

Reading from A Taste for Splendor: Russian
Imperial and European Treasures from the
Hillwood Museum. Fisher, F (2000)

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Marjorie Merriweather Post: *Collector with a Passion for Beauty*

FREDERICK J. FISHER

Right: Fig. 7

Portrait of Marjorie Merriweather Post by Frank O. Salisbury (1874-1962), 1934, oil on canvas (51.140)



DURING HER LIFETIME Marjorie Merriweather Post (1887–1973; fig. 7) amassed a superb collection of eighteenth-century French decorative arts in America. As a collector, however, her fame rests with the exceptional imperial Russian objects that she so beautifully displayed among her French pieces at Hillwood, her estate in Washington, D.C. With regard to her Russian collection, Mrs. Post is proclaimed a visionary. Long before others became fascinated with Romanov treasures, she had acquired some of the finest works outside Russia.

Mrs. Post joined a distinguished league of American collectors of fine and decorative arts who, near the end of their lives, realized a more noble purpose for their possessions than handing them down to the next generation. All of America's great art museums—the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Art in Washington—were founded through the generosity of public-minded collectors who donated their holdings of fine and decorative arts to the public so important museums with encyclopedic collections could be formed. Some noted collectors, such as Charles Lang Freer, Duncan Phillips, Sterling and Francine Clark, and J. Paul Getty, preferred to establish museums that stood as memorials to themselves. In another type of single-collector museum, works remain in the owner's original mansion. Among these are such beloved institutions as the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, The Frick Collection in New York City, and The Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, New York. These founders intended their art collections to be experienced within the intimate ambiance of their homes.

Yet another variation are collections of fine and decorative arts that are part of a larger estate, which perhaps includes a specialized library, greenhouses, arboreta, formal gardens, and other reflections of the founder's interests. This indeed is the type of museum that Marjorie Merriweather Post established. While an extraordinary collection is housed in Mrs. Post's mansion, Hillwood also boasts twelve acres of landscaped gardens and a greenhouse with an important orchid collection. Among

other museums of this type are San Simeon in California, founded by William Randolph Hearst; Kykuit in Pocantico Hills, New York, established by the Rockefeller family; and the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, founded by Henry Edwards Huntington. These house-museums differ from the thousands of historic homes that are scattered across America and are dedicated to a specific person or historical period. Indeed, such "collectors' estates turned museums" not only celebrate the wonders of great collections of fine and decorative arts, but they also permit a glimpse of the gracious manner of living that was enjoyed by their celebrated owners.

Marjorie Merriweather Post was born on 15 March 1887 in Springfield, Illinois, the only child of Charles William (known as C. W.) and Ella Merriweather Post.¹ Six months after Marjorie's birth her family, having fallen on difficult financial times, moved to Fort Worth, Texas, where C. W. and his two brothers operated a two hundred-acre ranch. Unfortunately, C. W.'s health failed, necessitating the family's move to Battle Creek, Michigan, where Post was admitted to the famed Battle Creek Sanitarium run by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg. After several months of little or no improvement, C. W. left the sanitarium and put himself under the care of Elizabeth Gregory, a Christian Scientist lay minister. Mrs. Gregory, the mother of five, reluctantly took on the added responsibility of caring for C. W. Within a few months the once-emaciated man was nursed back to perfect health.

This seemingly miraculous recovery instilled in C. W. and Ella a faith in the healing potential of the Christian Science movement. With entrepreneurial zeal Post immersed himself in finding ways to help others. He and Ella purchased a ten-acre farm outside Battle Creek and turned half of their farmhouse into La Vita Inn, an institute for curing the ill through a belief in Christian Science. Needing healthful food for the inn, C. W. began looking for a substitute for coffee. In an old barn on their farm, he experimented with various combinations of wheat grains, bran, and molasses, and in 1895 he perfected a coffee substitute dubbed Postum. Two years later he created a new granular breakfast food that he called Grape-Nuts. Believing in the power of advertising, C. W. was one of the first Americans to place advertise-

ments in national periodicals. This, coupled with the growing interest in health foods, positioned Post to ride the crest of a wave to success. By 1903 his profits were well over one million dollars, and the farm property had grown into a factory with more than four hundred employees. The once-impooverished Post family could now actively participate in the American dream of success, with all its attendant possibilities, responsibilities, and disappointments.

Marjorie, who attended elementary school in Battle Creek, was an inquisitive, intelligent child and the apple of her father's eye. Due to illness and stress in her marriage, Marjorie's mother Ella was often away from home, and this forged a strong bond between father and daughter.² C. W. took Marjorie on business trips and even insisted she experience the proceedings of board meetings. With growing wealth came the opportunity to travel and expand Marjorie's world. In 1900 they sailed to Europe to attend the Paris Exposition Universelle. Nettie L. Major, Mrs. Post's personal biographer, noted, "The family's many trips to Europe had a twofold purpose: while C. W. carefully examined dietary matters, educational tours designed for Marjorie were of utmost importance."³ Major also described a trip to England that

C. W. hosted for his extended family, on which he hired a coach-and-four to tour 246 miles of the English countryside so Marjorie could experience a vanishing way of life.⁴

In 1901, at age fourteen, Marjorie entered Mount Vernon Seminary, an exclusive finishing school in Washington, D.C. It was important in C. W.'s mind that his daughter attend an East Coast school to be exposed to Eastern society there. Marjorie finished her high school education in May 1904, having completed the seminary's well-rounded curriculum of European and American history, art history, music, and more.

By this time Marjorie had become a beautiful young woman and was attracting the attention of available bachelors. One leading contender was Edward Bennett Close, a Columbia University law student and a member of a distinguished family in Greenwich, Connecticut. Marjorie and Ed were married in the chapel of Manhattan's Grace Church on 5 December 1905. The following day the *New Yorker Magazine* reported, "The bride, who has already attained a wide reputation for exquisite charm, is probably the richest young woman in the United States in her own right, and in addition to her dower of beauty, is worth \$2,000,000. . . ."⁵



Fig. 8
Drawing Room of Boulders, the Close family home in Greenwich, Connecticut, ca. 1915



Fig. 9
Burden Mansion, located at Fifth Avenue and Ninety-second Street, New York City,
ca. 1916

Since 1902 C. W. had discussed plans with Marjorie to build a home for her and her future family that would include a wing for himself, undoubtedly because of his estrangement from his wife. He chose the Rock Ridge section of Greenwich as an appropriate site. When construction was completed in 1905, Marjorie had her first opportunity to experiment with interior decoration. With an aesthetic sensibility still rooted in the late Victorian era, so much celebrated by her father, she decorated the grand, dark rooms with a *mélange* of English-style furniture, Victorian pieces, and bulky oak chairs and rockers in the Mission style (fig. 8).

The first child entered the Close family with the birth of Adelaide in July 1908, and eighteen months later Eleanor was born. The duty of managing a home and a

growing family imposed an increasing responsibility on Marjorie. To stimulate her mind she “studied art and architecture courses at a nearby private school called Rosemary Hall.”⁶ The next decade brought about a tremendous change in Marjorie’s life. In October 1912 her mother died in her sleep, and two years later C. W. committed suicide, supposedly due to severe depression caused by poor health. His death was a tremendous loss to Marjorie. At age twenty-seven she became a multimillionaire and sole heir to the Postum Cereal Company.

The Close family’s fast-paced life now included many business-related activities that required Marjorie to spend much time in Manhattan. To make life less complicated, the Closes rented a small apartment in New York, but within a year they were looking at properties

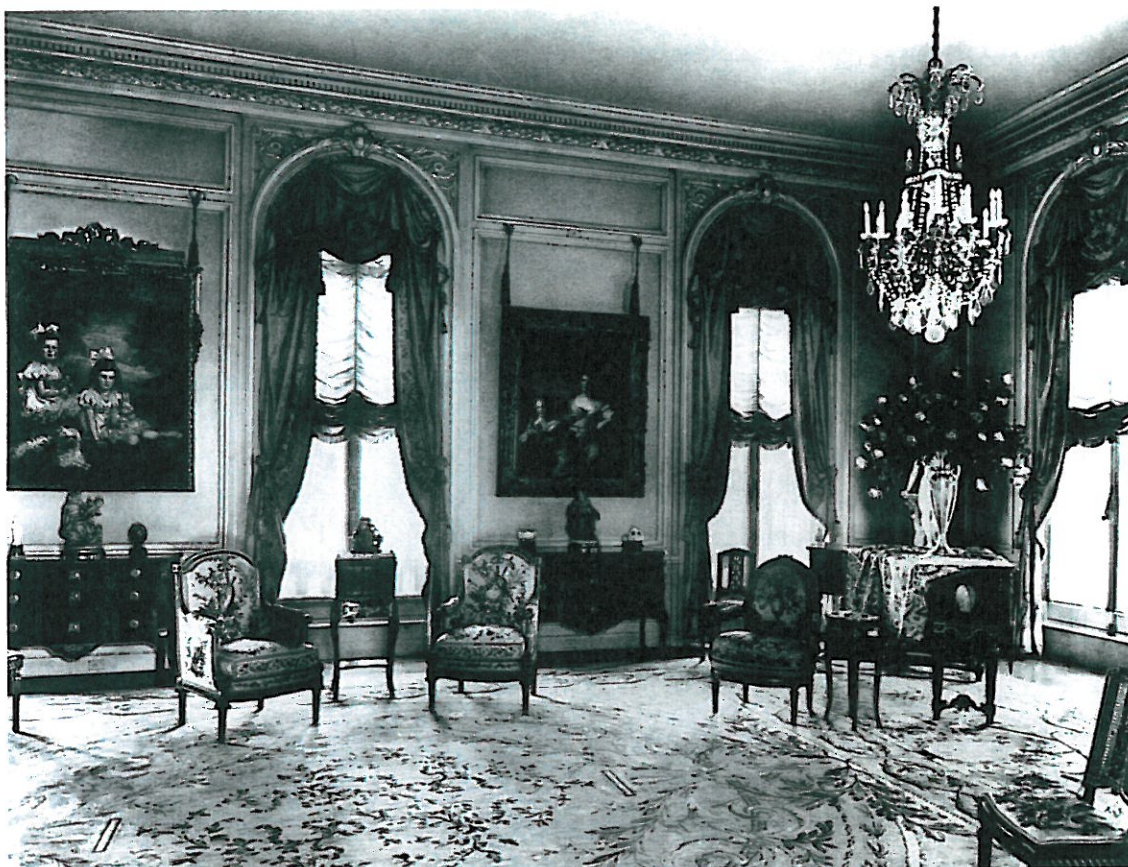
on Millionaire's Row on upper Fifth Avenue. Initially they rented the prestigious Burden Mansion at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Ninety-second Street, and in 1916 they purchased it for one million dollars (fig. 9). The sale made headlines in New York newspapers, which touted the mansion as one of the finest on Fifth Avenue.

Marjorie now deemed it important to be surrounded with luxuries befitting her new station in life. The five-story Burden Mansion, a Beaux-Arts-style dwelling, was a radical contrast to the bungalow style of her Greenwich home. Its opulent interior included a grand foyer, immense Louis XVI-style drawing room (fig. 10), spacious Louis XIV-style dining room, and a large, paneled study. She embraced the interior decorating philosophy that was beginning to take hold in early twentieth-century America. Excessive Victorian clutter, with its ponderous mix of revival furniture styles, was suddenly old-fashioned and unacceptable. Inspired by *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) by Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., and Elsie de Wolfe's book *The House in Good Taste*

(1913), the American elite was becoming more discriminating about interior design. In the first paragraph of her book Elsie de Wolfe wrote, "I know of nothing more significant than the awakening of men and women throughout our country to the desire to improve their houses. Call it what you will—awakening, development, American Renaissance—it is a most startling and promising condition of affairs."⁷ The formula for achieving this "American Renaissance" was to pursue a consistent style, that is, period rooms based upon acceptable canons of the past, using sensitive arrangements of authentic antiques, not reproductions. De Wolfe further explained, "There is a joy in the opportunity of creating a beautiful interior for a new and up-to-date house, but best of all is the joy of furnishing an old house. . . . It is like reviving an old garden."⁸

Indeed, Marjorie soon set about reviving her old mansion. She knew her limitations, however, and sought guidance to decorate its European period-style rooms appropriately. To embellish its spaces she relied on the

Fig. 10
Drawing Room of the Burden Mansion, ca. 1920



talents of Mitchell Samuels of French and Company. Furthermore, she began to frequent the New York shops of fashionable art and antique dealers, particularly that of Sir Joseph Duveen. His reputation was legendary for selling Old Master paintings and important decorative arts for enormous prices to J. P. Morgan, H. E. Huntington, and Samuel Kress. Duveen's biographer, S. N. Behrman, noted that Duveen's "educational mission was twofold—to teach millionaire American collectors what the great works of art were, and to teach them that they could get those works of art only through him."⁹ Duveen took Marjorie under his tutelage and directed her to attend educational courses sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum of Art on topics such as tapestries, porcelains, and furniture. Instilled with a new-found appreciation, she purchased from him two stunning eighteenth-century Beauvais tapestries designed by Boucher to display in the drawing room of her mansion. From other dealers she acquired paintings by Rubens, Nattier (cat. 49), Largillière, and Gainsborough. Continuing in this grand decorating style, Marjorie purchased absolutely superb examples of eighteenth-century fine French furniture.

In 1919 Marjorie divorced Ed Close and later wed the famed Wall Street financier Edward F. Hutton. The Huttons were a perfect match. Both were handsome, wealthy, and adventurous, ideal symbols of the Roaring Twenties. The opulent Burden Mansion provided the appropriate atmosphere and address for them. Even so, their real estate holdings grew as rapidly as their wealth. In the winter of 1920 they officially joined Palm Beach society by building Hogarcito, their first Florida home. Requiring a country setting as well, the next year they purchased a 176-acre tract in Brookville, Long Island, and then built a half-timber English-style manor house that they called Hillwood (not to be confused with Marjorie's later home in Washington, D.C.). Also in 1921 they acquired a 207-acre camp called Hutridge in the Adirondacks near Saranac Lake. These diverse properties afforded Marjorie ample opportunity to take on new decorating challenges and to acquire all manner of antiques, bibelots, and artifacts.

E. F. Hutton was appointed chairman of the board of the Postum Cereal Company in 1923. His enthusiasm, coupled with Marjorie's progressive ideas, engineered a brilliant maneuver: expanding the Postum Cereal Com-

pany into a line of prepared food products. They purchased the Jell-O Company, followed by Swans Down Cake Flour, Minute Tapioca, Log Cabin products, Sanka Coffee Corporation, and Maxwell House Coffee Company. Later, under considerable pressure from Marjorie, the Postum Cereal Company purchased Birdseye Frozen Foods, which placed Postum on the leading edge of the new frozen foods technology. Three months before the 1929 stock market crash, the company was renamed the General Foods Corporation.

In December 1923 Marjorie gave birth to her third daughter, Nedenia, whom Ned adored. (In later years Deenie, as she was called, became an actress with the stage name Dina Merrill.) Even though the Huttons acquired several more properties, Manhattan remained their center of operations. In 1925, on the thirtieth anniversary of the former Postum Cereal Company's

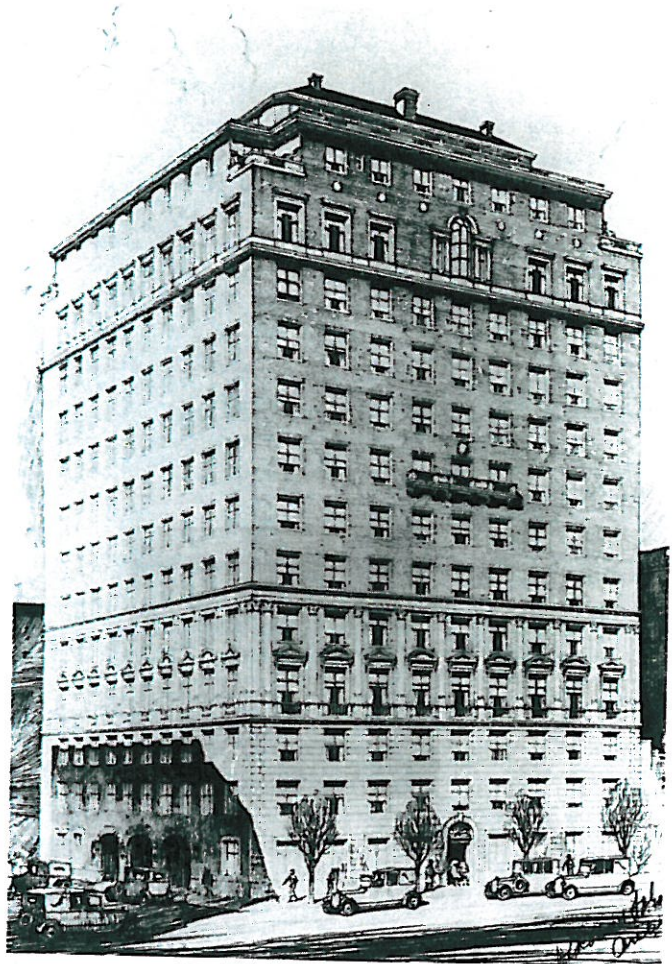


Fig. 11
Drawing of the Apartment House elevation, signed "Rouse & Goldstone Architects, 1924, 1107 Fifth Avenue"



Fig. 12
Drawing Room of the Apartment House, ca. 1927. Courtesy Harmon H. Goldstone and Andrew Alpern

founding, the headquarters of General Foods was relocated from Battle Creek to 250 Park Avenue. This move gave the Huttons improved visibility and easier oversight of the company's management.

A representative of the George A. Fuller Construction Company approached the Huttons in 1923 with an offer they could not resist: to purchase the Burden Mansion, raze it, and build a fourteen-story apartment house on the site (fig. 11). Fuller built many fashionable homes and apartments for such notable socialites as Mrs. Horace E. Dodge and Mrs. Edward Stotesbury. The deal was struck with the understanding that the developer would include a palatial triplex penthouse apartment for the Huttons. Since Marjorie greatly favored her elegant rooms that were so beautifully decorated by French and Company, her new apartment "was a faithful rendition. . . . Marble mantelpieces were moved to identical positions in identical rooms, [and] custom-made rugs were transferred from the parlor floor to the thirteenth floor."¹⁰ This magnificent, spacious, fifty-four-room residence was proclaimed in the New York press as the

largest apartment ever constructed. Its grand foyer was immense, as were the drawing room (fig. 12), library, and dining room, all spaces designed for large-scale entertaining. The apartment also included accommodations for eighteen staff members, a silver room, a flower room, a wine room, and off the grand dining room, a beautifully appointed breakfast room (fig. 13).¹¹

The Huttons' new home reflected a growing demand among affluent New Yorkers for opulent apartments far above the noisy streets. In his book *The Tastemakers*, Russell Lynes observed, "To the rich who financed them they were a new kind of castle—this time in the air—filled with promise of treasure."¹² The Huttons' new apartment was completed in 1926, and its spaciousness naturally necessitated additional treasures. Marjorie set about acquiring excellent examples of eighteenth-century French furniture from leading New York dealers, including Duveen, and paintings from Wildenstein and Company. Among the prize pieces purchased from Duveen were a marvelous Louis XV jewelry coffer inset with Sèvres porcelain plaques by Martin Carlin that was

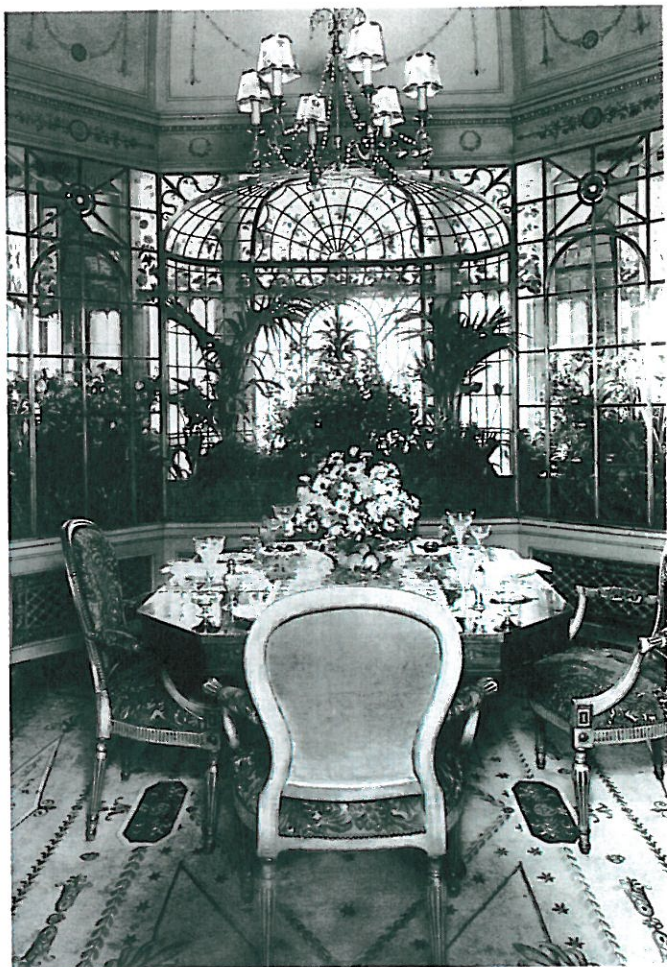


Fig. 13
Breakfast Room of the Apartment House, ca. 1927. Courtesy
Harmon H. Goldstone and Andrew Alpern

formerly in the Rothschild collection (she later gave it to her daughter Eleanor) and a refined Louis XVI commode by Riesener that was once in the collections of the Marquis of Hertford and Sir Richard Wallace (cat. 90). Furthermore, she paid Duveen nearly \$500,000 for a Louis XVI suite of chairs and sofas upholstered with Gobelins tapestries. By far her finest purchase was a roll-top desk by the German cabinetmaker David Roentgen (cat. 88), which she bought in 1927 from the New York shop of the distinguished British antiques dealer Henry Symons. During this same period Marjorie traded with Duveen two Renaissance-style tapestries she had earlier purchased from the French antiques dealer Jacques Seligman for more eighteenth-century Beauvais tapestries. She was indeed refining her collections as her taste matured and she adhered more consistently to the style of eighteenth-century France.

As she continued to acquire luxury antique furnishings to decorate her growing number of homes, Marjorie came to recognize the importance of her holdings. Assuredly under the recommendation of Duveen, she decided to document them in a privately printed book. Starting in 1924 she commissioned various scholars to prepare a catalogue of her holdings.¹³ The Hillwood Museum Archives contains six mocked-up volumes in various stages of development. Each is divided into chapters by subject matter: tapestries, paintings, sculptures, furniture, porcelains, enamels, jades, and laces. The unpublished catalogues illustrate Marjorie's growing maturation as a collector. As the introduction of volume five, written by Dana H. Carroll, clearly acknowledges, "This collection of works of art is a most unusual one, gotten together primarily for the decoration of a home and for the personal pleasure of daily association, not the quasi-professional satisfaction of the customary collector."¹⁴ Even so, Marjorie insisted that she be credited for her role in selecting these objects. "To the beholder it is apparent that taste governs everywhere, with the assistance and not the dictation of professional knowledge and ability." Quite the opposite is implied in a chapter titled "A Collection of Battersea [English] Enamels" by Nicholas Borneman. "The examples in this collection were originally in the possession of the late Sir Joseph Joel Duveen, and they were kept in his town house in London. He collected them with the utmost care and discrimination over a period of many years, carrying his search throughout England and the Continent" (see cats. 22–24).

The Huttons continued to enlarge their holdings. Hogarcito, their Palm Beach cottage, soon proved to be inadequate for their expanding social pursuits. In 1924 they purchased a seventeen-acre parcel of property between Lake Worth and the ocean, and set out to build their largest residence yet—Mar-A-Lago, a 114-room mansion designed by Joseph Urban, a Viennese architect-cum-theater set designer. Marjorie demanded that this residence be distinguishable from the growing number of Palm Beach mansions designed by Addison Minzer in the Beaux-Arts style, and she got her wish. It is an enchanting *mélange* of southern Mediterranean architectural styles. Following the tradition of the great mansions of Newport, Rhode Island, Mar-A-Lago

served as a stage set for entertaining and was decorated for show with a mix of antique and reproduction furnishings.

E. F. Hutton, a skilled yachtsman, loved the sea and owned a succession of yachts all named *Hussar*. In 1931 he and Marjorie christened their grandest *Hussar*—a four-masted, 316-foot windjammer—that was touted as the largest private sailing yacht in the world. Marjorie insisted that it be outfitted in regal style, and its interior design paralleled their palatial New York apartment. Their whirlwind social lives now followed the seasons, jumping from one glamorous residence to the next, with exotic trips on the *Hussar V* sprinkled in between.

Unfortunately, tensions in the Hutton marriage began to surface. In September 1935 they were divorced, and soon thereafter Ned left his position as chairman of General Foods. Marjorie retained all the properties and retitled a few of them to help her forget the past: Hutridge in the Adirondacks became Camp Topridge and the *Hussar V* became the *Sea Cloud*.

Her divorce from Hutton signaled the end of an era for Marjorie. During their fifteen years together, her manner of living evolved dramatically. It was a period of tremendous empire building—from the expansion of her father's cereal company to her vast property holdings. She accumulated a large number of important decorative and fine art objects for her palatial homes. Marjorie had been courted by many of the world's most powerful art dealers. Duveen, perhaps *the* most powerful one, succeeded in elevating her tastes, but in her mind she still was not a "collector." That was about to change as she entered the international stage of her career.

Marjorie met Joseph E. Davies at a dinner party in 1935. He was a successful lawyer specializing in international law with a flourishing practice in Washington, D.C. She was greatly taken with his maturity, his many associations with international personalities, and his personal friendship with President Franklin Roosevelt. Marjorie and Joe were married in December 1935 in her magnificent New York apartment. After a three-month honeymoon in Scotland, they settled in Washington, D.C.

A few months later, in August 1936, President Roosevelt appointed Davies to be the American ambassador to the Soviet Union. He was only the second U.S. am-

bassador since the United States recognized the new nation in 1933. Joe and Marjorie had been substantial financial supporters of the president's second campaign. In turn, Roosevelt made a calculated decision to send to the U.S.S.R. an American with cunning negotiation skills accompanied by a wife who symbolized the essence of capitalism.

Initially Marjorie had been disappointed with Joe's appointment—certainly Russia was not as prestigious as some ambassador appointments elsewhere in Europe—yet she stood stoically by his side and in due time became enthralled with Russia's exotic nature. As wife of the ambassador, her primary role was to be a gracious hostess, a skill in which she was certainly well trained.

The Davies arrived in Moscow in mid-January 1937, and they were immediately spun into a whirlwind of activities. Joe was adept at gaining confidence, and because he was not a State Department "careerist," the Soviets were somewhat more trusting of him. In fact, they actively began to cultivate his trust because of his close personal association with Roosevelt. During his eighteen-month tour Soviet officials invited Davies to important functions and allowed him to travel to areas not normally open to outsiders. Davies realized that the Soviet Union was growing in economical and industrial strength, and he determined that it could be counted on as an ally against Hitler's increasing aggression, a view not readily held by the State Department or by most European leaders.

For her part, Marjorie attended many diplomatic functions, including various luncheons given in her honor by important Russian women. She and Joe in turn hosted numerous dinners for Russian dignitaries. She also accompanied her husband to occasional meetings and observed some of the chilling mock trials that stemmed from Stalin's purges. Most significant for Marjorie, however, was her discovery of the beauty and mystery of Russia and its exceptional fine and decorative arts.

While in the Soviet Union, the Davies had the chance to visit opulent palaces once occupied by the Romanovs and Russian aristocracy. Even more exciting was the opportunity to purchase beautiful, historic objects once owned by them. Following the Bolshevik Revolution and the brutal extermination of Nicholas II and his

handsome family, the Soviet authorities sequestered those belongings that were considered decadent trappings of the former regime. Churches and estates of the aristocracy were likewise pillaged and their treasures stored in huge warehouses. Through the years from 1918 to when the Davies arrived in 1937, efforts were made to market these confiscated riches for hard currency to help finance the revolution and Russia's expanding industrialization. Various methods were used by the Soviets to disperse objects, including "commission shops" where Russians, Western art dealers, and members of the diplomatic corps could purchase prized items. By the time Marjorie and Joe explored these shops, their storerooms were fairly well picked over. Nevertheless, the nucleus of what was to become the largest assemblage of imperial Russian fine and decorative arts outside the Soviet Union was begun at that time. Available to them were such exotic objects as silver niello boxes, enameled *kovshi* from Moscow, and pieces of imperial porcelain. Marjorie later wrote, "Members of the diplomatic corps were allowed to go to the storerooms for selecting and purchasing what they wanted. Many fine imperial objects, including porcelains, were obtainable. It was then that my collecting of them began, and ever since, I have continued the search, finding pieces in eleven different countries."¹⁵ She further noted:

While in Russia, with the opportunity to see and enjoy the Russian love of color in all forms of art, I became interested . . . in the enamels. These I would never, perhaps, have learned to appreciate fully anywhere else. The Russian genius in the use of stimulating color is a spiritual quality related to the land itself, and these enamels with the uniquely Russian colors still give me pleasure.¹⁶

Being able to acquire objects once owned by the Romanovs must have been tremendously exciting for Marjorie. Her love of owning pieces with royal associations was by then well established. Many of the eighteenth-century French furnishings in her Manhattan apartment had superb provenances. She shared this fondness for royal objects with many notable American collectors, such as J. P. Morgan and J. Paul Getty.

The Davies received permission to purchase items from the storage warehouses they visited. Knowing that

vast heaps of liturgical objects were due to be destroyed, they purchased, for five cents per gram, several exquisite silver gilt chalices (cat. 7) and numerous liturgical vestments (cat. 172) and altar cloths. Marjorie often recounted the romantic story of how she found boxes of tarnished chalices under tables and initially purchased one. Back at Spaso House, the American ambassador's residence, she discovered that the chalice was silver, and when polished it was absolutely beautiful. Naturally, she went back for more.

Joe was equally immersed in the frenzy of collecting. He amassed a large number of paintings and icons that he later donated to his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin. At the same time he enthusiastically assisted Marjorie in acquiring objects for their own private collection. This was the first time that one of her spouses joined her in purchasing art objects. No doubt his excitement fed hers and ultimately sparked her new passion for collecting former possessions of the Russian imperial family.

In the summer of 1937 Joe was commanded by Roosevelt to confer with leaders of the Baltic countries. This led to more shopping opportunities and purchases of additional choice pieces of Russian decorative art. By the end of the year Joe learned that he was to be reassigned to Belgium. With anti-Soviet sentiment growing in America, his appointment in Moscow had become a political liability for the president. As a parting gift to Marjorie in June 1938, Madame Molotova allowed her to choose a pair of antique vases from the Kuskovo museum of ceramics (cat. 138), objects that Marjorie greatly cherished.

In mid-July the Davies arrived in Brussels. King Leopold III welcomed them with Old World pageantry, which pleased Marjorie tremendously. The American embassy in Brussels was then under restoration, and the Davies were forced to remain quartered on the *Sea Cloud* until work was complete. Marjorie immensely enjoyed decorating the embassy and imported many of her finest European antiques from her various residences. Although Joe was somewhat out of the international spotlight, he continued to monitor Hitler's frightening aggression. He actually witnessed German troop movement in Luxembourg across the Moselle River. While on summer leave at Camp Topridge in August 1939, Joe

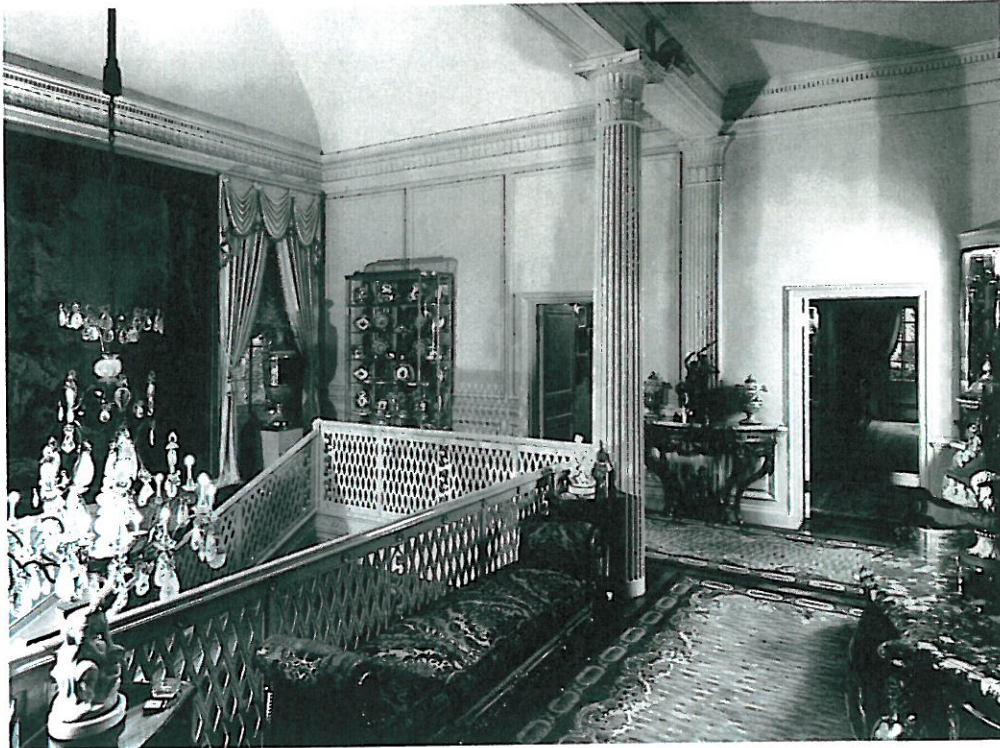


Fig. 14
Upstairs hall of Tregaron, the Davies home in Washington, D.C., ca. 1950

received word that he and Marjorie were not to return to Belgium. The following month France and Britain declared war on Nazi Germany. This officially ended Joe Davies's ambassadorial career. He continued, nevertheless, to serve President Roosevelt in various capacities.

In January 1940 Joe and Marjorie settled back in Washington, D.C. Initially they rented an estate at 1801 Foxhall Road in the prestigious northwest quadrant of the city. Joe had been reassigned by the secretary of state to offer advice on the war's progress. By year's end, however, Roosevelt appointed Joe to head the committee for his third presidential inauguration. Always the consummate hostess, Marjorie proved to be a tremendous asset to her husband. She not only orchestrated numerous parties for Washington's elite, but because of their recent Russian experience, she also hosted visiting Soviet dignitaries who would have caused political discomfort if they had stayed in the White House. The Davies' temporary home became the backdrop for some magnificent social functions at which they could show off their unique Russian collection. This caused a great sensation and undoubtedly fueled their passion to collect more.

The Davies' search for a permanent home in the District of Columbia ended in 1941 when they purchased a twenty-acre estate originally built in 1912 for James Parmelee. The elegant Georgian mansion and Italianate garden had been designed by the American Beaux-Arts architect Charles A. Platt. It took two years to renovate the residence's interior to convey the grandeur of Marjorie's New York apartment. New to her decorating requirements was the inclusion of ample display cabinets in which to exhibit their growing collection of Russian decorative objects (fig. 14). In addition, Marjorie created a "treasury" room to feature a display of the more exotic objects in their Russian collection, many of which were liturgical in nature and not appropriate as decorative accent pieces (fig. 15).

Marjorie and Joe moved into their new home in the spring of 1942 and christened it Tregaron, for the birthplace of Joe's mother in Wales. As Tregaron was nearing completion, the lease on Marjorie's New York apartment ended, and she made the decision to reduce her property holdings. She brought to Tregaron the best of her New York furnishings and sold numerous pieces at the auc-



Fig. 15
Mrs. Post seated in her Treasury Room at Tregaron, ca. 1950.
Courtesy Vogue Magazine

tion house of Parke-Bernet in September 1942. Despite this, she continued to add pieces to her Russian collection, and this required her to turn to dealers, among them Alexander Schaffer of *A La Vieille Russie* and Viktor Hammer of the Hammer Galleries in New York and Emanuel Snowman of Wartski in London. At this time she acquired many porcelain pieces and an occasional Fabergé object. Unlike many collectors, she loved to use her antique porcelain settings for dinner parties, which must have thrilled her guests.

In an effort to document his Russian experience and especially to help stem growing anti-Soviet sentiment in America, Joe published his memoir *Mission to Moscow* in late 1941. The book was a rousing success and made it to the top of the best-seller list. When it was made into a movie of the same title two years later, however, it had the reverse effect. The press labeled it flagrant propagan-

da and a glorification of dictatorship. By the end of 1943, due to several failed attempts by Roosevelt to gain Stalin's trust, Joe's usefulness to the president as a liaison between the White House and the Kremlin had come to an end.

At the conclusion of World War II, Marjorie hit her social stride in Washington. Her elegant parties, renowned for their exquisite surroundings and fine foods, as well as for Marjorie's warm Midwestern welcome, became legendary. Over the years presidents, senators, congressmen, heads of state, and notable international dignitaries vied for invitations to her gatherings. By the end of the decade she reigned at the center of Washington's social elite. For Joe, this was a complete reversal of position. When the McCarthy hearings shook the nation in the early 1950s, Joe assumed a low profile given his former pro-Russian posture. His resentment grew, and in 1955 their nineteen-year marriage ended in divorce. Their mutual collection of exotic Russian objects was divided, and over the years Marjorie was forced to purchase back many pieces, including the state portrait of Catherine the Great (cat. 100).

Having sold her Manhattan apartment and now deeply ingrained in Washington society, Marjorie was determined to remain in the District. She promptly purchased an estate less than a mile from Tregaron. Known as Arbremont, the twenty-five-acre site overlooks Washington's forested Rock Creek Park. The Georgian-style mansion, designed by John Deibert in 1926, was originally built for the daughter of Mrs. Delos Blodgett, who later married Henry Parsons Erwin. Marjorie renamed the estate Hillwood (fig. 16), the same name as her Long Island estate, which she sold in 1947 to Long Island University. (It is now known as C. W. Post College.)

At age sixty-eight, Marjorie knew this would be her last home. Mindful of the importance of her growing collection, she decided that after her death Hillwood would become a museum. Following her experiences in Russia, where she had become fascinated with the uncommon beauty and historical associations of Russian fine and decorative arts, she evolved from an accumulator of furniture and items to decorate her homes into an obsessive collector of high-quality objects. She recalled her experience in a letter she wrote to an aspiring collector.



Fig. 16
South elevation of Hillwood today

So far as young collectors are concerned, from my own experience it [collecting] can be a most rewarding and exciting affair, but first of all a particular interest in an article or period must be established to instigate the desire to collect. Once the “desire” is there and the seeds of the thrill of the search are sown the collector is on his way. Personally, in the beginning I enjoyed collecting the special things of which I was fond and then later on I realized the importance from both the preservation and educational standpoints.¹⁷

As early as 1952 Marjorie seriously began to consider the possibility of leaving her collection to the public. She apparently consulted various acquaintances about the mechanics of the process and which collector-museums she might emulate. Mitchell Samuels of French and Company wrote to her that he had observed several such museums in Paris but noted, “The best models for individual museums are in this country. Of course, the Huntington [Museum in San Marino, California] ranks as number one. Mrs. Jack Gardner’s [museum, Fenway Court] in Boston is number 2. . . . The Taft Museum in Cincinnati is quite charming and is particularly noted for the high quality of its collection.”¹⁸ Unlike these mu-

seums, Marjorie’s collection did not contain a great number of Old Master paintings because her first love was the decorative arts. Her philosophy was similar to that of J. Paul Getty, who said, “To my way of thinking, a rug or carpet or a piece of furniture can be as beautiful, possess as much artistic merit, and reflect as much creative genius as a painting or statue.”¹⁹

In decorating Hillwood she hired the New York architect Alexander McIlvaine to redesign and expand the old mansion completely. Having experimented with Tregaron, Marjorie wanted her final home to feature her collection appropriately. She insisted that nearly every room on the first floor have built-in, lighted display cases. At the base of some cases slim drawers were installed so that, when extended, they presented identification labels for the objects above. The whole first floor was carefully laid out to exhibit specific parts of her collection in logical order. For instance, the Sèvres porcelain alcove is located next to the French eighteenth-century-style dining room and the hexagonal Russian porcelain room is adjacent to her icon room. As at Tregaron, she repeated the notion of a “cabinet of curiosities” in which

to display a sizable portion of her liturgical and more refined Russian treasures. She not only had the exquisitely scaled breakfast room from her former New York apartment reinstalled off the paneled dining room, but she also purchased for it a magnificent Russian eighteenth-century chandelier that supposedly once graced the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo (fig. 17).

Marjorie's principal decorator for the interior of the thirty-six-room mansion was the New York firm of McMillen, Inc., the last of the old guard decorators. Clients of Eleanor McMillen Brown included such notables as Henry Ford, Doris Duke, and Jacqueline Kennedy (Onassis). Brown also decorated selected rooms of Blair House in Washington, D.C. In addition, Marjorie maintained her affiliation with Mitchell Samuels, who installed paneling in Hillwood's formal rooms. Louis XVI boiseries from the Château de Bethencourt were placed in the French drawing room



Fig. 17
Breakfast Room of Hillwood

(fig. 18) and boiseries from a Colonel Harjes collection in Paris were positioned in the large dining room. Marjorie also used the decorating services of others in New York, including Alavoine, Inc., and Frances Vogel.

While Hillwood was intended to display her collections, it also was designed as a "machine" for parties. Years of serving as a hostess had honed Marjorie's expertise, and she well knew that she required this house to be perfect for staging gracious parties. McIlvaine devised a layout that accommodated all permutations of entertaining by including a pavilion for dancing or showing movies as well as a state-of-the-art, commercial stainless steel kitchen.

Marjorie insisted that the estate's landscaping complement the interior layout of Hillwood. To that end she hired the landscape firm of Innocenti and Webel to design a series of pleasure gardens, or outdoor rooms, that on splendid spring afternoons would extend her entertaining spaces. Also on the twelve acres of landscaped grounds is a small Japanese-style garden designed by the Long Island landscape architect Shogo J. Myaida. It is among the earliest Japanese-style gardens installed in an American landscape following World War II. Marjorie expanded the estate's small greenhouse so she could have rare orchids in every room of her house. Throughout her life she loved to be surrounded by beauty—absolute resounding splendor. Beauty allowed her to escape the unpleasantness of life.

It took two years to rebuild Hillwood to Marjorie's specifications. When she occupied it in the early spring of 1957, the estate was heralded as Washington's finest. Later the *Washington Post* dubbed it the most expensive estate in the city. In an article titled "Costliest Homes and Full Values," Hillwood was listed as the most expensive, and Tregaron appeared third on the list of ten.²⁰

In June 1958 Marjorie married Herbert May, a Pittsburgh executive with Westinghouse Air Brake International. The marriage lasted only six years. After that divorce she reclaimed her maiden name and was thereafter known as Mrs. Marjorie Merriweather Post. In her later years she continued to entertain at Hillwood, Topridge, and Mar-A-Lago, but she was able to travel more swiftly to her various properties after she replaced the *Sea Cloud* with a Vickers Viscount turboprop jet named "Merriweather."



Fig. 18
Drawing Room of Hillwood

One of the diversions that consumed more and more of her time was adding to her exhaustive collection of fine and decorative arts. No doubt as she approached her seventh decade and examined the high and low points of her life, it became quite clear to her that her lasting legacy would be the magnificent objects she had acquired. Collecting had evolved into an avocation that required serious attention. Mrs. Post realized that she needed a professional on her staff to assist with the day-to-day care of her important and valuable collection.

In 1958 she hired Marvin Chauncey Ross as a full-time curator of her collections. A Harvard-educated scholar, Ross came highly recommended, having been a former curator of medieval art at the Brooklyn Museum, curator of medieval, Byzantine, and decorative arts at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, and chief curator at

the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Foremost among Mrs. Post's instructions were to institute a museum-type recording system and to begin a publishing program. Ross had to carve a place for himself within the layers of support staff required to run Hillwood. In due time, the rudiments of a museum registration system started to emerge from his research. Ross also engaged in other museum-related activities, such as conservation and acquisitions. He assisted Mrs. Post by searching for objects that would round out her collection. For years she had been acquiring additional European and Russian pieces, but now that the estate was to become her legacy, decorating Hillwood demanded a more concerted effort than ever before. Her finest pieces of French eighteenth-century furniture from her former Manhattan apartment now graced Hillwood, yet in

some instances she required new items for accent or balance. From Duveen Brothers, Inc., for example, Mrs. Post purchased in 1963 an outstanding Riesener commode (ca. 1774; cat. 89) to complement a commode (ca. 1775–80) by Riesener that she had acquired from Joseph Duveen in the late 1920s. Aware that eighteenth-century Russians had decorated their palaces with a mix of European and native pieces, she intentionally increased the quantity and quality of her French furnishings to create an appropriate ambiance for her imperial Russian pieces. With these additions to her collection Mrs. Post clearly intended Hillwood to reflect the vanished splendor of imperial Russian culture (fig. 19).

Ross traveled extensively to find suitable objects for Hillwood. In a memo to Mrs. Post in 1963, he recommended a particular Russian porcelain service, noting, “I can fly out to Louisville and see whether it would be appropriate and whether it could be used. . . . I am thinking of the future importance of the museum that you have decided to establish.”²¹ Mrs. Post was extremely particular about what she purchased, and she did not always rely on Ross’s suggestions. Her taste ultimately prevailed. Not only did objects have to be beautifully crafted and in near-perfect condition, but they also must fit within the context of her collection. In addition, she was not willing to pay excessive prices. To a dealer who was pressuring her to purchase a pair of Sèvres pot-pourri vases at the reduced price of \$240,000, she wrote, “The price for the two magnificent Sèvres Vases is much too high even with the liberal discount you offer. I would not think of paying such a price unless they were mounted in jewels.”²²

One of the most significant projects that Ross undertook for Mrs. Post was researching various parts of her collection in preparation for publishing. Ross brought leading experts to Hillwood to examine the collection and to confer with him. He traveled to private collections and museums around the world to further his research, and he built the core of Hillwood’s research library. His *Art of Karl Fabergé and His Contemporaries*, which was published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1965, was followed by *Russian Porcelains* three years later. In their day, these two books stood out as major contributions to the scholarship on Russian decorative arts.

Ross also traveled widely giving illustrated lectures about Mrs. Post’s stellar collection, including a presentation in 1963 to the prestigious Williamsburg Antiques Forum, at which both he and Mrs. Post spoke. National and international periodicals began highlighting her collection. In 1962 *Antiques* magazine, for example, featured Hillwood in its “Living with Antiques” section, noting, “It is a house that is lived in, but it is a treasure house too, and Mrs. May [Post] is well aware of its interest to students. She is generous in showing her collections, and has arranged and identified them in wall cases and cabinets in such a way they may be not only seen but studied.”²³ One of Ross’s additional responsibilities was to train a group of Mrs. Post’s enthusiastic friends to serve as docents when Hillwood was regularly opened to the public starting in the mid-1960s.

Determined to have her home become a public museum, Mrs. Post assembled all the necessary elements, including the rudiments of a professional staff. Obviously, after her death she wanted Hillwood to operate at the highest standards of museum oversight. Initially she explored the notion of having the nascent National Trust for Historic Preservation manage Hillwood, but she eventually realized that the Smithsonian Institution was more appropriate for meeting her expectations. Following in the footsteps of such notables as Charles Lang Freer, Joseph H. Hirshhorn and the Hewitt sisters (founders of the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City), Mrs. Post offered her property and collections to the Smithsonian. In 1969 the Institution’s board of regents officially accepted Hillwood, with the understanding that Mrs. Post would retain life tenancy. To provide supplementary funding to offset federal support for Hillwood’s operations, Mrs. Post established the Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation of the District of Columbia in 1967.

True to her noted organizational proclivities, Mrs. Post created a formal transfer document that outlined her wishes for Hillwood’s future operation. In it she requested that her collection be recognized as a significant cultural heritage and that her house and entire estate be interpreted as epitomizing a style of living that was fast disappearing in America. While not as restrictive as the rules set down by Isabella Stewart Gardner for Fenway Court, her house-museum in Boston, Mrs. Post did have



Fig. 19
Foyer of Hillwood

definite ideas about how Hillwood was to be operated as a professional museum, with absolutely no eating or drinking in her home, for example. Farsighted in her thinking, she truly wanted to protect her valuable collections of delicate porcelains, glass, and period carpets.

Having life tenancy under the auspices of the Smithsonian created new opportunities for her collection to grow. When the Smithsonian received gifts of a Russian nature, it sought Mrs. Post's approval to display them at Hillwood. Several important works were acquired in this manner, including Konstantin Makovskii's *Boyar Wedding Feast* (cat. 159). Undoubtedly the most significant assemblage of items donated to the Smithsonian for

Hillwood was the Madame Augusto Rosso collection of Russian icons and decorative objects. These works were given in memory of Madame Rosso's husband, the Italian ambassador to the Soviet Union during the same period that Marjorie and Joe Davies were assigned there. The two couples had become close friends. To separate the two collections, Mrs. Post built a replica of a dacha (a Russian country house) on the grounds of Hillwood in 1969.²⁴ Today the Rosso collection remains on view in the dacha, where, undiluted by subsequent additions, it clearly shows Hillwood's visitors what was available for purchase in the Soviet storehouses and commission shops in the late 1930s.

Even though Hillwood had been accepted by the Smithsonian Institution, Mrs. Post continued her collecting avocation. With the ongoing assistance of Marvin Ross, she added choice objects that greatly enhanced her collection. At the age of eighty she purchased a Russian gold chalice decorated with diamonds and rubies, which was made in 1824 for St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral (cat. 106). In one of his speeches Ross recalled the day that the chalice arrived and Mrs. Post's eagerness to embellish her collection with even more important treasures.

We were admiring it after its arrival and Mrs. Post asked me if it was the finest anywhere. I told her there was a finer one in a shop in London, but it was a show piece and had never been for sale. She asked me to see what could be done. Negotiations lasted six months, then when it was finally agreed upon . . . Mrs. Post acquired it for the Smithsonian to be always at Hillwood.²⁵

Ross was referring to the gold chalice that was commissioned by Catherine the Great in 1791 for the St. Aleksandr Nevskii Lavra in St. Petersburg (cat. 104). Made by Iver Windfeldt Buch, it is studded with thousands of diamonds and eight cameos from Catherine's private collection, and it stands out as one of the finest Russian Orthodox chalices ever created.

In Mrs. Post's twilight years she maintained her busy schedule of collecting, traveling, entertaining, and overseeing her numerous philanthropic activities. Early in 1973 she suffered through a bout of pneumonia, lingered through the summer, and died peacefully on 12 September. Her biographer Nancy Rubin observed, "With her death, an era of elegance and hospitality, of gaiety and splendor in their most ingenuous and original American form, faded forever."²⁶ Following Mrs. Post's wishes, her ashes were placed in the base of a monument installed in her beautiful rose garden on Hillwood's grounds.

In her last years Mrs. Post generously prepared the way to donate her three remaining great properties. In addition to the Smithsonian's acceptance of Hillwood, she donated Mar-A-Lago to the federal government for use as a winter White House, and she contributed Camp Topridge to the state of New York. Unfortunately, all three properties proved too costly for others to operate and maintain. The Smithsonian never attempted to open Hillwood and in 1976 returned it to the foundation that Mrs. Post had established to provide for its funding. The following year Hillwood was opened to the public by the Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation under the leadership of her eldest daughter, Adelaide Riggs. The Foundation has carefully maintained Hillwood ever since, and in retrospect it is the most appropriate organization to provide the high level of care that Mrs. Post desired for the preservation and interpretation of her estate and collections. She was well aware that she had collected "museum quality" objects worthy of preserving for the public good. In 1970 she wrote, "I am particularly attracted by the beauty of an object, its craftsmanship, history, etc. When I began I did it [collecting] for the joy of it, and it was only as the collections grew and such great interest was evidenced by others, that I came to the realization that the collection should belong to the country."²⁷

Marjorie Merriweather Post was a larger-than-life individual whose accomplishments in business, diplomacy, and philanthropy have become legendary. Over time, the magnificent treasures she carefully installed in Hillwood represent her greatest accomplishment. Today Hillwood remains a living monument to one woman's passion for collecting exceptional objects of beauty, craftsmanship, and historical associations. Mrs. Post must be admired for her far-reaching vision and her generosity in allowing what she cherished so deeply to be enjoyed by the public in perpetuity.



1. Much of the biographical information herein was taken from the latest biography of Mrs. Post by Nancy Rubin, *American Empress: The Life and Times of Marjorie Merriweather Post* (New York, 1995).

2. Werner Muensterberger, in his *Collecting: An Unruly Passion, Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, 1994), suggests that many passionate collectors engage in this avocation from a sense of emptiness and disillusionment in childhood. While both her parents deeply loved Marjorie, their marriage was fraught with tension, and they spent more time apart than together.

3. Nettie Leitch Major, *C. W. Post—The Hour and the Man*, privately printed (Washington, D.C., 1963), p. 156.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 156–57.

5. Rubin, *American Empress*, p. 70.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

7. Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York, 1913), p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

9. S. N. Behrman, *Duveen* (New York, 1952), p. 29.

10. Elizabeth Hawes, *New York, New York: How the Apartment House Transformed the Life of the City (1869–1930)* (New York, 1993), p. 238.

11. Andrew Alpern, in his book *Luxury Apartment Houses of Manhattan* (New York, 1992), p. 114, describes the Hutton apartment.

Mirroring the size and splendor of the rest of the apartment was the foyer, in the form of a Greek cross, with extreme dimensions of 44 feet by 44 feet. The other entertaining rooms were scaled accordingly, with suitably high ceilings, elaborate moldings and wood paneling. The apartment included a silver room, a wine room and cold-storage rooms for flowers and for furs.

. . . There were outdoor sleeping porches connected to the separate bedrooms of Mr. Hutton and his wife, and the top floor included terrace play areas for the Hutton children. In all, there was more space in the new Hutton apartment than there had been in the old Hutton house on the site.

12. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York, 1954), p. 164.

13. Unfortunately, the catalogue was never printed, even though its publication was announced in the *New York Herald-Tribune* (20 December 1928).

Mrs. Edward F. Hutton, one of our younger society matrons, is compiling a three-column catalogue of the rare art treasures and antiques stored in the half dozen homes she owns. The catalogue is to be a bit of de lux printing, and will cost Mrs. Hutton \$30,000 to publish. It will contain a photograph, a description and a history of every art object and antique in the Hutton collection, which is said to be very vast. Sir Joseph Duveen, famous art collector, is assisting Mrs. Hutton in the work.

14. These mocked-up versions are in the archives of the Hillwood Museum. Marjorie's pronouncement that she not be considered a collector may have been related to her sex. Susan M. Pierce, in her book *On Collecting* (London, 1995), pp. 206–12, observes that in the realm of collectors a noted contrast exists between the sexes. Female collectors, often thinking of themselves more as consumers, acquire objects through the sheer joy of shopping. On the other hand, male collectors take this more seriously and acquire objects in relation to an anticipated rationale. Not until later in her life did Marjorie become impassioned with amassing "things Russian" and accept the notion of being considered a serious collector.

15. Marvin Ross, with a foreword by Marjorie Merriweather Post, *Russian Porcelains* (Norman, Okla., 1968), p. ix.

16. Marvin Ross, with a foreword by Marjorie Merriweather Post, *The Art of Karl Fabergé and His Contemporaries* (Norman, Okla., 1965), p. viii.

17. Letter to Mrs. Green dated 8 April 1970, Post Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

18. Letter to Mrs. Joseph E. Davies dated 1 August 1952, Ritz Hotel, Paris, now in the Hillwood archives.

19. *The J. Paul Getty Handbook of the Collections* (Malibu, Calif., 1991), p. 3.

20. Thomas Wolfe, "Costliest Homes and Full Values," *Washington Post* (17 August 1961), p. D3. In two companion articles Wolfe, tongue-in-cheek, noted that Hillwood "so quickly exhausted all the adjectives, [that] over-eager society writers began making up stories about it."

21. In her later years Mrs. Post was almost totally deaf, which forced Ross to communicate with her solely by memo. Today these memos, now in the Hillwood archives, provide fascinating insights into her manner of collecting.

22. Letter to Hanns Weinberg, The Antique Company of New York, Inc., The Antique Porcelain Company, dated 18 March 1968; correspondence now in Hillwood archives.

23. "Living with Antiques," *Antiques* 82, no. 3 (September 1962), p. 267.

24. This was the third dacha she built on her various properties. The first was constructed at Camp Topridge in 1939 and was used for dancing and entertaining. The second was erected in 1941 as an office for Mr. Davies at Tregaron.

25. The speech was delivered in 1971 at the Smithsonian as part of a lecture series on great collectors. Transcript in the Hillwood archives.

26. Rubin, *American Empress*, p. 376.

27. Letter to Mrs. Green dated 8 April 1970, Post Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.