

# ART | ANDREA O. COHEN

## The Corcoran's new boss

ON April 26, the trustees of the Corcoran accepted "Aldus Chapin's suggestion" that his post as executive vice-president be abolished, and direction of the gallery and the art school passed into the hands of an operations committee headed by Vincent Melzac. Within less than two weeks, Melzac fired a number of key executives, changed the responsibilities of others and abolished or shifted the duties of many administrative offices. On May 13, we talked over lunch.

AOC: Remember that article Paul Richard wrote about you a few days ago?

Vincent Melzac: How could I forget?

AOC: He made you sound like a mafioso shylock and you don't seem...

VM: You don't think I'm tough?

AOC: I'm sure you're tough, but you don't give the impression of a desk-pounding head smasher.

VM: You don't have to do it that way.

'Who's this guy Melzac,' I heard a guy asking another at a cocktail party a couple of days ago. 'He's a son of a bitch who cares,' was the answer. Richard is absolutely right about one thing. I never made a decision before having all the facts, but then--I don't hesitate. I use no magic formulas, just sound business practices; it's what I'm used to. I've always driven a hard bargain, gotten as much as I could for my money and am doing the same for the Corcoran. During the last two weeks I stopped two construction projects; one was a plan to rebuild an entire wall in the basement of the school. I asked: 'who authorized this and how much is it costing?' Fifty to 70,000, I was told, and work was to start Monday morning. I stopped it on the spot. We could hardly make the week's payroll.

AOC: When word of Chapin's resignation came out, I heard people expressing the view that now everyone's in charge of nothing and no one's in charge of everything. They were wrong, right?

VM: Right. I'm responsible for decisions on a day to day basis. I know there are a lot of people who don't like that. It's not a pleasant job, firing people--even if they should have been released years ago. I'm not interested in being a popular man; I've got a job to do and that's to make the Corcoran run.

It all started about a year ago, when we had a flood in the basement. Paintings and antiques were damaged. When we put in a claim to the insurance company, they came, investigated and said 'what are we doing insuring this thing? It's an uninsurable property according to current standards.' We went to a Rochester, N. Y. consulting firm. The resulting Smith Report pointed out that we'd have to put up some 350 to 375,000 to modernize the building. I'm vague about the figures, but the point is we have a building with bad wires, among other things, and we have to repair it. Also how can we entice people to become members of an institution with glaring defects? (The day after this conversation the Corcoran announced that a \$200,000 grant was made to the museum by the Richard King Mellon Charitable Trusts, Pittsburgh, Pa., in reply to a request made by Chapin in January, '71. The money is earmarked for modernization of the electrical system.)

AOC: When the financial fiasco was publicized, I had the feeling Chapin would be scapegoated.

VM: I want to tell you off the record...I don't have time for the past. I want to give Aldie (Chapin) all the help I can. If he wants to be a fund raiser, he should be given the chance. I have no secrets from him and he shares his knowledge with me. I had another lady come in the other day who wanted to activate the question of how accurate our figures are. I said, 'please, that's dead and gone and I'm not interested in contradicting anything, but in getting a job done.'

And I want to tell you, the trustees are deeply involved and caring, which is not the image the public has of them. People see them as stuffy old men. They reached out and created an administrative structure, but it ran away from them and they had to pull back. Hamilton, the president of the trustees, is a very knowledgeable person and I confer with him almost daily; but the final decisions rest with me.

AOC: What was your position before Chapin's resignation?

VM: I wasn't on the board of trustees, but on the board of governors, and was vice-president of

the Works of Art Committee, which really runs the gallery.

AOC: How were you chosen for your present job?

VM: I was invited to a trustees' meeting, and assumed they just wanted a report. I had no knowledge they wanted me to do this. In fact, I had recommended someone else.

AOC: Who chose your committee?

VM: Me. Let me give you some idea of how we work. We meet twice a week, and we're working on a number of problems simultaneously, but each member of the committee has his own bailiwick. For example, Mary Chase is concerned with the whole area of scholarships, grants and community affairs. Carlton Swift has the task of reviewing the pay structure, the committees, how they're organized and staffed.

AOC: I take it that your first priority was to weed out the administrative staff and that you've all but completed that.

VM: There's only one administrative man other than myself left, that's Hal Glicksman (Associate Director under Walter Hopps before Melzac took over). He's directly responsible to me now, rather than to Walter. Hopps is not suited for administrative work. He has no experience in it, and it's only an irritation to him. He's a very aesthetic, sophisticated guy. When he comes back--he's been gone for ten days--he'll be freed of administrative duties.

Administratively, there's only one fuzzy area left and that's the comptroller's office; we want to structure our accounting system in the simplest way possible.

AOC: I take it you're trying to simplify things across the board.

VM: Absolutely.

AOC: Do you plan to stay in the present building?

VM: It's a magnificent, beautiful thing--Yes. But, it was built in 1897 and needs to be modernized.

AOC: What about the fund raising drive Chapin had planned?

VM: We have to get our house in order first and have delayed it indefinitely; it's at least a year away.

AOC: What are the prospects for federal aid, in the form of matching funds, for example?

VM: We're working on that now, and it's another thing which should be checked on long ago. The National Endowment is interested and we're trying to negotiate a matching grant of about \$35,000.

AOC: What do you regard as the Corcoran's priorities after getting your administrative structure in order; what do you see as the Corcoran's role?

VM: I can't answer that for the committee; we haven't gotten that far. For now, I'm occupied with the job at hand, but have some ideas. We have to assess our whole outreach program, like the Dupont Center.

AOC: Have you changes in mind for the Dupont Center Workshop?

VM: We're studying that now. All we know is it's costing us money, and we're not sure just how much, because of the bugs in our accounting

system. The question is, are we getting our money's worth and is it serving the needs it was intended to.

AOC: What about the Corcoran school?

VM: That's the one place where there's fresh air; where things are green, and I don't mean in dollars. The rest is brown. The school just got accreditation with the National Association of Schools of Fine Arts, and is the only part of the museum that pays its own way.

But to get back to the role of the Corcoran. I think there's room for a private museum in Washington. There should be more involvement with the other museums. I'd like to see a committee made up of Joshua Taylor, Carter Brown--who I think will make art history--the head of the African Museum and Hirschorn. We shouldn't compete, but sit down and discuss and cooperate. This museum should be completely involved with the community and what we call our local artists. None of the other museums are in a position to do what we can. At least we have one room.

AOC: But the Washington Room has been consistently pre-empted for one reason or another.

VM: Yes, and I don't understand that.

AOC: Broadly speaking Washington artists fall into two categories, don't they? There's the 4% who are color painters and their progeny; the second category consists of everyone else.

VM: Yes, and I don't think it's fair. I think very good things are being done in realism and gesture painting. But, while I ride herd on everything else, exhibitions are Walter's job. I do think, however, that our exhibits should be more balanced.

AOC: Since Walter Hopps does have his artistic preferences--who doesn't?--is it consistent to want more balanced shows and leave the job to him?

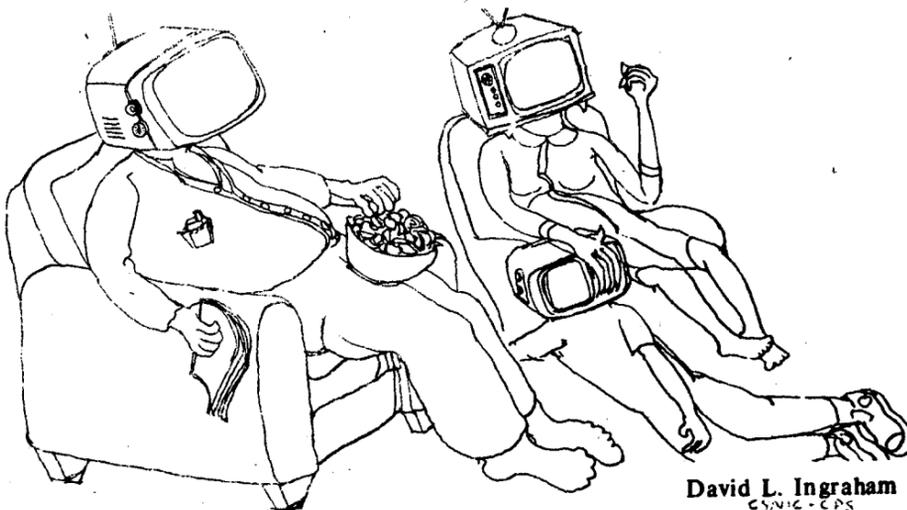
VM: I expect no conflict with Walter; he has an impeccable background. But, if he had his own way, from my point of view, we might go out of business. Our committee has the final decision. The process is the same as it was under Chapin, but then no one cared. Now we do, because we know the exhibits have not produced the attendance we wanted. We need money and one way to get it is through exhibits.

AOC: What do you think of holding an auction to raise funds?

VM: That's not a new idea. I want an acceleration of the recession program, and by next week I want a practical, workable, point by point procedure to implement it. I want to hire someone for the summer to go through the stacks and sort things out--another thing which should have been done long ago. Yesterday we got a check for \$7500 for a print and we can do a lot more along these lines. We have stuff we shouldn't. Our interest is in American art, not European. You know we didn't have one Clifford Still before I came. There wasn't one in Washington.

But, to get back again to ideas, I need all the help I can get, and recognize it. At present I work 18 hours a day and my doors are always open, even to the guards.

All of a sudden people are walking briskly in the museum and they're smiling, and that's a positive indicator.



David L. Ingraham  
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## LETTERS Cont'd

disrupters expect coffee and doughnuts from the police? Undoubtedly government agents would have known of the plans, but to make them so clearly public seems needlessly provocative and/or suicidal. How are we to gauge the seriousness of a "citizen army" which was caught flat-footed in its encampment and then dispersed? The spirit of Woodstock, apparently so prevalent at West Potomac Park, seems to have borne little resemblance to the spirit of '76. If I remember correctly, it was in the "first" American Revolution that Washington's ill-clothed and poorly equipped troops surprised the Hessians at their revels. The historical parallel is obviously not very flattering.

Finally, the mass arrests, the "concentration camps" and what Sam Smith refers to as "a taste of what a second Thousand Year Reich might be like." These allusions to incipient Naziism have become as obligatory on the Left as the Munich analogy was for the architects of the foreign policy which led us into Vietnam. In neither case are the analogies of much use; they are merely self-serving. What were the police to do? One can entertain fantasies as to what he would have liked for the police to do, but it seems to me that once the disruptions had been pre-announced, the police had no choice but to attempt to disperse and/or arrest the disrupters.

There were undoubtedly innocent bystanders arrested and conditions in some of the jails were obviously horrible. (In like manner, car fires were slashed and many bottles and bricks were hurled, though such was not typical of the disrupters.) But suppose detention centers had been set up beforehand and provisions for detainees stocked in. The cries of "concentration camp" would have filled the air and with considerable justification. And what should be done in the future, if this is truly not the last of the massive disruptions? Build special camps with adequate facilities for detaining protestors? One shudders at the thought. The point is that no police force, no jail system, no court system can cope with such massive disrupters, least of all the District's. The institutions are not designed nor the police trained for that purpose. As a result, in situations of stress the resort is to the simplest and most straight forward of measures--the tear gas, billy club and massive arrests.

I am not at all clear in my mind what the answer to the last set of problems is. It seems to me, however, that we are ill-served by a radical movement that operates according to the principle of "the worse, the better," that masquerades as a revolutionary army until the crunch comes and then cries that "It's just us well-meaning kids," that excoriates liberals and then screams like charter members of the ACLU when civil liberties are violated, that shouts "power to the people" and fails to ever talk to the people, and then tells us that out of all this a new and better order will emerge.

Richard King

## DISABILITY cont'd

guarding federal buildings...How much should the local situation dictate the national situation?"

As much as Congress sees fit, since they set the retirement rate and pass the laws establishing the system. Councilman Veazey would like to add non-partial private citizens and doctors to the retirement board, and the Commissioner has the power to do this. Bruce Terris of the D.C. Democratic Central Committee wants to remove all police and fireman from the board. Don Weinberg of the D.C. personnel office counters that changing the composition of the board won't matter because the basic rules are set by Congress and the courts.

Councilman Veazey feels that the best hope for changing the system is for the City Council to document flagrant abuses and push Congress for amendments to the retirement laws. Given the power of the police lobby with the House District Committee, Veazey may incur a disability in the line of duty trying to change things.

## Now let us praise a famous photographer

ROLAND FREEMAN

An exquisite group of photographs opened at the Corcoran Gallery on Saturday, May 14, for a one-month stay. This exhibition should be an absolute must for any photographer or student of modern American history. The Gallery has displayed these magnificent photographs in such a way that it is pure visual delight to view them. They are the works of one of America's finest living photographers, Walker Evans. Although the photographs presented in this exhibition were taken over a span of 40 years, a large portion of the work displayed was done during an 18-month period beginning late in 1935. It was during this extremely creative period that Evans produced all of the photographs for the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which portrayed the plight of the rural poor in the South, and was written by James Agee. During this period Evans, for the first time in his life as a photographer, was able to concentrate on his work with the assurance of a regular income, for these were the months of his service with the photographic unit of the Resettlement Administration (later called the Farm Security Administration.) He with a small group of photographers achieved what was probably the outstanding success of all the creative make-work projects of the Depression period. The success of this project was largely due to the fact that these photographers were given the opportunity to make true photographs, away from the carp-

ing help of editors and clients, and even away from the advice of bureaucrats. I sincerely hope that this will not be the last such exhibition by the Corcoran.

The Walker Evans opening was accompanied by another opening in the Corcoran's Rental Gallery of a show entitled "Eleven Washington Photographers," some never before exhibited in this area. Each photographer, of which I am one, is displaying 5 photographs.

Moving on to other fine photography news, for the youngsters living in the District of Columbia, there is a photographic competition being sponsored by the Black Women's League of Washington. This will be a fine opportunity for 10 to 18 year-olds to show what they can do. First prize will be a Nikon F camera, and the winners' work will appear in the *D.C. Gazette* and be on exhibit at the Education Gallery, National Collection of Fine Arts. Judges for the competition will be Maurice Sorrell, EBONY-JET, Matthew Lewis and Ellsworth Davis of the Washington POST, myself, Topper Carew of the New Thing and Bernie Boston, Washington STAR. All entries must be postmarked by no later than June 17. Applications have been distributed to all D.C. Public Libraries, Junior and Senior High Schools and to some community action groups. If applications in these places are not,

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## The McDowell Papers Getting bifocals

CHARLES McDOWELL JR.

DEAR Aunt Gertrude,

This is the first thing I have tried to type while wearing my new bifocals, and I feel as if I were on a ship crossing at sea.

The typewriter keeps moving. The letters blur and then come suddenly into focus. The room around me tilts one way and then the other. I am seasick, Aunt Gertrude, is what I am.

Anyway, I wanted to thank you for your letter of encouragement in response to my announcement of a couple of weeks ago that the age of bifocals was upon me.

It was helpful to be reminded that you have worn bifocals for 35 years and have become entirely accustomed to them. I must say, however, that I was not terribly encouraged by your observation that the first 10 years are the hardest.

You were just making a little joke, weren't you, when you said that Uncle Frazier, during his first week with bifocals, fell down the steps to the springhouse, stepped on a hoe, and kept tripping over the chickens?

It certainly is true that the bottom part of the lenses blurs and distorts things farther away than about 18 inches. I had to take the glasses off a few minutes ago to tie my shoe.

The top part of the lenses seems fine for distant objects, but I find it difficult not to look at everything through the little line between the tops and bottoms.

That line is bad news, Aunt Gertrude. It is a sort of artificial horizon that I am carrying around with me. Everything below the line is rolling like the ocean after a storm, and everything above it is as clear and calm as the evening sky.

So here I am at sea again, and I'm woozy and need to lie down.

Ever since the doctor prescribed the bifocals, I have been waiting anxiously for the optician to produce them.

I got a telephone call from the optician's office and a brisk female voice said, "Your executives are ready sir."

"My what?"

"Your executive glasses," she said.

Did you know that some people are so sensitive about getting bifocals that the eyeglasses

industry has invented "executives" as a euphemism?

Did you know, as a matter of fact, that the eyeglasses industry sometimes describes itself as dealing in "eyewear"?

Never mind. I picked up the glasses and drove back to Capitol Hill with my chin riveted against my chest to be sure that I was looking through the tops of the lenses. I forgot once and looked through the bottoms, and there was a truck on the hood of my car.

I stopped in the senate press gallery to test the bifocals in a typical "work situation." The senators whose desks are at the rear of the chamber looked clearer than I had seen them in years. I didn't recognize some of them.

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## Where to find the Gazette

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