

Book Review

Esmée Quodbach (ed.), *What's Mine is Yours. Private collectors and public patronage in the United States. Essays in honor of Inge Reist*. ISBN 978-84-15245-99-5. New York, Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick Collection, 2021. 419 pp., 139 col. illus. \$60.

Since its foundation in 2007 the Frick Center for the History of Collecting, under the leadership of Inge Reist, has set the agenda for historians of American collecting, with a particular emphasis on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collectors and their agents. These men and women scoured Europe for treasures, many of which were later donated or bequeathed to American public institutions. Between 2011 and 2017, Reist edited or co-edited six volumes of essays organized around types of collector or schools of art, the product of a programme of symposia and fellowships rivalled only by those of the Getty Research Institute. *What's Mine is Yours* is a fitting tribute to this impressive record of achievement, as well as to Reist's service to the Frick, which began with her appointment as assistant curator in 1980. The volume's contributors, who include university academics (in history as well as art history), curators and independent scholars, reflect Reist's gift for forming networks that transcend disciplinary boundaries and institutional cultures.

The volume opens with three essays addressing pre-Civil War collectors of American and European art, based in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York: Robert Gilmor, Jr., Isaac Lea and Jonathan Sturges, the last a business partner of the better-known collector Luman Reed. This generation combined an interest in collecting prints and paintings by living American artists such as Asher Durand and Thomas Cole as well as seventeenth-century Dutch masters with the study of natural history (mineralogy in Gilmor's case, conchology in that of Lea). Collecting art was a guilty passion. Gilmor acknowledged that his 'strong attachment to the Arts' afforded him 'pleasure, amusement and relaxation', yet he feared that it 'may perhaps prove dangerous'. Collecting might lead to neglect of business, and, as Lance Humphries notes,

was associated by contemporaries with a corrupting Old World decadence. By 1840 Gilmor was exploring the possibility of giving or selling his collection to a public institution. Discouraged to find no satisfactory or willing recipient (the new Smithsonian turned him down), he bemoaned the fact that American law did not permit him to entail his collection. All three collectors ended up dividing their collections among their heirs, and many of the paintings they once owned are untraceable today.

The second section addresses Gilded Age collectors, including two women (Mary J. Morgan and Catharine Lorillard Wolfe), a nod towards one of Reist's aforementioned volumes, *Power Underestimated: American women art collectors* (co-edited with Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, 2011). Leanne Zalewski provides a useful account of Samuel P. Avery's collecting of Asian (largely Chinese) porcelain, which he lent and then sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1870s. Samantha Deutch's account of Morgan (no relation to the banking family) shows just how quickly collections could be formed and dissolved in this period: having started collecting after the death of her husband in 1878, in just seven years (before her own death in 1885) Morgan assembled a collection of contemporary American and European paintings, prints and other artefacts, dispersed at a record-setting post-humous auction in 1886. Morgan died intestate, and Deutch explores how the pre-sale exhibition of her collection at the American Art Association Galleries in New York informed a gendered discussion of value among the estimated 100,000 visitors: where some viewed her 'Peachblow' vase (Qing dynasty, Kangxi period, now in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore) as evidence of dementia, others (seeing it sell for \$3,000 more than the eye-watering \$15,000 Morgan had reportedly paid) saluted her savvy. Two essays, by the volume editor and by Jeremy Howard, address respectively the Philadelphian collector John Graver Johnson and the path of a pair of portraits by Anthony Van Dyck from the artist's studio to Henry Frick's collection.

The final section tackles the next generation: Michael Friedsam (cousin to department store

magnate and collector Benjamin Altman), Edsel and Eleanor Ford, Andrew Mellon, and Solomon and Irene Guggenheim. Whereas the taste of the previous generation broadly evolved from Bouguereau and Bonheur to Old Masters, it is harder to identify an overarching trend for this cohort, whose interests ranged from Diego Rivera (in the case of Edsel Ford) to Wassily Kandinsky (the Guggenheims). Yet the question of how to immortalize one's collection never goes away: whether as an independent house-museum, as a museum annex or as a named gallery in a museum, all the collectors addressed in this volume wrestled with the same dilemma, and with curators increasingly reluctant to accept gifts bound by conditions that artefacts be displayed together in perpetuity.

Only a few of the essays discuss these issues in any depth, however, or seek to draw connections between different collectors. Neil Harris's essay on childless collectors is a notable exception. Here we hit against the limitations of the approach modelled by this and other volumes published by the Frick Center: not only a tendency to consider one collector or collector family at a time, but also a nervousness about breaching the Chinese wall separating collecting from business. In its attentiveness to reconstructing provenance, this approach sometimes neglects to consider what many collectors themselves sought to emphasize: that they

drew on a similar skill set in collecting to the one they deployed in business.

Although terms like 'merchant prince' now appear in scare quotes, the approach in this volume can appear somewhat unreconstructed. Little has been done to draw connections between the spending of fantastic fortunes in the art market and the getting of those fortunes in a cartelized economy (of which the art market was part). While we find scattered references to this or that collector's being accused of tax evasion (Mellon) or complaining of art import tariffs (Avery), there is little recognition that these same collectors were not passive benefactors (or victims) of the economic weather. They made the weather. Even were we not living in another age of unimaginable fortunes built on non-competitive practices, it would surely behove the next generation of scholars to acknowledge that these collectors were oligarchs, and to reflect more deeply on the influence of that status (noted by many of their contemporaries) on the representation of 'art treasures' as property – whether private property, public property or something in between. Thanks to the work of Reist and the many scholars she has inspired and encouraged, we are well placed to begin.

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