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Sally Webster

A Digital Recreation of the Lenox Library Picture Gallery: Scholarly Essay,” in Webster and Schwittek et al., “A Digital Recreation of the Lenox Library Picture Gallery: A Contribution to the Early History of Public Art Museums in the United States: Scholarly Essay

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Abstract:

The genesis of this digital reconstruction of the Lenox Library Picture Gallery is nine archival photographs (ca. 1882) that replicate the installation of the paintings owned by the New York bibliophile and art collector James Lenox. This three-dimensional, interactive platform allows easy access to the paintings and their history. The primary goal is to demonstrate that Lenox’s picture gallery is representative of the pre-Gilded Age era, when issues such as collecting and installation practices in the United States were coming to the fore and curatorial strategies were becoming articulated.

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A Digital Recreation of the Lenox Library Picture Gallery: Scholarly Essay by Sally Webster

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In the archives of the New York Public Library (NYPL) is a set of nine previously unpublished installation photographs of the Lenox Library Picture Gallery (LLPG; 1882; [Appendix 4](#)),^[1] which once formed an integral part of the Lenox Library located on Fifth Avenue between Seventieth and Seventy-First Streets (fig. 1). It was built for the wealthy bibliophile and art collector James Lenox (1800–80), who had inherited a great deal of money and real estate from his father, Robert Lenox (1759–1839), a prominent New York merchant.^[2] Although dark with age, the photographs, when placed sequentially, reproduce the entire gallery and document its 147 paintings.^[3] Enhancing their historical value are numbers written on the photographs' cardboard mounts under each row of pictures. These numbers correspond to the [Lenox Library Guide to the Paintings and Sculptures](#) (LLG; 1882), which, beginning in 1877 when the gallery opened to the public, was published annually by the Lenox Library Board of Trustees.^[4]



Fig. 1, Richard Morris Hunt (architect) and H. N. Tiemann & Co. (photographer), Lenox Library, ca. 1877. Photograph. Museum of the City of New York, New York. Artwork in the public domain; photograph courtesy of Museum of the City of New York. [\[larger image\]](#)

This photographic evidence has been used as the basis for a three-dimensional model in which the LLPG appears as it did in the early 1880s, when interested visitors had to mail in a

request for a free ticket to see it on Tuesday, Friday, or Saturday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. The historical information embedded in each image—the title of each painting, the name of the artist, and other tombstone information, as well as short explanatory content—adds to the scholarly value of the model. Augmenting the model is further documentation found in the *LLG*, such as the provenance of many of the paintings, including where and when the paintings were bought. Collectively, the data makes possible this in-depth examination of James Lenox's collection, which includes, in addition to the identification of the paintings, the location of each painting within the gallery and what informed its placement.

Analyzing the reconstructed LLPG reveals that Lenox, better known as a bibliophile than an art collector, did not have a unified, overarching curatorial or collecting strategy. Instead, he bought paintings in much the same way as he purchased books. In the absence of art dealers, especially during the early phase of his art collecting, he relied on advisors in England and on the Continent. Following their advice and buying at auctions as opportunities arose, Lenox built up a collection that, while corresponding to the taste of his time, engaged with his personal interests. In his work as curator of the LLPG, Lenox created arrangements of pictures within the gallery, discussed in further detail below, that demonstrate his bibliophile interest in subject clusters. Other arrangements reveal his idiosyncrasies and value systems, such as his emphasis on patriotism and Protestant values, and place him within the context of a developing emphasis on the museum as a pedagogical tool in the United States from the 1870s onwards.

There is no known comparable photographic record of older or contemporary institutions such as the New-York Historical Society (1804); the Boston Athenaeum (art gallery founded 1827); the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford (1842); the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC (1869); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1870); the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1870); or the Art Institute of Chicago (1879).^[5] These pre-Gilded Age institutions led the way in determining what libraries, art galleries, and museums in the US should look like, what they should contain, and how objects—books and art—should be displayed. This study of the LLPG is a first step toward a better understanding of the institutional roots of the museum age in the United States.

The Lenox Library Picture Gallery—An Overview

The LLPG was on the second floor of the Lenox Library, which was designed by the French-trained Richard Morris Hunt to house Lenox's prized collection of rare books and works of art. From the beginning, the building was popular with the public, who wanted to see what was inside. Since access to the books was limited, they went to look at the paintings: "The attendance of spectators gives ample evidence, were any needed, of the interest taken by Americans generally in all that relates to the Fine Arts."^[6]

What they saw was an international collection comprising nine nationalities, including the United States (thirty-eight paintings, twenty-one artists). Seventy-five percent, however, were British and European, with Great Britain predominating (fifty-three paintings, thirty artists). The subject matter included some forty landscapes, fifteen animal paintings, forty portraits, twenty-five genre paintings, five historic genre paintings, and some five history or religious paintings. There were more than ten "original" or acknowledged copies of old master paintings. However, Lenox's art collecting was not limited to paintings; he collected

in many different media—sculptures, mosaics, porcelains, engravings, enamels, casts, medals, and medallions—all of which, with the exception of the engravings ([Appendix 3](#)), were listed in the *LLG* and placed in a various rooms and hallways throughout the library.

Lenox's interest in collecting art was inspired, in part, by the example of his father, Robert, who at different times hired John Trumbull, Gilbert Stuart, and John Wesley Jarvis to paint portraits of him and his family. Lenox's mother, Rachel, commissioned Henry Inman to do several miniatures of her and her children in the 1820s. So collecting contemporary art was not unknown to Lenox and was perhaps even expected of someone of his wealth and class.

Another important factor was the Lenoxes' devotion to the Presbyterian church, which encouraged its members "to devote themselves as individual citizens to promoting all forms of charity and social reforms and to feel that in so doing they were expressing their religion." [\[7\]](#) To that end, Robert stipulated in his will that his farm (the property Lenox inherited was called the Lenox farm) "should be devoted to the establishment and support of four institutions": a hospital, a library, a home for the aged, and "Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church." [\[8\]](#) In fact, James would go on to establish Presbyterian Hospital, the Lenox Library, the First Presbyterian Home for Aged Women, and Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church on this property. [\[9\]](#)

Lenox never married; nonetheless, he was a family man and built a large house on Fifth Avenue that spanned the block from Twelfth to Thirteenth Streets for himself and members of his family, including his two sisters and one of their husbands. He was not a man about town, but he was known to other civic-minded New Yorkers as an aloof but generous citizen. As described by his bookseller and biographer, Henry Stevens, Lenox "staked out his own course, hoed his own row, paddled silently his own canoe and revelled silently in his own generous suggestions which began literally at home in his own bosom." [\[10\]](#) His greatest passion, aside from his devotion to the Presbyterian church, was for buying books, and he spent most of his days in correspondence with antiquarian book dealers in the United States and Europe. He and John Carter Brown of Providence were the great pioneer collectors of rare books in the United States. Both competed to flesh out their holdings with works devoted to the age of discovery, colonial history, and materials related to the founding fathers. Lenox also specialized in works by John Milton, John Bunyan, and Shakespeare and amassed a large collection of Bibles, including the first Gutenberg Bible to arrive in the United States.

Collecting Works of Art

Lenox began collecting art in the 1820s while on a grand tour after graduating from Columbia College. He started in London, where he stayed for a little over a year before leaving for the Continent. Information on his itineraries is confined to the listing of cities in his passports ([Appendix 2](#)) and notations of provenances included in the *LLG*. It is assumed from the dates of two paintings by the British painter and writer Charles Leslie, *Portrait of a Gentleman* (1823) and *Portrait of a Lady* (1824) listed in the *LLG*, that Lenox visited Leslie while in England. Leslie, a genre painter in the mode of Sir David Wilkie (also represented in the Lenox collection), had strong ties to the United States. He had lived in Philadelphia as a child but left to study in England with Benjamin West, in whose studio he met a number of other artists from the US, including the painters Washington Allston and Samuel F. B. Morse.

Leslie and the writer Washington Irving were also friends, and Leslie's small portrait of Irving was later bought by Lenox. For twenty years, during the 1840s and 1850s, Leslie remained a trusted art advisor who helped Lenox secure a painting from J. M. W. Turner and counseled him on other purchases.^[11] After his trip to Europe, Lenox returned to New York, where he joined his father as a partner in his trading company.

Lenox bought no works of art in the 1830s, but when his father died in 1839, he was left a great deal of money and land on Manhattan's Upper East Side. He was now free from business obligations and began to collect books and art in earnest. Among the first people he contacted was Leslie, to whom Lenox wrote for advice on what up-and-coming artists associated with the Royal Academy Leslie recommended. Leslie praised Alfred Chalon as "the most consummate master of his art" and added that Chalon was "most successful in gay subjects and such as admit of splendid color."^[12] He also suggested other painters, such as William Etty, William Mulready, and Charles Eastlake, and was frank in his personal assessments, mentioning that he preferred Mulready to Eastlake. He concluded by saying that "these four [Chalon, Etty, Eastlake, and Mulready] are our principal painters of figures and you could not choose amiss among them."^[13]

Lenox seldom purchased paintings from dealers. For the most part, he bought directly from artists, from private sales, or at auctions ([Appendix 1](#)). For instance, one of his first major purchases was Gilbert Stuart's full length portrait of George Washington (1799), which he bought from the family of its original owner, Peter Jay Munro (*LLG*, 12, no. 70). Also that same decade, the 1840s, he began to buy from auctions, beginning with several works from an 1848 Christie and Manson's London sale: John Constable's *Cottage on a River—“The Valley Farm”* (ca. 1855), George Morland's *Marine View Back of the Isle of Wight: Revenue Cutter in Chase of Smuggler* (ca. 1800), and William Collins's *View in Devonshire, on the Webber* (1825). Lenox was not in London at the time and may have relied on either Leslie or his bookseller, Stevens, to serve as his agent. From the David Hosack sale in 1849 he purchased Thomas Cole's *Expulsion from Paradise* (1828). While Lenox did not buy a great number of paintings during the 1840s, the ones he did buy—the Stuart, the Constable, and the Cole—suggest that he was a knowledgeable and discriminating buyer.

It was not until his second trip abroad (1850–51) that he began to collect widely. In London in June 1850, he bought Sir Joshua Reynolds's *A Boy in a Red Velvet Dress Leaning Forwards on a Green Cushion, Holding a Pen and Paper in His Hand* (1784) and five sketches (in one frame) by Sir David Wilkie (no known dates) at a Christie and Manson auction.^[14] His purchases from a second auction, the sale of the collection of Charles Meigh, also at Christie and Manson, greatly expanded his holdings of British paintings. These included a Thomas Gainsborough landscape (1783–84), two paintings by Edwin Landseer (dates unknown), and a second Turner painting, *A Scene on the French Coast with an English Ship-of-War Stranded* (1831–32). The rest were an odd lot with works by George Morland, William Mulready, Peter Nasmyth, a copy of Reynolds's portrait of *Edmund Burke* by John Jackson, and an unusual still life by David Wilkie, *The Crown of Scotland* (date unknown), which may have been first represented in his painting *George IV Received by the Nobles and People of Scotland at Holyrood House* (1830; Royal Collection).^[15]

From England, Lenox sailed for the Continent, where he spent the summer and fall touring France, Switzerland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia before reaching Belgium in mid-November. Once in Belgium, he met Ferdinand de Braekeleer, Sr., a well-known and esteemed genre painter who, like Leslie, became an art advisor. Lenox bought several paintings by him and asked the painter to recommend other artists. Their correspondence has been preserved in the NYPL, and while it is mainly focused on the shipment of paintings, the artist also asked Lenox for help in supporting his son, Ferdinand de Braekeleer, Jr., in a New York venture as a dealer in Belgian paintings.^[16] The archives of the NYPL also include sales agreements with the Belgian artists recommended by de Braekeleer.^[17]

From Belgium, Lenox returned to France en route to Italy, where he arrived in Rome in February 1851. Here he commissioned *The Children in the Wood* (original ca. 1850) by the expatriate sculptor Thomas Crawford, who modeled and completed the work “to order” in Rome in 1854.^[18] The Crawford was one of eighteen sculptures owned by the Lenox Library, among which included another work by Crawford, a bust of George Washington (ca. 1850), Hiram Powers’s *La Pensive* (1856), and Thomas Ball’s *Abraham Lincoln* (ca. 1865).^[19]

Lenox returned home that summer and went back to Europe in the spring of 1855, arriving in Paris in time to attend the June 4, 1855 W. W. Hope sale, from which he bought *The Field of Battle* (date unknown) by Paul Delaroche and *The Siege of Saragossa* (1819) by Horace Vernet, the only purchases he made of the then-fashionable French painters. Delaroche in particular was popular with collectors of Lenox’s generation, including William Walters, who owned a reduction of his *Hémicycle* (1841–42), a mural for the auditorium of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Its popularity was such that it was sculpturally reproduced for the façade of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1876.^[20] In addition, during his two European trips he also bought porcelain vases and plaques, many of which were decorated with illustrations of famous paintings.^[21] Not quite souvenirs, these decorative pieces were placed in his library’s rooms and hallways and served a didactic purpose, much like his copies of paintings and reproductive engravings.

Over the next two decades and until his death in 1880, Lenox bought mostly paintings by artists from the United States, including works by Asher B. Durand, John Kensett, and Albert Bierstadt, purchased from the 1864 Metropolitan Fair. Lenox also added to his holdings of colonial and early republic paintings with the purchase of John Singleton Copley’s *Portrait of Mrs. Robert Hooper* (ca. 1767) from a granddaughter of the artist and Robert Edge Pine’s *Portrait of David Garrick* (1776–79), plus two portraits of George Washington, one a copy and one an original, by Rembrandt Peale (both ca. 1850), which are still at the NYPL.

Lenox bought only a few paintings during the 1870s, since he was busy overseeing the building of his hospital and library. These included Copley’s *Portrait of Lady Frances Deering Wentworth* (ca. 1813) and three paintings by contemporary Spanish artists: José Jiménez y Aranda, Leon y Escosura, and Edouard Zamacois y Zabala. These were bought from Samuel Avery, one of the most respected art dealers of the era and one of the few dealers consulted by Lenox. Avery, who spent many years abroad, also worked closely with other collectors, such as William and Henry Walters.

Lenox was not alone in his dedication to buying an international and eclectic array of portraits, genre paintings, copies of old masters, and landscapes. The same artists and subjects can be found in the inventories of contemporary collectors published in Earl Strahan's *The Art Treasures of America*, an illustrated, three-volume tome that first appeared in 1881. While it is true that Lenox purchased many of his paintings abroad, similar European works were also available in New York. This new enthusiasm for collecting was fueled by the arrival of Michael Knoedler, who opened a branch of the Paris-based Goupil there in 1848. Knoedler exhibited paintings by European artists, including Ary Scheffer, Paul Delaroche, and Horace Vernet, and organized the International Art Union, similar to the then-thriving American Art-Union, that distributed prints of these and other important European artists. [22] Comparable works by the same artists and nationalities were also on view at two mid-century exhibitions in New York: the Crystal Palace (1853) and the city's 1864 Metropolitan Fair. [23] While no survey has been done, a similar breakdown of genres and painting types is found in the private collections of Lenox's contemporaries, such as William H. Aspinwall, Alexander Stewart, August Belmont, and Robert Stuart, whose homes had art galleries that were often open to the public at specified hours. [24]

Installing the Collection

By the late 1860s, Lenox's varied collections filled his Fifth Avenue house. Stephens, in his biography of Lenox, describes the clutter:

The truth was that from about 1845 to 1869 Mr. Lenox was actively collecting his library so rapidly and doing all the work himself that he had no time to catalogue or arrange his accessions, except a few of the tidier nuggets which he could put away in the few bookcases in his gallery of art which was also being filled at the same time with paintings and sculptures. The great bulk of his book collection was piled away in the numerous spare rooms of his large house, till they were filled to the ceiling from the further end back to the door. [25]

It was time to build a library and repository for his treasures.

The Lenox Library, which fronted the east side of Fifth Avenue where the Frick Collection is today, was a three-story building designed in the latest French, neo-Grec manner. [26] One entered through a wide entrance court, which opened onto an interior vestibule beyond which was a deep hallway with two handsome, wood-paneled, high-ceilinged reading rooms at the north and south ends. Two staircases led up to a wide corridor on the second floor. Here, Lenox placed his sculpture collection to the right and left of the picture gallery (fig. 2). The picture gallery, forty by fifty feet long, was at the rear of the building, where it was well lit by three large skylights. [27]



Fig. 2, Richard Morris Hunt, the Lenox Library, second floor, Statuary Hall, ca. 1885. Photograph. The New York Public Library Archives, Manuscript and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York. Artwork in public domain; photograph courtesy of the New York Public Library. [\[larger image\]](#)

To help him in the transfer and installation of his collections, Lenox turned to George Moore, his superintendent, who had formerly worked as chief librarian at the New-York Historical Society. During his tenure, he had overseen the society's move, including its painting collection, from New York University to its own building on Second Avenue and Eleventh Street. Aside from his renown as a historian and bibliographer, Moore had the right administrative skills and experience to oversee the transfer and installation of Lenox's collections.^[28] After the gallery opened in 1877, Moore described for the *New York Times* one of the curatorial strategies that he and Lenox had devised. Based on "some of the modern requirements as to picture-hanging," they placed "together the works of the same man, so far as was compatible with other demands."^[29] This was not the only strategy they followed. They also showcased their most important paintings on each wall. Gilbert Stuart's full-length George Washington held center stage on the gallery's east wall. On the north wall, it was the paintings by Turner, and on the south, Munkácsy's *Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to His Daughters* (1877). The entryway split the west wall in half; on its north end, Frederic Church's *Cotopaxi* (1862) took pride of place, while on the south Charles Leslie's *Our Savior Teaching His Disciples a Lesson of Humility* (date unknown) and Rembrandt Peale's copy of Raphael's *Madonna of the Chair* (1853) were the principal attractions.

Another strategy they followed was to group paintings together with shared subject matter. For instance, paintings of domestic farm animals were hung together on the north end of the west wall. Similarly, landscapes dominated the north wall and portraits the east. Lenox did not separate landscapes by nationality. Instead, he placed paintings from the United States next to British ones, inviting comparison and tacitly acknowledging that the ones by US artists could hold their own.

Inside the Gallery

Broadly speaking, then, Lenox's curatorial strategy was one of a librarian who sorted his artworks by subject. However, a more focused analysis of his hang suggests his commitment to several specific key topics. By studying his groupings of paintings within the LLPG, it becomes clear that Lenox's interest in literary subject matter carried over into his museum;

equally, he emphasized patriotism, the elevation of his own family, popular landscape and genre painters, and the advancement of Protestant themes.

When visitors entered the gallery, they were greeted by Stuart's full-length portrait of President George Washington, known as the Lansdowne version. Washington was one of Lenox's heroes; he had several other portraits of Washington, which he placed above the Stuart. Directly above was Rembrandt Peale's *Portrait of George Washington (Porthole Type)* (1850), in which the head of Washington was represented in a faux-stone, oval enclosure. To the left was Rembrandt's copy (original, 1772; copy ca. 1850) of his father Charles Willson Peale's first portrait of the president. Further to the right was James Peale's adaptation of his brother Charles's renderings of Washington as a soldier (1778). To the right of center was another copy by Rembrandt of a second portrait by Stuart of Washington, known as the Vaughan portrait (original, 1795; date of copy unknown), Stuart's earliest representation of the president. All together these portraits can be interpreted as a visual biography—Washington as soldier in the Virginia militia, as general of the Continental Army, and lastly as the “Father of his Country.”

These representations can be further linked to Lenox's collections of books and manuscripts related to Washington and the American Revolution, which included Washington's “Farewell Address to the People of the United States of America” (1796) published in David Claypoole's [*American Daily Advertiser*](#) on September 19, 1796. Lenox bought the original letter in 1850 for \$2,200 (about \$50,000 today), outbidding the US Congress.^[30] Lenox deemed it of enough significance that he had a facsimile made, which he distributed to libraries and universities in the United States and Europe. Lenox shared the passion of other nineteenth-century collectors—be they book or art collectors—of documenting the early history and birth of the United States.

Surrounding the five images of Washington were portraits of members of Lenox's family—his parents, three of his sisters—as well as a portrait of himself. Two of these were also by Stuart: Lenox's sisters, Elizabeth Sproat Lenox (1813) and Isabella Lenox Banks (1813). There were also two earlier portraits of Lenox's parents by John Trumbull (1813 and 1810–12), and a second portrait of his father (1830) and a posthumous portrait of his sister Althea (1817), both by John Wesley Jarvis. James's portrait (1848) by the by the Scottish painter Sir Francis Grant was one of two that appeared in the gallery. The second (1851) was by the US artist George P. A. Healy and hung on the west wall. The east wall, with its images of Washington and family likenesses, was a patriotic gesture that simultaneously linked Lenox, his relatives, and the first president of the United States.

The north wall was dominated by US and British landscape paintings by such artists as John Constable, Thomas Gainsborough, Asher B. Durand, Albert Bierstadt, John Kensett, Thomas Cole, and Turner. The most prominent were two literary landscapes: Thomas Cole's early *Expulsion from Paradise* (1828) placed above Turner's *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* (1831–32). The latter was the first Turner painting to enter a collection in the United States.^[31] Lenox acquired it in 1845 with the help of Charles Leslie, but the collector had reservations. As recounted by Leslie in his *Recollections*, Lenox took a while to get used to what he described as Turner's indistinctness. Later that year, Lenox wrote to Leslie saying that he now admired the picture greatly, “I have brought one or two of my friends to see it as I do, but it will never be a

favorite with the multitude. I can now write to Mr. Turner, and tell him conscientiously how much I am delighted with it.”[32]

Of interest is Lenox’s juxtaposition of the Cole and the Turner. William Dunlap, in his *History of the Arts of Design*, an early detailed compilation of biographies of US artists printed in 1834, published Cole’s impression of Turner when he visited him in his gallery in 1829. Cole expressed his ambivalence upon viewing Turner’s paintings, calling Turner “the prince of evil spirits.”[33] After a visit to the artist’s studio, his feelings had not changed, with Cole writing that Turner’s paintings were “the most splendid combinations of colour and chiaro-scuro—gorgeous but altogether false . . . in representing scenes in this world, rocks should not look like sugar-candy, nor the ground like jelly.” It is not known if Lenox had read Dunlop or if he knew of Cole’s misgivings, but by placing the works in the center of the wall he was expressing his belief that they were the two most important landscape painters of his era.[34]

Moving to the south wall, the focus changed from landscape on the north and patriotism and family to the east to literary and religious concerns embodied in the figure of another of Lenox’s personal heroes, John Milton, in the subject of Munkácsy’s large *Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to His Daughters* (1877). This was a painting given to the library by James’s brother-in-law, Robert Kennedy, who would succeed Lenox as president of the library after his death.[35] Munkácsy had become wildly popular in Europe and his success was known in the United States. Upon receipt of the gift, the Lenox Trustees noted in their annual report the “peculiar value and fitness of such a picture for the library in which is preserved so full and rich a collection of the works and ‘hallowed reliques’ of the great puritan poet.”[36] They also thanked Munkácsy’s dealer, the Paris-based Charles Sedelmeyer, who facilitated the purchase and who presented them with a bronze bust of Munkácsy by Louis-Ernest Barrias.

Lenox, as a man of high religious convictions, owned one of the largest collections of works by Milton in the world. He admired the poet and politician not just for his literary accomplishments but for his connection to the men involved in the Protestant Reformation. Lenox’s interest in the Reformation is further exemplified by his portraits of Oliver Cromwell and John Calvin on the same wall. Portraits of these men had meaning for nineteenth-century Protestants in the United States who were still enamored of the idea that the discovery of America and the nation’s subsequent independence were linked to European Protestantism and the Puritans’ search for religious freedom in the New World. The works and deeds of three of these men—Calvin, Cromwell, and Milton—undergirded Protestantism in England and gave purpose to the Protestant diaspora in the United States. Central to their success was the invention of the printing press and the publication in the mid-fifteenth century of the Gutenberg Bible—and Lenox purchased the first copy of this historic text to arrive in the United States.[37]

Replacing the literary or historical expression of religion on the south wall were more specifically religious and pious images on the west wall. In the center was Rembrandt Peale’s copy of Raphael’s *Madonna della Seggiola* (*Madonna of the Chair*) with Leslie’s *Our Savior Teaching His Disciples a Lesson of Humility* directly beneath. This pairing, along with other nearby paintings, is representative of contemporary Protestant teachings that emphasized the mother’s role in the religious education of the child.

Evaluating the Collection

It might be thought that, given the nature of Lenox's collection—which included books, manuscripts, and works of art—it might be best compared with earlier East Coast athenaeums and historical societies. These early membership institutions, such as the New-York Historical Society (NYHS; 1804), the Boston Athenaeum (1807), and Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum (1844), collected books, historical documents, furniture, and silver, and they also had notable art collections displayed in purpose-built galleries.^[38] Yet when it came to establishing his own library, Lenox had a broader vision. His institution, the initiative of one man, did not reflect the collective will of these earlier associations, rather the founder, along with the trustees of the Lenox Library, made no pretense that their institution reflected community interests. Instead, its rare book collections, most of which were authored by British and Continental writers and bought abroad, tacitly acknowledged and honored European tradition. Carol Duncan, in her book *Civilizing Rituals*, makes this same distinction: "museums like the Metropolitan and Chicago's Art Institute" were not outgrowths of earlier enterprises like Charles Willson Peale's Museum but "were a new starting point and were directly and self-consciously informed by European precedents."^[39] William Constable, in his history of art collecting in the United States, makes a similar point specifically about Lenox that he had "a wider range of interest than [Luman] Reed," an earlier and influential New York collector.^[40] This was intended to mean that as a result of Lenox's years abroad, he began to appreciate and collect European art: "like Reed, he bought contemporary American work . . . but he also owned some examples of contemporary Flemish, French and Spanish painters . . . with a remarkable group of English paintings." The importance of this shift, according to Constable, was that the "art of the past" was no longer "a historical curiosity but . . . a living thing."^[41]

The Lenox Library, with its distinguished book and art collections, is therefore more properly seen as a participant in the dawn of the museum age in the United States. As such, Lenox's art collection and his impressive library have more in common with William Corcoran's early ambitions for a national gallery of art.^[42] Corcoran's entry into the world of art collecting paralleled Lenox's: both became active purchasers in the decades before the Civil War. Like Lenox, Corcoran was a civic benefactor with contributions to municipal beautification, religious institutions, and education. At the time his gallery opened in 1874, Corcoran had the same number of paintings as Lenox with a similar mix of US and European works. But Corcoran's painting collection was augmented with a large assembly of plaster casts (including the Laocoön and friezes from the Parthenon), Barye bronzes, marble replicas of European sculpture, and electrotype reproductions of objects from the South Kensington Museum (today's Victoria and Albert Museum) all on the ground floor. The main picture gallery was upstairs to take advantage of illumination from overhead skylights. It was reached by a central staircase and was near smaller galleries that held a mix of contemporary and European paintings plus portraits of Washington luminaries.^[43] Both Lenox and Corcoran were among the bankers and wealthy businessmen who shared in their era's desire, as Duncan further notes, "to make American cities more civilized, sanitary, moral, and peaceful. The same men who created the Met and other public art museums also created parks and libraries, symphony halls, and Grand Army Plazas."^[44]

When the library opened, the press was enthusiastic about the building and expressed gratitude to Lenox for his generosity. Critics were less excited about the painting collection.

They waxed rhapsodic about a few paintings but were disparaging of the collection as a whole. The most extensive coverage was by the *New York Times*, whose reporter claimed that the best pictures in the gallery were portraits and was sharply critical of Leslie's genre paintings. Another reviewer, writing for the *Aldine*, made a valuable observation about the painting collection, commenting that "Lenox had a leaning toward what might be called the solid and substantial, having very little sympathy with the purely sentimental."^[45] He tried to be upbeat about the paintings but conceded that aside from those works of first rank, he was hard pressed to know why some of the paintings were included "except on the ground that they were probably pleasing to Mr. Lenox for reasons which nobody but himself knows."^[46] A few years later, critical opinion had not changed toward the old, darkened paintings: "Some of them have the appearance of age and hardly sustain the evidence of the best artistic skill."^[47]

Conclusion

Given these mixed and somewhat negative assessments, there is still value in resurrecting the appearance, history, and collections of the Lenox Library. Lenox, with his intimate knowledge of his collection, organized it in an accessible, albeit personal fashion, anticipating that in this way viewers would come to have a deeper understanding of the works of art. This digital recreation, then, is a starting point for the study of the holdings and installation practices of his contemporaries, the generation of art patrons referred to by James Jackson Jarves as those "wealthy connoisseurs, who have hitherto collected for their own gratification, are now proffering their stores of art and knowledge as free gifts to the public."^[48] At the same time, these "stores of art," when transferred from a domestic milieu to a public venue, required new criteria for the installation of works of art, since the audience for these public venues were seldom connoisseurs, had not traveled abroad, and had little familiarity with the famous monuments of art history. There was, then, an urgency to create didactic hangings that would inform and educate the public. As the Bostonian Charles C. Perkins, a founder of the Museum of Fine Arts, reminded his readers, these rich collectors, in addition to creating a "rich heritage of beautiful forms," also had the responsibility to contribute to "*the education of a nation in art, not at making collections of objects of art.*"^[49]

Lenox's picture gallery, then, is representative of an era when these issues—collecting and installation practices in the United States—were coming to the fore and curatorial strategies were becoming articulated. What is needed is further inquiry into the roots of these initial endeavors, which have not been well mapped. Used as a template, this three-dimensional, interactive digital platform can help chart and illuminate the collections and curatorial strategies of Lenox's contemporaries. In so doing, a fuller, more robust and accurate early history of museum collections and installations in the United States will emerge.

No scholar could ask for more helpful, sympathetic and caring editors than those of *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*: Isabel Taube, Elizabeth Buhe, and Petra Chu, founding editor of the journal who, from the start, saw the potential of the nine archival photographs of the Lenox Library. Thanks, too, to the officers of the Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art: president Peter Trippi and treasurer Andrew Eschelbacher.

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Sally Webster is professor emerita of American art at Lehman College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. An authority on historic murals, monuments, and American visual culture, her latest book, *The Nation's First Monument and the Origins of the American Memorial Tradition*, was published in 2015 by Routledge. Most recently she contributed an article, "The Lenox Library: New York's Lost Treasure House," to the anthology *New York: Art and Cultural Capital of the Gilded Age* (New York: Routledge, 2018). In addition, she co-authored an essay on the history of modern mural painting for *A Companion to Public Art* (Chichester and West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016) and co-edited a special issue on murals for *Public Art Dialogue* (2014).

Email the author: [salweb38\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:salweb38[at]gmail.com)

Notes

[1] There is a recently published allied essay: Sally Webster, "The Lenox Library: New York's Lost Treasure House," in *New York: Art and Cultural Capital of the Gilded Age* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 73–89.

These photographs may have been taken as early as 1881, when one of the trustees and Lenox's nephew, Robert Kennedy, presented two paintings to the library: Mihály Munkácsy's *Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to His Daughters* and *Portrait of John Milton*. The additions of the Kennedy gift brought the total to 147 paintings, a number which remained stable from 1881 to 1890, when changes were made to the gallery's holdings. This tally of 147 corresponds to the number of paintings included in the archival photographs and in the *Lenox Library Guide to the Paintings and Sculptures* (LLG). The LLG was first published at the time of the gallery's opening in January 1877, when 138 paintings were on display. The following year, as noted in the 1880 LLG, seven paintings were added bringing the total to 145. These included five paintings donated by John Fisher Shaefe, trustee of the Lenox Library and husband of James Lenox's sister Mary Lenox Shaefe. The 1882 edition was used for this project.

[2] The Lenox Library was incorporated in 1870 by James Lenox and a board of eight trustees for the express purpose of creating "a public library in the city of New York. . . . To receive from the said James Lenox his collection of manuscripts, printed books, engravings and maps, statuary, paintings, drawings and other works of art." *Annual Report for the Year 1870 of the Trustees of the Lenox Library of the City of New York* (Albany: The Argus Company, 1871), 9.

The Astor Library, the Lenox Library, and the Tilden Trust merged in 1895 to form the New York Public Library. The collections of the Lenox Library were transferred to the new building in 1911.

[3] 146 of the 147 paintings are reproduced in the three-dimensional model. [Possibly P. or Paolo] Vallati (Italian, active nineteenth century), *A Boar Hunt on the Campagna* (1852; LLG 21, no. 38) appears over the door and is not illustrated in the three-dimensional model.

[4] The numbers in the three-dimensional model correspond to the 1882 LLG.

[5] There is one exception that exists in the catalogue of a private collection: line drawings in the 1860 *Descriptive Catalogue Pictures Gallery of William H. Aspinwall* (New York, 1860). Numbers were written on or near the illustrations and correspond, as with the LLG, to the listings in the catalogue. Aspinwall was a member of the Lenox Library Board of Trustees and there is every reason to believe that Lenox visited his gallery, had a copy of his catalogue, and was influenced by this kind of documentation.

[6] Fr. Saule, "The Lenox Collection," *The Aldine* 8, no. 10 (1877): 318, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20637411?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[7] Theodore Fiske Savage, *The Presbyterian Church in New York City* (New York: The Presbytery of New York, 1949), 101.

[8] *Ibid.*, 102.

[9] Hunt also designed the hospital Lenox founded, Presbyterian Hospital (1869–72), which was built to the north and east of the library. It was demolished in the 1920s and relocated to Washington Heights, where today it is known as New York Presbyterian Hospital.

[10] Henry Stevens, *Recollections of Mr. James Lenox of New York and the Formation of His Library* (London: Henry Stevens & Son, 1886), 5.

[11] I am grateful to my colleague Barbara Gallati for sharing her appraisal of Leslie's role as a sought-after advisor by artists and collectors from the United States in London.

[12] Letter from Charles Leslie, London, to James Lenox, New York, January 20, 1845, James Lenox Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York.

[13] Lenox went on to buy paintings by Chalon and Mulready, as well as paintings by Leslie. Lenox noted in the LLG that he bought Chalon's small *Head of a Lady* as a companion to Leslie's earlier *Portrait of a Lady* (1824). He did not buy Mulready's *A Picturesque Cottage on the Bank of a River* through Leslie but instead purchased it at auction in 1850 from the estate of Charles Meigh.

[14] Christie and Manson, London, June 15, 1850.

[15] There is a conundrum here: the first stop on Lenox's passport for this second European trip was Boulogne, France, on July 11, 1850, so his London purchases may have been made by an agent. It is also possible that he was issued a separate passport for Great Britain that was not retained in his archives.

[16] *Catalogue of a Collection of Oil Paintings by the Modern Belgian Masters in Possession of De Braekeleer* (New York, 1852). I am grateful to Dr. Jan Dirk Baetens of Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, for bringing this New York gallery to my attention.

[17] Letter from Ferdinand De Braekeleer, Sr., Anvers, Belgium, to James Lenox, New York, 15 July 1852, James Lenox Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, New York.

[18] Also known as *Babes in the Wood*, the sculpture is now in a private collection. See Thayer Tolles, ed., *A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born before 1865*, vol. 1, *American Sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 1:40n6.

[19] These are listed in the LLG, 23–4. Thomas Ball's sculpture is a scaled-down replica of the 1876 marble monument in Washington, DC, known as the *Emancipation Group* or *Freedman's Memorial*.

[20] Sally Webster, "A Mural Carved in Stone," *Museum History Journal* 5, no. 2 (2012): 283–302, [doi:mhj.2012.5.2.283](https://doi.org/10.2183/mhj.2012.5.2.283).

[21] These decorative objects are included in the LLG, 27–32.

[22] For a discussion of the New York art market in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Carrie Rebora Barratt, "Mapping the Venues: New York City Art Exhibitions," in *Art and the Empire City New York, 1825–1861* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 47–82; and Michael Goldstein, *Landscape with Figures, A History of Art Dealing in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[23] *Official Catalogue of the Pictures Contributed to the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations in the Picture Gallery of the Crystal Palace* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1853); and *Catalogue of the Art Exhibition at the Metropolitan Fair, in Aid of the U.S. Sanitary Commission* (New York, 1864).

[24] Private art galleries of the antebellum period are discussed in a series of articles titled "Our Private Collections" that appeared in the *Crayon* in 1856. The collectors were John Wolfe (January, 27–28); Jonathan Sturges (February, 57–58); Abraham M. Cozzens (April, 123); Charles M. Leupp (June, 186); Marshall O. Roberts (August, 249); and Rev. Elias Magoon (December, 174). A modern discussion of these and other collections (including Lenox) is found in John K. Howat, "Private Collectors and Public Spirit: A Selective View," in *Art and the Empire City*, 83–108.

[25] Stevens, *Recollections*, 9–10.

[26] In 1895, the trustees of the Astor and the Lenox and the Tilden Trust consolidated to form the New York Public Library. After the contents of the Lenox Library were transferred to the New York Public Library in 1911, its Fifth Avenue site was bought by Henry Clay Frick. Here, he built a home and repository of his art holdings, later the Frick Collection. Frick offered to move the Hunt building, a proposal the board of the New York Public Library declined since all available monies were assigned to the construction and establishment of its new Forty-Second Street building.

[27] "The Lenox Library, New York, N.Y.," *The American Architect and Building News*, September 1, 1877, 281.

[28] R. W. G. Vail [Robert William Glenroe], *Knickerbocker Birthday, A Sesqui-Centennial History of the New-York Historical Society, 1804–1954* (New York: The New-York Historical Society, 1954), 97–98.

[29] "The Fine Arts. Paintings at the Lenox Library . . . (Second Notice)," *New York Times*, January 21, 1877, 6.

[30] Stevens, *Recollections*, 100. Lenox also bought two portraits of Washington from the same David Claypoole sale: James Peale's *Portrait of George Washington* (1778) and Rembrandt Peale's copy of Charles Willson Peale's *Portrait of George Washington* (date of original, 1772).

[31] Charles Leslie, in his recollections, notes that "it fell to my lot to select the first of [Turner's] pictures that went to America." Tom Taylor, ed., *Autobiographical Recollections by the Late Charles Robert Leslie, R. A.*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1860), 1:205. That Lenox's painting was the first Turner to enter a collection in the United States is further confirmed by its present owner, the Yale Center for British Art, <https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1669251>.

[32] Taylor, *Autobiographical Recollections*, 1:207. There is a copy of Turner's letter to Lenox in NYPL Archives R. G. 2, "Lenox Library Board of Trustees," box 5, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York.

[33] William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Scott and Co., 1834; reprint ed. New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 2:363.

[34] For more information on Cole and his contact with Turner, see Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Tim Barringer, *Thomas Cole's Journey Atlantic Crossings* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 35–37.

[35] The Munkacsy painting created a controversy between New York's two leading art critics—Clarence Cook and Marianna Van Rensselaer. Cook disliked the painting because it was not historically accurate, while Van Rensselaer praised it for its high ideals. M. G. Van Rensselaer, "Munkacsy's Picture of Milton," *American Architect and Building News* 6, no. 208, December 20, 1879, 195.

[36] *Tenth Annual Report for the Year 1870 of the Trustees of the Lenox Library of the City of New York* (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1880), 7.

[37] The following page from Wikipedia contains an illustration of Lenox's copy of the Gutenberg Bible, "Gutenberg Bible," Wikipedia, accessed June 13, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gutenberg_Bible.

[38] Lenox had a long-standing association with the NYHS and as a member in the 1850s made his first big splash as wealthy patron of the arts by purchasing thirteen Assyrian bas-reliefs, the Nineveh marbles, which he gave to the society. They are now on permanent loan to the Brooklyn Museum.

[39] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 145n4.

[40] William G. Constable, *Art Collecting in the United States of America* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964), 43. Constable, who died in 1976, was the first director of London's Courtauld Institute and later a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

[41] Ibid.

[42] These ambitions are cogently laid out by Alan Wallach in *Exhibiting Contradictions Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 1998), 22–37.

[43] William Macleod, *Catalogue of the Corcoran Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC, 1878).

[44] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 54.

[45] Saule, "The Lenox Collection," 318.

[46] Ibid., 319.

[47] "Lenox Library," *National Repository* 7 (June 1880): 496.

[48] James Jackson Jarves, "Museums of Art," *Galaxy* 10 (July 1870), 17. Italics in the original. Jarves was an important collector of early Renaissance painting and an influential writer on the status of the visual arts in the United States at mid-century.

[49] Charles C. Perkins, "Art. I.—American Art Museums," *North American Review* 111, no. 228 (July 1870): 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25109553>.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Richard Morris Hunt (architect) and H. N. Tiemann & Co. (photographer), Lenox Library, ca. 1877. Photograph. Museum of the City of New York, New York. Artwork in the public domain; photograph courtesy of Museum of the City of New York. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Richard Morris Hunt, the Lenox Library, second floor, Statuary Hall, ca. 1885. Photograph. The New York Public Library Archives, Manuscript and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York. Artwork in public domain; photograph courtesy of the New York Public Library. [\[return to text\]](#)