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Tastemakers, Collectors, and Patrons: Collecting American Art in the Long Nineteenth Century

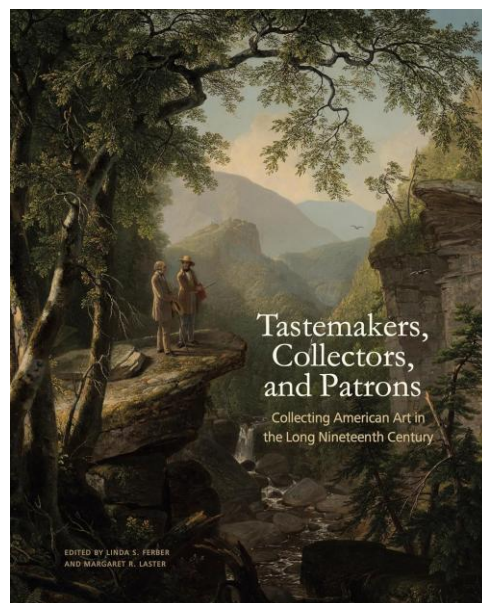
Edited by Linda S. Ferber and Margaret R. Laster

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Tastemakers, Collectors, and Patrons: Collecting American Art in the Long Nineteenth Century is the sixth and final volume in the beautifully produced series *Studies in the History of Art Collecting in America*, published by the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick, New York. This volume evolved from a 2017 conference featuring papers by scholars with deep knowledge of American patrons and institutions during the “long nineteenth century.” The title indicates a broad interpretation of collecting, encompassing those individuals who purchased paintings (collectors) and those who shaped public taste through other means (patrons and tastemakers). The editors are explicit about their goal to expand the scope of study beyond individual collectors and collections. The eleven essays and accompanying introduction touch upon questions of taste, cultural influence, art as marker of social status, and the history of cultural institutions.

Each of the books in the Frick series considers a geographically defined subset of artworks as acquired by American collectors. The previously published volumes cover Dutch, Flemish, and Italian seventeenth-century paintings, Italian Renaissance objects, and colonial and modern Latin American art. *Tastemakers* defines American art as the art of the United States; most of the objects discussed are paintings, not other forms of visual or material culture. The volume presents the collections chronologically, from the early years of the United States through the interwar explosion of cultural institutions. Unlike the other books in the series, which primarily explore American collectors’ acquisitions of secondary-market objects, *Tastemakers* documents individuals who collected the artistic production of their own time and place, responding to and often influencing contemporary artists.



Tastemakers is an extremely valuable contribution to the field, particularly in its effort to establish a more comprehensive picture of American collecting and to explore how collecting is defined and studied. In important new research, the authors deftly navigate two inherent challenges of the project. The first is an effect of the overarching organizing principle of the series. Investigating subsets of collections according to the national origin and chronological period of the artists inevitably presents an incomplete account of most collections. The second challenge is common to studies of patronage: scholars typically are forced to rely on textual (rather than visual) evidence and incomplete archival accounts in an attempt to reconstruct collecting patterns. The authors navigate these restrictions by alluding to works in the collections by artists who are not American while still maintaining the focus on US artists and artworks. For example, the tantalizing archival information that well-known patron Robert Gilmor Jr., displayed Thomas Cole's paintings opposite two seventeenth-century Dutch works in his dining room helps to clarify that Gilmor did not solely collect American artworks. It also points to the fact that collectors of the period rarely displayed works according to time period or national origin, which is the organizational principle of the Frick series.¹ In addition to providing information that refers to the broader scope of the collections, many of the authors explore varied ways in which collectors interacted with contemporary artists and shaped artistic production, considering a notion of influence beyond object acquisition.

The majority of the book's essays are structured around collectors' biographies, including factors that may have informed their aesthetic taste, such as financial resources, social connections, and incentives to engage with visual culture. During and after the nineteenth century, art critics and scholars of American art have primarily analyzed collections in light of the impulse of the collectors. Although some recent authors have moved away from biography-based studies of collecting—looking at corporate and institutional patronage as well as broad data-derived trends—the emphasis on the individual is consistent with nineteenth-century writings on the subject.² The texts of James Jackson Jarves, publications such as Earl Shinn's *Art Treasures of America*, and criticism in journals like the *Crayon* and *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* all focused on the role of the socially prominent individual who had the financial means to assemble a private collection. In an era before government sponsorship, independent associations and museums, or commercial ventures such as sales galleries, the regular exhibition of art was dependent upon private collections, such as those documented in this volume. As a result, many scholars and critics have investigated the identity of the collector as a way to understand taste and acquisition patterns. There is a generally accepted trajectory that pre-Civil War collectors were motivated by nationalism, while industrialists of the later part of the century sought social prestige. This volume follows a similar trajectory: starting with the pre-Civil War roots of artistic production and consumption in the United States, exploring the growth of art institutions, and concluding with those collectors who founded museums.

Seven tightly focused biographical essays offer case studies of individual collectors. Lance Humphries's essay on Robert Gilmor, Jr., of Baltimore (1774–1848) explores the small number of American works in Gilmor's collection and his artistic patronage in the context of contemporaneous support for a national school. Margaret Laster writes on another well-known collector, Luman Reed (1785–1836), whose collection is largely (and unusually) intact, now held at the New York Historical. Laster focuses on Reed's legacy, raising interesting questions about his practice of opening his collection one day a week to visitors

(albeit those who were “properly introduced”) and the posthumous stewardship of his collection as a public collection. Elizabeth Kornhauser organizes her essay according to place and documents the influence and collecting of the Hartford, Connecticut, collectors Daniel Wadsworth (1771–1848) and Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt (1826–1905). Kornhauser implies that the two collectors were motivated by different incentives: Wadsworth aimed to instill public virtue in the new republic by establishing a cultural heritage, while Colt’s collection served as a prestigious display of her fortune. Lynne Ambrosini’s essay moves the discussion from the Northeast to Cincinnati in her analysis of Nicholas Longworth (1782–1863). Seeing cultural patronage and civic activities as a way of sanitizing wealth, Ambrosini presents Longworth as an interesting case study of expansive civic and artistic patronage. Sarah Cash writes about William Wilson Corcoran (1798–1888), who founded the nation’s first purpose-built art museum with a permanent collection. She argues that his taste reflected that of other collectors but that philanthropy and patriotism motivated his interest both in educating artists and in displaying a national collection in his institution. Barbara Dyer Gallati also focuses on the influence of collectors’ taste. She finds New York attorney Samuel Untermyer (1858–1940) to be motivated by competitiveness and social ambition. His preference for acquiring works from well-known collections at auction introduces the role of provenance as a commercially valuable attribute of an artwork. Ilene Susan Fort’s account of William Preston Harrison’s (1869–1940) curatorial role in Los Angeles and his effort to build a museum collection rather than a personal one further touches upon the challenges of forming a collection outside of the art-world epicenter of New York. She presents his cultural philanthropy as a new century’s path to social status.

Four authors move away from biography and instead analyze the role of cultural or commercial institutions in shaping public taste. Sophie Lynford investigates the efforts by a small group of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic thinkers in the United States to influence the American public through essays, exhibitions, and criticism. Her chapter intersects with the history of scientific thought and aesthetics. Kimberly Orcutt studies the market conditions and efforts in tastemaking that both motivated and unraveled the short-lived American Art-Union (1838–52). She examines the way in which the organizers negotiated public taste, simultaneously trying to educate the people and attract members. She argues that the American Art-Union marks a shift from associations controlling art sales to a market-driven system. Richard Saunders’s analysis of the taste of early twentieth-century collectors for eighteenth-century portraits also engages with market conditions and the opportunity for forgeries and deception in the secondary market, and it implicates art historians and scholars as either uninformed or deceitful. Julie McGinnis Flanagan considers questions of cost, display, and transportation logistics in fascinating new material about the art galleries above Grand Central Station in New York. She investigates how organizers used commercial business techniques in an attempt to expand the public market and interest in art. The last two essays, which bring the volume’s material into the early twentieth century, introduce the influence of scholars, art historians, dealers, and museum professionals. Although the authors do not analyze the professionalization of these roles or their social, economic, or educational roots, the emergence of professions that did not exist in the earlier period covered by the collected essays leads the reader to reflect on the role of similar figures in tastemaking and collecting in today’s art world.

As patronage studies (of both private and public collections) overlap with reception and market histories, scholars in this subfield continue to investigate the psychology of

collecting, personal taste, economics, and entertainment. Studies in the history of collecting have expanded in the last decades alongside studies of the market. Currently there are several other series in production, including *Studies in the History of Collecting & Art Markets* (Brill), *Histories of Material Culture and Collecting, 1700–1950* (Routledge), and *Contextualizing Art Markets* (Bloomsbury). Although questions of economics, globalization, and transcultural influence, as well as other varied methodologies, have informed recent publications, *Tastemakers's* approach to the deciding role of the collector in artistic production and collection formation mirrors that of the nineteenth century itself. It also mirrors an emphasis on a single “top-down” direction of influence guided by important individuals. (My own interest in reception makes me wonder about other ways in which taste is shaped.) The volume echoes the excellent research program of the Frick’s Center for the History of Collecting, particularly its emphasis upon the importance of archives. The exhaustive archival evidence and exploration of both well-established and less well-known figures is a valuable addition to the documentation of American collecting and the role of patronage in the development of American artistic production. It provides an excellent historical foundation for future scholarship about less-studied areas of collecting. For example, the editors have a forthcoming volume on female collectors, and it is exciting to consider how new scholarship may develop the field beyond the prominent and wealthy individuals who purchased paintings in the European tradition.

Importantly, the volume also begins to expand the idea of collecting beyond who and what was collected to include an examination of the purposes of collecting and the definition of the term. Most of the authors confine their discussion to the aesthetic goals and development of the collections; they avoid exploring negative associations of collecting that are familiar to today’s readers, including the social and economic impact of the production of the wealth, and negative trends, such as racial or gender discrimination or questions around intellectual property. While institutional and private collectors of our own moment find themselves under increased scrutiny for their ownership of works of art, and scholars and museum professionals navigate an uncomfortable relationship with art as a commodity, art’s existence in the twenty-first century is often justified for its social and political role. This volume raises interesting questions about the canon as it was shaped by early tastemakers, alluding to different sets of values motivating collecting and the function of art; the role of financial and market considerations, such as government regulations, price, and tax laws; and the differences in medium on the potential for circulation—all of which continue to influence today’s art world.

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Notes

¹ For a discussion of this organizational principle, see Andrew L. McClellan, “The Musée du Louvre as Revolutionary Metaphor During the Terror,” *Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (1988): 300–13.

² Monica E. Jovanovich and Melissa Renn, eds., *Corporate Patronage of Art and Architecture in the United States: Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Bloomsbury, 2019); Diana Seave Greenwald, *Painting by Numbers: Data-Driven Histories of Nineteenth-Century Art* (Princeton University Press, 2021).