The Electra Havemeyer Webb Memorial Exhibition

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Had Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer decided to leave her impressive Fifth Avenue house as a museum, it would have rivaled the Frick in New York, the Wallace in London, and the Jacquemart-André in Paris, to name some of the great private collections turned museums. Its magnificence, however, would have worn a different aspect. Instead of choosing the customary formality of the Italian and French period rooms that appealed to American taste in the 1890s, Mrs. Havemeyer had devised her own setting, a mixture of Oriental art and art nouveau. Instead of concentrating on the established masters of older schools, although they were not at all excluded, her collection excelled in painters then avant-garde: Courbet, Manet, Degas—and El Greco. The house would have been a fascinating and splendid museum. But Mrs. Havemeyer envisaged broader and more comprehensive surroundings for her collection. For many years she and her husband had favored the Metropolitan Museum with their active interest and important loans, and in 1929 Mrs. Havemeyer bequeathed the greater part of her collection to the Museum. The bequest was justly called by Edward Robinson, then Director, “one of the most magnificent donations ever made to a museum of art.”

Thirty years later James J. Rorimer could write, in his introduction to the second edition of the H. O. Havemeyer Collection catalogue, that it “has grown in significance in the course of the years.”

Most of the great European museums had as nucleus princely collections, which often still constitute their main holdings. The Metropolitan Museum was slowly growing out of its humble beginnings when it received Benjamin Altman’s munificent bequest of paintings and porcelains in 1913. The addition of the Havemeyer donation enabled it to rank with the great. It is almost impossible now to imagine the Museum without the diversified treasures of the Havemeyer collections. With unusual understanding of a museum’s problems, the Havemeyers made no stipulations about displaying the collection in its entirety, apart from the other works in the Museum. Therefore it has been possible to show the individual works of art where they can appear at their best, among

Fig. 1. Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, by Mary Cassatt (1845-1926), American
Lent by J. Watson Webb, Jr.
other objects of their type and their time. This wisdom on the part of the donors thus enriched almost all of the Museum’s departments. Many of the finest and most beautiful objects that attract the visitor’s attention and admiration—whether a Japanese screen, a Whistler etching, a Degas pastel, a Chinese vase, or a famous painting by El Greco or Goya—bear the label: “Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929. The H. O. Havemeyer Collection.”

This magnificent donation also reflects the generosity of the Havemeyer children. After their mother’s death, Horace Havemeyer, Adaline Havemeyer Frelinghuysen, and Electra Havemeyer Webb enlarged the gift with many more items from their own inheritance. After they had selected what they desired to keep, which in terms of today’s less extensive collecting might be called fabulous, there was still enough left of the once immense collection for an auction that lasted four days and included paintings by Courbet, Manet, and Monet.

In this collection the three aspects of size, variety, and quality add to each other. A great deal of credit for it goes to Mrs. Havemeyer, who, in the company of her American painter friend Mary Cassatt, bought so much and so well. Yet one must not forget Mr. Havemeyer, who was just as ardent and determined a collector as his wife. They stimulated and complemented each other in their love of art. Their children, who grew up in a house bursting with treasures and were taken on frequent trips to Europe, became conscious of art quite naturally in their early youth and carried on the responsibility laid upon them by their parents’ achievements. Electra, the youngest, was the only one who inherited their zest for collecting, but in her it took an unexpected turn. It is amusing to speculate upon Mrs. Havemeyer’s reaction when Electra produced one of her first purchases: a carved and painted cigar-store Indian. What must have seemed to Mrs. Havemeyer a youthful whim and folly was the beginning of another great collection, however different in style and purpose from her own. Electra Webb’s now famous collection...
became the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, including, on many acres of land, old houses filled with American arts and crafts, a covered bridge, a lighthouse, and the S.S. "Ticonderoga," the last side-wheeler on Lake Champlain. As foresighted as her parents when they bought Degas bronzes and El Greco's View of Toledo, before such things became unobtainable at any price, Mrs. Webb collected Americana, bought quilts and eagles, houses and bridges when America was just becoming aware of a national heritage, and before its traces began to be destroyed.

On the grounds of the open-air museum in Shelburne, a building will be erected for the paintings Mrs. Webb inherited from her parents. Paintings by Rembrandt and Degas will make curious companions for cigar-store Indians—or at least Mrs. Havemeyer would have thought so. But they will form a link with the older civilization from which the settlers came; they will set off the fresh and natural character of the early days here and stress the history of the new United States.

Until Mrs. Webb’s paintings can be housed in Shelburne, the Electra Havemeyer Webb Fund has generously lent them to the Metropolitan Museum, following the tradition established by Mrs. Havemeyer's gift in 1929. In future years some of them may come to us again during the winter months when more people can see them here than in snowbound Shelburne. They will be shown in our permanent galleries then and will add to the glory of the Havemeyer paintings with which they once before shared the same roof.

Some of them are known to the public from last summer’s loan exhibition; others have been added for this special exhibit by Mrs. Webb’s children, Mrs. Dunbar W. Bostwick and J. Watson Webb, Jr. The illustrations shown here reproduce some of the high points of the collection. Of particular interest is a portrait of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer (Figure 1) by her friend and adviser Mary Cassatt. A robust, energetic woman, Mrs. Havemeyer was gifted with a taste as catholic as it was refined and—we can judge even better now—as profound as it was prophetic.

Miss Cassatt probably drew Mrs. Havemeyer’s attention to Degas, but after that no persuasion seems to have been necessary, for the Museum received from the Havemeyer collection forty-two paintings, pastels, drawings, and prints by Degas and seventy-one of his bronzes, an almost complete set. Many more works by Degas remained in the family, and the pastel now on loan...
to the Museum (Figure 2) is one of his finest, showing his sensitive vision of space and his exquisitely refined drawing. The rich representation of Degas in the Havemeyer collection was equalled by the examples of Courbet's and Manet's work. The Museum's unique assemblage of early figure paintings by Manet is mainly due to the Havemeyer bequest. While no Manet still life came with the bequest, The Salmon (Figure 3) now on loan from Mrs. Webb's collection has the characteristic qualities of still lifes by Manet: the material aspects of objects represented at their fullest, imbued with unalterable serenity of existence, and the beautiful handling of paint.

The somberness of black and shadows, the magical ambiguity of distance and presence, in Rembrandt's portrait of a Young Man in a Broad-brimmed Hat (Figure 4) might have fascinated a painter like Manet as it did Mrs. Havemeyer. We do not know who the sitter was, but his portrait will be as much at home among the masterpieces of the Metropolitan Museum as it will be at Shelburne, soberly contemplating the artifacts of hard-working honest people like himself.

The only painting added to the collection by Mrs. Webb after Mrs. Havemeyer's death is Ben Marshall's Huntsman and Hounds (Figure 5). Besides being one of the finest works by this accomplished British painter of sporting pictures, it is a reflection of Mrs. Webb's active outdoor life and of the passion for hunting that she shared with her husband.

This special loan exhibition is not, perhaps, so much a testimonial to Electa Havemeyer Webb herself—for her true memorial lies in Shelburne—as a tribute to the whole Havemeyer family, whose ideals, taste, and perspicacity have so nobly enriched the culture of our city and our country.

*Fig. 5. Huntsman and Hounds, by Ben Marshall (1767-1835), British
Lent by the Electra Havemeyer Webb Fund*