

CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING IN AMERICA

Turning Points in Old Master Collecting, 1830–1940

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False Dawn: Pioneering American Collectors of Old Master Art

The period from 1830 to 1860 was one of great economic and cultural change, as America sought to establish itself on the international stage. Although its courage and economic strength had been proven through the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, and an economic boom in the 1820s and early 1830s, the young nation was woefully behind in higher education and cultural offerings. Successful American merchants and industrialists were eager to add a veneer of sophistication and culture to their new-found wealth. This was mostly accomplished through European travel, and often complemented by collecting Old Master art.

Records of art collecting in America during this early time are limited to a handful of collectors, mainly because their collections were preserved in public institutions still extant, such as the Thomas Jefferson Bryan Collection at the New-York Historical Society or the James Jackson Jarves Collection at the Yale University Art Gallery. Since published photography of artwork did not become widespread until well after the Civil War, there are no pictorial records of art or of private collections from this early period. Consequently, although private collections may have occasionally been published – one may think of the William Aspinwall collection catalogue (ca. 1858-59), or auction catalogues for other private collections –, for most there is no detailed record of scope, specific holdings, or authenticity of individual works.

Contemporary scholarship on collecting patterns and individual collectors of Old Master art in the United States is limited to a handful of articles or chapters in larger books; there is much material yet to be gleaned by searching in newspapers and periodicals of the day. A cartoon published in an 1840 volume of *Knickerbocker Magazine*, entitled “Asinine Art Connoisseurs”, summarizes with great satire the scores of ambitious Italian entrepreneurs who assembled collections of contemporary copies, outright forgeries, or inferior older paintings, bringing them to market in the United States, where unsophisticated American consumers were easily duped.

In fact, the period was one of astonishing activity in the market as dozens of dealers and artists exhibited collections of Old Master art in rented halls, offering them for sale individually, or at auction. When we examine the estate auction catalogue for Michael Paff, one of just a few American dealers known to us through contemporary accounts, we are amazed to see the size (over 1,000 lots) and the names listed: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Carracci, Raphael, Murillo, Giorgione, Rembrandt, Rubens, and other luminaries of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Common sense dictates that a single American collection couldn't possibly hold multiple examples by such famous artists, and that Paff was a very optimistic (although apparently honest!) man. Paff, and another individual named Pierre Flandin, are the only dealers known to us

from this period. The first commercial galleries, as we know them today, were not established in this country until the late 1840s.

Wealthy American collectors also took advantage of their European travels to purchase art. This was the case with William Aspinwall, who traveled abroad for several years with the specific goal of assembling a major collection of Old Masters, which he exhibited in a gallery in his home, opened to the public at regular intervals. The widespread political and cultural unrest touched off by the French Revolution, followed by other European wars and the consequent disintegration of monarchies, meant that many private collections were dispersed. Thus, for instance, Thomas Jefferson Bryan was able to purchase paintings from the collection of Napoleon's uncle, Cardinal Fesch, and from the French Marshalls Soult and Oudinot.

With all of the pitfalls in the Old Master market, it is remarkable how successful Americans were at collecting paintings whose attributions either are still accepted, or if reassigned, are still given to major artists. Scientific methods of determining authenticity did not come into use until well into the twentieth century. Hence, people like Jarves and Bryan were either fortunate in finding good advisors, or as a result of intensive studies and many visits to private and public collections, developed their own discerning "eye."

Due to the sparse records and lack of accurate reproductions, Old Master collecting during the early nineteenth century has been little studied. Despite the difficulties involved in researching this topic, there is significant work to be done. Patterns of collecting and exhibiting Old Master art in this country prior to the establishment of art museums after the Civil War are eminently worthy of study and publication. This rich, exciting period has many secrets and stories yet to be discovered.

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