Chapter 6

Patrons of the Arts

Conspicuous consumption was considered to be the norm for the monied classes during the so-called Gilded Age between the 1870s and World War I, and the collecting of fine arts was one way to gain praise and prestige among one’s peers. Art historian Lisa Dickinson Michaux developed this concept by stating that:

For Gilded Age millionaires, art collecting became a favorite pastime, whether or not they actually liked art; some simply enjoyed the excitement of hunting down rare and valuable treasures. European art, in particular, helped to establish the collector as cultured and linked him or her to the historical past. In addition, the industrialists often viewed art as an investment that would increase in value. In the homes of the wealthy, private art galleries became highly desirable status symbols. While some of the largest collections were in New York City, substantial collections sprang up in cities as far afield as Pittsburgh, Chicago, Sacramento and Portland.85

Does this insight apply in the Twin Cities? Two men: capitalists, philanthropists, art collectors, and organizers of art institutions, were instrumental in the development of the fine arts in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Their collections were different in scope and number, but both men willingly lent to local exhibitions and welcomed visitors to their home galleries. They were Thomas Barlow Walker and James J. Hill.

Thomas B. Walker

Thomas Barlow Walker (1840-1927), one of America’s ten wealthiest men at the turn of the twentieth century, earned his money through ownership of timberlands and lumbering. The first record of an art purchase by Walker, dated June 5, 1878, was a receipt for the purchase of “a Rembrandt Peale Picture of George Washington,” for the sum of $250.86 Beginning at that time he purchased a number of paintings, sculptures and chromolithographs for his home on Hennepin Avenue at Eighth Street, in Minneapolis. Shortly thereafter he was to acquire important landscapes, portraits and paintings, including works by such renowned artists as Thomas Cole, Rembrandt Peale and George Inness. In 1879 Walker built a sky-lit gallery adjoining his residence. This was the first art gallery west of the Mississippi river and the first public art gallery in Minnesota.87 Entrance to the gallery was free to visitors.
One of T. B. Walker’s more important early acquisitions was an 1889 painting by Jules Breton (1827-1906), titled *L’appel du soir*. It was purchased in 1889 from M. Knoedler & Co. for $18,000. A nineteenth-century realist painter, Breton’s works were often views of the French countryside. According to Janet Lynn Whitmore, “Breton’s reputation in the art world is at its peak at this time...” and Walker’s purchase “is reflected by his increasing willingness to spend substantial sums for his art collection.”

The M. Knoedler & Co. was at the time one of the largest firms dealing in fine arts. It was the principal supplier of paintings to many of the elite collectors in the East, as well as to Walker and James J. Hill. Marketing “the tried-and-true in French or French inspired paintings,” Knoedler in effect became the taste-maker of what was then popular to collect, especially if one could not afford the Old Masters. Works by Corot and Bouguereau were especially favored.

T. B. Walker lent six pictures to the “Loan Exhibition of Selected Works of Old and Modern Masters” held at the Art Institute of Chicago from January 1 through...
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January 23, 1898. His loans were among others from the elite of Chicago, including Potter Palmer, William O. Cole, Martin Ryerson and R. H. McCormick. Works which Walker lent were by Bouguereau, Boulanger, Hogarth, Demont-Breton, Bol and Crome. After the exhibit closed, the secretary of the Art Institute of Chicago wrote to Walker: “A vote of thanks to you was unanimously passed for the loan of your valuable pictures for the recent exhibit of Select Works of Modern and Ancient Masters, one of the choicest collections ever exhibited in Chicago.”

Fig. 6.2 T. B. Walker residence, 803 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, 1889. His initial art gallery is attached to the residence at the left side. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center.

Fig. 6.3 New Art gallery adjoining T. B. Walker residence, on the right side. Further additions resulted in seven gallery rooms by 1913. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center.
A contemporary (1899) description of Walker’s home gallery from *Brush & Pen* magazine is of interest:

The entrance is through the house — a flight of steps, covered with a rich rug, leading to it from the drawing room. In the first and second rooms, which are separated from each other by an archway, are hung the larger pictures of his collection. In a third room, which can be shut off at pleasure, are a number of smaller and even more highly prized paintings by such artists as Rousseau, Corot, Cazin, Turner, Hogarth, Sir Thomas Lawrence, and others. Opening from this room is still another, called the bronze room, where Mr. Walker has a large collection of rare and costly bronze vases, and a case of curious and valuable articles of Chinese workmanship — crystal snuff-bottles and small intricate carvings in ivory.... Each room has a skylight and is furnished with a row of electric lights and reflectors, so that the lighting is as perfect as possible. Exquisite Oriental rugs are scattered over the floors and thrown over the divans.92

Walker’s galleries were not illuminated or furnished in any significant manner different from counterpart private galleries in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Boston

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*Fig. 6.4 Interior view of the T. B. Walker art collection, circa 1915, showing the succession of galleries. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center.*
or New York. Likewise, his artwork was initially hung in similar fashion to those galleries and, indeed, to public museums of the times. Quantity rather than quality was displayed, according to art historian Janet Whitmore, in a hodgepodge patchwork.93

As noted from the illustrations, Walker’s paintings were exhibited in various levels, from the floor to nearly the ceiling, with very little space between the frames. For visitors of that era this sort of display was the norm and presumably was to them visually appealing. As time went on, and working with the curator, Reuben H. Adams, a more organized, coherent approach to exhibiting was followed. Paintings were eventually grouped by stylistic categories or by individual artists. No rails or barriers separated the art works from the public.94

Noted in the bottom row of the ladies’ portrait alcove is Hogarth’s Portrait of his Wife. William Hogarth (1697-1764) was an English portrait painter, pictorial satirist and editorial cartoonist. Arranging together women’s portraits could have been simply an effort by Walker to gather similar subject matter in a single location. There may be a better reason, however, for this specialization. The nineteenth century, as art historian Gabriel Weisberg wrote, was a period of change in women’s lives, as shown in art and elsewhere. By the 1890s women who had once been confined to the home, were seen in public everywhere – from the tennis courts to advertisements in magazines and on posters.95 Women then were seeking greater economic and educational opportunities, as well as the right to vote. Among Walker’s portrait collection were women whose status came from birth or marriage, but among the more recent were, for example, actresses and painters.

One of the most effective tools which Walker used to inform and educate the public about his collection was the printed catalogue. Specially noted are his catalogues dated 1902, 1907, and 1912 in the time frame we are considering. Walker did not charge a fee for these catalogues.96

Two well known connoisseurs from the Philadelphia Art Club, John H. McFadden and Albert Hetherington, visited Minneapolis in 1912. The New York Sun reported that:

...to the amazement of the two Philadelphians, instead of the usual local gallery filled with copies or indifferent specimens bearing great names, they found a gallery literally crammed with distinguished pictures and fine old Chinese porcelains. The catalogue of the paintings numbers over 300. Truly an amazing gathering, one that reflects high and varied artistic tastes. Yet how many know the Walker gallery?97

A Norwegian artist, Carl L. Boeckmann (1867-1923), who settled in Minneapolis in 1905, was an assistant to Reuben Adams in the Walker Gallery. He also was commissioned to paint portraits of Blackfoot Indians, some of whom posed in
Fig. 6.5 Interior view of the T. B. Walker collection, circa 1915, showing the first large gallery. Seated is Reuben H. Adams, the first gallery curator. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center.

Fig. 6.6 Ladies portrait alcove, T.B. Walker Gallery, circa 1914. Courtesy of the Walker Art Center.
Walker’s gallery. These portraits, along with those of Henry H. Cross (discussed below) formed a part of Walker’s important Indian portrait collection.  
Walker also obtained for his collections a selection of works from Henry Lewis, discussed previously, an early artist whose oil paintings dealt with mid-western forts, Indians, and scenery of historical interest.
Walker was fond of publishing accolades about his collections, and did so in the various catalogues of his collections. One such comment, by David Starr Jordan, the first president of California’s Stanford University, said:

I do not profess to be an art critic, but I have seen miles of pictures in my time, at home and abroad, in public and private collections, but of all the galleries that I have seen, without exception, a large part of the pictures should be turned face to the wall. I have examined every picture in this collection and there is not one that needs disturbing, and it is the only gallery of the kind that I have ever seen, and stands the highest as a collection of art.

Walker’s collecting interests continued to expand, and eventually included galleries of miniatures, Asian porcelains and jade, and ladies’ portraits, as well as Native American artifacts from the Southwest.

Over time Walker made a very generous donation of his religious art to the Hennepin Avenue Methodist Church, located across the street from the present-day Walker Art Center. Included among the many canvases were those by
Washington Allston, Lucas Van Leyden, Giovanni Tiepolo, Benjamin West, and Jacobi Tintoretto. Later research has indicated that a number of these donated works were incorrectly attributed.

Walker also planned, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish a museum of American history in Minneapolis. He commissioned artist Henry H. Cross (1837-1918), to portray famous Indians and famous Indian fighters and scenes in which historic Western events occurred. For a time Henry Cross had a studio in Minneapolis to carry out this project. Cross had previously concerned himself with portraying the Sioux people; his first connection with Minnesota was his painting of each of the Indians sentenced to death for their participation in the Sioux Uprising of 1862. Buffalo Bill Cody called Cross “the greatest painter of Indian portraiture of all times.” In the course of his “Wild West” shows Cody had become acquainted with many of the subjects of the portraits of Cross and, as such, would have been familiar with the accuracy of these canvases.

In this regard The Walker Galleries Catalogue wryly notes that

Buffalo Bill, after enumeration of a great number of the Indians whose portraits, by Mr. H. H. Cross he saw in the collection, says ‘I knew these men personally and intimately, and the portraits of these people are true to life. I have Yellow Hand’s scalp.’

Fig. 6.8 Henry H. Cross with Native American portraits, circa 1905. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.
The Cross collection of paintings would, it was hoped, become the nucleus of such materials in the new museum. No further mention of this plan is noted in the records. Reuben H. Adams, the T. B. Walker curator, published a catalogue of the H. H. Cross Indian Portraits in 1927, which illustrated each of the portraits. The resulting collection, known as the Cross Native American portraits, was later sold and is now in the Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The goal of T. B. Walker was to have his comprehensive collection of art become a public museum in Minneapolis. The mayor and the city council would not agree, however, to fund such a museum. Some years later, 1927, the Walker Art Center formally opened its new building on Hennepin Avenue, and exhibited some, but not nearly all of Walker’s collection. Walker Art Center curators through time also determined that a number of paintings in Walker’s collection were not correctly attributed. The Center was to later change its focus, and its collection eventually was concentrated on modern, contemporary art.

The great majority of the paintings, sculpture and miniatures in the Walker collection were disposed of by the Walker Art Center in auction sales later in the twentieth century, at Parke Bernet Galleries, the New York City Gimbel Brothers Department Store, and Sotheby’s. The Chinese Jade collection eventually entered the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

What is the legacy of T. B. Walker? Art historian Janet Lynn Whitmore writes that “...he possessed a very specific aesthetic ideal, focused on the importance of rural life and values and on the beauty of the natural world. Secondary to that was his firm belief that an art collection should encompass cultural history and be useful in educating the ordinary person.”

Walker stated in his eighty-seventh year that “…the public has always been made to feel that the gallery belongs to it and that all are welcome to view the objects of art I have collected. ...the fact that so many have enjoyed visiting my galleries is one of my great compensations now that I am an old man.”

James J. Hill

James J. Hill (1838-1916) immigrated to St. Paul from Canada in 1856 and engaged in various freight-related businesses. By 1893 his Great Northern Railroad ran as far west as Puget Sound in the state of Washington, and was hugely successful. In 1881 Hill became interested in art, and in 1883 he added an art gallery onto his house at Ninth and Canada streets. Hill carefully recorded his art purchases between 1881 and 1915, the year of his death, disclosing a list of 285 paintings and pastels representing the work of 128 different artists.
Conspicuous consumption was not the only motivation for art collecting by James J. Hill. While T. B. Walker was interested in the subject matter of art, Hill’s interest also stemmed from his attempts to understand it in practice. Hill’s obituary in the *New York Times* said in this regard that:

> It was not generally known that he was a fair artist himself. He would take his brushes and palette, and with a keen sense of the values of light, shade, coloring and perspective, would turn out a very fair painting. When he was a boy in the Quaker school in Rockwood, Canada, he used to draw and make copies of famous engravings and paintings.107

In 1883 Hill spent $66,500 for thirty-four paintings. His acquisitions in succeeding years were works by contemporary European artists, purchased primarily from prominent New York art dealers, including M. Knoedler & Company, and Samuel P. Avery. When the Hill family left Lowertown for their new mansion at 240 Summit Avenue, completed in 1889, an art gallery was ready for the art collection.

For this new space Hill formed a collection of work by the French artists Corot, Millet, Rousseau, Delacroix, and Courbet. In 1891, for example, he spent $123,000 on twenty-four paintings.108 The public was always admitted to...
view the collection, which was open six days each week, but until 1894 it was necessary to ring the doorbell to gain entry to the gallery.\textsuperscript{109} For a time Hill had an apartment in Paris from which he furthered his art collecting interests.

As stated in Henry Fuller’s satirical novel, \textit{With the Procession (1895)}, owning a work by Jean Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875) was a status symbol: “people of our position would naturally be expected to have a Corot.”\textsuperscript{110} Hill’s collection eventually contained at least 18 paintings by Corot.\textsuperscript{111}

Describing the Hill home gallery, the French writer Paul Bourget said in 1895:

\begin{quote}
The gallery of paintings which it contains is mentioned in the guide books. Pictures, everywhere. Corots of the highest beauty... a colossal Courbet, the \textit{Convulsionnaires} of Delacroix, and a view of the Coast of Morocco before which I stood long, as in a dream, I saw the canvas years ago. I have sought for it since in hundreds of public and private museums, finding no book which could inform me who was its present possessor, and I find it here...\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}
Fig. 6.11 Residence of James J. Hill, at 240 Summit Avenue, St. Paul. The art gallery is at the left side of the residence. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Fig. 6.12 Ticket to home art gallery of James J. Hill at 240 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, circa 1900. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.
At the present time the Minnesota Historical Society owns and operates the Hill residence for public tours and events. The art gallery is currently used for the display of the Society’s own collection of Minnesota art.

Hill was public-spirited and generous. He lent works to the Minneapolis Public Library upon its opening in 1889, to the St. Paul Public Library in 1901, and to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1904. He gave substantial financial support to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts on its opening in 1914. He died in 1915 without leaving a will. His second son, Louis Hill, Sr., took on the task of dividing the art collection among the heirs. After the collection was appraised, Louis divided the oil paintings into six equal lots based upon monetary valuation, one lot each for his mother, himself, and his siblings. In this manner the remaining paintings in Hill’s collection, 83 pieces in all, passed to his descendants and they, in turn, were very generous in donating various works to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. By 1973 twenty-two works of art, including ones by Courbet, Delacroix, and Corot, had been donated by Hill family members. Two of these paintings, donated by Jerome Hill, had hung in the 1838 Salon, and could not have been more different. According to curators Gregory Hedberg and Marion Hirshler of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Corot’s huge (97 ½ by 70 ½ inches) Silenus (1838), took a story from Greek antiquity as told by Virgil and gave it almost a ballet treatment. These curators also noted that Eugene Delacroix’s Fanatics of Tangier, painted in 1838, was based on contemporary Morocco, a view of street violence which the painter had witnessed. Both paintings seem far removed from Hill’s usual selections for his collection.

James J. Hill purchased as a group fifty-six watercolor paintings, by Seth Eastman (1808-1875) during the five year period when Eastman was preparing illustrations for Henry R. Schoolcraft’s notable work, History, Conditions and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States (1851-1857). Eastman’s small watercolor paintings were then reproduced as engravings and colored lithographs in the six volume history. The original sketches for these paintings were made at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, between 1841 and 1848. According to art historian Jennifer Jane Marshall, Eastman’s works were said to differ from the ethnographic documenting of a vanishing race by his contemporary George Catlin since, frequently, “these small works aren’t really ethnography, but more properly genre scenes.” Following Hill’s death in 1915 the watercolors were donated to the James Jerome Hill Reference Library in St. Paul. Hill had built this library during his last years, to house his books and smaller collections.

Louis Hill, Sr., who succeeded his father as president of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific railroads, clearly shared his father’s interest in art. He created, in effect, the first Minnesota corporate art collection by commissioning works from such well-known artists as John Fery, Elsa Jemne and Winold Reiss, for use in railroad stations, national park hotels, and in tourism advertising. These commissioned paintings were usually based upon portraits of Native
Americans and landscape scenes in areas through which the railroad traveled.\textsuperscript{119} John Fery (1854-1934), for example, worked for Louis Hill between 1910 and 1913, completing 347 often very large paintings, for which he was paid $31.70 each. Hill provided Fery lodging and a studio in the Seymour Hotel and an annual salary of $2,400.\textsuperscript{120}
In 1958 the Minneapolis Institute of Arts held a loan exhibition of paintings and sculpture from Hill’s collection, then in the collections of his heirs. This event was an attempt to re-assess the scope of Hill’s collection.

Comparing the Collections of Walker and Hill

Why did the art collections of James J. Hill and T. B. Walker differ so markedly? Both were self-made men of enormous wealth who began collecting in middle-age. Neither man had the advantage of a classical education or, in fact, schooling beyond the elementary level. Neither man made a practice of traveling abroad where he could have examined art in its cultural context. Both had available to them their choice of dealers and advisers, both local and in such cities as New York and Boston. And the fine art collecting of both men has been extensively documented, based on the records of purchases and sales which they themselves maintained.

James J. Hill clearly was assisted in his selection of art by the dealers whom he frequented, but his taste in art was seemingly motivated by what he liked. He had a home gallery and he filled it with works of art by the Barbizon painters. As the proprietor of a hobby farm he enjoyed scenes of rural life.

T. B. Walker on the other hand was perhaps motivated, as the years passed, by his desire to leave for posterity a museum devoted to his collection. This necessitated the acquisition of an enormously wider spectrum of the fine arts, from Asian to European, and in a variety of media (sculptures, paintings, ceramics and miniatures). He also commissioned art by contemporary artists (Cross, Boeckmann, and Harnett) as he sought to assemble an even more comprehensive collection.

The families of both men continued to be interested in art, as collectors, donors, museum trustees, and in the case of Hudson B. Walker, as a museum administrator. T. B. Walker’s son, Archie, also used his business position to give America one of its most widely-known commercial icons. The Red River Lumber Company (T. B. Walker’s principal firm) introduced the figure of logging great Paul Bunyan. An American folklore figure, Paul Bunyan was first drawn by W. B. Laughead, a Walker cousin, in 1915.