

Agnes Mongan: "White-haired Dynamo"

Agnes Mongan, who died recently at the age of 91, has already been the subject of some weighty tributes—celebrated as an author of catalogues and scholarly articles, authority on Clouet, Watteau, and Degas, expert on left-handed artists, American liaison to Bernard Berenson, seminar teacher at Harvard, first woman director of the Fogg Art Museum.

But I like to picture her shaking off the sleazy cop trying to shadow her in Vienna. It was a spring day in 1936. She had been told to leave town fast, but was determined to enjoy one last lark. With the same eye for detail and tone of dismissiveness she might have used for a fake Ingres, Agnes described her tail to me as "a thin oily blond." She had decided to give the poor guy some real work. First, the tiny 30-year-old New Englander walked briskly to the city outskirts to cross the Danube. Then, back in the center, she stood through a High Mass in St. Stephen's Cathedral. After that she rushed to see the Lipizzaner stallions at the Winter Riding School and doubled back to the Kunsthistorisches Museum for one final look at the Breughels. By the time she returned to her hotel, the elegant Bristol, she was running—and so was he. The last time she glimpsed him at the train station—this detective hired by an Austrian government fearful of the potential loss of one of its greatest art treasures—the man looked half-dead. Agnes's 85-year-old face lit up like that of a contentedly naughty child as she told me the story. What she loved, in drawings as in life, was adventure.



A seat at the table: The late Agnes Mongan (second from left) with colleagues including Paul Sachs (far right) in Vienna.

Her Vienna escapade occurred after Paul Sachs, her boss at Harvard, sent her on a secret mission to catalogue and authenticate the Albertina collection of drawings. The Austro-Hungarian archduke Albrecht, allegedly its owner, wished to sell the collection clandestinely, and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and the Fogg wanted it, however dubious Albrecht's claim. Albrecht needed money to maintain his many girlfriends, support his gambling, and fund his lavish household.

Agnes came from a middle-class Irish Catholic background in Somerville, Massachusetts. Her mother, a schoolteacher, read her four children the classics each night, and in summer trained them to identify wildflowers, mushrooms, and other natural species. Her father, a doctor, instructed Agnes in Latin and mythology before sending her to Bryn Mawr College. But the product of this rigorous upbringing delighted in Albrecht's hijinks. Even after the Austrian government halted the raid of the Albertina and sent Agnes packing, she never regretted the caper.

How I loved hearing that white-haired dynamo with her sparkling eyes describe sneaking through the tunnels of Harvard's Widener Library and conniving to use the Faculty Club when both were off-limits to women. She followed her own rule that for a woman to succeed she "merely had to be better than the men" and became the second woman in the United States to direct a major museum.

Above all, Agnes Mongan taught and wrote about Old Master drawings and made their power contagious. She once asked her close friend Berenson, "How can one ever know enough or look enough?" But Agnes saw and conveyed more than most of us put together.

NICHOLAS FOX WEBER