

The Formation of the French Collection

Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, 10 November 2008

The journey from Salon or palace to antique shop or auction house to museum is not always a smooth one, and many pieces in the French collection have intricate and surprising histories.

Some of this talk will be a review for those of you who have been art docents for years, but I want to emphasize that the French collection continues to grow, as does our knowledge and appreciation of these objects.

The past six months or so have been especially exciting for connoisseurs of French art, as pieces that have been in storage for decades have come to light in the newly configured Huntington Gallery, and in the catalogue I worked on during my time here, *French Art of the Eighteenth Century at The Huntington*, published earlier this year by Yale University Press and available in the bookstore.

The catalogue represents a five-year collaboration between no fewer than twenty specialist contributors, as well as many more researchers, preparators, and photographers working behind the scenes. This multidisciplinary approach is intended to capture the breadth and depth of the collection and provide a valuable and lasting resource for scholars, collectors, and connoisseurs.

The Huntington is world-famous for its outstanding collection of British art, from Pinkie and Blue Boy to the William Morris archive, and its American collections, including paintings, photography, and Arts and Crafts furniture. For many years, the equally impressive French art collection was largely overlooked. In fact, French art has

been a cornerstone of the Huntington Collection from the very beginning, since 1909, when Henry Huntington was building his new house in San Marino.

But the story of the French art collection really begins even earlier, with a different Huntington, Arabella. As you all know, Arabella was the wife of Henry Huntington, the Huntington's founder. Many of you will know that she was also his aunt, for she had been married to Henry's uncle, Collis Huntington, until his death in 1900. It took Henry several years to persuade his glamorous and fiercely independent Aunt Arabella to marry him, but he finally succeeded in 1913. By that time, they were both sixty-three years old. These portraits were painted by Oswald Birley in 1924, the year of Arabella's death from pneumonia at age seventy-four; Henry died of complications from prostate cancer a few years later, in 1927. The Huntington opened to the public in 1928.

Even before her marriage to Henry, Arabella Huntington cultivated a passion for French art. At the death of Collis Huntington--who was either her first or second or third husband, depending on which version of her biography you believe--Arabella inherited one of the largest fortunes in the world. As a wealthy widow, she was uniquely placed to establish herself as a collector in her own right. She made frequent trips to Paris, where she stayed at the Ritz or the Hotel Bristol in the Place Vendôme, the eighteenth-century square that was and still is the center of the Paris luxury goods market; you can see Napoleon's famous Triumphal Column in this view of the Place Vendôme from the Rue de la Paix, painted in Arabella's time. Here, she was literally on the doorstep of the most important art dealers in Paris-- Seligmann, Agnew, Knoedler, and Arabella's closest advisor, Sir Joseph Duveen, all had their Paris branches in the Place Vendôme, where they sold eighteenth-century French art and antiques in beautifully preserved eighteenth-

century interiors. For Arabella, it was a crash course in eighteenth-century French art and interior decoration.

There is no question that she passed on her enthusiasm and expertise to her next (and last) husband, Henry. Arabella and Henry were married at the American Church in Paris, and they spent their honeymoon at the Hotel Bristol. Henry was not a serious art collector at the time of their marriage; he was a serious book collector. But his first major purchase of art—the foundation of the Huntington collection--was a French masterpiece, the *Noble Pastorale* tapestry suite by François Boucher now displayed in the Large Library. He began as he meant to continue, paying five hundred and seventy seven thousand dollars for the five tapestries; in today's money, that's roughly eight point five million dollars, and it was more than the entire budget for the construction of the HUG. Henry was so proud of his new acquisition that he had the HUG's architect enlarge the room to accommodate it, which is why the Large Library has a door to nowhere.

Although Henry would eventually focus his collecting activities on British grand manner portraits, he and Arabella continued to buy French art throughout their marriage. The Huntingtons' acquisitions of *Blue Boy* and *Sarah Siddons* may have made headlines around the world, but at home in San Marino they sat on French furniture, walked on French rugs, and surrounded themselves with French clocks, tapestries, porcelain, and other objects d'art. They even bought a French country house, the Château de Beauregard. The chateau was sold at the outbreak of World War I, but many of the French pieces the Huntingtons bought together are still here, mostly in the Large Library.

Not all of the Huntingtons' French art was eighteenth century. Like many collectors of their time, they bought what was then modern art, landscapes by the

Barbizon School. Barbizon painting is rooted in the English landscape tradition; the Salon de Paris had exhibited Constable's works in 1824, and the exhibition inspired a group of French landscape painters that emerged in the 1830s, including Camille Corot, Charles-François Daubigny, and Jean-François Millet. These artists became known as the Barbizon School, because many of them lived and painted in the rural village of Barbizon in the forest of Fontainebleau outside Paris, where it was easy to sketch directly from nature. The Barbizon painters made nature their subject, rather than a picturesque backdrop or a religious metaphor; they tried to portray nature objectively, without emotional meaning or imaginative flourishes. The development of photography in the second half of the nineteenth century forms the backdrop for the new interest in recording nature with absolute accuracy. The Huntington has a small but important collection of Barbizon paintings that used to hang in this very room; they are now displayed in the new nineteenth century galleries in the HUG.

From the time he started building his San Marino home in 1909, Huntington had intended for it to become a museum after his death. But within four months of Arabella's death, Henry expanded his plans and decided to form a collection within a collection in his wife's memory, which would reflect Arabella's passion for eighteenth-century French decorative arts. The Arabella Huntington Memorial Art Collection would be housed in a new suite of galleries Henry had installed in the library building. The Arabella Collection remained in those galleries until last year, when the objects were moved to the HUG; the library galleries have been renovated and just last weekend reopened to display the Dibner Collection of scientific instruments.

Before her marriage to Henry, Arabella had acquired an exquisite collection of French furniture, porcelain, and sculpture, which furnished her many homes in New York and Paris. But in her will, she left the collection to her son, Archer. This was no slight to Henry—he had his own art collection, and Arabella’s had been acquired with Collis’ money, Archer’s adoptive father. In accordance with his mother’s wishes, Archer donated many of the paintings to the Metropolitan Museum, gave the French furniture and decorative arts to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and sold the rest at auction. Nonetheless, it didn’t seem right to Henry that this institution they had built together would have no remnant of Arabella’s own taste.

By November 1926, Henry was becoming aware that he did not have long to live, so he summoned Sir Joseph Duveen to San Marino and explained his plan for one last shopping spree. I’d like to quote from the rather breathless telegram Duveen sent to his London office just after his meeting with Henry:

He wishes form great collection eighteenth century furniture marbles etcetera in wife memory to be publicly exhibited annex to library galleries near house comprising four large rooms . . . These now being hung with silk I have already chosen, to take things he proposes buying. Indeed he wants small Wallace collection and I expect sell at least fourhundred perhaps more [you can almost hear the cash registers ringing in his head] . . . All fine eighteenth century . . . Keep confidential and do following quietly cautiously . . work day and night . . think only fine objects important enough.

Duveen goes on to list all the fine and important objects he wanted to secure for the collection, knowing that if the word got out about his plan he would not be able to get them at what he considered a fair price.

Huntington ended up spending not four hundred thousand dollars, as Duveen predicted, but nearly three million dollars on more than a hundred pieces of eighteenth-century French art. Amazingly, Duveen assembled the entire collection in just six weeks, pulling pieces from his own stock as well as buying them from various art dealers and collectors; this photo shows one of Duveen's storerooms, with *Diana* and other pieces soon-to-be part of the Huntington collection. Only Duveen could have done it; nearly every important piece of art on the market had passed through his hands at some point, and he knew exactly where everything was and how much it would cost to get it back. Duveen delivered the collection personally, in two hundred and sixty cases, and supervised the installation. Henry died shortly thereafter, leaving the public a lasting tribute to his beloved wife.

In many ways, the Arabella collection says as much about the taste of the early twentieth century as the eighteenth. It is a microcosm of what some have called the Robber Baron aesthetic, and mirrors other collections formed at around the same time, like the J.P. Morgan collection and the Wallace Collection, which Henry used as his model. In fact, many of the pieces had already passed through other major eighteenth-century French art collections, like the Gould and Rothschild collections. I want to urge you to see the exhibition on William Randolph Hearst that just opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which explores issues of taste and fashion among American art collectors, especially in the 1920s and 30s.

The formation of any collection presents opportunities for comparison and connoisseurship. These pieces after Jean-Baptiste Pigalle illustrates something that may seem counterintuitive to us: sculpture was a reproducible art form. It was designed to be copied, whether in marble, bronze, terracotta, or plaster. That's why in addition to the marble *Child with Birdcage* on the left we have a bronze version of the same sculpture in collection, which still has its birdcage, on the right

This baby was one of the most popular sculptures of its time, and there were dozens if not hundreds of versions of it produced in Pigalle's lifetime, in bronze and terracotta as well as the marble original in the Louvre. Part of the reason for its popularity is that it represents an entirely new vision of childhood in art; this is not a sentimentalized cherub, but a portrait of a real baby, the one-year-old Marquis de Brunoy, and the artist has succeeded in capturing not only infant flesh but infant character. The combination of charm and veracity was equally appealing to twentieth-century collectors.

The Huntington also has duplicates of these small sculptures of bathers in the style of Etienne-Maurice Falconet. It's very unusual to find a one-of-a-kind piece of eighteenth-century sculpture. Sculptors showed their best works at the annual Salon, in the hopes of getting commissions for reproductions. In the rare case that a sculpture appears to be one of a kind, that may be because it wasn't very good or wasn't very popular and nobody wanted a copy of it. The question is not which version is the original—than can be very hard to determine without a well documented provenance—but whether any one version was produced by the artist himself, by a studio assistant, or by a forger or admirer, whether in the artist's lifetime or centuries later. After extensive curatorial and technical research, we do not believe that any of the Huntington's seven

so-called Falconet bathers are actually by Falconet himself, but at least four of them were produced in his lifetime by skilled copyists; the others are lesser nineteenth-century reproductions. If you study them carefully, you'll notice that all of these bathers are mounted slightly differently depending on which collection they came from. Three are on tall pedestals, three are on short pedestals, and one has no pedestal. The one on the left, on the pedestal, came to The Huntington as part of the Arabella collection and before that was owned by George G. Gould. The technically superior version on the right with no pedestal arrived in 1978, as part of the Green bequest. You can see how the study of the history of collecting forces us to consider the studio practices, market forces, and personalities behind each object.

One piece of sculpture that is definitely NOT a copy is the large bronze *Diana* currently guarding the entrance to the new Arabella Collection galleries on the second floor of the HUG. Houdon's *Diana the Huntress* was one of the most popular works of the eighteenth century, and it was copied in a variety of sizes and media including terracotta, plaster, and marble. Houdon himself created at least five life-size versions of the subject. The bronze in The Huntington can be documented as the first bronze version; there was only one previous version, in marble, owned by Catherine the Great.

For a first attempt at the difficult and dangerous process of casting in bronze, Houdon chose a stunningly ambitious composition. The enormous figure is running, balanced on one foot; her muscular, elongated limbs recall Renaissance depictions of Diana. A single interior rod supports her from the ball of her foot to the top of her head. When it was first displayed, it was admired not only for its beauty but because it employed the cutting-edge technology of the time.

The subject, too, was innovative. Both in antiquity and the Renaissance, the Roman goddess of the hunt was traditionally represented either nude, at her bath, or clothed for the hunt. Houdon chose to portray Diana both nude *and* hunting—an unusual and, at the time, highly controversial decision.

First displayed at the Salon of 1783, *Diana* has been publicly exhibited only a few times since: in Paris in 1867, at The Huntington since 1927, and at the Getty in 2003. Its provenance or ownership history is exceptionally thorough, and the high quality of the casting and finishing confirms that it is the work of the master himself and not an assistant, student, or admirer.

The bulk of the Huntington's magnificent holdings of soft-paste porcelain from the French royal manufactory at Sèvres were acquired as part of the Arabella collection. The wide variety of shapes and colors Sèvres produced made its wares highly collectible in the eighteenth century as well as in the twentieth. For Huntington, Duveen assembled a representative selection including tableware, flower pots, potpourri vases, and wine coolers. But most of the pieces are garnitures, that is, sets of three or five matching vases.

Much of the Huntington's Sevres, including this garniture, came from the collection of Lady Carnarvon, the heiress and illegitimate daughter of Alfred de Rothschild. She is better known as the wife of Lord Carnarvon, who financed Howard Carter's excavations into King Tut's tomb, and who famously became the first man to die of the mummy's curse in 1923, forcing his wife to sell of her inherited art collection, just when the Arabella Collection was being formed.

In addition to our Sèvres porcelain collection, The Huntington has several pieces of furniture decorated with Sèvres porcelain plaques, some acquired during Arabella's

lifetime and others as part of the memorial collection, like these writing desks or *bonheurs du jour*.

This mechanical music or reading stand has an interesting and well-documented provenance; it was a gift from Louis the Fifteenth's daughter in law Marie-Josepha to her father the Elector of Saxony. One of Duveen's scouts found it in the shop of a Berlin art dealer; coincidentally, right about the time Henry Huntington was commissioning Duveen to assemble a collection of world-class eighteenth-century French decorative art. Duveen declared in a telegram: "This is kind of French furniture we want, namely, only highest quality." His scout had to act fast, for a French dealer had already made an offer on the music stand, and Duveen ended up in a bidding war against the Seligmann brothers, his archrivals; a Seligmann representative arrived in Berlin on the same train as Duveen's. But Duveen's man easily outbid all challengers.

The Berlin dealer immediately regretted the sale and offered to buy the piece back for one of his own clients, but Duveen had it in mind for Huntington and he cabled back: "Not for sale at any price." He not only wanted to keep his best client happy, he had his own reputation to think about; Duveen was the only art dealer represented in the Arabella Huntington Memorial Collection, and it became his showpiece. He even brought prospective clients to see the Arabella galleries, just to prove how good he was at tracking down museum-quality pieces.

I mentioned that several pieces in the collection have checkered pasts, and this is a good example of the kind of detective work that goes into provenance research. This unusual piece is actually several works of art in one.

The large Sèvres plaque on the front of the 1812 secrétaire was painted in 1783 by Charles-Nicolas Dodin, one of the most important painters working at Sèvres in the late eighteenth century.

It is a copy of Francois Boucher's *morceau de reception*, the painting he submitted for admission into the Academie Royale in 1734. The painting, titled *Rinaldo and Armida*, is now in the Louvre.

There are a couple of very unusual things about this plaque. First of all, it's signed by Dodin; Sèvres painters rarely signed their work on the front, instead marking it on the back with a personal symbol and a letter to indicate the date. It is also exceptionally large; why would anyone make such a large plaque? We know it wasn't made for this secrétaire; it's so heavy that you can't even open the secrétaire anymore without it falling over.

According to records in the Sèvres archives, this plaque and four smaller ones were originally made to be set into an octagonal table top in 1784. The table was purchased by Louis the Sixteenth, who gave it to his brother in law, the Duke of Saxe-Teschen.

This is how the tabletop might have originally looked. Unfortunately, we'll never know for sure, because by the late nineteenth century, both the table and the secrétaire had found their way into the collection of Alfred de Rothschild. By that time, some of the smaller plaques in the table were damaged, and Rothschild had it dismantled. The small plaques were mounted in modern frames to serve as drinks tables, a function they continue to perform to this day in the London home of Edmond de Rothschild, we have heard.

The Dodin plaque was set into the front of this secrétaire, probably replacing marquetry paneling. Two additional Sèvres plaques were added to the sides at a later date.

In this 1884 photo of Alfred de Rothschild's London home, you can see the secrétaire with only the front plaque and, if you look very carefully, you can spot a few other Rothschild pieces now in the Huntington collection, including the pink Sèvres jewel garniture I just showed you, displayed on top of the secrétaire, and a porcelain-mounted bureau plat.

Boucher is well represented in the collection, in tapestry and painting as well as in porcelain. Boucher tapestries were especially popular with American collectors at the turn of the century, though they had fallen out of fashion in France. As a result, there are hardly any Boucher tapestries left in French collections today. Even outside of France, they are very scarce, and complete sets are virtually unheard of. The Huntington is fortunate enough to have not one but two sets, this one and *The Noble Pastorale* in the large library. This is an assembled set, bought from at least three different sources, but the *Noble Pastorale* is a rare complete set, with all five tapestries kept together since they were woven in the late eighteenth century. *The Fêtes Italiennes* was Boucher's first attempt at tapestry design, while *The Noble Pastorale* was the last of the six suites he eventually completed, so we have a unique opportunity to appreciate his technical and stylistic progress over a period of about two decades.

Henry already owned the four small tapestries—these two and two others--when Arabella died; they decorated the upstairs hallway of the house, overlooking the staircase. He desperately wanted to complete the set in time to hang it in the memorial galleries,

and Duveen was able to make a tidy profit on the remaining piece of the puzzle, the fifth and largest tapestry in the set, *The Charlatan and the Peep Show*. It cost Duveen \$40,000 and he sold it to Henry for \$220,000 a mere four months later. I don't want you to get the idea that Duveen was trying to take advantage of Henry; many of the objects in this collection were sold at cost or even at a loss. But Duveen had practically invented the art market and he knew exactly what he could get away with charging; he also had to factor in the expense of maintaining galleries, offices, and warehouses in several countries and transporting large works of art across seas and continents.

After Henry's death, the French collection grew slowly and sporadically, primarily through donations.

This firescreen was part of a large bequest of mostly British artworks from Florence M. Quinn of Beverly Hills in 1938. The frame is not original and was probably added by the donor; it is actually a gilded picture frame with feet added.

The six panels of French scenic wallpaper depicting the literary *Journeys of Antenor* that used to decorate the stairwell of the HUG were also part of the Quinn bequest. They had decorated her dining room in Beverly Hills and had to be carefully removed and reattached. They were removed from the walls of the HUG during the renovation and are now in storage and in rather bad shape; it is unlikely that they will ever be displayed again, which makes the French catalogue an even more valuable record.

The Quinn bequest included the Huntington's first eighteenth-century French paintings, including this wonderful portrait of Charles VanLoo's four-year-old son Louis.

It is currently undergoing conservation at the Getty but will go on display when it returns looking better than ever in June.

In 1949, a New York collector donated three terracotta medallions by the Paris-based, Italian-born sculptor Nini, including this portrait of Benjamin Franklin, sculpted in 1777, when Franklin was minister to the court of Versailles. Franklin was a major celebrity in France and Nini made a good living selling hundreds of these small, mass-produced souvenirs. French artists in general were fascinated by Franklin's rustic manners and appearance, and the image that we all have today of this American icon is largely based on French portraits.

In 1953, the Huntington purchased this pastel portrait of Franklin, thought to be by the French artist Jean Valade, who copied it from the famous 1779 oil portrait by Duplessis now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Unfortunately, neither of these portraits of Franklin is on public display; the Nini is in storage and the pastel hangs in David Zeidberg's office in the Library. But we made sure to include them in the catalogue so you can read more about them.

The bulk of the small but perfectly formed collection of 18th century French paintings now gracing the walls of the HUG came in 1978. It was part of a collection donated by Judge and Mrs. Lucius P. Green of Beverly Hills in memory of Mrs. Green's mother, Adele Browning—so you may hear it called both the Browning Collection and the Green Bequest.

While Henry Huntington collected large-scale grand manner British portraits, the French paintings from the Green Bequest are more domestic in size and subject matter. The Greens had no children, but the single unifying theme in their collection seems to

have been representations of childhood. Just as Huntington relied on Duveen, the Greens formed their collection with the help of William Valentiner, who was director of the LA County Museum at the time. They actually intended to leave the collection to LACMA but had a falling out with the administration and chose The Huntington instead.

Along with the paintings, the Greens also donated some minor pieces of French furniture and sculpture, which have been in storage for many years but can now be seen on the ground floor of the HUG.

The French collection continues to grow today; in fact, the beautiful catalogue we published just eight months ago is already out of date, because new pieces have already come into the collection. The Huntington collection would be much smaller and poorer today if not for the Art Collectors' Council, a group of about 80 major donors formed to direct and support collections development. If you'd like to be personally, actively involved in the formation of the art collections, this is how to do it. Members of the council pay annual dues, which the Huntington then matches to create a fund for new acquisitions. Every year, the curators scour the art market and select six works of art—three American and three European—that they would like to acquire for the collection. Then, in the spring, the Art Collectors' Council convenes at The Huntington to view, study, debate, and vote on the pieces they would like to acquire for the collection. The voting takes place in several rounds over dinner, accompanied by free-flowing wine, and the action and deal-making is convivial but fierce, with cabals of Americanists, Anglophiles, and Francophiles all plotting against one another. Usually, the budget stretches to two or three pieces; occasionally more. In one memorable year, a few donors generously volunteered extra funds to buy all six pieces for the collection. Many of the

recent additions to the French collection are gifts of the Art Collectors Council, including this sensual terracotta *Bacchante* by the neoclassical sculptor Joseph-Charles Marin in 2003 and this snuffbox by Pierre-François-Mathis de Beauleiu in 2000.

This year, Nicolas de Largillière's *Portrait of Jacques Roettiers de la Tour* was one of the pieces selected by the Art Collectors Council. Roettiers was a famed goldsmith and medallist who was still in his early 20s when he sat for this portrait, holding the tools of his craft. So it is not only a masterly painting but an evocative record of eighteenth-century artistic practice.

The Huntington Art Division also has a separate, smaller acquisitions budget that allows it to fill gaps in the collection and to take advantage of unique buying opportunities--as when, in 2005, these fragments of carpet came up for auction in Paris. Although this may not look like much, they are among the missing puzzle pieces that once made up The Huntington's much-altered seventeenth-century Savonnerie carpet, titled *Astrology*.

The fragments, measuring about 3 by 6 feet overall, visually completes the top of the head and arm of the cartouche figure. Although several pieces of the puzzle are still missing and will probably never be found, these fragments provide valuable insight into the design and technique of the carpet, as well as giving us an idea of the original, unfaded colors.

Of course, everyone's favorite way to expand the collection is through donations like the Green Bequest. Many donors have come forward with generous gifts in recent years, either with artworks from their own collections, funds earmarked for new acquisitions, or promised gifts—meaning that they have willed artworks to the

Huntington that won't come into the collection until after the donors' deaths. So the French collection is already even larger than it appears, thanks to promised gifts of pieces in private collections that will come to us in due course. The new French galleries on the second floor of the HUG display these two late eighteenth century terracottas formerly in the collection of Huntington trustee MaryLou Boone, donated to celebrate the reopening of the HUG. With all the changes that have gone on over there, you may have walked right by these and other unfamiliar pieces without even realizing that they haven't been on display before, so I want to end by encouraging all of you to go back and take a second look at the French collection and its catalogue. Thank you.