Peter Selz, 1919-2019  
Barbara C. Buenger

Peter Selz, renowned art historian, museum curator, advocate and teacher of modern and contemporary art, and honorary member of the Max Beckmann Society, died on June 21, 2019. In April he celebrated his 100th birthday at the University of California’s Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BMAPFA) he had long fostered.

Born to a wealthy Jewish family in Munich on March 27, 1919, Selz enjoyed many traditional pleasures of a German youth even as the Nazi persecution of Jews increased. His passion and ability to analyze art were nurtured by his maternal grandfather, the distinguished Munich art dealer Julius Drey, in weekly meetings at the Alte Pinakothek and other galleries. After he and his immediate family escaped Germany in the mid-1930s, Selz supported them by working in New York’s Rheingold brewery. At the same time he also familiarized himself with the American art scene under the guidance of a distant relative, gallerist and photographer Alfred Stieglitz; such other emigré dealers as J.B. Neumann, Curt Valentin, and Karl Nierendorf; and contemporaries Hildegard Bachert (later of the Galerie St. Etienne) and Kate Steinitz encountered in the German Jewish Werkleute group. Quick to assimilate himself to American life, the gregarious Selz discovered, interacted with, and championed artists in every city in which he lived.

After wartime service in the U.S. army and Office of Strategic Services and marriage to the writer Thalia Cheronis, Selz attended the University of Chicago on the G.I. Bill, met numerous Chicago artists through association with Lázló Moholy-Nagy’s Institute of Design, and studied for two years in Paris. As chair of the art department and director of the art museum at Pomona College in Claremont, CA (1955-1958), he became engaged with local artists and musicians, presented a first exhibition of German Expressionist art, and completed publication of
his dissertation, *German Expressionist Painting* (1957). That volume, treasured for its far-ranging introduction to the movement’s art, theories, and journals, remains in print to this day.

In 1958 Selz became curator of painting and sculpture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, where his innovative exhibitions won both acclaim and consternation. If a New York infatuated with abstract expressionism initially scorned “New Images of Man” (1959), many came to recognize the strength and contemporaneity of Selz’s figurative emphasis. Although Jean Tinguely’s self-destructing kinetic machine, “Homage to New York” (1960), shocked the museum when it mistakenly caught fire, it was ultimately recognized as one of MoMA’s major triumphs. Among many important exhibitions devoted to single artists, Selz presented the first American exhibition ever of Auguste Rodin and a Mark Rothko retrospective that Rothko unusually installed himself.

Always an advocate of modern German art, Selz had proposed a Max Beckmann exhibition when he first applied for the MoMA position; he would long be identified with Beckmann and considered him one of the 20th century’s strongest figures. As he wrote his dissertation in Chicago Selz had queried Beckmann about his interests in Grünewald and Bosch: probably confusing Selz with his dealer grandfather, Beckmann referred to the graduate student as “Dreyfus” in his diary. Selz’s comprehensive retrospective (also exhibited in Frankfurt, Hamburg, London, Boston, and Chicago) reintroduced Beckmann into discussions of modernism at just the time many contemporaries sought new models of figuration. Selz was delighted, but unsurprised, that admired figurative artists of subsequent generations, from Nathan Olivera to William Kentridge, found orientation in Beckmann. He returned to Beckmann on several occasions, as for the Gagosian Gallery’s 1992 prize-winning exhibition of the self-portraits.
From 1965-1973 Selz directed and expanded the University of California’s Berkeley Art Museum and inaugurated the Pacific Film Archive into stellar, internationally esteemed collections. He retired from teaching in 1988, respected for his energy, insights, and promotion of non-mainstream individuals and approaches. Selz flourished in Berkeley, absorbed in the city’s radical bohemianism and activist politics as he continued his prolific output of criticism and more than fifty books and exhibition catalogues. His exhibitions highlighting European as well as American artists were often the first to celebrate new directions, including Funk! (1967) (with Robert Arneson, Peter Voulkos, and Bruce Conner) and Directions in Kinetic Sculpture (1966, co-directed with George Rickey). In 1972 he mounted the first American retrospective of Ferdinand Hodler (1972) and became project manager for Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s Running Fence (1972-76). He collaborated both with a colleague and with a former student on texts that remain standard college textbooks (Theories of Modern Art, with Herschel B. Chipp [1968] and Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, with Kristine Stiles, 1996). One of his several volumes on contemporary art, Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond (2005), won the 2007 Charles Rufus Morey Prize of the College Art Association.

As the feminist artist Moira Roth acclaimed in Paul J. Karlstrom, Peter Selz. Sketches of a Life in Art (2012): “Peter had a passion for art, more so than other art historians. It was so impressive how much he looked at, touched, works of art. He was putting order into disorderly contemporary art. And he was comfortable with artists, and they with him.” Prof. Selz is survived by his fifth wife, Carole Schemmerling; his daughters Gabrielle Selz and Thanya Selz; his stepdaughters Mia Baldwin and Kryssa Schemmerling; four grandchildren; and one great-grandson.