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# To Collect and Conquer: American Collections in the Gilded Age

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# To Collect and Conquer: American Collections in the Gilded Age

Michaël Vottero

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- 1 The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented business and industrial development in the United States. The kings of steel, sugar or transport established their power and accumulated huge fortunes. They became the associates or the rivals of politicians. In some ways, the history of the first large art collections brings these two often-opposed groups together.
- 2 The development of the art market between Europe and the United States, supported by new laws, led many “barons” of business to buy costly works of art in order to establish their new social position. Politicians, although they often could not become art collectors, needed to have their own portraits painted or busts sculpted in order to fix their effigy for society and to circulate them through the media of photography. So, during the second half of the nineteenth century the search for the best portraitist became an important pursuit.
- 3 This paper explores these two sides of the artistic world during the Gilded Age, official imagery and private collections, through examples of politicians and American businessmen. The pictorial production of the Gilded Age, collected by the American elite, and related to investment and philanthropy, remains relatively neglected. This may be due to changing tastes, but the phenomenon of art collections deserves greater attention today as a turning point in the cultural history of the United States. In order to better understand the link between Barons and politicians and the artistic production that they regularly purchased, it is important to establish the panorama of the world of art in the United States, particularly the art market, during the Gilded Age.

## The American Collection During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

- 4 The real start of collecting in the United States dates back to the Civil War and its aftermath. Thriving firms offered their owners comfortable incomes to build true palaces accompanied by the traditional painting gallery, as demanded by society. The generation of collectors of the 1850s and 1860s was the first to devote a huge part of their fortune to buying works of art. One might indeed relate this change to specific events of the first years of the century that familiarized Americans with the art world.
- 5 In 1838, the creation in New York of the Art Union or Apollo Association, gave rich Americans the possibility to discover painting and to form their taste through exhibitions and an annual lottery (Brimo, 1938, 56). The first collector of this period to be mentioned here, is Luman Reed, a New York merchant, who opened the first private art gallery in New York in 1832. Like his contemporaries, Luman Reed collected only American works of art, notably of the Hudson River School.
- 6 For the discovery of European art, the pioneering event remains the opening of the Düsseldorf Gallery in New York by John Baker in 1849. It provided the first permanent exhibition of European works of art. The gallery proved a popular success and quickly eclipsed contemporary American painting. The collection bought in 1857 by the Cosmopolitan Association became the main attraction of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York before it was sold in 1862.
- 7 European art was honored in 1851 by the opening of the Metropolitan Fair Picture Gallery on 14<sup>th</sup> street. The exhibition established and popularized the taste for the contemporary French school with 350 paintings by Bouguereau, Breton, Couture, Gérôme and Meissonier. In the mind of American collectors, these were the names of the great painters of that period. Like Europeans, rich Americans sought a pleasant and easy art that reflected their ideals and coordinated with their interiors. A predilection for everyday life in painting thus characterized the taste of collectors during the Gilded Age. The choice of American collectors to turn more to contemporary art was the direct result of an art market phenomenon. After having bought old masters for many years, during a period when fakes flourished, American collectors discovered that it was easier to authenticate a living master than an old one. For that reason, French art became the most popular with collectors who did not hesitate to ask for a certificate of authenticity from the painters. This shift to contemporary art might also be explained by an 1861 law originally designed to check the importation of old works of art into the U.S. Contrary to its original intent, which was to protect American painters, this law promoted the influx of a great number of European paintings (Brimo, 1938, 56). With the rise of import levies on older works of art, collectors naturally came to prefer contemporary art (Nonne, 2002).

## The Role of American Art Dealers During the Gilded Age

- 8 We also need to mention the presence of many art dealers in the United States without whom the distribution of European art would not have been possible. The French house Goupil, Vibert & Company, specialized in prints, opened a branch office in New York in

1846, managed by Michael Knoedler (Nonne, 2002, 106-107). Only in 1848 does one see galleries trading in contemporary paintings with the creation of the International Art Union that offered “Original productions of the most celebrated artists of the modern French school” (Fink, 1978, 87). The transportation revolution allowed dealers to extend their market. Edward Strahan thus commented on how easy it was for European dealers to sell all the way to the American West Coast: “We cannot at once get used to the idea, only proper to this century, that considerations of space are now annihilated, and that Goupil has practically no more difficulty in placing a good picture on the coast of the Pacific than in the shadow of his own shop on the rue Chaptal” (Strahan, 1880, II, 47).

- 9 The London art dealer Ernest Gambart played an important role in the distribution of European paintings (Nonne, 2002, 105). He established a new system of itinerant exhibitions throughout the United States. His name is still linked to the exhibition of the *Horse Fair* by Rosa Bonheur (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), that thousands of Americans were able to admire between 1857 and 1858. For John Durand, the presentation of Bonheur’s painting inaugurated the beginning of “the eclipse of American Art” (Durand, 1894, 193). The European creations, and particularly the French ones, overtook American art production. The opening of branch offices attests to the growth of this market in the United States: Georges Petit, Paul Durand-Ruel and Ferdinand Barbedienne for the area of bronze furniture, opened many shops throughout the country. For example we know that in 1848, Goupil sold paintings for 140,000 francs and in 1858, for 569,000 francs. The art dealer gallery was as yet the only place where art collectors could view European paintings during the 1860s and 1870s. Besides the sale of such collections as the Wolfe collection in 1863 or the Düsseldorf Gallery’s in 1862, it was not until the 1880s that large sales of works of art began to regularly take place in the United States.
- 10 We should also underline that many American collectors came at least once a year to Europe to see the latest creations, to see the newest fashion in Paris or Rome, and to buy large numbers of paintings at the Salon or directly from the artists. John Oldcastle mentioned this fact with humor, declaring that: “If good Americans go to Paris when they die, rich ones go before their death, and with the rest goes the great picture-buyer”. And he added that “the New York Croesus finds his way to Paris rather than London in search of pictures” (Oldcastle, 1887, 153). This tradition of time spent abroad for “business” began with the Paris International Exposition in 1867. This event marked a turning point in the discovery of European art by Americans. For the Exposition, the United States sent a large quantity of paintings for the Fine Art section. Most of the collectors who lent a painting for the exhibition followed it to Paris and began to familiarize themselves with the Parisian art world.

## Collecting to Invest

- 11 During the 1860s most American artists complained about the lower prices being paid for their work compared to the sums paid for European paintings. *The Horse Fair* by Rosa Bonheur arrived in the United States in 1857 and had a dramatic impact on the prices of works of art. It was the first painting bought by an American for an astonishingly high price. The art dealer Gambart offered the painting to William Wright for \$ 6,000, but due to the great success of the picture, he raised the price to \$ 50,000.

He succeeded, in fact, in selling the painting at this price to Alexander Stewart from New York (Weisberg, 1997, 55-70). Upon the death of this art collector in 1887, Cornelius Vanderbilt bought the picture for \$ 53,000. The purchase of works of art became a new kind of investment. The self-made men in finance and transportation speculated on works of art as they did on other goods, hoping to make good investments. As well as constituting collections, they tried to make a good profit with paintings. Many American collectors thought like William H. Vanderbilt that “paintings increase after the death of the artist” (Brimo, 1938, 51). This idea was reinforced by the prices fetched by some paintings during the first art auctions.

- 12 In 1863, Wolfe’s first auction brought in \$ 114,000 with paintings by Troyon, Delacroix, Meissonier, and a replica of the *Soap Bubbles* by Thomas Couture (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), that reached the price of \$ 5,000. Wolfe sold a new collection in 1882, and a third was sold after his death in 1894 (Fink, 1978, 94). Similarly, in 1876, John Taylor Johnston, the president of the Central Railroad of New Jersey, used his collection to bail out his railroad company. The sale proved to be a financial success. The auction brought in \$ 332,719 and reassured art collectors who invested in contemporary art until the end of the century. Industrialists bought and imported into the United States an impressive quantity of works of art. This led Maurice Tourneux to use the expression “le trust des chefs-d’œuvre” (the masterpieces trust) to talk about this phenomenon in 1906.

## The Great Collections: Establishing Power Through Art

- 13 During the 1860s and 1870s, rich American collectors were dreaming about Bouguereau, Rosa Bonheur, Breton, Merle and Meissonier. An important source for our knowledge of American collections in the second half of the nineteenth century is the monumental *Art Treasures of America* published in 1879 by Earl Shinn, under the pen name of Edward Strahan. This student of the painter Gérôme presented in a luxurious book the lavish American mansions that generally no longer exist. Looking at this publication we can better understand to what extent the same artists were represented in all of these collections that differed mainly in the number of paintings.
- 14 After inheriting a ninety-million-dollar fortune in 1876, William Vanderbilt assembled what René Brimo saw as “*The Collection*.” The palace, at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 51<sup>st</sup> Street in New York City, included a gallery with more than 200 paintings. Strahan dedicated two special volumes to this house in 1883 as a testimony of the splendor of this collection (Strahan, 1883). René Brimo also underlined its place in the history of American art collections: “through the publications that it brought forth, through its reputation, and the aura of admiration and mystery that emanated from the personality of its owner, it represented to the eyes of all, the marvel of all marvels” (Brimo, 1938, 50). Strahan devoted his first volume to the reception rooms with their period furniture, stained glass, porcelain and sculptures. The magnificent display in all corners of the house allowed the writer to speak about the stairs, landings and other outbuildings, such as the stables that were decorated with engravings representing horses. The second volume is about the picture gallery populated with the most fashionable painters, such as Bagniet, Bouguereau, Couture, Duverger, Gérôme, Knaus, Meissonier, Merle, Millet, Tissot, Zamacois (Strahan, 1880, II, 104). For example, we know that between November 1878 and February 1879, Vanderbilt bought \$ 183,000

worth of French paintings. In the biography devoted to him in 1896, the collection is evaluated at \$ 1.5 million. New York was then home to the most important art collections in America. The importance of the gallery for these *nouveau riche* American families was to establish their names through their collections, giving them a semblance of antiquity, a function also fulfilled by portraits, as we will now see.

- 15 Although we cannot enumerate every New York collection, we do need to consider the Stewart collection situated, like most other great collections, in a mansion on Fifth Avenue, built between 1864 and 1869 (Fidell-Beaufort, 1979, 35). Among the masterpieces owned by this Irish immigrant who had built up a tremendous fortune, there was the already-mentioned *The Horse Fair* by Bonheur, and the *Return from the Fields* by Bouguereau (Jacksonville, Cummer Museum of Art). Two other paintings, *Confidence* by Alfred Stevens, and *Blind Man's Bluff* by Charles Bagniet (private collection) represented women activities. Indeed pictures of women were much appreciated by rich Americans. The testimony of Thomas Eakins confirms this observation. During his visit to the 1867 Paris Exposition, he wrote to his father that "About twenty pictures in the whole lot interest me. The rest of the pictures are of naked women, standing, sitting, lying down, flying, dancing, doing nothing, which they call Phrynes, Venuses, nymphs, hermaphrodites and Greek proper names" (Goodrich, 1933, 20). Historical paintings like those sought by European collectors did not suit their particular bourgeois values either. Americans preferred paintings dealing with subjects of everyday life. An art accessible to everybody. Only military scenes seemed to be acceptable as subjects of historical paintings. In the Stewart collection for example, we can see *1807, Friedland* by Meissonier (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), the most important work by the painter during this period.
- 16 The John Wolfe collection, much admired by Strahan who noted that "The effect is like that of some corner of the Luxembourg Gallery" (Strahan, 1880, I, 54), included a replica of the *Fellah Woman* by Léon Bonnat and *Britanny at the Fountain* by Jules Breton. Such themes appeared to have appealed particularly to Wolfe who also had in his collection the *Washerwoman of Étretat* by Hugues Merle. But the masterpiece of his collection was *Springtime* by Cot (Strahan, 1880, I, 63). The same names of painters can be found in the collections of John Astor or Samuel Hawk. The small collection of James Stebbins had some important paintings like *L'Eminence Grise* by Gérôme (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts) and was sold for \$ 162,550 in 1889. Paradoxically, the Havemeyer collection, well known today for its Courbet and impressionist paintings, was no different at the beginning from the others and could not rival great collections. Indeed, the small collection started by Harry Havemeyer, the sugar king, included some Meissonier, but no other work by great French academic painters. Havemeyer's taste for impressionism developed after his marriage with Louisine Waldron Elder in 1883 (Patin, 1997).
- 17 Great collections could also be found in other cities besides New York, for example in Pittsburgh. One might consider Henry Clay Frick and Andrew Carnegie. In the city of steel, Carnegie bought up "the old masters of tomorrow," as he put it. His museum founded in 1895 was, at that time, the first modern art museum in the United States. In Baltimore, William Walters, who made money in liquor and invested in railroads, assembled a collection that became a model in the United States, and *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal* noted in 1859 that Walters commissioned painters "with an enlightened liberality rarely met with in America, and neither limits them to size, price or subject"

(*Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, 1858). Walters discovered Europe and the Parisian artistic life with the advent of the Civil War in 1861. With the art dealer George Lucas he visited museums and studios. He was the first American to collect sculptures by Barye. The collection was continued by his son Henry who opened the Walters Art Gallery in 1909.

- 18 This phenomenon of “collectionism” was paralleled in Europe during these years and especially in France. Around the imperial couple, who bought many paintings, we find the duke of Morny, princess Mathilde but also great businessmen or bankers like the Schneiders, the Pereires or the Rothschilds. We might observe for example the great rivalry between Napoleon III and James de Rothschild. When the former built the new Louvre, with works by famous sculptors, the latter employed the same sculptors at the Gare du Nord in Paris, which looks like a palace, or at his château de Ferrières. They shared the same quest for the best painting, the most beautiful object or famous artist. Art became a weapon, an investment and a way to glorify its owner.
- 19 Art, fortunes and power were often linked during the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus Alfred Chauchard, the director of the Galeries du Louvre store, earned national renown with the purchase of the *Angelus* by Millet in 1890 (Paris, Musée d’Orsay) for 750,000 francs, overbidding American museums. Chauchard was a strange personality with some links to the French government: he was close to the President of the Republic and to the Secretary for Public Instruction George Leygues, to whom he left twelve million francs.

## The Place of Art Among the Politicians, Between Interior Design and Official Portraits

- 20 If American businessmen could buy great quantities of art works, the situation was very different for the politicians who needed to be in line with republican values. Since Cicero and his famous trial against Verres, the attachment to objects has been interpreted as a sign of weakness in a politician. The American republic however learned to consider with a kind eye a president-collector appearing as a sort of prince. During the Gilded Age, the White House was transformed into a bourgeois house. All White House-related spending was granted by Congress at the express request of the President. Early in 1881, Congress voted an appropriation of \$ 30,000 for the redecoration of the White House, but only the estimate had been made by the time of James Garfield’s passing. His successor Chester Arthur concentrated on the project of redecoration for fashion interiors by Tiffany, the best interior decorator in New York at the time. In addition to the decoration of the blue room, the red room and the banquet room, he ordered the famous glass screen in the entrance hall. The rooms looked like most New York mansions with their sofas, chairs, green plants, wallpaper and bronzes. Journalists underlined the subtle delicacy of the new decors but above all their great richness was remarked upon. The reference to such luxury was related to the president himself, best known for his clothes and his receptions. *The New York Times* declared that: “Never in the history of the Republic, has money been able to provide such an infinite variety of beautiful objects to be contemplated or worn, or so many foods and drinks that stimulate the palate... The current worldly extravagance that is encouraging the desire to have everything painted and decorated in order to attract attention is certainly not to be praised” (Duncan, 1989, 21). During the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, the interior designers McKim, Mead and White went back to

values of simplicity and sobriety. The example of Chester Arthur is perhaps somewhat of an exception, but there is one field of the arts where the action of politicians may clearly be considered in parallel with that of the businessmen: the portrait.

- 21 Whilst politicians circulated their portraits to their fellow-citizens, rich Americans tried to establish their families through dignified images according to the model provided by European portrait galleries. The 1860s to the 1900s were marked by an abundance of portraits without precedent in the United States. Although the phenomenon was related to the development of photography in the country, presidents and politicians generally preferred to call upon American painters, whilst businessmen preferred famous European painters. Thus a portrait gallery of American presidents circulated throughout the United States with photographs and prints. The purchase of paintings for the gallery had to be proposed by the president and approved by Congress. For example, in 1800, Congress voted a budget of \$ 800 to buy the *Portrait of Washington* by Gilbert Stuart (Washington, The Corcoran Gallery). It was not however until 1857 that the painter George Healy, from Chicago, was directly commissioned by Congress to do portraits of some of the greatest presidents. These portraits were framed by President Andrew Johnson in 1869 and exhibited at the White House. With the development of photography in the United States, a new kind of picture became more common, such as the Pach Brothers' photographed family portrait that immortalized Ulysses S. Grant with his family, taken in front of their Long Branch house just a few months before the Panic of 1873. However the painted portrait remained an important factor for establishing a presidential image.
- 22 Rutherford B. Hayes and his wife ordered many portraits of American presidents to complete the White House gallery. But even more interesting is Chester Arthur's portrait painted by Daniel Huntington (Washington, The White House). It gives the impression of being the portrait not of a president, but of an American art collector, a businessman with his expensive coat. In fact it displays some of the features of royal portraits, as exemplified in the portrait of Louis XVI by Callet. We can see the column as a symbol of stability and the same sculpted allegory of Justice which looks like a Greek work of art. The use of royal symbolism is recurrent, and we can see it again in the *Portrait of the Young Delancey Iselin Kane* by Thomas Wilner Dewing in 1887 (New York, The Museum of the City of New York). The son of colonel Delancey Astor Kane is presented in front of a tapestry representing the *Fleur de Lys*, the lilies of the French kings. Distinctive parallels can be drawn between presidential portraits and those of businessmen, especially in the representation of their wives. One might consider side by side the *Portrait of Mrs. Hayes* by Huntington in 1881 (Washington, The White House) and the *Portrait of Mrs. William Astor* by Carolus Duran in 1890 (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). The first, which looks like a portrait in an English landscape, depicts a great and rich woman. The value of the portrait of Mrs. Astor lies in the name of the painter, Carolus Duran, who was the best-known French painter at that time (Nonne, 2003).
- 23 At the end of the century presidents' portraits tended to be less official and more in tune with the fashion of their time. For example, when president Theodore Roosevelt commissioned a new portrait to replace an older one signed by Theobald Chartran, he turned to American painter John S. Sargent (Washington, The White House). The Roosevelt family had connections with some artists and made efforts to commission their portraits from famous American painters like Sargent or Cecilia Beaux. This



evolution, from a traditional conception of the portrait to a modern one, may also be observed in businessmen's portraits. In the 1880s, the most popular and expensive portraitists were people like Theobald Chartran, who was called upon to paint the pictures for the portrait galleries designed for the houses of rich Americans. A good example of this tradition of academic portrait is that of James Hazen Hyde (New York, The New York Historical Society), the vice-president of the Equitable Life Insurance Company, painted in 1904. By the early 1900s, this tradition was clearly on the wane: the author of the portrait commissioned by George Vanderbilt for his new Biltmore house was James Whistler, who worked on it from 1897 to 1905. The portrait qualifies as a modern portrait for the treatment of the surface and the choice of colors (Washington, The National Gallery of Art).

## From Collection to Philanthropy, to Leave One's Name

- 24 Along with portraits, collections both showcased economic and social success for posterity and represented financial investments. But they also carried a philanthropic function. Art collections were designed for the education of the public, especially for the study of fine arts, and open to visitors.
- 25 Many businessmen intended to bequeath their collection for the opening of a public museum in their name. For example John Jacob Astor left \$ 400,000 for the creation of the Astor Library in 1848. The creation of great museums during the 1870s, like the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in 1869, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1872 or the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore the following year, testifies to the desire of businessmen to glorify their names through the paintings they collected.
- 26 Other institutions reflected similar concerns, for example the university and museum created for the son of Leland Stanford, Governor of California and Senator. He was one of the "Big Four" California businessmen who invested in the Central Pacific Railroad. The creation of the Leland Stanford Junior University in 1885 is a memorial to his only child Leland Stanford, Jr., who died of typhoid fever as a teenager in 1884. Approximately 20 million dollars initially went into founding the university, which opened in 1891. The Leland Stanford Jr. Museum opened in 1894 as the first American museum with a general collection of works of art (paintings, sculptures, archaeological artifacts and so on). Leland Stanford is also known for having commissioned the photographer Edward Muybridge in 1872 to use newly invented photographic technology to study the movements of a galloping horse.
- 27 Photography, which held an important place in American society, also became a new element of the rivalry between businessmen and politicians. As we have seen, politicians used photography to bolster their social status. Businessmen used it to have a modern portrait and also a "real" one, without idealization. As they did with painters, they sought out the best photographer for their portraits, like Edward Steichen for J. P. Morgan in 1903 (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). A great photograph known today for the light reflected off the armrest, interpreted by viewers as a knife, it was not however circulated publicly like presidential portraits.
- 28 The analysis of portraits and collections highlights the role of art as propaganda or producer of social prestige and unveils an essential cultural phenomenon of the Gilded Age. For businessmen it was a means to improve their image even though collecting could also be viewed as a manifestation of a princely lifestyle. But thanks to donations

to public museums and libraries they attempted to play down this image. Politicians, on the other hand, could not emulate them without being accused of squandering public money. Still, the need to be known and immortalized was an essential function of the politicians' portraits. However, their place in history was secured in other ways. If there was any rivalry between these two groups it was in the area of portraiture and interior design, as American presidents tried to have the same way of life as businessmen. Paintings or works of art collected by businessmen, portraits of politicians or businessmen's family members, display the image of the Gilded Age. These collections of academic paintings are considered today in the collective imagination as an essential element of Gilded Age society. For example, in the adaptation of the *Age of Innocence* by Martin Scorsese in 1993, we can see many famous paintings in the decors throughout the film like *The Duel After Mascarade* by Jean-Léon Gérôme or the *Concert* by James Tissot. These paintings embody the taste of this period and also the image of the businessmen's lifestyle.

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## RÉSUMÉS

Dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, collectionner les œuvres d'art devint un des attributs essentiels de monstration du pouvoir. Cet article examine ainsi le marché de l'art américain comme prisme des changements de dynamique entre les hommes d'affaires nouvellement très fortunés et les hommes politiques. S'attachant aux aspects esthétiques comme économiques de l'achat d'art, ainsi qu'à l'ascendant de la peinture française à cette époque, il analyse comment l'art devint le vecteur des représentations du statut social et du pouvoir, et révèle le changement de rapports de force entre les élites économiques et les représentants de la souveraineté populaire.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, commissioning and collecting art became an essential feature of displaying power. This article thus looks at the American art market as a lens to study the changing dynamics between the newly affluent businessmen and politicians. Considering both the aesthetic and economic aspects of buying art, and the ascendancy of French painting at the time, it analyzes how art became the vehicle for changing representations of power and status, and revealed a new balance between successful businessmen and the representatives of popular sovereignty.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés** : art, peinture, histoire de l'art, représentations, marché de l'art, Âge doré, circulations transnationales

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