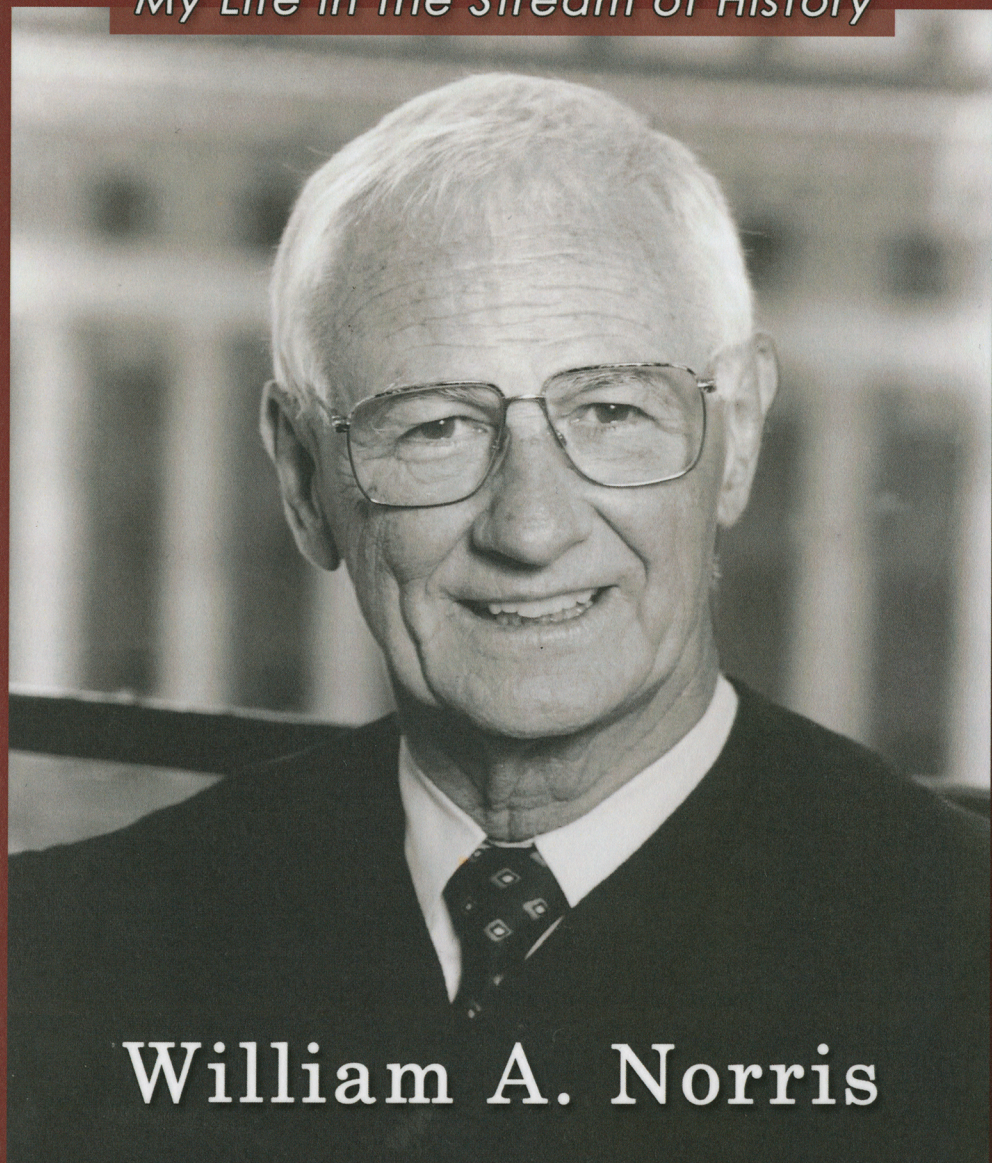


LIBERAL OPINIONS

My Life in the Stream of History



William A. Norris

don't know what you're talking about, do you?" I said, "Eli, you're absolutely right." He said, "Do you know that that is the only Pollock of that particular genre in private hands today in the world?" Of course I didn't know that! "Can we put her on the board now?" I asked. He agreed, and she went on to donate the Jackson Pollock as well as seventeen other paintings that became the heart of MOCA's collection, including: Mondrian's "Composition of Red, Blue, Yellow and White: Nom III" (1939), Mark Rothko's "Yellow and Orange" (1949), two versions of Alberto Giacometti's 1960 sculpture "Tall Figure," and his "Interior Studio with Man Pointing and Three Apples."

In November 1981, I signed the definitive agreement providing the museum with construction funds, building site, a \$1 million BHA payment to the endowment, and a share of California Plaza revenues, including rental income. MOCA was born—the result of a public-private partnership that became a model for future cultural and civic projects.

Over time, Eli, as Chairman, built up the board with members who were major collectors, renowned artists and business leaders. These included Leon Banks, Robert Irwin, Max Palevsky, Robert Rowan, Sam Francis, Betye Burton, Gary Familian, Dominique de Menil, Count Giuseppe Panza, Martin Lipton, Peter Ludwig, Seiji Tsutsumi, Lenore Greenberg, Jim Greene, Bill Kieschnick, Leo Wyler, and Fred Nicholas.

Fred brought some unique skills to the party. He is a lawyer, real estate developer, and art collector who was the founder of Public Counsel, the largest public interest law firm in the country. A dear friend and highly regarded executive, Fred was the perfect person to oversee the construction of the museum building on Bunker Hill. Max Palevsky's architecture committee had selected Irata Isozaki to design the building but there were many disagreements and issues among Max, Eli and the board that almost scuttled the process. Happily, Fred was up to the task. He also has a very wry wit and would often comment that my main contribution to the establishment of MOCA was that I managed to keep our two billionaire board members from killing each other.

Though financial solvency proved to be a nonissue during these early years, defining the museum's identity early on turned out to be a formidable challenge. We were doing pretty well with our fundraising, but we had not reached our goal yet, so we decided it would be helpful if we had a director in place. We had a meeting in Eli's boardroom which included a number of artists. Eli strongly recommended we hire a large search firm to find our director. He pointed out that this was crucial because it would immediately give us credibility in New York and that would be very important in recruiting the right candidate.

I did not know anything about the art world. I looked around that room, and said to myself, “Wait a minute, there can’t be more than five people in the world we would consider for this job. Why do we need anyone to tell us that?” So I came up with this plan.

“Look, I don’t know anything about who might be our director,” I said. “But everyone else in this room must know who the top contenders will be. So let’s play a game. Everyone should write a list, a list of the five top choices, ranked from the first choice to the last, and we’ll see who emerges as our top contenders for director.” Everyone thought that this was a fine idea, and while Eli bristled a bit, he relented. Two names emerged, both of them either first or second choice on everyone’s list. One was Martin Friedman, the director of the wonderful Walker Museum in Minneapolis, and the other was Pontus Hultén, director of the magnificent Pompidou Center in Paris.

All of a sudden this became an international project! We sent someone to talk to the director of the Walker, who was interested but since he had just committed himself to launching a major capital campaign, he turned us down. We then sent Sam Francis over to Paris to talk to his old friend Pontus Hultén—Pontus eventually wrote a book about him. Sam brought him back on the airplane! It took a bit more negotiating. This move amounted to a resounding coup in the art world. In August 1980, our committee secured Pontus Hultén—the world-renowned museum professional who had helped found the Centre Georges Pompidou—as director of the new museum and Richard Koshalek as its chief curator.

This was one more example of the mysterious, magical synergy of how the pieces that became MOCA fell into place. The question of amassing a respected collection was next on our minds. I remember talking with Pontus about the fact that we were building a museum but did not yet have a collection. He reassured me, saying “You’ve got something going here. Don’t worry. The art will come.” Slowly but surely, a number of high-profile art patrons began to pledge their private collections to the museum, including Weisman, television executive Barry Lowen, and Robert Rowan, the former chairman of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art’s board of trustees. The museum also purchased 80 pieces from the highly-regarded collection of Count Giuseppe Panza di Blumo.

Plans for a temporary exhibition space known as the Temporary Contemporary were well underway by 1981, also overseen by Fred Nicholas. Located in a former warehouse originally renovated by Frank Gehry, the space—which is now known as the Geffen Contemporary—would house the museum collection until the new site was completed.

MOCA officially opened its jewel of a building on Bunker Hill on December 10, 1986. I was already on the Ninth Circuit and disengaged

from fundraising activities. Today, the museum boasts over 6,800 works from renowned artists like Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, Cindy Sherman, Ed Ruscha, and others.

The whole experience remains one my proudest achievements. Most of my previous work—whether in the law or in politics—seemed like a natural trajectory for an ambitious kid from Turtle Creek, PA. But creating MOCA was beyond anything that I could possibly have imagined, especially coming from where I did.

Sure, the work in pulling it all together played to some of my other strengths: I like to deal with people, I like to talk to people, I like to try to make agreements with people and try to get something done by working together. And that took me beyond my skills as a lawyer, and even beyond what I had been used to in the political world. For the first time in my life, I had the thrill of creating something physical that was enduring. Not a legal decision or a political success. This was a bricks and mortar institution that would give our whole community art and culture for generations. As Keith Mann said, “How many people have an opportunity to establish a new art museum—without any money and without any art?”

Add to that, how many who were kids from Turtle Creek who barely knew a Jackson Pollock from a Renoir?

But now, after all that work, when I drive by the fantastic building of MOCA, even after all these years, I get a thrill. And I can answer Keith Mann and honestly say, “I did.”