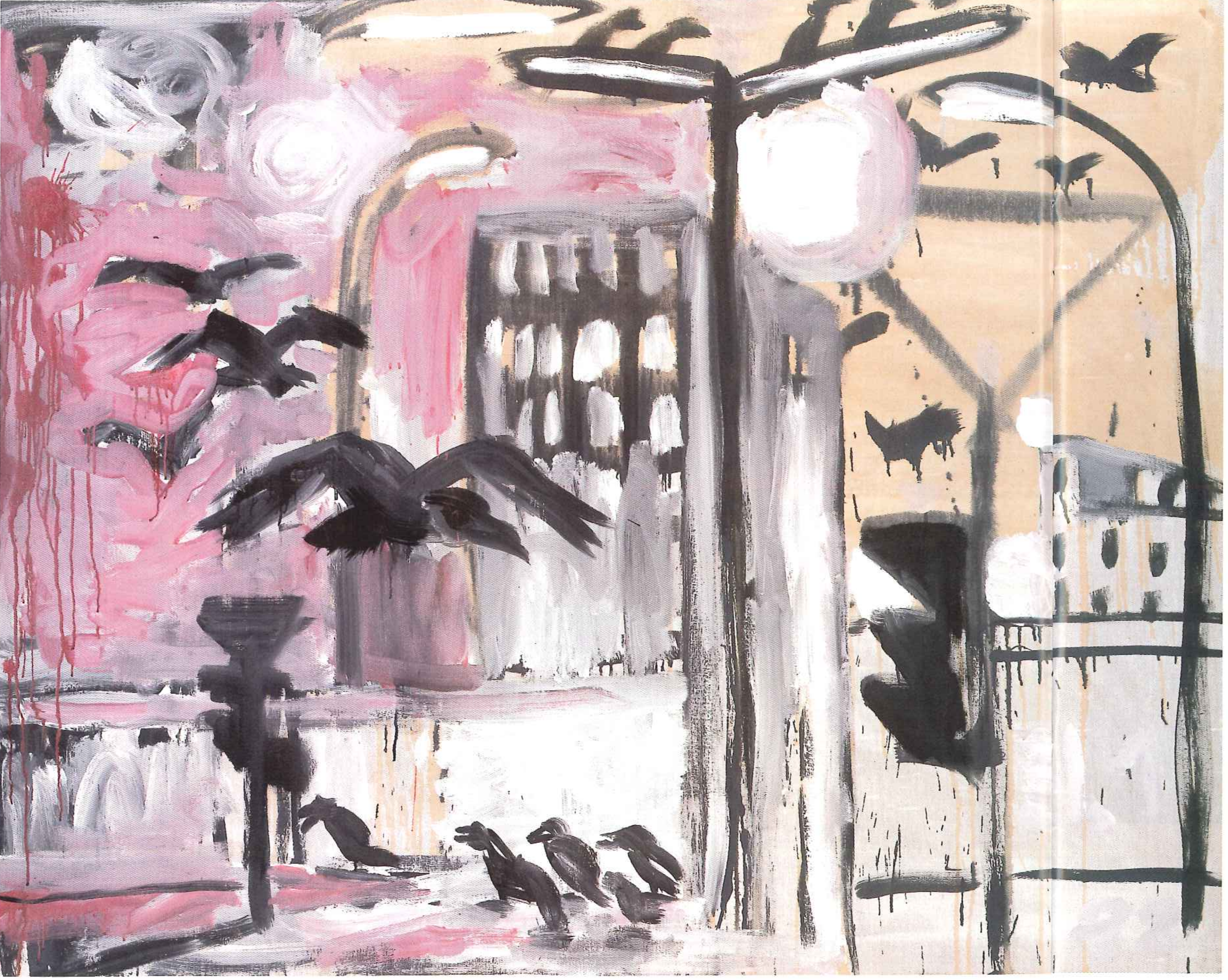
The houses in this old Hamilton neighbourhood, near Bay and Aberdeen streets, sit like pretty debutantes at a dance, quiet and shy, coy about the wealth they hold. Here is number 5 Undercliffe Avenue, the house Herman Levy lived in from the year it was built, in 1930, to the day he died from a heart attack, in June 1990, while in his rose garden.

From the outside the house does not appear grand. After Levy died it was sold, and the property was partitioned into two separate lots. A new house sprouts from the former garden. I have come to find 5 Undercliffe, to look at it from the street, because I have been told about the wonderful parties Levy and his sister held here. It was like going to court, someone said. Fine crystal. Exquisite china. I imagine Levy in his velvet smoking jacket or



George Romney
Robert, 9th Baron Petre demonstrating the use of an écorché figure to his son, Robert Edward c.1775-76
Oil on canvas 76 x 63.2 cm
Levy Bequest Purchase
Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates, London
Collection: McMaster University

Opposite: **Elsie Levy**, 1935
Photo: Herbert Beckett. Herman H. Levy Fonds, McMaster Museum of Art



Karl Horst Hödicke
Stadt Landschaft 1988
Oil on canvas 150 x 190 cm
Levy Bequest Purchase
Photo: J. Littkemann, Berlin
Collection: McMaster University

his knee-length Chinese silk robe. I imagine the staff from the ROM driving out to Hamilton for the annual summer lucheon Levy hosted. I imagine them—the women in sensible skirts andthe men in jackets—walking through the fragrant, pillowy rose garden, sipping gin-and-tonics from delicate glasses on the screened verandah. He loved to entertain, to meet new people. I imagine arriving for tea at precisely four o'clock.

Levy lifts his head from *The Globe and Mail* as you are shown in by Corinne, his housekeeper. Sweet woman—Come this way, he likes to sit in the sitting-room. Sunlight through the windows. Sharp eyes behind his glasses. His legs are crossed neatly, the shoes polished, the blazer buttoned around his medium frame. Ah, hello. He stands, of course, such a gentleman with his uncompromising notions about upright behaviour. The room is comfortable, not overly decorated. He motions to a chair. On the coffee-table lie catalogues from Christie's and Sotheby's, glossy pamphlets from Spink & Son in London, showing pictures of handsome paperweights, silver photograph frames, princely cuff-links, and on the corner, near his chair, is his favourite magazine, *Paris Match.*

He laughs gently, telling you that he calls the paper "The Bob and Gale." He has been reading the stock prices, though he doesn't say that. It is his daily custom, as is lunch at The Hamilton Club—just a walk down the hill—followed by a lively game of bridge. He folds the paper, tucks it away beneath a turret of books. You see Monet's *Waterloo Bridge* over the fireplace and the Courbet, the Sickert, the Pissarro, hung on the walls.

Corinne brings tea on a tray. Such delicate china. Her hands setting it down carefully on the table. No, thank you, that is all. She retreats. Footfalls through the house—a door closes. He begins to talk in a slow, deliberate voice, to ask questions. You tell him what you do. You have heard how he tests people to find out what they know. Nervous. Your hand on the teacup. That tale about the antique carpet dealer who came to ask Levy if he might loan one of his intricate, silk carpets for an exhibition he was mounting in Hamilton. Within fifteen minutes, it is said, Levy had precisely, carefully, like a surgeon removing a bullet, determined the size and shape of the man's knowledge, poor fellow.

He gets up, slowly, and takes you on a tour of his house. He is a fragile man, and his cane taps the floor as he walks like a slow beat of drips from a faucet. Beautiful antiques. Merchant and Ivory film. Soft, filtered light across objects, textures, treasures. Arranged in display cabinets in the foyer is his collection of Chinese celadons. He lets you hold in your hands glazed vessels and tea bowls—rich, heavy with importance—of the Song and Yuan dynasties. He watches you, pleased. On the walls, out of direct sunlight, hang some of the prints, the Albrecht Dürer, the Georges Braque. Halfway up the stairway you see Sir Thomas Lawrence's unfinished portrait of Reverend William Esdaile—the face is looking up and to the right—an invitation point to go up the stairs, and beside it, simple Southeast Asian sculptures are displayed on discrete projections from the walls.

Chandelier—a jewel dangling on a necklace—in a yellow room. The dining room. He shows you portraits attributed to Rubens, Tintoretto, Aelbert Cuyp. For the most part, they are private studies of their subjects. The poses are relaxed. The subjects' faces, close up. The portraits, along with a collection of still-life paintings, surround the long mahogany table. Yes, like friends. He eats here every night, his place carefully set, candles burning perhaps. Set in the middle of the table is a shallow Chinese celadon bowl of fourteenth-century vintage, filled with huge floating pink peonies. Back to the sitting room. Leaning on his cane. His papery white hand points to a still-life painting.

This one. Do you know who painted this?

Ah. You are prepared for this. Someone told you about this painting, that it was his favourite "test." It is an early van Gogh, although not necessarily recognizable as such. You stand back. You feign concentration, then slowly, with careful deliberation, you answer.

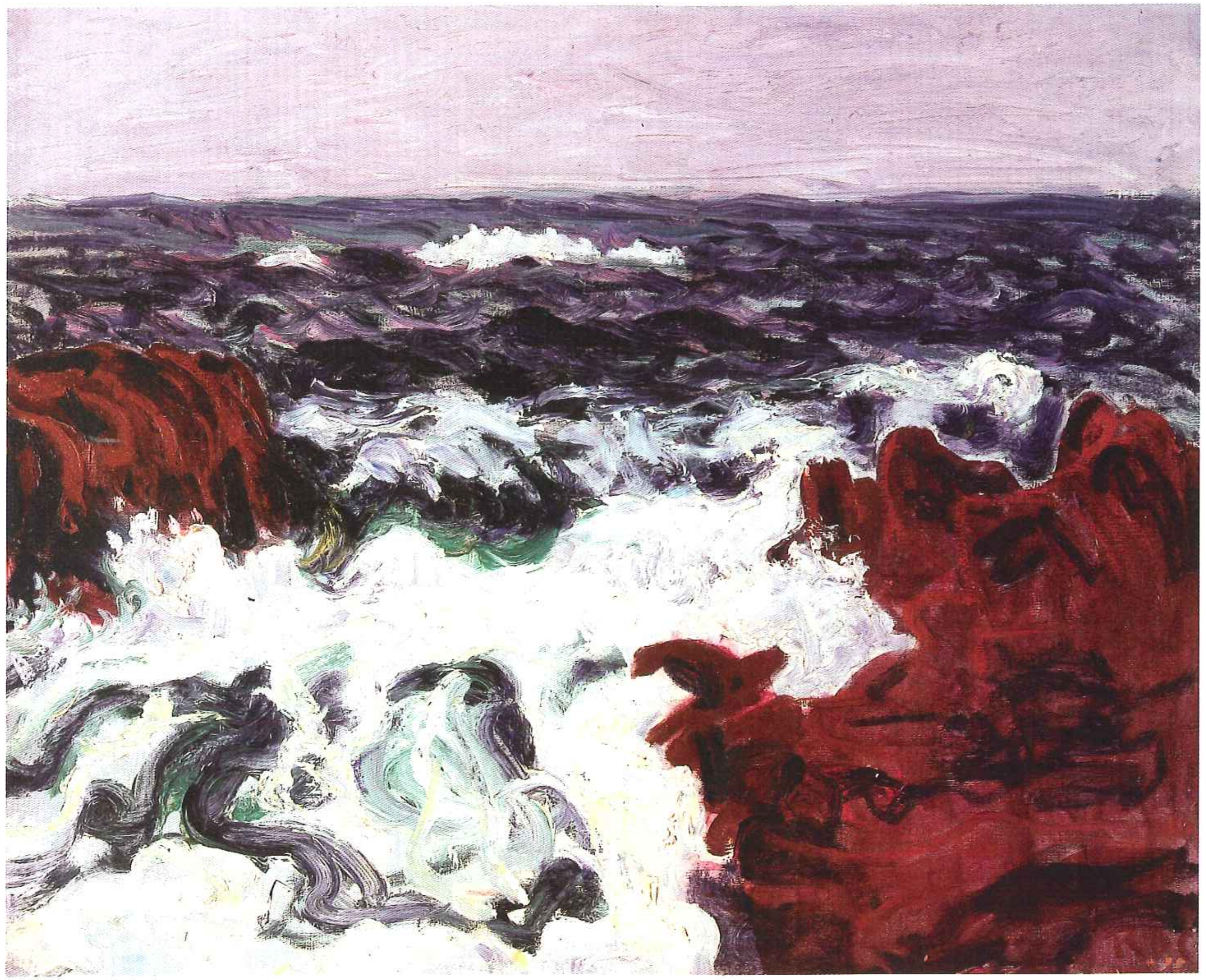
Well, I can't be sure, you know, but it reminds me of a style similar to a painter named Anton Mauve who was, if I'm not mistaken, an early teacher of van Gogh.

His face relaxes into a wide grin. He begins to talk about art, about the merits of good lighting, about how he buys art for its aesthetic value rather than for the name of the artist. Look here, at the onions, the jug, so painterly. He tells you about the time in London when he went to the Marlborough Gallery for three days in a row, only in the mornings, at 10 or 10:30, when the light was good and before he tired, to sit across from the Monet, to quietly contemplate its beauty, to lose himself through its frame in that dreamy landscape, trying to decide if he should purchase it.

"I thought I'd send you this on a card to thank you for your kindness in showing me "your" Louvre favourites. I haven't been back yet but spent yesterday afternoon at the Jeu de Paume and I found I wasn't in a very "receptive" mood so I couldn't get much satisfaction looking for something we defined as a work of art—I found many delightful paintings but primarily from the point of view of techniques and/or colour. VG's Church of Anvers, Monet's series on the Rouen Cathedral + Gare St. Lazare."
Note to Herman Levy from a friend, written on an undated postcard depicting Filippo Lippi's Self-Portrait.

Across my mind scrolled many little scenes featuring Herman Levy. Some were documented in his collection of postcards. Some were imagined. Others, cherished and perhaps polished, I had to lift gently from the memories of his friends. When Herman Levy died, he left a lot of himself behind.

"Herman was well informed about art, and very careful in making his selections," offered George Wallace, sculptor, printmaker and former professor at McMaster. "When a dealer brought a work to his attention, he would endeavour to see other works by the same artist before coming to a decision." From others, I found out that he was not fond of music. I was told that he had no interest in the performing arts. A tin ear was the explanation offered. He loved fine, expensive wines. He did not buy fancy cars. When he was young he drove what was described to me as the equivalent of a four-door, bottom-of-the-line Ford. He was possessed of an extraordinary intelligence, a gift that ran in his family. His uncle



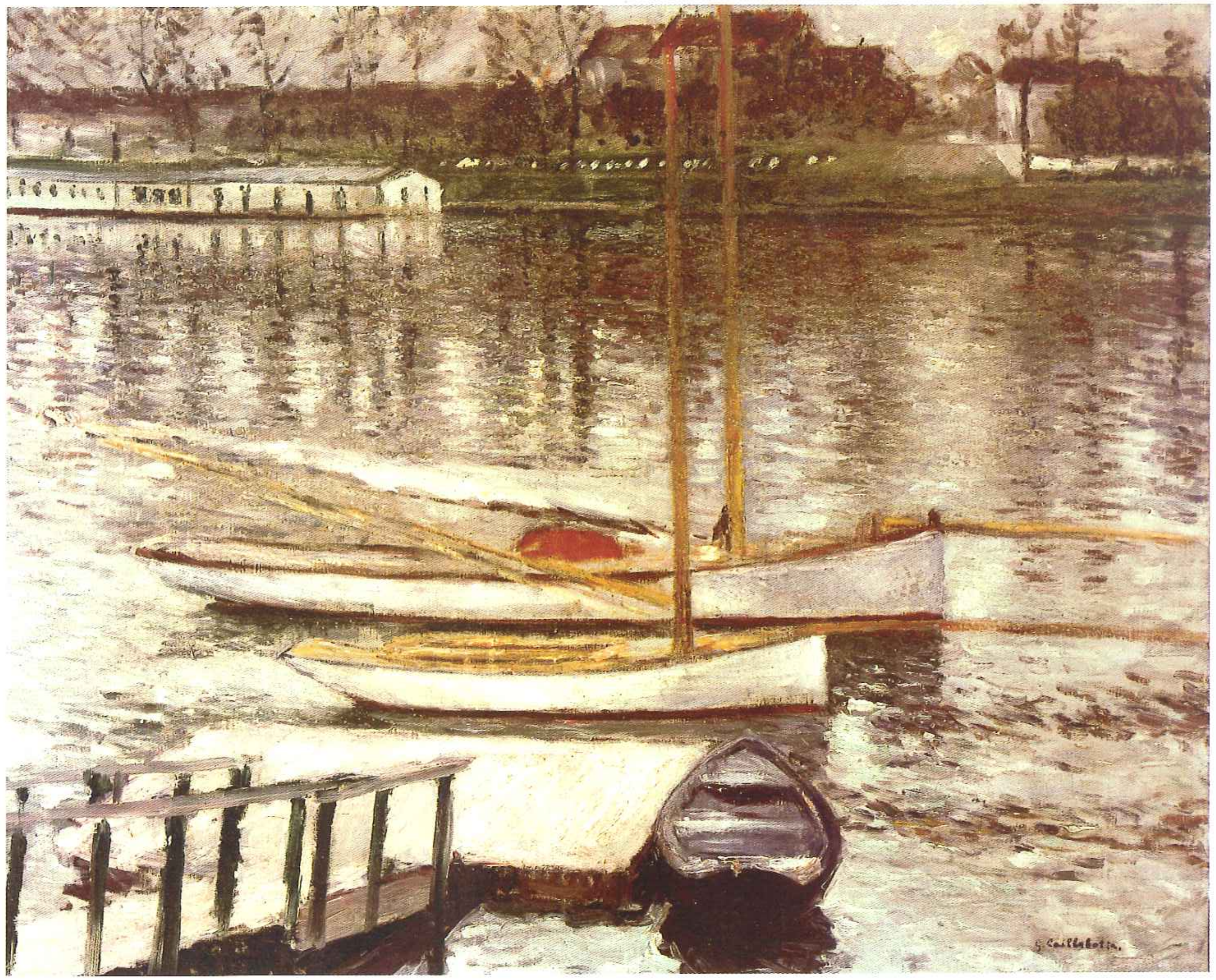
Roderic O'Connor
Red Rocks and Foam before 1900
Oil on canvas 48.9 x 61 cm
Gift of Herman Levy, Esq.,O.B.E.
Photo: M. Simon Levin/Gary Spearin
Collection: McMaster University

Gabriel Levy had developed the rules for contract bridge at The Hamilton Club, where the game was first played in North America. A cousin, John Levy, who was nicknamed "Genius," won the Lieutenant-Governor's medal at Hillfield School in Hamilton and numerous scholarships.

In family tradition, Levy had been educated at local schools. Later, he attended the University of Toronto, where he received a degree with honours in political science. He was a gifted athlete as well. He loved fly fishing, skeet shooting. In the archives containing some of his personal belongings, I found an article he had kept entitled "The Modern Olympics 1896–1932." It was about the moral virtues of athleticism. He was President of the Canadian Squash Rackets Association in 1934. In Hart House, at the University of Toronto, there is a squash trophy in his name.

"This, I assume, will convince you not to come to Cambridge. The weather is like the prices—calamitous."
Note written by the late E. Togo Salmon, art professor at McMaster University, to Herman Levy on a postcard depicting an odd looking eighteenth-century Chinese pottery duck.

"Please save this card for me. It's hard to believe that the piece of sculpture illustrated is more than 20,000 years old. The other pieces in the frieze are equally as fine and one a bit better. To feel really insignificant one should visit this district where human life is measured in periods of say 50,000 years."
Note written by Herman Levy to a friend on a postcard depicting prehistoric sculpture in Cap Blanc, Dordogne, France. April 7, 1953.



Gustave Caillebotte
La Seine à Gennevilliers (The River Seine at Gennevilliers) 1878-83
Oil on canvas 56 x 73.8 cm
Gift of Herman Levy, Esq., O.B.E.
Photo: M. Simon Levin/Gary Spearin
Collection: McMaster University

It was in the nineteen-fifties that Levy began to audit evening classes at McMaster University. He was working at the family firm then (he closed it in 1960), travelling frequently to Europe to buy diamonds as well as works of art, but he always found time to attend classes, either French or art history. There is a photograph of him, taken by Karsh around this time, which hangs in The Levy Gallery of the museum. He looks serious, erudite. Over the years, he would become close friends with a number of professors in the art history department. In the lectures he attended he would sit at the back, listening carefully. All the art professors knew him. They especially knew the meaning of his smile.

"There as I paced around on the stage in my old black academic gown," art historian Naomi Jackson Groves wrote as a tribute to Levy for the ceremony, in 1985, at which he received an honorary doctorate from the University, "I could see him sitting away at the back. Sometimes Herman would have a wide smile on his face ('a fiendish grin' I'd think to myself) as, for instance, when I held forth on the prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux in Southern France, which he had visited and knew well. So after my lecture I remember ambling down the aisle to where he sat, and he explained carefully how the black colour that was there maybe 40,000 years was really made of animal fat and soot, gradually covered by the film of time. I was delighted to get such things straight."

According to George Wallace and many others, it was Herman's mother who introduced her son to art. As part of his training to work in the jewellery business, Levy, at the age of twenty-one, went to Amsterdam to serve as an apprentice to a diamond merchant, and while there his mother encouraged him to visit the galleries. She was interested in modern art. She liked work by Käthe Kollwitz and other early twentieth-century German artists. Intelligent. Sophisticated. That is how she is described. She could speak five or six languages. Every summer, when Levy and his sister were young, she took them to the Rhineland to see her parents, who owned vineyards there.

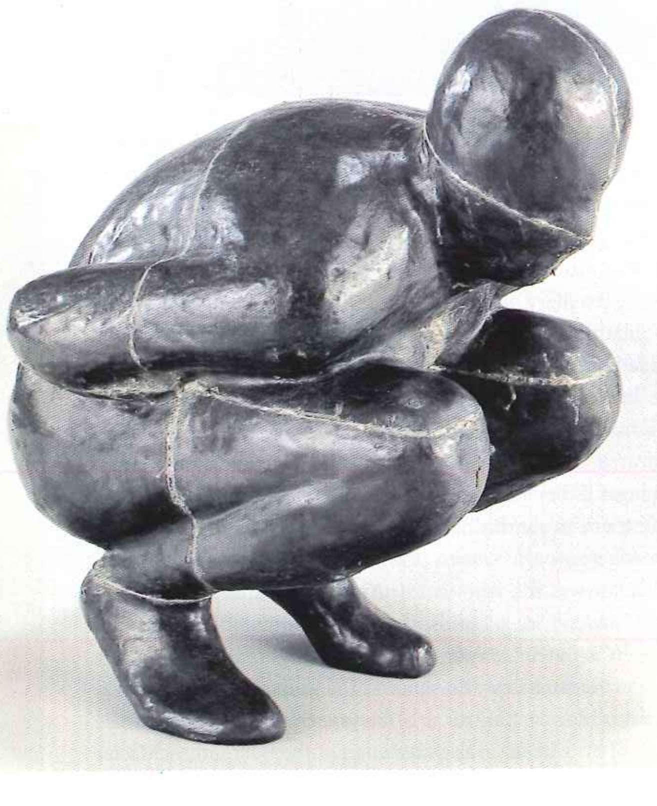
Perhaps it was she who instilled in the children their love of Europe. Elsie Levy, as an adult, spent six months of every year in London, in a flat in Mayfair, playing bridge and visiting her friends. For Herman Levy, Europe was the source of all culture and inspiration. Martin Luxton, his lawyer, friend and one of the executors of his will (he is also chairman of the Board of McMaster

University), explained that "for Herman, Canadian art was an oxymoron. All art is not Canadian art. He believed that to understand North American art one had to first understand European art."

Herman and Elsie Levy adored their mother. She was their context, a continual reference point. Was she the one who fostered her children's sense of philanthropic responsibility, too? Did she remind them about their father's mother? Instruct them about ideals? Did she tell them stories? Remember your grandmother. Her charity knew no bounds. When a dealer from the Canadian Professional Art Dealers Association, who was evaluating Levy's collection in 1985, expressed an interest in purchasing a print of his, he told her that he did not make money from his works of art. He gave them away. He anonymously gave works of art and money (for the purchase of slide projectors and screens) to McMaster University as early as 1947. During World War II he offered his services, for a dollar a year, to the War Time Prices and Trade Board in Ottawa, for which he was awarded an O.B.E. Elsie also contributed to the war effort.

Opposite: **Anselm Kiefer**
Yggdrasil 1985-91
Emulsion, acrylic and melted lead on canvas
220 x 190 cm
Levy Bequest Purchase
Photo courtesy: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London
Collection: McMaster University

Antony Gormley
Proof 1983-84
Lead, fibreglass, plastic 77.5 x 86.3 x 55.8 cm
Levy Bequest Purchase
Collection: McMaster University
Photo courtesy: Louise Spence



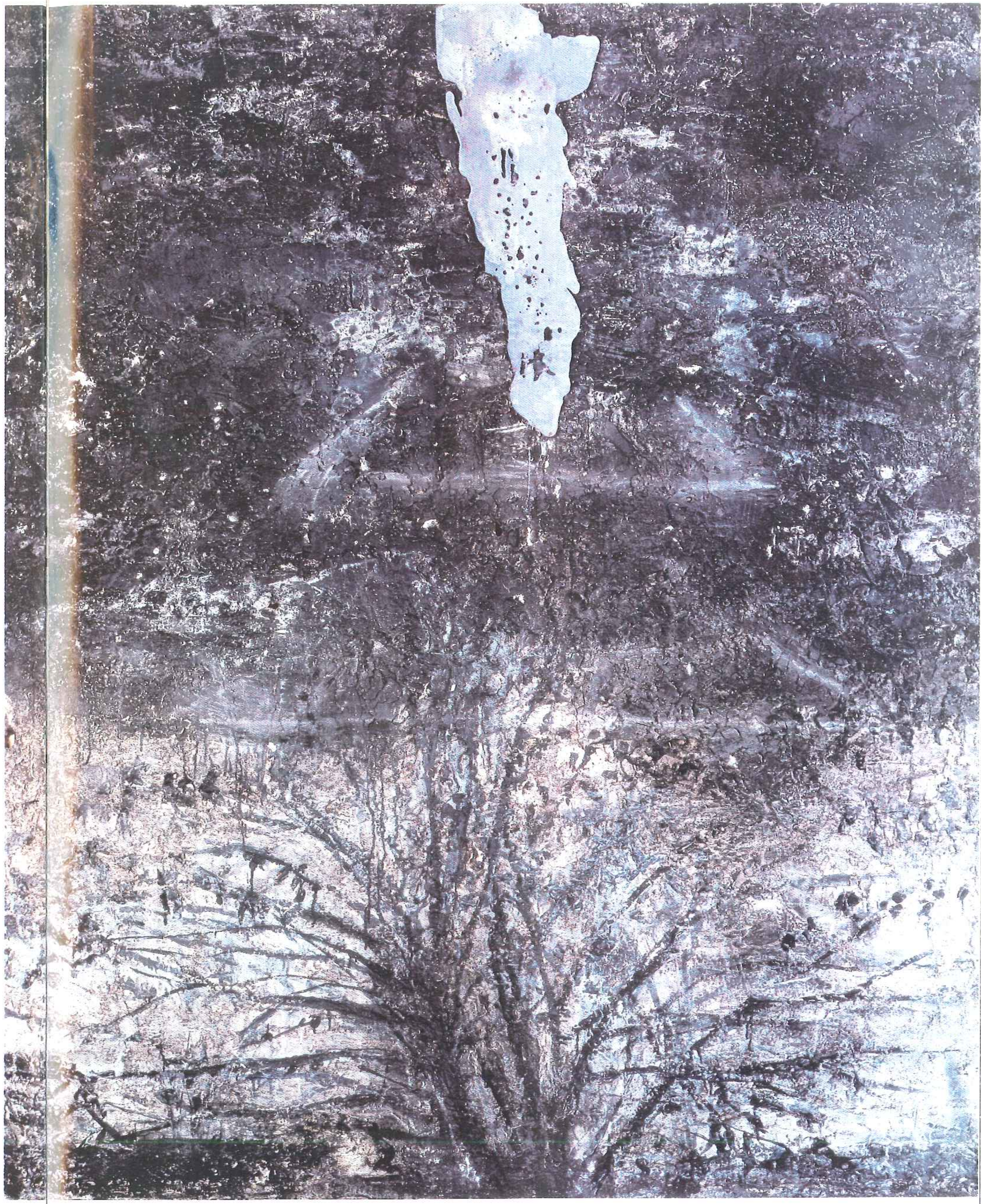
I did not find any pictures of Levy's mother, but I began to see her in my mind. I began to understand her as a woman with very strong opinions. She advised Elsie, a small, pretty woman with large dark eyes and thin pencilled-in eyebrows, that her hands were ugly, that she must wear large rings to cover them up, which she did. She also told her children that they must never marry. Their father suffered from manic depression. She told them that the illness was hereditary.

"Such a good + busy time that I can't even write you a letter this PM. Togo now here—Marina expected on Monday. We hope to leave on Tuesday AM. Afraid am putting on weight and that you will not like the paintings that I've bought."
Note written by Herman Levy to his sister, Elsie, on a postcard depicting Bezelay, Basilique de la Madelaine, Paris. April 17, 1954.

Elsie Levy died in 1980. She was a short-tempered woman. Everyone feared her. That sharp tongue of hers! Few people knew the story about how she fell in love with a doctor who wasn't Jewish, how she had her nose fixed to look more pleasing to him, how he had spurned her. They remember the clever jewellery settings she designed—a diamond wasp with moveable wings that caught the light; oh, and a diamond monkey with a swinging tail; a crystal lily. For many years, each November, she would throw an enormous party at 5 Undercliffe as a debut for her latest creation, which she wore with great pride, gliding through the rooms, past her guests, who would marvel politely at her talent.

She and her brother bickered endlessly, I was told. He cared deeply about her, though, seeking her approval when he bought paintings, some of which, especially work by the Old Masters and by Le Sidaner, he purchased for her. He was devastated when she died. A few months later, he suffered a stroke, from which he recovered, initially with the capacity to speak only French and remember the phone numbers of his friends. He was weakened by his illness, however, and it prompted him to make arrangements for the future. He went to see his friend Michael Watson, to his house on a hill overlooking Hamilton, and they talked about possible benefactions. Levy considered leaving money for acquisitions to the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Hamilton (institutions to which he had donated several works of art in the past), but he had become disenchanted with their management.

When Glen Cumming was appointed director of the Art Gallery of Hamilton in the nineteen-seventies, Levy issued a summons, so the story goes. Cumming was ushered into his house and



> *Ness had met Levy on several occasions. She had been invited to his house for tea. She had passed his tests.*

shown the collection, but he did not display much interest. He was shown the door. Levy's disappointment with the National Gallery, on the other hand, had grown over the years, reaching its zenith when two directors he had worked with and admired, Jean Sutherland Boggs and Hsio Yen Shih, were dismissed.

Watson listened to his friend on that day in the late nineteen-eighties. He had been close to the old man, sometimes finding works of art for his consideration, since his wife introduced them after she met Levy in a French class at McMaster.

"You have had a good time at McMaster," Watson is reported to have casually said. "Why not leave it there?"

The next day, Levy called Watson to say that the deed was done. He had added a codicil to his will. During the years that remained in Levy's life, a few people at McMaster learned of his decision. While directors and curators at other Canadian art institutions speculated about the possible recipient of Levy's inevitable largesse, Alvin Lee, then President of McMaster University (and a friend of Levy's), Michael Watson, Martin Luxton and Kim Ness, director and curator of the McMaster Museum of Art, as well as several faculty members knew that a bequest would come to the University for acquisitions. What they didn't know was the amount.

Kim Ness is showing me through *The Levy Legacy* exhibition. She is forty-one years old, a small woman with bright eyes and a smile she turns on and off like a lightbulb. Hired in 1984, during the time of Herman Levy's decision to donate his art collection, she says "the only constant [during her employment at McMaster] has been change." The Levy bequest as well as his donations "completely transformed the nature of our collection, our standard of operation and the expectations." The McMaster Museum of Art, in a new $3.4 million facility completed in 1994 and financed largely through private and corporate fund-raising, now holds the largest and most noteworthy art collection of any university in Canada.

Ness had met Levy on several occasions. She had been invited to his house for tea. She had passed his tests. On one occasion in particular, she passed with flying colours. In 1988, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta sent a request to McMaster for the loan of Levy's Monet. Ness responded by arranging for an outside specialist to assess the painting's condition for travel. "I am writing this letter tonight," she wrote rather breathlessly to Levy hours after the examination had taken place. She went on, "The possibility of potential damage places the work at too great a risk in my view." The loan was withdrawn. Levy was impressed.

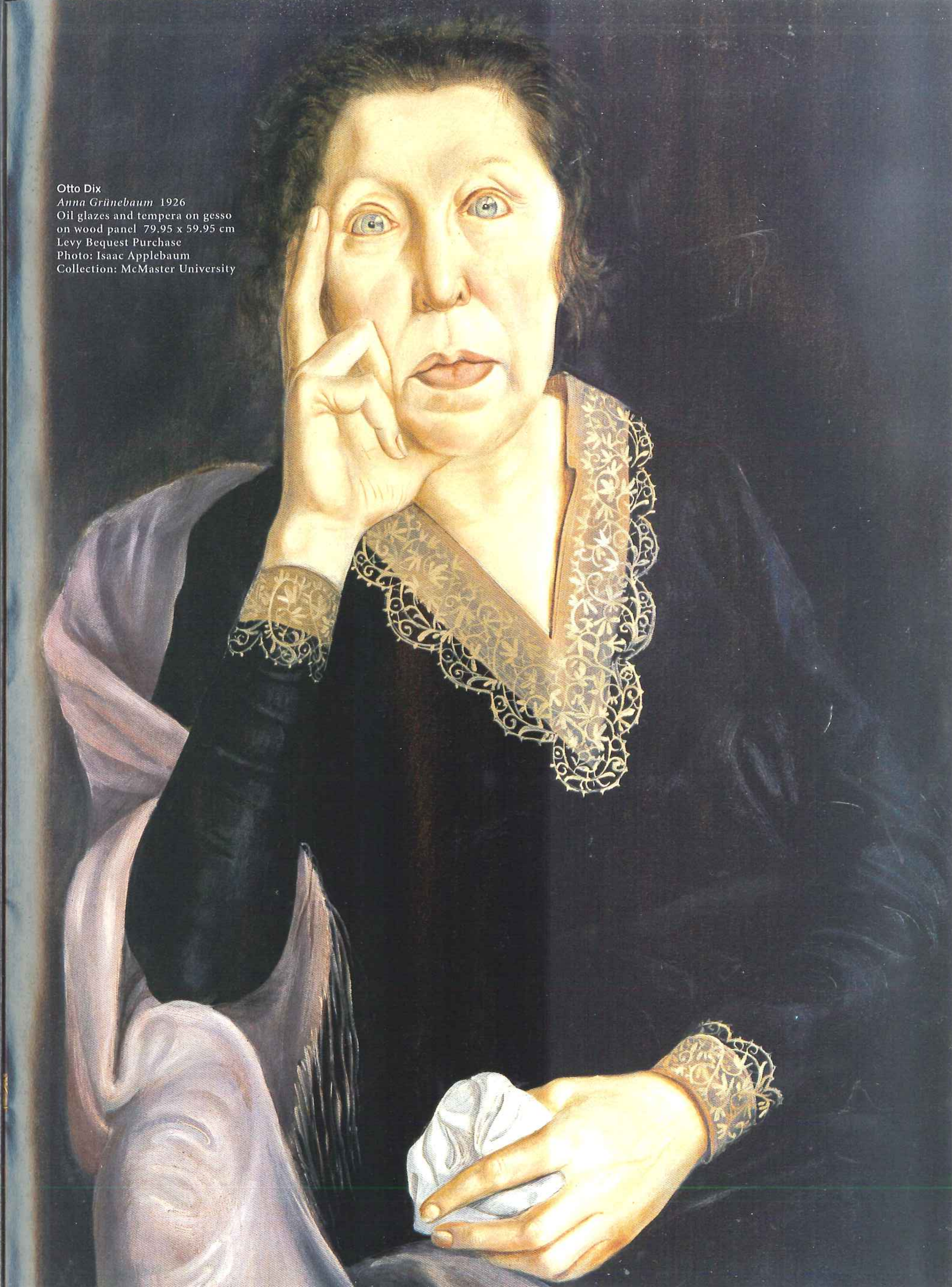
When I asked her about the fortunate position she found herself in, heading up a museum that has been restructured to play a greater role in the community (its operating budget has increased from 200,000 dollars to 500,000 dollars since the late eighties) and having to spend, with the help of an acquisitions committee, over $15 million in five years as opposed to the usual $5,000 annually, she said simply that yes, she is lucky. (Her previous job was with the education department at the Art Gallery of Ontario.) Serendipitous was the word she used, I think. She is a model of grace and discretion. A Herman Levy kind of person. Later on, I was told by Alvin Lee that Levy, near the end of his life, grew "hyper-anxious," and that he often called Ness at home to ask her to come and check his security system.

She is reluctant to talk at great length about Levy. "He was so modest, you see," she says. "He always did things without fanfare. It was never a specification to have a building named after him. We were never allowed to do anything special for him at all, except host one reception in 1987 in quiet recognition of his gifts." She sits on her friendship with Levy like a hen on an egg. She will smile. She will attempt to answer questions about him, but she prefers to talk about the collection. Which she does with great enthusiasm. Get her going and her mind swings from one abstract connection—the newly acquired Othon Friesz, to the Pierre-Albert Marquet, to the Lawrence, to the Romney, to the Courbet, to the Soutine—like a trapeze artist, high above the crowd, effortlessly floating from one bar to the next.

We are standing in the second-floor gallery containing the acquisitions from the Modern period. "We wanted to honour Herman Levy by buying art that relates to his collection, but we were primarily interested in building a strong teaching collection. Emphasis was not on glamour names but the kind of art. It was important for us to represent notable developments but also to have the opportunity to create interconnections." She talks about the procedures and guidelines and pre-arranged process for the acquisitions. She believes that Levy imposed the five-year limit because he was cognizant of rising prices in the market and also, that he wanted to ensure money did not trickle down over time into building funds.

I am listening to her, but I am thinking about Herman Levy, about how he may have stood across the room, looking at the works. Art is so quick to calm or disturb or confuse the viewer. Levy's collection was comprised of gentle paintings, for the most part, of paintings that spoke of serenity and quiet beauty, grace. More than once, when friends of his would tell me about how he loved to sit in quiet contemplation of his paintings, I thought of a poem fragment by that determined and vigorous spinster, Emily Dickinson: "Beauty crowds me till I die /Beauty mercy have on me."

We are looking at the Jawlensky now and as we turn to the other side of the wall panel, we come across Otto Dix's Portrait of *Anna Grünebaum.* Mrs. Grünebaum looks out from the frame with watery eyes, so perfectly articulated, and her hands, white in the foreground. The look on her face invites us into her space, to that darkened room, next to her chair. You can smell her perfume, can't you? Pause for a moment. Look at her. Her lips. She leans forward, as though she wants to tell you one thing more. The look in her eyes holds you in place. She is captured here. Still, she looks at you defiantly, daring you to fully know the person you can see merely on the surface. ■



Otto Dix
Anna Grünebaum 1926
Oil glazes and tempera on gesso on wood panel 79.95 x 59.95 cm
Levy Bequest Purchase
Photo: Isaac Applebaum
Collection: McMaster University