

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Jo Briggs

book review of

*A Paris Life, A Baltimore Treasure: The Remarkable Lives of George A. Lucas and His Art Collection* by Stanley Mazaroff

*Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 2018)

---

Citation: Jo Briggs, book review of *A Paris Life, A Baltimore Treasure: The Remarkable Lives of George A. Lucas and His Art Collection* by Stanley Mazaroff, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 2018), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2018.17.2.14>.

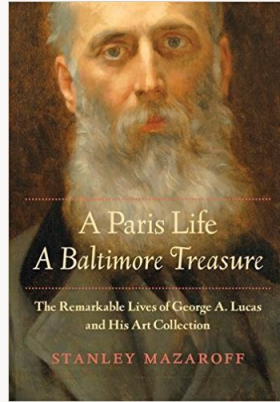
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Stanley Mazaroff,

*A Paris Life, a Baltimore Treasure: The Remarkable Lives of George A. Lucas and His Art Collection.*

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

344 pp.; 36 color and 72 b&w illus.; appendix, "Art acquired by George A. Lucas for William T. Walters," "Lucas's Collection of Paintings"; notes; bibliography; index.

\$64.95

ISBN: 978-1421424446

The history of collecting has become a central concern within the field of art history, manifested in numerous books, journals, and exhibitions. Several factors underlie this new interest. Questioning of the legitimacy of museums' ownership of objects has prompted intense scrutiny of provenance and the means by which art was, and is, acquired, especially as books, such as *Rape of Europa* and *Chasing Aphrodite*, and the films *The Monuments Men* and *Black Panther*, have brought these questions to popular audiences.[1] The discipline of museology, which has critiqued museums as providing support to dominant ideological positions, has led to museums wishing to appear more transparent to their visitors. To give one example, the Worcester Art Museum recently added labels on portraits in its collection that noted the sitters' ownership of slaves and their reliance on a slave owning economy.[2] Exhibitions on the history of collecting have also become quite common. In 2017 the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art presented an exhibition titled *Morgan: Mind of the Collector*, celebrating the one thousand plus art objects gifted by J. Pierpont Morgan's son, Jack, to the museum in 1917. Other examples include *Paul Mellon's Legacy: A Passion for British Art* in 2007, or *America Collects Eighteenth-Century French Painting* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 2017. Finally, and most broadly, what used to be called "the new art history" has shifted the focus from artists as (typically white male) geniuses, to context, which includes figures such as dealers, patrons, models, mistresses, consumers, and critics. Happily, the future of research on the history of collecting seems secure. The Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick in New York City is now just over a decade old, and supports scholarship by hosting symposia, offering fellowships, publishing, and awarding prizes annually for books in the field of the history of collecting in America.

Baltimore, Maryland, has been the subject of a number of books in this area; during the wealthy and cosmopolitan Gilded Age, the city was home to notable art patrons. In 1999 Johns Hopkins University Press published William Johnston's book *William and Henry Walters: Reticent Collectors*, and more recently in 2010, Stanley Mazaroff's first book *Henry Walters and*

*Bernard Berenson: Collector and Connoisseur*. Both these books deal with the formation of the core collection of the Walters Art Museum. *The Cone Sisters of Baltimore: Collecting at Full Tilt* by Ellen B. Hirschland and Nancy Hirschland Ramage, covering the outstanding collection of post-impressionist paintings at the Baltimore Museum of Art appeared in 2008; and in 2017 *Evergreen: The Garrett Family, Collectors and Connoisseur* was published, again by Johns Hopkins University Press. The city of Baltimore and its collectors are now the subject of more book-length studies than any other American city, with perhaps the exception of Boston. As the title of the book currently under review might not immediately suggest, however, George A. Lucas was first and foremost a dealer, or more accurately an art agent, a go-between, guide, and fixer in the Parisian art world. And, although he left Baltimore and the United States for France at the age of thirty-three never to return, he left his mark on American collections. Studies like *A Paris Life, a Baltimore Treasure* form another subset of scholarship within the history of collecting. The international blockbuster exhibit, *Inventing Impressionism: Paul Durand-Ruel and the Modern Art Market*, which traveled to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the National Gallery in London, and the Luxembourg Museum, Paris from 2014 to 2015, revealed a popular appetite for these stories when rightly told, and Mazaroff's book does just that; with rich period detail and a genuine warmth towards its subject, it is eminently readable.

Written for scholars and a general audience alike *A Paris Life, a Baltimore Treasure* amplifies Lucas's vital role in linking collectors in the United States and French artists during the highpoint of American buying power, from the Civil War until the mid 1880s, a story that, to date, has only been told in temporary exhibitions of Lucas's collection. Mazaroff entertainingly relates how in 1868, a single shopping spree with John Taylor Johnston, who a few years later proved instrumental in founding the Metropolitan Museum of Art, lasted eighteen months (112). When William T. Walters opened his newly constructed art gallery in 1884, almost half of the French art on display had arrived in Baltimore via Lucas (121). Lucas's energy and expertise shaped public collections, as well as feeding private ones that eventually, in part or whole, entered museums accessible to the public today. The gift to the Metropolitan Museum in 1891 of a bronze portrait bust of himself by Augustin Jean Moreau-Vauthier was therefore not simply an act of hubris. Lucas was claiming his rightful place, reflecting his status as "Honorary Fellow for Life" at that institution.

Lucas's diaries, which he kept throughout his life, are the central source in the first two-thirds of this book, which trace his biography. The diaries dryly record his daily transactions, and it is one of the book's great achievements that it transformed these notations of money owed, visits made, and parcels dispatched—through supplementary research—into a vivid picture of life in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century. Lilian Randall is rightly given credit as a central figure in the preservation of Lucas's diaries. As curator of rare books and manuscripts at the Walters Art Museum, it was Randall who found Lucas's diaries, stored in small musty boxes, and recognized their importance, transcribing them and publishing them in 1979. In Mazaroff's telling, Lucas emerges as a romantic figure, compromised at various moments in his life by the desire to assist and rescue women in financial and moral danger. It is clear that when Henry Walters intervened in the rewriting of Lucas's will following the death of his mistress, the threat of exposing Lucas's unconventional domestic arrangement was used as leverage (159). The only drawback of using Lucas's diaries, which were working documents of a purely practical nature and not meditations on personal matters, is that gaps and silences are taken as evidence of absence, rather than absence of

evidence. For example, the fact that Lucas's mistress "M." is only mentioned in his diaries after 1903 to record her medical needs is taken as evidence that she was no longer an intimate part of Lucas's life (149). Also, the diaries are used to support the idea that in his last years Lucas never spoke with his adopted son, Eugène, after his niece Bertha became his caretaker, but, like the record of "M.'s" medical needs this could simply reflect the fact that the diaries were primarily a memory aid for financial transactions—for example with a doctor or with Eugène for services as a caretaker.

What is most innovative about this book, however, is that it does not restrict itself to the events of Lucas's lifetime. The final six chapters, about a third of the book, describe what happened after Lucas's death in 1909, following the bequest of his collection via Henry Walters to the Maryland Institute College of Art. These chapters detail three decades worth of uncertainty over the ownership and importance of Lucas's collection of bronzes, small scale paintings, and most significantly, prints, including 152 by James McNeill Whistler, which he had amassed through purchase and gift over the course of his busy life. This history is greatly enhanced by the fact that most of the actors in this legal drama, which played out from the 1960s to the 1990s, gave interviews to the author; this oral history, enhanced by printed and archival documents, is the kind of vital inside information that scholars in future decades will need and relish. The inspiring part of this story is how significant a difference a few idealistic and outspoken individuals (often women, and, in the case of curators Lilian Randall and Gertrude Rosenthal, immigrants to the United States) are shown to play in shaping a city's cultural landscape. Despite the strength of these characters, however, as the author points out, action happens and progress is made "by the combined voices of an entire community" (222).

A bigger philosophical question that is touched on, but lies outside the scope of this book, is what happens when a rich, prosperous city generates significant cultural capital for the arts in the shape of art collections and art institutions founded by the philanthropic actions of a privileged social elite, but then must face a decline in economic fortune. As the author notes, during the years that the fate of the Lucas collection was being debated, Baltimore became increasingly challenged economically as factories and businesses closed or left the city. As a result, the population (and the tax base) fell; in 1968 riots broke out following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many (mainly white) families who could afford to left for the suburbs, while within the city family incomes dropped dramatically (215). Baltimore is today a majority-minority city, and questions of what to do with art that is rarely exhibited (for lack of space, or often because it is light sensitive) or how to fund necessary modernization and capital projects, are still very much alive. One approach taken recently by director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Christopher Bedford, with the support of donors and trustees, has been to deaccession works by Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock in order to create a fund to purchase contemporary art by more diverse artists.<sup>[3]</sup> When resources are limited, audacious and possibly controversial actions are necessary. As the last third of *A Paris Life, a Baltimore Treasure* traces the fallout from a series of bold decisions, among museum directors, politicians, and judges in the late twentieth century, the book is a timely reminder that unless we document these moments, they cannot serve as a narrative from which we can learn. This book is, therefore, not just an archival excursion, but also of great practical benefit as we take stock of the issues. Not knowing history and the history of collecting is ignorance we cannot afford as we look for a way forward in this thorny territory.

However, perhaps the most profound lesson to be taken from this book is that collections often derive their value from their context. The book opens with a photograph of Lucas in his Paris apartment surrounded by his choicest paintings, prints, and sculpture. This is fitting as context proves a crucial term in the evolving assessment of his collection. Given that it was considered to contain no “masterpieces,” curators and supporters of the collection tended to emphasize that it was a kind of time capsule: it was an “entity,” a “historical aesthetic document,” and a “window onto the nineteenth-century Parisian art world” (175–76). Lucas’s collection functioned as an extension of his mind: it was filled with personal stories of the artists he worked with, the prints and their different states that tracked their creative evolutions, as well as their biographies and official honors through press clippings, books, and notes. Lucas lived with his collection. It filled every room and drawer in his and his mistresses’ adjoining apartments, and he carefully indexed, labeled, organized, and re-organized its various parts. The same method of reading as is applied to *Cabinets of Wonders* holds here: the special arrangement was a vital part of the collection’s intellectual meaning. Once the art left Lucas’s apartment, this animating sense was lost. Mazaroff concludes his book by imagining a future installation of Lucas’s collection that reconstructs his library and shows images of Paris during his lifetime alongside portraits of the collectors and artists who formed his personal network. Until that installation is realized, this book is undoubtedly the closest we will come to reconstructing the aesthetic and intellectual appeal of Lucas’s collection.

Jo Briggs

Associate Curator of 18th- and 19th-Century Art, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland  
jbriggs[at]thewalters.org

---

## Notes

[1] Lynn H. Nicholas, *Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and Second World War* (1995); Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino, *Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World’s Richest Museums* (2011); *The Monuments Men* (film released 2004); *Black Panther* (film released 2017).

[2] Sarah Cascone, “A Massachusetts Museum Is Taking a New Approach to Wall Text: Revealing Early American Portrait Sitters with Ties to Slavery,” *Artnet News*, June 19, 2018, accessed June 20, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/worcester-art-museum-slavery-wall-text-1305407>.

[3] Mary Carole McCauley, “Baltimore Museum of Art to Sell Works By Masters Such as Andy Warhol, Will Aim to Improve Artist Diversity,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 13, 2018, accessed July 13, 2018, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/bs-fe-bma-sells-artworks-20180413-story.html>.