

Art as Chattel

Collectors and the making of the great modern museums

by JAMES CUNO

AT BASE, works of art are chattel: the stuff of economic exchange. Historically, the British legal code forbade nobility from selling “settled land” and tangible property. Then in the 1870s, cheap grain from the United States and Canada caused a decline in the price of English wheat and with it the value of English farmed estates. The British government countered by passing a law in 1882 allowing nobility to sell their treasured property, and within months the duke of Hamilton had auctioned part of his art collection in a sale that ran for days and generated some £500,000. Some of the paintings were bought for British museums and thus remained “at home.” But many, perhaps most, were sold to overseas buyers.

The transfer of so much art away from England alarmed many Britons. By one count, almost half of the works included in the famous 1857 Manchester exhibition, *Art Treasures of Great Britain*, had been sold away 50 years later. In reaction, a group of British critics, connoisseurs, and curators organized the National Art Collection Fund for the purpose of buying such works for the nation; never mind that many of these were in Britain only because they had been purchased earlier from Continental collections. But the pull of the market was too strong. (The centenary of the fund was celebrated with an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 2003 titled *Saved!*)

The economic decline of Britain was offset by the economic rise of the United States. By 1914, U.S. national income stood at \$37 billion, more than triple that of either Britain or Germany, the next two

largest economies. Individual capitalists—J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Frick chief among them—were quickly amassing extraordinary wealth. They were also art collectors of great ambition who exercised their taste for rare and beautiful things by buying up masterworks in Britain and all over the Continent.

They were building their collections for themselves, surely, but also for the rapidly growing and rambunctious U.S. public. This was a time of great growth in our nation's art museums. Every city of any size had one, from Boston and New York to Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco.

Old Masters, New World: America's Raid on Europe's Great Pictures, 1800–World War I serves as a thoughtful and informed introduction to the early history of art collecting in the United States. The author, Cynthia Saltzman '71, is a journalist whose previous book, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, about a Van Gogh masterpiece, also concerned art and collecting. In the current case, I don't

know who came up with the idea to use “raid” to describe the pursuit of European old-master paintings by prominent American collectors, but it casts an unfortunate pall over the book's story, for the individual accounts of collectors building first private and then public collections do not suggest a raid so much as an impassioned pursuit that enriched everyone from seller to dealer to buyer to public.

The book begins with banker and railroad executive Henry Marquand's search for two Van Dyck portraits he wanted for the fledgling Metropolitan Museum of Art, of which he would soon become second president. In 1886, he traveled to Corsham Court, the fabled country seat of the Methuen family, just outside Bath, England. Their collection had been assembled in the 1720s and now the second baron needed to part with some paintings. He sought first to sell them to Britain's National Gallery, but its trustees were slow to respond. Word spread quickly and within months, encouraged by the dealer Charles Deschamps and the artist Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Marquand saw the Van Dycks, made his offer, and acquired the paintings. And not just those two, but also three others by Rubens,

Luca van Leyden, and, purportedly,

Cynthia Saltzman '71, *Old Masters, New World: America's Raid on Europe's Great Pictures, 1800–World War I* (Viking, \$27.95)



ILLUSTRATION BY TOM MOSSEY

Masaccio. A year later he acquired Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* from a Paris dealer, and then, within a year, some 30 more paintings, most of them seventeenth-century Dutch. In January 1889, he offered them to the Metropolitan and then promptly bought and gave the museum 13 more. For this he was described by a journalist as "the greatest collector in America because he collects not for himself alone, but for a whole people and for all the world."

The book's principal players, in addition to Marquand, are the collectors Frick, Morgan, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Henry and Louisine Havemeyer, and Joseph Widener; the dealers Deschamps, Paul Durand-Ruel, Otto Gutekunst, Joseph Duveen, and Roland Knoedler; art historians and museum curators Wilhelm von Bode, Roger Fry, and Bernard Berenson; and artists Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent. (It is interesting to read of the persistent role artists both well and little known have played as advisers to collectors. It is also interesting to read of the importance of photography—just a few decades after the invention of the medium—in these various transactions, as collectors often first saw the paintings they purchased through photographs.)

OLD MASTERS, NEW WORLD is not original research, but rather a well-told tale that synthesizes a great deal of recent research published elsewhere, and in this, it succeeds admirably. I have quarrels with some things, like the imbalance in treatment of the collectors. Why, for example, is Morgan given a single chapter of 15 pages when the Havemeyers rate one

more than twice that length and Frick's coverage totals four times that? Morgan's 1914 Metropolitan exhibition comprised some 4,000 works of art shown in 13 galleries and he founded the Morgan Library itself, now also an art museum.

Nor is there any discussion of the governmental instruments that encouraged the import of artworks into this country and contributed to building our public collections. There is brief mention of the fact that in 1895 the American tariff on works of art was eliminated, only to be reinstated two years later, and a simple reference to the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act of 1909, which eliminated the 20 percent customs duty on art more than 20 years old. But that's all. There is no mention at all of the income-tax and estate-tax provisions that allow donors of works of art to museums to reduce their tax exposure by the value of their gifts. By passing such legislation, the U.S. government became a generous partner in the building of our private and public collections during the twentieth century. If only as a kind of coda, Saltzman could have acknowledged this, for in a way, it is the end of the story: as a further means to prevent the export of art, European governments have been adopting the U.S. model, offering their own tax deductions for gifts to museums.

And of course, Saltzman mentions other very interesting persons of whom one would like to learn much more. John G. Johnson, for example, is mentioned only three times. A Philadelphia attorney, he worked for Henry Havemeyer, Henry Frick, and Peter Widener, and was himself an important collector

whose purchases now form the core of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's distinguished old-master painting collection, making one curious about his role in the context of the book's otherwise rich and intriguing story.

STILL, SALTZMAN'S NARRATIVE is full of tales of the interrelationships of personalities seeking personal gain. The attempts by dealers to coax works of art from collectors and by collectors to bargain down prices from dealers, and then the willingness of art historians to offer authentications (sometime, it seems, for personal profit) are illuminating. And the pursuit of individual works of art is sometimes even thrilling.

Henry Frick's purchase of the Ilchester Rembrandt, the deeply moving, late self-portrait, is but one example. Dealer Otto Gutekunst had been pursuing the painting for four months in 1906. Meanwhile, the English critic, painter, and Metropolitan curator Roger Fry had been approached by the English architect Herbert Horne, who had spoken with the sixth earl of Ilchester about possibly selling the painting to pay off steep inheritance taxes; Horne thought the Metropolitan might help by buying the work.

Then Horne learned that the earl had given the right of first refusal to the London collector Herbert Cook. Fry told Horne that J.P. Morgan, as president of the Metropolitan, would agree only to a price lower than was being asked. Because Cook was not moving on the painting either, the earl turned to Gutekunst, who pressed Frick and tried to get Fry to back away. Fry kept after the painting

Dennis De Witt hopes someone can identify "a song or bit of doggerel last heard, I think, in the 1960s, suggesting that there was nothing left for the Modern Movement to discover because,

in the approximation of the refrain that lingers in my mind, 'It was all done in the Twenties in Berlin.'"

Harry Goldgar asks if any fan of the 1992 film *School Ties* can identify the French text which a sadistic teacher orders a student to memorize, thereby causing the victim's nervous breakdown.

Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Bruce Hoff is curious about the meaning of a taunt uttered on at least one occasion by Zelda Fitzgerald: "I hope you die in the marble ring." Sally Cline's biography refers to a childhood game Zelda played in the marble rotunda of the Alabama state capitol; other writers refer to the ring used in a game of marbles. Does the reference ring any other bells?

"born of Lust unchained/And most vile Flux" (September-October). Daniel Rosenberg identified these lines by the fifth-century pagan epigrammatist Palladas of Alexandria, as translated by

Dudley Fitts in his *One Hundred Poems from the Palatine Anthology* (1938). Palladas sets his "ruder Truth" against the claims that man is "divine" or even simply "dust."

Send inquiries and answers to "Chapter and Verse," *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.

and Morgan, but by the time Morgan finally agreed, it was too late: Gutekunst, with Roland Knoedler and Colnaghi, the English dealers, had secured the self-portrait.

They offered it to Frick for \$225,000; he demurred, but later offered \$200,000. Knoedler wanted to accept the offer, but Gutekunst and Colnaghi held out for the original price. Gutekunst then raised the specter of the Rembrandt scholar Wilhelm von Bode buying the painting for Berlin. Finally, Frick suggested he wanted the picture, but also wanted six months to pay. He added that he wanted to pay in part with a painting he had purchased 11 years earlier that he reckoned was worth almost \$25,000 (he had paid \$14,000). This allowed him to pay \$200,000 in cash—the amount he'd initially offered.

The sale had been a year in the making, and many of the book's key players were involved: a cash-strapped earl, three leading art dealers, two competing museum curators, and both Morgan and Frick. A short time later, prompted by the purchase and his growing collection, Frick bought the Manhattan property on which he would construct the building we know as the Frick Collection. There the Rembrandt hangs not far from the singular masterpiece *St. Francis in the Desert* by Giovanni Bellini, the subject of another great story.

All in all, *Old Masters, New World* is a very good read. No doubt it will encourage its readers to learn more about the history of art collecting in this country, which, like all such histories, is intertwined with the history of extraordinary individuals and national and international political, economic, and social circumstances. I hope, too, that it will inspire them to learn more about the building of our great public art museums, for that is ultimately the great story here: how these very wealthy men and women turned their private fortunes into lasting, public legacies for the benefit, as the early journalist said of Marquand, “not for himself alone, but for a whole people and for all the world.” ▀

James Cuno, Ph.D. '85, is president and director of the Art Institute of Chicago. From 1991 to 2002, he was director of the Harvard University Art Museums. His most recent book is Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage (Princeton).

Blindspot: A Novel

A send-up of eighteenth-century literary forms

by JONATHAN SHAW

JILL LEPORE and Jane Kamensky, friends since graduate school, didn't plan to write a book. Their project, set in 1760s Boston, was supposed to be a sketch, a playful spoof of two genres: the picaresque, with its rogue hero exposing the hypocrisy around him, and the sentimental epistolary narrative—in this instance, a series of letters from a young “fallen” woman to a friend. Lepore would write a chapter as Stewart Jameson, a portrait painter in exile; then Kamensky would pick up the story in a letter from Miss Fanny Easton. They planned to present the finished product as a gift to their mentor, John Demos, the historian under whom both studied at Yale.

“We were both trained in history as a creative discipline...trained to think of imagination and rigor as being sympathetic rather than antithetical,” says Kamensky, chair of the history department at Brandeis. A fellow at the Radcliffe In-

stitute during the 2006-2007 academic year, Kamensky wrote her installments furtively to keep them from Demos, also a fellow, who had an office nearby. “I was living a double life...sometimes secretly working on one of Fanny's letters when John walked in to talk about my work on Gilbert Stuart,” she recalls. “*Blindspot* felt like a covert piece of business that wasn't really germane” to her fellowship's focus on life writing.

But that feeling, she found, turned out to be wrong: “I was reading all this stuff about biography and theory of biography and different ways of writing lives, but none of that was in any way as transformative a project as just writing a life from the inside out.” *Blindspot*, a first work of fiction for both women, eventually grew to more than 400 pages and became, Kamensky says, “the deepest piece of work I have done in re-imagining life writing.” (Spiegel & Grau will publish the book in December.)



Jane Kamensky (left)
and Jill Lepore

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Still, the coauthors distinguish between creativity in writing a novel and the creative aspects of their nonfiction books. "Writing early American history always requires a fair amount of hunch-playing and intuition," explains Kamensky, author of *The Exchange Artist: A Tale of High-Flying Speculation and America's First Banking Collapse*. "While modernists have the problem of throwing stuff away, for biographers and even social historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, only rarely is the historical record comprehensive and complete enough to write a life history."

Lepore agrees. "We can know what the American Revolution was like for poor widows in Boston as a group, because we know how many of them went on the poor rolls or how many of them sold their breast milk for cash in the *Boston Gazette*, but you can't really get a life story," says the Kemper professor of American history, who is also chair of the history and literature program and author of *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (see "Witness to Violence," September-October 2005, page 42). "In my

own work, [the point] where I find the limits of social history are awfully frustrating is in the anonymity of the people that you are writing about." Eighteenth-century fiction, of which Lepore is "a very big fan," brings a "degree of drama and human depth that...social history just can't do."

"In part," says Kamensky, "what the novel does for us is segregate this play of imagination, so that rather than creeping close to the line between history and fiction in our work as Ph.D.-carrying historians, we jumped the fence and tried something else."

The pair worked mostly by e-mail, "pinging back and forth like a tennis game" the two interwoven first-person narratives: a chapter, then a letter, and another chapter. The first hundred pages flew by. There was no preplanned plot. Lepore likens it to the game families play on long car trips, where each person gets to add a sentence to a story going around and around, except that theirs was set within a contained imagined world: Boston in the 1760s, a period they both know well.

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

gut geography course (taken to fulfill a science requirement) flunked Plimpton for skipping every class.

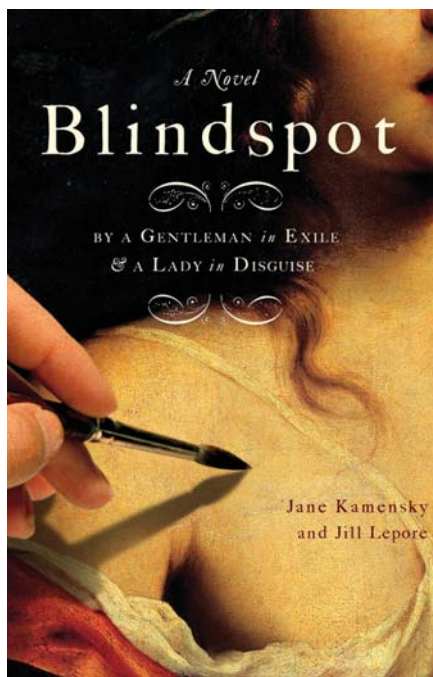
Reputation: Portraits in Power, by Marjorie Williams '79 (PublicAffairs, \$26.95). No matter who is elected, the president must contend with those permanently in power. No one ever portrayed such people better than the late Marjorie Williams, as this second collection of her work, edited by her husband, Timothy Noah '80, vividly shows. The profiles—of the likes of Clark Clifford, James Baker, Lee Atwater, and Colin Powell—get at a Washington where, Noah notes, "the worst thing they can call you is a human being." Williams showed why.

George, Being George, edited by Nelson W. Aldrich Jr. '57 (Random House, \$30). Two hundred ways, more or less, of looking at George Plimpton '48, of the *Paris Review* and other ventures. We learn that his graduation, delayed by World War II service, was further postponed because the irate professor in his final-semester

Your Child's Strengths, by Jenifer Fox, Ed.M. '95 (Viking, \$24.95). How to discover, develop, and use same, rather than dwelling on weaknesses, by the head of the Purnell School, in Potterville, New Jersey.

Home Girl, by Judith Matloff '80 (Random House, \$25). Back from reporting in Moscow, the author buys a fixer-upper in West Harlem. This is the chronicle of what it means to build a "dream house on a lawless block."

Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, edited by Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton, RF '01 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$40). The exchanges between the poetic giants, linking Lowell '39, Litt.D. '66, and Bishop for 30 years and spanning 458 letters. The period covered includes Lowell's time teaching at Harvard, 1963-1977.



When they realized that the sketch would become a book, they sat down to do some storyboarding and began revising what they had already written. As

“These characters were in some way more real to us than other people we have written about...”

they worked, Lepore read colonial artist John Singleton Copley’s letters. Her portrayal of the fictional painter Jameson, which may leave male readers squirming, also drew on her familiarity with Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and the works of Henry Fielding, just as Kamensky drew on sources such as Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. Always, in trying to imagine what people’s lives were really like, they strove to be faithful to the past, Kamensky says, but “in a way completely different from the work of history, one that was wonderfully liberating.”

To imagine their characters standing or sitting in space, they visited an eighteenth-century house in downtown Boston that became the setting for the home where their two characters lived.

Lepore had made many such field trips for history research, but found this particular experience unique. Writing the novel “was worth doing fully” because “these characters were in some way more real to us than other people we have written about—about whom we just couldn’t know enough to have that realness. I think,” she adds, “that will make me work harder” as a historian—and as a teacher.

Blindspot is full of learning and literary allusions, as well as historical documents that Lepore says she and Kamensky introduced into the text. But writing it, she emphasizes, was a “privileging of the emotional, the delightful, the playful, and the imaginative: writing about things that we really care about by giving vent to different faculties than we usually draw on.”

Physicists on Wall Street, by Jeremy Bernstein ’51, Ph.D. ’55 (Springer, \$34.95). Somewhat accessible essays on options pricing and on why Wall Street has become a home for the physicists and other “quants” not employed at CERN’s Large Hadron Collider, plus “other essays on science and society.”

Patronizing the Arts, by Marjorie Garber, Kenan professor of English and of visual and environmental studies (Springer, \$34.95). A meditation on the dual attitudes toward art in modern culture—patronage and condescension—and universities’ role in sustaining support for the artistic enterprise.

The Gridlock Economy, by Michael Heller ’84 (Basic Books, \$26). The author, Wien professor of real-estate law at Columbia, explores how “too much ownership” complicates development and deployment of drug discoveries and new technologies, urban renewal, and more.

The Global Achievement Gap, by Tony Wagner, M.A.T. ’71, Ed.D. ’92 (Basic Books, \$26.95). The codirector of the Change

Leadership Group at the Graduate School of Education laments that American schools are obsolete, and focuses on how to retool them for the global information economy by emphasizing such core skills as critical thinking and collaboration.

A Great Idea at the Time, by Alex Beam (PublicAffairs, \$24.95). Beam, a *Boston Globe* columnist, writes vividly about the Great Books program of the 1950s, tracing its formation in part to Harvard president Charles William Eliot’s “five-foot shelf” of Harvard Classics (reconsidered in this magazine’s November-December 2001 issue by Adam Kirsch).

Frontiersman: Daniel Boone and the Making of America, by Meredith Mason Brown ’61, J.D. ’65 (Louisiana State Uni-



Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap, by George Caleb Bingham (American, 1811-1879)

versity Press, \$34.95). The author’s father, John Mason Brown ’23, wrote a *Landmark* (for teenagers) biography of Boone in 1952. From the late 1700s on, the Brown family had interacted with Boone in Kentucky. Now comes this clear, well-illustrated modern biography of an icon who helped bring about America’s “birth and transformation.”