

Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens April 2024

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 art dealer Sir Joseph 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 your 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. The museum's administration will respond to you.

On rare occasions, a person might elect a more confrontational way of sharing their view. In this case, if reinforcing interpretive messages does not bring the visitor's behavior back in line, the protocol is:

- Excuse yourself from the visitor(s) and contact nearby staff (i.e.: visitor services or Security).
- From this point, staff will navigate the situation.
 - *What's the staff protocol?* In most circumstances, Security/visitor services staff will first remind the visitor of expected museum behavior. If the person feels they can comply and continue their visit without further disruption, they will be permitted to do so. If not, they will be asked to leave and escorted from the estate.
- You should gather yourself and, if possible, return to your volunteer duties.
- Should you find it necessary to seek further assistance or support, please notify the volunteer management staff promptly.

How visitors can share feedback

Hillwood values visitor feedback and offers a variety of options for guests to share their insights, questions, and suggestions with the staff:

- **In-person** | For on-site visits, direct those visitors to the visitor services staff members at the front desk of the visitor center. Staff will document their feedback and ensure it reaches the relevant department.
- **Email** | Visitors are welcome to email their feedback or questions they may have to info@hillwoodmuseum.org.
- **Post-Visit Survey** | Visitors who provided an email address when checking in for their visit will receive a ten-question post-visit survey via email within two weeks of their visit. Survey answers are anonymous, so we encourage guests looking for a response to email Hillwood instead.