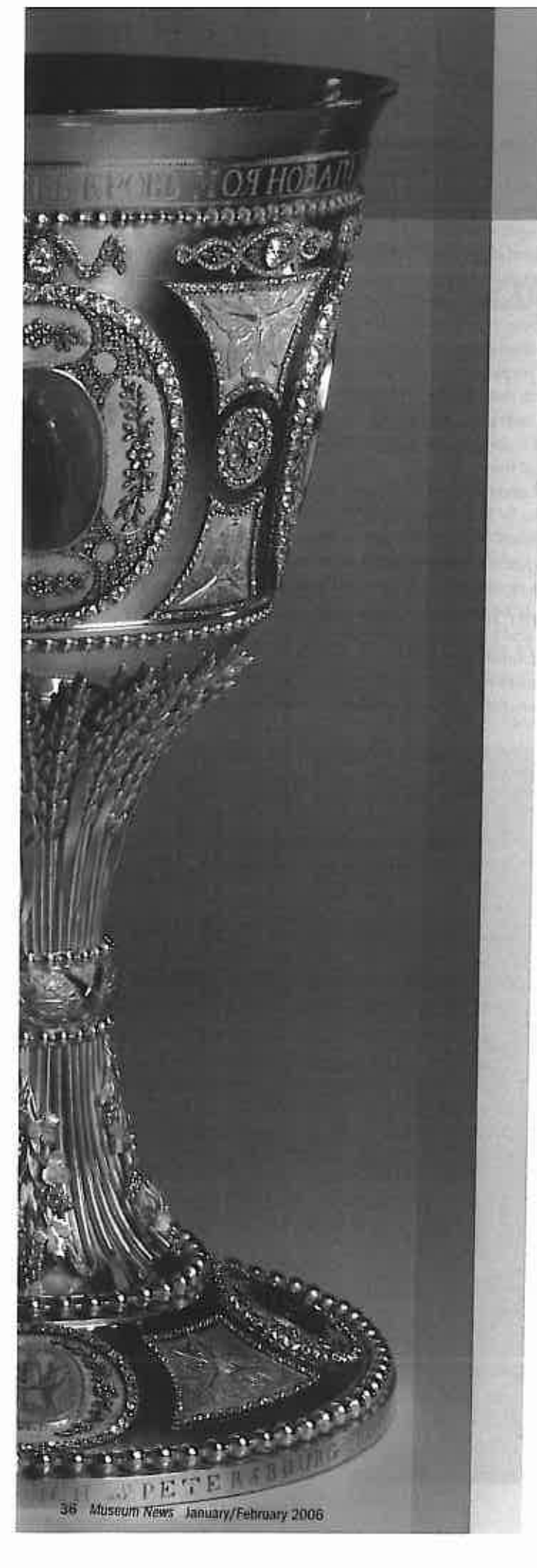

An Excerpt from

Riches, Rivals and Radicals

The Collectors Who Shaped the American Museum

By Marjorie Schwarzer

On April 18, 1906, at precisely 5:12 a.m., a massive earthquake tore through the San Francisco Bay area. Within minutes, downtown San Francisco was in flames. One after another, buildings collapsed. Terrified residents by the thousands fled their burning city. But one woman, a 47-year-old botany curator named Alice Eastwood, was seized by a different impulse. She left the safety of her Berkeley home and, dressed in the long skirt befitting a proper woman of the time, rushed across the bay toward the raging fires. Her destination was the museum where she worked, the California Academy of Sciences, repository of one of the country's most extensive collections of botanical specimens.

By 7 a.m. Eastwood had reached the smoke-filled academy building. Unable to use the crumbling marble stairs, she painstakingly inched her way along the iron railings until she reached the sixth floor. There she feverishly gathered more than 1,000 records and specimens. For hours, via a makeshift pulley, she lowered items to the street below. "The earthquake didn't frighten me," Eastwood later recounted. "What scared me more was losing my life's work." At last conditions forced her out of the building, and she made a mad dash to join her rescued treasures. By 2 p.m. the Academy of Sciences was completely destroyed. But today those same botanical specimens, saved from a burning museum, can still be viewed. They survive thanks to the heroic efforts of an otherwise anonymous, but most assuredly dedicated, museum curator.[1]

Obsession and self-sacrifice lie behind nearly every museum's collection of objects. Individuals with a fierce "collector's passion" shaped the 20th-century museum. They exemplified the American

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Chalice, 1791, St. Petersburg, Russia. Iver Winfeldt Buch, gold, diamonds, chalcedony, bloodstone, nephrite, carnelian, cast glass. H. 13" (33 cm.), D. 7" (18 cm). Hillwood Museum & Gardens; bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 1973. Accession no. 11.223.

Hillwood Museum & Gardens, Washington, D.C. Photo by Edward Owen. Library/California Academy of Sciences.

Botany curator Alice Eastwood takes a break from working with a plant press in the fields of Warner Hot Springs, San Diego (c. 1913).

spirit of rugged individualism in which the self-made tycoon, not the conqueror or royalty as in the older European model, expressed power through acquisition. Often they were adventurous about it, hunters stalking and bagging their prey, spinning tales of narrow escapes from charging rhinos or storms at sea. Such collectors were highly competitive, even ruthless, repeatedly trying to outdo, outbid, and outclass each other. Intriguingly, these same individuals often proved to be exceedingly generous, bequeathing their hard-won collections to public institutions in service to humanity—and, let's be honest, their egos. Most important, however, collectors frequently possessed a passion that has been compared to falling in love. As the assistant director of New York's Frick Collection observed in the 1940s: "Gnawing obsessions, stealthy pursuits, crushing disappointments, and intoxicating triumphs lie in the background of most beautiful things."[2]

Because of these individuals' incessant drive to amass objects, America's museums possess a universe of fascinating things. And, like the universe, museum collections are continually expanding. With haiku-like elegance, former Secretary of the Smithsonian S. Dillon Ripley summed up the reason behind this growth: "Culture creates collections; collections create culture."[3]

Midway through the 19th century, collections in American museums were embarrassingly inferior to the collections of priceless originals found in Europe. Plaster casts and inexpensive copies of Greek, Roman, and Renaissance masterworks. The odd plant, arrowhead, or rock that appealed to an explorer or a missionary. A few motley circus animals. Military records of English immigrants. The masterful art and towering dinosaurs that we have come to associate with our nation's museums were virtually unknown.

Ensuing decades, however, would bring an enormous change in quality and quantity to America's museum collections as the nation's wealthiest citizens set their sights on amassing a complete "encyclopedia" of the world. This growth mirrors the nation's economic and industrial rise to power. It also speaks loudly, if not always eloquently, about Americans' proclivity for acquisition, our continuing infatuation with things, and our desire to amass and exhibit them. At last count (and this is a conservative estimate), today museums across the nation house some 750 million specimens, objects, artifacts, and works of art.[4] Museums possess so much stuff that

Collectors frequently possessed a passion that has been compared to falling in love.

less than 5 percent of it can be exhibited at any one time. The rest sits in storage rooms, laboratories, or wherever else there is space for one more marble bust, mounted owl, or pottery shard. Yet lack of space does not stop museums from acquiring even more things. It is estimated that the aggregate rate of collection growth is 1 to 5 percent annually[5]: millions of additional objects each year.

Behind every great museum collection there are stories, often fascinating ones, about how and why these objects were gathered and the influential men and women who used a combination of wealth, willpower, vision, and ego to acquire and ultimately bequeath them to us.

As the myth goes, art buying was intuitive to millionaire collectors, a kind of noblesse oblige for the moneyed classes, a cultural pursuit that offered a welcome break from the hard-nosed tactics required to make money. In fact, art buying was always a hard-nosed business, usually conducted with the help of expert advisors and skillful dealers. Typical of these were two prominent early players active at the turn of the 20th cen-

Wheeler Museum & Gardens, Washington, D.C. Photo by Edward Owen. Library/California Academy of Sciences.

tury, Harvard-trained connoisseur Bernard Berenson and British dealer Lord Joseph Duveen.

Berenson was a scholar of Italian Renaissance art who believed fervently in the virtues of pedigree, classical beauty, and the supremacy of old world values. He was best known to America's elite collectors (whom he called "squillionaires") as an authenticator of masterworks. Operating out of a villa near Florence, Italy, Berenson claimed that it was his life's mission to make sure that all paintings were correctly attributed: "We must not stop till we are sure that every Lotto is a Lotto, every Cariani a Cariani, every Santa Croce a Santa Croce. . . ." An attribution from Berenson could vastly augment the price of a work of art, much to the delight of the dealers who paid him to study a work with a magnifying glass (later, a flashlight) and then sign a certificate of authenticity.[6]

From 1906 until their highly public falling out in the 1930s, Berenson worked with the legendary dealer Joseph Duveen. Based in London, Duveen was the persuasive voice behind some of the most important American art acquisitions of the early 20th century, including Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* by the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Botticelli's *The Resurrected Christ* by the Detroit Institute of Arts, and Raphael's *Cowper Madonna* by the National Gallery of Art. To find just the right piece for his eager American clients, it is said that Duveen "was at the center of a vast, circular nexus of corruption that reached from the lowliest employee of the British museum right up to the King." The dealer drove up prices by urging collectors to bid against each other. Once a sale was final, however, he then talked the collector into giving the work to a museum.[7]

Although dealers and connoisseurs courted their powerful clients vigorously and advised them freely, when it came to purchasing art the collectors usually prevailed. As museum historian Kenneth Hudson writes of these early collectors, "They knew and loved art and were as savvy and passionate about it as any Renaissance tyrant."[8]

One such collector was the eccentric Boston socialite Isabella Stewart Gardner. In the 1890s, a proper member of Boston high society would have collected French academic art, a tasteful and safe choice. But Gardner—a native New Yorker who delighted in rattling the socialites in her adopted city—had other ideas. She teamed up with Berenson and together they hunted down authentic Italian Renaissance masterpieces, combing Europe for Botticellis and Titians.

This iconic image of Isabella Stewart Gardner, painted by John Singer Sargent in 1888, caused quite a stir in Boston. Oil on canvas, 190 cm. X 81.2 cm.

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Photo by Edward Owen.

Even with Berenson's guidance Gardner made impulsive purchases, driven by her competitive nature. She was reputed to possess an ego so "cosmic and insatiable" that "the hint that anyone else was after an object catapulted her into an immediate purchase."[9] Yet as one former art museum director has noted, "To many people the making of a great collection represents only a combination of money and luck. These elements are usually necessary but there is far more to it than that. To make a really great collection, the collector must have taste, the ability to recognize quality, and perseverance in getting the best works of art obtainable."[10] Gardner possessed all of these qualities. In 1903 she built a Venetian-style palace in Boston to display the magnificent pieces she had acquired. She micro-managed every detail of the construction process, arranged each painting, sculpture, or tapestry as she saw fit, and then named the museum after herself. "Years ago," she stated when the museum was completed, "I decided that the greatest need in our country was Art . . . we were a very young country and had very few beautiful things . . . so I was determined to make it my life's work." In her will, Gardner forbade any alterations to her precise arrangements of her treasures.

Over the ensuing decades other American collectors would follow suit. Philadelphia's Alfred C. Barnes (1924), Washington, D.C.'s Duncan Phillips (1925), New York's Henry Clay Frick (1935), and Tulsa's Thomas Gilcrease (1949) are a few of the many who established museums in their own names as public monuments to their private tastes.[11]

Not every mansion-museum belonged to an informed collector with a fine eye and impeccable taste. California newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst was reputed to "represent the *nux vomica* of bad collecting on a grand scale." Between the 1890s and 1930s, Hearst traveled regularly to New York auction houses and bought every "modern gewgaw or ancient tchotchke . . . that drew his eye," stuffing his booty of "fourth-rate paintings of Madonnas," Georgian silver, and Grecian urns into miles of railroad cars. The items were crammed into his garish castle on the Pacific coast, as seen in the semi-fictional 1941 film *Citizen Kane*. In 1942 about $4-million worth of objects from the collection was sold at Gimbel's Department Store in New York. Many objects—including a vast amalgamation of odd lamps, ceramic dogs, and portraits of Hearst's mistress—ended up in private col-

Hillwood Museum & Gardens, Washington, D.C. Photo by Edward Owen.

lections, although plenty remains at Hearst's San Simeon estate. Today this "Bastard-Spanish-Moorish-Romanesque-Gothic-Renaissance-Bull-Market-Damn-the-Expense" mansion-as-museum is one of the most popular attractions in California.[12]

Collectors like Hearst felt that for the right price the world could be theirs. This attitude motivated some dealers to raise prices and move shoddy goods. In the 1920s, Italian forger Alceo Dossena became a local celebrity for creating convincing copies of sculptures in styles from Etruscan to Rococo. Fooling both dealers and collectors, many of Dossena's artistic fakes landed on display in American museums. "You can sell anything to Americans," said convicted French forger Jean Charles Millet in the 1920s. "They know nothing about art. . . . All you have to do is ask a fabulous price."[13]

The collector most credited with paying fabulous prices was J. P. Morgan. Between 1902 and his death in 1913, Morgan spent more than $60 million on art. While some of his purchases lacked authenticity and quality, others were magnificent. Morgan, as legend goes, "would buy a Louis XVI gold box . . . as casually as a commuter picks up a morning paper, and a few minutes later, with the same aplomb, spend $200,000 for the Cellini cup which had come to Adolphe Rothschild via the King of Naples."[14]

At first Morgan's lavish purchases decorated his homes in London and Paris, a practical solution to the burdensome U.S. customs duties that would be imposed on his treasures if he attempted to bring them to New York. Art more than 20 years old was subject to a heavy tax when imported into the United States. But in 1909 Congress passed the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act, cosponsored by Rhode Island Sen. Nelson Aldrich. Imported art was now welcomed into the country duty-free. This legislation was to prove of enormous benefit to America's museums and, as some Europeans later bemoaned, of equal detriment to Europe's collections. Several art museum trustees testified in support of the act, and Morgan's influence was decisive. Only two years earlier, he had orchestrated a major bailout of the U.S. banking system and stock exchange, thus helping the U.S. Treasury avert financial collapse. Because he had almost single-handedly rescued the nation from "The Panic of 1907," Morgan was perhaps the most powerful man in America. This was no small factor in the repeal of custom duties that would allow him to import his collection to America and bequeath it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

After the Tariff Act, Duveen and other international dealers prospered as never before. Using well-oiled connections to continental museums and royalty, they spirited art out of Europe and into the hands of eager American clients—including, within the next few decades, two of Sen. Aldrich's children, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, a co-founder of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and her brother William, a trustee of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art.

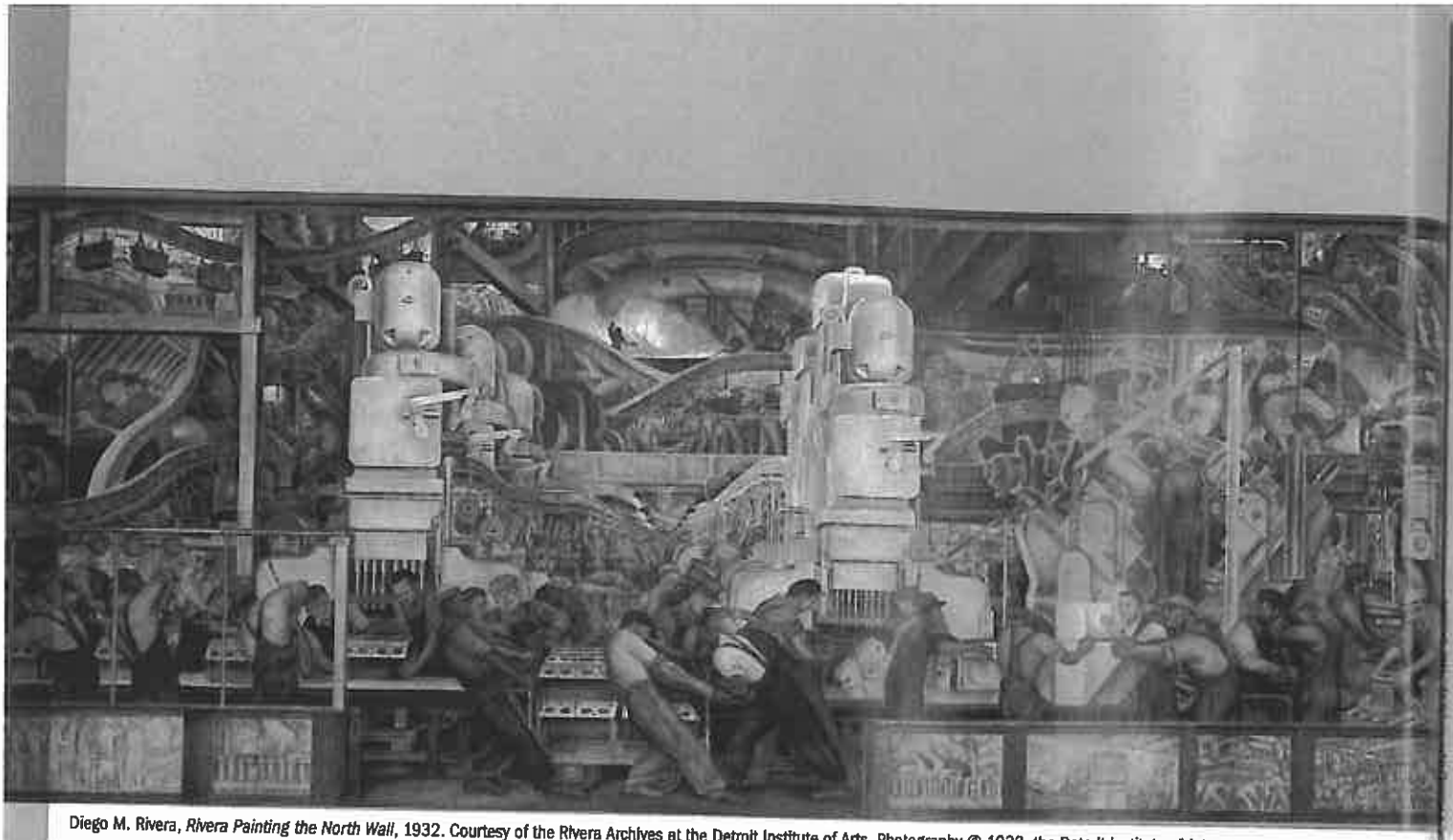
In 1913 Congress intervened again, to the enduring benefit of American museums, and softened the Tariff Act to allow contemporary paintings and sculptures, in addition to older ones, to enter the country duty-free. The mechanisms were now in place to stockpile the country's museums with art that would be the envy of any royal court.

That same year also saw the arrival of a controversial new style of artwork from Europe. Works by avant-garde artists like Marcel Duchamp and Alexander Archipenko traveled across the Atlantic and premiered at one of the most important exhibits of the 20th century: the Armory Show in New York. The first large-scale public showing of modern art in the United States, the Armory Show opened collectors' eyes to radical new images and created a buzz that continued for decades. As critic Calvin Tomkins described it, "Hideous and unspeakable tendencies had been let loose upon the land—blue nudes and nudes that descended staircases, wild beasts and other Parisian monstrosities . . . dangerous breeding grounds for Bolshevism and gross sexuality."[15] It was art as scandal, described by newspapers as "freakish," "mad," and "inane." A growing group of American collectors would prove to

Clock, 1896, St. Petersburg, Russia. Firm of Carl Fabergé, Julius Rappoport (1864-1916), workmaster. Henry Moser & Cie, works. Silver gilt, bowenite, watercolor on ivory. Height 11 1/4" (28.6 cm.), width 4" (10.2 cm.). Hillwood Museum & Gardens; bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 1973 (Accession no. 12.155).

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

Hillwood Museum & Gardens, Washington, D.C. Photo by Edward Owen.



Diego M. Rivera, *Rivera Painting the North Wall*, 1932. Courtesy of the Rivera Archives at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Photography © 1932, the Detroit Institute of Arts.

be eager advocates of this and later radical movements. Inspired by artists like Picasso and Gauguin, they also began to acquire "primitive" art like African ceremonial masks and pre-conquest sculpture from Latin America. In the coming decades, these collectors would found the nation's first museums of modern art.

With the outbreak of World War I, the economic balance tilted further in favor of the United States. War contracts filled the bank accounts of industrialists and investors, swelling the ranks of wealthy American collectors. Meanwhile, the remnants of European aristocracy, desperate for hard currency, were willing to sell their most precious masterpieces. Rembrandts, Tiepolos, and Turners crossed the Atlantic. U.S. buyers who couldn't afford paintings lapped up prints, engravings, and sketches. In 1916, German museum director Wilhelm von Bode warned that American collectors were draining Europe of its masterpieces. Soon, he decried, America's museums would "equal or surpass the great museums of Europe. . . ."[16]

American collectors also sapped Europe's museums of future masterpieces. Dealers organized "European War Benefit Sales" to provide financial relief to overseas artists. The artists in turn were only too happy to sell their work to eager and rich American collectors.

Throughout the roaring '20s, art collecting boomed, benefiting both dealers and museums. By 1923 Americans were spending $250 million annually on art purchases, the American Art Dealers' Association estimated. Even with the onset of the Great Depression, prices for art continued to rise. Some saw the acquisition of art as essential to civic pride and reputation. Said Dallas Art Museum Director John Ankeney in 1930, "Nature made Dallas rich. Time will make her powerful. Only Art can make her great." Political turmoil in Europe led to further opportunities for collectors. In 1931 the Soviet government acquired hard currency by putting some of Russia's most treasured paintings on the market. Marjorie Merriweather Post, heir to the breakfast cereal fortune, bought the tsar's Fabergé eggs in addition to Russian icons, textiles, porcelains, and silver, which are now at the Hillwood Museum and Gardens in Washington, D.C. Andrew Mellon purchased more than $5-million worth of paintings, including Raphael's exquisite *Alba Madonna* for $1,166,400, setting a record price for a single painting. Mellon's purchases of Titians, van Dycks, and Vermeers—sequestered in a safe in the Corcoran Art Gallery—were great fodder for journalists. While most Americans suffered from economic woes, the former U.S. treasurer was indulging his muses to the tune of millions of dollars. But he had a plan.[17]

In 1936 Mellon made an extraordinary gesture. He gave his treasures to the U.S. government, along with an endowment to care for them and a building to house them. "Over the period of many years I have been acquiring important and rare paintings and sculpture with the idea that ultimately they would become the property of the people of the United States and be made available to them in a national art gallery," Mellon wrote to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "I have given . . . securities ample to erect a gallery building of sufficient size to house these works of art and to permit the indefinite growth of the collection."[18] The National Gallery of Art was born.

Established on the Mall in Washington, D.C., the National Gallery grew as other collectors came forward: Mellon's son Paul, five-and-dime magnate Samuel Kress, Sears & Roebuck heir Lessing Rosenwald, and Philadelphia collector Joseph Widener, much to the chagrin of the leaders of the Philadelphia Museum of Art who had coveted the Widener collection. Still, Mellon's gift, however magnificent, was tinged with scandal. While overseeing the U.S. Treasury, Mellon had been charged with falsifying his personal income tax returns. He subsequently endured a series of humiliating public trials. Federal prosecutors intimated that Mellon evaded conviction by using his art collection to curry

favor with Congress and the American people.

By the 1930s there was an established class of cosmopolitan patrons like Mellon who had a powerful effect on American tastes in art. They exercised great influence over the kind of art the country's leading museums would acquire and exhibit. Among this class were prominent socialites like Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Peggy Guggenheim. Such patrons did more than collect works by long-dead masters, as their parents had done. They socialized with living artists, acting as modern-day Medicis. Whitney parlayed her fortune and collection into the Whitney Museum of American Art. Guggenheim is famous not only for her financial support of artists but for her numerous liaisons with them. One resulted in marriage to surrealist Max Ernst, whom she helped escape the growing fascist movement in Europe.

Such relationships were not without their problems. In 1932 Wilhelm Valentiner, the flamboyant, German-born director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, met Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and his wife Frida Kahlo at a tennis match in California. Valentiner was taken by this striking couple, particularly Kahlo, whom he found "especially charming and typical of modern Mexico." He hired Rivera, an avowed Marxist, to adorn the museum's courtyard with 27 frescos depicting the spirit of industrial Detroit. The frescos were financed by the decidedly not-Marxist Ford Motor Company, under the leadership of Henry Ford's son Edsel, a collector and head of the Detroit Arts Commission. The murals were controversial from the moment they were unveiled in 1933. The press, clergy, and politicians complained that the subject—industrial might—was inappropriate for an art museum. Worse, Rivera's nudes were considered pornographic. Critics demanded the frescos be whitewashed. Ford, it should be noted, had the courage to rally to Rivera's defense, as did many others in the community. Today, the murals are still on display in Detroit, considered to be among Rivera's finest works.

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Nuptial Crown, 1884, St. Petersburg, Russia. Unknown maker. Silver, diamonds, velvet. Height 5 3/4" (14.5 cm.), diameter 4" (10.2 cm.).