

The Benjamin Altman Bequest

FRANCIS HASKELL

Professor of the History of Art, Oxford University

WHEN BENJAMIN ALTMAN (Figure 1), founder of the New York department store that still bears his name, died on October 7, 1913, leaving some \$35 million to philanthropic institutions in the city and to the Metropolitan Museum the greatest bequest it had ever received, the *New York Times* commented that "he was probably the most retiring man in New York. Avoidance of personal notice of any kind was almost an obsession with him. . . . Could there be better evidence of the privacy with which he surrounded himself than the fact that no newspaper has been able to procure and publish a portrait of Mr. Altman?"¹ It is therefore hardly surprising that his personality has been so little studied in the now flourishing literature, both scholarly and popular, that has been devoted to the formation of the major American collections.² Wherever we look,

1. *New York Times*, October 8 and 9, 1913.

2. René Brimo, *L'Evolution du goût aux Etats-Unis* (Paris, 1938); S. N. Behrman, *Duveen* (New York, 1951); Aline B. Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors* (New York, 1958); W. G. Constable, *Art Collecting in the United States of America* (London, 1964); and many specialized articles on individual collectors. The only works dealing with Altman himself are "The Benjamin Altman Bequest," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 8 (1913) pp. 226–241, various editions of the *Handbook of the Benjamin Altman Collection*, published by the Metropolitan Museum, which first appeared in 1914 (I have used the 1928 edition and refer to it hereafter as *Handbook*), and three articles by François Monod, "La Galerie Altman au Metropolitan Museum de New York," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 5th ser. 8 (1923) pp. 179–198, 297–312, 367–377.



FIGURE 1
Benjamin Altman, by Ellen Emmet Rand, American, dated 1914. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Estate of Benjamin Altman, 14.122

we find indications of his reticence. If too much publicity were likely to follow his purchase of a Velázquez or a Rembrandt, he warned Henry Duveen, he would prefer to give up the picture altogether.³ When negotiating with the Museum about his bequest, he complained with indignation that rumors of his intention had already begun to circulate.⁴

On one occasion Altman gave a rational explanation for the secrecy that he was so concerned to maintain about his collecting: “people, learning of the great amount of money involved in the two transactions, are given to idle talk to the effect that the money must be obtained, and that the prices of goods in the store will be advanced, or as customers have previously expressed themselves: ‘Mr. Altman, I see, has just bought a new picture; I suppose that is the reason things are so high.’”⁵ After his death, on the other hand, his bewildering attitude was attributed by those who knew him to “a desire to avoid even the appearance of using his devotion to art as an advertisement of his business.”⁶ There is a direct conflict of evidence here, but both explanations are in any case too superficial. Whatever the reasons—and we do not even know enough about these to speculate—discretion was too deeply ingrained in his character to be accounted for purely by business preoccupations. It finds expression even in his use of language. On one occasion he received a cable from Henry Duveen: “Rug I purchased yesterday is greatest finest have ever seen. Will give me greatest pleasure submit it to you on my arrival.”⁷ Five days later Altman wrote him a brief letter that, after disposing of various matters, ended: “Your cable regarding the rug has been received for which I thank you. It evidently is a very fine rug.”⁸

This same tone is revealed in the nature of most (though not all) of his collection of paintings. While other millionaires of his day were amassing glamorized portraits of the English aristocracy, Altman concentrated boldly on the severe, tight-lipped bankers and merchants of the Low Countries and Germany. It is

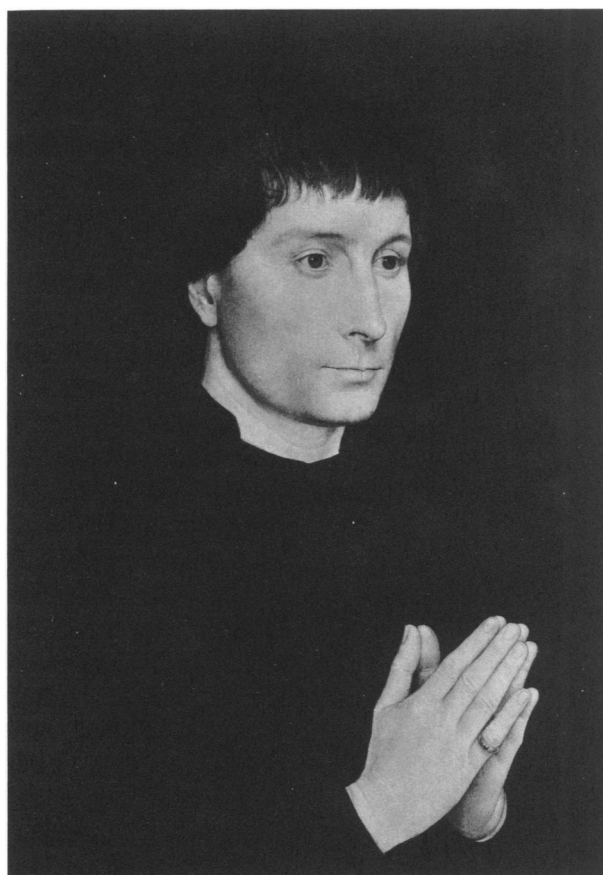


FIGURE 2

Tommaso Portinari, by Hans Memling. Tempera and oil on wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.626

when looking at Memling’s Tommaso Portinari (Figure 2) and Portrait of an Old Man, Dieric Bouts’s Portrait of a Man, and, above all, Hans Maler zu Schwaz’s Ulrich Fugger of Augsburg (Figure 3) (for can one think of any reason apart from spiritual kinship for the purchase of this bleak, almost abstract, portrait?) that we seem to come closest to the inner core of Benjamin

3. See his letter to Henry Duveen of September 6, 1912, and his cable of June 6, 1913. This correspondence is kept in two files in the Department of European Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum. The files contain letters and cables between Altman and Duveen’s from March 1912 until his death. I will refer to them hereafter as Duveen File.

4. Letter from Altman to Edward Robinson, May 17, 1909,

in the Archives of the Metropolitan Museum (Altman Bequest), henceforth referred to as Archives.

5. Duveen File, letter of June 11, 1913.

6. *New York Times*, October 8, 1913.

7. Duveen File, cable of July 11, 1912.

8. Duveen File, cable of July 16, 1912.

Altman. Here is the gallery of ancestors that *he* built up for himself.

Altman was, in fact, the son of Bavarian Jews who had come to New York in about 1835.⁹ He was born in 1840, and, in the words of a rather condescending writer in the *Times* (of London), "it will always remain a mystery to those who met him in his later years how this mild-mannered little man could have built up so vast a business as that which bears his name." *Little* is not the adjective that springs to mind when one looks at the benign but rather austere features that are so striking in the few surviving photographs, but mild mannered he certainly was toward the end of his life; it remains, however, truer than ever that his early activities are shrouded in mystery. His father ran a small dry-goods store, and Altman's education was brief—to the end of his life his grammar and spelling were inclined to be erratic. We know that he helped his father in the store and that in about 1863 he and his brother Morris set up business in partnership. Together they made something of a success, though the scale was still modest. Morris, apparently, campaigned to shorten the working hours of clerks in the dry-goods business, and in later years, when he himself was prosperous, Benjamin was among the first to provide luncheon, rest, and medical services for his employees. It is not quite clear how long the association between the two brothers continued, but in 1876, when Morris died, Benjamin took over his interests and moved from Third Avenue to Sixth Avenue between Eighteenth and Nineteenth streets. It was then that his enterprise began to develop with very great rapidity. He was obviously an extremely thorough worker, and, as will be seen from our examination of his activities as a collector, he would fully master every aspect of anything that interested him. All the same, the attribution of his fantastic success merely to "hard work" must leave open a number of questions that as yet remain without an answer. After thirty years he established his store, by then vastly expanded, in its present location on

Fifth Avenue at Thirty-fourth Street, thus pioneering the move of big business uptown. He never married, and although he expressed warm appreciation of his associates and employees, very little is known of any close friends. He died of kidney disease at the age of seventy-three.

No one can now say what first moved Altman to collect works of art. Was he merely following a fashion that was already current among the rich businessmen of his day? If so, he was unique in that, far from using his collection as a tool for rising higher in the social scale, he did everything possible to avoid drawing attention to it. Was he already—for there can be no doubt about his later feelings—moved by an insatiable love of the beautiful? If so, it is strange that he scarcely ever visited Europe and showed little, if any, interest in the museums of his own town. These questions must remain unanswered. What seems certain is that in

FIGURE 3

Ulrich Fugger of Augsburg, by Hans Maler zu Schwaz. Tempera and oil on wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.630



9. The following facts about Altman's life are taken from three obituaries that appeared immediately after his death (*New York Times*, October 8, 1913; *Chicago Examiner*, October 8, 1913; *Times* [London] October 9, 1913) and from the *Dictionary of American Biography* (1928). These sources are not always in agreement.

1882 he visited a small exhibition of Chinese art that had been arranged by the young Dutchman Henry Duveen, who had settled in America five years earlier, and bought from him a pair of Chinese enamel vases.¹⁰ From then until the very end of his life Chinese ceramics of all kinds remained one of his keenest interests, culminating in a collection of exceptional quality and importance.

In 1889 and again in 1890 he at last traveled extensively in Europe (and elsewhere in the world), but thereafter he only once left the United States. We know very little indeed of his other purchases during these first two decades of activity beyond the fact that they included a number of American paintings (which he later disposed of) and some good Barbizon pictures (several of which came to the Metropolitan Museum) as well as a number of very fine rock crystals and other examples of "applied art."¹¹ None of this distinguishes him much from many other collectors of his time.

With the beginning of the new century we first begin to hear of his interest in the old masters. It is true that after thinking over the matter for some time he turned down Hoppner's portrait of Lady Louisa Manners, for which Duveen paid a record price at auction in 1901,¹² and that two years later he rejected a Hobbema that Agnew's sent him on approval from London;¹³ but (although it is likely that he already owned some Dutch pictures, which he subsequently got rid of) in 1905 he acquired, through Gimpel and Wildenstein, the first two of his pictures which still remain in his collection, the Man with a Steel Gorget (attributed to Rembrandt) and Hals's so-called Yonker Ramp and his Sweetheart.¹⁴ In this same year he moved into a large new residence at 626 Fifth Avenue, which he began to fill with Oriental rugs, eighteenth-century furniture, and other sumptuous adornments.¹⁵

10. *Handbook*, and the (oral) recollections of Edward Fowles, to whom I am much indebted for this and for other information concerning the relationship between Duveen and Altman.

11. *Handbook*. See also Germain Seligman, *Merchants of Art* (New York, 1961) p. 19. The rock crystals came from the Spitzer collection.

12. (Oral) recollections of Edward Fowles.

13. Agnew's, "London Day Book," no. 21, June 4, 1903, p. 125. I am most grateful to Geoffrey Agnew for making these records available to me.

14. René Gimpel, *Diary of an Art Dealer* (London, 1966) pp. 298–299, claims that it was his father who in 1905 first interested

The great majority of his pictures were to be Dutch, and though the gross exuberance of the Hals strikes a surprising note among his generally somber paintings, we shall see later that, in sculpture at least, Altman was not wholly averse to gaiety and riotous living. The following two years saw the purchase of two more paintings by Hals and another Rembrandt, as well as the first (and until 1910 the only) Italian picture in his collection—Montagna's *A Lady of Rank as St. Justina of Padua*.

This was a reasonably distinguished opening, but in retrospect it seems scarcely more than a rehearsal for the truly spectacular year of 1908, on the second day of which he bought nine major pictures, all of them of the Dutch seventeenth century, with the exception of Van Dyck's beautiful portrait of the Marchesa Durazzo. The group included Vermeer's *Girl Asleep*, three paintings attributed to Rembrandt, and one each to Maes, de Hooch, Hobbema, and Cuyp. All these pictures came from the collection of Rodolphe Kann in Paris, and as they and four pictures subsequently bought from the estate of Rodolphe's brother Maurice constitute the biggest single group from one source in Altman's collection (and in certain other American collections), it is worth discussing briefly the nature of that source.¹⁶

Rodolphe Kann, a bachelor who died in 1905 without having made a will, was in many respects so similar in background to Altman himself that one cannot help feeling that, along with his pictures, the American acquired something of his spirit. It is true that Kann's raffish features, as recorded for us by Boldini, have nothing in common with Altman's sober, dignified appearance, but in other respects the two men are comparable. The Kann brothers had been born in Hamburg and had then prospered as bankers in Paris, but

Altman in old masters, but the previous note shows that this is not strictly accurate.

15. Rugs, tapestries, and, above all, Oriental porcelain were always to remain as important for Altman as his pictures. If I have concentrated primarily on the latter, it is both because the documentation is much richer and because it is only in regard to his pictures that I feel qualified to write in any detail.

16. See two articles by Emile Michel, "La Galerie de M. Rodolphe Kann," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 3rd ser. 8 (1901); also the *Times* (London) of August 7, 1907, and the *Daily Telegraph* of the same date.

they owed their vast fortunes to the diamond and gold mines of South Africa. They had begun to acquire pictures only in 1880, at very much the same moment as Altman, and in the course of twenty-five years had built up what were looked upon as the finest private galleries in Paris, and among the finest in Europe. Rodolphe Kann belonged to the "forceful type [of new collector] and he set about the formation of a collection that should be of the rarest and best. He obtained the assistance of the most scientific connoisseurs. He backed their opinion with adequate resources." In 1900 Wilhelm Bode published a massive, extensively illustrated volume on Kann's pictures, and it was doubtless from this and the even more lavishly produced catalogue in four volumes that appeared in 1907 that Altman made his choice. That choice was highly significant, for Kann's pictures (most of which were bought in England) ranged widely in period and country—from Northern and Italian "primitives" to Gainsborough, Watteau, Fragonard, and Tiepolo. The acquisition of the whole collection by Duveen's (in association with Gimpel) was one of the great coups of the Edwardian era, and it was from them that Altman bought his carefully selected pictures and a few pieces of sculpture. He entirely ignored the somewhat over-rich "decadent" side to Kann's taste and concentrated almost exclusively on the Dutch seventeenth century. He missed what was the greatest masterpiece of all, Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, which went to Mrs. Collis P. Huntington, but he did nevertheless boldly buy what were (or, in some cases, what were thought to be) those other late works by Rembrandt that constituted the special glory of Kann's collection: *Pilate Washing His Hands*, the *Old Woman Cutting Her Nails*, and the portrait of *The Artist's Son, Titus*.

Although (with the relatively small exception of a Terborch) Altman now waited for more than a year before buying additional pictures, his acquisition of the cream of the Kann gallery had already established him as one of the most important of all New York collectors. And the consequences of his purchase were, in fact, decisive for his own future, and hence for that of the Metropolitan. At the time, one cannot help feeling, the most surprising result was his giving of a reception for "friends, art lovers and patrons. . . ." ¹⁷

In 1909 it was planned to hold in the Metropolitan

Museum two concurrent exhibitions—one of Dutch seventeenth-century paintings and one of American art—in order to celebrate "the tercentenary of the discovery of the Hudson river by Henry Hudson in the year 1609, and the centenary of the first use of steam in the navigation of said river by Robert Fulton in the year 1807." ¹⁸ The Dutch section of the exhibition was to be organized by the recently arrived W. R. Valentiner, curator of decorative arts, and on February 10 the director of the Metropolitan, Edward Robinson, called on Altman to ask for the loan of some of his pictures. ¹⁹ It comes as no surprise to learn from the correspondence that followed this visit that Altman was extremely reluctant to make any such gesture to publicity; but any disappointment that this refusal may have caused Robinson was more than offset by the fact that he "spoke to me at some length in regard to the disposal of his collection upon his death. He said that he had considered leaving his entire collection of works of art of all kinds to the Metropolitan Museum. . . ."

Although as early as 1892 Altman had given the sum of \$1,000 to help subsidize free Sunday openings of the Museum, ²⁰ his relations with it had not hitherto been very close. Five years later he had refused to contribute to the purchase of a statue, ²¹ and, as we learn from the obituaries that only a very few people were ever privileged to see his pictures during his lifetime, it is not even certain that he had agreed to a request made to him in May 1907 that officials of the Museum should be allowed to look at the beautiful things in his house ²²—certainly there is no surviving letter to this effect in the archives.

The news, therefore, that he was thinking of leaving his collection to the Museum must have come as a wonderful surprise. There was, however, a serious

17. "Mr. Altman's Reception," *American Art News*, March 14, 1908, p. 1.

18. For full details see the catalogue of the exhibition, *The Hudson-Fulton Celebration*, New York, September–November 1909, 2 vols.

19. See Archives, letter of February 11, 1909, from Edward Robinson to J. Pierpont Morgan.

20. Archives, minute book, vol. 3, report of November 9, 1892, p. 135. I am very grateful to John Buchanan for drawing my attention to this.

21. Archives, letter of April 21, 1897.

22. Archives, letter from Robinson of May 2, 1907.



FIGURE 4
Lucas van Uffel, by Anthony Van Dyck. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.619

drawback: Altman explained that he was deterred from taking any definite steps by his fears that the Museum might not accept his condition that the whole collection should be kept together as a separate entity. In conversation with Robinson he now insisted that, although he was prepared to make an exception for his rugs and tapestries, he would not accept for himself the terms that the trustees imposed on other benefactors. Some indication of the extent of the collection by this time can be gauged from the fact that Robinson was reluctantly forced to agree that "it was of such exceptional value and importance to the Museum, that if he insisted on his condition, rather than lose the collection I would favor the acceptance of his terms." Altman did so insist, and at his request Robinson agreed to write to J. Pierpont Morgan, the president of the Museum, who was then in Egypt, asking him to use his influence to persuade his fellow trustees accordingly. Three weeks later he received a cabled reply from

Cairo: "... my desire is great to meet his views and I will do whatever I can to accomplish it if requirements not too minute. . . ." ²³ To all intents and purposes this settled the matter, though there were many more discussions over detail (and the usual anxieties caused by Altman's dread of publicity) before Robinson was able, on June 21, 1909, to cable Morgan, who was now in Milan: "... The will was signed Friday in our favor." ²⁴

As eventually modified not long before his death, Altman's will ²⁵ obliged the Museum to exhibit permanently in at least two rooms, not less in floor space than those that had been devoted to the purpose in his private galleries at 626 Fifth Avenue, the entire bequest—and only that bequest. Moreover, "notices of a proper size shall be placed and maintained in such room or rooms so as to indicate clearly that the collections therein contained were bequeathed to the Museum by me. . . ." It must be admitted that such hankering for posthumous publicity comes strangely from a man who was so secretive in his lifetime, and (though sympathizing with his dilemma) the outside observer can only share the regret expressed by Robinson at the nature of Altman's terms—terms that, as in the case of similar bequests in Europe and America, have not helped the cause of art and learning as fully as was evidently intended by public-spirited benefactors. Be that as it may, it is of the utmost importance to realize that already by May 1909, more than four years before his death, Altman knew that his collections were to be bequeathed to the Museum. This knowledge unquestionably influenced the nature of all his remaining purchases and of many other steps that he now took.

The first of these was a compromise with the Museum authorities as regards the Hudson-Fulton exhibition. This opened in September 1909, and Valentiner explained in an addendum that "the following works, generously lent by Mr. B. Altman, New York, were received too late to be included in the body of the catalogue." The six of his pictures shown included some new purchases of exceptional quality and importance from the Maurice Kann collection in Paris; ²⁶ he

23. Archives, cable from Morgan of March 1, 1909.

24. Archives.

25. See "Altman Bequest," *Bulletin*, pp. 226–228.

26. He had also bought in the meantime Van Dyck's Lucas van Uffel (Figure 4) and three more paintings by Rembrandt.

himself visited that city for the occasion and traveled also to Holland and Germany—the last time that he was to set foot in Europe.²⁷ Indeed, Altman made special efforts to ensure that the pictures reached New

York before the exhibition opened, and the public was thus, for the first time, able to see Vermeer's *Girl Asleep* and Hals's *Merry Company*, as well as Ruysdael's superb *Wheatfields* (Figure 5) and three mag-

27. Our information about this trip is unfortunately sparse. In an article in the *Vossische Zeitung* of January 18, 1914, Bode recalls Altman's visiting him in the Berlin Museum and telling him "that he had just come from Paris—a visit to the Louvre had given him extraordinary pleasure, for previously he had only once seen the

Louvre, in fact with a Cook's party." Edward Fowles has kindly shown me some letters from Henry to Joseph Duveen in his possession dating from the summer of 1909; it is from one of these (August 8) that we know that he visited Holland.



FIGURE 5
Wheatfields, by Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruysdael. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.623

FIGURE 6
 Man with a Magnifying Glass, by
 Rembrandt. Oil on canvas. The
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, be-
 quest of Benjamin Altman,
 14.40.621



nificent Rembrandts, all just acquired: the so-called Auctioneer, or Portrait of a Young Man, the Man with a Magnifying Glass (Figure 6), and the Lady with a Pink (Figure 7). No better choice from his pictures could possibly have been made, and it would be interesting to know who was responsible for it: Robinson, Valentiner, or—the most likely—Altman himself.

The second consequence of his (still secret) bequest to the Museum was his decision to have a special gallery built behind his house on Fifth Avenue (Figures 8–10).²⁸ Though the photographs that we have of this gallery date from after his death, when the final ac-

quisitions had been made, it is likely that the principles governing its arrangement were established from the first, and it is of interest to examine them. The most striking feature (though it is one that Rodolphe Kann had also adopted) is the rigid separation of “high art”—pictures and sculpture—from the decorative and applied arts that Altman was continuing to buy on a very extensive scale throughout all these years. The well-lit picture gallery was an austere place with no trace of the rich furniture, tapestries, rugs, and so on that were, presumably, used to adorn the living rooms of the house itself. Thus Altman did not eat or sleep or work surrounded by his great masterpieces, as other collectors have often liked to do, and even the Chinese porcelain was kept severely isolated in glass cabinets in a second gallery. A further foretaste of the public museum was his grouping of the pictures (with a very

28. See “Art Gallery for Mr. Altman,” *American Art News*, October 23, 1909, p. 1.



FIGURE 7
Lady with a Pink, by Rembrandt.
Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, bequest of Benja-
min Altman, 14.40.622

few exceptions) into national schools and periods. Thus that same didactic purpose that he had ensured could not be theirs once the pictures became the property of the Museum was paradoxically insisted on by him in his own house.

Both the Rodolphe and the Maurice Kann pictures had been bought by Altman from the firm of Duveen Brothers, and although it is not true to claim (as has sometimes been done) that it was to them that he owed his entire collection, it is certainly the case that with no other dealers was his association so intimate. Although much must have been settled by word of mouth, enough of his correspondence with Henry Duveen (who spent some months each year in London and Paris) has survived for us to be able to gain some clear indication of his tastes and personality.

It has already been pointed out that Altman had

made his first acquisitions of Chinese porcelain from Henry Duveen, and a close relationship between the two men continued for more than thirty years. Indeed, it seems more than likely that when Henry Duveen was in trouble with the law for infringing customs regulations, Altman was one of those who came forward to help him.²⁹ Though evidently marked by much friend-

29. For a discussion of the case, see S. N. Behrman, who, however, does not refer to Altman's intervention. I have deduced this from a letter of his in the Duveen File, dated April 22, 1913: "... I stood by you in your hour of trouble, alone! and unselfishly!! interviewing newspaper men, and stopping certain insinuating remarks made by private parties, as well as dealers, and emphasizing to everybody my high opinion of you and your firm, knowing as I did these expressions would reach the government's ears, either directly or indirectly.— Do I not *desire* [*sic*] some consideration for all this?—"



FIGURE 8
Altman's gallery at his home on Fifth Avenue

ship, the letters between them remain formal in tone to the very end. "My dear Mr. Altman" and "My dear Mr. Duveen" they almost invariably begin, but very occasionally one or the other will interrupt a sentence with a "Dear Friend" or "Friend Duveen." On one occasion at least the more spontaneous Duveen made a passionate plea that Altman should look after his health, to which came the rather frigid answer that "your suggestions regarding taking care of myself are perfectly acceptable, and it is a fact that both of us should give attention to this. I am glad to know you are feeling so much better. . . ." ³⁰ Only very rarely do the letters ever touch on anything other than business affairs, and it must be admitted that when they do so, they are not of great interest: "I presume that the people of both London and Paris, are terribly shocked as we all are here, at the appalling disaster which has just occurred at sea, and we all do hope that the proper

measures will be taken to prevent a similar occurrence" is Altman's comment on the sinking of the *Titanic*. ³¹

The friendship between Duveen and Altman was, however, exposed to constant risk by the directly opposing interests of the two men in two special fields. The first of these conflicts of interest is probably inherent in the relationship between client and dealer: Altman thought that Duveen charged him too much for works of art; Duveen thought that Altman was too slow in paying his bills. Both had some justification for the complaints that occasionally flared up between them. The second conflict of interest, however, was

30. Duveen File, letter of July 22, 1912. It is true that on other occasions Altman could be more forthcoming, and Mr. Behrman has kindly let me know that he has information about the very warm relationship that existed between them on a more informal level.

31. Duveen File, letter of April 23, 1912.

peculiar to the particular men concerned: Henry Duveen (and especially his nephew Joseph, who was taking an increasing interest in the business) was as anxious for publicity as Altman was for discretion. Again and again storms would rage over this crucial matter. Altman would be “*terribly annoyed*,” would find that Duveen’s conduct “amounts to a scandal and is outrageous and *inexcusable* and I can never forget it.”³² Then the explanations and apologies would come pouring in, and everything would be resumed much as before.

Sometimes we can find a hint in these letters of that shrewd business sense and overpowering energy of will that had made—and was continuing to make—Altman so prosperous. He took the keenest interest in the new premises that Duveen’s were having constructed in New York during the summer of 1912 (“our building” he once called it),³³ and when Henry was in London and

Paris, he would receive long letters from Altman about the unreliability of the architect and the negligence of the builders: “You can never depend upon their statements, nor even their judgement,” he said, and to Henry’s nephew Benjamin he wrote that builders and architects must be pushed the whole time, as he himself had had to do. “*Pushing means* that you want a knowledge of what is to be done and to see in *advance* they are *preparing for* it and will do it.”³⁴

No one could read through this correspondence and believe that Duveen’s were in a position to impose their own choice of pictures on a docile Altman. Though both Henry and Joseph recognized that he was “a

32. Duveen File, letters of April 23 and June 28, 1912. Many similar examples could be quoted.

33. Duveen File, letters of July 3 and September 6, 1912.

34. Duveen File, letters of August 19 and 23, 1912.

FIGURE 9

Another view of Altman’s gallery





FIGURE 10

Altman's gallery at his home on Fifth Avenue

great friend and client of the house," they also felt that his independence of judgment and willingness on occasion to turn to other dealers made him "slippery," and they had to devise careful tactics for dealing with him. "I should like him to feel that he gets a bargain now and then, when we are able to take this course, having bought reasonably," writes Henry to Joseph, or "I think you are making a grave mistake in showing Mr. A. too many things. . . . Let him be hungry and enquire for beautiful things, and he appreciates our things because we only show him the very finest."³⁵

But, however "particular" and "slippery" Altman

might be, the very conditions of travel and the art market inevitably forced him to rely heavily on the judgment of his dealers. Well-illustrated books and sale catalogues were still comparatively rare, and crossing the Atlantic took time. Consequently, the vast majority of pictures that Altman acquired were bought for him by Henry Duveen in Europe before he had actually had the chance to see them himself. Competition for

35. Letters from Henry to Joseph Duveen of August 8, 1909, and April 3 and 8, 1913, kindly shown to me by Edward Fowles.

great old masters was very keen, and quick decisions were essential. Moreover, for all their panache, neither Duveen's nor any other dealer had enough capital reserves to be able to make a habit of buying very expensive pictures without having definite clients in mind.

It was, therefore, Henry Duveen's business to bring to the attention of his demanding patron the sort of pictures he thought he would like and warn him off others about which Altman, who kept in the closest touch possible with all the available literature, would make inquiries. At the Doucet sale, for instance, "a great number of things were only fit for French taste, being all of a class which we call 'finicky' and effeminate, so much sought after by French people."³⁶ At the Taylor sale, "the Bronzino is a very fine and striking picture, but after all it is Bronzino and therefore decadent. . . . Bronzino as you know is rather late as far as 'great art' is concerned, and he is not an artist whom we should consider of any very great degree of importance."³⁷ Another problem was that of "unpleasant subjects," and Henry Duveen's category embraced a

very wide range. While one can understand that Rembrandt's St. Bartholomew ("an ugly man with a knife in his hand")³⁸ may merit the description, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that the same can be said of "an interior with a woman nursing a child" by the same artist. Both Judith and Dido may perhaps be "objectionable," but it is surely a strange taste that finds that the majority of Fra Angelico's pictures have "disagreeable subjects."³⁹

It is not certain whether Altman ever actually told Duveen of the ultimate destination he had in mind for his pictures, but it was clearly understood by everyone that he was only interested in "great art": more than once Duveen had to remind him that "we can only approach you when we have something really and utterly GREAT."⁴⁰ As far as this was concerned, how-

36. Duveen File, letter of June 14, 1912.

37. Duveen File, letter of June 28, 1912.

38. Duveen File, letter of June 26, 1912.

39. Duveen File, letters of July 11, June 14, and May 31, 1912, respectively.

40. Duveen File, letter of June 26, 1912.



FIGURE 11
Christ and the Pilgrims of
Emmaus, by Velázquez. Oil on
canvas. The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, bequest of
Benjamin Altman, 14.40.631

ever, his own taste was often more adventurous than that of his dealers. It was he who, toward the end of his life, was pressing again and again for a landscape by Rembrandt (he was probably influenced in this by P. A. B. Widener's famous purchase of Lord Lansdowne's Mill), whereas Henry Duveen would point out that "I told you that we ourselves did not care overmuch for genre or landscape Rembrandts, but preferred portraits by that master, [which are] . . . more saleable and more understandable."⁴¹

As Altman's collection grew better known—in July 1912 Joseph Duveen wrote to him from Paris that "the fame of your collection is becoming more and more pronounced in Europe. . . . Every French person who comes into our place seems to have heard of your Collection and is generally enthusiastic about it"⁴²—he would sometimes get letters from perfect strangers offering him a strange assortment of pictures for sale. Thus, as early as May 1909 he heard from a man in Málaga who was to insist that "I am not a dealer, but a retired merchant, and a lover of Art," which began bluntly "I have an authentic picture for sale by the great Master Velázquez. . . ." This, in fact, proved to be the early Christ and the Pilgrims of Emmaus (Figure 11), which, after some examination of photographs and expertise by Beruete (who, however, would not consent—as he had been asked to do—to call it a work "of the first magnitude"), was acquired from Gimpel and Wildenstein before the end of 1910.⁴³ But not all the offers were so appealing.⁴⁴

Altman's most spectacular venture into the field of Spanish art was also the purchase that caused him the

most distress. In 1911 Agnew's acquired two full-length portraits by Velázquez of Philip IV and his minister Olivares from the Villahermosa Palace in Madrid, as well as receipts signed by the artist for payment he had received for these pictures. They were published in a very imposing brochure by the firm, and then bought by Duveen's, who sold them to Altman. The price of more than a million dollars was, however, leaked to the press, and the resulting publicity induced him, after much brooding and many bitter complaints, to sell back the Olivares.⁴⁵

These examples will have shown that during his later years he was widening the range of pictures represented in his collection, in which the concentration had hitherto been almost entirely on northern painters. He continued to buy works by these masters, but from 1910 he turned also to Italian art, and it was now that the character of his collection—like those of so many other American millionaires—began to reflect the taste and skill of Bernard Berenson, who for the previous two years had been working for Duveen's. Altman always relied scrupulously on the opinion of experts—Bode and Friedlaender for his northern pictures, Beruete for his Spanish ones—but his reactions to the views of Berenson show that he was never prepared to accept their advice without question.

The first Italian picture to gain a permanent place in his collection since the Montagna, which he had acquired in 1907, was Fra Angelico's Crucifixion, which he bought in March 1910.⁴⁶ This was followed by Mainardi's rather tame tondo of the Madonna and Child with Angels and, in February 1912, by Francia's

41. Duveen File, letter of May 23, 1913.

42. Duveen File, letter of July 9, 1912.

43. The letters from Warren C. Bevan bringing the picture to Altman's notice are dated May 17, June 3, June 17, August 11, and October 13, 1909. He mentions the authentication by Beruete and says that Roger Fry had tried to buy the picture for the Metropolitan. It actually belonged to a Mr. De Soto of Zurich. Beruete's opinion is given in letters from him and from his son, dated November 7, 1910, and January (misdated December) 7, 1911. All this correspondence is kept with the picture's file in the Department of European Paintings. Gimpel (*Diary*, p. 303) has some interesting details on Altman's enthusiasm for this picture.

44. In 1913, for instance, a "Country Court Bailiff" in Northallerton, Yorkshire, wrote directly to Altman: "I have in my possession a fine old painting by Titian, the subject being 'Venus Reposing'. I wish to dispose of the same and shall be pleased to

hear from you if interested in Old Master Paintings" (Duveen File, July 24, 1913).

45. There is a great deal of correspondence about this in the Duveen File. At one stage (October 12, 1912) Altman actually decided to get rid of both the portraits. The Olivares is now in the Museu de Arte, São Paulo, Brazil.

46. About this picture Berenson wrote to Gimpel, from whom Altman acquired it: ". . . it was painted entirely by his own hand and not as was so often the case in pictures by old masters with the assistance of pupils" (letter of April 21, 1910, kept with the file on the picture in the Department of European Paintings). At that time the background of the painting consisted of a landscape with palm trees, "low hills and a wide expanse of twilight sky, much in the spirit of the painting of the last century" (*Handbook*, p. 42). A cleaning in 1951 revealed the original gold ground.

FIGURE 12

Federigo Gonzaga, by Francesco Francia. Tempera on canvas transferred from wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.638

ravishing portrait of the ten-year-old Federigo Gonzaga (Figure 12), painted for his mother, Isabella d'Este. It was in April of this year that there came his way the dream of every private collector in the world—a painting authoritatively attributed to “the rarest, most wonderful, most fascinating and perhaps most discussed artist of the whole Renaissance—Giorgione!”⁴⁷

Or was it? In 1895 Berenson had seen this Portrait of a Man (Figure 13) at the famous loan exhibition of Venetian art at the New Gallery in London. It then belonged to A. H. Savage Landor, a descendant of the poet in whose house in Florence the picture had been kept. Berenson acknowledged its “exquisite quality” but thought that it was “a work by the young Titian, or else only a copy after such a work, the copy by Polidoro Lanzani.” Very pertinently he also pointed out its “deplorably bad preservation.”⁴⁸ In 1912 it was acquired by Duveen, and in a rapturous private letter to Joseph Duveen, Berenson wrote: “. . . you may ask how I know it is Giorgione’s—this head. To make a very long story short, I know it quite as well, and am quite as ready to prove it as that I know I am ready to prove that you are Joe Duveen. . . . I am ready to stake all my reputation on its being by Giorgione. . . .” In a more official letter to Messrs. Duveen, two months later, Berenson elaborated:

I would go further and challenge a comparison of your portrait [in his first letter he had written “ours, as I

47. Letter from Berenson to Duveen’s of March 11, 1912, kept with the file on the picture.

48. Berenson’s article “Venetian Painting, Chiefly before Titian (At the Exhibition of Venetian Art, New Gallery, 1895)” is reprinted in *The Study and Criticism of Italian Art*, I (London, 1901) p. 145.

FIGURE 13

Portrait of a Man, by Titian. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.640





FIGURE 14
The Last Communion of St. Jerome, by Botticelli.
Tempera on wood. The Metropolitan Museum of
Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.642

already venture to speak of it"] with any of those that have ever been ascribed to Giorgione, and with any of those done by great pupils and rivals of his, like Palma or Titian. I am convinced that yours would come out triumphant as the unattainable model which they all had in mind from which they drew their inspiration. . . .

There is nothing remotely surprising in the spectacle of a Giorgione scholar changing his mind when confronted by the insuperably difficult problems posed by that artist's work. More curious, however, is the manner in which, during the seventeen years since Berenson had seen it, the portrait had changed from being in "deplorably bad preservation" to a "miraculously fine state."⁴⁹ Visitors to the Metropolitan who ponder over this problem as they gaze at this sad, but still moving, ghost of a picture may be interested to know

that Altman himself was not too happy about it. In May 1912 he wrote to Henry Duveen that

the Giorgione has been placed in my gallery. I have given it the greatest consideration and have tried to study it with much interest as it is undoubtedly the work of a great master. I must confess, however, that I don't fully understand it, which has to be deeply studied. Up to now it has not impressed me as much as I should like, but I believe and hope it will grow upon me. . . .⁵⁰

It may have been this uneasiness that caused him to react firmly, only a month later, when he began to have some doubts about Botticelli's Last Communion of St. Jerome (Figure 14), which he had just acquired, and this episode should dispose finally of any idea that Altman had no perception of his own. "To my surprise," he wrote to Henry Duveen on June 12, 1912,

upon examination and comparison of the Botticelli painting with the illustration in H. P. Horne's book I find that the Cardinal's hat has evidently been tampered with in some way, the hat in the painting has the positive appearance of having been repainted. Did you know of this, if so will you kindly let me know why it was done. I have sent you under separate cover a photograph which clearly shows a portion of the bed to be entirely obscured by the cardinal's hat while [in] the illustration in Horne's book the bed is seen through the hat.

Berenson was called in and was able to reassure everyone that

the reproduction in Horne's book was taken from a photo made at least 15 years ago, as I happen to know perfectly well, when the process of photography was nothing like so perfect as it is now; and that all the difference which Mr. Altman may perceive is entirely due to that. Also that when the photo was first made, the picture was very slightly soiled by age, which soiling has since been cleaned away. I guarantee that the hat is precisely as Botticelli painted it at the time.⁵¹

49. Berenson's two letters, the first to Joseph Duveen, dated January 14, 1912, and the second to Messrs. Duveen, dated March 11, 1912, are kept with the file on the picture. In the first of these he referred to the article cited in the previous note but did not mention the fact that he had discussed this particular picture before. He did say specifically, however, that it was he who was bringing the picture to Duveen's notice.

50. Duveen File, letter of May 17, 1912.

51. The correspondence is to be found in the Duveen File, letters of June 12 and 26, 1912. Berenson's letter of November 14,

Altman was not very happy about some of the other Italian pictures that Duveen's acquired for him—"I must tell you frankly," he wrote on July 3, 1912,⁵² "that neither of them [the Mainardi and the Filippino Lippi] have made the impression upon me which I think they should, and I am inclined to think I don't care for them"—and while this may have been caused by his far greater sympathy with northern art, the unprejudiced observer will probably agree with Altman that his Italian pictures do not on the whole constitute a very exciting group. If only, one sometimes feels when reading through his letters, he had trusted his own judgment more than the opinions of Duveen and Berenson. . . . It is true, however, that, as Duveen insisted on several occasions, "fine Italian pictures generally . . . are very scarce indeed, much more so than you can imagine . . .,"⁵³ and after the very battered Antonello da Messina, and the distinguished (but not, surely, **GREAT**) Mantegna and Verrocchio, one can easily understand the enthusiasm that he expressed toward the end of his life for Titian's fine portrait of Filippo Archinto, Archbishop of Milan.⁵⁴

Fortunately, Altman had developed a taste for early Flemish and German art at much the same time as he was buying Italian pictures, and here, with the purchase of distinguished works by Holbein, Dürer, Gerard David, and Van Orley, as well as the beautiful series of portraits by Memling and Bouts—most of these bought from Kleinberger on the advice of Bode and Friedlaender—he not only acquired paintings whose grave austerity seems to have been most in tune with his own taste, but also added to his collection works that hold their own with his great seventeenth-century masterpieces.

He was also on the lookout for sculpture, which alone among all his variegated treasures he kept with his paintings in his picture gallery. Beginning somewhat modestly with Venetian andirons of the late Renais-

sance, he became much more ambitious after 1909, and in the course of the next four years he was able to acquire a few very fine pieces, though it must be admitted that some of his choices have about them an element of paradox. We can see the appeal for him of Luca della Robbia's tender, but very grand, Madonna and Child in enameled terracotta (Figure 15), and a number of other busts and religious groups that were bought, on the authority of Bode and Berenson, as by Donatello, Mino da Fiesole, and other great names of the Tuscan quattrocento, though the majority of them today would more likely be regarded as distinguished school pieces;⁵⁵ it is more difficult to visualize his relishing the entrancingly sensuous terracottas by Clodion (Figure 16) or Houdon's graceful Bather, part of a group designed for the duc de Chartres in 1782. The superb quality of these works is beyond doubt, but it

FIGURE 15

Madonna and Child with scroll, by Luca della Robbia. Enameled terracotta. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.685



1912, confirming his conversation with Joseph Duveen in response to Altman's query, is with the file on the picture, as is an earlier letter by him of March 12.

52. Duveen File.

53. See letters of June 14 and 19, 1912, in the Duveen File.

54. Duveen File, letter of April 22, 1913. The other outstanding Italian picture is Tura's Portrait of a Member of the Este Family.

55. Altman's finest piece of sculpture, Rossellino's marble relief of the Virgin and Child with Angels, came from the Hainauer Collection, which Bode had hoped to buy for the Berlin Museum.

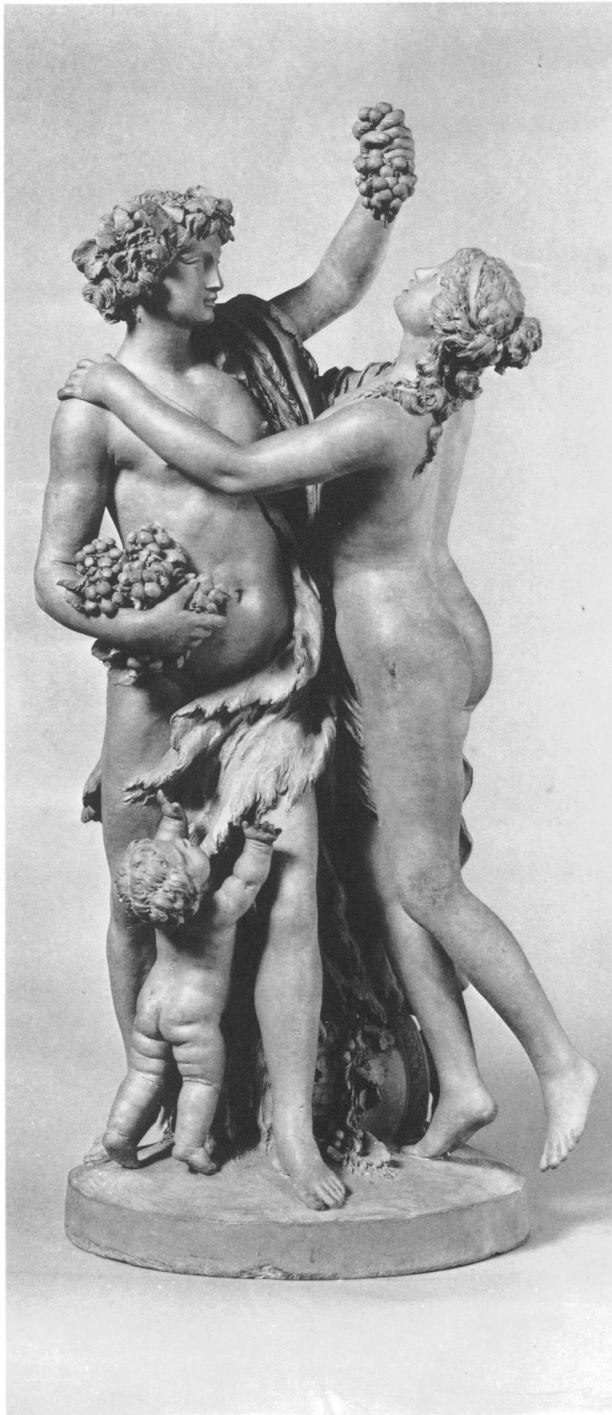


FIGURE 16
Bacchus and a Nymph, with Cupid, by Clodion.
Terracotta. The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.679

is not easy to reconcile them with the concept of “great art” as formulated for Altman by Henry Duveen.⁵⁶

Of all the sculptured works in his collection, however, the one that attracted the most attention was a cup of gold and enamel bought from the Rospigliosi family (Figure 17). Sumptuous yet refined pieces of this kind—and the Altman cup is of excellent quality—had an irresistible fascination for the contemporaries of Fabergé and were at that time invariably attributed to Benvenuto Cellini. Altman followed their appearance on the market with the greatest interest and was reassured when Henry Duveen was able to inform him in 1912 that the one that Pierpont Morgan had just bought was “very small, half the size of yours.”⁵⁷

The last picture to find a permanent place in Altman’s collection was, like the first, a Rembrandt; and for no work of art had he ever fought with greater passion.

In the spring of 1912 Baron Steengracht died, childless, in The Hague, and speculation at once began about the future of the famous art collection that he had inherited from his grandfather.⁵⁸ For many years it had been one of the chief sights of Holland, and foreign visitors had come to look upon it so much as a public institution that they were disconcerted to find it suddenly closed. Most of the pictures had been acquired in the 1830s when Baron Steengracht was director of the Mauritshuis, and though not very great in number, they included a few of exceptional fame, which had been repeatedly published—Metsu’s *The Sick Child*, Steen’s *The Merry Company*, Brouwer’s *The Smokers*, and, above all, Rembrandt’s *Toilet of Bathsheba*, signed and dated 1643 (Figure 18). It was on this latter picture that interest was mainly concentrated during the year that followed its owner’s death. After some months of rumor it was confirmed that all the paintings were to be auctioned in Paris, and eventually in the middle of May 1913, a handsome catalogue was issued.

56. Among his other eighteenth-century sculptures reference should be made to Pigalle’s excellent *Mercury* (terracotta) and Houdon’s bust of his daughter *Sabine*. On June 14, 1912 (Duveen File), Duveen wrote to Altman of the bust, calling it “as great as anything that was ever executed by Donatello.”

57. Duveen File, September 6, 1912.

58. See the sale catalogue of this collection, and also the *Times* (London) of June 1 and October 16, 1912, and March 17, May 17, and June 10, 1913.

FIGURE 17

The Rospigliosi Cup, Italian (Florentine), about 1585. Gold, enamel, and pearls. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.667

Duveen's had already been interested in securing the Rembrandt for Altman, and, after getting confirmation from Bode that it was "really an *exceptionally fine* picture . . . in excellent state,"⁵⁹ they remained in

59. Duveen File, May 14 and 23, 1913.

FIGURE 18

The Toilet of Bathsheba, by Rembrandt. Oil on wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.651



the closest, almost daily, touch with him about it. Altman made no attempt to conceal his enthusiasm, and the underlinings in his letters as well as repeated cables to and fro across the Atlantic convey something of the excitement that he felt: "*Now I should like to have that picture, especially if my information so far received is correct, it being I understand well worthy of my collection.*"⁶⁰ But there were problems: it was known that the bidding would be very keen, and Altman was most anxious that Duveen's themselves should not act for him, but should instead employ someone not known to be working on their behalf, as he was all too aware of the fondness of the firm for making a splash. Such a proposal was completely unacceptable to Duveen. "Our very absence from such a very important sale would provoke comment creating suspicion," they insisted in a series of coded cables that surrounded the deal with an atmosphere of melodrama.⁶¹ Altman, however, was not so much worried about the price—though Duveen's had suggested that he would have to pay £30,000 for it, he himself said that he was ready to go at least £10,000 higher—as about the publicity, and this time Henry Duveen was careful to warn him in advance that, whatever precautions they might take, some leakage to the press was inevitable.⁶² And there were further complications: Altman knew that the Metropolitan Museum was interested in the Metsu ("a dreadful subject," as Henry Duveen characteristically described it), the Steen ("fine quality but much too large vulgar picture"), and the Brouwer, and he naturally did not want Duveen's to bid for him against the Museum.⁶³ Finally, there was the fear that Kleinberger, who had acted for him on many occasions, would be offended by his desertion this time and would deliberately bid against him. As far as this was concerned, Duveen was able to reassure him not only that "German collectors

are very cautious prices they pay," but that in any case a conciliatory cable would do the trick—as it did.⁶⁴

At last on June 9 the sale took place. Newspapers all over the world were able to announce that a new record (£40,000) had been established in the auction rooms, and Duveen cabled Altman that the picture was his, adding later in a letter that "your 'lucky star' has followed you, for had it not been for the tremendous drop on the Stock Exchange last Saturday and on the day of the Sale, I am *positive* that the price would have gone fully to your limit, if not over." Altman's cable in reply to the news that the picture belonged to him will seem laconic only to those who have not studied his correspondence in detail: "Many Thanks Very Happy Kindest Regards To All Altman."⁶⁵

Benjamin Altman was now aged seventy-three. His health was failing, and in April he had been saddened by the death of Morgan⁶⁶—a rival collector but the man who had ensured that his bequest would be accepted by the Metropolitan. He was moreover very heavily involved in the extensive rebuilding of his store.⁶⁷ His intentions were still ambitious in the extreme: only two days after the acquisition of the Rembrandt, he wrote to Duveen of a rumor that Lord Radnor might be willing to sell his pictures: "The pictures which particularly impressed me are the following:—Pierre Gilles 'Quentin Matseys'. Erasmus 'Holbein'. Children of Christian II, King of Denmark, also Mother and Child 'Mabuse'. The Velasquez 'Juan de Pareja' did not strike me hard."⁶⁸ And he showed interest both when Duveen's announced that they had bought "a very fine Bellini . . . quite a 'corker'" and when, even more dramatically, they referred to the possibility that the duke of Devonshire might be ready to sell his entire collection.⁶⁹ Time was pressing. Already Duveen's had warned him that the English were

60. Duveen File, letters of May 20 and 23, 1913.

61. Duveen File, letter of May 30, 1913, and cable of June 4, 1913. As an illustration of the code, I quote from a cable regarding an earlier purchase (Duveen File, June 29, 1912): "Agvapyafap/inekiwion/ubusodoud/memling" ("Have seen Altman very good humor will answer in re Memling").

62. Duveen File, cable of June 6, 1913: "... you must not be angry if later some newspapers suggest that picture may be going to you or Frick or Widener, because the fame of your collection is so great here that some enterprising journal may hazard guess and couple your name with the other two."

63. Duveen File, letters and cable of May 20, 23, and 30, 1913. The Brouwer was later presented to the Museum by Altman's closest associate and successor in his business enterprise, Michael Friedsam.

64. Duveen File, cables of June 6 and 7, 1913, and letter of June 12: "Of course your cable to Mr. K. certainly did good in one way but it was unfortunate that you had to expose your hand to him. I think he acted most loyally in the affair." See also the letter from Altman of June 26, 1913.

65. Duveen File, cables and letter of June 9, 10, and 12, 1913. Altman had been prepared to go very much higher for the picture.

66. Duveen File, letter of April 22, 1913. Morgan had died on March 31.

67. Duveen File, letter and cable of July 18 and September 22, 1913.

68. Duveen File, letters of June 11 and July 1, 1913.

69. Duveen File, letters of July 1 and 18, 1913.

becoming alarmed at the number of pictures leaving the country and were thinking of legislation to prevent this; now they wrote that the American government might be on the verge of reintroducing import duties on works of art.⁷⁰ But it was too late. Money matters were difficult, and Altman warned Duveen not only that during 1914 he could buy nothing more but that he was even thinking of selling Holbein's *Lady Rich*, which they had acquired for him some months earlier.⁷¹ On October 7 he died. A few days later it became officially known that he had left his collection to the Metropolitan.

Benjamin Altman only started seriously collecting old-master painting and sculpture when he was aged sixty-five, and from the first he must have realized that time was short. He once claimed that he always made up his mind quickly, and, given the scale on which he was buying, this is true enough.⁷² Fifty-one pictures were included in his bequest, but he certainly owned many more at different moments, for we know from a number of sources that he was constantly weeding out works that no longer appealed to him or that no longer seemed sufficiently important.⁷³ Indeed he spent almost as much energy on trying to get rid of a Turner as he did on trying to acquire a Rembrandt.⁷⁴ Like all collectors at all times he responded to fashion, and he could on occasion desire a picture just because it was celebrated and apparently unattainable (he once toyed with the idea of trying to buy Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*)⁷⁵ or because some other collector had just bought one like it (he seems to have acquired Holbein's *Lady Rich* partly because Frick had bought the *Thomas More*).⁷⁶ Indeed, living as he did in one of the great epochs of art collecting, he was constantly observing the activities of his rivals—just as they kept an eye on him.⁷⁷ He certainly liked his pictures to be famous as well as beautiful and would worry if his Van

Dycks were not to be found recorded in Bryan or his Dürer in the *Klassiker der Kunst*.⁷⁸ But he also had strong views of his own. He did not like majolica or ivories or drawings—even drawings by Rembrandt;⁷⁹ and although, like most collectors at the turn of the century, he accumulated rugs and tapestries, crystals and enamels, jewelry and Oriental porcelain, he always showed himself far more keen on quality than on quantity. When he died, this was the point that was most strongly emphasized by many of those who were best aware of his tastes, such as Wilhelm Bode, Edward Robinson, and Henry Duveen. How far, then, was he successful in his aim of building up a collection of masterpieces?

Surely no one can walk through the Altman rooms in the Metropolitan without being struck by a number of exceedingly beautiful paintings, sculptures, and objets d'art. Tastes will obviously vary, but it seems likely that some of these would be included in most people's lists of treasures in the Museum: Van Dyck's superbly aristocratic portrait of Lucas van Uffel (Figure 4), for instance, with its surprising combination of the instantaneous and the pensive; Rembrandt's *Man with a Magnifying Glass* (Figure 6) and *Lady with a Pink* (Figure 7); Francia's tender little *Federigo Gonzaga* (Figure 12); one of the finest of all Ruisdael's landscapes (Figure 5); the beautiful *Young Girl Peeling Apples* by Maes, to which one can turn with pleasure again and again even after gazing at Vermeer's *Girl Asleep* opposite; the Memling portraits (Figure 2). Many more could be added, for this selection makes no pretense to be other than a personal one, and it is easy enough to visualize what a dramatic difference this magnificent bequest made to the Museum in 1913. Nevertheless, even in the issue of a *Journal* designed to celebrate the centenary of that Museum, it may perhaps be permissible to try and probe a little further and, considering the collection as a whole, to ask whether it entirely fulfills the ambitions of its creator.

70. Duveen File, letters of June 19, 1912, and July 1, 1913.

71. Duveen File, letters of September 18, 19, and 22, 1913. Altman also thought of getting rid of the "Rembrandt" portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels (now tentatively attributed to Barent Fabritius).

72. Duveen File, letter of September 6, 1912.

73. It is, of course, not easy to track these down. We hear on several occasions of his rejecting pictures that were offered to him—a Jacopo da Sellajo, a Pintoricchio *Madonna and Child* "as fine as Raphael," two portraits by Mainardi, and so on.

74. Gimpel sold Altman a Turner in 1907, but according to

the dealer's son (Gimpel, *Diary*, p. 300) Altman returned it in 1908. If that is correct, it must have been another picture by that artist that he was still trying to dispose of in July 1913 (Duveen File, July 18) and that, in fact, was still with his estate after his death (Duveen File, December 17, 1913).

75. Duveen File, June 19, 1912.

76. Duveen File, letters of June 12 and 26, 1912.

77. For the comments of John G. Johnson on Altman see Saarinen, *Proud Possessors*, pp. 108–109.

78. Duveen File, letters of June 12 and July 5, 1912.

79. Duveen File, letters of June 12 and 14 and July 5, 1912.

The question should perhaps be put in another way. To what extent was it possible in the early years of the twentieth century for an American to build up a collection of “great art” on the lines envisaged by Altman? The concept of “great art” is central to the question, for by this term was clearly meant painting of a kind that had already been sanctified by the taste of half a century and that had earlier been collected with such conspicuous success by an institution such as The National Gallery in London: that is to say, works of the Flemish and Italian masters of the early Renaissance, the Venetian High Renaissance, the Dutch seventeenth century, and Van Dyck (but not Rubens—and not, more surprisingly, Claude and Poussin). Looking at the history of American collections in general, it will at once become clear that with the notable exception of Hals, Rembrandt, and Van Dyck few acquisitions of really outstanding importance were made in these fields before the death of Altman. Isabella Stewart Gardner’s collection in Boston, so wonderfully built up by Berenson, is the one outstanding exception, but elsewhere one may be reminded of those English aristocratic collections that attracted such vast attention all over Europe in the eighteenth century but that, in fact, acquired most of the more important of their treasures in the nineteenth. Similarly, if one again excludes the Gardner Museum and the special cases of Hals, Rembrandt, and Van Dyck, one soon becomes aware that most of the really “great art” in America (as both Duveen and modern taste would agree on the term) entered the country after 1914: the Frick and Washington Bellinis (1915); the Raphael Small Cowper Madonna (Duveen, 1913; Widener, 1917; Washington, 1942); the Titian Venus and the Lute Player (Metropolitan, 1936)—and this list could obviously be very much extended. Indeed, the richest single supply of “great art” in this traditional sense was not available until the 1930s, when Mellon was able to buy some of the treasures of the Hermitage. Altman’s collection must therefore be gauged not against the Platonic idea of some sublime “museum without walls” but against the possibilities that were open to him—against, for instance, the Frick as it was in 1913; or against the purchases made by the Berlin Museum in the early years of the century, for we know from frequent complaints by Bode that Altman’s resources were much greater than those of that institution. When looked at in that

way it remains a great collection, but it cannot be denied that it suffers from the comparisons.

The real drawback, however (and it must be emphasized once again that drawback is a strictly relative term in this context), lies in the concept of “great art,” and here it is necessary to take another vantage point and give up trying to look, as we have until now, at Altman’s pictures through his own eyes, but gauge them instead against a wholly different criterion, though it is one that is historically valid. If we now abandon the special meaning that Duveen attached to the term and broaden it so as to include such artists as El Greco and Goya, Fragonard and Tiepolo, Delacroix and Degas, we can see at once how great were the possibilities open to American collectors—and with what intelligence and discrimination many were able to take advantage of them.⁸⁰ For though the English, and The National Gallery itself, had excelled in accumulating the sort of pictures that Altman was later to search for, when faced with these less traditionally accepted masters, they suffered a complete failure of nerve—and it was lack of nerve rather than of finance that was responsible for their pitiful omissions. The lack in Altman’s gallery of works by any of these masters, some of whom were superbly represented in other American collections of his day, must be noted by the historian of taste, but to insist upon it would lead to a total misunderstanding of his aims and achievement. Better by far to return once again to the Van Dycks, the Rembrandts, the Ruisdael, and the Vermeer that this strange, silent man bequeathed “to the benefit of mankind.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the Altman Foundation and the Metropolitan Museum, which made possible my visit to the United States to collect the material for this article. I am also most grateful to Elizabeth Gardner, Claus Virch, and everyone else in the Museum’s Department of European Paintings, who gave me unrestricted access to all the relevant archives. I express these thanks with the greater feeling as I am aware that they may disagree with some of what I have written. Finally, I wish to thank Baron Cecil Anrep, who has kindly permitted me to quote from several of Bernard Berenson’s letters.

80. One might also include Vermeer in this category. Though he was “discovered” in the 1860s, European collectors were to show far less interest in him than were the Americans.