

January 2014

“Money alone was not enough”: Continued Gendering of Women’s Gilded Age and Progressive Era Art Collecting Narratives

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Recommended Citation

Capel, Elizabeth (2014) “Money alone was not enough”: Continued Gendering of Women’s Gilded Age and Progressive Era Art Collecting Narratives,” *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 6, Article 1.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/2168-0620.1013>

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

It is commonly understood that women experienced art collecting differently from men around the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. Art collecting of quality and depth often required the ability to travel freely and make independent financial decisions, which excluded most women as well as middle- and working-class people and people of color. To understand the complexity of gender’s relationship to art collecting I have focused on the collecting narratives of Isabella Stewart Gardner and the Cone Sisters, Etta and Claribel. These individuals acquired a range of art, with Gardner primarily collecting Renaissance, Asian, and American Modern art and the Cones being collectors of French Modern art. Through a feminist historical lens I have used both archival and contemporary sources, in addition to site visits to the Cone Collection and Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, to examine and interpret the collections and histories of these individuals. The guiding question of my research has been whether women have collections or collecting narratives that differ from those of men. I have discovered that while women collectors during my time period of focus do share a genuine commonality in their gendered and comparatively less advantaged collecting narratives, that commonality does not suggest further relatedness or inherency in *what* or *why* they collected. Furthermore, I have observed that scholarship on women art collectors often compounds the gendered disadvantages seen in their histories by suggesting intrinsically shared qualities among them. I aim to present a new perspective on women collectors’ experiences and to critique gendered presentation of those individuals’ histories in contemporary scholarship.

Acknowledgements

Editor’s Note: Dr. Kirstin Ringelberg, Associate Professor, Department of Art and Art History, Elon University, served as faculty mentor for this work.

Despite making up a minority of collectors, American women acquired an impressive breadth and quantity of art during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (in the late 1800s to early 1900s). In the body of literature on women art collectors, though, they are often described as sharing essential qualities seen through their collections, motivations, or methods. The set of women collectors discussed in this essay do share an important commonality: the gendered social conditions affecting their endeavors. The problem arises when that commonality is taken to be reflective of deeper or intrinsic similarities reflected in the type of art collected, methods of acquisition, or manner of display, for example. Using a feminist historical lens I will demonstrate how the logic of that implication fails to hold in examining and comparing individual collections and collecting narratives. I also aim to address the reasons women collectors continue to be perceived as a cohesive unit. Women collectors from the United States during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era share a legitimate similarity in the alternate routes to collecting they were directed toward due to the lack of gender equality they encountered. Arguing that the connection among women art collectors extends into what they collected or why, however, is not supported by research on those collectors' lives and collections. Nonetheless, literature on collecting is replete with scholarship that grasps at these tenuous connections. This demonstrates that what is being written now perpetuates the false image of women collectors as similar on a fundamental level.

Some common ideas presented are that women collectors have similar collections; that they collect "feminine" things; that their collections are less competitive than men's in terms of prestige; and that their collections are based around interior decoration. Because of the way

these constructions are presented as being innate, present-day reception of women art collectors sometimes perpetuates false commonalities among these individuals.¹ Demystifying the assumptions that lead to such generalities requires an understanding that, firstly, women's collections are often quite visibly disparate and distinct from one another and, secondly, that any evident similarities among them are not the result of "intrinsic" shared qualities of women collectors.

I chose Isabella Stewart Gardner and the Cone sisters, Claribel and Etta, as case studies in order to demonstrate the breadth of art collected by women living within the same time period and general geographic location (the East Coast of the United States around the turn of the twentieth century). Their collections are not fully disparate, though, which allows me to compare and contrast them more easily. Gardner's eclectic collection, now housed at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, includes a wealth of Renaissance paintings. Gardner also maintained friendships with artists working during her lifetime such as John Singer Sargent and Anders Zorn and collected from those individuals in addition to acquiring objects from Asia while traveling. The Cone Sisters were more avant-garde in their collecting on the whole. Fostered by friends and advisors like Leo and Gertrude Stein, the Cones formed friendships with artists including Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso and collected works of avant-garde art in Paris in the early twentieth century. Gardner's collecting

¹ Anne Higonnet's "Self-Portrait as a Museum" (*Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 52 (Autumn 2007): 198-211), Dianne Sachko Macleod's *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), and Susan M. Pearce's *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (New York: Routledge, 1994) are a few examples.

prerogatives made it apt for her to use art agents, while the Cones often contacted artists themselves and visited studios. I will also briefly discuss, as counterpoints to my case studies, Marjorie Merriweather Post and Charles Freer.

As Gardner's and the Cones' differing methods of art acquisition demonstrate, gender did not dictate the use of art agents. Male and female art collectors alike employed art agents, and they ostensibly did so for the same reason: the invaluable connections that they offered within the art world. This points to the way that women used art experts as part of a deliberate strategy. The nature of Gardner's interactions with those who helped manage her collection supports this view. Gardner was often very clear about the artworks she selected for acquisition and understood their cultural and historic value without persuasion from agents or dealers. Their connections, not necessarily their knowledge or opinions, appear to have been of most value to her. In 1920 Gardner became determined to buy two Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres drawings that were at auction. She wrote to Henry Swift, her business manager, to tell him that she had already sent for the works to be bought on her behalf.² The fact that she ordered the pieces herself yet reported them to her business manager is revealing of Gardner's interactions with individuals working for her collection. She took initiative in some senses but at the same time chose to employ others to take care of some of the affairs of her collection. This demonstrates another purpose of art agents in these cases: to mask, at times, the ingenuity of the female collector by having a man take care of

communications and business issues, a more socially appropriate arrangement.

Another example of misrepresentation of women's intentions and motivations is when interior decoration is cited as a common start to their collections. It is plausible that interior decoration does play a role in the development of individuals' collections, but what is at stake is the way that some women's collections are viewed perpetually as interior decorating rather than legitimized as collecting. Brenda Richardson, subtly implicating interior decorating as a precursor to collecting, writes that Etta Cone first purchased art only at the direction of her older brother, Moses, who asked that some décor be added to the family home.³ Mary Gabriel discusses the five paintings Etta bought with money from her brother in a different light. She observes, "For Etta, these purchases did not represent decoration but personal rebellion."⁴ The paintings referenced were by Theodore Robinson, an American impressionist. Gabriel observes that Etta's choice was bold and revealing of her future in collecting. The purchase "shocked" most of the family and Gabriel notes that it would have been more "reasonable to expect her to buy new curtains or rugs."⁵ Instead she bought art of the modern Impressionist school without any recorded prior exposure or art education. This makes Etta's choice appear to be personal and independent of family and other influences.

Nonetheless, Etta Cone's continued association with interior decoration in some scholarship is reflective of a wider minimization of women's chances to be seen as legitimate collectors in a public light.

² Isabella Stewart Gardner, Letter to Henry Swift, January 31, 1922, Henry Swift Papers, Box 1, Isabella Stewart Gardner Correspondence Folder, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Archives, Boston, MA.

³ Brenda Richardson *Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962), 55.

⁴ Mary Gabriel, *The Art of Acquiring: A Portrait of Etta and Claribel Cone* (Baltimore, MD: Bancroft Press, 2002), 16.

⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

Kathleen McCarthy notes this lack of legitimacy for women collectors and writes that women during the Gilded Age "were cautioned to confine their aesthetic ministrations to the home."⁶ As it relates to women who collected on a large scale, the implications of this observation can create a double bind. First, it can mean that women who technically do "keep their aesthetic ministrations to the home" by using their house as a museum for their collection might be considered to be interior decorators rather than legitimate collectors. Second, if a woman's aesthetic ministrations have far exceeded the boundaries of her home and commonly take place in the studios of avant-garde artists (for example), that woman collector could likely be seen as a violator of gendered social norms and, in association, still not taken seriously. Interior decoration is often assumed to be the precursor or motivator for women who collect art because interior decoration is an activity associated with the home and often expected of bourgeois women during Gardner's and the Cones' time. Even if interior decoration is a component of some women's collections, the association of decorating with women's collecting in scholarship discounts those collections that do not involve interior decorating or else move beyond it.

Far from simply adorning their living spaces, many women were able to collect on a large enough scale that it surely constituted a career or primary occupation. Etta Cone, for example, worked full time on collecting, but she is sometimes described as a more passive and domestic sister when compared with Claribel who held a career in medicine. An essay by Jay Fisher, however, states that in researching the Cone Collection, archival material "argues

strongly that Etta Cone defined the true individuality of the Cone Collection."⁷ These observations certainly add dimension to the apparent differences between Etta and Claribel, and Angela Bianchini corroborates the idea that both of their career choices were exactly that.⁸

Charles Freer, a collector of American and Asian art around the turn of the twentieth century, serves as a fruitful comparison here as aspects of Etta Cone's and Freer's career paths overlap. Katherine Nash Rhoades writes that Freer had a successful business career but retired from it in his mid-forties and devoted himself to studying and collecting art.⁹ I might change Rhoades's statement, however, to say that rather than a retirement Freer had a career change. If this is understood to be true (and if it is, one accepts that collecting for individuals like Etta Cone and Freer *was* a career), then it works to refute the idea that Etta's choice to work for herself and her sister in the realm of collecting was a less-than-desirable career choice or one that Etta was relegated to because of gender. That being said, a difference between Freer's and Etta's career paths is apparent due to Freer's first career in business. However, Charles Freer and Etta Cone both devoted a significant portion of their lives and financial resources to collecting despite the differing sources of those finances: Cone's were given by her family; Freer's acquired through his career in business.¹⁰ Ultimately,

⁶ Kathleen D. McCarthy, "Culture and Gender in Antebellum America," in *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4.

⁷ Jay Fisher, "Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone: A Collection of Modern Art for Baltimore," in *Before Peggy Guggenheim: American Women Art Collectors*, ed. Rosella Mamoli Zorzi (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2001), 110.

⁸ Angela Bianchini, "The Cone Sisters: Art Patrons in Baltimore," in *Before Peggy Guggenheim: American Women Art Collectors*, ed. Rosella Mamoli Zorzi (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2001), 132.

⁹ Katharine Nash Rhoades, "An Appreciation of Charles Lang Freer," *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957): ii, 1.

¹⁰ Richardson, *Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta*, 48.

their collecting narratives are not dissimilar despite their differences in gender. Their primary differences arise in the way that they acquired the resources needed for their collecting, not the collecting itself.

Although it is clear that the individuals discussed here collected on a career-worthy level, Gardner's and Freer's respective collecting trajectories may have begun through the pursuit of a leisure activity. Freer and Gardner were each recommended to find some sort of distraction (whether taking up a hobby or traveling) in order to treat what was ostensibly depression in both of their cases. Gardner's depression stemmed from the death of her young child, often noted in biographies of the collector. Rosemary Matthews specifically connects Gardner's desire to begin collecting with this loss. According to Matthews, the advice Gardner received to travel to combat her depression resulted in her exposure to new cultures and a subsequent desire to collect art objects from those cultures. Gardner's husband, John Lowell "Jack" Gardner, also took part in and benefitted from this "cure," making it perhaps appear to be less gendered. But Jack's participation does not dismantle this aspect of Gardner's start to collecting, as Gardner's depression, tied to a gendered role, was its cause. Matthews writes that Gardner's loss was different from Jack's: the particular anguish caused to a mother by the death of her child.¹¹ But it is important to note, as Douglas Shand-Tucci does, that Gardner was faced with the gendered expectation of motherhood from early in her marriage, and no evidence exists that Gardner wanted to become a mother. Shand-Tucci suggests that the desire to have

children was primarily Jack's.¹² Though Isabella Stewart Gardner later assumed the role of a mother figure to her husband's nephews,¹³ "it was to be other roles than wife and mother to which she seemed to take more naturally, in the end so much so they made her famous."¹⁴ The point is that gender does not wholly dictate Gardner's experience in this facet of her life or in her collecting narrative generally.

Charles Freer appears to have begun collecting through a suggestion from his doctor as well and, as in Gardner's case, Freer's gender played a role in that suggestion. Freer was identified in middle age as having neurasthenia, a nervous condition often diagnosed in men with jobs in fields of business, commerce, and the like. Men diagnosed with this condition were sometimes prescribed wilderness cures designed to restore the manly health of sufferers, which is something that Freer took part in.¹⁵ Freer's collapse of nerves was also treated by the suggestion of a diversion that would be less mentally consuming than the railcar industry in which he previously worked.¹⁶ Through this advice, Freer began collecting. His and Gardner's diagnoses, essentially of depression, are revealing of wider segregation of men and women still existent during this time in history. Shand-Tucci mentions hysteria, which finds its gendered opposite in neurasthenia, as having been attributed to Gardner first in early adulthood and again immediately following the death of her son.¹⁷ The fact that these highly gendered terms were used and that diagnoses for very similar psychological conditions were so strongly determined by

¹¹ Rosemary Matthews, "Collectors and why they collect: Isabella Stewart Gardner and her museum of art," *Journal of the History of Collections* 21, no. 2 (2009): 184-185.

¹² Douglas Shand-Tucci, *The Art of Scandal*, 18.

¹³ *Ibid*, 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁵ Kathleen Pyne, "Portrait of the Collector as an Agnostic: Charles Lang Freer and Connoisseurship," *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 1 (March 1996): 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

¹⁷ Douglas Shand-Tucci, *The Art of Scandal*, 15.

the gender of the patient is indicative of a still separate world for men and women extending into medicine and other spheres. This would have certainly permeated Gardner's and Freer's lives; fundamentally, however, both entered into collecting in nearly identical ways despite these differences.

I will also use Freer as a point of comparison for the collecting legacy of Marjorie Merriweather Post. Post's house and collection were originally donated to the Smithsonian, and the institution maintained control of Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens for several years. However, they eventually chose to restore the house and objects to Post's foundation, citing physical distance of the house from the rest of the Smithsonian buildings as a major issue.¹⁸ Considering the wealth of objects included at Hillwood, especially the large collection of Fabergé objects, it seems a bit unusual that the Smithsonian would have severed ties with such a culturally rich collection solely on the grounds that the house is removed from the downtown area. It is possible that the collection was simply undervalued in terms of its worth as an association for the institution to keep. A feasible cause of Post being undervalued is her status as a woman, a socialite, and a collector of decorative rather than "high" art. In contrast, Charles Freer's collection now resides in front of the Smithsonian castle in Washington, D. C., in a building named for him. The decorative art at Hillwood, including furniture and Fabergé Eggs, represents the kind of pieces often disparaged as not being worthy of museum inclusion. Importantly, however, Freer can also be called a collector of decorative art. The *Peacock Room*, for example, was created by Whistler as decoration for an interior space, and Freer's collection

includes ceramics and furniture. Noting overlap between the two collections in terms of decorative art allows me to point more strongly to gendered reasons for Post's exclusion at the Smithsonian. Freer's connection to the Smithsonian, unlike Post's, remains, and Freer's personal identity is thus highlighted to a greater extent than Post's.

Freer can also be contrasted with the Cones in terms of public recognition enjoyed by each party. Freer's and the Cones' collections share important similarities: namely the fact that they contained collected works by modern artists (in Freer's case American; in the Cones' case French) as well as objects from their travels. Freer's Asian art collection is, to be fair, more extensive than the objects the Cones acquired during their travels, but in a broad sense the collections of Freer and the Cones are not wholly dissimilar. In fact, the Cone Collection holds the title of the largest collection of works by Matisse – certainly an impressive accomplishment. Despite this, however, Freer's collection is arguably more famous; it occupies a prominent space at the Smithsonian rather than being part of a museum in Baltimore. Without disparaging the Baltimore Museum of Art, Freer's inclusion at the Smithsonian speaks for itself in terms of prestige. Being situated in the nation's capital also ensures more visibility of Freer's museum than of the Cones' in Baltimore. Importantly, Freer and the Cones each chose the locations for their collections themselves. The Cones wanted their collection to reside in their hometown, Baltimore, despite competing offers from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example.¹⁹ They did stipulate that the

¹⁸ Helen Dudar, "A Lavish Legacy," *Smithsonian* 32, no. 2 (May 2001): 58.

¹⁹ "Collecting Matisse and Modern Masters: The Cone Sisters of Baltimore" at The Nasher Museum of Art includes wall text describing the sisters' experience with "leading institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art in New York seeking to acquire their collection" [Brenda Richardson, *Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta*, 15-16]; the film *Michael*

Baltimore Museum of Art must begin to show more of an interest and dedication to modern art if they were to follow through with their plan to bequeath their collection to it.²⁰ Freer's hometown is Detroit, yet having his collection displayed more prominently in Washington, D.C., was clearly of more importance to him. It is curious that even as women like the Cones begin to escape overt gendered marginalization in the world of collecting their collections ultimately reside in less visible and less "important" places comparatively to men's. The Cones' desire to leave their collection to their hometown even when other options, offering greater visibility for their collection, were available may represent a gendered modesty absent in Freer. The Cones' apparent desire to better their hometown, not necessarily shared by Freer, is very possibly gendered as well.

Perhaps counterintuitively, contemporary scholarship on women art collectors often compounds the inequities these individuals have faced throughout their collecting careers. Museum voices particularly seem to cultivate gendered images of their respective founders. The aura of femininity surrounding Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens is demonstrative of this. Reasonably or not, Hillwood promotes images of femininity surrounding its founder with special exhibits on wedding dresses and lace, for example.²¹ Scholarly sources further this image with

Palin and the Ladies who Loved Matisse also references "all the tempting offers" received by the Cones from museums who wished to obtain their collection [*Michael Palin and the Ladies who Loved Matisse*, Produced by BBC One (Scotland, 2003), edited, 26:13 minute loop.]

²⁰ Angela Bianchini, "The Cone Sisters: Art Patrons in Baltimore," 137.

²¹ Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens, "Past Exhibits: Wedding Belles," <http://www.hillwoodmuseum.org/whats/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/wedding-belles>.

one book on women's collections zeroing in on the shoes on display at Hillwood.²² Understanding that many of the instances just mentioned might not be inaccurate reflections of Hillwood, the real problem occurs when aspects of one woman's collection are magnified and then taken to be true of women's collections on the whole.

Despite the disadvantages discussed here, women collectors were often very successful in facing the gendered obstacles their collecting careers accorded them. Even still, these women's legacies were achieved through what was often a non-normative collecting path, and it was this sense of difference among them that was an impetus for researching whether non-normativity contributed to their ultimate collections. As I have demonstrated, women collectors can in fact be grouped together by little other than their wealth and comparatively inequitable experiences in attempting to acquire art on a career-worthy level. And as Christine Guth astutely points out, "money alone was not enough to enter into the competitive world of international art collecting."²² Making claims of further similarities among these individuals or their art collections tends to reduce idiosyncrasies to essentialisms and contributes to generalizations on the basis of femininity, domesticity, maternity, or other qualities falsely assumed to be inherent among women as a group. Instead, I propose that the museums and scholarship that influence women collectors' images take on a different assumption: that women collectors make up a diverse, relatively unconnected "group," and their othering experiences should be confined to their lifetimes and not extended into their ongoing legacies.

²² Christine M. E. Guth, "Asia by Design: Women and the Collecting and Display of Oriental Art," in *Journeys East: Isabella Stewart Gardner and Asia* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2009), 57.