



TRANSCRIPT

Episode 107
The Frick Art Reference Library
Transcript
2010.05.29

[00:00:00;00]

Czeslaw Jan Grycz

In his lifetime, Henry Clay Frick acquired a reputation as the hardest of the hard-nosed capitalists of the Gilded Age. He was called “the most hated man in America”. He was also a self-taught and devoted art collector, who left, as his legacy, one of the great art collections of the world. And, thanks to his beloved daughter, Helen, the Frick legacy also includes one of the great libraries of the world.

[00.00.47;29]

Anne Poulet

The Library was founded, the year after Henry Clay Frick died, by his daughter. Her idea was to have an “object-based” research library, which was inspired by the Witt Library in London. That was for the curatorial staff, from the outset, a vital resource for research. So there's always been a symbiotic relationship between the Collection and the Library. There's a constant exchange of information and contact between the staff of the Library and the Collection. We influence acquisitions that are made for the Library. We make suggestions when we think something should be added. They let us know when something important has been acquired. Then on top of that is the huge Photo Archive, which is one of the greatest in the world and an extraordinary resource.

[00:01:46;27]

Ross Finocchio

I'm a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Fine Arts, and the dissertation that I'm working on here on the Library is about Henry Clay Frick's life as an art collector.

[00:01:57;25]

Anne Poulet

The Archives are extremely rich because the Frick family and Henry Clay Frick and his daughter kept every piece of paper they ever had. Copies not only of letters written, but letters received. We have menus from dinners that were given here. It's a very deep and interesting archive. We have a great deal of information about the history of collecting—not just Henry Clay Frick's collecting—but the collecting of the period, because of correspondence with dealers and an idea of what was in the marketplace. So its been a great resource.

[00:02:38;18]

Ross Finocchio

This is, of course, the Gilded Age: the end of the 19th Century and early 20th Century. And Frick was just one among a number of major American collectors—who, of course, include J.P. Morgan, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Henry Walters—who were driving the American art market for European arts at this time.

He was connected to all of the collectors that I just mentioned, as well as many others of the previous generation—the Vanderbilts, for example, and the Rockefellers—both professional and personal contacts. And I think that there is little question that these social relationships between collectors at this time, it seems that just about everybody knew everybody else.

[00:03:25;12]

Sally Brazil

We have a range of paper records, primarily photographs, albums, and some objects connected to the history of the institution and its earliest days, from when it was built first as a house (the Frick Collection), the Library has obviously always been the Library. Then Frick family materials, which have come to us as a deposit gift.

[00:03:45;29]

Ross Finocchio

Social competition certainly plays a part, especially when Frick decides that this house will be his “monument” (and I'm using his words). There is one motivation. It is this desire to acquire the best that is available. It is apparent not only in Frick's choice of paintings and sculpture, but in his correspondence, as well, with improvements that are being... renovations being made at his home in Pittsburgh, the work that was being done in 1914, 1915 on the house, here, in New York. At every turn he insists on the best materials and the best quality workmanship. And he is very disappointed when he feels that he is not receiving it. He was really the strictest and most exacting of clients for contractors and tradesmen.

[00:04:39;28]

Sally Brazil

The lighting of the Collection was primarily provided by Caldwell and Company, which was a very famous New York lighting manufacturer. And Mr. Frick—along with a lot of other people who were building big houses and museums and institutions—was calling on Caldwell to design lights specifically for them. These are beautiful. They're practical, but they're also works of art on their own, too.

We just found them, going through drawers, and pulled them out and realized that it was probably time to give them a little more attention than we might otherwise, just because we thought they

were unique. Part of our goal is to work our way through all of our architectural drawings. We have a very large scanning project going on via the Digital Lab, where these drawings like this, all sorts of plans, go up to them, are cleaned, flattened, and scanned.

[00:05:30;04]

Czeslaw Jan Grycz

Gathering these images, with other construction images, suddenly gives you a sense of what the Company was like. And the whole thing gives you a sense of the dynamism of society in the turn of the Century.

[00:05:42;240]

Sally Brazil

That's exactly right.

[00:05:45;10]

Inge Reist

We continue every day, really, to be astonished at the extraordinary eye for quality that Henry Clay Frick showed in his collecting. As all the visitors to the Collection realize when they see masterpiece after masterpiece, Henry Clay Frick really sought nothing but the best. More crudely put, you might say there's no "filler" at the Frick Collection. It's just one first rate picture after the next. He shared this love of art that he had with his daughter, Helen, his only surviving daughter. Helen and he really clearly had a close relationship. I think one might argue that the love of art was the lynchpin of that relationship. But she showed her interest in art in a slightly different way. She did collect. But she had a somewhat more academic set of mind. I think that's largely what led her to establish this Library—as a memorial to her father—just a year after he died.

She had actually hand written, a two-volume catalog of Henry Clay Frick's Collection. We have it in our archives. It's a beautiful *catalogue raisonné* of a collection, detailing the provenance, the exhibition history, etc. of the works of art in her father's collection.

[00:05:45;10]

Inge Reist

There were no advanced art history degrees in the 1910s when she was a young woman, but she absorbed a great deal of knowledge. She was not in the least bit shy about consulting experts. She would find out who was the person who knows the most about this subject and then she would shoot off a letter to that person and await the response.

Actually, her first confidant and mentor in founding this Library was Sir Robert Witt. He had, in the 1920s, just established a photograph archive in London. The Witt Library was a source of great inspiration to Helen Clay Frick. She indicated to Robert Witt that she would like to, in her words "copycat his Library". It is for that reason, largely, that the Frick Art Reference Library developed as

a photo archive. It now has more than 1,000,000 images of works of art in it, as well as a bibliographic library. Then this was supplemented by auction catalogs and ephemeral exhibition catalogs that other libraries just really don't have. It also led, quite naturally, to her and her staff's encouragement of scholars to continuously give us opinions about works of art. So our documentation for the works of art represented in the Photo Archive, for example; that documentation continues to grow, organically, over time. So a scholar who attributes a work of art to artist X in 1925, may be supplanted, if you will, by a scholar who comes in to look at that image, four decades later, and offers an attribution to a different artist.

[00:08:58;24]

Suz Massen

The Library originated in a bowling alley of “The Frick Collection, the Family Mansion”, before it was “The Frick Collection, a Public Collection”. Then in 1924, the first Library was built. Then when the Frick mansion was being converted into a public collection, that [first] Library was eventually torn down and became the East Gallery. Then this building was built at that time. This was a “state-of-the-art” building when it was built in 1935. It had air conditioning. It had a book conveyor system. It had a system to communicate between floors, where one would write on metal plates and it would transmit the message to the other floors.

[00:09:38;09]

Stephen Bury

...I think because art history has a different vision of materials. A lot of the exhibition catalogs were thought not to be properly “scholarly”. Now, they just have a sheer fantastic documentary value; not just in terms of content, but as a physical, sort of, souvenir, memento of an event that took place in history. They also reflect graphic design, taste in paper, cheap bindings. So there's a whole range of interest that are catered for by them.

[00:10:15;12]

Deborah Kempe

What has been characterized in the past as ephemeral, we don't really see it that way. Collectively, it's far from ephemeral. It brings a lot of historic sources that can be mined; that, really, are not that accessible. So we want to create virtual collections with some of the leading art museums.

[00:10:35;01]

Inge Reist

We champion “object oriented research”. We really try, as best as we can, to offer our researchers everything they could possibly need to establish what I would call the “biography” of a work of art: where it has been, who has owned it, to which artist it's been attributed, the dimensions, the condition, whether it's been cut down... All of these are aspects of research that we are especially proud to support.

[00:11:03;21]

Deborah Kempe

So, for instance, this particular catalog, which was of the Lotos Club, an exhibition on Saturday evening of March 31, 1906. "*Exhibition of American Paintings from the Collection of William Evans.*" So, not surprisingly, it's just a checklist. There are no illustrations. But if you look more closely at some of the listings for artists like Ralph Blakelock, Childe Hassam, Winslow Homer, Charles Davis, Frederick Church, you'll notice that there are check marks in the margins. What that was, was work by the staff of the Photo Archive, here at the Frick, to indicate which of these paintings they actually held images to. So the act of digitizing this, gives promise for our future efforts to connect the names in the checklist to the actual images of the paintings that were exhibited there.

This was in 1906, so much of his collection has presumably been dispersed, distributed, and is in various places and hands. Part of that trail can be through our Photo Archive.

[00:12:12;17]

Don Swanson

In our negative collection, we have about 60,000 negatives that were taken by photographers that worked at the Library and photographed from the 1920s up until 1961. So those negatives are of paintings that are unique. They were a slice of life of that painting. A painting that was... a photograph was taken in 1930... That painting may have changed either through deterioration, an overzealous restorer, some items may be stolen or lost, and we don't know in whose collection it is. So there is an 8x10 photograph of that painting (and it's a high resolution photograph). And those really gives you information that may not be available any place.

An interesting example, this is a before restoration and after restoration. This photograph was taken by the Library. You will notice that the woman looks the same, but the costume has changed. The whole idea was, that the person that purchased it later had put this costume on. So when it was restored they were able to remove this from it. But this was trying to update her, so she was looked more like the period, and now we have this...

Czeslaw Jan Grycz

The way that the artist originally did it.

[00:13;22;10]

Don Swanson

So it's great to have these before and after shots that are part of our negatives. It's great for conservators because conservators actually approach us and they're looking for something. This early photograph (even though they're not in color) has information that tells them exactly what was there, earlier.

[00:13:35;08]

Vivian Endicott Barnett

I love to come to the Frick. I find that they really have the best resources—even for early 20th Century modern art going up to the second World War—which is not what everybody thinks. They think it's much more “old master paintings”. However, the Frick librarians have a wonderful manner of obtaining exhibition catalogs, books that have just been published in many countries and in many languages. Even now. Much more so than any other library I know. Period.

[00:14:11;00]

Inge Reist

The looted art during World War II became the subject of inquiry for many researchers, especially since 1998, when President Clinton established the Commission on Holocaust Era Assets Recovery. This Library became a very important center for that kind of research... for the so-called “degenerate art”, as well as the looted art during the second World War. So having such a rich collection of these catalogs from the early 40s really made a tremendous difference to the researchers in the 1990s and 2000s who were doing this work.

[00:14:54;15]

Czeslaw Jan Grycz

There's been some allusion to the fact that during the Second World War the Frick was shut down and became an operation of the defense forces. Could you enlighten us a little bit about that phase?

[00:15:07;25]

Anne Poulet

Because of the richness of the Photo Archive and the Library's resources themselves, they became a very valuable source for documentation of important historic and art historical sites to be avoided during the bombing of Italy, for example. So that's one way in which the Frick Art Reference Library was extremely important during the war. Also in establishing the provenance of works of art. That has been a vital resource for the research of many, many collectors or descendants of collectors in determining what was in their family's possession; when it left their possession; and therefore helping them to establish whether or not they have a legitimate claim to try and recover works that have passed into other hands.

She [Helen Clay Frick] had photographic campaigns in the '20s for the photography of private collections in the United States. That is an extraordinary resource because often collections were dispersed, lost, fires, floods. So it's a very useful archive to establish who owned what, when. She had campaigns all over Italy, Spain, some in France, and the United States.

[00:16:43;16]

Czeslaw Jan Grycz

The kind of curatorial work that is done here really does get into more detail than one would expect in an institution.

[00:16:52;09]

Vivian Endicott Barnett

Yes, and they make other resources available, such as the Getty Provenance Index. And a lot of material for people who are doing research on provenance to determine where they were from 1930 to 1945, say, during the Nazi period. And they have really made many resources available so that researchers can come and do that.

[00:17:17;19]

Don Swanson

We have paintings that were stolen in World War II, that were taken. It's part of the [responsibility of] Provenance Research to find out where this item came from... who had it. Even though the painting was in Wildenstein and had been in France, they knew it was purchased by someone in France. It was stolen in World War II. We still don't know where it is. But we have this representation of it. This is another one. This is a stolen painting. No one knows where this small miniature is. But we have a representation of it.

[00:17:42;19]

Inge Reist

These are pamphlets that Rosenberg's Gallery issued, usually once a month. He was the dealer for artists such as Picasso, Braque, Sisley, Matisse, etc. So you have an artist as prolific as Picasso. Really, where do you begin trying to track whether this particular work of art in question was looted or not? But having a checklist of the works that were exhibited at Rosenberg, January, February of 1939; this will set you on your way. You can't be positive that these were all looted, but you have a good notion that they might have been. They were, at least, in his stock. So if he hadn't sold them, they were probably confiscated. And here is a Matisse catalog, same sort of thing, 1938. These are precious, precious documents, which we were proud to have in the 1940s and 1950s. But now we find we are even prouder to have because of the help that they give to people doing this very significant kind of research.

Just so that you can recognize that a more impartial judge than I, has found this so helpful... This is a Gustav Klimt painting that was recovered and then sold in 2004 at Sotheby's. It was owned by the Altman family.

Let me just read you a paragraph from a letter that we received in June of 2004, just prior to this auction. This is from Peter Reubstein, who lives here in New York. He says, "as a son-in-law of Bernard Altman, I have been principally responsible for the family's research during the past few

years leading to the recovery of some of the property dispersed by the Austrian Nazis. I want to note, particularly, the invaluable support rendered by staff of the Frick Art Reference Library to our family's research effort. It is extraordinary that we were able to demonstrate to the Austrian government on the basis of catalogs in the Frick, that Bernard Altman had bought the Klimt, and 15 other works of art, at the same November 1922 auction in Vienna.”

And he goes on to say that “the Frick Art Reference Collection has been of an inestimable value to the Altman family in successfully seeking the restitution of the cited works.” So this is the sort of letter that I'd like to say “we get them every day”. We don't get them every day. But we do get them a lot. This is not a unique instance of praise of the great help that not only our research collections, but our human resources have given to researchers here.

[00:20:25;12]

Stephen Bury

We still don't know whether “the digital” will last another 20 years; 100 years. So those institutions that are throwing everything out thinking that they don't need to rely on a physical copy, albeit it might be shared physical copy, I think are being presumptuous about the future. I'd like to think it's possible that we'll crack the digital preservation thing soon. But I haven't seen anything, yet, to convince me. Even if we can guarantee future availability, I think people will still want to see the real thing. There's some excitement, some conveying of material culture of the time. I think if you look at a text that's scrolling, you've no idea of the object that it comes from, where it is, what side of the page it is. You don't understand what an encyclopedia is if you just get an odd entry from Wikipedia or whatever. I think you miss so much. I'm optimistic that a combination of the new and the old is the right way forward.

[00:21:37;08]

Anne Poulet

Helen Clay Frick had the vision. She knew what she wanted to do with this Library. She had the means to finance the outreach and a real dedication to achieving her goal. She died in 1984. She was deeply involved with the Library from 1920 until 1984 and never really deviated from her goals, as far as the Photo Archive is concerned and the resources that the Library should offer. So that makes it a particularly rich resource, a 20th Century resource for researchers.

[00:22:22;04]

Ross Pinocchio

And the quality of the collection simply speaks for itself. When we think of works like Holbein's *Thomas More*. Is there a better, more characteristic, more representative example of Holbein's work in the United States in any private or public collection than that *Thomas More*? When we think of the Velasquez; we think of the Rembrandt? and we could go on. The quality of the Collection really speaks for itself. I think that that's the thread that we can follow through from the beginning to the end of his career as a collector.

[00:22:54;060

Czeslaw Jan Grycz

The Library is an embodiment, institutionally, of that same quality.

[00:22:58;29]

Ross Finocchio

I would agree. Professionalism; the expertise and the skill of the librarians and the archivists who have helped me so much; that's what makes it such a pleasure to work here.

[00:23:10;29]

Czeslaw Jan Grycz

So you like the Frick?

[00:23:11;27]

Ross Finocchio

It's my favorite Library in the world!

But of course, I'm biased!

2