

## Private Visions, Public Treasures: Exploring Hillwood and The Phillips Collection

### Hillwood Estate (Marjorie Merriweather Post, c. 1977)

“If (art and objects) do not tell any story to the people who can see them, the whole point...is lost.” – Marjorie Merriweather Post (The Houses and Collections of MMP, p. 69)

Marjorie Merriweather Post bought Hillwood in 1955 and soon decided her home would be a museum that would inspire and educate the public. Her northwest Washington, D.C. estate endowed the country with the most comprehensive collection of Russian imperial art outside of Russia, a distinguished eighteenth-century French decorative art collection, and twenty-five acres of serene, landscaped gardens and natural woodlands for all to enjoy. Opened as a public institution in 1977, today Hillwood's allure stems from the equally fascinating parts that make up the whole. From the captivating life of Marjorie Post to the exquisitely maintained mansion and gardens, the experience of Hillwood outshines even the Fabergé eggs.



That Marjorie Merriweather Post valued beauty, elegance, and graciousness in her life is apparent to all who experience the exquisite gardens, collections, and estate she left for the public's enjoyment. In all its splendor, Hillwood is the culmination of a lifetime in business, art collecting, philanthropy, and estate management that gave rise to her singular style and grace.

### Developing Her Taste

Born in 1887 in Springfield, Illinois, Marjorie Merriweather Post was the only child of Ella Merriweather Post and Charles William (C.W.) Post, who founded the Post cereal empire. With her father's entrepreneurial spirit as inspiration, Post embraced her midwestern work ethic to become one of America's most successful businesswomen. When both of Post's parents died in the 1910s, she became, at the age of 27, the owner of the \$20 million cereal company that would later become the General Foods Corporation.

It was in this second decade of the twentieth century when Post's taste for collecting was shaped. A young woman of great wealth living in New York, married to Edward Bennett Close and a mother of two, Post began to furnish her elegant new interiors according to the most current trends in design. She developed a preference for the arts of late eighteenth-century France, in particular the neoclassical style of Louis XVI—a style that was in vogue

among New York's fashionable society. The elements of harmony, balance, delicate decoration, and superb craftsmanship that defined this period continued to guide Post's collecting taste for the rest of her life.

### **Sir Joseph Duveen**

Few influences played a more critical role in the development of Post's collecting tastes than Sir Joseph Duveen. A British art dealer whose clients included Henry Clay Frick, J. P. Morgan, Andrew Mellon, and John D. Rockefeller, Duveen introduced Post to the arts and culture of eighteenth-century France. Though she avoided his enticements to develop a taste for the Old Masters, it is through Duveen that Post carved a niche for herself among the discerning collectors of European works of art through her purchases of furniture and tapestries.

### **Frozen Peas to Fabergé**

Post's second marriage was to financier Edward F. (E.F.) Hutton, with whom she had one child, and together they transformed the Post Cereal Company into General Foods, a pioneer in frozen and prepared foods. The Huttons epitomized the *Roaring 20s* lifestyle and Post grew ever more socially practiced, hosting a stream of charity and philanthropic events in New York and Palm Beach. She further refined her collecting tastes during the



1920s, turning her attention to the acquisition of fine Sèvres porcelain, outstanding examples of French furniture, and a collection of gold boxes that proclaimed her taste for the jeweled object and, later, Fabergé. In the 1920s Post built and decorated her legendary and multiple residences, including a fifty-four-room New York apartment; her Palm Beach estate, Mar-A-Lago; Camp Hutridge (later Topridge) in the Adirondacks; and her well-appointed four-masted yacht, which Post decorated to perfection.

In the 1930s Post accompanied her third husband, Joseph E. Davies, to the Soviet Union, where he served as ambassador. During these years, the Soviet government was nearing the end of its efforts to sell treasures it had seized from the church, the imperial family, and the aristocracy in an effort to finance the new government's industrialization plan. Exploring commission shops and state-run storerooms, Post discovered that the fine and decorative arts of imperial Russia appealed to her taste for finely crafted objects and ignited a new collecting passion and pioneering effort in the field of Russian art.

At Spaso House, the American embassy in Moscow, Post welcomed the role of diplomatic hostess and sharpened the skills that prepared her for the world of politics, diplomacy, and philanthropy that awaited her in Washington, D.C.

### **Life at Hillwood**

Following her divorce from Davies in 1955, Post purchased Hillwood, which remained her Washington residence for the rest of her life. The mandate for her architects and designers was to refurbish the 1920s neo-Georgian house into a more stately dwelling that could function both as a well-staffed home and as a place to showcase her collections.



were highly-prized.

Post promptly became one of Washington's top hostesses and her legendary parties were inseparable from the political, business, and social fabric of Washington, D.C. With her full-time live-in and local staff, she organized memorable spring garden teas for hundreds of Washington guests, and invitations to formal dinners at Hillwood

In addition to spending the spring and fall at Hillwood, Post maintained an estate in Palm Beach, Mar-A-Lago, where she spent the winter and a camp in the Adirondacks, Camp Topridge, where she entertained guests throughout the summer. Travel between these three diverse properties was facilitated by her well-trained staff and private airplane, the Merriweather.

Post's patriotism and passion continued to guide her life of philanthropy at Hillwood. Crowning a fifty-year commitment to supporting American soldiers and veterans of war, in the 1960s and 1970s Post opened Hillwood to Vietnam veterans, including wounded Marines and Navy corpsmen from Bethesda Naval Hospital, and patients from Walter Reed Army Medical Center, for tea on the Lunar Lawn and live entertainment, allowing them an afternoon of respite and leisurely enjoyment. The effect of her generosity on Washington continues to be felt today. She gave generously and often anonymously and was active in group efforts to raise money for the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Kennedy Center, and the Washington Ballet Guild, among many others—with Hillwood as her final and lasting legacy.

(<https://artesmagazine.com/2023/07/washingtons-hillwood-museum-in-a-collectors-eye/>,  
<https://hillwoodmuseum.org/estate>)

## The Phillips Collection (The Phillips Family, c. 1921)

“Sorrow all but overwhelmed me,” Duncan Phillips wrote. “Then I turned to my love of painting for the will to live.”

The Phillips Collection, America’s first museum of modern art, was opened in 1921 in historic Dupont Circle in Washington, DC, by collector and philanthropist Duncan Phillips.



Duncan Phillips (1886-1966) was the son of Major Duncan Clinch Phillips, a Pittsburgh businessman and Civil War veteran, and Eliza Laughlin Phillips, whose father was a banker and co-founder of Jones and Laughlin Steel Company. The family moved to Washington, DC, in winter 1895-96. (*Left: Duncan and James Phillips with their father, c. 1900*).

Duncan was close to his older brother, Jim; Jim postponed attending college for two years so that he and Duncan could attend Yale University together. The brothers moved from DC to an apartment in New York in 1914. Duncan wrote

extensively on art and published his first book, *The Enchantment of Art*, in 1914. Duncan’s passion for art was fueled by trips to Europe in 1911 and 1912 and visits to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with friendships in New York with artists Augustus Vincent Tack, who became a lifelong friend, and American impressionist painter Julian Alden Weir. In 1916 the brothers convinced their parents to set aside \$10,000 annually to allow them to assemble a collection of contemporary American painting for the family.

Soon after, tragedy struck the Phillips family. Major Duncan Phillips died suddenly in 1917 from a heart condition and James died from the flu epidemic in 1918. To cope with these stunning blows, Duncan turned to the restorative quality of art. “Sorrow all but overwhelmed me,” he later wrote. “Then I turned to my love of painting for the will to live.” He and his mother founded the museum in late 1918. It was originally called the Phillips Memorial Art Gallery and opened it to the public in fall of 1921. In a specially designed room added onto the second floor of the family home, they showed selections from their growing 237-work collection that now included examples by European artists, reflecting Duncan Phillips’s pioneering idea of creating a museum in the nation’s capital where one



could encounter the art of the past and the present on equal terms. As the collection grew, the family moved out of their Dupont Circle home to a new residence in 1930, allowing the entire house to become a dedicated space for the museum. (*Pictured: The house at 21<sup>st</sup> and Q Streets NW, c. 1900*).

Duncan Phillips married painter Marjorie Acker (1894-1985) in 1921, shortly before the museum opened, and she became his partner in developing The Phillips Collection. Born in Bourbon, Indiana, and raised in New York State, she was encouraged by her uncles—painters Gifford and Reynolds Beal—to pursue art; she studied at the Art Students League in New York City. Duncan and Marjorie met at an exhibition of his collection at The Century Club in New York in late 1920. After they were married, Marjorie painted almost every morning, ran the household, and served as Associate Director of the museum. She helped him gain insight into the artist's process, and over the course of their lifetime together they collected nearly 2,500 works of art. When Duncan died in 1966, Marjorie became the museum director, continuing to develop close relationships with artists and the artistic community of DC. She held that position for six years.

From the outset, the vision for The Phillips Collection was “an intimate museum combined with an experiment station.” As a collector, Duncan Phillips was noted for his willingness to deviate from the art museum standard of displaying works together based on shared nationality and geography, interpreting modernism as a dialogue between past and present. He collected the work of his contemporaries at a time when art that did not follow traditional, academic standards was not widely accepted as aesthetically and culturally valuable. This philosophy of taking risks allowed for Phillips to be the first to collect and exhibit artists who were not well known at the time, such as Milton Avery, Pierre Bonnard, Georges Braque, Jacob Lawrence, Grandma Moses, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Rufino Tamayo.



*Pictured: Marjorie and Duncan, c. 1920.*



*Pictured: Phillips Gallery Art School, c. 1931.*

Their son, Laughlin (known as Loc) (1924-2010), succeeded Marjorie Phillips in 1972, serving as Director until 1992 and Chairman of the Board until 2002. Under his leadership, the museum underwent extraordinary growth and transformation; he turned his parents' personal and original creation into a professional museum by creating a formal collection database, launching a membership program, and doubling the footprint of the Goh Annex to include a storeroom and a conservation studio, as well as increased gallery space.

Charles Moffett, a renowned curator of French Impressionism, served as director from 1992-1998. Jay Gates served as director from 1998 to 2008, overseeing the major renovation that included the addition of the Sant Building. Gates established the Center for the Study of Modern Art in 2006, fulfilling a hope of Laughlin's that the Phillips would create a scholarly center at the museum that would bring students, scholars, curators, critics, and artists together in shared conversation through lectures and informal talks as his father had always envisioned would become part of the Phillips's educational program.

Under the directorship of Dorothy Kosinski from 2008-2022, the Phillips has worked to diversify its collection, exhibitions, programs, and staff, notably hiring a full-time Chief Diversity Officer and expanding its collection and exhibitions to include more contemporary art and more works by women and people of color. The museum launched a major partnership with the University of Maryland from 2015-2021 and opened a satellite campus in Southeast DC at the Town Hall Education and Recreation Campus (THEARC) in 2018. Jonathan P. Binstock became the director in 2023.

[\(https://www.phillipscollection.org/about/history\)](https://www.phillipscollection.org/about/history)