

The Golden Age of the Private Collector

by Anne Higonnet

Henry James called it "acquisition on the highest terms." The great American collectors did more than spend money on art, or even assemble collections. They aspired to be more than merchants, to be merchant princes, so that not only they but also their nation would become noble. To accomplish their goal, they turned their collections into museums. Many of our national or metropolitan museums were formed around the nucleus of private collections: the National Gallery, for instance, around Widener's, Kress's and Mellon's collections. American collectors, however, left their clearest legacy when they kept their collections intact and installed them in their own homes. By founding museums like the Frick, the Gardner and the Huntington, America's merchant princes demonstrated both public service and private achievement, both their sense of history and their individuality. The most important of these institutions were all created between 1890 and 1940, so I call this period the Golden Age of the private art museum, which may also be the Golden Age of the American collector.

Washington, D.C., has more private art museums than any other city: the Phillips, the Corcoran, Dumbarton Oaks, and more recently Hillwood and the Kreeger. Just to list those five museums is to evoke the character of the institutional type. Homes on a grand scale, they bring together a wide range of art forms in domestic settings, often enhanced by gardens or music programs, sometimes both. Historically, the type originates in Europe with museums like the Poldi-Pezzoli in Milan and the Wallace in London. What distinguishes American versions is precisely that they were inspired by, but were also reactions to, European models. At the age of sixteen Miss Isabella Stewart — later to become Mrs. Jack Gardner — announced she would have a home like the Poldi-Pezzoli "filled with beautiful pictures and objects of art, for people to come and enjoy."¹ Americans believed they should share a European past, but they could not simply find it around them. They had to import it. After seeing the Wallace Collection, Henry Clay Frick confided

to a friend, "The American people are fond — and properly so — of going to Europe, chiefly to see the famous paintings and other works of art there. I am going to try to bring some of them here where all Americans may have the opportunity of seeing them without crossing the ocean."² He was not alone. Besides the museums already cited, many others in every part of the United States were founded around the same time, including Bayou Bend in Houston; Hillstead in Farmington, Connecticut; the Hyde Collection in Glen Falls, New York; the Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum in San Antonio; and the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida.

The culture private museums provided for America was mainly old and European. A few collectors asserted America's indigenous artistic traditions, notably Mary Cabot Wheelwright, who collected Navajo masterpieces and founded what is now called the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian. Others prized contemporary American art, notably Duncan Phillips and Charles Freer. Yet even the Phillips Collection and the Freer Gallery balanced modern American art with older art from someplace else: Europe, typically, in the case of the Phillips; Asia, exceptionally, in the case of the Freer. America measured itself against European standards. But the great American collectors put those standards to their own purposes.

American collectors were unabashedly merchants. Without exception, they either made their own fortunes in industry or inherited industrial wealth from a father who had succeeded only decades before. In contrast to European counterparts such as the fourth Marquess of Hertford (whose collection became the Wallace Collection in London) or the Duc d'Aumale (son of King Louis-Philippe of France and founder of the Musée Condé in the Château Chantilly), the great American collectors inherited nothing and therefore had to buy everything. (Not coincidentally, seizing art as war booty had passed from fashion about the time America became a nation.) The myth persists that

1995 Washington Antiques Show Publication

collectors like Frick or Henry E. Huntington were embarrassed by their social origins. Quite the contrary. Not only were they proud of their capitalist accomplishments, but, more to the point, they enjoyed inaugurating a capitalist attitude to art.

Unlike previous collectors, Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bought art on what we would call an open market. They consciously exploited their tremendous financial liquidity to draw art objects out of churches, family estates and other traditional artistic contexts. Huntington, for example, lured the world-famous *Blue Boy* away from the Duke of Westminster's aristocratic collection. Cash beckoned. And private collectors had more of it at their instant disposal than any national or metropolitan museum. Much to English chagrin, Huntington's price for the *Blue Boy* could not be matched — \$700,000 and then some was hard to match in 1921. If private collectors did not quite create the art market as we know it today, they certainly galvanized it.

Most fundamentally, American private collectors attached a money value to art objects of all sorts. Almost every newspaper article tracking the great collectors — and there were many of them — commented on this new way of thinking, often with dismay or regret but more usually with patriotic glee. Exercised by art collectors, the dollar's buying power signaled America's manifest cultural destiny.

Much more money value was attached to some objects than to others. The Golden Age of the private art museum produced our modern concept not only of the art market, but also of the artistic masterpiece. Of course some art objects had always been hailed above others. But American collectors valued paintings comparatively more than

that kind of art object had ever been valued before and, moreover, they fanned out the values ascribed to different paintings. In this they collaborated — and I use the word “collaborate” insistently — with art historians and art dealers. Legendary figures like Joseph Duveen, nicknamed “the world's greatest salesman,” and Bernard Berenson, supreme connoisseur, made their fame and fortune by working with private collectors. Both Frick and Huntington were among Duveen's best customers, and Gardner gave

Berenson his start. Art historians effected triages among paintings, placing artists in a hierarchy and pronouncing on quality; they made their reputations as scholars by ascribing objects to authors, by sorting out the authentic from the fake, the inspired from the ordinary. For dealers, paintings were the most mobile, volatile and thus potentially most

profitable kind of commodity, the kind they had the strongest incentive to seek out and make available for study and purchase.

If collectors depended in some ways on historians and dealers, however, the reverse was also true. Art historians and dealers might not have become professionals in the modern sense, or at least not so quickly, had there been no great collectors. To be professional, one has to be paid. To be paid, there has to be money. The golden age of collecting put enough money in circulation to support the professionalization of many talents or skills. For once the most esthetically ambitious collectors had bought masterpieces, they wanted to give them a worthy setting. They proceeded to hire the finest architects, interior decorators, landscape designers and craftspeople. Frick is supposed to have spent as much on the room within which he placed his delightful Fragonard panels as on the panels themselves. (Figure 1) Meanwhile, he commissioned his second floor decoration from a woman just starting out,

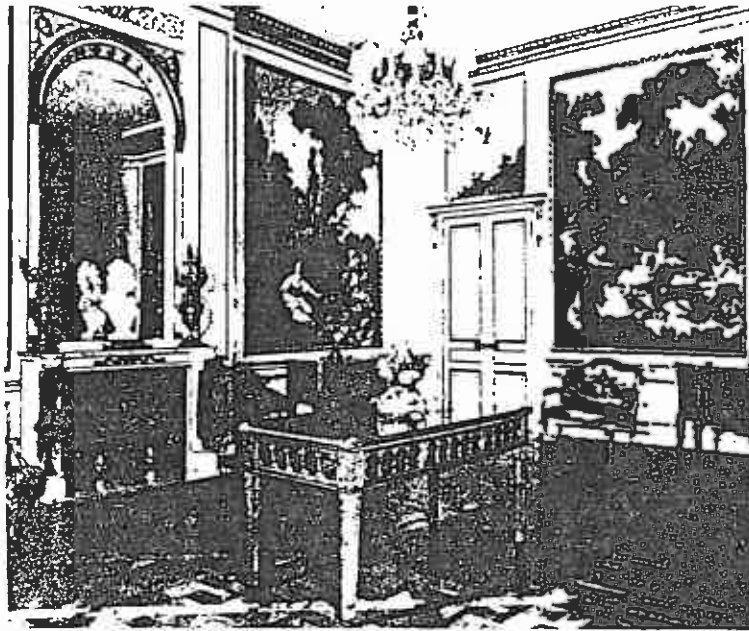


Figure 1. Frick Collection: Fragonard room, fireplace and southeast corner. Photograph, copyright The Frick Collection, New York.

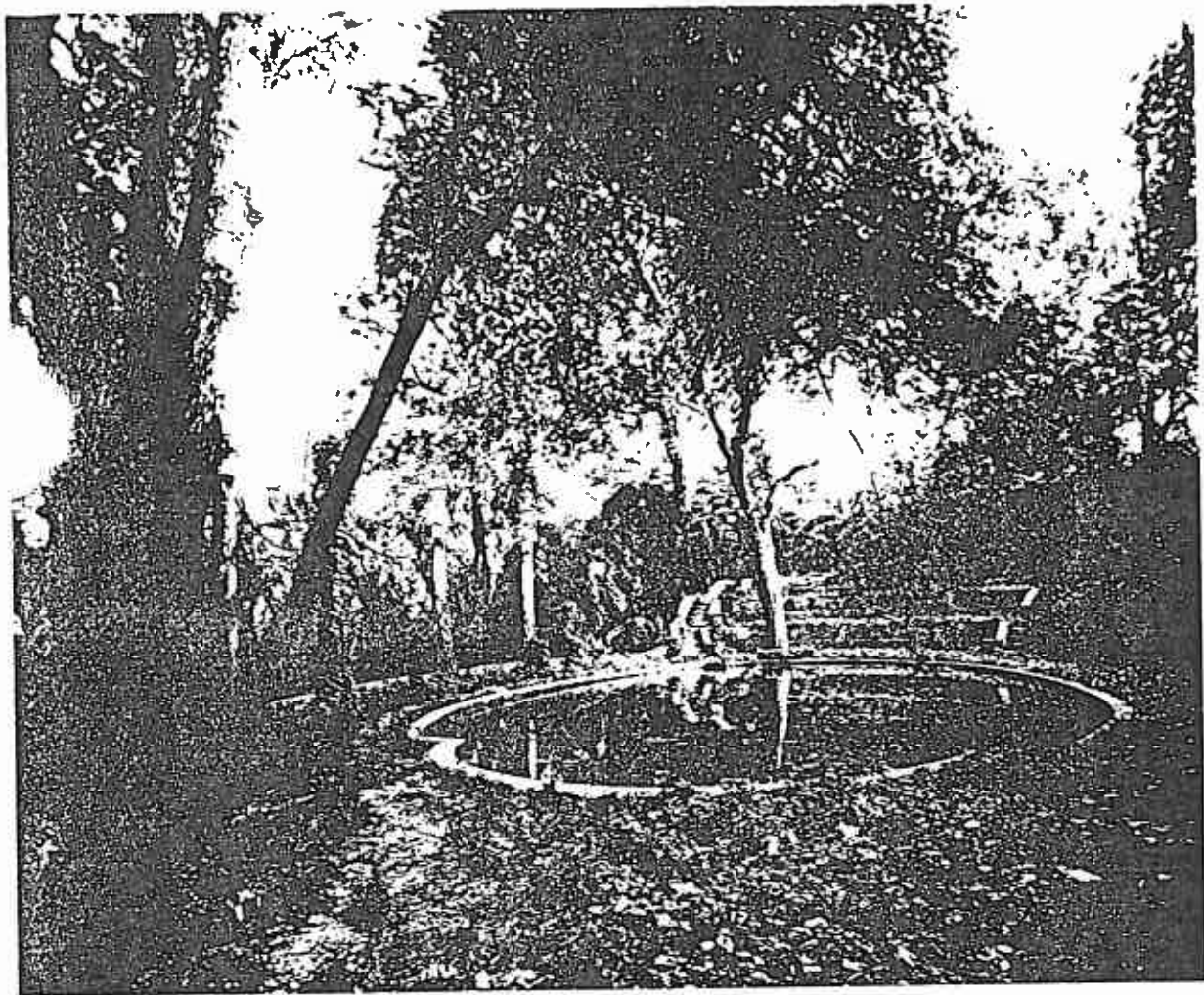


Figure 2. *Dumbarton Oaks: Lover's Lane Area* — the reflecting pool, 1923. Photograph courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks, Studies in Landscape Architecture, Photo Archive.

Elsie De Wolfe. In a stunning coup, De Wolfe obtained for Frick privileged access to the remains of the renowned Hertford collection. There had been more than enough to constitute the Wallace Collection. With such prestigious leftovers, De Wolfe launched the first professional interior decorating career. Beatrix Farrand, similarly a pioneering professional, also owed a great deal to private collecting. She had many clients, but in the end the garden that proved to be her masterpiece, the one that marks her as one of the greatest landscape designers of all time, was created for Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss's Dumbarton Oaks. (Figure 2) It took the conjunction of the collector's desire and the professionalization of the arts, each reinforcing the other, to create the great American private art museums.

Gifted collaborators only goaded collectors to further extravagance. If anything, the creation of their palaces brought out their fullest individualism.

Perhaps the easiest way to gauge the strength of the American collecting personality is to recognize that fully half of the greatest collectors were women. In an age in which women were not supposed to affirm their own wills, collecting encouraged some very willful ladies indeed. Isabella Stewart Gardner even took "C'Est Mon Plaisir" (such is my will/pleasure) as her motto, and emblazoned it on the wall of Fenway Court, the home that would become the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Gardner was only one among many flamboyant collectors, but she is perhaps the most famous, deservedly. Boston newspapers regularly commented on such features as "the finest arms in all of Boston," while one reporter went as far as to claim, "All Boston is divided into two parts, of which one follows science, and the other Mrs. Jack Gardner."³ Alas, it appears to be factually untrue that Gardner walked grown lions around Boston, but imagine the aura that made such a story believable.

America's great collectors styled themselves as royal princes — and princesses. Both Frick and Arabella Huntington took intense pleasure in owning and living with objects that had belonged to royalty or near royalty, objects like Frick's Fragonard panels that had originally been commissioned by King Louis XV's mistress Madame Du Barry. Arabella Huntington signalled her emergence from dubious obscurity into unassailable wealth as the wife of the railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington by purchasing a set of eighteenth-century French royal tapestries. They were destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, but no matter — in 1909 she bought a better set, as well as chairs to go with them that had belonged to Madame de Pompadour, the greatest rococo art patron and also Louis XV's mistress. When Arabella married Collis's nephew Henry E. Huntington, the tapestries and chairs became a part of the future Huntington Art Gallery. Across America, in climates as different as Florida and Washington State, the merchant princes erected their palaces and laid out their grounds, leaving us with spectacular estates like Vizcaya in Miami and Maryhill in Goldendale that were intended to rival the princely palaces of Renaissance Italy and the aristocratic country "houses" of baroque England.

Each of the great collectors perpetuated his or her personal will through a legal will. To varying degrees, each of the great private museums must revolve around its founder's collection, and often around the original installation of that collection in the founder's home. In the relatively rigid case of the Gardner, all art objects must remain permanently in the place Mrs. Jack chose for them, or else the entire collection is to be sold and Harvard University to receive the proceeds. In the relatively flexible case of the Huntington, the collection can be expanded as well as rearranged, and the Huntingtons' own European tastes have even been complemented by a new American art collection. Few cases are as extreme as that of the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania; besides the usual strictures on altering the collection and its installation, until recently the Barnes was open to the public on a quite restricted basis and did not allow color reproductions of works in its collection. Against any of these limitations must be weighed the empathetic pleasures visitors derive from their identification with a single person, the physically manageable scale of an individual's collection and, frankly, the voyeuristic delights of visiting an exceptional person's home and peeking at all his or her things.

We can enjoy these pleasures today in a private museum without knowing much about its his-

tory. If we were to think about the merchant princes in the context of their time, we might realize that they were princes not only in a selfish, but also in a civic way. They did leave their homes and collections to posterity in order to glorify themselves. Frick said outright: "I want this collection to be my monument."⁴ Yet the Frick was left "for the use and benefit of all persons whomsoever," and the Huntington "to promote the public welfare." Other private museums were left to nations, villages, or abstract "communities." The merchant princes flaunted their personal wealth by giving it all away. This apparent paradox once made perfect sense, and in several ways.

In an age of innocent capitalism, it was assumed that if all members of society tried to become as rich as possible, society as a whole would automatically benefit; private museums provided an intrinsically visible — beautifully visible — incitation to strive toward that goal. In the meantime, the private museum compensated for an unequal distribution of wealth. It was easier to accept the fortunes made by someone like Frick when he returned some part of them in philanthropic form, despite business practices such as his notorious strike-breaking role in the Homestead events of 1892. A museum, moreover, returned more than money; it paid cultural interest, as it were. Museums provided an experience which, because of the quality of separate objects, the systematic rigor of their collection and the splendor of their installation, was perceived as a cultural heritage. It may feel strange to us that so rarified, so precious, a heritage seemed at least potentially common, but it was. As interpreted around 1900, the American democratic ideal promised the moral elevation of all citizens. Inside the private museum, every man and woman could pretend to be a merchant prince, and perhaps the fantasy might become a spiritual reality.

Every single one of the great collectors described himself or herself at some point as a steward. They were convinced that they were merely the temporary guardians of objects that belonged to the public. They would never have assembled such great collections if their belief had not been genuine. America's merchant princes did not begin collecting systematically or building and installing a palace until they had decided to turn their personal acquisitions into public institutions. None of the installations of private museums was the actual home of their founders for long, if ever. They were designed to look like homes in order to produce the effect of intimacy that their founders thought was essential to their cultural function. J. P. Morgan, admittedly, collected all kinds of art on a grand

scale, but only his books and manuscripts were obtained with that combination of passion and planning that characterizes the really great collector. It was perhaps because he sensed this that Morgan's son dispersed his father's art objects. Many of them are now in the Frick and in the Huntington, where they were brought to transcend their owner and become a part of history. Above her motto "C'Est Mon Plaisir," Gardner placed a phoenix rising from the ashes to immortality.

Participating as they did in the shaping of history, it was inevitable that the great collectors were in turn affected by historical change. The simplest way of summarizing that response to shifting circumstances is to line up the four most important American private museums in chronological order and note a gradual evolution. The Gardner, the Frick and the Huntington have been mentioned several times already, and Dumbarton Oaks may be familiar to a Washington audience.

Gardner's collection was begun in earnest about 1885 and turned into a museum in 1903. Of our four test cases, the Gardner most closely follows European models in the heterogeneity of its collection and the idiosyncrasy of its installation. Gardner was able to buy her collection early in the development of the art market; consequently she used professional help like Berenson's only intermittently and was able to pay what in retrospect were low prices for masterpieces like Titian's *Rape of Europa*. Her courtyard garden and her music program were extensions of her personal interests and are inseparable spatially from areas that exhibit art objects. (Figure 3)

The Frick, whose collection was begun about 1895 but which was not opened to the public until 1935, streamlines and rationalizes the Gardner model. Frick allowed his house to be significantly altered to become a museum and his collection to be shaped by future professionals. Already in his lifetime he had relied heavily on Duveen. Under Duveen's guidance, Frick had only bought works which were both personally pleasing to himself and of outstanding quality by art historians' standards.

After her father's death, Helen Clay Frick added to his monument an art history reference library. She was responding to the trends that distinguish the slightly later Huntington from the Frick. Although the Huntington was institutionalized as early as 1919, substantially before the Huntingtons' deaths, Henry Huntington had only begun collecting in 1909. The Huntington Art Gallery specializes in English Georgian painting and French eighteenth-century decorative arts; almost entirely brokered by Duveen, it is housed in the Huntingtons' home, but the most important paintings have

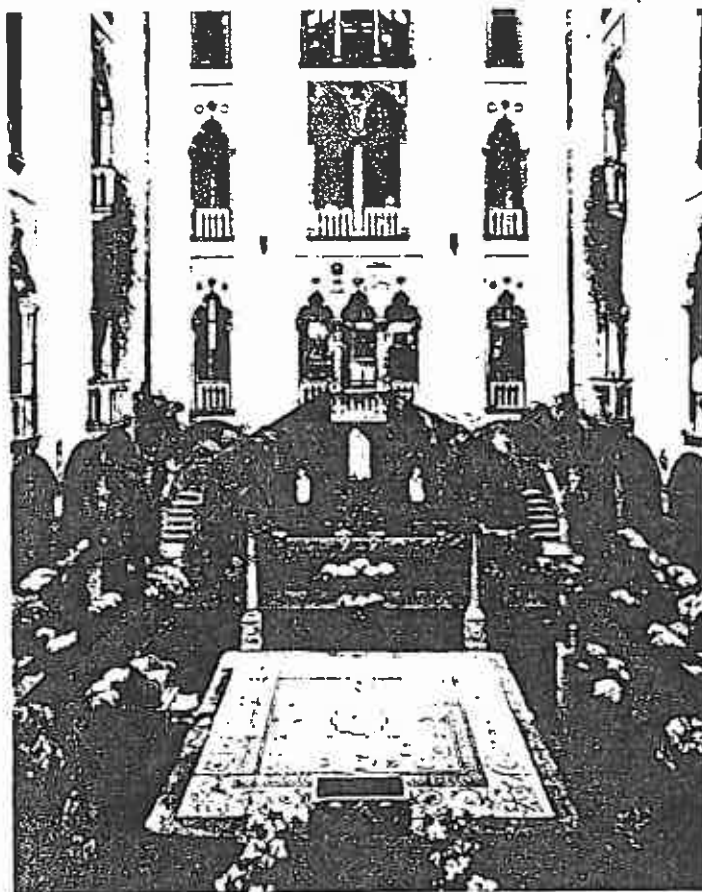


Figure 3. The Courtyard of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Photograph courtesy of Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

been united in one conventionally museum-like space; many of these paintings, such as the *Blue Boy*, were already world-famous when the Huntingtons bought them. (Figure 4) The Huntington Library and gardens are separate entities with professional research functions and are placed apart from the Art Gallery.

Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss began to rebuild Dumbarton Oaks in 1920. In 1940 they placed it under the aegis of Harvard University so that the entire estate could become a research institution, albeit one which includes a few domestic

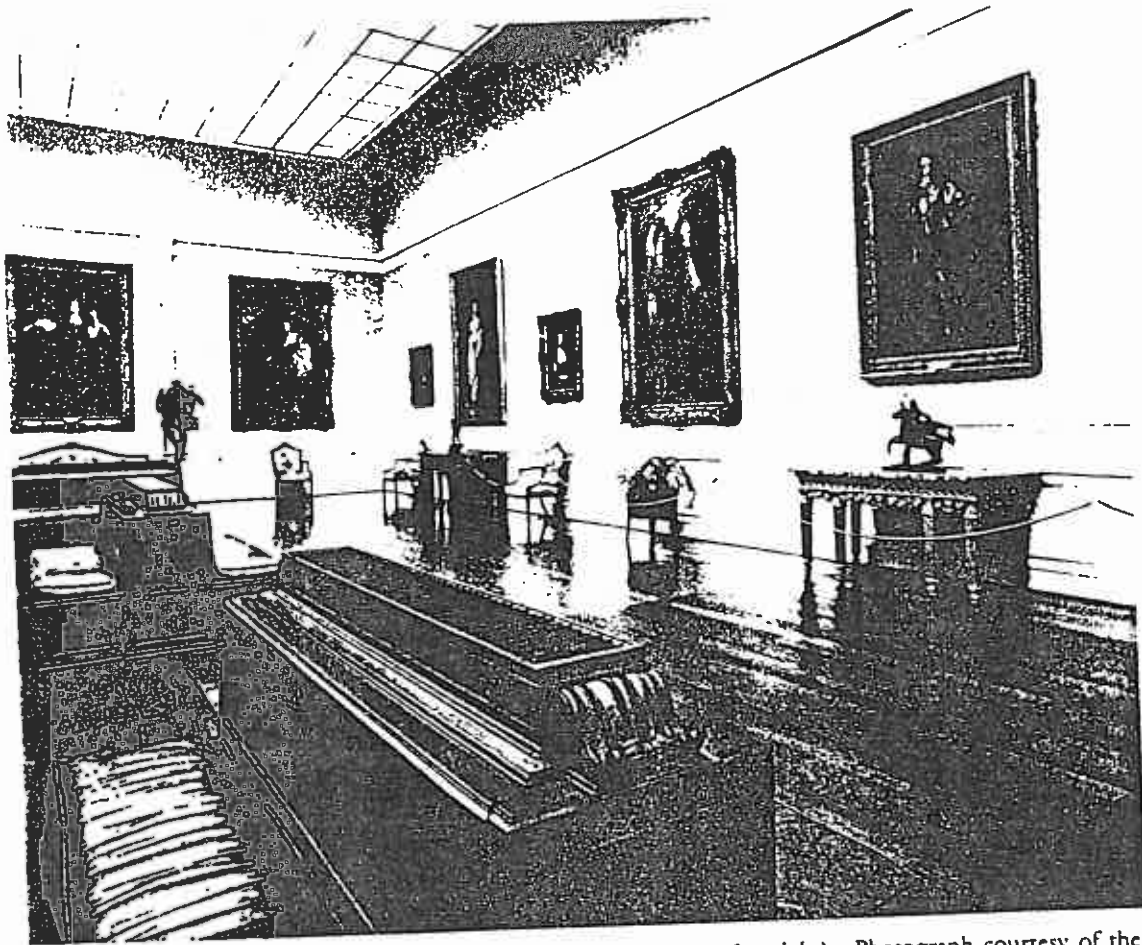


Figure 4. Huntington Art Gallery: Main Gallery with Blue Boy (far right). Photograph courtesy of the Huntington Library and Art Collections, San Marino, CA.

spaces, with galleries devoted to Byzantine art, as well as a wing designed by Philip Johnson for their Pre-Columbian collection. (Figure 5) Yet if Dumbarton Oaks moves further out along the private museum's trajectory in the direction of institutional objectivity, it also reincorporates some of the Gardner Museum's qualities. Its gardens, in whose design Mildred Bliss played a crucial part, make Dumbarton Oaks a living place, and its art collections, though based on a professional notion of the masterpiece, reflect its founders' sophisticated taste, extremely innovative in its time, for non-Western art objects.

Each at their own moment, the great American collectors balanced the opposing values

that "private" and "museum" represent. They sought to reconcile the personal and the collective, to buy what they wanted and also to present what they believed their society needed. They expressed their own taste and exercised their own wills, while at the same time generously endowing their communities. Beyond art, beyond collecting, beyond museums, this was a noble cultural enterprise. The Golden Age of the private museum may have ended with the Second World War, but its lessons remain contemporary.

Anne Higonnet teaches in the Art Department of Wellesley College. She is writing a book on the history of the great private art museums.

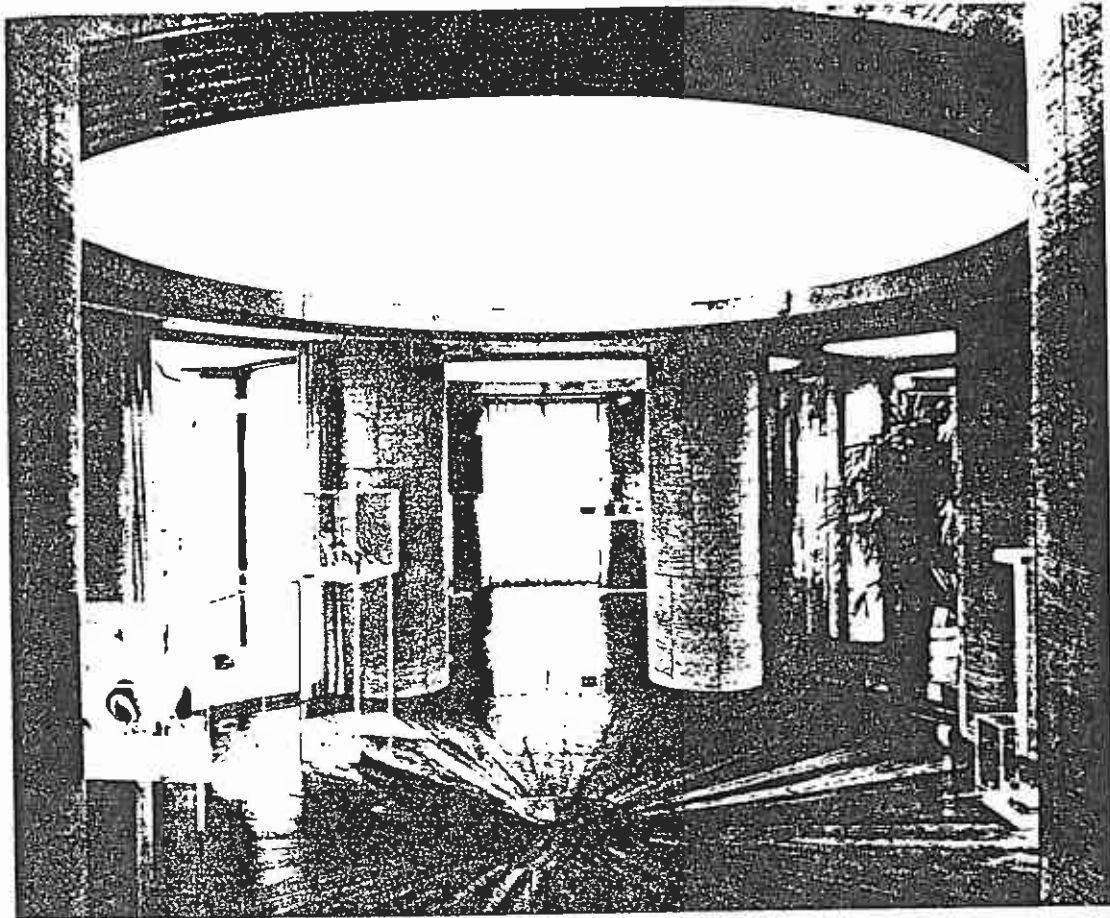


Figure 5. *Dumbarton Oaks: Pre-Columbian Wing* — first installation, 1966. Photograph courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks, Studies in Landscape Architecture, Photo Archive.

NOTES

1. Morris Carter, *Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court*. Boston: 1925, 3rd ed. 1972, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, p. 15.
2. George Harvey, *Henry Clay Frick the Man*. Privately printed, 1936, p. 336.
3. Hilliard T. Goldfarb, *Isabella Stewart Gardner: The Woman and the Myth*. Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1994, p. 11.
4. Harvey, p. 336.