Passion for art fulfilled — in Houston

Museum will house collection of MoCA trustee Domenique de Menil

Domenique de Menil wants to keep the new museum on a "human scale" — "big inside but small outside."

By Hunter Drohojowska

HOUSTON — Most of the cottages in the neighborhood are painted dove gray. Actually, you could call it Domenique Gray, the color coating all of the buildings owned by art collector Domenique de Menil. That includes a new museum being built here in the Montrose area by architect Renzo Piano to house the Menil Collection, some 10,000 pieces of modern, contemporary and primitive art.

De Menil, also a trustee of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art, is considered one of the most generous and committed of art patrons. While the rich and famous often collect for status, hobby or investment, de Menil is considered an intellectual who collects out of passion. The new museum building is just east of another demonstration of this passion: the famous Rothko Chapel, an octagonal building designed for de Menil in 1972 by the eminent modernist architect Philip Johnson, with Houston architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubrey, to house enormous brooding abstract canvases by Mark Rothko that she commissioned in 1964.

With de Menil and museum director Walter Hopps otherwise engaged, associate director Paul Winkler, 36, agreed to show a visitor around. He keeps a well lit office of minimal clutter in one of the cottages behind the construction site of the half-completed building. He is a lanky, nervous man, an art history graduate of another de Menil project, the local Catholic University of St. Thomas. He doesn't want to be photographed or quoted, and in general wants to keep his profile as low as that of the museum.

He explained that de Menil's primary desire is to keep the museum on a "human scale" — "Big inside but small outside," she has said — so that it will not appear to dominate the residential neighborhood. They wanted to preserve the two-story scale of the University of St. Thomas, a campus also built by Johnson and funded by de Menil, just west of the Rothko Chapel. The area will be treated as a "village museum" — Piano's term — wherein the new building is just one of many dispersed elements. "This is not a monument to the de Menils, or to the architect, but a place where art has interest and the building has integrity," said Winkler. "This is not a final solution, but an approach to things that will continue."

The choice of Piano for a build-

ing of modest profile was surprising to some. Along with Richard Rogers, he designed one of the flashier museums around: the notorious high-tech, brightly colored Pompidou Center in Paris. It was the recommendation of de Menil's friend Pontus Hulten, former director of both that museum and L.A.'s MoCA, who suggested Piano for the commission. He is working with the Houston firm of Richard Fitzgerald and partners.

In Paris, Piano wanted to "demystify the idea of the museum, to negate its institutionalism, break down the barriers between culture and the public." In Houston, however, where culture is far from established, he sought the opposite, the return to "ritual . . . the right to enjoy works of art," in a peaceful oasis away from the metropolitan center.

Seen from the end, the museum is an L-shape, stretched along an entire block. The edges and windows will be supported by white steel girders, the face covered with panels of gray cypress, echoing the appearance of surrounding frame cottages. Budgeted at $21 million, the museum will have a net square footage of 100,000, with 30,000 square feet allocated to galleries. The taller, two-story portion of the building is close to completion, and will house offices, library, registration, conservation lab, staff lounges and the "Treasure House."

De Menil's lengthy interest in education and art history have led to this unconventional "Treasure House" for visible storage. Environmentally stable rooms will be hung salon style with paintings, and the historic artifacts such as African and Oceanic art will be kept in glass-fronted cabinets. Thus, the collection will always be available for spontaneous and intimate study. The galleries will be entirely on the ground floor and will measure approximately 20 feet by 40 feet. The ceilings are 16½ feet high with skylights, 14 feet without.

In an effort to preserve a calm meditative atmosphere, at most only a few hundred works will be displayed at a time. Like the private Frick Collection in New York City, the Menil Collection may operate free from the commercial pressures to draw mass audiences and concentrate instead on the quality of the viewing experience.

De Menil's concern for the proper natural lighting gained preeminence after her visit to a tiny museum in a kibbutz north of Tel Aviv. The architect calls the new museum "an atelier of light."

Piano devoted his high-tech interests to designing a glass-plated roof with interior "leaves" of concrete and steel that allow natural light to enter some of the galleries. "We wanted natural light in some of the areas but we didn't want it to be constant," explained Winkler. "There was to be life to the light, so you felt a sense of day." The varying lumination and gallery sizes are designed to reduce the "museum stress" that comes from the sort of visual overload experienced by anyone who has spent a day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Winkler added, "Rather than organize 30 or 40 shows a year, we'll continue a policy we had at the University of St. Thomas, to do one or two. . . . The thing is to focus on what you are doing and do it well.

"We want to have a particular identity as a place that takes care of the collection. It is built out of passion and love of what the de Menils were interested in. There's nothing mysterious about it. Rather than destroy the personal identity, it's about what they, their family and colleagues have been interested in. And it works well with the other museums in town," said Winkler.

De Menil was once quoted as saying, "What I admire, I must possess." Although she and the late John de Menil were known for their connoisseurship and their generosity, they were equally reputed to want complete control over any institution where they became involved. The de Menils moved to Houston in 1942 from France, refugees from the World War II. Domenique de Menil inher-

"Mother and Child" by Fernand Leger is part of the Menil Collection, which will be housed in a new museum in Houston.

ited her fortune from her father and uncle, the famed Schlumbergers, who invented a method of detecting what minerals and liquids were present during oil drilling. That business brought the family to a Texan town of only 380,000 and no culture. John became a trustee of the Fine Arts Museum but withdrew support when other trustees refused to exhibit modern art. They turned their charitable attentions to the University of St. Thomas in the late '40s, bought land and built a campus designed by Philip Johnson. They hung their modern paintings in the student commons, and endowed many departments, but spent the largest sums on the art history department, and an entire art library. But by 1969, when the conservative Basilian fathers refused to allow liberal lay people on the university board, the de Menils took their art, their library and even a few teachers and gave it all to Rice University.

Similarly, when the Contemporary Art Museum was formed in 1948, John de Menil joined the board and urged shows of the finest international art. Other trustees wanted more exposure for local artists but he resisted and hired the controversial director Jermayne MacAgy, formerly of San Francisco's Palace of the Legion of Honor. By 1959, she had exhibited such daring art, her contract was not renewed so the de Menils hired her to run the gallery at the University of St. Thomas. In 1959, the Museum of Fine Arts had built Cullinan Hall, a wing designed for modern art (again by Johnson) and John de Menil, who was on the board, brought out the brilliant [illegible] just resigned from the Guggenheim. He lasted until 1967 before he was fired for rejecting a trustee's Fragonard gift as a fake.

In short, the de Menils wanted to run things *their* way, which meant unwavering standards for the finest modern and contemporary art in a community which was only beginning to achieve any sophistication. Ultimately, their own museum was the only solution.

Plans to build were discussed with architect Louis Kahn but he died in 1974, and plans were put on hold. A few years ago, friends of the de Menils who were concerned that the incomparable collection might slip away from Houston offered $13 million toward the construction of the Menil Collection.

When the institution opens in the spring of 1986, Domenique de Menil will finally be able to see her collection in the manner to which she can become accustomed.