

An 80-Year Relationship: John and Dominique de Menil, Schlumberger, and Baker Botts

By Bill Kroger

A banker's box was pulled off a dusty shelf from a massive offsite archive. Slowly, it wound its way to the Baker Botts offices at One Shell Plaza in Houston Texas. It was unloaded on floor 32. And two volumes of the box were put on a cart and brought up to floor 36. There they sit, while I write this essay – Baker Botts partner Joe Hutcheson's bound volumes from the 1961 initial public offering of Schlumberger, Ltd., an IPO that changed the City of Houston.

The motivation for this activity comes from a new book, "Double Vision," by William Middleton. Middleton tells an epic tale about the story of the remarkable marriage and lives of John and Dominique de Menil and their company, Schlumberger Ltd. It took 12 years to write, with funding from everyone from Lynn Wyatt and Louisa Stude Sarofim, to the Brown Foundation and the Houston Endowment. It tells a nearly 200-year story, starting in 19th Century France and ending in 21st Century Houston. It is one of the best books written on the City of Houston. Like one of Plutarch's lives, it also provides a guide for how to live a meaningful life and improve the conditions of a community.

Baker Botts was honored to play an important role in this remarkable story. The firm first represented Schlumberger in 1932, when Schlumberger opened an office in Texas. Hutcheson, who represented Schlumberger for many decades and later served on the Schlumberger board, observed, "At that time it had one truck, with the necessary equipment for conducting electrical well surveys." Jean and Dominique, who was one of the children of legendary founder Conrad Schlumberger, worked for the company in France during this time.

Schlumberger's and Baker Botts's work expanded during the World War II years. When Germany invaded France, the Firm helped the de Menils and other Schlumberger family members become settled in the United

States and its Houston headquarters. During the war years, Jean became President of a Schlumberger affiliate in Venezuela (and much later, Chairman of the Board of the entire company). Starting in 1943, Jean called upon the Firm to represent Schlumberger on matters in Latin America. Baker Botts also helped Jean and Dominique access funds that were frozen as a wartime measure, to help cover the expenses of the family.

One unusual Schlumberger/Firm project during this time stands out. In 1942, Baker Botts helped Schlumberger form a company named Electro-Mechanical Research, Inc. (“EMR”). EMR’s sole purpose was (in the words of John Bullington, a Baker Botts partner who headed up this work) “highly patriotic”—to hire ex-pat French scientists to help develop new types of weapons to assist in the war effort. EMR later evolved into the creation of a charitable institution, the Schlumberger Foundation, of which Hutcheson and Dillon Anderson of the Firm served on the board.

By the 1950s, Hutcheson observed, Schlumberger had a net worth of \$100 million and, through its affiliates, furnished “more than twenty different types of services to the oil industry throughout the United States and all other important producing areas in the free world.”

The IPO in 1961 was a game changer for the company, the de Menils, and the Firm. Baine Kerr headed up the Firm’s legal work on the offering. Schlumberger went from being a family-owned company to a publicly traded one with expanded operations around the globe. And the IPO also allowed Dominique and John (as he now wanted to be called, reflecting his love for his adopted country) to convert their shares into dollars. Over time, much of that wealth was re-invested into their new home town of Houston, Texas.

In his book, Middleton explains how the love and marriage between Dominique and John led to a massive catalog of projects and gifts that expanded and challenged Houston’s existing institutions, or that built new ones. These include the Contemporary Arts Museum, the Museum

of Fine Arts, Houston (including the Mies van der Rohe addition), the art program at the University of St. Thomas, the Institute for the Arts at Rice University, the Menil Museum, the Rothko Chapel, the Carter-Menil Human Rights prize, the Cy Twombly Gallery, and the Dan Flavin installation at Richmond Hall, to name just a few. The art installations in Marfa, Texas are also projects seeded by de Menil family funds.

They also brought countless artists, architects, photographers, writers, and activists to Houston. Their friends who visited Houston and left behind important works and installations are a Who's Who of 20th Century culture, including artists Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, and Rene Magritte; architects Mies van der Rohe and Phillip Johnson; photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson; and filmmaker Roberto Rossellini. They built one of the first international-style homes in Houston, designed by Phillip Johnson. And they helped lead the desegregation of the Houston public schools and promoted important civil right leaders like Mickey Leland and Rev. Bill Lawson.

These changes were observed and became part of the fabric of the new City of Houston. They touched everything – from how Houstonians looked at art, to how they treated each other. Several generations of generous donors (from the Wyatts and Sarofims to the Kinders) look back to the de Menils for inspiration and guidance on how to give. And it changed things at Baker Botts – it is not a coincidence that Baker Botts led the legal effort by Rice Institute to de-segregate the school and admitted the first African-American and female partners at major Texas law firm.

Today, Schlumberger remains an important client of Baker Botts, a relationship spanning more than 80 years. Firm partner David Kirkland, whose father John Kirkland was a Baker Botts lawyer who worked on the Schlumberger IPO, serves on the Board of Trustees of the Menil Museum. Danny David, another Baker Botts partner, serves on the Menil Council, as does retired partner Roy Nolen.

The de Menils were the most impactful couple for shaping modern Houston, as well as Baker Botts, for the better. Middleton's book explains how they did that. It is a guide for all of us as we build upon their examples going forward.