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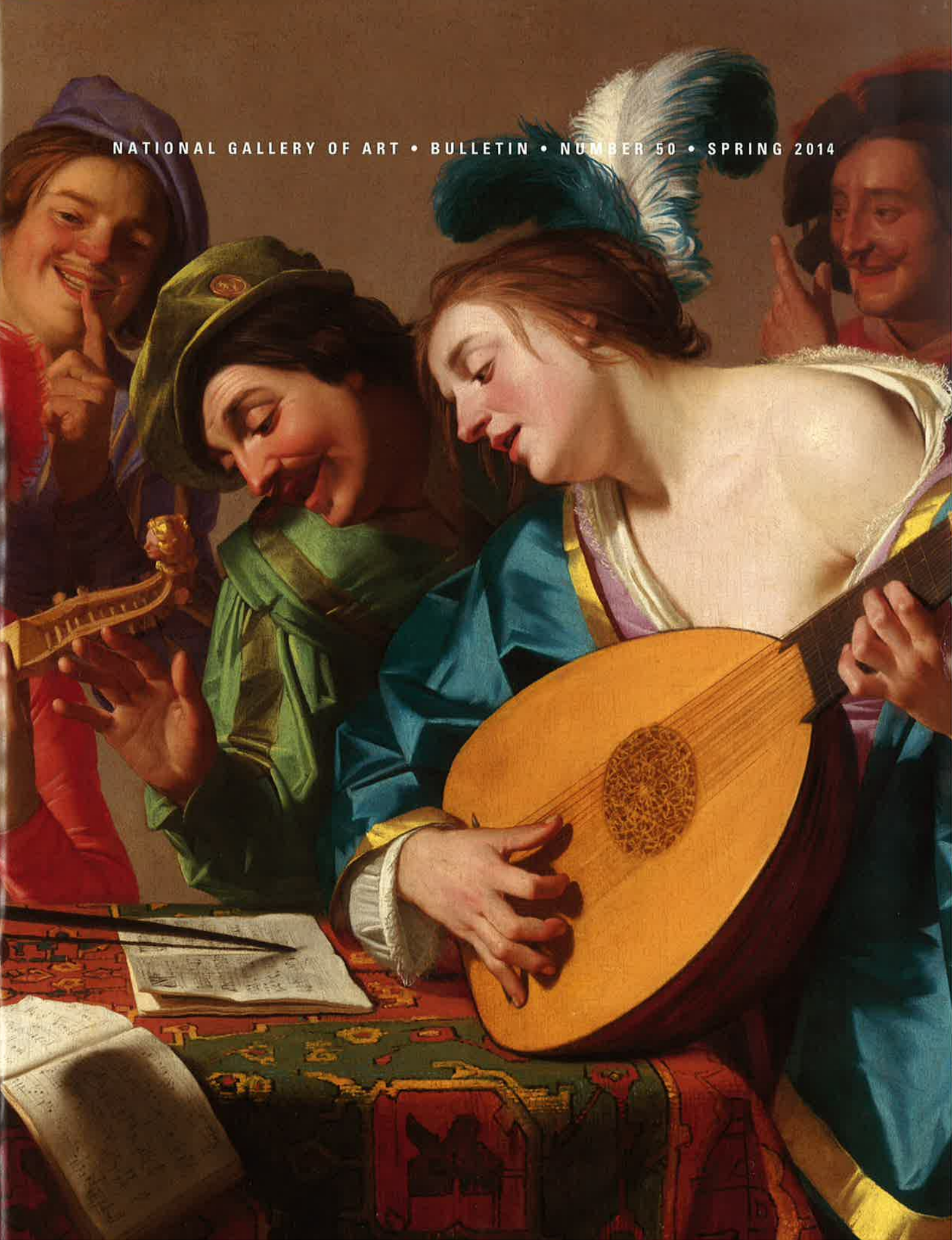

CASVA
Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

A Kress Professor Remembered: William Chapin Seitz (1914–1974)

In 2012 one of the six senior fellowships at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts was given a new name and assured of its future. The William C. Seitz Fellowship at CASVA was established through the will of Irma Seitz, who directed that the proceeds from the sale of her residuary estate be used for this purpose in honor of her late husband. Her generous gift is the first bequest made to CASVA in memory of an alumnus. William Chapin Seitz—always known as Bill—was named Samuel H. Kress professor for 1971–1972. The Center was not yet officially established, but planning was well under way, and Seitz, who had just been appointed to the University of Virginia, brought new momentum to the expansion of research and scholarship at the Gallery.

The Seitz Fellowship provides a special opportunity to remember the pioneering role in the development of American art, art history, and curatorial practice of this versatile, brilliant, and passionate man. A former curator of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and director of the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Seitz was the first Kress professor to specialize in modern and contemporary art. His distinguished career was marked by many such firsts. After working for the Federal Arts Project, he earned his BFA at the University of Buffalo, and remained a serious artist throughout his life. Seitz eventually went on to graduate study in art history at Princeton University and exhibited his work in one-man shows at the Princeton University Art Museum in 1949 and 1950. Determined to work on a PhD degree, he proposed to write a thesis on abstract expressionism even though contemporary art was not yet accepted as a suitable subject for academic study at Princeton.

Fig. 1. Alice Neel, *William Seitz*, 1963, oil on canvas, Princeton University Art Museum/Art Resource, NY, Gift of Dr. Hartley Neel in memory of William C. Seitz, © Estate of Alice Neel, Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

Fig. 2. Alice Neel, *Irma Seitz*, 1963, oil on canvas, Princeton University Art Museum/Art Resource, NY, Gift of Richard Neel in memory of William C. Seitz, © Estate of Alice Neel, Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

Late in 1950, Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, came to the defense of Seitz's proposal in a now famous exchange of letters with Baldwin Smith, chairman of the department of art and archaeology at Princeton. Barr recognized the challenges: Seitz might lack sufficient perspective on the recent past, foreign-language sources would be used very little, and perhaps nobody at Princeton could supervise the work adequately. At the same time, Barr, who had just that summer presented abstract expressionism at the Venice Biennale, saw great value in the project. His own work on Henri Matisse and the Fauves had been hindered by the lack of thorough, scholarly documentation. Seitz was a painter, Barr wrote, but primarily an objective scholar capable of documenting living artists whose work was, for the first time in Barr's view, equal if not superior to painting "anywhere in the western world." Everyone concerned with contemporary art, insisted Barr, urgently needed the support of young, well-trained scholars to order the history and theory of the recent past.

Seitz received his PhD in 1955 and was appointed to the Princeton faculty. Another series of firsts would follow.

He invented a drawing studio and a painting program in which Walter Darby Bannard and Frank Stella flourished. On moving to MoMA in 1959, Seitz turned to a study of Claude Monet, whose work he saw as foundational for American abstract painters. He produced the first scholarly monograph on the artist, documenting the many places where Monet painted. Seitz also masterminded such major exhibitions as *The Art of Assemblage*, *The Responsive Eye*, and monographic treatments of Mark Tobey, Hans Hofmann, and Arshile Gorky.

As Kress professor, Seitz brought energy and expertise to the Gallery's new commitment to twentieth-century art. In 1973 he helped curate *American Art at Mid-Century 1*, the first exhibition of modern painting and sculpture organized by the Gallery, installing works by Gorky, Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, and others, including Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, on the ground floor of the West Building. It was Seitz who encouraged the young curator Gil Ravenel to concentrate on exhibition design, helping in the conception of *The Far North*, Ravenel's innovative display of American Eskimo and Indian art.

Irma Seitz, also a painter, was as committed to the cause of contemporary art as her husband. Alice Neel's portrait diptych (figs. 1 and 2) captures their vibrant characters especially well. Some years after her husband's early death in 1974, Irma Seitz expressed their shared affection for the Gallery through the gift and bequest of twenty-seven works of art from their personal collection by artists from Bruce Connor to Gene Davis to Hans Hofmann. Among these is an early work by Seitz's pupil Frank Stella, inscribed on the stretcher: "for Bill and Irma / ROWLEY 1962 Frank Stella" (fig. 3). Irma Seitz's more precise identification of its subject in her own list as "George Rowley" is important. Rowley taught in Princeton's department of art and archaeology, and art historian and critic Michael Fried, who was Stella's close friend at Princeton, remembers that "his course on Chinese art was maybe the best, the most eye-opening, I ever took." Rowley's formalist and spiritual approach to the subject held appeal for the young abstract painters around Seitz. Rowley, in turn, had worked behind the scenes with Barr to help Seitz advance his chosen thesis subject. The Gallery would publish that groundbreaking dissertation as *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* in 1983.

Irma Seitz was a careful custodian of her husband's legacy. She gave his papers to the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Together with those at the Museum of Modern Art and the University of Virginia, they provide an essential foundation for anyone studying the explosion of interest in contemporary American art among museums in the 1960s and 1970s. She bequeathed pottery from the Acoma Pueblo to the National Museum of the American Indian. To CASVA she generously provided the means to support the sort of scholarship her husband had championed. Four paintings by Bill Seitz also came to the Center from her estate. One now hangs outside the dean's office (fig. 4), and another is in the office of the Kress professor, contributing to the memory of this teacher, curator, critic, painter, and art historian who was among the first to take the study of contemporary American art seriously. • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*

Fig. 3. Frank Stella, *Rowley*, 1962, alkyd on canvas, Gift of William C. Seitz and Irma S. Seitz

Fig. 4. William Chapin Seitz, *Wall of Remorse*, 1952, mixed media on paper on canvas, Gift of Irma Seitz