

2024 Garden Docent Training  
Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

### **Marjorie Merriweather Post as Collector—Interpretive Messages**

Post intended her art collections to be experienced within the intimate setting of her home. Post's legacy is Hillwood.

Post, under the tutelage of experts like Duveen, began in the 1920s to acquire outstanding French furnishings to decorate her homes, thus establishing interests in French and decorative art\* that she continued throughout her life.

As a result of her Moscow experience in the 1930s, Post became a pioneer collector of Russian fine and decorative arts. It was during that time period that she had her "great moment of artistic and collecting innovation:" she recognized those Russian decorative and liturgical objects as having artistic merit.

Her collecting criteria was to look for objects with:

- Great beauty and design
- Exquisite craftsmanship
- Connections to historical figures and royalty

She had a means to collect because of the wealth inherited from her father C.W. Post, the founder of the Post cereal empire. That wealth continued to grow through business decisions like those made by herself with husband E.F. Hutton.

\*Decorative arts are traditionally understood as furniture, metalwork, ceramics, glass, and textiles. They are often juxtaposed with fine arts, which are typically understood to include paintings and sculpture.

### **Marjorie Merriweather Post & her Russian Collection—Interpretive Messages**

From 1937-38, Marjorie Post was in the Soviet Union as the wife of the U.S. ambassador. While there, she fell in love with the Russian culture and its art.

She was in the Soviet Union at a time when the government was selling confiscated imperial-era objects for hard currency to fund its industrialization.

She purchased Russian art through government-sponsored commission shops and storeroom sales. These shops were where Russian and Western art dealers and members of the diplomatic corps could purchase prized items.

She purchased only the nucleus of her collection while in Moscow, and acquired most of her collection over the next thirty years in Europe and the United States at auction and from art dealers and private collectors. Most of the most fabulous pieces in Hillwood's Russian collection enter the collection long after Post left the Soviet Union.

She was by far the most significant collector of Russian art in the United States during her lifetime.

Post's decision that her collections would become a museum resulted in the preservation of these objects for the public's enjoyment and education. Below is an individual speaking to the importance of Hillwood's preservation of Russian art:

- A Russian émigré who donated her family heirlooms to Post for Hillwood stated in 1965: “Every time I have the privilege of seeing your house, --this synthesis of art and history reflecting the spirit of both--, I am filled with a deep feeling of admiration and gratitude to you which no doubt is shared by all Russians; it is a wonderful consolation to know that so much of old Russia’s dignity and grandeur is forever shrined in you magnificent collection.”

### **Best Practices for Navigating Visitor Concerns**

Every now and again, we’ll catch wind of an individual’s negative opinion of something about Hillwood, for instance regarding our Russian collection. Most times the comments are conversational, and standard interpretive messages and graciousness will see you through:

Interpretive messages for the Russian collection:

- Marjorie Post was in the Soviet Union at a time when the government sold imperial-era objects to finance industrialization. There, she purchased through government-sponsored commission shops.
- She continued to collect for the rest of her life through well-established dealers and auction houses.

Graciousness:

- I appreciate your concern and encourage you to submit your comment to visitor services staff at the visitor center. Museum’s administration will respond to you.

On the rare occasion, a person might elect a more confrontational way of sharing their view—either by disrupting or derailing a formal tour or through inappropriate conversations with stationed volunteers. In this case, if reinforcing interpretive messages does not bring the visitor’s behavior back in line, the protocol is:

- Excuse yourself from your visitor/s or group and contact Security (summon nearby officer or press panic button).
- From this point, staff will navigate the situation.
  - *What’s the staff protocol?* In most circumstances, Security will first remind the visitor of expected museum behavior. If the person feels he/she can comply and continue his/her visit without further disruption, he/she will be permitted to do so. If not, he/she will be asked to leave and escorted from the estate.
- You should gather yourself and, if possible, return to your visitor/s or group.
- If you are not able to do so, please ask a fellow volunteer or staff to attend to your visitor/s or group.