Museum director fought to save Rivera murals

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

Recent controversy between Detroit Institute of Arts officials and the public, stemming from a decision to dig up the floor of the Rivera Court to install a staircase, carried little of the acrimony that accompanied an earlier confrontation between the two groups.

In 1932, the public was all determined to rip out the walls of the great hall on which Mexican artist Diego Rivera had just completed a series of murals that were a glowing tribute to man's ingenuity and the industrial revolution.

The public labeled Rivera's primitive style and the frescoes Marxist and antichrist. Museum officials claimed his works on a par with Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Fortunately, as over one million visitors can attest, the officials won that one.

The 1932 struggle provides grist for one of many episodes that late biographer Margaret Sterne related while weaving a fascinating portrait of William R. Valentiner, who served as director of the fledgling Detroit museum from 1924-1945.

Titled, "The Passionate Eye" (Wayne Press, $19.95), the narrative of the often quixotic personality, who is attributed with being the founder of the museum as we know it today, is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand Detroit's confusing dual role as industrial capital and sophisticated culture center.

VALENTINER WAS born in 1880 in Karlsruhe, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Baden. Educated in Germany, like many immigrants who flocked to Detroit during its industrialization, Valentiner brought with him a unique expertise that was to prove useful.

His brilliant understanding of an art world undergoing a major revolution during the early and mid portion of the 20th Century was to turn Detroit's provincial museum into a ranking art center before his death in 1956.

Trained by the world's foremost art historians, Valentiner developed a reputation as one of the leading experts on Rembrandt. At the same time, his nocturnal habit of relaxing in earthier havens throughout European cities was developing his knowledge of another movement in the art world, the German Expressionists, whose influence was soon to be felt on both sides of the ocean.

Fortunate indeed for Detroit was a decision by Valentiner's mentor, friend and teacher Wilhelm von Bode that the youthful historian was becoming too much a threat to von Bode's hold over the Berlin museum establishment.

Valentiner arrived in Detroit to take over directorship of the museum in 1924 just as the great industrialists and businessmen were finding time to turn their attention to art collecting on a major scale.

The invitation to take over the museum's directorship (he had been a consultant for the two previous years, 1923-24), arrived on the eve of his return to Europe after a disappointing lack of offers. Valentiner noted in his diary. However, when the invitation did come, Valentiner, a close friend and advisor to collectors J.P. Morgan, Widener, Frick, Rockefeller and the Mellons, found himself lionized to an embarrassing degree on his arrival in Detroit.

DRAWING EXTENSIVELY on Valentiner's personal papers and diaries, Sterne's narrative recapitulates his rise as an appraiser of private and public collections, his skirmishes with the Detroit City Council, friendships with Eleanor and Edsel Ford, and his major acquisitions he made for the museum during extensive study and buying trips in Europe.

The story also details Valentiner's frustrated youth (his mother was committed to a mental institution, his father never fully approved his son's choice of a career). She also delves into his friendships, admirations and romances with a variety of leading figures of his day.

Of one such association involving actress Katherine Cornell, Valentiner noted in his diary that he was so fearful that he would not be able to be near the great actress that he refused to attend a party in her honor.

Sterne also paints a portrait of Detroit bursting from frontier town into the cultural age. Industrialist Edsel Ford takes on dimension and compassion through Valentiner's personal commentary.

An instant rapport between himself and Edsel Ford, Valentiner noted in his letters, led to the salvation of the museum as the Depression deepened (Ford personally paid the staff salaries), and more importantly, Ford's protection and patronage of the Rivera murals during the 1932 controversy was instrumental in their preservation.

"FORTUNATELY, Diego Rivera and Edsel Ford understood each other very well, perhaps proving that the world might be more peaceful if the representatives of opposing social orders were constantly in personal touch with each other or were perhaps forced to work together," Valentiner noted in his diary.

Valentiner didn't disguise his pleasure that Rivera, like himself, had discovered that the industrialist "had none of the characteristics of an exploiting capitalist, that he had the simplicity and directness of a workman in his own factories and was one of the best of them."

Some of the most important information that Sterne has incorporated in her biography of Valentiner lies in descriptions of the acquisitions for which Valentiner was responsible.

Not only was he instrumental, she noted, in acquiring major pieces of antiquity, he was the first to recognize the importance of the Impressionist movement; and he was also among the first to recognize the need for proper display areas and techniques.

In 1922, she wrote, Valentiner brought to Detroit the first of what is the museum's collection of modern works, including Van Gogh's "Self Portrait," which he purchased for $4,200, Raoul Dufy's "Still Life," purchased for $75, and Matisse's "Interior with Forget-Me-Nots." The latter, she writes, was the first Matisse to be acquired by an American museum.

Valentiner also must have gained satisfaction when he was on hand to purchase works from his old friend Wilhelm von Bode's acquisitions for private collections and the Berlin museums when the German mark collapsed.

The Detroit Arts Commission, she noted, was hard at work back in Detroit during Valentiner's acquisitive trips raising the funds needed to pay for his purchases.

To complete her reserach, Sterne read extensively among Valentiner's personal papers and those of others who carried on long, informative correspondences with the late director during his stay in Detroit and later when he worked with the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh.

Among them, she turned to his correspondences with William Randolph Hearst, Sir Joseph Duveen, actress Marion Davies, playwrite Clifford Odets, Helen Wills Moody, who introduced Valentiner to Rivera, and Bernard Berenson.

Sterne also interviewed the late J. Paul Getty with whom Valentiner worked during the formation of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, and the late Robert Tannahill, whose bequest to the Detroit Institute of Arts leapfroged the Detroit collection into a ranking international position.

Margaret Sterne did not live to see her manuscript completed and published, but the completed work, which was finalized and edited by Jean Owen, stands as a monument to a young man who struggled through feelings of insecurity, depression and financial inadequacy to become a giant in the international art world.