

Otto Kahn: Art, Money, & Modern Time. *By Theresa M. Collins.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 383 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 0-807-82696-0.

Reviewed by Michael Kammen

Although Otto Kahn (1867–1934) has long since ceased to be a household name in the United States, he was the subject of two popular biographies, published in 1963 and 1988. This scholarly version by Theresa Collins, engagingly written, will surely be definitive. Based upon his papers and many collateral archives, the massive collection of 250,000 items at Princeton has apparently been sifted so that documentation about some of his affairs, financial and extramarital, is missing. Nevertheless, Collins’s work leaves no extant source unturned, and the project feels satisfyingly thorough.

The author is associate editor of the Thomas A. Edison Papers and teaches international history at Rutgers. The latter role contributed significantly to making this a genuinely transnational biography and a model for those who wish to engage in that rapidly growing field of historical scholarship.

Born and raised in Mannheim, Germany, Kahn moved to London, where he became a British subject before going to the United States in 1893 on a temporary assignment that led to permanent residence and eventual partnership in Kuhn, Loeb, a private firm of investment bankers whose initial wealth developed largely from railroads in the United States and Europe. He learned much about “the art of the deal” early in the century from E. H. Harriman, a difficult man who nonetheless served as a kind of mentor in bold railroad entrepreneurship before Kahn moved on to investment in European banks, floating bonds for France during the war, and investing in central Europe and Japan after the war and in Germany during the later 1920s.

Kahn remained a transatlantic traveler his entire life, spending roughly one-third of each year abroad, not merely on company business but also on the pursuit of his personal passion: to import *and* export cultural organizations, events, and potential “stars” in many fields. By 1910 he had become a celebrity millionaire, widely recognized for his well-mannered ambition as the “Man of Steel and Velvet.” As Collins puts it, his energetic enterprise by the eve of World War I “suggests the ultimate extent of transatlantic integration. . . . Kahn had become a unique emissary of art, capital, and metropolitanism. He had come to represent the marketplace of world cities—an expansive metropolitan culture carried outward on the tracks of railway systems, the wires of news services, and the shipping lanes of the Atlantic” (p. 93).

By 1907 he had already begun a career-long series of articulate and well-received appearances before congressional committees that were investigating banking and investment practices. In 1933, when Kahn gave four days of testimony before the Pecora hearings, instigated by public anger directed at the entrepreneurial elite and especially at manipulative moneylenders, Kahn achieved the apogee of success in disarming antagonism against the banking community. As Senate investigator Ferdinand Pecora himself wrote in his memoir of the investigation, “No suaver, more fluent, and more diplomatic advocate could be conceived. If anyone could succeed in presenting the customs and functions of the private bankers in a favorable and prepossessing light, it was he” (p. 293). Within a year Kahn was dead of a heart attack at the age of sixty-seven. His apt self-description had been as a man of “Machiavellian finesse” (p. 140). Collins’s detailed account of the Pecora hearings, which included far less successful testimony from the House of Morgan and others, is one of the highlights of her book, presumably written before contemporary public outrage over the tarnished reputations of so many corporate CEOs in 2001–02 appeared to echo the outcry that led to the 1933 investigations.

Collins is equally attentive to Kahn’s cultural philanthropies, which is appropriate because he became equally well known on that account and always sought to keep his vocation and avocation in balance. He wrote in 1915: “Business is driving me pretty hard; it has not yet succeeded, however, in drying up the springs of my interest in and enthusiasm for art and beauty, and it never will if I can help it” (p. 108). Unlike J. P. Morgan, a voracious collector of art, Kahn primarily gathered institutional and individual clients, ranging from the Metropolitan Opera, which he generously chaired for decades, to the poet Hart Crane, the theatrical producer Max Reinhardt, the designer Norman Bel Geddes, the singer/actor Paul Robeson, the composer George Antheil, and many others.

His cultural patronage became legendary well before he reached middle age. Getting Nijinsky released from arrest in Budapest and bringing the Ballets Russes to the United States in 1915–16 brought Kahn acclaim, but his largesse also supported many less spectacular projects, such as the *Little Review* and the launching of the Theatre Guild, in 1923–24. He wanted highbrow productions to reach a broader audience, and he even praised the People’s Theatre in New York, a labor-union enterprise. His 1924 address, “The Value of Art to the People,” voiced his fundamental philosophy: “We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. . . . Our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into a given time” (p. 308).

Collins calls Kahn’s ethos and enthusiasms “bourgeois modernism,” noting that he was invariably ahead of his social peers in his willingness to experiment with avant-garde operas and

theatricals. His controversial (and unsuccessful) effort to bring Richard Strauss's *Salome* to the Metropolitan Opera in 1908 provides a prime illustration of the open-mindedness that subsequently led to his sustained dialogue with Ezra Pound, his enthusiastic campaign to bring the music of Prokofiev to America, and his acquisition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* when it was still illegal to bring a copy into this country. Kahn's "aesthetic modernism" made an interesting mix with his savvy but cautious behavior as an investor. Collins's phrase "conservative liberalism" describes her subject very well.

Kahn is also referred to throughout the book as a "Maecenas," which seems apropos because he applied that phrase to himself on occasion. At the time of his death, one of the most frequently voiced laments was that there was no Maecenas on the scene to replace his distinctive support for cultural innovation. By 1933–34, Kahn's sense of his own identity took an interesting turn. Not raised as an observant Jew, he remained totally secular throughout his lifetime yet endured endless anti-Semitic slurs, especially from Jack Morgan, the laconic but arrogant son of Pierpont. Observing what was happening in Germany, however, especially to siblings still living there, Kahn explicitly reaffirmed his Jewishness on several occasions, despite his skepticism about Zionism.

In 1922, when *Chauve Souris*, a showy cabaret review appeared in New York, Ralph Barton painted a wonderful drop curtain titled "A Typical First Night Audience" that affectionately caricatured a great array of celebrities from the world of show business, broadly construed. Otto Kahn is featured prominently in the middle of this illustrious throng, which appeared in a slightly different version in *Vanity Fair* as "Ingredients in the Mixed Grill of Metropolitan Life: A Social Panorama." The publisher has reproduced that version as the endpapers for this elegantly designed volume. It is just as fitting as the reproduction of Kahn's appearance on the cover of *Time* in 1925 with the caption "Cosmopolite, Metropolitite." Kahn was all of that, and more. This biography does equal justice to the dual facets of his career.

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