



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Before the “Mellon Gallery”: Toward an American National Gallery of Art, 1811–1937

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This dissertation considers three collectors whose donations mark important stages in the development of the first National Gallery of Art under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, from its legal inception in 1906 to its change of name in 1937. It looks at the roles played by Harriet Lane Johnston (1830–1903), Ralph Cross Johnson (1843–1923), and John Gellatly (1852–1931) in the creation of what is today the Smithsonian American Art Museum. I will analyze each donor’s motivation for collecting, approach and method to building a collection, and rationale for donation to national museum.

My project places the actions of these three donors within the broader context of the history of collecting in America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Close study of selected paintings from their collections will determine provenance, the basis for attribution at the time, as well as current critical opinion. I will review this information with an eye to these artists’ popularity in the art market at the turn of the century as recorded in sales catalogs and annual reviews of works sold in America and abroad. I will also examine the choice to bequeath or donate these collections to the nation rather than to a private art institution as it relates to the artistic, intellectual, and nationalistic movement toward an American National Gallery of Art in the nineteenth century.

My goal with this project is to determine the factors contributing to the need for a National Gallery of Art, the role of specific donors in shaping the political and cultural responsibilities of such an institution, and the fate of their actions in modern art history.