



CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

McCLOY, William Ashby

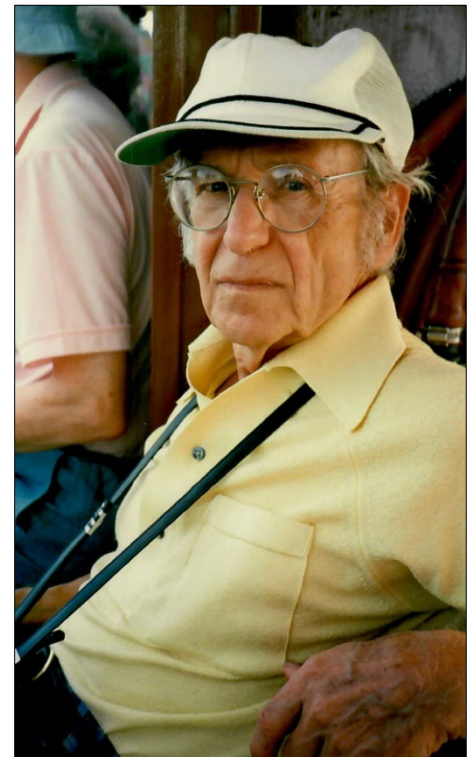
The Artist as Educator

Excerpts from David Smalley's Memorial Minute, September, 2000

William McCloy died on June 3rd, 2000 at the age of 87. Bill chaired the Art Department at Connecticut College from 1954 to 1972, and he retired from the College in 1978. Bill's death brings to a close a very long chapter in the history of the Art Department at Connecticut College and the College as a whole. In 1954, when Bill joined the faculty, there were only about 1200 students at this all-women's college. Rosemary Park, President of the College at that time, moved aggressively to bring distinguished scholars and teachers to the small college, and recruited actively.

Along with William McCloy, she brought in such key people as William Neiring, Richard Goodwin, Pierre DeGuise, Rosmund Tuve, Mackie Jarre II, among many others. Bill's academic and artistic credentials were impressive - perhaps unprecedented [see chronology] - undergraduate and graduate degrees in fine arts, an M.A. in psychology, and a Ph.D. in art history. This unusual combination of degrees, in particular terminal degrees in both studio art and art history, qualified him uniquely to chair what was then a single department encompassing both art and art history.

In fact, only two years after he stepped down as chairman in 1972, the department petitioned the college to separate into two constituent parts - studio art and art history. It was impossible to find a single member from either discipline who could manage both areas and the complexity of administering the resulting co-chairmanship argued strongly for separation. It is interesting to note that Bill did not oppose this move; he recognized that the continued development of each area depended upon strong and professionally trained leaders - and he further recognized the impossibility of finding that unusual range of academic expertise in a single individual. He voiced regret, however, that the system of higher education as it had been evolved made the sort of academic career he had virtually impossible to replicate.



He was a true exemplar of the Liberal Arts tradition.

Beginning in the 1960s, the College underwent the first of several expansions, resulting in additional hiring. I was fortunate to be among the first of the new hires, along with Charles Price [now retired] in art history. Insofar as he was able, Bill always tried to bring the elements of the combined department along equally; matching hires in art with new people in art history as well. It is interesting to note that most of us he hired in studio art were clearly from a different generation - to us, Bill was a unique combination of boss, mentor, and parent figure. We bridged the growing age gap between the faculty of his generation and the students of the time. It was not always a perfectly smooth situation. We "young ones" had to remember (and he had to remind us often) that we were *faculty*, especially when he felt that the increasing informality of college life threatened that important relationship; simultaneously, he worked hard to be mindful that the changes he saw in his own department were also part of a nation-wide change in the nature of academic institutions.

This is not to imply that Bill was himself a "conservative" either academically or politically. The year I was hired, Bill was involved in two political issues: the local one being the design and placement of Cummings Arts Center, and the second was watching with great interest the development of a new campus institution called the "teach in." During my interview, he recounted with pride the social and political activism then emerging on campus. It is worth remembering that Bill chaired the department during the most turbulent periods of both the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movements. He navigated what we now know to be tense new territory with skill, wisdom and patience, and the College was better for the experience.

As the department expanded and Cummings Arts Center neared completion toward the end of the decade of the 1960s, Bill lead us all in very serious discussions about the future of art at the College. He was, first and foremost, a committed modernist. He had no patience for letting the department concentrate its resources on the kind of academic art training that he had rebelled against as a student. This was not always a popular position to take. Various administrations failed to understand his premise that the study of art would lose its vitality and the immediacy of the educational experience it offered its students if it became a mere restatement of old, and he felt, outmoded expressions.

His modernism was, I think, as much ideological as esthetic. While it is clear that Picasso and Braque were among the major influences on his work in the 50s and 60s, it is well to remember that his art training occurred in the Midwest - that he was a colleague of John Stuart Curry, and that American regionalism was also a powerful influence on his vision. While maintaining his commitment to the latest developments in post-war American and European painting, much of it abstract, Bill enjoyed celebrating his traditional technical virtuosity. There was no medium he did not try and ultimately master. His early training as a realist stood him in great stead as art movements segued into one another. When photographically derived "Pop" painting began to attract notice, he was able to apply his expertise in that direction. Even before American Realism began to make what some called a "comeback" in the late 70s and 80s, Bill was incorporating meticulously painted fragments of family photographs into an essentially modernist and abstract format.

His interest in sculpture paralleled his work in painting and he pursued it with vitality. For a time, Bill and I shared a studio behind what is now the Tansill Theater. We were able to help each other when the inevitable need for a "third hand" manifested itself. We also found in that scruffy space a kind of ease in discourse which didn't always manifest itself in the art building. Bill balanced theory and practice seemingly without effort. Though the bulk of his training was in painting, he found in the physicality of sculpture making an outlet for his own athleticism, for Bill was a gifted athlete, achieving All-American status in intercollegiate diving competition.

Bill was extremely generous with his work. He gave major sculptures to the college and provided many of his colleagues with paintings on very extended loans. He painted the very large mural in Hale. His extraordinary range is demonstrated by a number of works that hang on the college campus, including a vivid, semi-abstract portrait of Rosemary Park, and another, more restrained portrait of President Charles Shain. The latter, while a more traditional picture, has an intensity not usually associated with commemorative portraits.

As colleague and as chairman, William McCloy was generous and demanding, critical yet full of praise, and committed to seeing both his students and his faculty succeed at doing their version of what was, after all, his life's work. Whether he was teaching a formal class, offering help to a colleague, working long hours with individual students, or visiting the major galleries and museums in New York with such regularity and intensity, it was all the same - he was living the life of the Artist/Teacher. He made no distinction as to the importance of either half of this "job description" - the fact that many years after he retired his work was attracting important national critical attention never diminished the fact that he was most proud of the role he played in the development of the students and of his colleagues. Helping develop young artists required that he BE a serious artist himself... and that may be the greatest example and legacy he left us all.

David Smalley, Professor of Art at Connecticut College.