

CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING IN AMERICA

Turning Points in Old Master Collecting, 1830–1940

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“I was to have all of the finest”

Henry Clay Frick, Joseph Duveen, Jack Morgan and the Dispersal of the Morgan Collection

Between 1915 and 1916 Henry Clay Frick became the owner of a large portion of the Morgan collection through acquisitions that greatly shaped One East 70th Street and inspired his decision to transform the house into a public institution. In 1915 Frick acquired from the Morgan estate his Chinese porcelains, Fragonard panels, and eighteenth-century furniture; in 1916 he bought his bronzes and enamels, as well as several sculptures from other sources. Frick was not a connoisseur of Renaissance bronzes, and before the 1916 purchase he had shown very little interest in three-dimensional works of art. Yet his decision to transform his house into a “museum”, where the eventual visitor would be able to appreciate works of art of different periods and in a variety of media, turned Frick into a collector of Renaissance bronzes.

Between 1900 and 1912 J. Pierpont Morgan had assembled one of the largest private collections of European sculpture, *objets d’art*, and Old Master paintings. The collection was transferred from London to New York in 1912, where it was shown between 1914 and 1916 in a blockbuster exhibition organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and conspicuously dispersed by Pierpont Morgan’s son, Jack, through the art dealer Joseph Duveen. The dispersal of the Morgan collection not only had relevant consequences for collecting in America, both in the public sphere (as in the case of The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and in the private sphere (as in Frick’s case), but it also had an impact on the reception, display, and value of the objects themselves. In fact, Frick’s acquisition of Morgan’s Renaissance bronzes is a rather revealing case of how the objects were affected by their transatlantic relocation.

In 1914, Henry Walters, and Morgan before him, were the only American collectors interested in Renaissance bronzes, and the American public, except for those who were familiar with Europe’s museums, had never seen such works before the Morgan exhibition at The Metropolitan. Remarkably, given the size and variety of the Morgan collection, the bronzes were the highlights of the show. It was around the bronzes that the reviewers and critics, and, most especially, the curators who installed the show, wove a narrative of Renaissance art history, artistic freedom, taste and collecting, which largely contributed to the intelligibility and popular interpretation of Morgan’s vision.

On the basis of the extent of Frick’s acquisitions from the Morgan estate, the press immediately hailed him as Morgan’s heir, yet in fact the respective collections that Frick and Morgan envisioned could not have been more different. Morgan had been an insider in the London art world, and the collecting of Renaissance bronzes that he so conspicuously pursued was an exercise in connoisseurship, performed in a

closely-knit international milieu. Frick, on the other hand, was never part of a milieu of connoisseurs and he took advice mainly from his dealers, Roland Knoedler and Joseph Duveen. What really concerned Frick was looking at art and, as importantly, the way art looked in his house.

To put it bluntly, if Frick made rooms, Morgan made catalogues. For Frick, the display established the conditions for the appreciation of a work of art to the point that it preceded and ruled its acquisition. For Morgan, who was primarily a book collector, it was through the unfolding of the pages of a catalogue, looking at perfect reproductions, and reading a scholarly text that a work of art was absorbed. In real life, Morgan's art works were displayed either at the Victoria and Albert Museum (in rather uninspiring glass cases) or at his house at Prince's Gate. Of all the different catalogues of the Morgan collections, the one of the Renaissance bronzes, completed in 1910 with entries by Wilhelm Bode, was the most ambitious one from a scholarly point of view.

Compared to George Salting, who began collecting bronzes in the 1870s, Morgan was an epigone in the field. Nevertheless, thanks to his purchase of the collection that had been assembled by the London-based German connoisseur Henry Pfungst (an affiliate of Bode's) at the end of the nineteenth century, and thanks to some crucial acquisitions that the London dealer George Durlacher made under his direction in the following years, Morgan was able to assemble a collection of bronzes that resembled and integrated that of Salting. Both collectors favored fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century works of Florentine and Paduan origin, as well as functional pieces, showing an appreciation of Renaissance bronzes comparable to that established decades earlier by Charles Edward Fortnum, for whom an object's function was inseparable from its design. It is hard to say if Morgan consciously shared this perspective or if he just emulated his predecessors. Certainly, the catalogue of his collection was a groundbreaking contribution to the field, immediately recognized as such and unanimously praised, also because at the time it was the only such publication available, besides Bode and Marks's book.

When the Morgan collection was finally exhibited in New York, the Renaissance bronzes, more than any other section – for example, the equally highly praised paintings, furniture and works of art of the eighteenth century – inspired reviewers to broaden their interpretations of Morgan's collecting. To critics compelled to make sense of a collection of staggering value assembled by the most important and debated financier of the time, the Renaissance bronzes came to represent a standard of artistic quality and accessibility against which to consider the rest of the collection. Rather romantically, this quality consisted in their being objects made by artisans rather than artists and for “common” cultivated people rather than for “princes”, objects with a “touch of human experience here and there to which we respond”, and whose functional purpose could illustrate the culture of the Renaissance equally, if not more vividly than painting.

Between 1915 and 1916, Jack Morgan sold large sections of his father's collection . He first hoped to sell the objects in London, but profound changes in the art market, as well as World War I, made this plan unrealizable. Joseph Duveen became the dealer in charge of the dispersal of the collection, which, if it on the one hand increasingly consolidated his position as the leading dealer in old European art in America, on the

other it obliged him to venture into fields, like the Renaissance bronzes, which had never been his province. Duveen's mediation in the relocation of a European collection like that of Morgan was cultural as much as it was commercial. He took the bronzes out of the realm of connoisseurship and moved them into the domain of display; he turned pieces that had been in public museums for decades into domestic objects, whose placement within a carefully designed environment was a crucial component both of their marketing and of their appreciation.

The sale of the Morgan collection enabled Duveen to conquer Frick's trust as an art advisor rather than merely a decorator. Duveen bought the bronzes in April 1916 and even if the firm had a large clientele Joseph offered them only to Henry Huntington and Frick. Quite likely, Duveen was aware of Frick's intention of transforming his house into a public museum, and Huntington's decision to do the same (finalized in 1919) was probably already in the air. To these collectors with their public ambitions, Duveen presented the acquisition of Renaissance bronzes as a must. He did not have much expertise in Renaissance bronzes and the selection of the pieces was done exclusively on the basis of the catalogue of the collection.

In the case of Frick, the placement of the object ruled the sale: Duveen would bring the pieces to One East 70th Street, place them in the different rooms of the house, and leave them on approval. It is unclear to what extent Frick participated in the actual distribution of the pieces, but given his attention to the display of works of art, their placement was likely a collaboration of some sort. The distribution of the bronzes in the house, which is partly still visible, evoked different forms of appreciation. In the Library, the more private of the rooms, where the connoisseur would enjoy and study his works of art, Duveen placed the most complex pieces. In the Living Hall, he placed the representations of animals and other decorative pieces, putting the objects that looked more familiar to viewers in a room appropriate for conversation rather than contemplation. In the West Gallery, where more than anywhere else the visitor had to grasp the collector's vision at a glance, Duveen assembled the larger and more museum-like pieces.

To both Frick and Duveen the Renaissance bronzes represented a significant stake: to Frick, they were the cultural and social attributes of a particular kind of collecting -- learned, impervious, and practiced by the most select European connoisseurs; to Duveen, they represented his international reputation of having "translated", as it were, for the United States a genre of art objects that until then had never crossed the Atlantic.

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