

CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING IN AMERICA

Turning Points in Old Master Collecting, 1830-1940

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS – *Beyond Biography: Art Collecting as Social Experience*

This paper argues that historians should pay closer attention to collecting as a social activity, to collectors as social beings, responsive to one another, to local cultures, to precedents, to personal models, and to institutional affiliations. This means looking more attentively at place, social connections, and events, as influential elements in the collecting enterprise.

Biography, of course, remains central to the larger story, and quite a number of collector (and dealer) biographies have appeared in the past several years. There are still, however, many important art collectors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly those living outside the Northeast, whose stories are little known.

Without denying the value of creating more collector biographies, indeed urging their expansion, it seems to me that posing additional questions makes sense. Thus I review in this paper the broad phases of American art collecting, proposing that we examine, among other things, American artists as collectors, the spread of print and drawing collecting even before the Civil War, early Old Master collecting in cities like Detroit, Cincinnati, Cleveland among others, and the interest taken in somewhat more exotic areas – the ancient Near East, Asian objects, biblical antiquities, which required adventurous and sometimes hazardous searches.

Three options seem to me specially useful in trying to transcend biography itself. First, studying American collectors within specified categories – by period, by place, by specific artists, calling prosopography to the aid of our inquiry. Regional and municipal variations among collectors still seem obscure.

Secondly, examining collector relationships as worthy of scrutiny – clubs, organizations, dealers, above all, connections with museums and the professionalizing world of curators.

Third and finally, we should examine event-driven moments, which reveal, albeit in snapshot form, collecting patterns and attitudes toward collecting. In that connection this paper describes, in considerably more detail, connections between America's World Fairs and the collecting enterprise, most particularly, the three 1930s Fairs held in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, which were the occasion for lavish and significant displays of Old Master art pieces. The attention collectors received, partly as a result of the Fair publicity machines, emphasized the remarkable migration of Old Master art pieces (along with 19th-century masterpieces) to the United States, that had taken place within the previous half century, and demonstrated surprising respect for the tycoons who had been responsible for so much of the collecting.

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