

The Art Institute of Chicago

Chauncey McCormick: Some Recollections

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Source: *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Nov. 15, 1954), pp. 61-67

Published by: [The Art Institute of Chicago](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4112665>

Accessed: 31/07/2014 12:45

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CHAUNCEY McCORMICK: Some Recollections

Long before he became President of the Art Institute in 1944, Chauncey McCormick stepped in and took a leading role in affairs of the museum. "Stepped in" is perhaps the wrong expression. Rather from the moment he was named a Trustee in 1925 his outstanding gifts of energy, tact and imagination were felt by the Board and he quickly grew to be an invaluable figure in our institution. With all his activities, which varied from child welfare to toll roads and the concern for the blind, I have an idea that his part in the Art Institute gave him the deepest satisfaction. Or is this only an illusion? Perhaps every committee or agency which he served was made to feel the same thing. For he had an uncommon gift of throwing himself completely into any cause he believed in.

He was brought up in an atmosphere which recognized art as one of the responsibilities of the cultivated man. His father-in-law, Charles Deering, was a pioneer American collector, seeking out and buying El Grecos, Goyas, Spanish primitives and baroque decoration, long before these were recognized in the United States. He saw Mr. Deering create a beautiful *palacio* in Sitges in Valencia and when it was suddenly decided to bring the collection home, he helped to arrange for its exit in face of a protesting government which intended that Marycel, the Deering house, should remain a Spanish museum. One can imagine the diplomacy and skill necessary to pry these treasures loose. But diplomacy and skill were parts of Chauncey McCormick's nature and the Charles Deering Collection landed triumphantly in Florida.

Once there, Mr. McCormick persuaded the owners to lend it to Chicago. For this was one of his strong beliefs, that great works belonged

to the public. They should be shared rather than privately enjoyed. And so he and Mrs. McCormick and Mrs. McCormick's sister, Mrs. Richard Ely Danielson, in time presented some of the greatest pieces to the Institute. Today one journeys to Chicago to see the Martorell, "St. George and the Dragon" or El Greco's "St. Martin" or the unique Ayala retable or the marvelous needlework altarpiece from the distant cathedral of Burgo de Osma.

Not in time but in sympathy he belonged to that generation of Chicagoans who had the highest ambitions for the city. As a young man he had been a friend of the Ryersons and the Hutchinsons and other leading citizens who wanted Chicago known for its culture as well as for its stockyards. The "I Will" slogan meant for them the will to create universities, museums and symphony orchestras. He often spoke to me of their vision, of their untiring efforts to bring the best to the Mid-West. They inspired him to carry on where they left off and they in turn sensed in him a man devoted to the same ideal.

In the 1933 Century of Progress, Chauncey McCormick, then a Vice President of the Institute, had the clearest opportunity to serve art on a great public scale. The Fair was about to fumble its official art exhibit. The depression was on with a vengeance and early plans for a grandiose international art exposition had been abandoned. For awhile there was talk of a little art temple, stocked with "popular" pictures that would "pay off"—paintings like "Washington Crossing the Delaware," "The Song of the Lark" and even "September Morn" (if the last could be located!). Mr. McCormick was utterly opposed to such truckling to what might be considered public taste. A Trustee of the Fair as well as of the Institute,

Published quarterly September 15, November 15, February 1, April 1, by The Art Institute of Chicago, Michigan Avenue at Adams Street, Chicago 3, Illinois. Telephone CE 6-7080. Correspondence pertaining to subscriptions may be sent to the Museum Store at that address. Entered as second class matter April 5, 1951 (originally entered January 17, 1918) at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of August 24, 1912. Acceptance for mailing at special rate of postage provided for in section 1103, Act of October 3, 1917, authorized on June 28, 1918. Subscription for the *Quarterly* \$1.00 per year, free to members. Volume XLVIII, Number 4.

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO **Quarterly**



Volume XLVIII • Number 4 • November 15, 1954

he persuaded both Boards to pool their resources and stage a survey of the highest quality at the Art Institute. With the help of Potter Palmer, then our President, with whom he always worked in complete harmony, and under the organizing taste of Robert Harshe, then our Director, the Century of Progress Art Exhibition came into being, a great loan showing of 800 paintings, many of them masterpieces, chosen from twenty-four American museums and over 200 American collections. In all this Mr. McCormick was tireless. Not only did he secure pledges for financial backing (the insurance alone represented a staggering figure) but he used all his persuasion to lure great pictures from reluctant owners. When Mr. Widener demurred at shipping three priceless paintings from his home in Philadelphia, Mr. McCormick arranged a private car on the Pennsylvania Railroad to convey them here. He visited the Louvre and overcame the objections of French officialdom so that they promised to send Whistler's "Mother" to Chicago.

He was not unaware of the publicity value of such stories to the success of the exhibit. He had the surest, most subtle appreciation of public relations. He could think as the public thought without a trace of condescension. He never believed in "playing down" to taste. He had a strong conviction (unshared by many publishers and by most of Hollywood) that Americans deserved and could appreciate the best. But with that best secured, he used dramatic means of attracting public interest. He met Whistler's "Mother" at the railway station, as he would have met another distinguished visitor, and accompanied the picture in an armoured truck to the steps of the Art

On Cover: Chauncey McCormick and Mayor Kennelly admire the flag of Chicago on occasion of its presentation by the Mayor in 1948 to the Art Institute

1. Mr. McCormick and two French visitors (M. Hymans and M. Biquard) during the Century of Progress Art Exhibition in 1933, admiring Daumier's *Uprising*, loaned by Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington

2. A luncheon party during the Century of Progress Art Exhibition; Mr. McCormick, second from right

3. Sir Kenneth Clark, Mrs. McCormick, Mr. McCormick and Lord Inverchapel, British Ambassador to Washington, on opening night, October 15, 1946, of the exhibit, Hogarth, *Constable and Turner*

4. Vincent van Gogh, nephew of the artist, and Mr. McCormick unloading the first case for the great Van Gogh Exhibition, Winter of 1948

1.



2.



3.



4.



Institute. There flash-bulbs exploded and photographers snapped while the case was reverently carried into the building.

Staid Chicagoans were a little shocked but the city was stimulated. And when the Century of Progress Art Exhibition closed its doors some five months later, he had the intense satisfaction of knowing that it had not only been the most superb art showing yet staged in America but that 1,538,103 visitors had passed through the turnstiles. Many of them had come face to face with great art for the first time.

Eleven years later he became our fifth President. Immediately he remarked to me, "I will not interfere with the professional side of the museum. We have a staff of experts and we must respect their judgment." It was a position from which he never deviated. For a man of Chauncey McCormick's wide experience in art this was a remarkable achievement. He was able—as few are—to separate his personal taste from what he believed to be right for a public museum. This attitude was put to considerable test during some of the local squabbles over modern art. I know that he did not care personally for the most extreme experiments in contemporary painting. His own apartment was hung with Goyas and El Grecos; he enjoyed, round him, such painters as Cézanne, Van Gogh, Bonnard and early Picasso, but he never collected the Cubists or Surrealists. He recognized, however, the artist's right to express himself with freedom and believed in the Institute's liberal tradition. He would point with pride to the fact that the Institute hung the first Van Goghs in America and purchased its first Matisse as far back as 1921.

When it came to defending experimentation he spoke out strongly. "We recognize no big movement as a forbidden movement," he told a newspaper critic in 1951. "For us there is no prohibition in art. We want no dictatorship of any sort." In 1949 when United States Representative Dondero of Michigan accused the Institute of Red "isms," he re-

torted "Nuts! The minute we begin to censor the art shown to Chicagoans, we should close our doors." And one of his last generousities was a contribution to the purchase of a great Picasso, "Mother and Child."

This sympathy for the administration of the museum made him remarkably effective as an interpreter of our point of view to the Trustees and to the public. This was more than diplomacy; it was confidence and understanding. Many times I have seen him tackle a problem full of seeming conflicts. He would look all round it to find points of agreement; from there he would proceed with a deft reasonableness to a solution. He tried to know as many of our three hundred employees as possible. He would drop into every department and section of the museum, talking with curators or guards or workmen. At staff parties he appeared with a warm, personal word. He was never too busy to hear a new idea or listen to a complaint. In a complex, revolving institution like ours, this was a rare accomplishment.

All of Mr. McCormick's acumen was needed to negotiate the first loan collection of great paintings from Europe after the war, the memorable exhibit from England of Masterpieces by Hogarth, Constable and Turner. We had discussed the idea and he had the happy thought of broaching the plan at luncheon with Lord Halifax, then British Ambassador to Washington. The Ambassador was instantly impressed but there were tremendous hurdles. We were asking for the loan of the greatest of English treasures, pictures which had never left the walls of the National Collections.

In April, 1946 Mr. and Mrs. McCormick and I went to London. There I saw all of his resources at work. He planned the campaign with great adroitness, enlisting the aid of Mrs. Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, the American Ambassador and a host of friends, both English and American. Endlessly he visited offices in Whitehall; he spent hours with museum directors and board members.

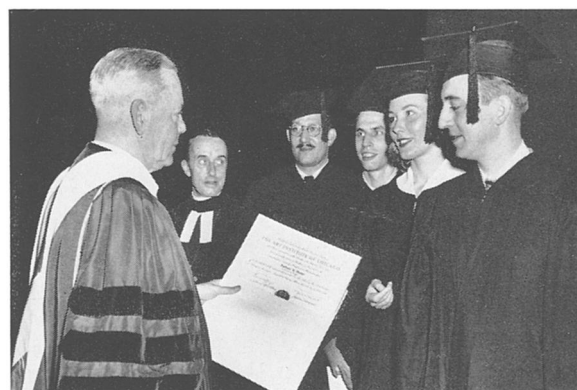
He accomplished all this with grace and humor and ended by practically charming off the walls of Trafalgar Square, Constable's "Hay-Wain" and Hogarth's "Shrimp Girl." Only once did I see him momentarily discomfited. We had gone to call on an important official and Mr. McCormick had preceded me into his presence. A few minutes later I was asked to enter and found that the official, a little like Mussolini, had put Mr. McCormick down on a low sofa while he, a much smaller man, was sitting high at his desk above him, delivering a lengthy lecture on how impossible the whole idea was. But in the end he was no match for Chauncey McCormick. By the end of the hour he was agreeing with much that the President said and his final conversion, two days later, tipped the balance in Chicago's favor.

During the Emergency Campaign I witnessed again and again Mr. McCormick telling the story of our needs to prospective contributors. In the office of corporation chairmen, in the homes of potential donors and before all kinds of groups and meetings he outlined his belief in this institution so warmly and vividly that we usually came away with a pledge. Not the least of his abilities was a flair for writing and speaking. He talked, publicly, with the same informality as he conversed, lighting up his words with wit and charm. Privately, I knew that he worked hard on his speeches, rewriting, rephrasing each point to capture the simplest and most effective way of saying it. Without his captaincy of the Campaign we would never have gone over our goal by some \$100,000.

He could bring home the needs of our Institute so well to everyone because he was a man who deeply loved his city. Though he and Mrs. McCormick had houses in Maine and Florida and a home in Wheaton, he refused to live outside Chicago. He loved to walk its streets, stroll in its parks and watch its growth. Fiercely he belonged to the Midwest and was constantly baiting—in an amusing tone—those Eastern friends who



The German Salt Mine Treasures arrive July 17, 1948. In front row: Brig. Gen. Kenneth Buchanan, Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker, Maj. Gen. Joseph Teece and Mr. McCormick entering the Art Institute



President McCormick presided annually at the Commencement Exercises of the Institute School.

On November 9, 1950 he addressed Members and their guests at gala opening of the Vienna Exhibition



looked upon this part of the country as a dark, uncultured jungle. He irreverently referred to certain Bostonians as "codfish" and was delighted when Londoners found our Chicago accent to their liking. "You don't have," they remarked with typical British candor, "the usual harsh American way of speaking."

His own liveliness created an atmosphere of life in the Institute. From countless visits to orthodox museums he came to dread the stuffed, fixed air of many art galleries.

"I suppose," he once told a distinguished audience, "that the remark we hear most from visitors from other cities is 'How *alive* this place seems.'

"This comes from the fact that mixed up with people looking at our Rembrandts and our Picassos there are students drawing and painting all over the place; there are groups of children asking questions of teachers; there are adults on special gallery tours and sketch classes.

"Not only are people always on the move in the Institute but also the objects of art. We are constantly changing things around, hanging and rehanging our galleries.

"Our vital activity does not always find favor with the fastidious who sometimes sniff at the paint rags or who are jostled by kids with ice-cream cones or candy bars.

"And it does not always please the visitor who expects to find everything in its usual place—as one woman did recently who said plaintively, 'But my mother says the Millet always hangs right there on *that* wall!'

"No, the tradition of this Institute, since the beginning, has been that art is something alive and *going on*, rather than finished and dead.

"If it comes to a choice, we would rather have an art merry-go-round than an art *morgue*."

He liked to wander about the Institute, particularly on Sundays or holidays, watching the crowds, stopping to talk to a visitor now and then. Often the visitor didn't know who he was but felt, somehow, for a moment, there had stood at his side a man who could enthusiastically help him enjoy a great painting or a piece of sculpture.

He loved to bring distinguished guests to the museum and was proudest, perhaps, in telling them how our great collections of

nineteenth century art had been purchased years ago by daring Chicagoans when Renoir and Monet and Degas were little known and valued even in France. Once he was showing our Renoir room to a somewhat top-lofty visitor. "My, my," exclaimed the guest, "all these Renoirs must have cost you a great deal of money." "Oh, no," replied Mr. McCormick. "In Chicago we don't *buy* Renoirs. We inherit them from our grandmothers."

Movie stars, ambassadors, governors, princes, all appreciated his friendliness and enthusiasm as they toured the galleries with him. It is notable that, among the many messages that poured in from all over the world at his death, there was a lengthy personal cable from the Chancellor of West Germany. Mr. McCormick had received Konrad Adenauer last year in the museum and the Chancellor had not forgotten their meeting.

A few weeks before his death he came back from Maine to Chicago for a day or two. I found him excited over the Masterpieces of Religious Art, an exhibition which even in the hot summer days was attracting appreciative crowds. He was full of plans for rebuilding the Institute and ready, as always, to talk of our many problems, some of them budgetary, some of them educational. Throughout shone his cardinal belief that, as he once said in a talk before the Economic Club, "The Art Institute belongs to *all* the people of Chicago. Its Trustees are but the servants of the people, holding these great art treasures in trust for the benefit of our fellow citizens."

It was that firmly held principle which dominated his thought and helped to raise our Institute to the ranks of the world's important art centers. Many citizens have given their possessions with great generosity. Mr. and Mrs. McCormick did this constantly. But he went farther. Instinctively and unselfishly he gave of himself so that the people of the city he loved might have a wider, richer experience in living.

DANIEL CATTON RICH



Mr. McCormick and Chancellor Adenauer on a tour through the galleries, stop to admire a famous German primitive on Mr. Adenauer's visit to the Art Institute, April 14, 1953

In the Renaissance gallery two great collectors, Lord Harlech and Chauncey McCormick, examine a large Italian lustered plate of majolica ware made in the city of Deruta about 1520

