

PETER SELZ 1919-2019

Berkeley Art Museum leader organized major exhibitions

By Charles Desmarais

Peter Selz, the founding director of the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley and an influential curator and art historian, died Friday at age 100, his daughter Gabrielle Selz announced.

Hired as professor of art history at Berkeley in 1965, he was also charged with overseeing the establishment of the museum, which opened in

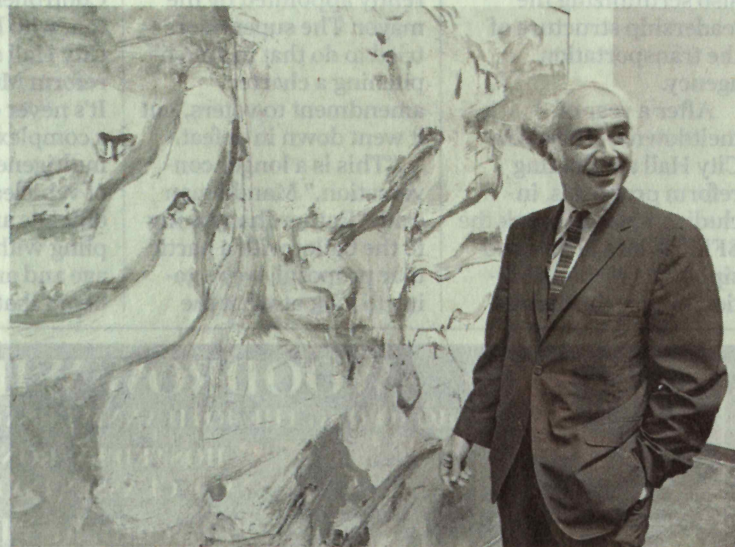
1970. Lawrence Rinder, the current director of what is now called the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, praised Selz's contributions. "Peter transformed BAMPFA from a modest university art collection into the internationally renowned art and film institution it is today," he said.

Before the Berkeley appointment, Selz chaired the art department and directed the art

gallery at Pomona College from 1955 to 1958. He was appointed curator of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art, where he served from 1958 to 1965.

At the New York museum, he orchestrated major surveys of the work of such significant figures as Max Beckmann, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, Emil Nolde, Auguste

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Vincent Maggiora / The Chronicle 1969

UC Berkeley Professor Peter Selz organized a Willem de Kooning exhibition for the University Art Museum in 1969.

Founding director led museum to fame

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Rodin and Mark Rothko. The shows traveled to other top museums around the world.

Selz had a similarly stellar record at the Berkeley museum until he left the directorship in 1973. He continued as a professor at UC Berkeley until his retirement in 1988.

But if the one-person exhibitions he organized were the staple of his career, it was his analytical group exhibitions that had the greatest influence on artists and art history.

His 1959 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "New Images of Man" was not a critical success, with its attention to figurative art at the height of Abstract Expressionism and on the cusp of the Pop Art movement. But it generated a lot of ink and was significant in bringing to New York's attention the work of artists from across the U.S., including Californians Richard Diebenkorn, Rico Lebrun and Nathan Oliveira.

He also organized the New York museum's "Art Nouveau" (1960) and "Futurism" (1961), the first major shows to examine those artistic tendencies. And his exhibition "Funk," at the Berkeley museum in 1967, brought 27 counterculture artists out of their studios and the coffeehouses of Northern California and into the public eye.

Selz was born in Munich on March 27, 1919. Fleeing the Nazi regime, he traveled alone in 1936 to New York, his Jewish parents following one year later, a story recounted in a biography by Paul J. Karlstrom, "Peter Selz: Sketches of a Life in Art."

He served in the U.S. military in World War II and attended the University of Chicago on the GI Bill, receiving his graduate education at the University of Paris and École du Louvre. He wrote more than 50 books and exhibition catalogs, as well as numerous magazine and journal articles. For some years, he was a West Coast correspondent for the magazine *Art in America*.

Selz is survived by his fifth wife, Carole Schemmerling Selz; his daughters Tanya Selz and Gabrielle Selz from his first marriage, to Thalia Cheronis Selz; his stepdaughters Mia Baldwin and Kryssa Schemmerling; and his grandson, Theo Mync.

"We just had a big celebration of his 100th birthday (in April), so at this point we're not doing any memorial event," Gabrielle Selz said.

The family asks that donations be made in Selz's name to the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Selz will be cremated and his ashes sprinkled on a cemetery plot he bought in the unincorporated Marin County community of Olema, close to the grave of artist Sam Francis. "Brothers in eternity," he told Gabrielle Selz.

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