

The Lasting Legacy of Marjorie Merriweather Post





Marjorie Merriweather Post

(1887–1973)

*deserves a place in the arena of
great twentieth-century
American collectors. Her lasting
legacy, the Hillwood Museum
and Gardens, attests to her
vision as a collector.*

Opposite

*Detail of The Duchess of Parma and
Her Daughter Isabelle
Jean-Marc Nattier, 1750*

Above

*Drawing Room of the Burden
Mansion, New York, New York
ca. 1920*

Marjorie Merriweather Post was the only daughter of C.W. Post, founder of the Post cereal company of Battle Creek, Michigan. On her eighteenth birthday in 1905, she became the richest woman in America in her own right with assets amounting to \$2 million. That same year she married Edward Bennett Close, a Columbia University law student and member of a distinguished Greenwich, Connecticut, family.

The genesis of Mrs. Post's career as a collector harks back to the early part of the twentieth century and coincides with her move to New York City. In 1916 the Closes bought Burden Mansion, a Beaux-Arts grand house on Fifth Avenue. The palatial home along the so-called "millionaires row" put the couple in the same social sphere as the Fricks, Vanderbilts, and Whitneys, who had all built homes on Fifth Avenue.

Burden Mansion's lavish French-style interiors marked a turning point in the evolution of Mrs. Post's aesthetics. Her Greenwich, Connecticut, home had been the essence of Victorian taste. Now, under the influence

of Jules Allard, a French cabinet-maker who crossed the Atlantic to design fashionable French eighteenth-century-style interiors for wealthy Americans, Mrs. Post began to furnish her grand home with rare tapestries and French period furniture.

Lacking an art history background, she relied on the advice of Allard and French & Company, who shaped her taste in things French and European. Nobody, however, played a more critical role in helping her build her collection than the art dealer Sir Joseph Duveen who, in her own words, would remain, along with her father "the most influential man in my life." Rather than invest in the Old Master paintings Duveen hoped to sell her, she revealed a profound interest in the decorative arts.

Collecting decorative arts was not a new concept. For centuries European princes and wealthy merchants had acquired objects along with paintings. It was only in the nineteenth century that a serious chasm appeared separating the assessment of fine and decorative arts. At the turn of the twentieth century, J. P. Morgan

*Reading from Hillwood Museum and Gardens:
Marjorie Merriweather Post's Art Collector's
Personal Museum. Fisher, F. (2000)
(pp. 14-21). Washington, DC: Hillwood Museum and Gardens*

and Henry Clay Frick revived a tradition of mixing paintings and sculpture with decorative arts objects. Mrs. Post's collection differed from theirs in that it centered almost entirely on decorative arts and lacked great paintings.

In Mrs. Post's collection, paintings serve mostly as backdrops for elegantly appointed rooms. It is the furniture and objects that take center stage. Among her paintings the genre of portraiture predominates. She made one of her most important purchases of the 1920s when she acquired the *Portrait of the Duchess of Parma and her Daughter Isabelle* by Jean-Marc Nattier, a fashionable painter at the court of the French king Louis XV.

Mrs. Post turned her collector's eye first to tapestries. In the early 1920s, under Duveen's guidance, she attended classes on the subject at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Soon thereafter she made her first significant purchases in this area. Among early textile acquisitions number the Beauvais tapestries of the *Italian Feasts* and the *Loves of the Gods* series, after designs by François Boucher; both are now at Hillwood. At the turn of the century, critics and collectors regarded tapestries as highly valuable works of art, much more so than is the case today. Frick, for example, paid more for tapestries than for any other furnishings, while Mrs. Post paid Duveen astronomical sums for her sets.



With the purchases of French period furnishings she made during the early 1920s, Mrs. Post carved a niche for herself among discerning collectors of European art. The Roentgen desk, a collaborative creation of cabinetmakers Abraham and David Roentgen, has traditionally appeared in the literature as a presentation piece made around 1774 for Marie Antoinette. Regardless of its provenance (still uncertain today) the desk figures as a highlight in Hillwood's collection and one of Mrs. Post's favorite acquisitions.

The period from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s was one of steady collecting of French decorative arts to fill the spaces of her brand new Manhattan penthouse apartment in a 1926 building. Of the pieces acquired at this time, the outstanding commode (see page 13) made by Jean-Henri Riesener, cabinetmaker to Louis XVI, had formerly belonged to Lord Hertford in Paris. Art dealer Jacques Seligman bought Lord Hertford's furnishings as a complete lot in 1912. While Frick





Above

Beauvais Tapestry, detail of
Les Fêtes Italiennes
Designed by François Boucher, 1736

Opposite top

*The Duchess of Parma and Her
Daughter Isabelle*
Jean-Marc Nattier, 1750

Opposite

Roll-top Desk
Abraham and David Roentgen
Neuwied, ca. 1770

acquired most of Lord Hertford's furniture through his interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe, Riesener's commode ended up with Duveen, from whom Mrs. Post bought it in 1931.

Like other collectors of her time, Mrs. Post developed a fondness for French gold boxes, which set the tone for her later purchases of works by the firms of Fabergé and even Cartier. The boxes epitomized her taste for the beautifully crafted and her affinity for precious metals and small objects that reflected both the civility and frivolity of the French court and aristocratic society prior to the Revolution of 1789.

In Mrs. Post's lifelong and relentless pursuit of adding treasures to her collection, she paid close attention to each individual purchase, rarely buying great numbers of items as a lot.

During the early years of her marriage to her second husband, Edward F. Hutton, which lasted from 1919 to 1935, her collection grew so much that at the instigation of Duveen she began preparation of a catalogue to be privately printed. Inspiration probably came from J.P. Morgan, who had published a limited-edition catalogue of his collections to give out to a few selected individuals. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Post followed Morgan's example as a way to solidify her reputation as a collector. Consultants began work on the catalogue, but the 1929 stock market crash spelled an end to the project.

In 1935 Mrs. Post divorced E.F. Hutton and married Joseph E. Davies, who a year later was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as ambassador to the Soviet Union. The Davies couple



Above

Mrs. Post and Ambassador Joseph E. Davies in Moscow, 1937

Left

Box, Firm of Carl Fabergé
St. Petersburg, 1886–96

Opposite top

Mrs. Post in the Icon Room at
Tregaron, ca. 1950

Opposite

Pieces from the Orlov Service
Imperial Porcelain Factory
St. Petersburg, 1762–65



spent only eighteen months in Moscow, but this initial Russian experience was to have a profound impact on Mrs. Post and her future collecting activities. In purchasing Russian art, she moved into totally uncharted territory, with no Joseph Duveen to guide her. She had to rely on her own eye.

Mrs. Post did not go to Moscow armed to buy Russian art. At the time, she owned at least two objects by the Russian court jeweler, Carl Fabergé: one a small box (below) sold by Felix Iusupov at Cartier along with family jewels in the 1920s, the other the Catherine the Great Easter Egg, which Mrs. Post received from her daughter Eleanor as a gift in 1931. Both pieces more likely reflect her love for finely crafted French gold boxes than for their Fabergé pedigree.

In Joseph Davies Mrs. Post found the first husband who shared her collecting enthusiasm. The couple began collecting religious art—icons, liturgical silver, and textiles—at the end of a period when the Soviet government sought to finance industrialization at home and communist parties abroad by selling off its national treasures. Officials gave orders to melt down nineteenth-century objects, especially liturgical pieces, for their silver and gold content. Of stories related by Mrs. Post, more have to do with the acquisition of icons, chalices, and vestments than any other type of Russian purchase. Icons and chalices never fit into Mrs. Post's neoclassical decorating scheme, so already at Tregaron, the house where she and Davies lived in



Washington, she created a special treasury or "icon room."

The Davies traveled extensively during their diplomatic tenure in Moscow. They spent the summer of 1937 on the *Sea Cloud*, Mrs. Post's yacht, sailing from one Baltic port to another on a special mission for President Roosevelt, but also conducting collecting excursions in their spare time. Once Mrs. Post caught the Russian fever, it gave new meaning to these shopping adventures. In the fall of 1937 Mrs. Post went to Vichy, France, where she found about twenty pieces of the famous Orlov porcelain service.

These pieces alone, however, do not account for the greatness of Hillwood's collection. They form a nucleus of only about a fifth of the museum's Russian collection.

Contrary to popular perceptions, Mrs. Post did not load up the *Sea Cloud* with all of Hillwood's Russian treasures and sail away. The Moscow experience merely provided the impetus that





Above

Nuptial Crown, St. Petersburg, 1884

set her on a new collecting path. She collected Russian art for the rest of her life, buying many things that had left the Soviet Union decades before. Indeed, many of her Russian purchases in the late 1960s had, in fact, left the Soviet Union in the 1920s. The Soviet authorities sold the imperial wedding crown worn by Alexandra at her wedding to Nicholas II at auction at Christie's in London in 1927. Mrs. Post acquired it in 1966. That same year she purchased the first of two outstanding gold chalices. In 1968 she bought the Buch chalice that Catherine had commissioned as part of a liturgical set for the Aleksandr

Nevskii Monastery in St. Petersburg.

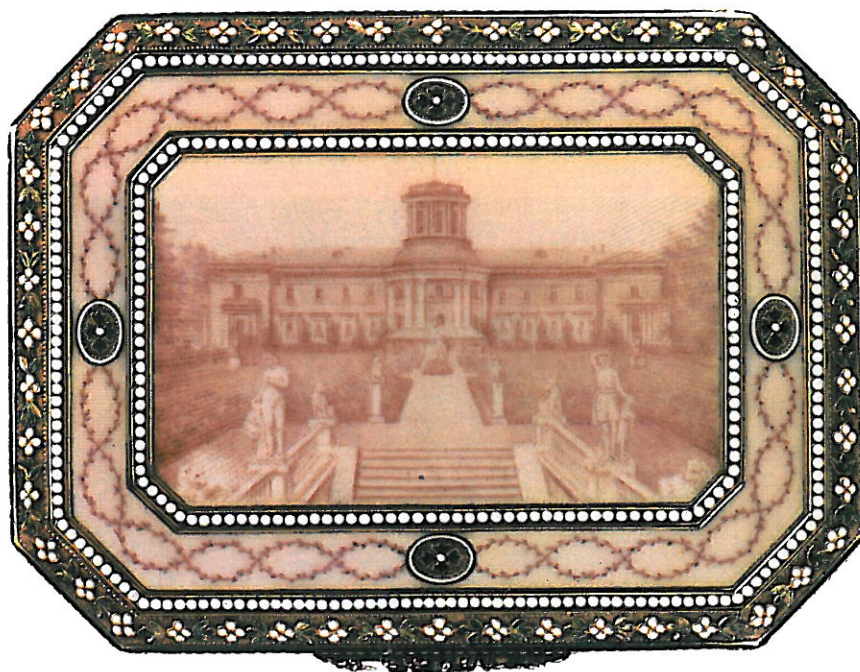
In 1955 Mrs. Post bought Hillwood, a 25-acre property with a mansion built in the 1920s. She spent two years renovating the house, with French & Co. advising her in the design of spaces to serve both as a residence and as a showcase for her collection. By 1952 she had already conceived the idea of making her house a museum. Like other collectors with a democratic spirit, she believed that as she had enjoyed the fruits of the capitalist system, she should give back to society what she had been able to collect with the wealth she had inherited and earned.

Hillwood blends the two main interests of Mrs. Post as a collector. In the foreword to the museum's first guide, she eloquently

expressed what those were: "My two major interests have been the art of 18th century France and that of Imperial Russia. . . . French 18th century art was my earlier interest and the Russian collection only started when I was *en poste* in Russia. . . . As the influence of French artists and artisans was very strong in old Saint Petersburg and Moscow, it seems quite natural that these two artistic expressions should be brought together here."

By the 1950s Mrs. Post was a recognized collector of Russian art. She received a steady flow of letters and photographs offering her one object after another. It must have been a special pleasure to find a treasure that combined her two loves: a French gold box with a portrait of Catherine in the guise of Minerva. By 1958 Mrs. Post's Russian collection had grown sufficiently so that she hired Marvin Ross to catalogue it. Ross, a Harvard trained art historian with a background in Byzantine and medieval art, implemented standard museum practices at Hillwood: he created object files, oversaw the conservation of the collection, devoted his time to research and publication, and advised Mrs. Post on acquisitions.

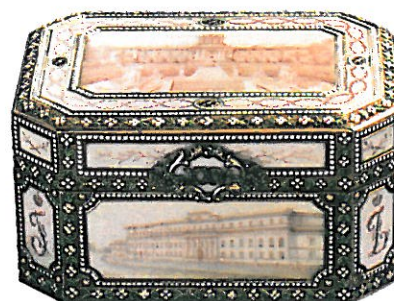
In 1964 Ross was at work on his book *The Art of Karl Fabergé and His Contemporaries* (1965). It is clear that his research led him to suggest more Fabergé objects to Mrs. Post, and she bought at least six pieces in 1964 and at least twenty between 1964 and 1969. One of the most important of these later items is the Iusupov music box, purchased from the estate of Lansdale K. Christie in 1966. Ross



rightly called it a “true museum piece—and historic” when he successfully convinced her to pay the asking price.

By 1965 Mrs. Post had opened negotiations with the Smithsonian Institution about donating her house and collection. In 1968 she made this offer formally; it was accepted in January 1969. From then on a number of objects and paintings entered the collection as

gifts to the Smithsonian to be housed at Hillwood. Mrs. Post herself gave the painting *The Countess Samoilova and Her Foster Daughter* (see page 23) by Karl Briullov in this manner. The Smithsonian never opened Hillwood to the public and in 1976 decided to return it to the Foundation, which administers Hillwood Museum and Gardens.



Above

Music Box
Firm of Carl Fabergé
St. Petersburg, 1907

Top

Top of Music Box

Below

Marvin Ross with students in the
Hillwood French Drawing Room,
1960s

