American artist William Nelson Copley (1919–1996) was both an outsider and an insider. Known by his nom de plumes CPLY, he was a self-taught satirist and storyteller whose madcap, ribald narrative paintings and drawings bucked prevailing art trends. He also was a collector and patron of some of the most important artists of the twentieth century, in particular European Surrealists and American Pop artists.

Adopted in 1921 by wealthy Chicago and San Diego newspaper magnates Ira C. and Edith Copley, the left-leaning artist was the black sheep of his politically conservative family. He left Yale to fight in North Africa and Italy during World War II and returned to a job writing for his family’s newspapers. Introduced to Surrealism and painting by his brother-in-law John Ployardt, an artist working at Walt Disney Studios, Copley made art his life’s work.

In 1945, eighteen-year-old William Copley moved to Paris to study art at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. There he met the American artist Robert Motherwell, who introduced him to the Surrealist art of André Breton, Max Ernst, and Yves Tanguy. The following year, Copley and Ployardt opened the Copley Galleries in Beverly Hills, the first gallery dedicated to Surrealism on the West Coast. During its six months of operation, it showed works by René Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, and Joseph Cornell as well as Ernst and Man Ray. Although it was a commercial failure, the gallery became the primary source of Copley’s personal collection. Using his family fortune to make good on his promises to artists of guaranteed ten percent sales from each exhibition, he quickly amassed one of the most important holdings of Surrealist art in the world.

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eleven important works from his collection, many of which are on display in the Menil Collection’s nearby Surrealism galleries. The couple quickly became friends with, and patrons of, the artist as well, buying a number of his own paintings and drawings. Museum founding director Walter Hopps, who visited Copley’s gallery as a teenager, also became a lifelong friend. In the Menil Collection’s nearby Surrealism galleries. The couple quickly became friends with, and patrons of, the artist as well, buying a number of his own paintings and drawings. Museum founding director Walter Hopps, who visited Copley’s gallery as a teenager, also became a lifelong friend. In the same decade, Copley also made a number of X-Rated paintings, which were based on pages from pornographic magazines. Despite the strong sexual content of these works, Copley insisted that the X-Rated images, he stated, “are essentially still-lifes; they are flowers.” In the same decade, Copley also made a number of X-Rated paintings, which were based on pages from pornographic magazines. Despite the strong sexual content of these works, Copley insisted that the X-Rated images, he stated, “are essentially still-lifes; they are flowers.” In 1978, Copley began the Nouns series: images of everyday objects set against brightly colored, patterned backgrounds. Although one work from this series, Electric Chair (1978), acknowledges his friend Andy Warhol’s famous silkscreens of the execution chamber at Sing Sing Correctional Facility (as well as Vincent van Gogh’s 1888 painting of an empty chair), Copley’s subject matter in general, much of which is drawn from old Sears Roebuck catalogues, explores Americans—in particular a vanishing vaudevillian sensibility. The Nouns series was followed by the S.M.S. (Shit Must Stop) series, which was distributed by mail-order subscription. The six S.M.S. portfolios were more accessible. Distributed by mail-order subscription, the six S.M.S. portfolios were more accessible. Distributed by mail-order subscription, the six S.M.S. portfolios were more accessible.

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Given: 1. The waterfall; 2. The illuminating gas. (Étant donné: 1° La chute d’eau, 2° Le gaz éclairant ... (1952-55), for the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1958, with artist Dimitri Petrov, Copley established the Letter Edged in Black Press, which published the groundbreaking S.M.S. (Shit Must Stop) portfolios of multiples and authored artworks by many of the most famous artists of the time. Distributed by mail-order subscription, the six S.M.S. portfolios were also a means to subvert the traditional gallery system and make art more accessible. In the early 1970s Copley began the Nouns series: images of everyday objects set against brightly colored, patterned backgrounds. Although one work from this series, Electric Chair (1978), acknowledges his friend Andy Warhol’s famous silkscreens of the execution chamber at Sing Sing Correctional Facility (as well as Vincent van Gogh’s 1888 painting of an empty chair), Copley’s subject matter in general, much of which is drawn from old Sears Roebuck catalogues, explores Americans—in particular a vanishing vaudevillian sensibility. The Nouns series was followed by the S.M.S. (Shit Must Stop) series, which was distributed by mail-order subscription. The six S.M.S. portfolios were more accessible. Distributed by mail-order subscription, the six S.M.S. portfolios were more accessible. Distributed by mail-order subscription, the six S.M.S. portfolios were more accessible.

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