

Women Art Collectors in 19th-20th Century Europe

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ABSTRACT

The late 19th century was a time of significant change in practices and representations of private art collections. A few women collectors stood out as exceptions, although the growth of women's collections did little to change the stereotyped image or lack of visibility that women's collecting suffered from. The permanence of the aristocratic model in the 19th and 20th centuries leads us to reconsider the leading place that is often attributed to American women in western collecting. During that period, women art collectors used the founding of museums as an efficient instrument for asserting their aesthetic judgment. Their collections were sometimes also used as a means of emancipation and social recognition for women. Therefore, women's art collecting is no longer the outcome of a legacy or an isolated activity, but a capstone of professional success. That is demonstrated even more forcefully by present-day women art collectors. Gender as a category of analysis encourages us to write a more complete and inclusive history of art collecting and cultural heritage. Not only will that allow us to unearth forgotten or minimized figures, but it will also enrich the very notion of collecting itself.



Adelaida Crooke y Guzmán, Countess of Valencia de Don Juan, Carrera de San Jerónimo, Madrid, circa 1890-1900, albumen print, Archivo del Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, Madrid. © Élodie Baillot

Private collections of *objets d'art* appeared during the western Renaissance, and several women participated: Isabelle d'Este (1474-1539) and Mary of Austria (1505-1558), as well as Countess Alethea Arundel (1585-1654) and the Duchess of Portland, Margaret Cavendish Bentinck (1715-1785), who perpetuated the tradition of art collecting and patronage in England's aristocratic families. In the following centuries, the figure of the art-collecting female monarch became established thanks to Christine of Sweden (1626-1689) and Catherine II of Russia (1729-1796), whose large-scale art commissions represented both support for artists and a political instrument. That aristocratic practice of collecting was still dominant in the 19th century and remained a model for subsequent generations.

Women Collectors and Patrons of the Arts: Numerous but Overlooked

In the late 19th century, social transformations and the invention of museums and of the concept of cultural heritage led to a fondness for collecting that was shared by both men and women. This increase in the number of collections – including ones owned by women – needs to be placed in the context of a sociological expansion: the aristocratic practice of collecting was spreading to the upper and middle bourgeoisie. Granted, for the most part, women-owned collections remained invisible at that time. Women were excluded from the institutions and places of sociability that blossomed around private collections, although a few rare exceptions do stand out. Among them: Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924) and Louisine Havemeyer (1855-1929), both in the United States, represent the capitalist model that saw itself as a triumphant competitor with the aristocratic model embodied by such figures as Alexandra and Dagmar of Denmark (respectively 1844-1925 and 1847-1928).

Yet some women collectors did attempt to have their collections recognized as part of the national heritage, participating in the emergence of “matronage.” The significant bequests of English ceramics to the South Kensington Museum (1885) and the British Museum (1892 and 1894) made by Lady Charlotte Schreiber (1812-1895) are striking examples of this. Less well-known, Yolande Lyne-Stephens (1812-1894) created one of the largest collections of old masters of her day. Intended at one point to be donated to national museums, her collection wound up being dispersed at auction at Christie's in 1895, which probably contributed to that woman collector's being forgotten.

Collecting began to have more and more repercussions in public spaces, thanks to private collections being bequeathed to public institutions and home-museums being founded. Nélie Jacquemart-André (1841-1912) and Adelaida Croke y Guzmán (1863-1918), Countess of Valencia de Don Juan, both bear witness to that. In 1916, the latter, alongside her husband, founded an institute intended for the display, preservation and study of the collection she inherited and built with her father. So many women collected art, but there were never more women collectors than men.

Universality of Collecting, Particularities of Women Collectors?

Is there a specifically female way of collecting? In the first half of the 20th century, the creation of museums became an instrument for legitimating and claiming autonomy for women's aesthetic judgment. Helene Kröller-Müller (1869-1939), who founded a museum in Otterlo (Netherlands) to house her many works by Van Gogh,

illustrates that. In actual fact, the relationship between gender and collecting reveals highly diverse practices. Women may assert their own tastes through practices staked out as autonomous and distinct from men's, sometimes fueling both sexual and intellectual emancipation for women. For some women, collecting became a tool for assimilating the universal masculine by claiming art as a way of asserting oneself and rejecting the specificity of femininity. In that sense, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) comes across as the epitome of the woman collector who defied social expectations for women of her day. Many of those women – like Marie Laure de Noailles (1902-1970) with Max Ernst, and the Belgian painter and collector Anna Boch (1848-1936) – became patrons, or matrons, of the arts. When her work was shown at the Salon des Indépendants in 1885, Bloch began to collect painting by her contemporaries Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), whom she met through her brother, Eugène Boch (1855-1941).

In the latter half of the 20th century came the first collections created by women who were using money they had earned themselves. As women began to have careers, some of them were eventually able to invest in collecting. Gabrielle Keiller (1908-1995), a professional golf player, got a late start on her collection, which focused on Dada and Surrealism. Other women collectors, like Jacqueline Delubac (1907-1997), had become famous as actresses. In the 1950s, Delubac collected work by Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and Fernand Léger, as well as Wifredo Lam and Jean Dubuffet over the following decade. Her collection was particularly distinct from her second husband's, which was made up of Impressionist paintings.

Women Collectors' Expertise and the Social Usefulness of Collecting

Certain non-individual collecting practices have been relatively ignored, particularly by couples (including same-sex ones), pairs and even trios of collectors. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake (1809-1893) played a significant role in constituting the National Gallery's collections and in professionalizing art history. Her role has recently been reevaluated relative to her husband's. She is now recognized for her expertise in terms of acquisition, art criticism and building social networks that benefitted art and cultural institutions. Women collectors have actually asserted themselves as true cultural intermediaries who, complementing museums' role, draw attention to collecting's social usefulness. Berta Zuckerkandl (1864-1945), for example, hosted a salon that was the hub of a social network benefitting artists in the Vienna Secession, which Berta promoted as a journalist and an art critic. She established herself as a spokeswoman concerned both with building bonds between the French and Austrian artistic communities and with defending Austrian identity.

Elizabeth Russell Workman (1874-1962), one of the most important women collectors of Impressionism and post-Impressionism in Great Britain, is proof of the sometimes overlooked presence of women in the art market. She makes us reconsider collecting's capacity to forge both men's and women's cultural identity. The painter Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), for instance, advised Henry and Louisine Havemayers in collecting Impressionist art, attesting to the increasing recognition of women's expertise.

Women collectors also contributed to the rise of fields of study and subjects with specific museographies, like archeology and anthropology. Ellen Georgiana Tanner (1847-1937), one of the first women to travel alone in the Middle East, acquired many items there that she donated to the Holburne Museum in Bath. The palace-museum built in Seville by the Countess of Lebrija (1851-1937) is a decorative and architectural re-creation of the ideal

antique Sevillian home, built as much to glorify a regional identity as to assert a family's ancestry.

Since the late 20th century, with the growing globalization of the art market, women art collectors have displayed a range of conducts and expanded the fields covered by their collections in the context of the development of exhibit spaces outside of major art capitals.

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