

CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING IN AMERICA

Turning Points in Old Master Collecting, 1830–1940

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Seen from Afar. Collecting, Displaying, and Writing about British Art in America

The history of art collecting in America during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has focused above all on the collecting of Italian Renaissance and French eighteenth-century art. But in emulating the collecting patterns of earlier British aristocrats, American collectors, such as Henry Clay Frick and Andrew Mellon, also acquired substantial numbers of British paintings, above all from the eighteenth century. Such works formed almost as important a part of these new collections as the Italian and French pictures. Given the fact that many of the continental Old Master pictures came from aristocratic British collections and so carried associations with the nobility and their country houses, it is perhaps not surprising that examples of the family portraits that once formed such an integral part of these interiors figured so prominently. Recent studies by Shelley Bennett, Julius Bryant, and Alex Kitson have explored the collecting of British art not only in America by Frick, Mellon and Henry H. Huntington, but also in Britain by collectors such as William Hesketh Lever, Edward Cecil Guinness, and others. My paper owes much to this recent scholarship but attempts to extend this by exploring the relationship between the collecting of British art around 1900 and the historiography of British art. Although the activities of collectors have often shaped the way the history of art has been written, histories of art have conversely played a role in the choices made by collectors. What, then, was the relationship between collectors of British art around 1900 and the place that British art had within the history of art as it was then understood?

The British works collected by Henry Clay Frick, Andrew Mellon and Henry H. Huntington consisted above all of eighteenth-century portraits, with a preference (most obvious in Huntington's case) for full-lengths. While Gainsborough and Reynolds figured prominently, each of these collections also included a substantial number of works by painters who would now be considered lesser artists, such as Hoppner and Romney. This emphasis now appears strikingly at odds with the canon of British art familiar from modern surveys. By contrast, those works by Constable or Hogarth which are now given a central place were largely lacking, as were genres such as the conversation piece. Pictures of this type were to be found only in the collection of John McFadden of Philadelphia whose more limited resources did not allow him to compete with Frick or Huntington for the grand manner full-length portraits. The preferences shown by Frick, Huntington and Mellon should, however, not be seen simply as characteristic of American collectors of British art, for collections with a comparable profile were already being assembled in Britain by Guinness and Lever. We cannot, therefore, argue that the activities of American collectors alone were shaping a distinctive view of British art, seen as it were from afar. On the other hand, the removal of eighteenth-century

portraits from houses and collections of which they had formed an integral part for over a century and the disruption of familiar narratives of family lineage opened up the possibility of such works being reassembled, whether in Britain or America, in fresh configurations. These combinations both shaped and reflected a new view of British art and its history – a development paralleled by a newly awakened concern with British art and design being shown at the South Kensington Museum and the interest in British country houses evident in the pages of the newly founded periodical *Country Life*. Although British art as yet hardly figured in wide-ranging surveys of European painting, there developed between about 1890 and 1920 a literature about just those painters whose portraits were being collected. But this was not a literature that was being produced with the academy. Given the way in which a handful of dealers – most notably Agnew and Duveen – played such a guiding role in the formation of the major American collections, it is not surprising that this spate of monographic publications on British artists was closely connected with the art trade. (Thomas Humphry Ward and W. Roberts’s four-volume study of Romney was, for example, produced in conjunction with Agnew’s.)

While the historiography of British art is at this point connected with the dealers who supplied British and American collectors alike, its development slightly later has more to do with the stimulus provided by American, rather than British collectors. This is most obvious in the case of Paul Mellon, whose collecting of British painting led to an academic recognition of British art as a serious field of study. But before this, Henry H. Huntington’s hiring of Charles Henry Collins Baker from London’s National Gallery led to a shift away from monographs linked with the art trade. Collins Baker – perhaps recalling his display at the National Gallery of Sargent’s Wertheimer portraits – was responsible for the display together in a new gallery of Huntington’s collection of full-lengths. But he also wrote pioneering studies of less familiar figures such as Kneller and Lely which – as Ellis Waterhouse recognized in his dedication to Collins Baker of his Pelican history volume on British painting – provided a foundation for the subsequent growth of academic interest in this field. But it was only with the formation of Paul Mellon’s collection, and the scholarship associated with it, that collecting British art and writing about it at last came properly together.

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