

WHY MRS. GARDNER HAD NO HOPEMay 6, 2002John H. Wilson, III

As Literarians we inhabit a neighborhood. We face a public park, elevated above the great river that defines our city. A monumental statue of the man who defined the Union, for which so many of our nineteenth-century members fought (and gathered material for papers), greets us as we leave the front door. Standing on the front steps, we see to the right an Italianate palazzo that served many years as a school. Next door to that is one of the city's venerable private clubs honoring those who have successfully undertaken higher education. Across the park we see the edges of a stately columned building with an inviting porch. Next to us to the east is a distinguished apartment block. Crowning the district, at the east end of the park, surveying the whole, is an elegant dwelling, essentially one story, with pleasing proportions. Always described as a mansion, it is, in reality, something of a cottage or a villa, but with extensions that make the whole broader and give the house a presence that in the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Architecture is organic; it grows into itself. Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum was designed much larger, but it is the temple that is there today that inspired legions of admirers to move to preserve it from extensions, extensions that one critic likened to a stretch limousine version of the Kimbell. Perhaps Zaha Hadid's scaled-back Contemporary Arts Center will inspire the same devotion. The little building at the end of Lytle Park, originally constructed as a dwelling, has evolved as well, but not so much as an architectural wonder, although it remains one of the most distinguished buildings in Cincinnati. For that part of the United States off the east coast, in terms of visual art, that house is the Ark.

We all know the drill: Nicholas Longworth bought the house, began patronizing living artists (what a concept), such as Lilly Martin Spencer, Thomas Worthington Whittredge, William Louis Sonntag and the African-Caledonian-Canadian-American artist Robert Duncanson. The combination of the latter's talent and skin color led the abolitionist Longworth to commission decorative murals for his entrance hall, talent that was rewarded with a stipend for a Grand Tour of Europe. He did the same for other talented artists. Some refused; our fellow member James Henry Beard, who completed Benjamin McConkey's self-portrait back in the corner, refused Longworth's largesse when there wasn't enough to cover his wife's travels in Europe too. Beard also expected William Henry Harrison to name him to a diplomatic post after his inauguration. Longworth bought Benjamin West's mammoth Shakespearian subject *Ophelia and Laertes* out of Robert Fulton's distinguished collection, and brought it to Cincinnati and hung it in the house at the end of the park.

This patronage was significant but not unusual for Cincinnati in the first half of the nineteenth century; there were others like Longworth. But Longworth's ancient house, Belmont, survived, and it survived with art in it. It was bought by David Sinton, an Irish-born entrepreneur, who was one of those Cincinnatians who believed that one of the things his city needed to be an important metropolis was culture. He did not seek to be surrounded by it himself, but he understood its place and he was sympathetic when his son-in-law, Charles Phelps Taft, was engaged in motivating the city to be one of the major cultural centers of the United States. The art collection that now lives at the house at the east end of Lytle Park, or rather the collection that is currently on view at five separate locations around the country during the house's renovation, is the most visible manifestation of the utterly inspired cultural philanthropy of our fellow member, Charles Taft, and his wife.

Charles Phelps Taft was the half-brother of William Howard Taft, one of two of our members who were elected President of the United States. Charles' wife, Anna Sinton Taft, was David Sinton's only child. After the Tafts married in 1873, they moved to Belmont in 1875.

Charles Taft was well educated, attending Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale, receiving a master's degree in law from Columbia, and studied in Europe while working toward a doctorate. From Europe, his letters home describe frequent trips to look at art and architecture. As with Longworth and his fellow art patrons, a generation earlier, Taft was no different from any number of privileged Cincinnatians who made the same travels, hoping to acquire ideas to mold their own city with a culture similar to any large provincial European city. Cincinnati artists, funded by Longworth or not, had done the same, since the early 1850s studying in Europe, many of them returning home to enhance the city's artistic life.

What is now the Taft Museum of Art is the result of that desire on the part of this privileged class to enhance the city of Cincinnati culturally. Our city has had an inferiority complex since the publication in 1832 of Fanny Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Mrs. Trollope began her chapters on the city by writing, "Though I do not quite sympathize with those who consider Cincinnati as one of the wonders of the earth. . ." and later continued, "I never saw any people who appeared to live so much without amusement as the Cincinnatians." Perhaps not least because of this, there were frequent attempts to make the city more culturally attractive during the middle years of the 19th century, almost exclusively by observing the social culture of Europe. To outline simply the visual arts, George Ward Nichols, Longworth's son-in-law, found a Kentucky-born student of the French artist Thomas Couture, Thomas Satterwhite Noble, to come to Cincinnati and lead the McMicken School of Design in 1867. Mrs. Nichols, Maria Longworth, returned from the

1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia with an infatuation with Japonisme, and proceeded to organize the local Rookwood Pottery factory. Henry Probasco, who owned one of the most distinguished collections of contemporary art in the city, in 1871 gave the monumental Tyler Davidson Fountain to the city sculpted by the Bavarian August von Kreling. Cincinnati's iron foundries forged much of the decorative ironwork that is one of the reasons a visit to the French Quarter of New Orleans is such a pleasure. The city has a thriving woodcarving tradition, led by two Britons, Benn Pittman and Henry Fry. Cincinnati had long been an inland center for painters and sculptors, it was the home of the Western Art Union. Charles Taft and others believed that Cincinnati deserved an art museum, but not merely for public enjoyment. They believed that the artisans working in Cincinnati - the potters, the woodcarvers, the silversmiths and even the painters and sculptors - needed to have easy access to the finest work by the greatest artists of their crafts.

In 1877 the Women's Art Museum Association was founded, to spur on the establishment of a museum for the city. In 1878 three public lectures were presented, the last by Charles Taft with the concise title of "The South Kensington Museum. What it is; How it Originated; What it has Done and is now Doing for England and the World." Taft said:

"We may involuntarily criticize the ladies of the Art Association, for endeavoring, in these times of pecuniary distress and scarcity of work, to establish an institution of this character, simply for the gratification of the tastes of the few. . .The Ladies Association, in establishing such an institution, is seeking to relieve the present pecuniary distress of our idle population, by opening new industries or enlarging the scope of those already existing."

Taft related that taste had improved in England since the establishment of the museum, citing someone from Minton, who testified before parliament that he

visited the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria & Albert Museum) three or four times a year, simply to refresh his memory by studying the specimens of pottery, porcelain and maiolica on exhibition. Taft concluded by pointing out the merits of a museum for craftsmen:

"the designer of furniture should know the history of that branch of manufacture. . .The potter should know the struggles, the hardships, and, at times the despair of a Palissy, and be familiar with the history and result of his work. Every artisan should derive inspiration from the best works of his handicraft. The Library is a museum for the scholar. The Industrial Art Museum is a library for the handicraftsman."

As we shall see, the private collecting pattern of Charles and Anna Taft, and the motivation to open a separate museum, almost invariably matches this philosophy. Cincinnati's Art Museum was established in 1881; and the Romanesque Revival doors opened in 1886; the McMicken School of Design, still led by Noble, became the Art Academy of Cincinnati and joined the Cincinnati Museum Association in 1887. Mrs. Taft's father, David Sinton, was also one of the founders of this institution. For many years the museum followed the Industrial collecting pattern of the South Kensington Museum and many early acquisitions are contemporary European porcelain and pottery, primarily English.

On Sinton's death in 1900, the Tafts inherited a fortune that some estimated at \$20,000,000 (approximately \$300,000,000 in today's value). Under the eye of - and caring for - the conservative Mr. Sinton, the couple had lived modestly at Belmont for 25 years. They had had a long time to plan what to do with their freedom and how to spend their inheritance. One correspondent wrote, less than a fortnight after Sinton's death, "Annie will hardly know what to do with her new-found liberty - or her fifteen millions! Her first desire will be to go around the world. . .She has

been wild to travel and now she will have her fill." Within five months the Tafts were in Europe.

They were gone from Cincinnati from January to the autumn of 1901. Their itinerary reads like an on-site survey of art history: Cairo, Athens, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Rome, Florence, Venice, Paris, London and Dublin, from whence Charles returned home and Annie stayed on with their daughter, touring the land of her father's birth. The couple made purchases all along their trip. Charles wrote to William Howard Taft from Paris (and Charlie's letters to Will are our primary method of following the formation of the collection), that they had bought enough old Venetian lace ("a portion of which was worn by some old Dogess") to cover a whole dress. In Paris at Tiffany they bought "a beautiful string of pearls and one large pearl pendant. We had considerable difficulty in persuading Annie that she ought to have them; it took several United States bonds to pay for them." Annie wears the lace and the pearls in her portrait by Madrazo, which usually hangs in the music room at the Taft Museum, and at the moment graces the small display at the Art Museum. Charles relates their visit to a number of dealers, essentially scouting what was available, and making only a few purchases of works of art, most notably what he described as "a beautiful carved cabinet of the 16th century style of the Lyons school." That piece remains in the collection, a 16th century deep brown armoire of walnut and white oak, richly carved with terms at the corners, egg and dart, foliated scrolls, and replacement nineteenth-century paw feet. Charles wrote proudly to Will that he "saw nothing at the Musée de Cluny that compared with it."

The letters Charlie wrote to Will outline their travels, occasionally point out specifics as to what they saw or bought, but suggest an early interest in the whole package of diverse collection in a distinguished house. One visit is mentioned specifically, suggesting its magnificence was extraordinary; worth recording; indeed, seminal. That

visit was to the collection of Gustave de Rothschild in Paris.

In his June 1901 letter to Will, Charlie wrote from the Hotel Bristol.

"The other day I had the opportunity of seeing the collection of Baron Gustave Rothschild at his home. The treasures which he has are wonderful and they are spread around the house in a very pleasant way, and make one think that the owner has bought them for his own enjoyment and not for the purpose of display. His smoking-room is filled with all kinds of Limoges enamel paintings, small bronze work, so that it is cozy, comfortable and attractive."

Later letters about the formation of the Taft collection indicate merely what was bought and from whom; this reference is the only place where Charles writes, albeit briefly, about a similar, existing collection. This Rothschild collection was located at 23, avenue de Marigny, not far from the Bristol, and accounts of Gustave's taste suggest that it was rather Versailles-oriented, with quite a lot in a Louis XIV style. The minor French artist Eugene Lami made watercolors of a variety of Rothschild houses and we are fortunate that one of the few he made of Gustave's Paris house illustrates that same smoking room, albeit from about 20 years earlier, in 1882. The scene illustrates an engagement party for Gustave's eldest daughter, Zoé, to Léon Lambert (cuddled cosily at the back of the composition). Gustave stands near the fireplace with his second daughter Aline; the Baroness sits at the left, the youngest daughter Juliette sits on a large upholstered comfy chair and a variety of other guests are scattered about. What is fascinating for our purposes is the arrangement of decorative arts in floor-to-ceiling cases flanking the fireplace, enhancing the room along with a full-length 1634 portrait of Machteld van Doorn by Rembrandt and a profile portrait of perhaps Louis XIV as emperor. The shelves or vessels appear to contain maiolica, perhaps

enamels, some in precious stones as well as a figural ormolu clock on the mantel. "They are spread around the house in a very pleasant way," Charles wrote, "it is cosy, comfortable and attractive."

Within the month, on June 20, the Tafts left for England; no letters survive describing what they saw. The 1898 Baedeker guide for *London and its Environs*, however, lists a chapter on "Private Mansions around Hyde Park and St. James." "Many of them are worth visiting," writes Baedeker's reporter, "for the sake of the treasures of art which they contain." These collections were open either to the public on selected days, or by application supported by some person of influence. It is safe to say that the son of Alphonso Taft (another of our number and the attorney general for President Grant), and the brother of William Howard Taft, then Governor of the Philippines, would have had access to persons of influence, if only through the American Embassy. These London collections, for instance the Duke of Sutherland's at Stafford House (now renamed Lancaster House), the Earl of Ellesmere's at Bridgewater House (now pulled down), the Marquess of Lansdowne's at Lansdowne House (now a private club), Captain (later Sir) George Lindsay Holford's at Dorchester House (site of the hotel), these collections were traditional British collections of the type that inspired Henry Clay Frick, J.P. Morgan and Joseph Widener.

Another collection, formerly private but newly open to the public for less than a year at that point, was likely even more influential to the Tafts considering the similarities in ultimate disposal. This was the Wallace Collection in leafy Manchester Square, displayed as a museum but in the residence of its owner. The Wallace Collection is a distinguished accumulation of historic and contemporary pictures, porcelain (Chinese and European, albeit Sir Richard Wallace only collected Chinese when it was mounted in 18th century French ormolu), enamels and maiolica, among other objects. It had been bequeathed to the

citizens of Great Britain for their education and enjoyment. The exact date of the Tafts' visit to the Wallace is unknown, but the significance of the collection to the couple can be deduced not only from the similarities in what the Tafts ultimately collected, but likewise from the presence in the Taft Museum library of Charles and Anna Taft's copies of the four volume paintings catalogue, and the two volume catalogue of *objets d'art* both published in 1902, the year after their visit.

The Tafts returned from Europe in the autumn of 1901, with many souvenirs, a few works of art and many ideas. Before April 1902 they had begun collecting in New York, buying pictures from Arthur Tooth & Sons, a dealer still in business in London today. By October 1902, they had bought nineteen oil paintings from Tooth - "from the best artists," Charlie wrote to Will - spending \$157,000 (approximately \$2,355,000 today). They had also bought seventy-two pieces of Chinese porcelain, three tapestries and two 16th century enamel ewers by Jean de Court, all from Duveen. Charles Fowles, their contact at Tooth, came to Cincinnati in late October to hang and light the paintings, and began a fifteen-year friendship with the Tafts to whom he introduced many other collectors and scholars from Europe and America. The friendship ended only with Fowles' death on board the *Lusitania* in 1917. These earliest dealers, Fowles for paintings (either with Tooth or later with his own firm Scott and Fowles), and Duveen for decorative arts, remained the prime suppliers for the Tafts. Maurice W. Brockwell, who wrote a 1920 publicly-printed catalogue of the Taft paintings, suggested that the Tafts bought their decorative arts first, for the purpose, naturally, of simply decorating the house, and then (as he said Taft once told him), in New York in 1902 "stepped out late one afternoon to buy old art on the Avenue." Between November 1902 and April 1903 Charles Fowles had left Tooth and had formed the firm of Scott and Fowles with Stevenson Scott.

For the purposes of this paper, suffice it to say that the Tafts bought and traded up works of art with some regularity over the years, working almost exclusively with Scott and Fowles for paintings, acquiring many of the masterpieces for which the museum is known today, the Rembrandt, *Man Rising from His Chair*, the three Hals portraits; and the two Turner oils. In 1909, after Will had been inaugurated President, the Tafts went public and several paintings were exhibited in November at the opening of Scott and Fowles' new gallery on Fifth Avenue between 47th and 48th Streets in New York. Charlie wrote to Will, "They made quite a sensation in the New York art world." Other collectors made note. Bernard Berenson received a letter from one of his clients, one Isabella Stewart Gardner, a lady that many of us know more about from David Reichert's paper of several years ago. Mrs. Gardner wrote: "We are rather amused by a newspaper account of the Great Collections in America. It eliminates Morgan's because so much of it is in Europe and goes on to say the 3 great ones are Frick's, Widener's and Charles Taft's. No hope for me."

The three great collections in America in 1909 included Charles and Annie Taft's? Could the art press be serious? The exhibition generated substantial press coverage perhaps not least because the New York media was surprised to find a collection of substantial quality off the east coast, but the collection then included pictures that we in Cincinnati today, and art historians the world over, know well: a pair of portraits by Frans Hals unknown to the trade, a Rembrandt, a Hobbema, two Gainsborough portraits, a Reynolds, a Hoppner, and two Raeburns. All these paintings were collected at a time when works of that sort were sold at a premium, and in terms of the British portraits that are today the best bargain in collecting old master paintings, in 1909 these were paintings that were not only expensive but critically significant.

With that sort of attention, the Tafts, perhaps understandably, began considering something beyond their villa, at the very least an enhanced setting, for the collection. That the Tafts would need another, more grand setting for their collection was not idle dreaming. Additions to the house or moving altogether were frequently considered. As early as 1903 Will had written to Charlie that simply for reasons of light he would have to move "out to the country," and soon after he wrote in a matter-of-fact fashion to a mutual friend that Charlie and Annie would have to move because the soot was so bad on Pike Street (all the paintings were glazed in these early years. The Cincinnati pollution was one theoretical reason the Art Museum was built away from downtown up in Eden Park and some paintings I had cleaned during my tenure there proved that the distance did no good). In 1909, *Cincinnati Magazine* (not the same organ we have around today) reported that the Tafts had purchased a large plot of land near the house specifically to build a gallery. That purchase might give cause to speculate that even by 1909 the Tafts were considering their own museum, apart from the Art Museum. Indeed, even in 1902 Charlie expressed concern about the Art Museum; he wrote to Will that he had "come to the conclusion that our collection in Eden Park is a very inferior one. I am surprised to see what an amount of trash there is there." In 1903 the Tafts opened their personal collection to visitors on application, making Cincinnati the sort of place that might eventually need a chapter in Baedeker, with a private mansion worth visiting for the sake of the treasures of art which it contains.

In fact, the Tafts were actively involved with the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1909. That year they donated the Spaniard Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida's lyrical beach scene *The Little Granddaughter* to the museum; two years later they lent their collection as a special exhibition (the last such exhibition before the current display on the hill), and in 1917 the couple, along with Stevenson Scott and fellow Cincinnati collector Mary Hanna, donated Zurburan's masterpiece *St. Peter*

Nolasco Recovering the Image of the Virgin in memory of Scott's late partner and the Tafts' adviser, Charles Fowles. Charles Taft was president of the Museum Association from 1914 to 1927.

It is clear that far from wanting to separate from the Museum Association, the Tafts worked to augment it. Charles and Annie Taft's concern, in their collecting, was to acquire works of art that enhanced the museum's mission as Charlie himself had vocalized it in 1878: as "a library for the handicraftsman." Their enamels, maiolica and Chinese porcelain were primarily vessel shapes. The Tafts understood that these vessel shapes could be used as inspiration for designers such as those at the Rookwood Pottery. Even his della Robbia sculptures, now downgraded to 19th century imitators or contemporary followers, functioned the same way for Rookwood's glazed fountain sculptures, which decorated practically every school building, public or private, in Cincinnati.

The paintings bought by the couple were primarily portraits and landscapes, which were almost the solitary genres practiced by contemporary artists from Cincinnati. In the early years of the 20th century, Cincinnati painters had all but abandoned Munich as a focus for their studies, they were working almost exclusively in France and Holland. The focus on landscape and figure work would be, therefore, from those two countries: recent painting from Barbizon, by Millet, Corot, Charles Daubigny, Theodore Rousseau and Diaz de la Peña; contemporary art from the Hague School by Jozef Israëls, Anton Mauve, the Maris, and Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch; and 17th century Dutch landscape and genre by Hobbema, van der Neer, Ruisdael, Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch, and Jan Steen. The best portraitists in the eyes of the Tafts were Dutch 17th century (for instance, Rembrandt and Hals) and British 18th century (Gainsborough, Reynolds, Raeburn, Hoppner and Romney), hence the focus on works by those masters. The focus on foreign art, with a few notable exceptions usually by personal friends, such as Charlie Taft's

fellow Literarians Henry Farny and Frank Duveneck, was to allow artists and "handicraftsmen" (some of whom were women) to see works of art they would normally not; American art was seen annually at the Art Museum's summer exhibitions.

As mentioned earlier, post Civil War cultural leaders in Cincinnati, who were as familiar with the cultural amenities of the capitals of Europe as they were with those of the east coast of the United States, spent much of their time endeavoring to grace their city with similar cultural amenities. The most important of these were the Conservatory of Music, founded in 1867, the choral May Festival founded in 1873, the museum, and the Symphony, founded in 1895. Judging from the terms of their bequest, Charles and Anna Taft hoped not only to support professional arts organizations, but also institutions that trained these professionals. Taft was comfortable with art and artists, evidenced by the focus of his European travels and his willingness to lecture on the subject. In his social life he interacted with the art world, first at this Literary Club, to which Taft was elected in 1865 (and where he contributed a paper in 1907 "Some Suggestions on Art Matters"). There he met on a regular basis with artists such as the sculptor Nathan Baker, or Duveneck and Farny, as well as fellow cultural leaders.

The Tafts therefore, to dispose of their estate and collection and mindful of their desire to augment the Cincinnati Museum Association, endowed a foundation, the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts. This Institute, which, despite the term "Fine Arts" in its name, has a pig outside its headquarters, was established to support the Conservatory, the Symphony, and the Museum Association, the institute that comprised not only the museum but the Art Academy. Indeed, the Tafts considered their bequeathed art collection as supporting the Cincinnati Museum Association, but separately located and kept together. Its first director was likewise the director of the Art

Museum, Walter Siple. Just as their largesse to the Conservatory would train the musicians that would eventually play with the already well-known Symphony, they were equally concerned that artists be trained as well, and their collection went to further that role. The Taft collection's later (and current) independence, not the subject of this paper, was probably more the result of Phil Adams' administrative impatience with an off-site responsibility and Siple's successor, Katherine Hanna, than any particular urge on the part of the Tafts or Taft Museum that it be a separate entity. I only knew Phil Adams, as did many of us here, but from what I have heard of Miss Hanna, I suspect they did not have a warm and fuzzy working relationship.

The only vanity on the part of the Tafts was the family name on the outside of the building. The large portraits of the couple by Madrazo, the ones on view at the museum for the moment, were not even part of that 1931 bequest. That bequest was of art for the citizens of Cincinnati; visitors were not to visit the Tafts' residence and see the collection as it had been installed in a domestic setting. One was not to see how the couple lived, simply the art that had been assembled. The Tafts were concerned that their collection was to be seen in a museum setting. As at London's Wallace Collection, part of the couple's artistic consciousness for over a quarter century and a museum likewise given to the public and displayed as a museum in what had been a private house, the Tafts desired that their house be transformed - in like philosophy - into a museum. However, in their case, ever conscious of local history, taking care to note that the building itself was of historic interest. Siple and local architect Woodward Garber, both Literarians, appear to have been the driving forces behind the *Williamsburgering* of Belmont (some might call it the *Williams-bugger-ing* of Belmont). It was Siple who chose to acquire reproduction furniture for the museum was because it appeared to match the 1820s style of the house. From a paper Siple read in this

room in 1933, his intentions were clear; it was intended that one was to sit on the chairs, but not have seat furniture that was out of keeping with the architecture.

It was one thing to leave a museum for your community; another to ensure its spot remained secure in the city. Perhaps motivated by the dismaying construction in 1903 of the American Book Building to the south of the house, and the acquisition for development of the property directly to the north, the Tafts endeavored to preserve as much of the rest of the neighborhood as possible, to allow the collection to be placed in an active urban setting. The University Club, a short block westward, was reestablished in two mid-nineteenth century residences by Charles Taft. The plot of land near the museum that *Cincinnati Magazine* suggested in 1909 had been acquired for a new gallery in fact was the site of the Anna Louisa Inn, a residence for working women, the colonnaded edifice we glimpse across Lytle Park. The statue of Lincoln outside our front door, controversial in its day, was also endowed and placed in the park by the Tafts. Moreover, we moved into this clubhouse in 1930 as a result of the Tafts, who loaned the club the funds to purchase the property. This is the village we inhabit, active on all sides, day and night (particularly Monday nights).

But whatever the setting, and certainly today precisely because of its independence, the Taft Museum functioned then and now in exactly the fashion the Tafts intended. A visit to the Taft Museum of Art today is a visit to a very personal collection, put together with great care, in a domestic scale, displaying works of art of equal interest to the artist, the expert and even the general public, who may come only to see Cincinnati's only oil paintings by Rembrandt and Turner. Just as today one doesn't need a personal introduction to visit a Rothschild collection, such as Waddesdon, outside London, or an introduction to visit the Wallace Collection, the Taft collection is

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indeed that special attraction so eagerly noted of Mr. Baedeker: a house worth visiting for the sake of the treasures of art which it contains.
