

The AMAM Collection: A Brief History of Major Donors and Gifts

The strength and importance of the AMAM's collection is a result of the generosity of many donors—both Oberlin alumni and others unaffiliated with the college—over the past century. Following is a brief history of some of the museum's major benefactors and their gifts:

Charles Fayette Olney

Inspired by Oberlin College's educational ideals, Cleveland educator Charles F. Olney (1831–1903) bequeathed his collection of nearly 8,000 paintings, ivories, and bronzes to the college in 1904 to aid in the teaching of art. As a public school teacher, founder of the New York Teachers Association, and vice president of the Cleveland School of Art, Olney knew his collection had great educational value.

Importantly, since Olney's gift came without restrictions, only the 700 best works were retained. The remaining objects were sold off during the following decades, with the proceeds used to purchase objects of superior quality, to which Olney's name was attached.

Olney's collection included many important Asian objects, an area of collecting that the college continued to emphasize after his gift. In the college's annual report of 1908–09, Professor Frederick Grover, Chair of the Committee of Art Interests, wrote: "I cannot close this report without calling your attention again to the great need of even a small amount [of money] for the purchase of Chinese and Japanese works of art, especially of paintings and wood prints, of which the collection has no representatives."

Charles Lang Freer

Oberlin College's desire to develop its collection of Asian art led it to solicit a gift from Charles L. Freer (1856–1919), the celebrated Detroit collector whose 1904 offer of his important collection of Asian art to the Smithsonian Institution—the first major bequest of art by an individual to the U.S. government—eventually became the Freer Gallery of Art, opened to the public in 1923. Freer also made a number of generous gifts of art to institutions across the U.S. In 1912, he personally chose from his collection a group of 100 works of Asian art, including paintings, scrolls, and decorative arts, for the AMAM.

Charles Martin Hall

Chemist Charles M. Hall (1863–1914), a member of Oberlin College's class of 1885, discovered an inexpensive method for the isolation of pure aluminum and went on to found Alcoa, the Aluminum Company of America. His estate included a gift to the college of Oriental rugs and Chinese porcelains.

Elisabeth Severance Allen Prentiss

Along with funds that helped not only to build the Allen Memorial Art Museum in 1917 in memory of her first husband, Cleveland surgeon Dudley Peter Allen, but also to expand the museum 20 years later, Elisabeth Severance Allen Prentiss (1865–1944), daughter of Standard Oil magnate Louis H. Severance, made several other transforming

gifts to the AMAM. She continued to support the museum throughout her life with funds for acquisitions and periodic gifts of individual artworks.

Upon her death, Mrs. Allen left the museum more than \$434,000 and eight well-known paintings by artists including Hobbema, Pinturicchio, Reynolds, Jacques and Daubigny. Among them is one of the AMAM's acknowledged masterpieces, J.M.W. Turner's *View of Venice: The Ducal Palace, Dogana, and Part of San Giorgio* of 1841. Other works she bequeathed include Rembrandt's famous *Hundred Guilder Print* of about 1649 and many other Old Master prints by Rembrandt, Dürer, Whistler, Meryon, Haden, Zorn, and Claude Lorrain. She also left a pair of portraits of herself and Dr. Allen that today hang in the museum, a fitting memorial to their beneficence to Oberlin.

Aaron Augustus Healy

A. A. Healy (1850–1921), a Brooklyn leather merchant and for 25 years the president of the board of trustees of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, gave the AMAM a small trove of paintings in 1919, a gift intended to help give the fledgling museum a start on developing its collection. These gifts include Dutch 18th and early 19th century paintings and late 19th- and early 20th-century American paintings by Arthur Davies and Ernest Lawson. Later works were purchased for the collection on the A. Augustus Healy Fund.

Healy's gift honored his wife (and cousin) Mary Theodosea Currier Healy (c. 1871–June 19, 1940), daughter of Rev. Albert Henry Currier, a professor emeritus of theology at Oberlin Theological Seminary. Mrs. Healy worked for a number of years as a reference librarian in the Oberlin College library.

Romanta Tillotson Miller, Jr.

The quality and breadth of the AMAM collection changed suddenly and dramatically after 1940, when Chicago businessman R. T. Miller Jr. (1867–1958), a member of the Oberlin College class of 1891, made the first of his annual gifts. Miller founded the American School in Boston in 1897 and moved it to Chicago in 1902; the school offered high school correspondence courses to students who were unable to engage in resident study. Miller believed that “young men and women could rise, through a significant educational experience, to an attainment and self-realization otherwise impossible for them.” Miller felt that Oberlin provided the ideal atmosphere for such an educational experience, which led him to embark on a program of annual giving to the college.

For the next 18 years, until his death in 1958, Miller gave the museum an average of \$25,000 annually to purchase art—with the critical stipulation that the funds be spent within a year or two at most. During his lifetime, Miller's donations to Oberlin came to about \$1 million in total, earning him the distinction of being the greatest living donor to the college. His final gift, a major bequest, remains the AMAM's most important endowed fund for acquisitions.

Miller's gifts enabled the museum to acquire its finest works. Following his unceasing insistence on outstanding quality, the museum bought a wide range of works, ranging

from a portable altarpiece (1608) by Mannerist artist Jacopo Ligozzi and a 16th-century Spanish *Fountain of Life* painted in the style of Jan van Eyck to paintings such as Rubens's *The Finding of Erichthonius* of 1632-33, a Sweerts *Self-Portrait* of about 1656, Ter Brugghen's 1625 *St. Sebastian Attended by Irene*, Monet's *Garden of the Princess, Louvre* (1867), Cézanne's *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* (1882), Gorky's *The Plough and the Song* (1947), and two outstanding works by German Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: his remarkable 1915 *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* and a sculpture, *Standing Female Nude* (circa 1919).

All of these artworks are not only of extraordinary aesthetic quality, but they also serve the teaching needs of Oberlin College particularly well.

Mary Andrews Ainsworth

Mary A. Ainsworth, a member of the Oberlin College class of 1889, bequeathed to the AMAM her superb collection of more than 1,500 Japanese prints upon her death in 1950. (She also bequeathed her books, which included many fine editions illustrated with woodblock prints, to the Oberlin College library.) Assembled in part during her many trips to Japan in the late 19th and early 20th century, the Ainsworth collection is widely recognized for its many rare and beautiful impressions. Today the AMAM collection of Japanese prints numbers nearly 2,000 and is known for its depth, quality, and variety of subjects.

Enid and Joseph Bissett

Twenty-four paintings given by Enid Bissett (died 1965), co-inventor in 1922 of the Maidenform brassiere, and by her husband Joseph (died 1968), transformed the AMAM's holdings of modernist paintings. The Bissetts made their gift at the urging of their nephew, Jay Richard Judson, a member of the Oberlin College class of 1948 and a distinguished historian of Netherlandish art who is W. R. Kenan, Jr. Professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of North Carolina.

In 1955, the couple made their first gift, with life interest retained, of Modigliani's 1917 *Nude with a Coral Necklace*. Each year after, they gave the AMAM one or more paintings, donating works by Matisse, Modigliani, Chagall, Picasso, and Miró—as well as seven Du Buffets—until Mr. Bissett's death in March 1968. The Modigliani is one of the icons of the AMAM's collection—and, not incidentally, one of the works most often requested by museums worldwide for major loan exhibitions.

Samuel H. Kress Foundation

Ten Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings were given to the AMAM by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation in 1961. Among these is Neri di Bicci's *Five Saints* of about 1445, a wing of an altarpiece from SS. Annunziata, one of the most prominent churches in Florence.

Gustave Schindler

A small group of high-quality African art was given to the AMAM in the 1950s by the art dealer Gustave Schindler (died 1988). Among these objects is a late 15th- or early 16th-

century Afro-Portuguese ivory lidded saltcellar, one of only about 100 extant works of this type known today.

Max Kade Foundation

The AMAM's collection of works on paper grew substantially beginning in the 1960s, aided in large part by a distinguished collection of more than 100 Old Master woodcuts, engravings, and etchings by Dürer, Schongauer, Rembrandt, and others bequeathed to the AMAM by the Max Kade Foundation, which since 1944 has promoted the study of both German and German-American history, including the Max Kade Writer-in-Residence program at Oberlin College, founded in 1968. Max Kade (1882–1967) immigrated to New York from Germany in 1905 and became a successful pharmaceutical researcher and entrepreneur.

Helen Hesse Charash

For two decades beginning in the late 1970s, the AMAM was given regular gifts of drawings and archival material associated with the German-born American draftsman and painter Eva Hesse (1936–1970) by the artist's sister, Helen Charash, and the artist's friend and dealer Donald Droll. Today, the Hesse Archives at the AMAM comprise nearly 1,000 items, including more than 200 working drawings, collages, and photographs, as well as diaries, datebooks, and letters.

Ellen Hulda Elizabeth Johnson

Legendary Oberlin professor of art history Ellen H. Johnson (1910–1992), a member of the Oberlin College class of 1933, bequeathed 300 works of art from her personal collection to the AMAM. Included are important contemporary works by Oldenburg, Dine, Kline, LeWitt, and Warhol.

George Schlenker

Through a combination of a gift and purchase, the AMAM in 1997 acquired an important collection of 18 Chinese paintings from Dr. George J. Schlenker of Piedmont, California. The works, selected by his stepson James Cahill, a respected professor of Chinese art history at the University of California at Berkeley, range in date from the 14th to the 20th centuries and include representative examples of the most important schools of Chinese painting during that crucial 600-year period.