

# The Frick Collection: A Legacy of Beauty



MICHAEL BODYCOMB

THE FRICK COLLECTION IN NEW YORK CITY is renowned both for one of the world's great collections of fine and decorative arts and for its extraordinary research library for art history. Founded by Henry Clay Frick (1849–1919), a Pittsburgh coke and steel industrialist, the Collection opened to the public in 1935 and offers its visitors a stunning array of Old Masters in the opulent residential setting of a Gilded Age mansion. Among other treasures, the Collection includes a superb painting by Giovanni Bellini (*Figure 1*), three by Vermeer, an exquisite Rembrandt self-portrait of 1658, Fragonard's *Progress of Love*, and some of the finest Renaissance bronzes ever cast. Visitors come from around the world to enjoy not only the masterpieces that hang on its walls, but the contemplative ambience that sets it apart from other museums and cultural

*Figure 1.* Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516), *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1480, tempera and oil on poplar panel, The Frick Collection

institutions. While the Collection retains the atmosphere of a distant age, recent years have seen a dramatic growth in the number of special exhibitions presented, including the critically acclaimed *Whistler, Women, and Fashion* (2003), *Memling's Portraits* (2005), *Goya's Last Works* (2006), *Jean-Étienne Liotard: Swiss Master* (2006), *George Stubbs: A Celebration* (2007), and, most recently, *Gabriel de Saint-Aubin*. Beginning October 15, the Frick will present the first monographic exhibition ever dedicated to Andrea Riccio (1470–1532), one of the greatest—and least known—bronze sculptors of the Renaissance. In late October, the



Figure 2. Majolica dish with a scene of the Judgment of Paris after Raphael, probably from the Urbino workshop of Orazio Fontana or his nephew Flaminio Fontana, c. 1565–75, tin-glazed earthenware, The Frick Collection, gift of Diane Modestini

Collection will present five masterpieces of European painting from the highly acclaimed Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, marking the beginning of a series of reciprocal loan exchanges between the two institutions. These and other special exhibitions—often inspired by works from the permanent collection—contribute to making the Frick what many have called “everyone’s favorite museum.”

Adjacent to the museum is the Frick Art Reference Library, founded in 1920 by Henry Frick’s daughter Helen Clay Frick. Today, with a photographic archive of more than one million documented images of European and American art from the fourth to the mid-twentieth century, many of which have rarely, if ever, been reproduced elsewhere, the Library serves an international community of scholars, art historians, curators, and dealers. The Library has an unparalleled collection of auction catalogues from the seventeenth century to the present day, as well as a rich array of archival materials and special collections; together, these resources make the Library a preeminent center for the object-based study of painting, sculpture, and decorative arts in the Western tradition. Last year, the Library established the Center for the History of Collecting in America. Interest in the history of art collecting in this country has grown steadily in recent years, and the Center facilitates serious research on American collectors, dealers, and museums through programs that include fellowships, symposia and colloquia, university seminars, and the creation of research tools.

Henry Clay Frick grew up in the vicinity of Pittsburgh. From an early age he was interested in art, and his acquisitions over a span of forty years show an evolving knowledge

and discernment. After concentrating initially on contemporary American artists, Salon pictures, and works by the Barbizon school (many of which now hang at the Frick Art and Historical Center in Pittsburgh), he purchased his first Old Master paintings around the turn of the last century. In the next decade he acquired many of the extraordinary works that form the core of the collection as we see it today.

At his death in 1919, Frick bequeathed his New York residence and the finest of his many artworks to establish a public gallery for the purpose of “encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts.” Chief among his bequests—which also included sculpture, drawings, prints, furniture, porcelains, enamels, rugs, and silver—were one hundred and thirty-one paintings. While the museum did not open to the public until 1935 (four years after the death of Mrs. Frick, in 1931), the Board of Trustees began to acquire works for the museum in 1924. By the end of 1935 they had purchased nine paintings, among them Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s 1845 *Comtesse d’Haussonville* (Figure 3), which was acquired in 1927. Described by Charles Baudelaire the year it was painted as a work “of profound voluptuousness,” Ingres’s portrait of the twenty-seven-year-old Louise, Princesse de Broglie (1818–1882),

Figure 3. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), *Comtesse d’Haussonville*, signed and dated 1845, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection





MICHAEL BODYCOMB

Figure 4. Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi (1656–1740), *Pietà with Two Mourning Putti*, probably 1715, terracotta on original ebony base, The Frick Collection, gift of The Quentin Foundation

ranks among the artist's greatest achievements. It was the focus of a 1985 exhibition at the Frick and was featured in the 2006 retrospective at the Musée du Louvre in Paris. One of the Collection's signature works, the *Comtesse d'Haussonville* is a favorite of museum visitors, art historians, and artists alike.

From 1919 to 1961, Helen Clay Frick served as the chairman of the Collection's acquisitions committee. Under her leadership, a total of thirty-seven works were purchased by the trustees from an endowment provided by the founder and from gifts and bequests. Over the last several decades, new works added through the generosity of a number of benefactors continue to augment the Frick's holdings. In 2005, Henry Clay Frick II and his wife, Emily, gave the Collection two superb sixteenth-century Limoges painted enamel plaques from the workshop of Pierre Reymond, *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* and *The Mocking of Christ*. In 2006, three important acquisitions were made by



MICHAEL BODYCOMB

Figure 5. Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), *Madame His*, 1775, marble, The Frick Collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Victor Thaw



Figure 6. Claude Michel (1738–1814), known as Clodion, *The Dance of Time: Three Nymphs Supporting a Clock by Lepaute*, 1788, terracotta, brass, gilt brass, silvered brass, steel, and glass, The Frick Collection, purchased with funds from the Winthrop Edey Bequest

gift and by purchase. The Quentin Foundation gave *Pietà with Two Mourning Putti* (Figure 4), a masterpiece of Florentine baroque sculpture by Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi. Made during the early eighteenth century, when Soldani was at the height of his fame as a bronze sculptor, the *Pietà* is one of four surviving versions by the artist and the only one that omits the mourning Virgin. It is his simplest treatment of the subject, a work of powerfully distilled emotional intensity. Although a highly finished model, intended for translation into more permanent bronze, the *Pietà* was made when terracottas were beginning their eighteenth-century revival as an independent art form. Some of Soldani's rare terracottas survive because the sculptor himself gave them to highly regarded patrons. The clay captured the inventive movements of his hand, and they were valued as precious examples of artistic creativity.

Joining the Frick's outstanding ensemble of portrait busts is the stunningly elegant marble depiction of Madame His (Figure 5), by the great eighteenth-century French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, an artist whose work was admired both by Henry Clay Frick and his daughter Helen Clay Frick. The bust is a gift from the noted art dealer, collector,



Figure 7. Edmund Charles Tarbell (1862–1938), *Henry Clay Frick and Daughter Helen*, c. 1910, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.; photograph courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution / Art Resource, NY

and philanthropist Eugene Victor Thaw and his wife, Clare, and represents Marie Anne Damaris Dumoustier de Vastre, the wife of bourgeoisie German banker Pierre-François His, who lived and worked in Paris. Houdon was on close terms with his subject, whom he presents in an elongated, draped bust format, terminating at the waist and set atop a pedestal, a composition that was little known at the time and was likely inspired by the portrait busts of Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne. The vast amount of choice marble needed to create such a representation suggests that the work was a commissioned piece. *Madame His's* charming face, her elaborate upswept coiffure—which spills into a seductive tendril down her bare right shoulder—and the revealing neckline of her chemise imbue the piece with a sensuality and warmth that transcends the lustrous marble from which she is crafted. This exquisite work joins four others by Houdon in the permanent collection, in addition to Houdon's poignant relief, *La Grive Morte* (*The Dead Thrush*), presently on loan from The Horvitz Collection, Boston.

Also in 2006, the Frick purchased *The Dance of Time, Three Nymphs Supporting a Clock by Lepaute* (Figure 6), a



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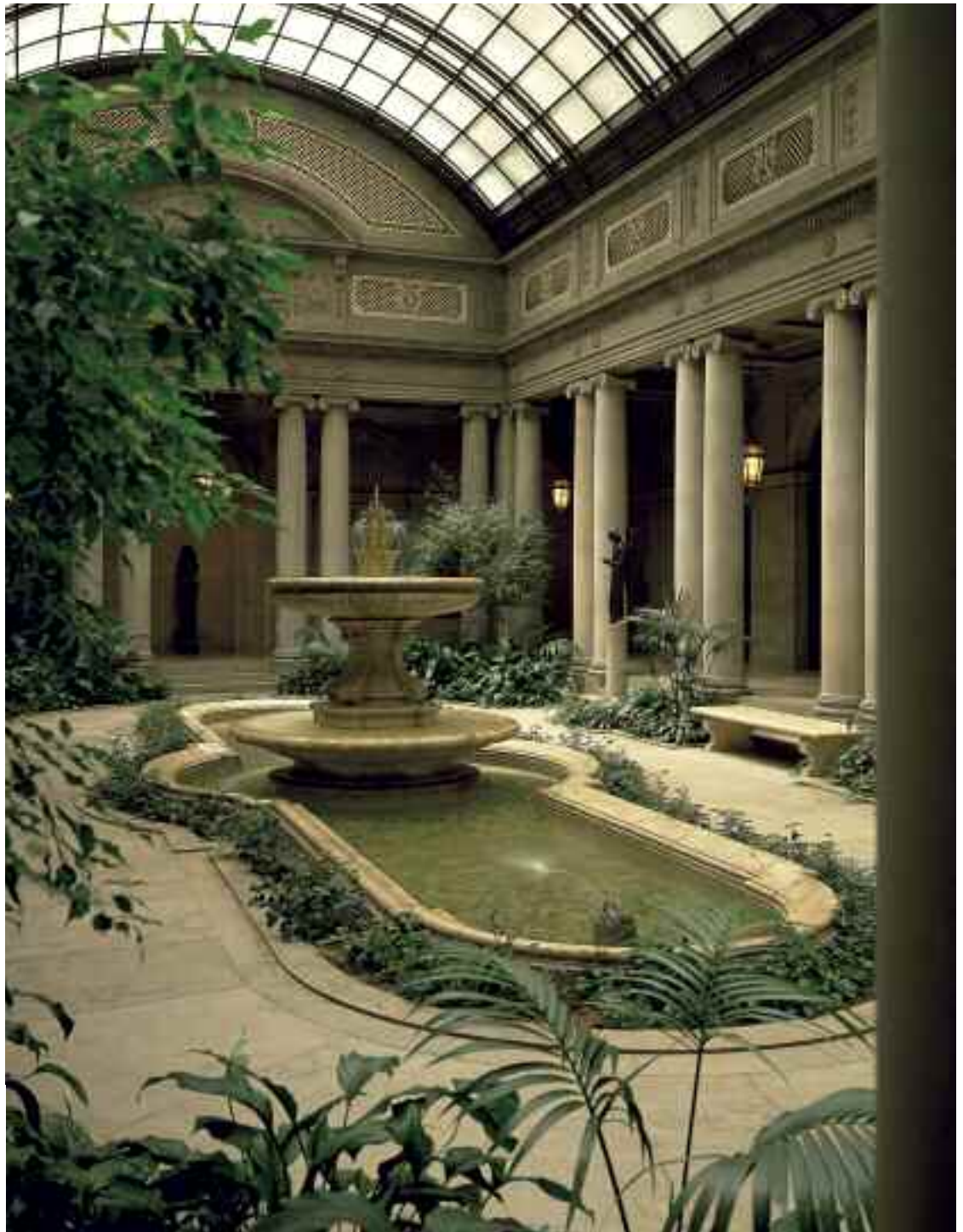
*Figure 8.*  
Main entrance of The  
Frick Collection

*Figure 9.*  
Western exterior of  
The Frick Collection

*Figure 10.*  
The Reading Room of  
the Frick Art Reference  
Library

*Right:*

*Figure 11.* The Garden  
Court of The Frick  
Collection



JOHN BIGELOW TAYLOR

masterpiece that beautifully harmonizes sculpture and clock design. Executed in 1788 by Clodion, one of the most inventive and technically gifted sculptors of the second half of the eighteenth century, the base features three terracotta nymphs, coiffed and draped in the antique manner, dancing around a fluted column that supports a gilt-brass pendulum clock by Jean-Baptiste Lepaute, a clockmaker to Louis XVI. Purchased with funds from the Winthrop Edey Bequest, the work was cleaned in preparation for its debut in the

galleries, and the Lepaute clock is now in running order following conservation. When the clock chimes its hours, delicate bell-like sounds give voice to the nymphs' dance and celebrate this brilliant conceptual marriage of art and science.

Most recently, the collection received a beautiful example of Italian Renaissance majolica, a dish showing a scene of the Judgment of Paris after Raphael (*Figure 2*). The flat rim and the shallow inner wall are painted with delicate



MICHAEL BODYCOMB

grotesques on a whitened ground. This type of grotesque decoration, known as “a raffaellesca” style, appeared in the ceramics workshops of Urbino in the early 1560s and soon became fashionable among the Italian aristocracy. Probably from the workshop of Orazio Fontana or his nephew Flaminio Fontana, the dish illustrates the technical and artistic excellence reached in the Fontana workshop during the third quarter of the sixteenth century. The dish, which once belonged to the Rothschild family, is the generous gift of Diane Modestini and is a wonderful addition to the Collection.

It was the intention of its founder that The Frick Collection would evolve over time. Indeed, these new acquisitions, along with loans and special exhibitions, enliven the galleries while enhancing the visitor’s experience and providing opportunities for furthering scholarship. As The Frick Collection anticipates its second century, the institution and those who love it are deeply indebted to the foresight of Henry Clay Frick and his daughter along with countless other generous donors who, over the years and going forward, seek to reaffirm Frick’s gift to New York of a legacy of beauty.

*The Frick Collection is located at 1 East 70th Street and the Frick Art Reference Library at 10 East 71st Street, New York City. For more information, please visit the Frick’s Web site at [www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org).*

Figure 12. The Living Hall of The Frick Collection

Figure 13. The Fragonard Room of The Frick Collection, following recent conservation and the installation of a new lighting system



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