

*The first in a series of articles profiling museums across the United States.*

## Washington Museums: Diversity and Connoisseurship

by Gail Leggio

What are museums for? In the past few decades museology has emerged as an academic discipline in itself, overlapping with other fashionable subjects, such as cultural studies, visual culture, and the history of taste and connoisseurship. Museums often have multiple missions: preservation and stewardship, the physical conservation of objects and the protection of heritage; education, teaching us more about ourselves as well as about geographically or temporally remote societies; aesthetic pleasure and exploration of the infinite variety of formal beauty. The modern institution can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when princely collections began opening their doors to the public, but contemporary museums also emulate nineteenth-century models, monuments to nationalistic pride and didactic fervor.

The history of the museum in the United States both builds on the European example and develops its own dynamic. That full story is outside the scope of this essay, but I would like to examine some aspects of the subject by looking at three museums in Washington, D.C. The American museum is a mixture of democracy and elitism. Encounters with art objects can be intensely subjective experiences, for the collector and for the individual museum-goer. At the same time, visiting a museum is a social ritual, and the presence of the building itself is a sign of the importance and civility of a city. The three museums I have chosen to discuss—The Phillips Collection, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the National Building Museum—suggest the richness and variety of museum experiences in our nation's capital, and the way very different kinds of spaces can be used to display art.

The Phillips Collection is one of America's great intimate museums, with nearly 2,400 choice works by Impressionist and modern artists, and a scattering of intriguing forerunners. Like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and the Frick Collection and Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, the Phillips is a personal collection, shaped by a strong-minded individual and physically tied to a private home. Duncan Phillips (1886–1966) founded the collection in 1918. In 1921 two rooms of his 1897 Georgian Revival mansion in Dupont Circle were opened as a museum of modern art, and soon the entire house was turned over to public display. In the first catalogue published, *The Phillips Collection: A Museum of Modern Art and Its Sources* (Washington, D.C., 1952), Phillips outlined his purposes. Despite the "obvious disadvantages and even dangers" of the domestic setting, he argued, "at least there is a sense of art lived with, worked with and loved." He announced with the enlightened hedonism of the true art lover that the collection was "made with enjoyment for the enjoyment of others." Enjoyment is certainly the initial reaction of the visitor confronted with Pierre Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881) or Paul Cézanne's *Pomegranate and Pears* (1895–1900) or one of the twenty loose, luminous watercolors by American John Marin (1870–1953) or Pierre Bonnard's *Woman and Dog* (1922) and his dozen or so similar exercises in edenic domesticity. The collection also juxtaposes European and American modernists. In 1926 Phillips acquired Georgia O'Keeffe's *My Shanty*, the first of her paintings to enter a museum collection.

An imaginative connoisseur, Phillips refused to be constrained by rigid art historical categories. "Ours is a unique, unorthodox museum," he wrote in the Introduction to the



Claude Monet, *Still Life with Melon*, 1872

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

1952 catalogue, “with a way of its own in not segregating periods and nationalities in order the better to show the universality of art and the continuities of such ancient seeing habits as realism, expressionism and constructivism.” He acquired images of the *Repentant Peter* by El Greco (c. 1541–1614) and Goya (1746–1828), an Ingres *Bather* (1826) and Thomas Eakins’s great austere portrait *Miss Van Buren* (1889–91). Phillips was an articulate spokesman for the artists he favored; he saw them as individuals conforming “only to their own sincerities and for spiritual companionship seek[ing] their own kind across the ages.”

A recent exhibition, “Impressionist Still Life,” co-organized by the Phillips and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was more than a cache of attractive paintings, one of those *de rigueur* crowd-pleasers popular on the museum circuit. This intelligent exhibition traced the evolution of still life as a genre in nineteenth-century France, from the Realism of Gustave Courbet to the sophisticated spatial experiments of Paul Cézanne. In comparison to history painting, landscape and even portraiture, still life ranked low in the nineteenth-century hierarchy. Yet the Impressionists, admirers of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painters and the purely formal brushwork of Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), “found in still life a breadth of opportunity for individual expression,” according to exhibition curator Eliza Rathbone, chief curator at the Phillips. A dozen still lifes by Cézanne—simultaneously monumental and domestic, opulent and restrained—illustrate how a simple bowl of fruit on a rumpled piece of cloth could generate masterpieces. Other artists well represented include Berthe Morisot, with her charmingly anecdotal arrangements of objects; Henri Fantin-Latour, whose fruit and flower studies verge on the Symbolism of Redon; Paul Gauguin, who brings his exotic palette and radical compositional strategy to simple table-top groupings; and Gustave Caillebotte, with his loosely deployed market

stalls. The immediately appealing subject of extravagant bouquets attracts Renoir, Monet and Manet, while van Gogh reveals the animistic energy of flowers. The exhibition catalogue, with essays by Rathbone, George Shackelford of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and other scholars, is co-published by the Phillips and Harry Abrams, Inc. "Impressionist Still Life" travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, February 17–June 6, 2002. The Phillips Collection, 1600 21st Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20009. Telephone (202) 387-2151.

If the Phillips grows out of an individual's labor of love, the Corcoran Gallery of Art has institutional roots. The Corcoran is Washington's first art museum, an early example of the structure dedicated to the display of art from its inception. Helen Searing's *New American Art Museums* (Whitney Museum, in association with the University of California Press, 1982) offers a succinct history of this building type. The original Corcoran Gallery building (1859–74) was a highly ornamented and eclectic structure designed by Smithsonian architect James Renwick, Jr. (1818–95). As part of the institution's overall mission of cultural improvement, the Corcoran College of Art and Design opened in 1890. The Corcoran outgrew its first building (now the Renwick Gallery) quickly. The current structure (1893–95), designed by Ernest Flagg (1857–1947), has the classical dignity we now associate with museums: outside, marble and granite walls; inside, a top-lighted central atrium. Today, the privately funded Corcoran is a multifaceted cultural presence. The permanent collection of European and American painting, sculpture and decorative art is diverse, but the museum also addresses contemporary topics. Two recent exhibitions illustrate its mission: one explores the relationship between art and environment; the other provides a snapshot of connoisseurship through the collection of an important patron.

"In Response to Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places" celebrates the conservancy's half-century of work in preserving natural sites. The private, international organization has been responsible for protecting more than twelve million acres of land in the United States, with interests in Canada, the Asia Pacific, the Caribbean and Latin America. Exhibition curator Andy Grundberg invited a dozen contemporary photographers to visit some of the conservancy's designated Last Great Places and record their responses. The 130 photographs commissioned explore human relationships to the land as well as natural beauty. Rather than limiting the assignment to those pigeonholed as nature photographers, the project included a wide range of artists, reminding us that the environment matters to everyone.

The portraitist Annie Leibovitz, best known for her celebrity images in vivid color, presents ten muted studies of the Shawangunk Mountains. Lying between the Catskills and the Hudson River about two hours from New York City, the area is characterized by pine-barrens and dramatic outcroppings of rock. Liebovitz's gelatin silver print *Sam's Point Dwarf Pine Ridge Preserve, Ellenville, New York* is a dramatic composition centered on a bedrock fracture in the Shawangunk conglomerate cliffs. Though the rugged geological formations seem forbidding, trees sprout up through every crevice. The photograph suggests the austere beauty of Asher B. Durand's mid-nineteenth-century paintings of rocky terrain. Two artists from different centuries, working in different mediums, both inspired by the raw-bones elegance of New York's everlasting hills.

On the other side of the United States, California resident Karen Halverson tackles the problematic relationship between nature and development in the west. The ecological disasters wrought by reckless water management were the subject of Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (Penguin, 1986, 1993), the companion book to a fascinating PBS documentary. Halverson, who spent several years chronicling the ways dams constrain rivers, chose as her subject for this exhibition

the Consumnes, the last free-flowing river on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. The landscape, with its rare valley oaks and migratory bird habitat, is threatened by suburban sprawl encroaching from Stockton and Sacramento. The Nature Conservancy is cooperating with farmers and ranchers to find ecologically and economically sound ways to reconcile nature and the human presence, a harmony illustrated by Halverson's chromogenic print *Nicholas Ranch, Consumnes River Preserve*.

There is a clever variation on the figure in a landscape theme in William Wegman's *Of the Sea*, featuring one of the artist's weimaraners. The dog's sleek, sand-colored curves are played off against the intense blue-green expanse of Maine's Cobscook Bay, close to the Canadian border. Photojournalist Mary Ellen Mark brings her trademark empathy to swimmers and churchgoers in extraordinary settings, the barrier islands and salt marches of Virginia's Eastern Shore and Alaska's Pribilofs, home to some of the world's largest breeding colonies of marine birds and mammals.

The photographers responded to the variety of the American landscape. Terry Evans worked at the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Oklahoma. Her suite of photographs included not only sweeping vistas but also close-ups of plant specimens: evening primrose, common mullein, wild cherry and sneezeweed. Throughout the exhibition, there was an undercurrent of discovery, as professional photographers became amateur naturalists, entranced by botany or geology. Lynn Davis showed toned gelatin silver prints of weathered natural arches and buttes in Utah. Davis is best known for her grand scale, nineteenth-century-style images of pyramids, temples and icebergs—a favorite subject for Hudson River School painter Frederic Church. A few photographers ventured outside



Annie Leibovitz, *Sam's Point Dwarf Pine Ridge Preserve, Ellenville, New York, 1999*  
Courtesy of the artist and the Nature Conservancy

the United States. Sally Mann, known for her photographs of her own children, went to the Yucatán, training her camera on the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, which surrounds and engulfs ancient Mayan temples. Mann used a turn-of-the-century lens that degrades the image. The resultant glare has a mystical intensity, hinting at the epiphanies that must have awaited early explorers stumbling upon the remains of a great civilization. The exhibition is accompanied by a 160-page, fully illustrated book with essays and artists' statements. "In Response to Place" travels to the Houston Museum of Natural Science (February–April, 2002), the High Museum in Atlanta (August–December, 2002), the Field Museum in Chicago (January–April, 2003) and the Indianapolis Museum of Art (May–August, 2003).

This winter, the Corcoran also celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the William A. Clark bequest. In 1925 Clark (1839–1925) left much of his extraordinary collection of European and American art to the museum, which opened a new suite of galleries to display more than 800 objects in 1928. "Antiquities to Impressionism" showcased 250 works. This exhibition offered a glimpse into the tastes and habits of one of those highly individualistic art collectors who built up America's great museums. Born in Pennsylvania, Clark made a fortune as a banker and merchant in the west, with holdings in Montana and Arizona. After serving one term as Senator from Montana, he moved to New York City. The mansion he built on Fifth Avenue at 77th Street, costing between five and seven million dollars, was designed to display his art collection. As early as 1902, Clark had begun lending works to the Corcoran. Clark's bequest gave Washington, D.C., an unprecedented cultural credibility. (The National Gallery of Art would not open until 1941, largely as the result of another individual's generosity.) Clark also offered the prize money for the Corcoran's biennial exhibitions from their inception in 1907, and his \$100,000 endowment has made it possible for the museum to add important American paintings to the permanent collection over the years.

Clark's eclectic collection reflects many of the preoccupations of turn-of-the-century connoisseurs. In 1911 he purchased 190 Greek and Roman antiquities, many on the intimate scale of household artifacts, from a Parisian collector. The group is especially rich in Greek vases and small terracotta figures. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) was very popular with American art collectors. Of the twenty-one Corots in Clark's collection, the late landscape *Dance Under the Trees*, purchased in 1919 for the huge sum of \$100,000, was his favorite. A pair of Corot masterpieces—*The Moored Boatman: Souvenir of an Italian Lake* and *La Bacchante au Tambourin*—were featured in the exhibition. The French illustrator Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel (1851–1913) created one of the best-loved children's books of the period, a life of Joan of Arc, with charming watercolor pictures. Clark commissioned a set of six panels, in oil and gold, depicting scenes from Joan's life.

Clark's interest in Dutch topographies and British portraiture hardly led him into uncharted territory, but he had a good eye. Jan van Goyen's (1596–1656) panoramic *View of Rhenen* sets the crumbling architecture of the medieval town in the context of glassy water and scudding clouds. Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88) is represented by pendant portraits of Lord and Lady de Dunstanville, a fashionable young couple who benefit from the high-style brushwork of the artist. The highlight in this genre is Sir Henry Raeburn's (1756–1823) dashing portrait of his step-daughter, *Mrs. Vere of Stonebyres*. With her loose neoclassical dress and Pompeii-inspired coiffeur, her vivacity and relaxed charm, Mrs. Vere has a modern confidence that the Scottish painter clearly admires.

Another striking portrait in the Clark collection is Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-LeBrun's (1755–1842) *Madame du Barry*, which catches the famed courtesan between her heyday as the official mistress of Louis XV and her death by guillotine during the French

Revolution. At the other end of the social scale is Chardin's *The Scullery Maid*, undoubtedly one of the best pictures bought by Clark. As anyone seduced by the brushwork and softly gleaming palette on view at last year's Chardin retrospective will attest, the artist is an alchemist with saucy pans. Treating his subject, a young woman in white absorbed in her chore, with reserve and respect, Chardin finds poetry in humble objects and everyday light. Clark was particularly fond of French art, and the collection includes batches of Jean-François Millet (1814–75) drawings, in pastel and charcoal, of shepherds, and Edgar Degas's (1834–1917) more worldly pastels of ballet dancers and Parisian cabarets.

American works in the collection include William Merritt Chase's (1849–1916) portrait of Clark, an ethereal *Moonlight* by eccentric painter Ralph Blakelock (1847–1919) and a selection of works purchased with funds from the Clark endowment: Arthur Davies's (1862–1928) *Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night*, Edward Hopper's (1882–1967) *Ground Swell*, Willard Leroy Metcalf's (1858–1925) *May Night*, Maurice Prendergast's (1859–1924) *Landscape with Figures* and George Bellows's (1882–1925) *Forty-two Kids*. The William A. Clark Collection is an important part of the permanent collection at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 Seventeenth Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20006. Telephone: (202) 639-1703.

The third museum under discussion here takes a different tack from the first two, focusing on architecture rather than painting, sculpture or photography. It is one of Washington's newer museums, founded in 1980 by an Act of Congress and opening its doors in 1985. Yet the National Building Museum has already mounted more than 125 temporary exhibitions. The new institution's most obvious asset is its historic home. Designed by Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs (1816–92), the monumental brick structure, completed in 1887, originally housed the United States Pension Bureau. Fifteen inaugural balls—from Grover Cleveland's in 1885 to George W. Bush's in 2001—have been held in the Great Hall. At its tallest point approximately fifteen stories high, the Great Hall measures 316 feet by 116 feet. On the ground floor seventy-two terracotta Doric columns surround the space; the seventy-two Ionic columns on the second floor are made of cast iron. The eight Corinthian columns that dominate the Great Hall are among the tallest interior columns in the world, seventy-five feet high, eight feet in diameter and twenty-five feet in circumference; they were remarmbled in 2000, in accordance with the original design. As a physical presence in the city and a creative transformation of an existing structure, the National Building Museum makes a statement about the role of museums in the urban environment.

The museum's mission encompasses architecture, urban planning and design, as well as more pragmatic concerns such as engineering and construction. Exhibitions tackle a wide range of historical and contemporary topics. The recent "Monuments and Memory" featured the work of contemporary District-based architects, dealing with both existing memorials and speculative designs for monuments. In the light of the present debate on the meaning and purpose of memorials, such exhibitions contribute to the dialogue. "Twin Towers Remembered" (through March 10, 2002) presents a selection of photographs by Camilo José Vergara, who made images of the 110-story buildings for more than thirty years. From construction to destruction, Vergara chronicled the World Trade Center's impact on its neighborhood, the skyline of Manhattan and the nation. The variety of angles, perspectives, distances and weather conditions illustrates how architecture participates visually in the daily life of a city. Other exhibitions explore the history of building and design in the United States. "From Arts and Crafts to Modern Design: The Architecture of William L. Price" (through March 25, 2002) reintroduces the work of a

pioneer modernist. This first major exhibition on Price (1861–1916) features original drawings and paintings, furniture and decorative arts, along with photographs and historic film footage. Combining Arts and Crafts attention to detail with state-of-the-art building technology, Price was best known for the exuberant Atlantic City hotels he designed with partner Martin Hawley McLanahan. Their work in Miami established an American Art Deco style before the French exhibition that coined the term in 1925. In addition to planning and building experimental communities, and popularizing the use of reinforced concrete, Price built private homes that have the muscular grace of buildings by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright.

“A Genius for Place: American Landscapes of the Country Place Era” (through February 18, 2002) focuses on a neglected aspect of the American cultural legacy. During this period (roughly 1895–1942) wealthy Americans commissioned estates in non-urban areas, often combining neo-baronial architecture with elaborate landscapes. The movement owes much to the British country house tradition and Romantic attitudes towards nature, but the American landscape architects also drew on the example of naturalistic designers Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted. The 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago was another influence, with its Beaux-Arts mix of formality and fantasy. Clients who traveled to Europe picked up ideas for their own gardens and parks, especially in Italy. Many of the American landscapes have been lost to development and suburban sprawl, but a few have been meticulously maintained.

This exhibition documents seven examples, most of them open to the public: Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C.; Gwinn in Cleveland, Ohio; Stan Hywet in Akron, Ohio; the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House in Grosse Point Shores, Michigan; Naumkeg in Stockbridge, Massachusetts; Val Verde in Santa Barbara, California; and Winterthur in Winterthur, Delaware. The sites are shown in seventy black-and-white photographs and seven color Iris prints by award-winning landscape photographer Carol Betsch. Sculptural and architectural elements, as well as plantings and carefully composed vistas, contribute to the charm of these often theatrical natural settings.

Designers Bertram Goodhue and Lockwood de Forest let their imaginations run free in Val Verde (1915–35), the estate of Wright S. Ludington. In the mid-1930s de Forest replaced the original lawn terraces with boxwood hedges and a stuccoed colonnade ruin. Intimations of the Hollywood epic are not limited to the grounds; set designer Oliver Messel, a frequent house guest, created a fantasy Roman bedroom and bath for Ludington. In contrast, Jens Jensen’s design for the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House was poetically minimal, a distillation of the Romantic contemplative landscape. Jensen reconfigured the lakeside property to create an island parallel to the shoreline, finding images of serenity in sky, water, lawn and trees. “A Genius for Place” was curated by Robin Karson, founder of the Library of American Landscape History. Her book on the subject will be published by the University of Massachusetts Press in the near future. The National Building Museum is located at 401 F Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20001. Telephone: (202) 272-2448.

Museums can be focused or encyclopedic; they can emphasize the historical timeline of making and building or seek an ideal of atemporality. Museums offer a retreat from the confusing welter of immediate events; yet they also help us make sense of our place in history. Cities need museums, if they are to be truly civilized places, to provide aesthetic sanctuaries and to enrich the architectural fabric. The Phillips began as a private house, the Corcoran, as a cultural institution; the National Building Museum is a creative conversion. These three places, along with dozens of other museums, make an invaluable contribution to Washington’s cultural vitality.