

About AICA

Unfolding the Archives of James Johnson Sweeney

by Marek Bartelik

"I however, had something else in mind: not to retain the new but to renew the old."

—Walter Benjamin

"[T]he main results of the [first AICA] Congress were I think, two. The first was the sense it gave one of the immense importance that for the human mind attaches to art and everything pertaining to it, because it is the imaginative expression of man's deepest feelings and beliefs in relation to his own destiny, his religion, his philosophy, his politics, his whole personal and social life. ... The second main result of the Congress was the decision to establish an International Bureau of Art Criticism."

—Thomas MacGreevy

A large white envelope addressed to the headquarters of AICA International at 32 rue Yves Toudic, 75010 Paris, stamped "Documents only," was mailed from New York on April 27, 2010. Last March, during my visit to the French capital to attend our annual administrative meeting, I found that envelope on a bookshelf in our office, stuck between two exhibition catalogues.

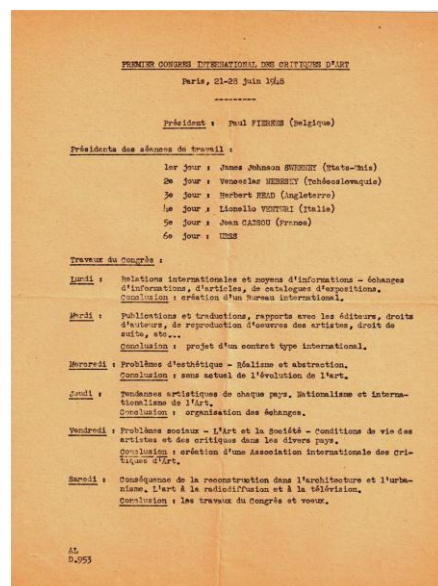
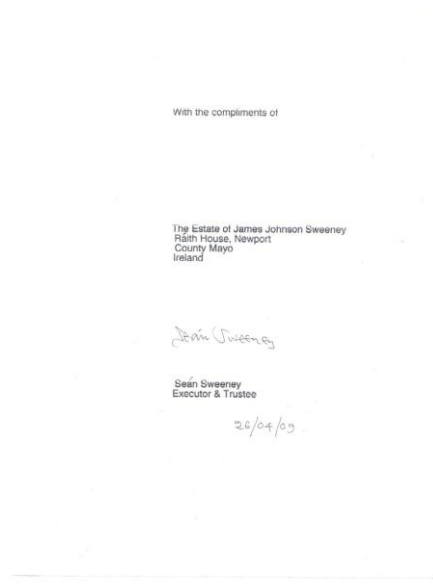
From the moment I opened the envelope and quickly read the documents in it, I knew I was holding something precious. The enclosed pages showed traces of age; yellowed, they were dotted with brown foxing, revealing the gap between the time the documents had been issued and the time they were mailed to Paris.

Then, I examined the individual documents—letters, brochures, and photographs—immediately becoming aware that any careless handling of them would result in breaking the fragile pages along their edges.

The documents were arranged more or less chronologically, dating from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s.

1948 Paris, France

Two of the earliest documents—two letters addressed to Sweeney—carry the dates May 26 and May 27, 1948 and concern the First International Congress of Art Critics, which took place at the Paris headquarters of UNESCO between June 21 and June 28 of that year. They were sent from the department of Cultural Services of the French Embassy in New York by René de Messières (identified as "Cultural Counselor") and G.L. Assié (identified as "The Cultural Counselor").



The first letter was accompanied by the Congress's preliminary program, which listed James Johnson Sweeney as one of four vice-presidents. Paul Fierens from Belgium was listed as president, and the other four vice-presidents were Herbert Read (England), Jean Cassou (France), Lionello Venturi (Italy), and Mojmír Vaněk (Czechoslovakia). The program listed the topics of daily sessions, which ranged from the discussion of contracts with publishers, including royalties and copyrights, to "Problems of aesthetics—realism and abstraction" and "Consequences of reconstruction in architecture and town planning."

The second letter begins with this statement:

I have just received from Paris the enclosed information about the First International Congress of Art Critics. I have been told that you are the representative of the International Association of Art Critics in the United States and, as such, I am sure that you will be interested in the program of this Convention.

Sweeney was asked to disseminate the information about the Congress among the American critics, who were yet to organize a local chapter of AICA in the United States.

The presence of Sweeney's name among the vice-presidents on the committee of the first International Congress of Art Critics had been already confirmed. On March 30, 1948, he had accepted the invitation sent to him a week earlier by Raymond Cogniat, President of the French Union of Art Press Professionals. The invitational letter to Sweeney mentions six vice-presidents, including one from the U.S.S.R., but the preliminary program does not list any specific name from that country. The final version of the program lists a person from the U.S.S.R. to preside over the sixth day of the Congress, but again no name is listed. In fact, no Soviet delegate attended the event, and Fierens presided on the sixth day in place of the absent Soviet delegate. Likewise, instead of Mojmír Vaněk, Venceslas Nebesky is listed as the representative from Czechoslovakia, and he presided on the second day of the Congress.

But there were Russian critics in the audience in Paris. The Sweeney archives contain an article by the Irish art critic and museum director Thomas MacGreevy, entitled "Art Criticism, and a Visit to Paris," in which he mentions the presence of:

Madame Krestovsky, a Russian lady of distinguished manner, who, as I understand it, wished for a canon of art criticism that would include ugliness as a recognized positive factor, as a thing that inspired art. She used the word 'new.' ... The lady came to me afterwards [after MacGreevy's presentation] to put matters right and I gathered that a book which she had had published in Paris was not so much conscious Manicheism [*sic*] as a plea for the setting up of an artistic equivalent to the Dostoevsky literary canon.

From a letter sent by Sweeney on May 28, 1948 to Cogniat, we learn that he would travel to Dublin on board the R.M.S. Mauretania and then, take a flight from the Irish capital to Paris via London—to arrive on the eve of the Congress. No funds for his travel were provided, but—as another letter indicates—the organizers covered the costs of his stay in the French capital.

1949 Paris, France

The Second International Congress of Art Critics, which took place in Paris between June 27 and July 3, 1949—and which resulted in the creation of AICA—is documented in Sweeney's archives by only two article clippings, both from unidentified French publications.



One of them announces Paul Fierens's election as the first President of AICA. The article mentions that 13 national sections were established. It also lists new vice-presidents; in addition to those mentioned above, they were from Holland and Mexico (none from Eastern Europe). Sweeney, together with Walter Pach, became international members with voting rights to represent the U.S., while Clement Greenberg was elected an international member without national affiliation.

The second article reports on the reception given for some hundred critics at the Château de Cheverny, at the invitation of Comte de Vibraye. "They have been received the way we still know to receive in France"—the article concluded.

1950 Venice, Italy

From the second General Assembly of AICA in Venice, Italy, in 1950, Sweeney preserved typed notes in his archives, with comments from various European art critics and historians, which he collected on the occasion of a large group exhibition of American painters and a solo show of John Marin's work during that year's Venice Biennial.

[French art critic Charles] Estienne:

Pollock—a very similar type painting in Paris—Riopelle. Pollock's work is very strange. ... Chance half-controlled[.] Must find some control. ... In America one can do paintings such as Pollock's more naturally, it seems, than one can do it in Paris. At any rate Pollock does it more naturally than Riopelle. ... But Romanticism cannot continue this way.

...

De Kooning: ... Has he the head to carry his work on far enough? It is a dangerous period—it is a period of chaos. Today one needs a sound head if he is to control such a romantic approach.

...

De Kooning is like a runner who has caught his second wind, where as Pollock is still tearing along wildly completely out of breath.

[Dutch art historian Gerard] Knuttel:

De Kooning conveys a sense of "feeling." There is structure in his work—something very mysterious about it. ... No, I do not regard him as particularly Dutch.

...

Pollock—is he a real American? Possibility of assimilation strongest American characteristic. His work is distinguished. ... There are many [of] Kandinsky's pictures in America?—Is there some Kandinsky influence in Pollock's work? But, myself, I am not sure if this is a solution or an experiment.

[Austrian art historian Otto] Benesch:

Marin: offers a beauty of color and landscape. I have a great love for Marin. I saw his work first in Boston. I prefer his 1928 #11 to anything I have seen in oil. ... He is a great artist and I am happy to see his work here in Venice.

...

Gorky—That reminds me of Miro.

...

I like this little De Kooning (Rockefeller)[.] It is delicate.

[Belgian critic Léon] Degand

Marin's sketches are merely what every one was doing. They lack invention. ... He may have a value for your country as a precursor, as an aide-morale.

...

Of Pollock I had already heard in Paris. The reproduction of his work which I saw made me a little dubious.

...

De Kooning has a certain strength.—Some power—mute power—a certain intensity in his grays bien placés. ... But I would not like to risk a judgment of his work from the single group.

...

Gorky does not convince me. ... The U.S. could certainly send someone more striking.

[Unidentified] Gespo

Gotch interesting but a little superficial. Does not go to the root of the matter. Decorative.

...

Bloom interests me very much. ... Reminiscent vaguely of Chagall.

...

Pollock #70 – 1949. Like it very much. Very strong. Decorative. Movement vibrant, good. Impressionist landscape of a surrealist world.

...

De Kooning #81 Black—balance and rhythm.

...

Marin: facile interesting, but not very profound.

[Belgian art historian Paul] Fierins [sic!]

Pollock and De Kooning have been a surprise to the Europeans. Marin retrospective seems to me out of place here—just as the English pavilion group of Constables.

...

Gorky seems to me a true painter, but too readily open to influences.

...

De Kooning for me is very Dutch.

...

Gotch? No.

[Italian critic Lionello] Venture [sic!]

Marin is one of the greatest painters of today, because through abstract form he succeeds in giving the reality of his dream, but with a power which is quite rare.

...

As far as Gorky is concerned, my attitude would be one of benevolent expectation. But you tell me he is dead. Then in that case I do not feel I have anything to say for his work.

...

Have you any feeling about Pollock?

For me his work is a curiosity, rather than convincing art.

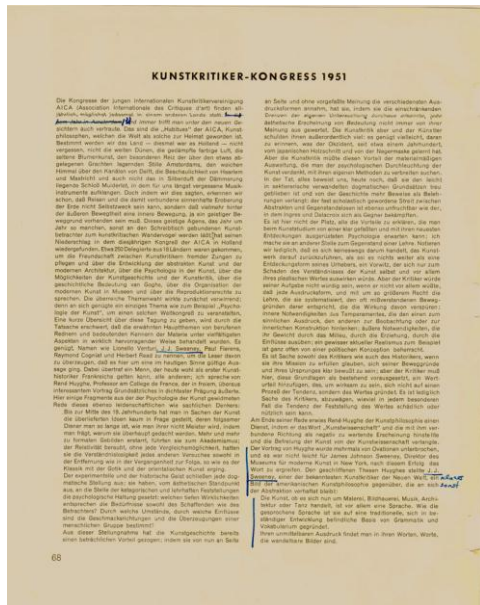
...

De Kooning? Well, his work is interesting, certainly. It has a mystery about it. Is he dead? Well, in this case then I can maintain a benevolent expectation.

1951

Amsterdam and The Hague, Holland

From the Third International Congress of Art Critics, which took place in Amsterdam and The Hague between July 2 and July 10, 1951, Sweeney kept several documents, among them the abstracts from different participants in the discussions “Psychology of Art” and “The Sources of Abstract Art and of Modern Architecture in Holland” (the second of these reflecting the heated debates among the members of AICA on the importance of figuration and abstraction, one of the main topics of discussions during the early stages of the association’s existence).



Sweeney preserved this article, in which he underlined his name and a quotation from him.

The Belgian art critic Léon Degand opened his abstract with: “For present purposes, Psychology of the Plastic Arts, not Psychology of Art.” He argued: “Psychology, and not history, sociology, morals, philosophy, or metaphysics, of the plastic arts, in spite of the inevitable contacts of the last five with the first.” He also advocated treating the role of the spectator as the third factor in “the artistic phenomenon,” next to the creative artist and the work of art.

In his report, the French curator and writer on art René Huyghe argued for moving beyond the experimental and historical interpretations of art—toward a psychological understanding of it, “armed with its most recent discoveries,” both experimental and historical.

Reports on the “The Sources of Abstract Art and of Modern Architecture in Holland” in Sweeney’s archives include those of Charles Estienne, Pierre Francastel, S[igfried] Giedion, H.L.C. Jaffe, and Herbert Read. Francastel and Read addressed the question of the differences between figurative and non-figurative art, while others focused on Neo-plasticism and the contribution of De Stijl to the development of modern art and architecture. Jaffe called the character of De Stijl “essentially Calvinistic.” Giedion noted parallels between the Dutch movement and Mies van der Rohe, Corbusier, and Richard Neutra. Read finished the outline of his report as follows:

A problem remains: the diversion of humanistic emotions—the permanent craving for representational symbols—the role of the film—the icon and the “star” (vedette)—dance and drama—Mondrian and jazz—the compensatory balance of the arts.

1955

London and Oxford, England

From the seventh AICA Congress in London and Oxford (July 3 – 12, 1955) Sweeney preserved a copy of *Art*, in which the critic Bernard Denvir, reported on “what went on” during that Congress.



Commenting on the efforts of a “few devoted members,” who organized the Congress in England, the article stated:

The imagination boggles at the problems they had to face, which ranged from cutting cakes of soup for souless delegates, to assuring distinguished foreign critics that their location in a certain set of rooms implied no slur on them, and that the decrepitude of Oxford college rooms should be attributed rather to the distinction of historicity than to the active malevolence of academic authorities. The debt which the British section of A.I.C.A., and in an indirect sense our national culture, owes them cannot adequately be recorded.

Commenting on the Congress attendees, Denvir mentioned Sweeney by name, as well as Alfred Frankfurter, editor of *Art News*. “There were critics with wives,” he continued with humor, “and critics with daughters. It was rumored even that the editor of a well-known English art magazine was accompanied by a dog.”

As usual, during the Congress new members proposed by the national sections were accepted or rejected, which provoked some discussion, to which the article responded:

Clearly, of course, in an organization of this kind, the qualifications can never be qualitative (as any artist would agree), but the Anglo-Saxon countries labour in this respect under a grievous disadvantage in that the attitude of most newspaper proprietors does not foster the existence of a large body of professional critics, and that many who pass as such are either amateurs or cultural *rentiers*.

The article concluded by mentioning various social activities accompanying the official program, which included:

A trip to Windsor where the critics were received by Sir Owen Morshead; a trip to Blenheim, where the critics were not received by the Duke; and a reception at the Ashmolean where moderate amounts of beer and white-wine cup were drunk.

1957 Naples and Palermo, Italy.

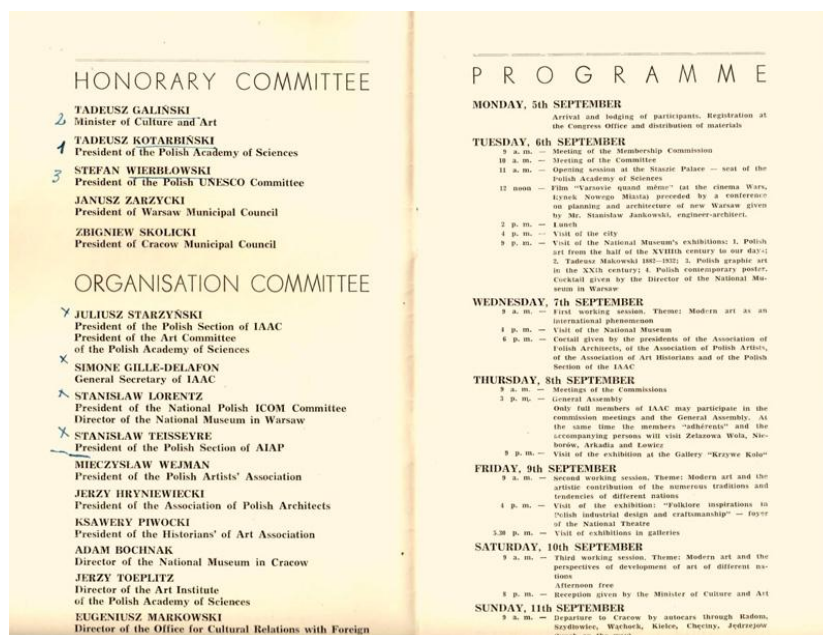
From the 6th AICA Congress (and 9th General Assembly), during which Sweeney was elected President of AICA, his archives contain four photographs from Naples and Palermo, among them:

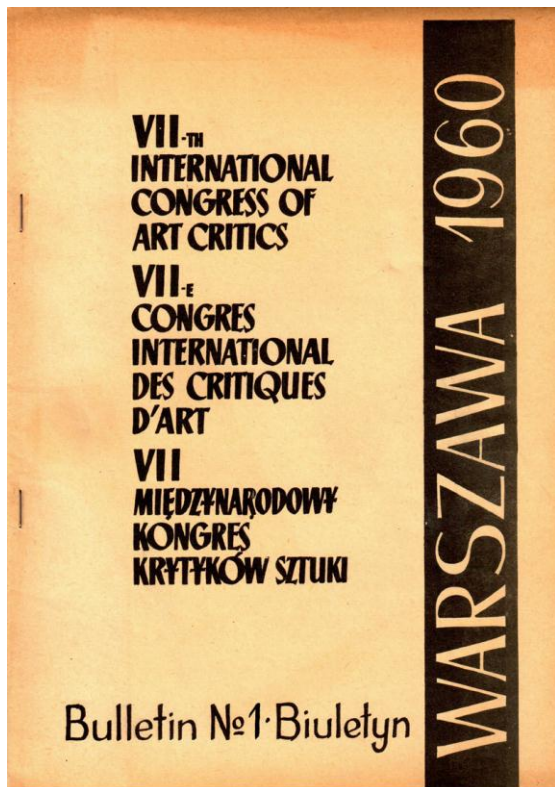


1960 Warsaw and Krakow, Poland

Sweeney was reelected during the 7th AICA Congress (and 12th General Assembly) in Poland between October 6 and 13, 1960.

The only documents preserved in his archives from that Congress are an official program for the Congress and four bulletins published on its occasion. In the brochure, he wrote "1" next to the name "Tadeusz Kotarbiński," "2" next to "Tadeusz Galiński," and "3" next to "Stefan Wierbłowski" in the list of the Honorary Committee. This was perhaps to indicate the order in which he would thank and acknowledge these participants. He also put crosses next to the names of Juliusz Starzyński, Simone Gille-Delafon, Stanisław Lorentz, and Stanisław Teisseyre, the first ones listed in the Organization Committee.





1962 Houston, TX, USA

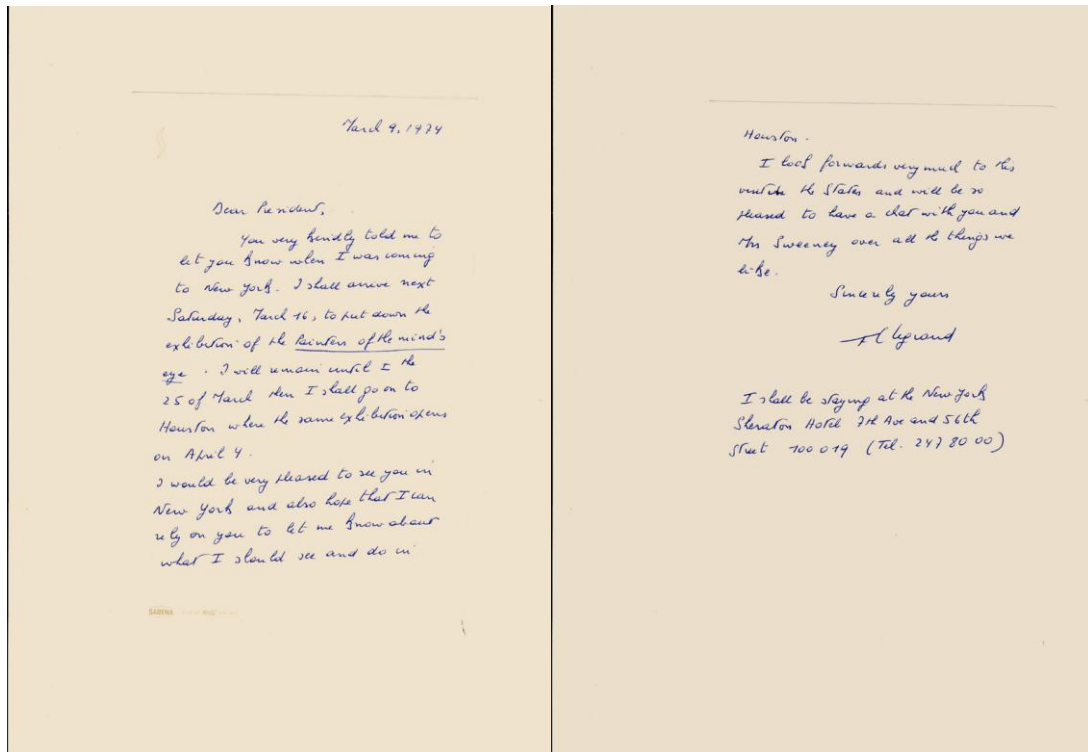
After the 14th General Assembly finished its deliberations in Mexico City, about half of the delegates who had attended it went on a trip to Houston, Texas, where Sweeney was director of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. As an anonymous article from the *Houston Press* informs us, the delegates “visited the Museum of Fine Arts today and were guests of oilman R. E. (Bob) Smith at his Sugarland ranch, where they enjoyed a Western barbecue.” After this, they were also the guests of Herman and George Brown at the Bayou Club and of John and Dominique de Menil, and visited a number of prestigious private collections.



1974

New York, New York

The most recent document in Sweeney's archives is a letter from the curator of modern art at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium), Francine-Claire Legrand, written prior to her visit to the U.S.



The Sweeney archives discussed here will be deposited at the Archives de la critique d'art in Rennes, France, where most of the AICA archives have already been preserved.