

The First Score for American Paintings and Sculpture, 1870–1890

WENDELL D. GARRETT

Managing Editor, Antiques

In the year 1776 this nation declared her political independence of Europe. The provincial relation was then severed as regards politics; may we not now begin institutions that by the year 1876 shall sever the provincial relation of America to Europe in respect to Art? (George Fiske Comfort, “Address” at a meeting recommending *A Metropolitan Art-Museum in the City of New York*, November 23, 1869).

THE FOUNDING of The Metropolitan Museum of Art by the cultural and economic leaders of New York during the passionate interlude of Radical Reconstruction following the Civil War was a gesture of faith—faith in the need for both a trained school of indigenous artists and an educated class of citizens in the arts. The United States was emerging as the leading industrial and agricultural producer of the world. Americans were in both an exuberant and an uncertain mood. Amid the turbulence of historic changes, the idea of progress exercised an almost compulsive attraction for Americans as a rationalization of those changes—a pious conviction that human conditions could be improved if reason was applied in good faith to the problems of the country. In this era the business classes wrested control of the political institutions from the agrarian majority and executed an economic revolution that was to change profoundly the character of representative government and popular culture in the United States. The most significant consequence of

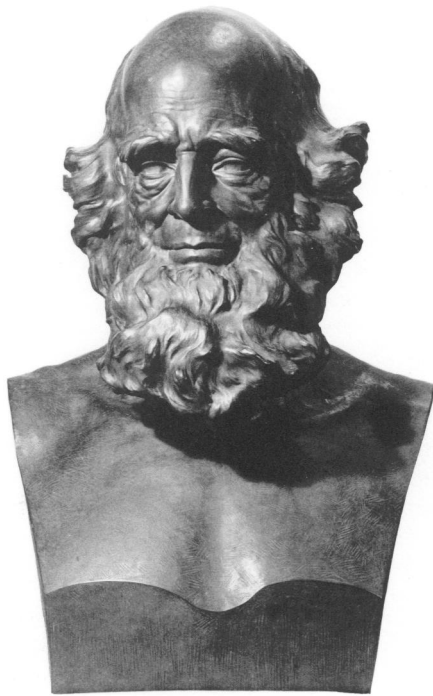
this revolution was the creation of modern America, of a powerful productive economy that, notwithstanding its limitations of vision and conscience, provided an increasingly rich material life for a majority of its citizens. In spite of the depressions of 1873 and 1893, industrialization capriciously heaped great wealth in the hands of a few individuals, while laborers, including children, bore the heaviest share of the costs of that industrialization. As E. P. Richardson has noted:

A new period of urban life began and brought, among other things, new civic institutions, new ideals and amenities, as well as grave new problems. The public gallery of art, toward which American artists and art-loving citizens had been making a variety of efforts for three quarters of a century, at last emerged as an institution apart from the Academy, the Athenaeum, or the Art School.¹

1. E. P. Richardson, *Painting in America: The Story of 450 Years* (London, 1956) p. 263.

FIGURE 1

William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), by Launt Thompson (1833–1894). This monumental bronze portrait of Bryant, who presided over the Union League Club meeting that initiated the founding of the Metropolitan and who served as a vice-president of the Museum from 1870 to 1874, was cast in 1867. Intended for a monument in Bryant Park, it has been on deposit in the Museum since 1896. H. 46½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, deposited in the Museum by the New York City Department of Public Parks, O.L. 88. IV (Photo: Taylor and Dull, Inc.)



“Some three hundred gentlemen,” according to one newspaper account, met at the Union League Club on November 23, 1869, to consider “measures for the foundation of a permanent national gallery of art and museum of historical relics, in which works of high character in painting and sculpture and valuable historical memorials might be collected, properly displayed, and safely preserved for the benefit of the people at large.”² William Cullen Bryant (Figure 1), the popular poet and editor of the *Evening Post*, was chosen president of the meeting and delivered the major address.³ In it he emphasized the importance and

relevance of contemporary or modern American art in this nascent museum:

Moreover, we require an extensive public gallery to contain the greater works of our painters and sculptors. The American soil is prolific of artists. The fine arts blossom not only in the populous regions of our country, but even in its solitary places. Go where you will, into whatever museum of art in the old world, you find there artists from the new, contemplating or copying the master-pieces of art which they contain. Our artists swarm in Italy. . . . But there are beginners among us who have not the means of resorting to distant countries for that instruction in art which is derived from carefully studying works of acknowledged excellence.⁴

This was a period in which painting was in every sense a popular art; “the country came not only to accept but to be proud of its artists and to lavish fame and approval on them.”⁵

A popular faith in progress, a widely professed optimistic mood in a generally acquisitive age, and a comfortable belief in a benevolent evolutionary process appear on the surface to have been satisfying to most Americans, to whom these attitudes were borne out by the abundant evidence of material growth, the scientific and industrial advances, the democratization of their republican institutions, and the vitality of their Christian religion. But these shared beliefs reveal only one side of the coin. By 1870 a growing number of Americans were beginning to entertain grave misgivings about rapid and uncontrolled industrialization: many viewed with alarm the social, the human costs; cities, where millions lived amid squalor and misery, were growing too fast; the shift from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture was creating the farm problem; unrestrained exploitation of the immigrants in factories and cities was creating the urban problem. Many people began to show a preference for

2. Quoted in Winifred E. Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art with a Chapter on the Early Institutions of Art in New York*, I (New York, 1913) p. 103.

3. “Report of the Art Committee of the Union League Club,” *A Metropolitan Art-Museum in the City of New York. Proceedings of a Meeting Held at the Theatre of the Union League Club, Tuesday Evening, November 23, 1869* (New York, 1869) p. 3.

4. “Mr. Bryant’s Address,” in *Metropolitan Art-Museum . . . Proceedings, 1869*, p. 10.

5. Richardson, *Painting in America*, p. 266.

stability, to remain where they stood and keep old, familiar ways; others began to feel a nostalgia or cultural homesickness, to flee the present and the future into a golden, secluded yesteryear. Thus both the hopeful vision of progress and the withdrawal impulse of nostalgia influenced the founders of the Museum to make an accommodation for historical as well as modern American painting and sculpture in 1870. Both attitudes powerfully suggest the instability and fluidity within the field of American art and in the bifarious nature of American society. Bryant reminded the Museum's founders that they lived in an acquisitive age in which the revivals of Romanesque solidity and Gothic spirituality only betrayed the pretensions of an era of transparency and greed, an age bent on the pitiless extinction of the past, and a city caught up in the fierce struggle for wealth and power:

Our city is the third great city of the civilized world. Our republic . . . is the richest nation in the world, if paying off an enormous national debt with a rapidity unexampled in history be any proof of riches; the richest in the world, if contented submission to heavy taxation be a sign of wealth; the richest in the world, if quietly to allow itself to be annually plundered of immense sums by men who seek public stations for their individual profit be a token of public prosperity. My friends, if a tenth part of what is every year stolen from us in this way, in the city where we live, under pretence of the public service, and poured profusely into the coffers of political rogues, were expended on a Museum of Art, we might have, repositied in spacious and stately buildings, collections formed of works left by the world's greatest artists, which would be the pride of our country. . . . But what have we done—numerous as our people are, and so rich as to be contentedly cheated and plundered, what have we done toward founding such a repository? We have hardly made a step toward it.⁶

The Museum "should be based on the idea of a more or less complete collection of objects illustrative of the History of Art, from the earliest beginnings to the present time."⁷ But it also could be a bold setting for American artists, both teaching them and commissioning them to nobler works. Bryant declared this purpose in his remarks:

It is unfortunate for our artists, our painters especially, that they too often find their genius cramped by the narrow space in which it is constrained to exert

itself. It is like a bird in a cage which can only take short flights from one perch to another and longs to stretch its wings in an ampler atmosphere. Producing works for private dwellings, our painters are for the most part obliged to confine themselves to cabinet pictures, and have little opportunity for that larger treatment of important subjects which a greater breadth of canvas would allow them, and by which the higher and nobler triumphs of their art have been achieved.⁸

These hopes of the founders for the future were to be realized against their cherished backgrounds of the simple, agrarian past of the old republic. The present and future of American painting were important, but so also was its past. Because of the misgivings about the course of events that underlay the optimism of the era, it was with a slight sense of irony that the founders brought up the subject of early American historical paintings for discussion—or what they called a "collection of antiquities and works of art in this country."⁹ William J. Hoppin of the New-York Historical Society strongly urged the new Museum to establish two departments of American painting:

In the first place, we should try to procure a complete series of specimens of the works of our American artists—of all those who have been noticed by our friend Tuckerman [Henry Theodore Tuckerman author of *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life*, New York, 1867]. At present, I know of no such collection; but its importance to art-students and its interest to general observers are too obvious to need to be dwelt upon here.

In the next place, we ought to have a great National Portrait Gallery—authentic likenesses of all those who have been in any way distinguished in the history of the nation, or of the States, and of the State of New York in particular. One of the most delightful places of resort in London is the National Portrait Gallery, which, although founded as late as 1858, contains already more than two hundred works of the greatest interest and value.¹⁰

6. "Bryant's Address," *Metropolitan Art-Museum . . . Proceedings*, 1869, pp. 8–9.

7. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Annual Report*, 1881, p. 215 (from copy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Annual Reports*, 1871–1902, bound in one volume with continuous pagination, in the Museum Archives).

8. "Bryant's Address," *Metropolitan Art-Museum . . . Proceedings*, 1869, p. 10.

9. William J. Hoppin, in *Metropolitan Art-Museum . . . Proceedings*, 1869, p. 25.

10. Hoppin, in *Metropolitan Art-Museum . . . Proceedings*, 1869, p. 29.

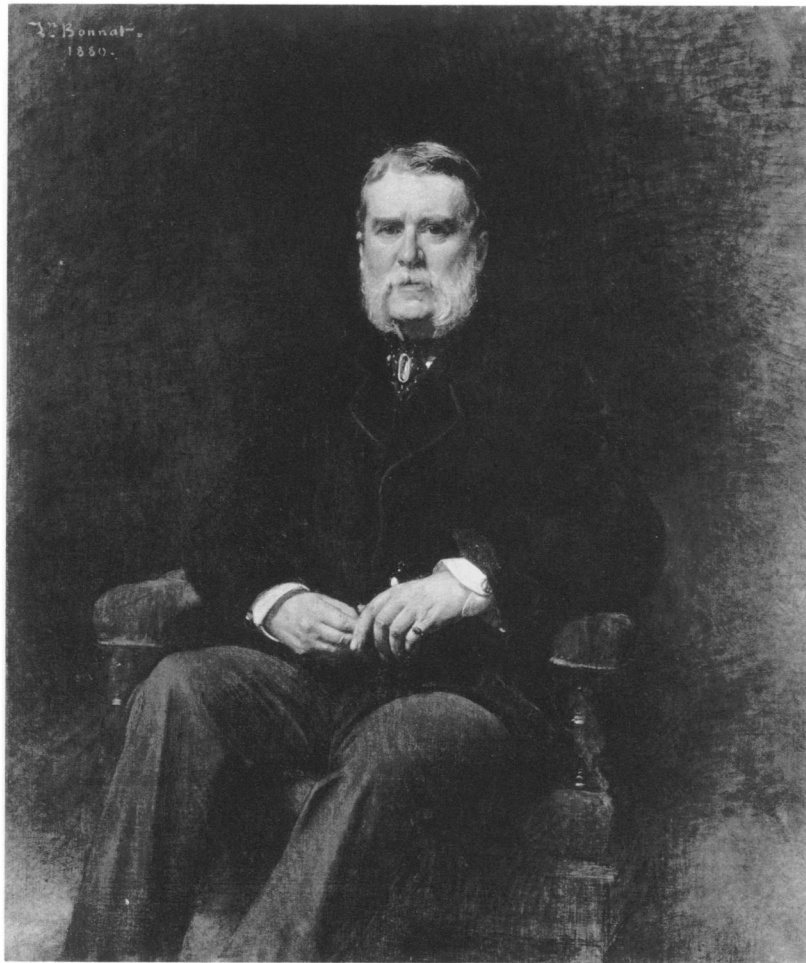


FIGURE 2

John Taylor Johnston (1820–1893), by Léon Bonnat (1833–1922). This portrait, painted in Paris in 1880, was commissioned by the trustees for presentation to the Museum on the tenth anniversary of Johnston's election as its first president. Oil on canvas. 52 ¼ × 44 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Trustees, 80.8

This acute awareness of the past was strong enough in the early years of the Museum to prompt John Taylor Johnston (Figure 2), the Museum's first president, to say in response to the receipt of a gift from Henry Gurdon Marquand (Figure 3) of "ancient American Vases" from the graves of Missouri mound builders that "such relics are very important to the Museum, as in the future one of its features should be a collection of the ancient arts of America."¹¹ Yet historical American painting could not be taken very seriously by a generation strongly attracted to the extraordinarily rich, profuse painting of Europe, by a generation whose national culture was fragmented in the closing phase of romanticism, by a restless generation in revolt and reaction against the romantic movement. There was even a question in some minds as to whether the Museum should acquire American paintings by either

purchase or gift, because "pictures illustrating the early period of American painting exist in neighboring cities and towns, and may be borrowed though their importance in the history of art is not very great."¹²

This was the voice of authority from "the custodians of culture," to borrow Van Wyck Brooks's phrase. Their point of view was, in a way, one that might be expected from a generation that had been born in the late national period and reached maturity before the historically conscious Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia. For many of them, it was hard to consider the family portraits they had known as children to be of artistic and historical importance in a museum sense. Their national past was too recent to be of any artistic

11. *Annual Report, 1880*, p. 166.

12. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Board of Trustees minutes, vol. 1, March 28, 1870, p. 89 (Museum Archives).

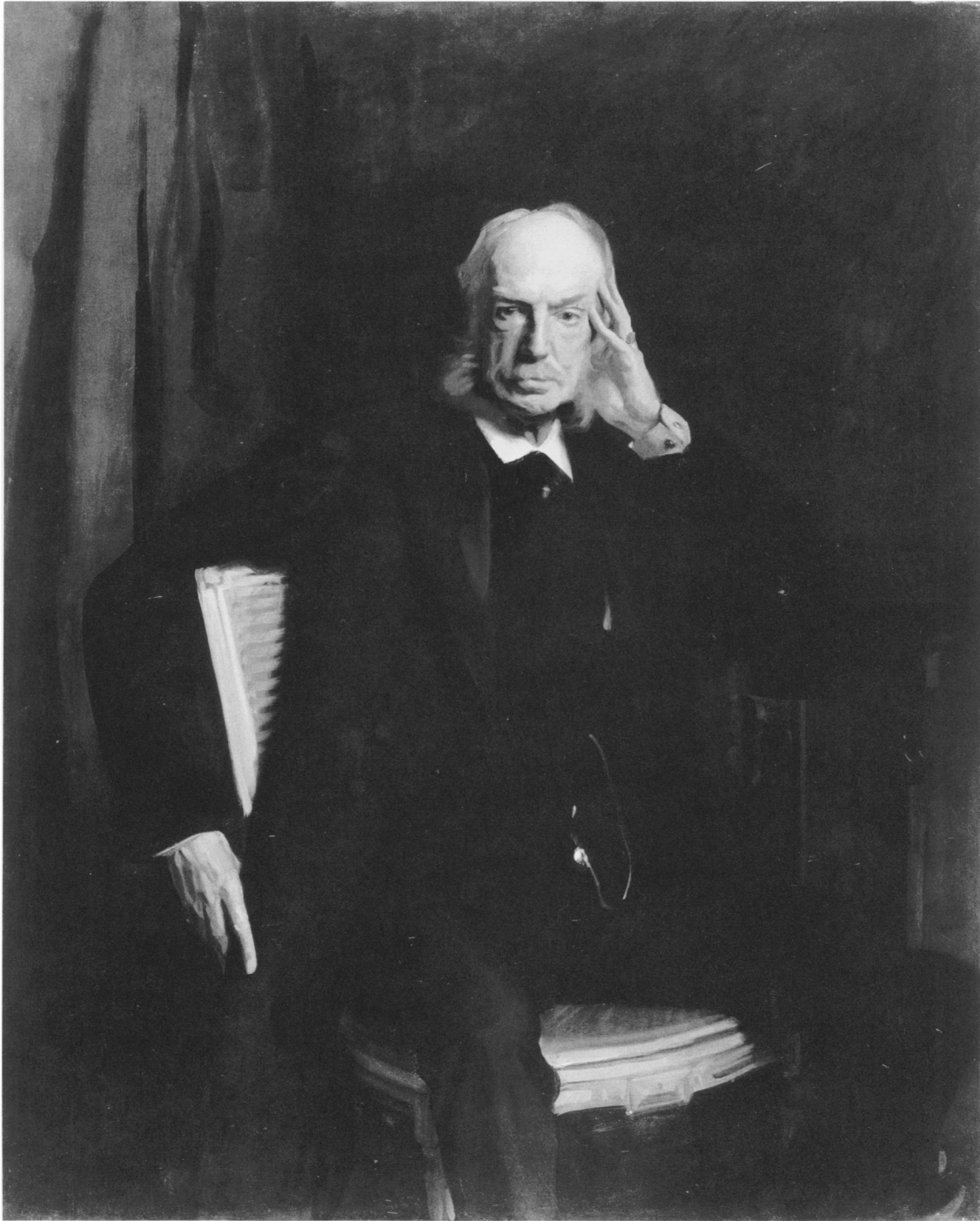


FIGURE 3

Henry Gurdon Marquand (1819–1902), by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925). Marquand, one of the Museum's most active and generous supporters, succeeded John Taylor Johnston as president in 1889 and served until his death in 1902. This portrait was painted in 1897. Oil on canvas. 52 × 41 ¾ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Trustees, 97.43

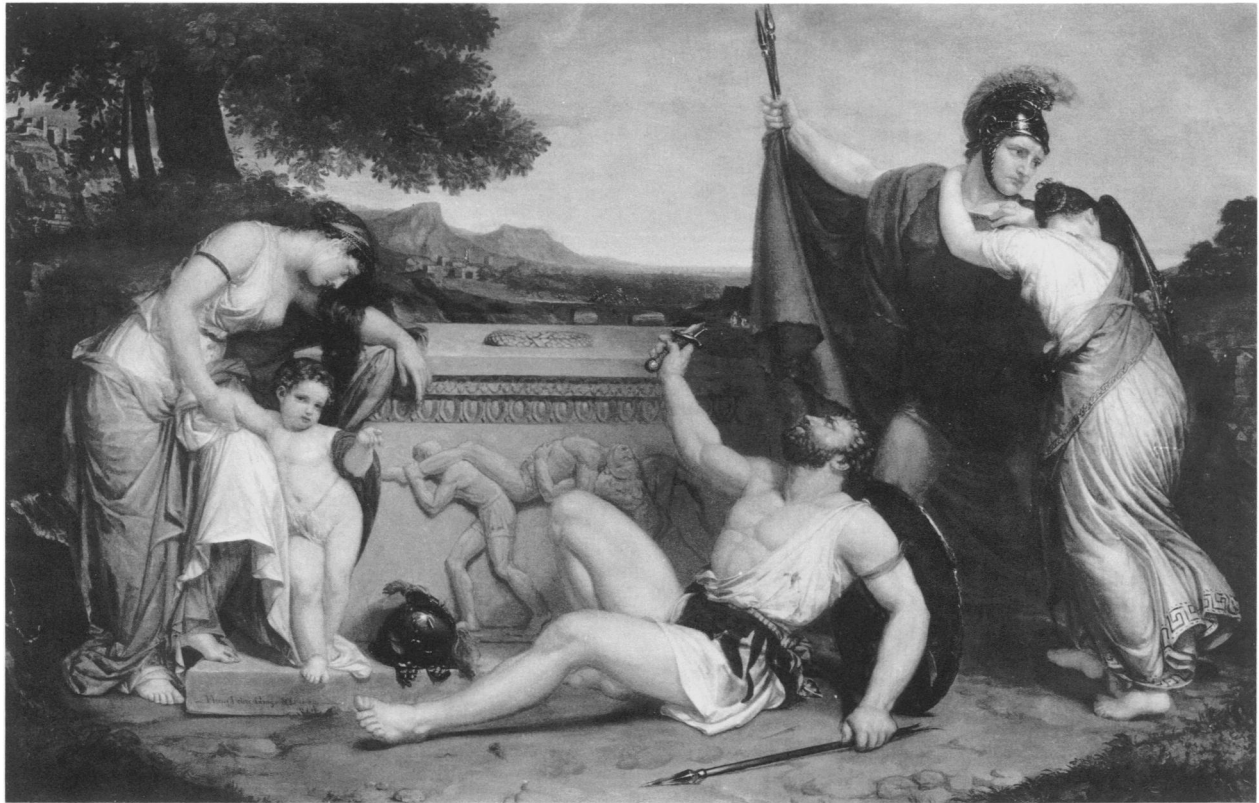


FIGURE 4

The Wages of War, by Henry Peters Gray (1819–1877). This work of 1848, the first painting by an American artist acquired by the Museum, appears above the doorframe in one of Frank Waller’s views of the Museum’s galleries in the Cruger Mansion (see Figure 7). Gray was one of the artists attending the Union League Club meeting in 1869 and served as president of the National Academy of Design from 1870 to 1871. Oil on canvas. 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 76 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Several Gentlemen, 73.5

relevance. At the same time, if incompetence and a general lack of artistic training were characteristic of early American artists and their work, they realized that they were living during an era when good and bad painting flourished and that they, as trustees, must exercise and demonstrate critical judgment:

Pictures. No subject presents greater difficulties; it calls for a degree of skill and experience, and a distinct Knowledge of the object of every acquisition, that can only be gradually acquired, either by an individual or an association. The principle should be to keep in view the historical aim of the collection, and to admit no work but those of an acknowledged and representative value. The value and use of a collection of Pictures depends absolutely on quality, and not on quantity.¹³

These early trustees assumed an extraordinarily enlightened intellectual stance on their dual role as preservationists and critics of American art, not only for their own but for future generations. After the first ten years of the Museum’s existence they felt “that we have been not infrequently admonished that we are working for the generations to come after us, and that those who have accomplished what has hitherto been done, must hand over the work of continuation to successors.”¹⁴ In 1883 this philosophy of building the Museum’s collection was extended in a statement by the president, John Taylor Johnston:

13. Trustees minutes, vol. 1, March 28, 1870, p. 70.

14. *Annual Report*, 1881, p. 218.

A museum would be of small use if we gathered in it only what we, with peculiar tastes and special education of our own times and surroundings, regarded as models of fine arts, to be admired, and accepted as instructors. If we should select from the art works of our own period for preservation only such examples as agree with some peculiar standard of present taste and judgment, or even with the several and diverse standards of various minds of educated and cultivated lovers of art, we should deliver to posterity no proper or adequate illustration of the arts of our own day. . . . This important consideration applies to the whole principle of a Museum of Art. Its purposes should be, not to teach what its founders think ought to be admired, but to teach what men and women, under the varied circumstances of age, country, education, religion, have admired and have utilized. The object is not to illustrate artists or producers of art work, but to illustrate the human mind, its wants, tastes, judgments, even its desires and imaginations.¹⁵

It was in this milieu of abstract thought and artistic sensitivity that the collection of American paintings and sculpture came into existence.¹⁶

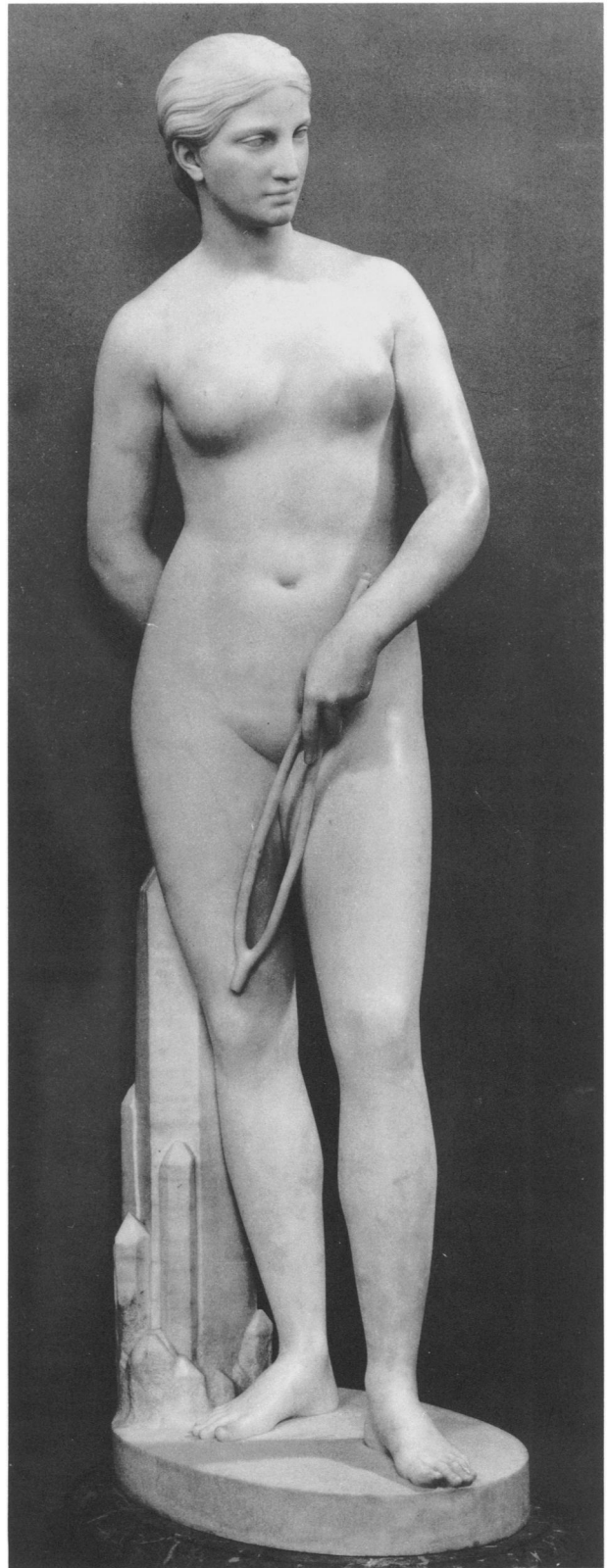
The first painting by an American artist came to the Museum in the middle of 1872, the "Gift of Several Gentlemen" (actually, purchased and presented by several trustees); it was *The Wages of War* by Henry Peters Gray, painted in 1848 (Figure 4). This was very

15. *Annual Report, 1883*, p. 259.

16. The historical record of this department and its collections has been documented fully in several recent books and articles, notably by the late Albert TenEyck Gardner: Albert TenEyck Gardner, "The First Thirty Years," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 23 (1964-1965) pp. 265-274; Albert TenEyck Gardner and Stuart P. Feld, *American Paintings, A Catalogue of the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, I, Painters born by 1815* (New York, 1965); Albert TenEyck Gardner, *American Sculpture, A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1965). See also David C. Preyer, *The Art of the Metropolitan Museum of New York* (Boston, 1909) pp. 282-306.

FIGURE 5

California, by Hiram Powers (1805-1873). This was the first piece of American sculpture and one of the first works by an American artist to be acquired by the Museum. It was originally designed in 1850 in Florence and completed in 1858. Marble. H. 71 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of William Backhouse Astor, 72.3



early in the Museum's history: the first "meeting of gentlemen" to consider "the subject of forming a Museum of Art" had been held on November 23, 1869, the Museum had been incorporated on April 13, 1870, and finally a constitution had been adopted and officers elected on May 14, 1870; but it was not until February 21, 1872, that the Museum opened with its first exhibition.¹⁷ The Executive Committee minutes for June 10, 1872, recorded: "The Superintendent submitted a letter from Mr. H. P. Gray Jr. received with a picture by Mr. H. P. Gray, entitled the 'Wages of War,' now presented to the Museum of Art by Messrs. William Cullen Bryant, Jonathan Sturges and others."¹⁸ On July 10 the matter was referred to the committee on gifts "with a list of the Subscribers who had purchased the picture for \$5,000 for presentation to the Museum."¹⁹ In 1909 one art critic dismissed this and several other paintings by Gray at the Metropolitan: even though he "painted genre in a foreign way . . . the stories he tells are not impressive, notwithstanding the appealing titles" of his works.²⁰ Albert TenEyck Gardner has placed the painting in better perspective: "In buying the picture and presenting it to the Museum the donors were honoring the artist not so much for his art as for his extraordinary success in managing a fund-raising campaign in 1865 that resulted in putting the National Academy of Design on a sound financial basis."²¹

In the field of American sculpture two important gifts were made to the Museum in 1872. The first was the allegorical statue of California by Hiram Powers (Figure 5), finished in 1858 for William Backhouse Astor, who in turn presented it to the Museum's Executive Committee in March 1872; the next month the trustees thanked "Mr. Astor for this valuable and interesting addition to the Collections."²² The second gift of sculpture in 1872, though not by an American artist, was, nevertheless, of an important American subject: Benjamin Franklin, by Jean Antoine Houdon (Figure 6), executed in marble in 1778 and given to the Museum by John Bard "together with an Autograph letter from Franklin to Mr. Bard's father."²³ According to Charles Coleman Sellers, "the bust is the first piece of sculpture acquired by the Metropolitan Museum," and though it was long thought to have belonged to Franklin's close friend Dr. John Bard, it "actually had been inherited by Mrs. William Bard,

mother of the donor, from her father, Nicholas Cruger."²⁴ The accession by gift of these two superb examples of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sculpture by Houdon and Powers in the earliest years of the Museum's existence established a standard of historical and artistic excellence that was rarely matched by additions to the collections over the next two decades.

The expansion of the Museum's collection of American painting and sculpture through the remainder of the 1870s was severely crippled by the depression of 1873, which lasted for six years. In an economy in which expansion had become dependent upon speculative capital, many investors and speculators became overextended. In September 1873 when Jay Cooke, unofficial banker for the federal government, and his firm failed, panic deepened into a depression that paralyzed the country. It was a crippling depression of the worst sort: confidence dwindled, security prices dropped, failures multiplied, factories cut their production, unemployment grew and consumer purchasing power declined, people began to hoard cash, and credit contracted further. From 1873 until recovery came in 1879, the country knew the full meaning of depression. Since most of the original \$250,000 raised at the founding had been spent for the purchase of art works by 1873, the lean years during the first decade of the Museum's existence were met with all sorts of expedients: admission fees were charged, new classes of membership formed, gifts from private collections solicited, loan exhibitions advocated, and the state legislature memorialized to provide maintenance funds through the Park Department.²⁵

17. *Annual Report, 1881*, pp. 214-215.

18. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, June 10, 1872, p. 184 (Museum Archives).

19. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, July 10, 1872, p. 196.

20. Preyer, *Art of the Metropolitan*, p. 295.

21. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," pp. 265, 269.

22. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, March 6, 1872, p. 154; Trustees minutes, vol. 1, April 1, 1872, p. 296; Gardner, *American Sculpture*, pp. 5-6.

23. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, September 23, 1872, p. 199, November 11, 1872, p. 208; Trustees minutes, vol. 1, May 13, 1872, p. 327; *Annual Report, 1873*, pp. 39-40.

24. Charles Coleman Sellers, *Benjamin Franklin in Portraiture* (New Haven and London, 1962) pp. 309-310.

25. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 162.

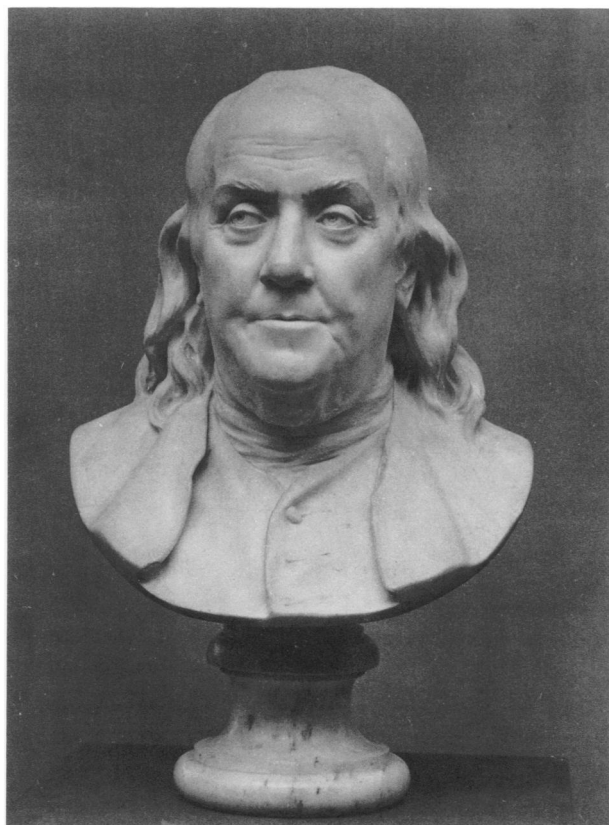


FIGURE 6

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), by Jean Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), dated 1778. Marble. H. (with base) 22½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of John Bard, 72.6

FIGURE 7

In the Metropolitan Museum, Cruger Mansion, by Frank Waller (1842–1923). The Douglas Mansion at 128 West Fourteenth Street, the property of Mrs. Douglas Cruger, served as the second home of the Museum, from 1873 to 1879. Using sketches made in 1879, Waller executed this painting of two of the Museum galleries in the Cruger Mansion in 1881. Henry Peters Gray's *The Wages of War* (see Figure 4) can be recognized above the doorframe. Oil on canvas. 24 × 20¾ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, 95.29

Early in 1873 the collections were moved from the Dodworth Building, the Museum's first home at 681 Fifth Avenue, to the Douglas Mansion at 128 West Fourteenth Street (Figure 7). There a loan exhibition was opened in the fall; its catalogue, containing 112 entries, was issued in September 1873 and shows "only a scattering representation of American artists."²⁶ According to Winifred Howe, "Another of these early loan exhibits recalls the days of the New York Gallery of Fine Arts, for it was a collection wholly American in character, a memorial exhibition of 38 paintings by John F. Kensett, his last summer's work, and the three paintings, *The Cross and the World*, by Thomas Cole."²⁷ Kensett had been a trustee before his death on December 14, 1872; soon after his death the pictures and studies in his studio were sold for \$136,312,

26. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 165.

27. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 166.





FIGURE 8

Passing Off the Storm, by John Frederick Kensett (1816–1872). Kensett was a member of the organizing committee of the Metropolitan Museum and a trustee of the Museum from 1870 to his death. This painting is one of thirty-eight pictures known as *The Last Summer's Work*, presented to the Museum in 1874 by the artist's brother, Thomas Kensett. Oil on canvas. 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Thomas Kensett, 74.27

but thirty-eight of his works (Figure 8), painted at Darien, Connecticut, and some of them unfinished, were presented to the Museum by his brother, Thomas Kensett.²⁸ These thirty-eight paintings (given a value of \$20,000 in the *Annual Report*) represented the major portion of the total of fifty-three American paintings acquired by gift in the decade of the seventies.²⁹ Among the remaining group of fifteen paintings were nine by Joseph Fagnani known as *American Beauty Personified* as the *Nine Muses* (Figure 9), valued at \$4,500.³⁰ This quaint suite of portraits of contemporary belles was described in the *Annual Report*:

The *Nine Muses*, a series of nine paintings, by the late Joseph Fagnani, presented by friends of the artist who purchased them from his estate, are valuable as specimens of the work of that artist and as illustrations of our own times. Each of the muses is a portrait of a lady of this country and period, and the faces will always be regarded with interest as types of American beauty in the latter half of the nineteenth century.³¹

In 1909 David C. Preyer expressed his view that these “portraits of society women” were representative examples of “the stagnation of artistic feeling, and the stiltedness of its expression, so manifest in the landscapes of the time.”³² Gardner quoted one of the misses as saying later, “I think they all look like ladies on prune boxes.”³³ A gift in 1875 from W. E. Dodge of “six copper plates (engravings executed for Audubon’s *Work on the Birds of America*)” added a new dimension to the growing collection.³⁴

At this moment, when the Museum was expressing an active interest in collecting and exhibiting Ameri-

28. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, March 23, 1874, pp. 285–286.

29. Gardner, “First Thirty Years,” p. 269; *Annual Report*, 1874, p. 55.

30. *Annual Report*, 1874, p. 55.

31. *Annual Report*, 1874, p. 51.

32. Preyer, *Art of the Metropolitan*, pp. 291–292.

33. Gardner, “First Thirty Years,” p. 269.

34. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, May 3, 1875, p. 335.

FIGURE 9

American Beauty Personified as the Nine Muses: Calliope, by Joseph Fagnani (1819–1873). The series of nine pictures to which this one belongs was completed by the Italian-born portraitist in 1869. Calliope, representing epic poetry, is shown with the *Iliad* and a trumpet and is identified as Miss Lizzie Wadsworth. Oil on canvas. 43½ × 33½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of an Association of Gentlemen, 74.43

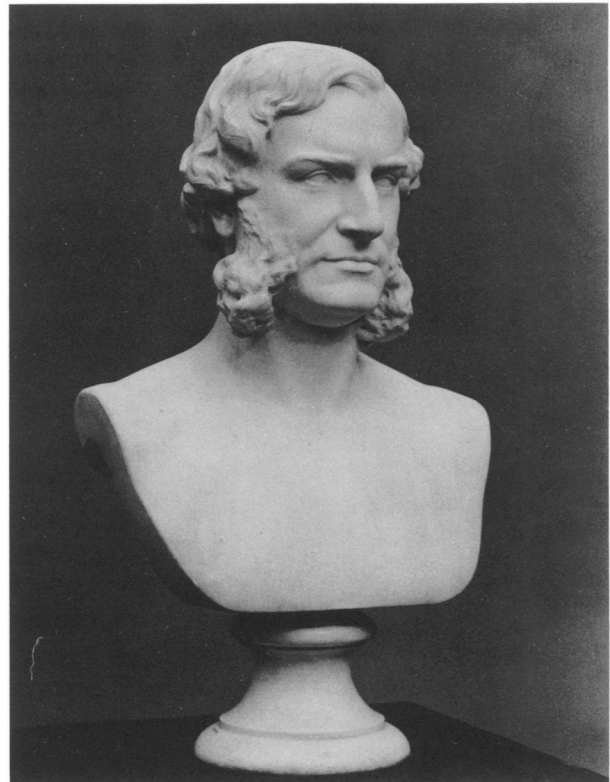
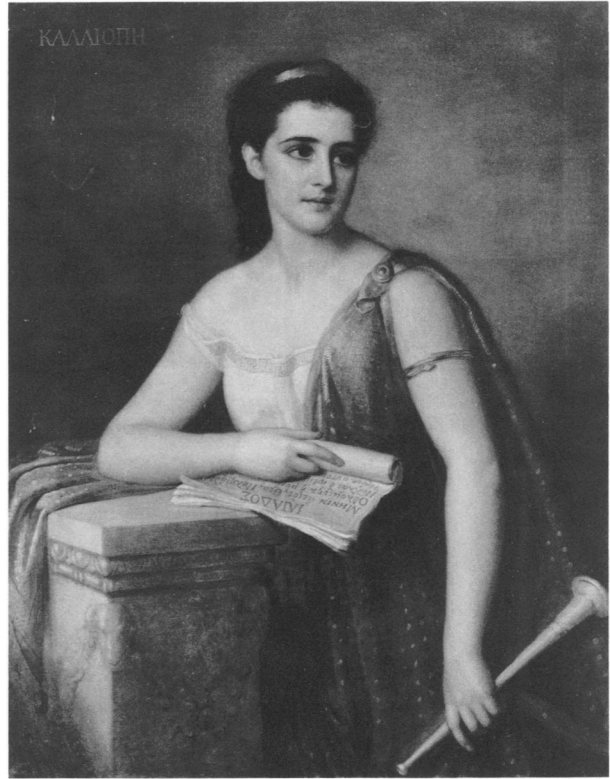
can art of the nineteenth century, it lost through death on November 4, 1875, a vice-president, William Tilden Blodgett (Figure 10), one of its most loyal supporters of “the cause of American Art.”

He bought among other valuable Works, Church’s “Heart of the Andes,” and he exercised that cordial and elegant hospitality towards Artists—the most obscure and struggling as well as the most eminent, which is sometimes as strong a stimulus to effort as the purchase of their works. . . . With this knowledge and unaffected love of the fine Arts, Mr. Blodgett had a thorough conviction of the importance of cultivating them at home, and seeing that Justice should be done to our own school in the eyes of the world. He was a diligent worker in the Committee which selected the American Collection for the French Exhibition of 1867, and was also a member of the advisory body which is performing a similar service for the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.³⁵

35. Trustees minutes, vol. 2, November 15, 1875, pp. 65–66.

FIGURE 10

William Tilden Blodgett (1823–1875), by John Quincy Adams Ward (1830–1910). Blodgett was a founder, trustee, vice-president, and chairman of the Executive Committee of the Metropolitan Museum, and Ward was one of several artists on the original Board of Trustees of the Museum at its founding in 1870. Marble. H. 26 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. John Quincy Adams Ward, 10.200



The loss of Kensett and Blodgett within the first five years of the Museum's life was felt keenly and regretted, as the trustees' minutes recorded, by "the friends of American Art."³⁶ In these years before 1879—when General Luigi Palma di Cesnola was appointed the Museum's first director—the president and his trustees, particularly the Executive Committee, directed the collecting and exhibition policies through their own art-history interests and personal preferences. From the founding in 1870 it had been the portrait painters Daniel Huntington and Eastman Johnson, the sculptor John Q. A. Ward, and the New York art dealer Samuel P. Avery, in addition to Kensett and Blodgett, who as board members and as "professionals naturally oriented the institution to the acquisition and display of the work of American artists, and of study materials for the instruction and inspiration of American art students."³⁷

As attention focused on the approaching Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, there was a heightened awareness throughout the country, and particularly among the Museum's board, of the history, accomplishments, and promise of American art. Late in 1875 the board resolved in response to an inquiry from Philadelphia:

That the President be requested to express to the officers of the Centennial Exhibition the sympathy of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the endeavor of the former to secure an adequate representation of American Art with a pledge of the cooperation of the Institution in every possible way.³⁸

The following April the Exhibition Committee reported that H. P. Gray's *The Wages of War* had been delivered in Philadelphia for exhibition.³⁹ With a "growing appreciation of art over the entire country," during the summer of 1876 the Metropolitan Museum and the National Academy of Design sponsored joint exhibitions of art from private collections in New York "on the principle that New York ought to furnish to the many visitors of the centennial year more than its ordinary sources of entertainment. . . . In both exhibitions, only about one-fourth of the paintings were the work of American artists and the remaining three-fourths were by modern European artists."⁴⁰ The spirit of the Centennial Exhibition was only in part retrospection and restoration; the primary and over-

riding conception behind each exhibition was to demonstrate progress and the high level of prosperity achieved as a result of the machine and the Industrial Revolution. The relatively few examples of American paintings and furniture shown, indeed even the "New England Log Cabin" ("a quaint structure of that style of architecture which characterized the backwoodsman's cot in Vermont or Connecticut one hundred years ago," according to Leslie's official *Historical Register of the Centennial Exhibition*), were actually only historical props to satisfy the firm American belief in the idea of progress. Cheek by jowl with the New England Log Cabin, for example, was a New England Modern Kitchen for comparison. Here was visual demonstration of historical change through some sort of benevolent evolutionary process. Here was an exhibition of the best efforts of artists and manufacturers produced with skill and confidence. The Executive Committee of the Museum looked upon the event in Philadelphia as a unique opportunity and asked in May 1876 that a special committee "be appointed for the purpose of inquiry with a view to the acquisition of Works of Art from Exhibitors on the close of the Centennial Exhibition."⁴¹ Henry G. Marquand reported the following November on behalf of the special committee "that no successful attempt in that direction could be made."⁴²

Between the 1876 centennial and 1879—the year when the Douglas Mansion was closed (January 11) in preparation for the Museum's move to its new building in Central Park and when General Cesnola was appointed director (May 19)—a small number of notable gifts and loans of American paintings and sculpture was accepted.⁴³ The offer of a loan of Randolph Roger's *Indian and Squaw* from a "Mrs. Montgomery of Washington" was accepted in 1877.⁴⁴ Through a

36. Trustees minutes, vol. 2, January 4, 1873, p. 2.

37. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," p. 266.

38. Trustees minutes, vol. 2, November 15, 1875, p. 67.

39. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, April 3, 1876, p. 372.

40. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, pp. 170–171.

41. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, May 15, 1876, p. 3.

42. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, November 6, 1876, p. 12.

43. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, pp. 180–184; Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, December 16, 1878, p. 118, May 19, 1879, p. 143.

44. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, January 15, 1877, p. 34.



FIGURE 11

High Point: Shandaken Mountains, by Asher Brown Durand (1796–1886). This painting was done for the New York collector Nicholas Ludlum. Oil on canvas. 32 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 48 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Sarah Ann Ludlum, 77.3.1

bequest in the same year Mrs. Sarah Ann Ludlum gave “six Pictures by Durand, Cropsey, Chapman & Louis Lang with two by unknown Masters.” These included Asher B. Durand’s *High Point: Shandaken Mountains* (Figure 11) and Lang’s *The Basketmaker* (Figure 12), both dating from 1853.⁴⁵ Also in 1877 a Colonel Lee loaned “a Marble Medallion of Genl. Lee” by William Henry Rinehart; Theodore Roosevelt gave a bronze medallion of Washington; *The Antiquary*, a painting by Edwin White, was given by his widow; and the marble group *Thetis and Achilles* (Figure 13), executed in 1874 by Pierce Francis Connelly, was donated by Mrs. A. E. Schermerhorn.⁴⁶ In 1878 a miniature portrait of Washington, a marble bust of General Edwin Vose Sumner, and a marble statue of Polyxena by William Wetmore Story were loaned by W. H. Huntington, George W. Curtis, and Robert F. Bixby, respectively.⁴⁷ And even though the Museum was closed for over a year from January 1879 until March 30, 1880, as preparations were made for the move to the new building, Reverend E. L. Magoon of Philadelphia, “on a visit to the Museum while as yet unopened, very generously presented to it, as a special gift to the people, a valuable collection of eighty-five water-color paintings by the eminent artist Mr. William T[rost] Richards; and . . . proposes to increase the number to one hundred specimens” (Figure 14).⁴⁸

As the decade of the seventies drew to a close, it was

abundantly clear to those intimately engaged in the Museum’s affairs that, because of the strangulating effects of the depressed economy on purchasing funds, the growth of the American collection was exceedingly random and chaotic, and at times embarrassingly uneven. Rarely were the works of incompetent artists and the portraits of inconsequential subjects rejected as gifts; loans were always accepted, with the sole restriction in sculpture being that it be “delivered at the Museum at the owner’s cost.”⁴⁹ The paintings collection was indeed so thin that about a month before the new Central Park building opened, early in 1880, a report to the trustees said with some alarm, “The picture galleries on the West side of the Museum are almost without Paintings.”⁵⁰

45. *Annual Report*, 1877, p. 106; Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, March 19, 1877, p. 45; Gardner and Feld, *American Paintings*, pp. 212–213, 274–275.

46. *Annual Report*, 1877, p. 106; *Annual Report*, 1878, p. 131; Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, June 21, 1877, pp. 60–61, March 18, 1878, p. 95.

47. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, February 4, 1878, p. 81, October 22, 1878, p. 111.

48. *Annual Report*, 1880, p. 166; Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, February 23, 1880, p. 209.

49. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, October 22, 1878, p. 111.

50. Trustees minutes, vol. 2, February 16, 1880, p. 165.



FIGURE 12

The Basketmaker, by Louis Lang (1814–1893). The German-born artist painted this picture in 1853. Oil on canvas. 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 34 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Sarah Ann Ludlum, 77.3.4

FIGURE 13

Thetis and Achilles, by Pierce Francis Connelly (1841–after 1902). This sculptural group, executed in 1874, was enthusiastically received at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. Connelly was a pupil of Hiram Powers (see Figure 5). Marble. H. 56 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. A. E. Schermerhorn, 77.2 (Photo: Taylor and Dull, Inc.)

After ten years of what one writer has called a “nomadic existence” for the young Museum and its collections, the new building opened on March 30, 1880.⁵¹ The president of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes, was invited to the formal exercises marking the opening; he “declared the institution to be open for the purposes of ‘free, popular art education’ ” in “modest, simple, and yet sufficient words.”⁵² This ceremony, almost a decade after the founding of the Museum,

51. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 189.

52. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, March 8, 1880, p. 215; Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 196.

reflected in numerous ways a new maturity and stability. Virtually simultaneous with the opening of the new building, the Museum announced the establishment and opening of an Industrial Art School at Union Square, the beginnings of a museum library and the appointment of a librarian, the founding of a collection of architectural casts, and in 1882 the division of the Museum into three departments with the appointment of Professor William Henry Goodyear as curator of the Department of Paintings, “to embrace all the paintings, drawings, etchings, water-colors, engravings, prints, textile fabrics, photographs, and books for ex-

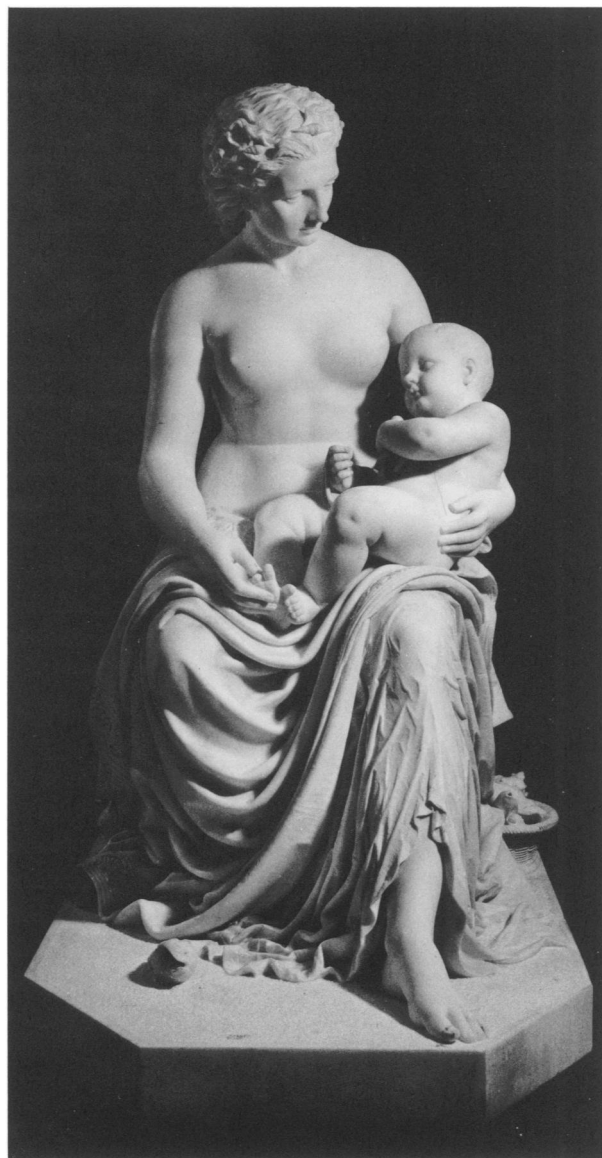




FIGURE 14

Moonlight on Mount Lafayette, New Hampshire, by William Trost Richards (1833–1905). This is one of a group of eighty-five watercolors by Richards that Reverend Elias L. Magoon presented to the Museum in 1880. The gift served as a cornerstone of the collection of American drawings and watercolors. $8\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{3}{8}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Reverend Elias L. Magoon, 80.1.2

hibition (exclusive of the Museum Library).”⁵³ There were significant developments at the same time within the Museum, particularly in the thinking of the director and trustees, that would affect the collecting of American art through the eighties. Soon after his appointment as director, General Cesnola “suggested in 1879 that the Museum should collect pictures by early American painters, a suggestion conscientiously pursued during his long directorate (1879–1904).”⁵⁴ It was, however, at the opening of the new building that a trustee, Joseph H. Choate, in an address entitled “The History and Future Plans of the Museum,” made a bold, imaginative statement on the status and promise of contemporary American art:

Whoever labors for the growth of American art must look for his reward not to this age only, but largely to

the distant future. And who shall dare to set limits to the possibilities that await the energies of this vast people in any department of human effort? It is not fifty years since the possibility of an American literature was scouted and sneered at by the scholars of England; and already the proud Court of St. James’s has welcomed an American historian to whom the world of letters paid homage, and an American poet of whom the English speaking race is proud, as the fitly designated representatives of the young Republic; and who, in the light of her experience, shall dare to despise or doubt the prophecy that in the fulness of time, American architects and painters and sculptors may be held in equal honor?⁵⁵

53. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 219.

54. Gardner, “First Thirty Years,” pp. 269–270.

55. *Annual Report*, 1880, p. 178.

There runs through the official minutes and records of the Museum in the two-year period 1880 to 1882 a double strain of thought: one is an acute historical sense of having reached a turning point, a watershed in the institution's existence; the other is a curious counterpoint in which statements of Museum philosophy revealing lofty aspirations stand alongside accounts of the mundane problems of workaday operation. The Metropolitan had come of age in March 1880, but attending that growth came new responsibilities and complexities. After "ten brief years of hearty, united efforts," the Museum's members were congratulated that "they may content themselves with the familiar epitaph of a great architect, resting in the cathedral he constructed, '*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*'" "Brief as have been the ten years since the opening of our first exhibition," the trustees reported on February 13, 1882, "the Members of this Museum have been not infrequently admonished that we are working for the generations to come after us, and that those who have accomplished what has been done, must hand over the work of continuation to successors."⁵⁶ Facing overwhelming problems of expansion, the trustees enunciated their genuine concern with the forces of continuity and change, a sense of the past wedded to a sense of the future.

The decade of the eighties witnessed significant growth in the field of American art: "twenty-nine American pictures were added to the collection, and in general their quality and interest show a decided improvement over the pictures received in the previous decade."⁵⁷ There was an increasing awareness of the historical importance of adding early American paintings to the collections. In 1880 a significant beginning was made in this area when a collection of nine Benjamin West paintings (Figure 15) was offered through O. B. Smith, attorney for Mrs. Anne Seguin, on loan "for an indefinite term of years," although "he thought that once so deposited they would never be removed from the Museum." The pictures were received in December 1880 and "remained as a loan from her

heirs until 1923, when they were purchased for a modest sum to settle the estate of her daughter-in-law."⁵⁸ Even though this was an extremely important collection, including three works painted by West to hang in his own studio, it was not universally appreciated after it came to the Museum; one critic said that the paintings were "in the pure French academic style, which leaves us cold no matter how ardent the subject."⁵⁹ In 1881 Henry G. Marquand gave a portrait of Alexander Hamilton, painted early in the nineteenth century by John Trumbull (Figure 16); in June of the same year "An association of gentlemen having subscribed a certain sum" purchased the portrait of

56. *Annual Report, 1881*, pp. 215, 218.

57. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," p. 270.

58. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, November 29, 1880, p. 282, December 20, 1880, p. 295, March 7, 1881, p. 328; Gardner, "First Thirty Years," p. 270.

59. Preyer, *Art of the Metropolitan*, p. 284.

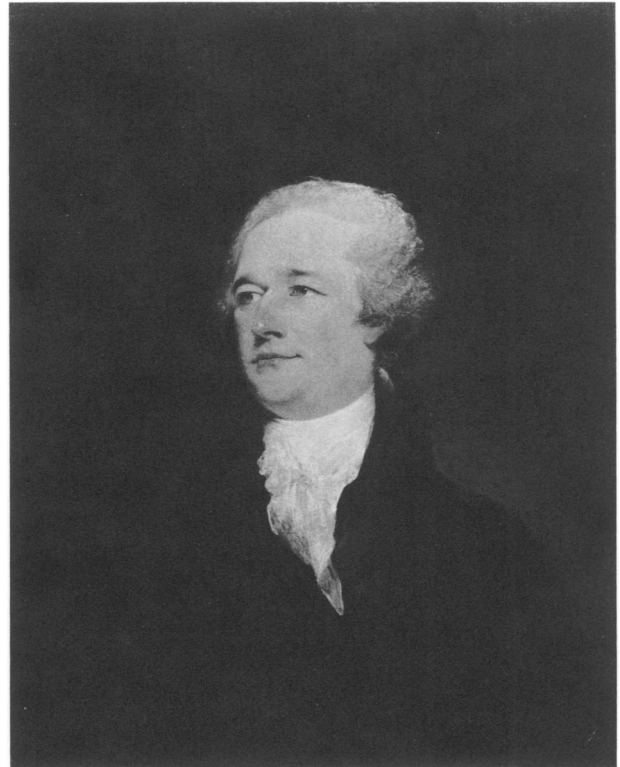


FIGURE 15

Hagar and Ishmael, by Benjamin West (1738–1820), painted in 1776 and reworked in 1803. Oil on canvas. 76 × 54½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Maria Dewitt Jesup Fund, 1923, 95.22.8

FIGURE 16

Alexander Hamilton (1757–1804), by John Trumbull (1756–1843). This portrait, painted in the early years of the nineteenth century, is one of six recorded replicas of Trumbull's portrait of Hamilton executed in 1792 for John Jay. Oil on canvas. $30\frac{3}{4} \times 24\frac{3}{4}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Henry G. Marquand, 81.11



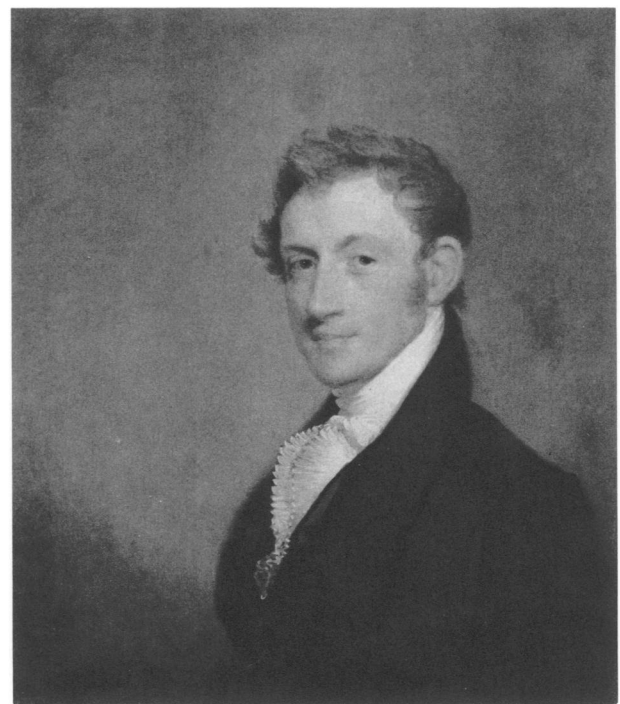
David Sears, Jr., by Gilbert Stuart for presentation to the Museum (Figure 17); and in November Robert Hoe made a gift of the portrait of Alexander Anderson, the wood engraver, painted in 1815 by John Wesley Jarvis (Figure 18).⁶⁰ At the same time the trustees became more discriminating in their acquisitions: they rejected the offer of H. H. Winant of "his own portrait painted in oil as a gift to the Museum" and declined the offer of E. C. Lewis of Hoboken, New Jersey, to sell "the marble group of Latona by Rinehart for \$10,000—which is on Exhibition at the Museum" (Figure 19).⁶¹ In 1887 the trustees adopted a resolution stating that it was "the Sentiment of this Board that the Standard of the Collection of this Museum should be raised to a higher degree of excellence by the . . . withdrawal from exhibition [of] all works of art . . . that do not reach the desired Standard"; the Committee on Paintings and Sculpture was instructed to make a selection of objects it considered of "insufficient merit

60. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," p. 270; Gardner and Feld, *American Paintings*, pp. 95–96, 105–106, 146; Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, June 24, 1881, pp. 350–351, vol. 3, November 27, 1881, pp. 3–4; Trustees minutes, vol. 3, January 27, 1889, p. 9.

61. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, January 24, 1881, p. 310, vol. 3, November 27, 1881, p. 4.

FIGURE 17

David Sears, Jr. (1787–1871), by Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828). This portrait, painted in Boston about 1815, is one of several that Stuart did of Sears, the Bostonian statesman and philanthropist. It was acquired from Sears's daughter for presentation to the Museum. Oil on canvas. $27\frac{1}{4} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Several Gentlemen, 81.12



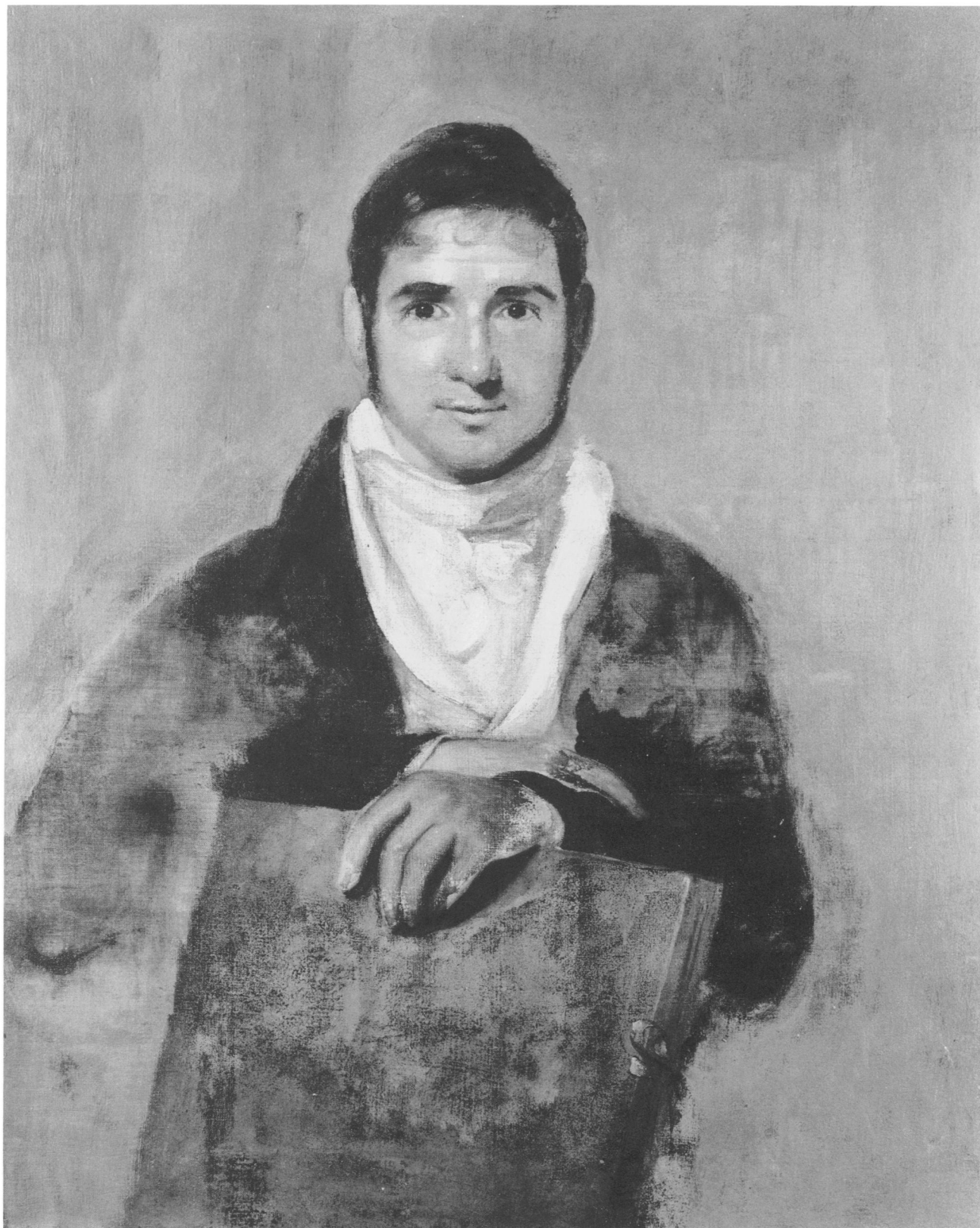


FIGURE 18

Alexander Anderson (1775–1870), by John Wesley Jarvis (1780–1840). Robert Hoe, who served on the provisional committee for the establishment of the Museum and the first Executive Committee and who was chairman of the Committee on Art Schools, presented this portrait to the Museum in 1881. The portrait of Anderson, who was known as the Father of American Wood Engraving in the 1880s, was accompanied by a certificate from a descendant of the sitter dating the painting to 1815. The removal of overpainting in the early 1950s revealed the spontaneity of Jarvis's original work. Oil on canvas. 34 × 27 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Robert Hoe, 81.16

FIGURE 19

Latona and Her Children Apollo and Diana, by William Henry Rinehart (1825–1874). This work, completed in 1874 after the artist's death, was purchased by the Museum in 1905. It had previously been declined when offered for sale by E. C. Lewis, who had commissioned it from the artist in 1871. Marble. H. 46 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 05.12



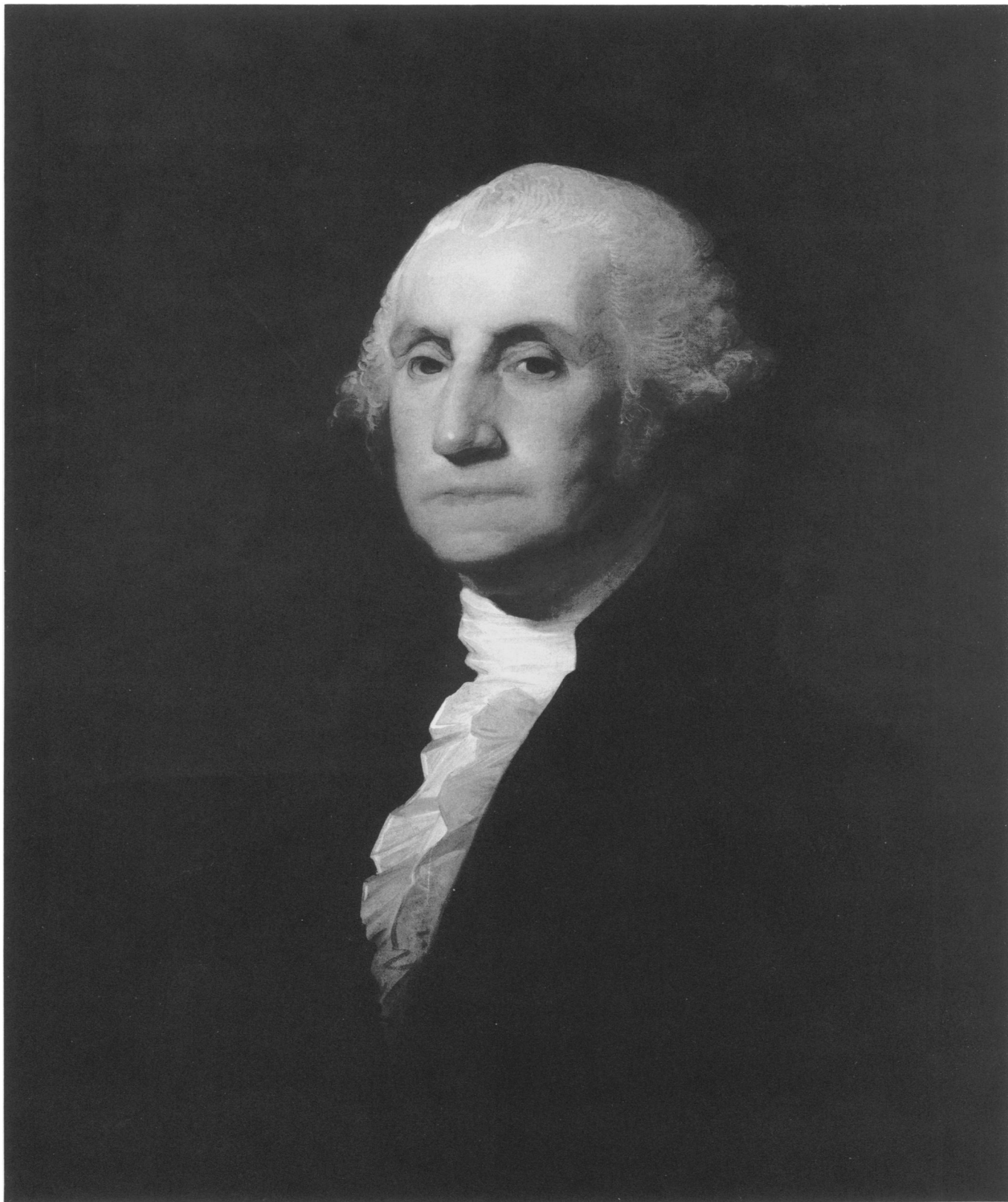


FIGURE 20

George Washington (1732–1799), by Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828). This portrait, of the Athenaeum type, is known as the “Carroll Washington” since it was once in the possession of Daniel Carroll in Washington, D.C. The long and generous support of the Museum by the Havemeyer family was to culminate in 1929 with the munificent bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer. Oil on canvas. 29 1/8 × 24 1/8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Henry O. Havemeyer, 88.18

for the Museum,” and the Executive Committee directed “to dispose of such objects as they may deem expedient.”⁶²

As the centennial of George Washington’s inauguration approached in 1889, the patriotism and filial piety generated were even stronger than in 1876 and expressed themselves in a growing interest in the iconography, and in some cases the relics, of the first president and the other founding fathers. When the “Art Committee of the Washington Centennial Celebration” asked for the loan of Trumbull’s Alexander Hamilton, it also “requested to be informed if there be other portraits or relics in the Museum of prominent men of the Inauguration period in order that the Committee may secure them for their loan Exhibition.”⁶³ Beginning at the time the Museum was founded, when William J. Hoppin had urged close cooperation with the New-York Historical Society, there had been an increasing confusion regarding the overlapping spheres of the two institutions’ collecting interest in the field of historical Americana.⁶⁴ During 1874 the Museum went so far as to accept as a donation “parts of a watch found in a revolutionary burying ground on the Banks of the East River, at Ravenswood, Long Island.”⁶⁵ This trend culminated in the gift in 1883 of the Huntington collection, consisting of all sorts of material relating to the founding fathers, principally Franklin:

An exceedingly interesting addition to the Museum has been made by the gift of Mr. William H. Hunting-

ton. During his long residence in Europe, Mr. Huntington has made a very large and valuable collection of works of art which have special reference to Washington, Franklin, and Lafayette. This collection, which has been made with great care and judgment, includes several hundred objects, statuettes and busts in bronze, pottery, porcelain and other materials, paintings, about 3000 prints and engravings, medallions and medals in various metal and other substances. It forms as a whole a remarkable illustration of the tributes of art, other than great monuments, to the characters of the men whose memory America cherishes.⁶⁶

Huntington had been a correspondent for the *New York Tribune* for a number of years in Paris and became an inveterate collector. His close friend John Bigelow, the Franklin editor and former minister to France, was a Museum trustee and came into possession of many imprints from the collection, and in 1885 he presented “about 660 Books and pamphlets . . . with the condition that the books should be kept apart by themselves and known as the Huntington Collection.”⁶⁷ A marble bust of Washington was presented by a Mrs. Falconer in 1884, and in 1885 C. L. Hogeboom gave “Two Plaster Casts by him of Franklin and Jefferson.”⁶⁸ Of more importance was the gift of one of Gilbert Stuart’s portraits of George Washington (Figure 20), known as the “Carroll Washington,” in May 1888 by H. O. Havemeyer—the first of what were to be many important gifts from him.⁶⁹ The interest in Washington was to continue unabated: the James Peale Washington at Yorktown from the Huntington collection was also received in the eighties (Figure 21); then in 1890 the “Misses Emma and Harriet White of Newport” presented “A plate with Washington on horse-back painted on it”; Samuel P. Avery made a gift of “2 Copperplates of Washington, with their im-

62. Trustees minutes, vol. 2, May 16, 1887, p. 333.

63. Trustees minutes, vol. 3, February 18, 1889, p. 25.

64. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 115.

65. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 1, December 21, 1874, p. 312.

66. *Annual Report*, 1883, p. 267.

67. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, October 28, 1885, p. 144.

68. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, April 28, 1884, p. 110; *Annual Report*, 1884, p. 297; *Annual Report*, 1885, p. 329.

69. Trustees minutes, vol. 2, May 21, 1888, pp. 348–349.

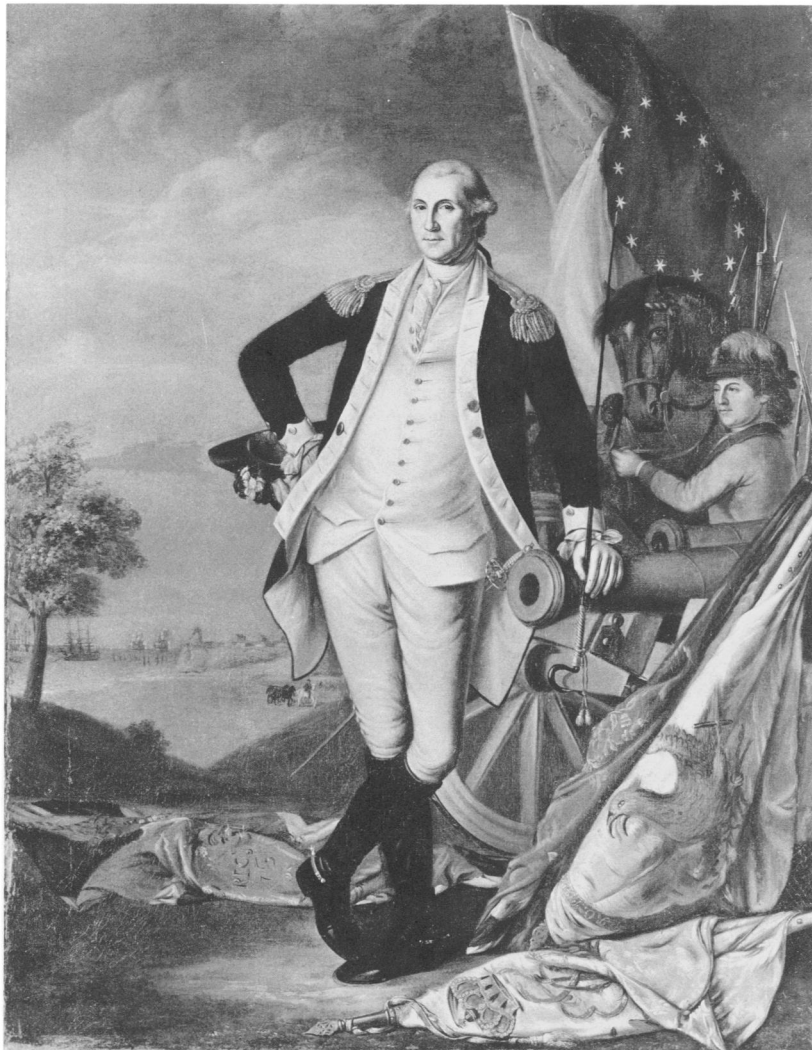


FIGURE 21
George Washington at Yorktown,
by James Peale (1749–1831). Oil
on canvas. 36 × 27 in. The Metro-
politan Museum of Art, bequest of
William H. Huntington, 85.1

pressions”; and in 1891 John Crosby Brown donated “A chair formerly belonging to Washington.”⁷⁰

The accessions in sculpture during the eighties were remarkable in some instances but on the whole were characterized by a general unevenness. This, of course, reflected the severely restricted purchase funds during these years; twenty years after the Museum’s founding the trustees stated with pride that “Not one Dollar of the public Money has ever been received or employed for the acquisition of works of Art.”⁷¹ But the fact remains that the Museum was too bound by the tastes

of its donors. From the estate of a Mrs. Andrews it acquired a “marble group . . . known as The Flight from Pompeii,” and from Morris K. Jesup “a Marble Statue with Marble pedestal the title of which is ‘I am the rose of Sharon.’”⁷² In 1885 Charles Calverley presented his “Model in plaster of his Colossal Bust of Elias Howe with its pedestal,” and the following year Benjamin Hazard Field gave Wilson MacDonald’s bronze bust of Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock, which had been made around 1880.⁷³ But the real prize among the accessions of the eighties in sculp-

70. Gardner, “First Thirty Years,” p. 270; Trustees minutes, vol. 3, February 17, 1890, p. 40, November 16, 1891, p. 106.

71. Trustees minutes, vol. 3, May 18, 1891, p. 63.

72. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, April 28, 1884, p.

109; Trustees minutes, vol. 2, November 1, 1886, p. 373.

73. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, October 28, 1885, p. 145; Trustees minutes, vol. 2, November 1, 1886, p. 372; Gardner, *American Sculpture*, p. 23.

ture was John Taylor Johnston's gift in 1888 of Cleopatra by William Wetmore Story, "one of the most famous and popular works by any American sculptor of the mid-nineteenth century" (Figure 22).⁷⁴ This version (the sculptor made several copies) is dated 1869 and had been on exhibition as a loan since 1878.

As the Museum became in the eighties more discriminating, more departmental, more professional, and more historically minded in its collecting, the work of, and indeed the presence of, contemporary American artists within the institution were clearly less enthusiastically tolerated than they had been in the seventies. At the moment when the Museum was moving into a new building, consolidating under its first director, and regrouping in departments under the administration of professional curators, it is a significant indication of change that Daniel Huntington, the painter, was replaced as chairman of the powerful Committee on Painting and Sculpture by Rutherford Stuyvesant.⁷⁵ Through the early 1880s there were subtle indications of a growing estrangement between the director, Cesnola, and an officious and meddlesome clique of American artists on the Board of Trustees and affiliated with the Museum in other less formal ways, who had used loan exhibitions for promotional purposes. The exhibition held by the Society of American Artists in 1886, for example, "was entirely different from any other exhibition in the Museum before or since in two respects: namely, the pictures were understood to be for sale and prizes were awarded for the best paintings."⁷⁶ It was, seemingly, a proposal from "Mr. Mansfield, an artist in this City about the desirability of having a Loan Exhibition at the Museum of Copies of Old Masters made by living artists for their own study" early in 1883 that stirred the wrath of Cesnola; the following November was selected as an appropriate time for the exhibition and "the Director was requested to carry out this plan."⁷⁷ Mansfield was confident that "some 200 such Copies might be obtained from the New York artists alone." The president appointed a committee from the trustees—Samuel P. Avery as chairman, Robert Gordon, D. O. Mills, William L. Andrews, Heber R. Bishop, Frederic E. Church, and H. G. Marquand—to which were added representatives of the local community of artists—Henry A. Loop, George Henry Yewell, J. Carroll Beckwith, George Henry Story, and Walter Shirlaw.⁷⁸ The year 1883 was a



FIGURE 22

Cleopatra, by William Wetmore Story (1819–1895). Marble. H. 54½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of John Taylor Johnston, 88.5

difficult one for Cesnola (among other things the manager of the Museum's art school had to be discharged "for having embezzled funds intrusted to him"⁷⁹), and one can only surmise as to the circumstances that triggered the director's scathing blast at modern American artists. The minutes do record that he won the Executive Committee's approval in February 1884 on a

74. Trustees minutes, vol. 2, December 27, 1888, pp. 359–360; Gardner, *American Sculpture*, p. 19.

75. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, April 26, 1880, p. 234.

76. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, p. 216.

77. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, January 8, 1883, p. 67, January 26, 1883, p. 70.

78. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, March 12, 1883, pp. 76–77.

79. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, May 14, 1883, p. 89.

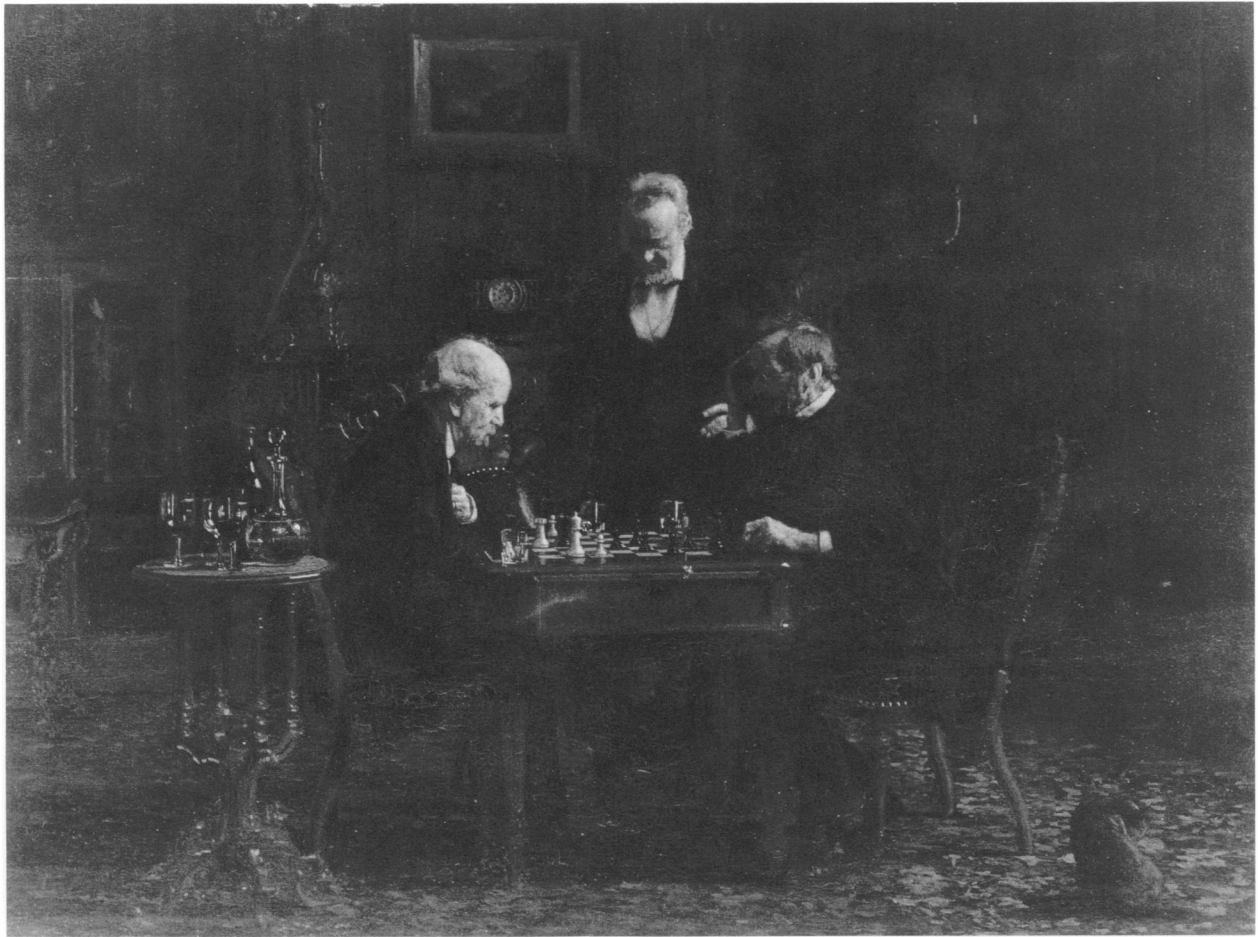


FIGURE 23

The Chess Players, by Thomas Eakins (1844–1916). The artist's father, Benjamin Eakins, appears as the standing observer in a chess game between the French teacher Mr. Gardel and the painter and teacher George W. Holmes. In 1942 the Museum purchased a perspective drawing for the painting with monies from the Fletcher Fund. Oil on panel. 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Artist, 81.14

new policy “that the modern pictures which are the property of the Museum be permanently hung in the smallest of the western galleries”—that is, where loan exhibitions had previously been held.⁸⁰ As the permanent collections grew, the amount of space that could be given to such loan exhibitions was diminishing, particularly space for the work of dabblers whose talent Cesnola seriously questioned. In April 1884 he ex-

ploded in a letter to his friend General George B. McClellan, of Civil War fame:

You asked me in the Circuit Court, why I did not like our American Artists, in general, and those of New York, in particular. . . . I will tell you *why* . . . “BECAUSE THEY ARE HUMBUGS.” American Artists, especially those of this City, or at least the mass of them (as there are some noble exceptions) is not at all Convinced that long and hard Study is absolutely *necessary*, to become *real* Artists and not mere *Manufacturers* of paintings as they are. They imagine, and probably believe,

80. Executive Committee minutes, vol. 3, February 6, 1884, p. 104.

that it is possible to use the brush before they have learned how to use the *pencil*. They are too much in haste to succeed, and to be known, and talked about in the newspapers; hence they cultivate the friendship of such asinine Art Critics as Clarence Cook, Richard Gilder, John Foord and so on.

The American Artists have a morbid and immoderate desire to be thought *great Artists*, to be talked about in the newspapers, as “Representative American Artists”! They need to be better educated but they do *not* want to be; in fact they consider themselves too highly educated already! Messrs. Willet, St. Gaudens, Olin Warner, Hopkinson Smith, Chase, and others who call themselves, and among the ignorant public of New York, are known as “Artists of the *new School*,” indeed they are in earnest. Their works (*in their own estimation*) are either too good, or not properly appreciated by the “Vulgar rich”! All of them are thinking how great they are, and are thirsting for fame and still more for *Sales*. They are bristling with a sense of their unrecog-

nized importance and genius! Yet there is absolutely nothing in them; they are only rich in pretension and *impudence*. Their productions are monstrosities—toadstools. They see everything with diseased eyesight, and want you, me, and the general public to see as they do. No thanks!

The New York Manufacturers of painting know what is my opinion of them and they hate me consequently. Their hate honors me indeed. Some of these unrecognized *geniuses* tried very hard to use the Director of the Art Museum of this City as their tool. They offered him large and liberal Commissions if he would use his influence with the Trustees and make them purchase their Monstrosities for “chefs d’œuvre” to be presented to the Museum. But the Director said most emphatically, no. . . . The American Artist in general is vain. Vanity means emptiness which craves to be filled with praise.⁸¹

81. Cesnola to McClellan, New York, April 17, 1884 (Museum Archives).

FIGURE 24

Near the Coast, by Robert Swain Gifford (1840–1905). This was one of four pictures awarded a prize at the Prize Fund Exhibition of 1885, assembled by the American Art Association. Oil on canvas. 31 ¼ × 51 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of an Association of Gentlemen, 85.7



In spite of this blast by the director, a respectable number of significant modern pictures came to the Museum during the eighties. The decade opened with a memorial exhibition of works by Sanford Robinson Gifford, who died in August 1880.⁸² In 1881 Thomas Eakins presented his *The Chess Players* (Figure 23), painted in 1876.⁸³ Out of the 1885 Prize Fund Exhibition of the American Art Association, Robert Swain Gifford's *Near the Coast* (Figure 24) came to the Museum, and from the 1886 Prize Fund Exhibition, Charles F. Ulrich's *The Glass Blowers of Murano* (Figure 25) was acquired.⁸⁴ The following year a group

FIGURE 25

The Glass Blowers of Murano, by Charles Frederick Ulrich (1858–1908). Painted in Venice in 1886, this was one of four pictures awarded a prize at the Second Prize Fund Exhibition, assembled by the American Art Association in 1886. Oil on panel. 26 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Several Gentlemen, 86.13



of paintings by George Fuller and George Inness was presented by George I. Seney.⁸⁵ Of the greatest interest then, and certainly most important, was the gift of William Dannat's *The Spanish Quartette* (Figure 26) by his mother in 1887. This "huge tour de force," Gardner has noted, "established the reputation of the painter when it was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1884. . . . In the Paris Exposition of 1889 this picture occupied the place of honor in the American section. Today it stands as a monument to the French academic influence that had such a profound effect on American painting of the time."⁸⁶ These acquisitions represented a trend that would be amplified in the nineties when "over thirty contemporary American pictures were added to the collection."⁸⁷

The decade of the 1890s, and particularly the period around 1890, can be distinguished more as a watershed than as a time of historical continuity. The period was marked by abrupt, and sometimes jarring, changes: in December 1888 the first wing to be added to the Central Park building was opened to the public; due to declining health, John Taylor Johnston, the Museum's first president, was made honorary president in 1889, and Henry G. Marquand was elected president; then in 1891 William C. Prime (Figure 27), a vice-president since 1874, resigned both as vice-president and trustee in protest over the decision to open on Sundays "because of his principles on Sunday observance."⁸⁸ This was a period of introspection and self-examination as an institution:

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was incorporated about twenty years ago, the only property it then possessed being the small amount of money individually subscribed by the Trustees. Its present collections of works of Art, amounting in value to Millions of Dollars,

82. *Annual Report, 1881*, p. 196; Executive Committee minutes, vol. 2, September 3, 1880, p. 252.

83. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," pp. 271–272.

84. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Loan Collection of Paintings and Sculpture*, November 1886–April 1887, p. 12, no. 82, p. 20; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Collection of Paintings and Sculpture*, November 1887–April 1888, p. 19, no. 102, p. 29.

85. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," p. 272.

86. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," p. 272.

87. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," p. 273.

88. Howe, *History of the Metropolitan*, I, pp. 231, 233–234, 236–247; Trustees minutes, vol. 3, November 16, 1891, pp. 95–98, 103–104.



FIGURE 26

The Spanish Quartette, by William Turner Dannat (1853–1929), painted in 1884. Oil on canvas. $94\frac{3}{4} \times 91\frac{3}{4}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. William H. Dannat, 87.26

are exclusively the gifts of the Trustees, their friends and the friends of the Museum. . . . Our entire income has been required to meet our running expenses, so that we have had no funds to devote to the enrichment of the Museum. . . . We have been wholly dependent upon the generosity of individuals and friends for every increase of our collections. . . . The city has not contributed one dollar towards the increase of said collections.⁸⁹

While restricted support for the purchase and endowment funds would obtain for some years to come, through the nineties there was clearly more money for buying works of art, including American examples. The following entry from the trustees' minutes of February 1899 indicates the extent of change in the fiscal and operational orientation of the Museum in the acquisition of American art after three decades:

The President [Marquand] informed the Board that he had authorized and directed the Curator of the Department of Paintings, Mr. George N. Story, to go to the auction sale of Mr. Thomas B. Clarke's pictures

and secure, if possible, for the Museum one or two paintings representative of American Art; that Mr. Story had purchased two paintings, one by Pearce, and the other by Inness [Figure 28] for the aggregate sum of \$8,610 which he considered a good acquisition for the Museum.⁹⁰

Here were all the elements of a twentieth-century museum at work: the selection and purchase of works of art by curators subject to the approval of a board of trustees with purchase funds at their disposal. The impact of this change in the late nineties is evident in the succession of major accessions in American art recorded by Gardner.⁹¹ The child had come of age. It was William C. Prime who best expressed with simple eloquence the process of a museum growing up in a letter written in December 1891 after his resignation to Marquand:

89. Trustees minutes, vol. 3, May 18, 1891, p. 63, November 9, 1892, p. 132.

90. Trustees minutes, vol. 3, February 20, 1899, pp. 260–261.

91. Gardner, "First Thirty Years," pp. 272–274.

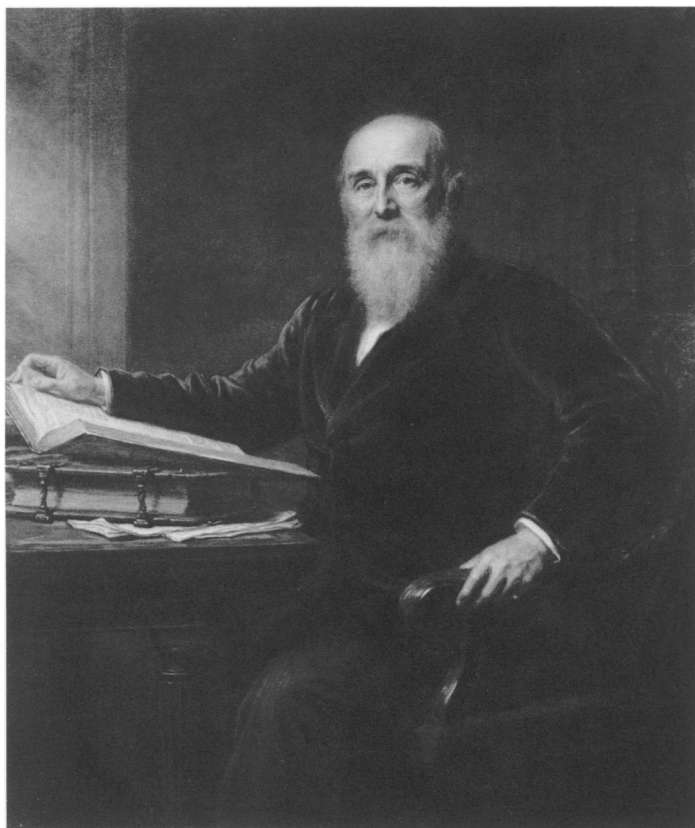


FIGURE 27

William C. Prime (1825–1905), by Daniel Huntington (1816–1906). Journalist, author, and a vice-president of the Museum from 1874 to 1891, Prime resigned his Museum post following the passing of a resolution by the Board of Trustees to open the Museum on Sundays. His colleagues were unsuccessful in their attempt to dissuade him but to show their appreciation of his work asked him to sit for a portrait by Huntington, a vice-president of the Museum from 1871 to 1874 and 1876 to 1903. The portrait was completed in 1892 and presented to the Museum the same year. Oil on canvas. 54 ¼ × 44 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Trustees, 92.17

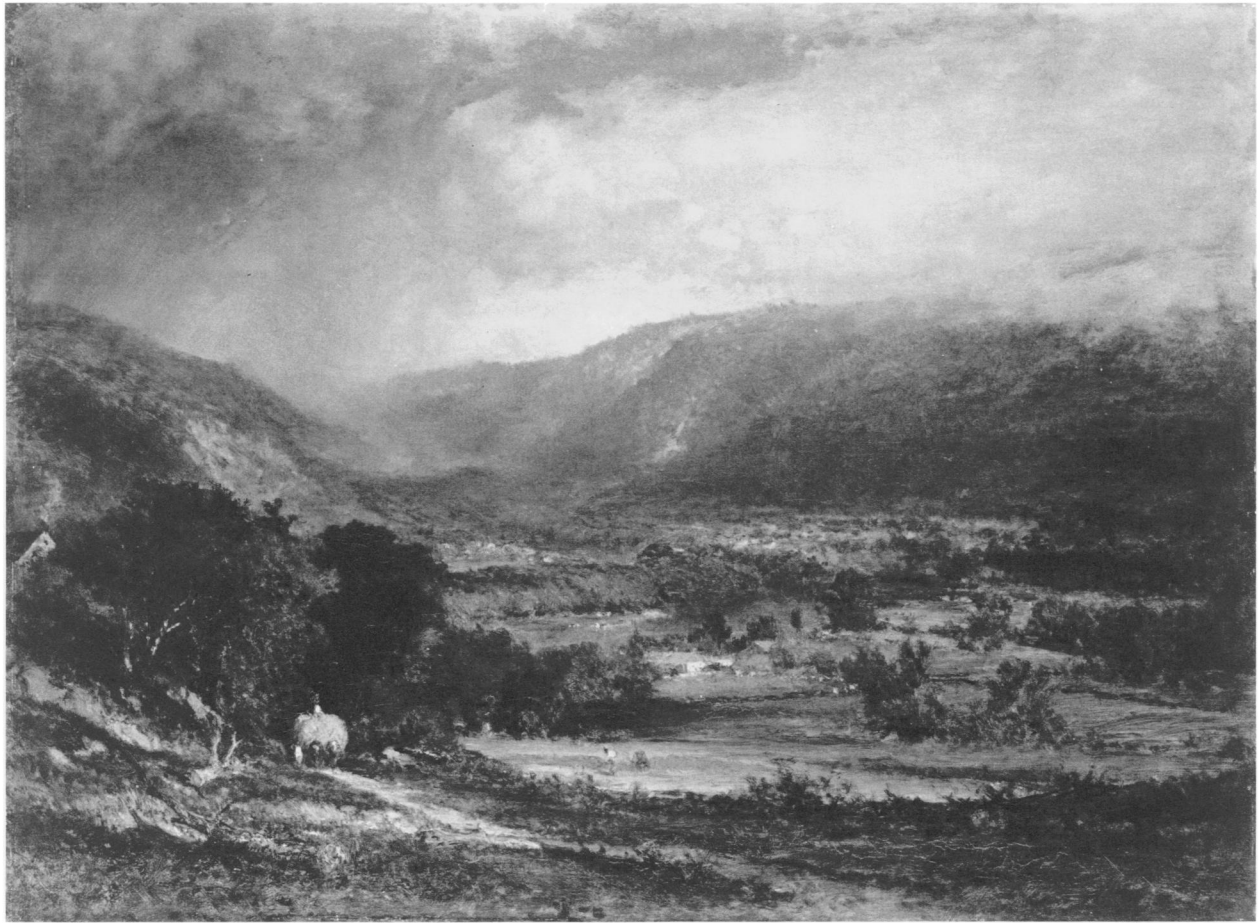


FIGURE 28

The Delaware Valley, by George Inness (1825–1894), painted in 1865. Oil on canvas. 22 × 30 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Several Gentlemen, 99.27

I trust I may not be supposed to abate in any degree my affection for or interest in the Museum, or my desire, in every possible way, to render it service, that would not be possible for any of us who with all the anxiety of parents, have brought it up to its present stature and strength. It is still young, but its bones and blood and soul are good for centuries to look forward, as we have looked since its infancy, to its vigorous maturity in that far future, when it will be gathering the works of our artists and artisans as illustrations of ancient art in America.⁹²

92. Trustees minutes, vol. 3, February 15, 1892, pp. 114–115.