

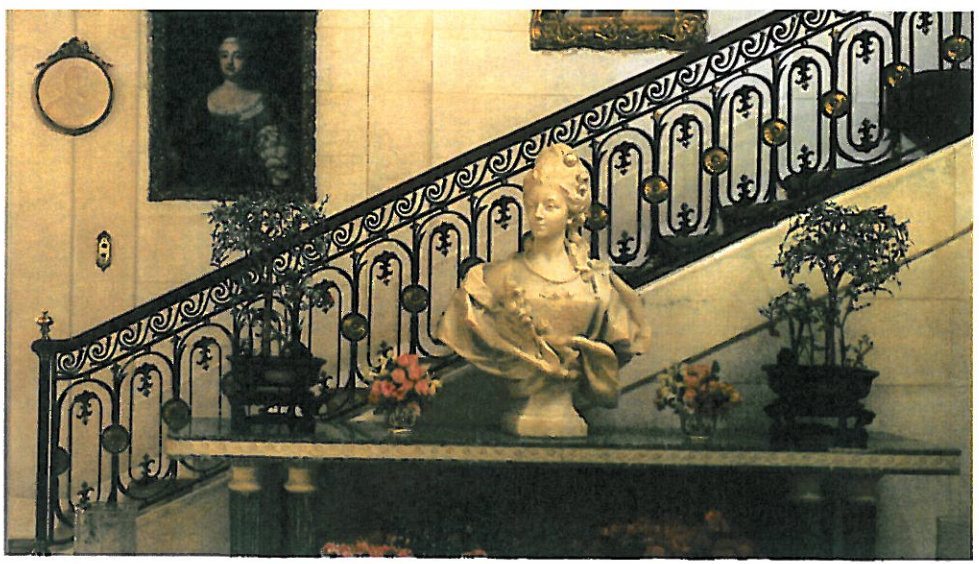


Hillwood: An Art Collector's Personal Museum





*Marjorie Merriweather Post's Washington, D.C., estate, Hillwood Museum and Gardens, exemplifies a rare type of American museum known as the art collector's personal museum. The founders of these national jewels followed a pattern set in Europe, where since the Renaissance, princes and wealthy individuals have transformed their domiciles into showcases for art. Like their counterparts abroad, American collectors bestowed a public legacy by turning their homes into museums highlighting the fruits of their collecting interests.*



These collections range from important Old Master paintings and stellar examples of contemporary art to European and American decorative arts. Most founders of personal museums wanted the public to experience their treasures within the same ambiance they designed and built to contain them. Today, approximately twenty-four such museums exist throughout the nation. However, not all reflect their original appearance, due to structural changes needed to fulfill obligatory conservation requirements and facilitate effective interpretation of the works of art.

Moreover, some personal museums have added to the collections after their founder's death. Art collector's personal museums should, also, not be confused with the plethora of house museums scattered across America whose typical function is to highlight a historical figure or period lifestyle. Although most house museums contain assemblages of household furnishings, some extremely valuable, their owners were not serious art collectors.

The first American to establish a personal museum is the Boston

art collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924). The daring Mrs. Gardner delighted in challenging Boston blue bloods when, in 1903, she opened her home, Fenway Court, to the public. She included in her will a proviso that after her death it never be altered. Hers was not a typical New England home but a melange of Venetian architectural fragments installed around an interior three-story courtyard. Scattered throughout the spaces, esoteric and magnificent Old Master paintings share living quarters with an idiosyncratic mix of antiques and memorabilia. Mrs. Gardner, like



*Opposite*

Hillwood Icon Room

*Above*

Hillwood Entry Hall

*Right*

The Long Gallery, The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts

*Reading from Hillwood Museum and Gardens: Marjorie Merriweather Post's Art Collector's Personal Museum. Fisher, F. (2000) (pp. 8-12). Washington, DC: Hillwood Museum and Gardens.*



many subsequent art collectors, developed the idea for creating such an exotic space in America from her many travels abroad. When American collectors visited European family estates with fine and decorative arts collections, they returned home with a desire to make up for the absence of Old World culture in America.

An American collector who

*Below*

The Fragonard Room, The Frick Collection, New York, New York



emulated Mrs. Gardner's example was Henry Clay Frick (1849–1919). The Pittsburgh coke and steel industrialist began collecting art at age thirty-one on his first trip to Europe with his friend Andrew Mellon—who also became an important art collector. By the turn of the century, Frick's extraordinary eye for quality had led him to acquire some of the finest paintings and decorative arts in America. In 1913 he and architect Thomas Hastings created

his upper Fifth Avenue, New York City, residence after the style of eighteenth-century European aristocratic domestic architecture. Throughout the mansion, his magnificent paintings are elegantly set among fine French furnishings and decorative arts. Like Mrs. Gardner in Boston, Frick intended his home and collection to become a museum after his death. However, he did not stipulate that it remain frozen in time as did Mrs. Gardner, but allowed for future expansion of the facility and collection.

Across the continent, in San Marino, California, Henry E. (1850–1927) and Arabella (1850–1924) Huntington transformed their majestic estate into the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens. As its name implies, the Huntington is more than an art museum, reflecting the couple's multiple avocations. Huntington made his wealth as a railroad executive, initially co-managing the Southern Pacific Company and later organizing the Los Angeles interurban railway system. He began buying art in the early 1900s, but it wasn't until he married his second wife, Arabella, that he became a serious collector. Indeed, it was she who nurtured his art-collecting passion. Together they amassed one of America's finest assemblages of eighteenth-century English paintings and decorative arts, including such masterpieces as Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* and Sir Thomas Lawrence's *Pinkie*.

The Huntingtons' 207-acre site also includes an outstanding botanical garden of approximately 150 acres. Like Frick, Huntington

conceived of his estate as a living institution that could evolve over time. Today, the couple's fine and decorative arts collections appear in a variety of spaces in their home and library, some as originally arranged and others in galleries retrofitted from former living quarters. Over the years, the Huntington has acquired additional art collections, the library has grown exponentially, and the botanical garden has become a renowned educational facility.

The Barnes Foundation, located in suburban Merion outside of Philadelphia, represents a personal collector's museum of quite a different nature. Founded by the eccentric Dr. Albert C. Barnes (1872–1951), it ranks as one of the world's finest private collections of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and early modern art. Barnes made a sizable fortune from his invention and manufacture of Argyrol, an antiseptic for the treatment of eye inflammation. In the second decade of the twentieth century, he began assembling a number of paintings by America's early modernist painters to decorate his manufacturing plant and expose his workers to the educational benefits of art.

Later, with the assistance of American realist artist William Glackens, Barnes acquired a great number of paintings by contemporary European artists including Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, and Henri Matisse—a pioneer collector indeed. Unlike other collectors, he did not live with his collection but built an adjacent gallery on his property for its display. Highly suspicious of academic art historians, Barnes developed his





*Left*

The Library Room, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California

own obscure philosophy of art education that led him to decorate his gallery, floor-to-ceiling, with works of art totally out of chronological sequence and juxtaposed to a strange assortment of decorative objects and metal hardware fragments from all over.

Opened to the public in 1951 in the Brandywine Valley near Wilmington, Delaware, the magnificent Winterthur estate of Henry Francis du Pont (1889–1969) has become a local landmark. The beautiful rolling terrain was settled by du Pont's ancestors—founders of America's black powder industry—in 1810. He inherited it upon his father's death in 1926. Formally educated in practical horticulture, du Pont eventually developed an interest in collecting American antiques. At the end of his life, he possessed the most comprehensive collection of objects made or used in America before 1840.

In addition, he purchased numerous period interiors from structures slated for demolition that enabled him to create authentic spaces for the display of his collections. Du Pont enlarged the family home several times to properly mount items from his vast collection. The seriousness of du Pont's avocation is attested to in

his attention to research and conservation, leading him eventually to establish a research library and conservation center.

Du Pont had a colleague collector—or one might say a competitor—in Ima Hogg of Houston, Texas (1882–1975). Formally educated to be a concert pianist, she decided not to pursue a musical career, but instead enjoyed the comforts of family wealth based on oil holdings and real estate. Early in her life, Hogg acquired a passion for fine and decorative arts of several categories including European contemporary paintings on paper, the arts of Southwest Indians, and, what she

is best remembered for, American decorative arts from the colonial period up to the Victorian era.

In 1926 she built her home Bayou Bend (much smaller in scale than du Pont's Winterthur) in the suburbs of Houston. There she spent the rest of her life expanding and refining her magnificent American fine and decorative arts collection. Like du Pont, she organized her collection according to periods and displayed them in appropriately styled rooms. At age seventy-five Hogg deeded Bayou Bend to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with the provision of life tenancy. She stipulated that it remain forever a house museum

*Below*

The Port Royal Parlor, The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware





for the display of her American collection. It opened to the public in 1966.

Another house museum of nearly the same scale as Bayou Bend is the Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, New York. However, that is where the similarity ends. Louis Fiske (1866–1934) and Charlotte Prunyn (1867–1963) Hyde's fine and decorative arts collection takes this brief survey of American art collector's personal museums back full circle to Isabella Stewart Gardner's Fenway Court. The Hydies modeled their

span of western art history from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century. In 1963, after Mrs. Hyde's death, the couple's home opened to the public with the proviso that it remain intact as a museum to benefit the communities in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. Unfortunately, its remote location makes it one of the lesser known art collector's personal museums.

While space does not allow descriptions of other art collector's personal museums, a few deserve mention. Among the more noted

amass such troves in unrefined America. In reality, they also thought of themselves as artists, creating rooms with extraordinary atmosphere for the display of their treasures. Unlike kindred collectors such as J. P. Morgan, Andrew Mellon, and Samuel Kress—who preferred to bequeath their collections to large American public museums—these individuals sought to retain for posterity a personal association with their possessions—making these personal museums veritable acts of self-expression.



home—built on the banks of the Hudson River overlooking the pulp paper factory that was the source of their wealth—on an Italian Renaissance villa. Young students in Boston when Gardner was creating her museum, the couple later fell under the spell of living with Old Master paintings and Renaissance decorative arts.

While their wealth did not match most of the other serious art collectors, they judiciously accumulated a small but significant representation of art covering the

are the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida; the Taft Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio; the Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut; and in Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks, the Phillips Collection, and the recently opened Kreeger Museum.

By allowing the public to experience great art in intimate spaces—as much of it was originally meant to be seen—founders of these museums left a special legacy. Most of them traveled extensively, bringing them into contact with the art treasures held in European public and private collections. They longed to

Strong-willed and fascinating individuals founded each of these rare and special American museums. They drafted legal trusts to ensure that their legacies of magnificent fine and decorative arts remain in perpetuity for the public's pleasure. For many well-traveled museumgoers, these art collector's personal museums stand out as special places in which to experience art's magic and become acquainted with vivid personalities such as Marjorie Merriweather Post.

*Above*

Hillwood French Drawing Room  
(see page 30)