



Who Was Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.?

Industrialist, art collector, bibliophile, publisher, and theatrical producer Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., was born on May 27, 1909 in Oelwein, Iowa. He grew up on the Long Island estate of his father, Walter P. Chrysler, Sr., noted automobile designer, president of Buick Corporation, executive vice president of General Motors, and founder of the Chrysler Corporation.

The younger Chrysler was fond of recalling a remark his father once made to him concerning the fine art objects his parents had acquired: "Son, they are yours to enjoy only for a brief period of time. But remember that fundamentally they and all things like them must belong to everyone."

Inspired by these words, Chrysler began a nearly eight decades-long journey of collecting. *The New York Times* critic John Russell wrote: "It would be difficult to spend time in the Chrysler Museum and not come away convinced that the most underrated American art collector of the past 50 years was the late Walter P. Chrysler, Jr."

While a 14-year old student at Hotchkiss School, he purchased his first painting – a small Renoir watercolor of a nude – with \$350 in birthday money from his father. A dorm master, believing the work to be salacious, confiscated and destroyed the piece.

After graduating from Dartmouth College, Chrysler embarked on a grand tour of Europe. There he met Picasso, Braque, Gris, Matisse, Leger, and other *avant-garde* artists in Paris. He lost no time in buying works by each, quickly assembling among the largest and most important private collections of modern painting and sculpture in the United States. Throughout the 1930s, he enthusiastically participated in the development of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

In 1935 Chrysler acquired both the presidency of the Chrysler Building – a position he held until 1953 – and the Paul Eluard-Camille Dausse collection of Surrealist and Dada material for the Museum of Modern Art Library. As the first chairman of MoMA's Library Committee, Chrysler was instrumental in forming that preeminent modern art reference library. In addition, several pillars of MoMA's permanent collection – including Matisse's *Dance* and Picasso's *The Charnel House* – came from Chrysler's collection.

Although art was his chief interest, Chrysler made several theatrical forays. He produced the plays "The Strong Are Lonely" and "New Faces," a smash hit on Broadway which introduced actress Eartha Kitt. Chrysler also produced the film "The Joe Louis Story" and the English production of "The Hanging Judge."

In the public realm, Chrysler worked under Nelson Rockefeller as coordinator of inter-America Affairs in Washington, D.C., in 1940. At the outbreak of World War II a year later, he volunteered for service in the Navy. While serving in Norfolk, Virginia, Chrysler met Jean Ester Outland, whom he married in 1945. A previous marriage to Marguerite Sykes had ended in divorce.

By the early 1940s, Walter Chrysler had established himself as one of America's preeminent collectors. Adventurous in his acquisitions, he claimed he often "bought against fashion," acquiring superior works for comparatively modest sums. Of particular renown is the comprehensive 8,000-piece collection of glass, rich in holdings of Art Nouveau and 19th-century American art glass. Chrysler was an acquaintance of Long Island neighbor Louis Comfort Tiffany, and the elderly master's beautiful works inspired Chrysler to collect these delicate objects.

In 1956 Chrysler retired from an active role in business to devote his time completely to the arts. He settled his

vast holdings into a public space in 1958 with the founding of the Chrysler Art Museum in Provincetown, Massachusetts. The efflorescence of paintings, sculpture, artifacts and glass soon outgrew its limited quarters in a 19th-century church, however, and Chrysler began seeking a new home for the works. After visiting dozens of localities, he accepted an offer in 1971 from the city of Norfolk, where his wife still had long-standing ties.

"What had been the Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences became The Chrysler Museum," wrote *The New York Times'* John Russell. "And, in 1971 he made the gift that is one of the strongest and most various ever given at any one time by a single individual to an American museum."

After serving as director of the institution from 1971 through 1976, Chrysler chaired the Board of Trustees from 1976 through 1984. He was named chairman emeritus in 1984. Chrysler's abiding love of books, which he shared with his wife, led to the founding of what became the Jean Outland Chrysler Library with Mrs. Chrysler's death in 1982.

Chrysler also was an active member of the Virginia Opera board of directors. In his last years he focused his attention and energy on the Music Library and Musical Instruments Museum, which he founded in 1980. With the same enthusiasm he devoted to fortifying the institution's art library, he assembled a 10,000-volume library of musical literature, a collection of 400,000 recordings ranging in style from classical to jazz, and an extensive assortment of musical instruments.

For his support of the arts in Norfolk, Chrysler was named the First Citizen of the Arts in 1980 by the Metropolitan Arts Congress of Tidewater, Inc. In 1985 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree from Old Dominion University.

Chrysler died in Norfolk, on September 17, 1988, after a long struggle with cancer. The *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper wrote of Chrysler after his death, "The museum bears his name, but his mark, perhaps indelible, is upon the region."