

**THE GIFT OF A MUSEUM TO A MUSEUM:  
ELIZABETH DAY MCCORMICK'S TEXTILE COLLECTION  
AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

Born into a wealthy Chicago family, Elizabeth Day McCormick (1873–1957) dedicated her life and considerable means to collecting textiles, focusing on European needlework, costumes, and costume accessories from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Between 1943 and 1953, she donated approximately 6,000 objects to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA). Gertrude Townsend (1893–1979), the museum’s first textiles curator, worked closely with McCormick to encourage her patronage, manage the donation, and research and interpret objects in the collection. McCormick and the MFA serve as a case study for exploring the relationship between collectors and museums, and what happens when a collection is transferred from private to public ownership and an individual’s taste becomes institutional fact. The relationship of McCormick and Townsend also highlights how female networks of collectors, professionals, philanthropists, and enthusiasts influenced museum development, particularly in relation to textile and costume collections. Overall, the conviction that museums reflect intellectual and social priorities of their time drives this thesis, and this case study begins to dissect the institutional authority cultivated by museums.

## INTRODUCTION

In August 1946, Elizabeth Day McCormick (1873–1957), having just sent to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), another shipment of her extensive textiles collection, wrote to the curator of textiles Gertrude Townsend:

I wish I could be there at the Fine Arts with you as you are opening up all my precious treasures but I visualize a good many of them and I enjoy the greatest of all satisfactions, my reassurance that they are all in such interested, scholarly hands, and that this chapter pertaining to the customs and the inherent art of the plain bourgeois, in the preceding centuries, on the continent, has found a foothold in this great new continent, to provide new ideas and inspiration for all of our composite population in this great land of ours—you have provided my great joy and contentment, by carrying on my profound purpose in life.<sup>1</sup>

At the time she wrote this letter, McCormick was in the midst of a decade-long process of donating approximately 6,000 objects to the museum. McCormick put a high value on the objects her collection, calling them her “precious treasures,” and she had great aspirations for what her collection could accomplish: “to provide new ideas and inspiration for all of our composite population in this great land of ours.” Most of all, McCormick was satisfied that her collection, when transferred from individual, private ownership to possession by a public institution, would remain in “interested, scholarly hands,” at the Museum of Fine Arts, and more specifically, with Gertrude Townsend. McCormick was deeply concerned with the future of her collection, which

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Elizabeth Day McCormick (EDM) to Gertrude Townsend (GT), August 30, 1946. Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Unless otherwise noted, all letters cited hereafter are from the same collection.

she called her “profound purpose in life,” and in Townsend she identified someone who would continue what she saw as her life’s work.

Born into one of Chicago’s wealthiest and most prominent families, McCormick dedicated her life and considerable means to collecting textiles, focusing on European needlework, costumes, and costume accessories from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Growing unrest in Paris (she wrote later, “Hitler was on the rampage ... I grasped the idea that I had better get out”) prompted McCormick to leave her apartment there in 1939 and return to the United States, where, through a mutual friend and needlework enthusiast, she met Townsend, the first textiles curator of the MFA.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this relationship and two loan exhibitions of McCormick’s embroidery, in 1943 McCormick made the first in a series of donations over the next decade, encompassing 6,000 objects. Of these, 2,000 articles of costume and costume accessories propelled the MFA’s young textile department, founded only thirteen years previous, to the forefront of costume collections in the United States, a field receiving new attention from art museums in the 1940s.

When the collection left McCormick’s hands and joined a much larger institutional body, its meaning as an assemblage of objects necessarily changed. When McCormick’s “precious treasures” entered the context of the museum, they were validated by the institution’s reputation as a discerning cultural authority. The donation also raised the museum’s profile regarding certain types of objects—primarily costume and costume accessories—which the museum had not previously aggressively collected. A collection is imprinted by its maker, and that imprint does not evaporate because the collection was given to a public institution.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, July 19, 1953.

What, then, is the role of the collector in the development of museum collections? Visitors experience most museums today as monolithic entities, and unless the museum is named for or created by a single collector, exhibitions and catalogues do not reveal the multitude of individual efforts through which collections are built. When a collector donates his or her collection to a museum, an individual's idiosyncrasies become institutionalized, and often are elided into the overarching history of the museum. With the case study of Elizabeth Day McCormick's textile collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, this thesis will argue that the process by which a collection moves from private to public ownership and the relationship between collector and curator in negotiating that process are important sources for understanding the particular meaning and impact of a museum.

This thesis examines a case study that combines cultural context and comparable collectors and institutions to clarify the meaning of its central subject. Unlike many collection histories, this thesis examines the institutional context of the donated collection as well, an often-overlooked topic unless the collector also founded a personal museum. Just as decorative arts scholarship often privileges the moment an object is created, collecting scholarship privileges the moment the collection is created. The collection creation story is a necessary component of this project, but the main focus is the relationship between the collector and museum. This thesis considers the collection's meaning when it is transferred from private to public ownership and how an individual's taste and interests can become institutional fact. In describing the relationship of McCormick and Townsend, this thesis also highlights how female networks of collectors, professionals, philanthropists, and enthusiasts influenced museum development in the mid-twentieth century. Overall, this thesis examines the ability of museums to reflect intellectual and social priorities of their time. The McCormick case study dissects the sources of institutional authority inherent in many

museums, especially those that are large, influential, urban, and attempt to be encyclopedic.

### Sources

Two collections of material are primary sources for this project: the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection at the MFA as it exists today, and the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers which are held in the Textile and Fashion Arts Department. The objects themselves were an important resource for understanding what McCormick and Townsend valued about the collection. Two factors influence the integrity of this collection for the purposes of this study. First, some deaccessioning and departmental transfers within the museum have occurred since the 1940s, altering the collection from the way McCormick originally composed it. Second, the sheer volume of objects in this collection prevented careful study of every object. The focus became the textile objects, particularly costume and costume accessories. These were exhibited by the MFA, were mentioned by McCormick or Townsend in their letters, or seem to best exemplify McCormick's collecting in a particular way. The objects highlighted in this thesis by no means represent the full breadth of the McCormick collection. However, the selection does not incorrectly characterize the collection as it supports this study's narrative and argument.

The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers include over 600 letters and documents like press clippings, photographs, memos, articles from the *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, and promotional materials relating to the donation of the McCormick collection to the MFA. The letters between McCormick, Townsend, and MFA Director George H. Edgell were invaluable in reconstructing this story. The majority of the papers date from 1941–1954, reflecting one major limitation: the lack of documentation of McCormick's early life and how her collection was assembled.

Supplementing the McCormick Collection Papers were 200 related documents, correspondence, notes, and press materials in the Museum Archives, the MFA's annual reports in the William Morris Hunt Memorial Library, and a collection of documents relating to the history of the Textile and Fashion Arts Department compiled in a binder in that department. These latter documents were especially helpful in understanding the history of the institution, of the textile department, and of the McCormick donation.<sup>3</sup>

Lacking archival materials for McCormick's early life and collecting process, newspaper accounts proved to be a significant resource. The society pages of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* offered commentary on McCormick's activities as a young woman, particularly her participation in social and charitable events. These documents showed McCormick's social milieu, which was very helpful in understanding her background. Newspaper accounts of the McCormick family, their various legal battles, and the fate of the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, were also useful. The *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* also shed light on McCormick's life in Chicago, noting loans and donations she made there in the 1930s. Thus far, no comprehensive collection of Elizabeth Day McCormick papers has come to light.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Gertrude Townsend's research papers are held in the MFA's Museum Archives, but I was not able to access them because they have not been processed. This could be a significant resource for future research into both the history of textiles collections in museums and the role of women in museum development in the twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, she would appear in the papers of other McCormick family members, which are held in several institutions. The Wisconsin Historical Society holds the McCormick-International Harvester Company Collection, the Lake Forest College Donnelly and Lee Library & Special Collections holds the Cyrus McCormick II Papers, and the Newberry Library holds the McCormick Family Financial Records, 1890–1958, and the Chauncey McCormick Papers. This would be an excellent area for further research.

existing papers at the MFA, fortunately, pertain to the thesis topic, the later part of McCormick's life and her relationship with the MFA.

Another important primary source in reconstructing this story was interviews with relatives and colleagues of McCormick and Townsend, as well as current and former staff at the MFA. Thomas Townsend, Townsend's nephew, and Sargent Collier, McCormick's great-nephew, each graciously agreed to speak about their aunts, sharing their personal memories and family stories. This was particularly helpful in achieving a clear picture of the collection's disposition at the MFA. Conversations with Adolph Cavallo, Townsend's successor as curator of textiles, were extremely enlightening about the immediate impact of the McCormick collection had on the department. Cavallo's recollections of Townsend were also very helpful. Additionally, interviews with more recent MFA staff in the textiles department including Susan Ward, Elizabeth Ann Coleman, and Pam Parmal (the current David and Roberta Logie Curator of Textile and Fashion Arts at the MFA) added different perspectives on the McCormick Collection. The former and current staff members worked with the collection closely and could reflect on the impact of the collection on the department and museum over a long period of time.<sup>5</sup> Hearing their individual perspectives on the collection was a valuable reminder of the larger framework for this thesis: that museums are the product of many personal experiences of those who work for or contribute to the institution, even if the stories are sometimes hard to unravel.

This study's primary goal in bringing these many sources together is to trace the series of events in which McCormick and Townsend met and worked together to bring McCormick's collection to the MFA. This narrative was constructed

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Ward is a former Curatorial Research Fellow and Elizabeth Ann Coleman is a former David and Roberta Logie Curator of Textile and Fashion Arts.

primarily from correspondence and other documents in the McCormick Collection Papers and Museum Archives. Although it tells the story of only one collection, this case study addresses larger themes. McCormick and Townsend's participation in a largely female network of collectors, philanthropists, and museum curators dedicated to textiles demonstrates how women negotiated both professional and social interactions in accomplishing their work. Townsend's engagement with the fashion industry to promote the McCormick collection represented renewal of a longstanding museum ideology—that museums could and should influence contemporary design—in a new context.

### **Historiography**

Several bodies of literature informed this work. First, the history of costume collecting has not been widely studied. Most discussion of the topic appears only in the introductions to costume exhibition catalogues like Jean L. Druesedow's *In Style* (1987), the Phoenix Art Museum's *In Pursuit of Elegance* (1985), and Jan Glier Reeder's *High Style* (2010). In these works, McCormick's collection merits single sentence, noting its existence and little more. The MFA's *MFA Highlights: Textiles and Fashion Arts* (2006) devotes a few introductory pages to the significance of McCormick's collection and Townsend's contribution to the department, but it is not the focus of the catalogue.

In the history of museums, costume and textile departments are barely present. Walter Muir Whitehill's *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History* (1970), the standard institutional history of the MFA, mentions the donation of the McCormick collection, but briefly, and with far less exposition than is given to the M. and M. Karolik Collections of Eighteenth Century American Arts and of American

Paintings. Overall, exhibition catalogues that reveal the history of the exhibiting institution have been much more helpful than museum histories.

Lou Taylor's *Establishing Dress History* (2004) leads the field in analyzing the history of costume collecting in museums. Her study focuses on collections in the United Kingdom. Taylor argues that fashionable European dress, traditionally regarded as frivolous or unworthy of study, was unwelcome in museums until women were employed as curators in greater numbers. Her insight resonates with this case study, but the story of McCormick's collection at the MFA is more complicated. As will be discussed in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5, Gertrude Townsend was never a crusader for costume in museums, and she did not set out to acquire the McCormick collection specifically to raise the profile of the costume collection at the MFA. Yet the prevalence of women in this narrative is remarkable. Taylor's work is a valuable and influential resource, even if the story of the McCormick collection does not fit her model precisely.

Much of the general literature on collecting is theoretical rather than historical in its analysis. In Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968), collecting is framed as a means to assert control over one's environment and symbolically transcend death. The collector replaces a chaotic universe with the controlled series of objects, with the collector him- or herself as the final term. Baudrillard's psychologically-based work has been extremely influential, and his impact is visible in the works of Susan Stewart (*On Longing*, 1984), James Clifford (*The Predicament of Culture*, 1988), Susan M. Pearce (*Museums, Objects, and Collections*, 1992), and John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (*The Cultures of Collecting*, 1994).

Baudrillard's legacy is that scholars have focused on collecting primarily as an interior act. Jeremy Braddock critiques this method as "isolating the activity of the collector from his wider social situation," when collections "may also represent

systems of knowledge in whose names collectors act, hoping to claim agency and authority through the institutional acceptance of those systems.”<sup>6</sup> Braddock was writing about the teaching philosophies of Albert C. Barnes, but his argument applies to less literal “systems of knowledge” that are present in any collection, from the types of objects collectors seek to the juxtapositions and groupings they create. This thesis fleshes out the social, cultural, and historical context for McCormick’s collecting rather than conducting a psychological assessment of her. It places McCormick in the “wider social situation” that Braddock writes about; it does not remove her from it. Many people were involved with, influential to, and impacted by McCormick’s collection. To focus only on what the collection tells us about McCormick would lose much of what the collection has to offer as an historical document.

Within the scholarship on the history of collecting, there are also a number of works that are more historically rooted. More specifically, literature on women collectors and women’s involvement in the arts has proven a relatively rich resource. Kathleen D. McCarthy’s *Women’s Culture* (1991), Charlotte Gere and Marina Vaizey’s *Great Women Collectors* (1999), Diana Sachko Macleod’s *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects* (2004), and Beverly Gordon’s *The Saturated World* (2006) examine the unique position of women collectors and philanthropists, ranging from the most humble collectors of ephemera to fine art collectors who founded their own museums. These works all feature a number of short case studies profiling individual collectors and comparing their priorities, tastes, and ultimate accomplishments. These works also emphasize the different spheres occupied by men and women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They examine the cultural influences and

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<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Braddock, “Neurotic Cities: Barnes in Philadelphia,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 48, 50.

motives of women collectors and their collections. Many, like McCormick, were from wealthy families, never married or had children, and had no other profession.

Collecting and fostering art appreciation became their lives' work.

### **Structure**

This thesis is structured chronologically in five chapters. Chapter one provides a brief biography of McCormick until 1941, when she met Townsend. This chapter relies largely on newspaper accounts to reconstruct the details of McCormick's early life in Chicago. A consideration of her family's social status in Chicago and McCormick's philanthropic activities provides some context for her collecting.

Chapters two and three provide a close look at the collection as it exists at the MFA today and a compilation of what is known about how it was assembled. Chapter two lays out the different components of the collection both in numeric and descriptive terms. From the diverse range of both textile and non-textile objects that McCormick collected, this chapter seeks to draw some conclusions about McCormick's criteria for the items she bought, what they have in common, and how her criteria varied for different types of objects. Chapter three recounts how McCormick assembled her collection, whether buying at auction or from dealers, and how McCormick "curated" her collection, repairing items and researching provenance. This chapter also suggests some comparable collectors, many of whom were McCormick's peers, with a discussion of her collection's relevance to contemporary trends.

Chapter four traces the process through which McCormick and Townsend met and McCormick made the decision to donate her collection to the MFA. This is placed in the context of the history of the MFA, its textiles department, and

Townsend's work with costume prior to 1941. In 1933, Townsend had articulated the collecting policy of the department as "[adding] to the collection of Textiles only such costumes whose material either as an example of weaving, embroidery or lace, would have a place."<sup>7</sup> The evolution of Townsend and the MFA's attitude toward costume is charted in this chapter and the next. Chapter four uses correspondence between McCormick, Townsend, and Director George H. Edgell to show how careful and strategic negotiations were required to secure McCormick's donation, a process that continued to influence that collection's role in the department of textiles at the MFA.

Chapter five examines the McCormick collection's impact on the MFA, beginning with an exhibition in 1945 celebrating McCormick's gift. Edgell declared the donation "without hyperbole ... the gift of a Museum to a Museum," and McCormick fondly recalled how "the whole of Boston turned themselves out to welcome me and do me honor."<sup>8</sup> The McCormick collection prompted the MFA to fulfill its museological mission to "instruct and inspire" in a new way.<sup>9</sup> At Townsend's invitation, a number of fashion designers from New York previewed the collection, their enthusiastic response to which Townsend found a "delight" and "an indication that the collection will have a real influence on American design."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gertrude Townsend, Curatorial recommendation to the Committee on the Museum, 27 April 1933. Quoted in Tiffany Webber-Hanchett, "Collecting and Exhibiting Dress as Fine Art: A Case Study of the Textile and Fashion Arts Department, MFA, Boston," Presented at the Costume Society of America, Region I Symposium: *What is Costume? New Perspectives and Approaches to Dress Scholarship*, 12 March 2005, 1.

<sup>8</sup> George H. Edgell, "Report of the Director," in Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Sixty Eighth Annual Report for the Year 1943* (Boston: T. O. Metcalf Company, 1944), 21-22. Letter from EDM to GT, March 10, 1946.

<sup>9</sup> Webber-Hanchett, "Collecting and Exhibiting Dress," 10.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, November 11, 1944.

Townsend's efforts to make the collection accessible to the fashion industry represent both her knowledge of current museum trends and the extent to which the McCormick collection prompted action and innovation on the part of the MFA.

Of her decision to donate the collection, McCormick wrote to the wife of one of the museum's trustees, "I feel so happy to know that they have finally reached their happy journey's end. It has been a life long pleasure to acquire them and I think that after all that the world has been through, during these last few years, that they would be very hard to replace."<sup>11</sup> Tracing the "journey" of McCormick's collection, this thesis illuminates some of the major factors in museum development in the mid-twentieth century, examining the historical context not only for collecting, but also for the role of women in cultivating the arts, the culture of philanthropy in elite society, and evolving institutional identities and meanings.

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from EDM to Mrs. Coolidge, November 22, 1943.

## Chapter 1

### ELIZABETH DAY MCCORMICK: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Day McCormick was born on July 11, 1873, in Chicago, Illinois, into a prominent family whose fortunes had grown along with those of the city in the nineteenth century. Her grandfather, Leander James McCormick, moved to Chicago from the family home in Rockbridge County, Virginia, in 1848, following his brother Cyrus Hall McCormick who planned to manufacture and sell his patented reaping machine throughout the country. The brothers, along with a third, William, were extremely successful over the next few decades, branching out to sell other types of agricultural equipment and experimenting with marketing techniques like employing travelling salesmen. After the loss of the factory in the 1871 Chicago fire, the McCormicks rebuilt an even bigger facility.<sup>12</sup>

The business weathered several cycles of economic downturn to be a success, but tensions arose between the brothers. The employment of Leander's son Robert Hall (known as Hall), Elizabeth Day McCormick's father, was a point of contention between Leander and Cyrus, ending in accusations of breach of contract and disloyalty in 1880. In 1889, Cyrus Hall McCormick Jr., Cyrus's son, bought Leander and Hall's one-quarter interest in the company for \$35 million. Leander and Hall invested heavily in Chicago real estate after Cyrus Jr. bought them out, and they

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<sup>12</sup> Gary Scott Smith, "McCormick, Cyrus Hall," *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000. <http://www.anb.org/articles/10/10-01098.html>. Accessed 27 January 2011. Fred Carstensen, "McCormick, Leander James," *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000. <http://www.anb.org/articles/10/10-01100.html>. Accessed 27 January 2011.

were not very involved in the family business after that. This sequence of events occurred largely before Elizabeth Day McCormick was born or when she was a small child, but it had significant consequences for the source of her family's, and eventually her own, money.

McCormick was the second child of Hall and Sarah (Day) McCormick, following Henrietta (1872) and preceding Robert Hall III (1878), Phoebe (1879), and Mildred (1888).<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth, known as "Elsie," was educated at Miss Kirkland's School in Chicago (where Ellen Gates Starr taught before founding Hull House with Jane Addams) and Miss Peeble's School in New York City. That McCormick was sent to these schools was a marker of the family's economic resources and social status, as McCormick was likely taught arts, literature, and other subjects that would enable her to converse with educated people. Attendance at Miss Kirkland's and Miss Peeble's schools is noted in many women's entries in *Woman's Who's Who of America* for 1914–1915, suggesting these particular institutions were well-regarded, connoting status and accomplishment for their students.<sup>14</sup> After leaving Miss Peeble's School, McCormick returned to Chicago to her parents' home.<sup>15</sup> From a young age,

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<sup>13</sup> *McCormick-Hamilton Lord-Day Ancestral Lines*, Vol. 1. (Privately printed: 1957), 22. This genealogy was compiled by Reverend Arthur Wilmot Ackerman and Neil F. Mears for Elizabeth Day McCormick and Robert Hall III, her brother.

<sup>14</sup> John William Leonard, ed. *Woman's Who's Who of America: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Women of the United States and Canada* (New York: The American Commonwealth Company, 1914). While McCormick was not listed in this volume, several of her aunts and great aunts were, including Edith Rockefeller McCormick.

<sup>15</sup> The McCormicks lived at 660 Rush Street. The area around the intersection of Huron and Rush Streets was known as "McCormickville," and a number of family members lived in the neighborhood. Susan Benjamin and Stuart Cohen, *Great Houses of Chicago, 1871–1921* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2008), 80. See also John Drury, *Old Chicago Houses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 106–108.

McCormick had taken up needlework, a component of many girls' educations in the late nineteenth century. She also began travelling to Europe with her family. Both had a lasting impact on how she would spend her life.

Few sources survive to document McCormick's young adulthood in Chicago. The only document from this period in the McCormick Papers at the MFA is an undated photograph that captures a calm and composed McCormick who appears to be in her late teens (fig. 1). The society pages of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* played the role of devoted onlooker and ardent admirer. From at least the early 1900s, the paper tracked McCormick's movements alongside those of all of Chicago's most prominent families. Her attendance was noted at lunches, parties, and cotillions, as well as several of her younger sisters' debuts.<sup>16</sup>

On December 11, 1907, McCormick posed in a tableau vivant for "English night" as Sir Joshua Reynolds's 1782 *Portrait of Mrs. Baldwin* (Jane Maltass) (fig. 2). She joined two women dressed as figures from paintings by Thomas Gainsborough (*Mrs. John Douglas*, 1784) and George Romney (*Charlotte, Lady Milnes*, 1788–1792).<sup>17</sup> *Mrs. Baldwin* was owned by McCormick's father, and had recently been in the news when, the previous year, a copy of the same painting had been donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. It was reproduced in the Metropolitan Museum's *Bulletin*.<sup>18</sup> McCormick chose a portrait that was

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<sup>16</sup> I was unable to find record of McCormick's own debut in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* archives, but this does not necessarily mean she did not have one. It may not have been covered or there may be a gap in the archives.

<sup>17</sup> "News of the Society World," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 1, 1907, A11.

<sup>18</sup> Algernon Graves and William Vine Cronin, *A History of the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London: Henry Graves and Co., 1899), 45. William Randolph Hearst purchased *Mrs. Baldwin* from the sale of R. Hall McCormick's collection by the American Art Association on April 15, 1920. Mary L. Levkoff, *Hearst: The Collector* (New York: Abrams, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2008), 49n32, 111n30.

contemporary to the selections of her peers, one she presumably had lived with in her parents' house and knew well.

However, McCormick was the only person to select a portrait with a figure depicted in Eastern dress. Jane Baldwin was an Englishwoman born in Izmir, Turkey, and Reynolds depicted her in the Turkish costume she wore to a ball hosted by George III.<sup>19</sup> In the portrait, Baldwin wears a vibrant green and gold striped brocaded caftan with small red flowers under a sleeveless ermine robe. She has a gold embroidered shawl in her lap, gold and diamond jewelry, and a white and pink silk turban on her head, adorned with pink blossoms. Such a luxurious and exotic costume would not have been out of place at an English ball, where Eastern motifs were popular, but Baldwin appears to be wearing an authentic ensemble.<sup>20</sup>

What does eighteenth-century English orientalism tell us about Elizabeth Day McCormick, a twentieth-century Chicago socialite? First, McCormick's participation in the tableau demonstrates that her engagement in the arts as a young woman had both intellectual and social aspects. McCormick had to select and then

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Levkoff writes that the portrait was purchased from the Philip McCormick collection, but that appears to be an error. See "Raeburn Painting Sold for \$30,000," *New York Times*, April 16, 1920, 18. There was another version of *Mrs. Baldwin* very similar to McCormick's in the Landsdowne Collection, now at Compton Verney (fig. 2). The copy at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is only a portion of the size of the other versions. See George H. Story, "Principle Accessions by Gift: Four Paintings by English Masters," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* Vol. 1, no. 3 (February 1906): 48-49.

<sup>19</sup> Monika Class and Terry F. Robinson, "Introduction," *Transnational England: Home and Abroad, 1780-1860* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, *The Dress Worn at Masquerades in England, 1730 to 1790, and Its Relation to Fancy Dress in Portraiture* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984), 232. Ribeiro notes that other English women were depicted wearing authentic Eastern dress rather than English pastiches, including Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

undertake a close study of the portrait to copy it. The tableau vivant was a component of the social rituals surrounding the holiday season. Second, imagining McCormick dressed as Mrs. Baldwin provides insight into her aesthetic and the principles that guided her collection. In 1907, McCormick was thirty-four years old, and while it is unknown exactly when she began collecting textiles, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted that same year that she had “thoroughly studied artistic linens” in connection to her contribution to an exhibition at the School of Domestic Arts and Sciences which aimed to advise consumers.<sup>21</sup> This suggests she had begun, if not collecting, then at least educating herself in the material so that she could recreate the portrait in an informed way.

In McCormick’s peers’ portraits, the figures wear eighteenth-century dresses of silk in brown and gray with white shifts lined with lace. The palette is refined and elegant and the texture of the fabric smooth and crisp. Contrast this with Mrs. Baldwin’s attire. The bold brocade of the caftan, presumably woven with gold threads, is juxtaposed with the gold shawl, which has its own embroidered pattern. To these, add the luxurious ermine robe, the silk turban, and the glinting crystal and gold necklaces. Aside from her clothing, Mrs. Baldwin is surrounded by textiles, from the crimson curtain in the upper left corner of the frame to the red damask upholstery of the couch and the red and white shawl strewn on its back. All three portraits convey a sense of richness through the sitters’ clothing, but the refined sensibility of the Gainsborough and Romney paintings contrasts strongly with the riot of color, pattern, and texture in *Mrs. Baldwin*.

The visual drama of the textiles in the Reynolds portrait is worth keeping in mind when looking at the objects McCormick collected. McCormick’s selection of

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<sup>21</sup> “Domestic Science,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 6, 1907, 18.

*Mrs. Baldwin* gives an early suggestion of her aesthetic preferences in textiles that would again be evident in the building of her collection. McCormick sought textiles that displayed patterns or dynamic visual interest, that were made of rich or sumptuous materials, or that were unusual or particularly “precious.” This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two, but it is noteworthy that these qualities are present in the textiles depicted in *Mrs. Baldwin* as well, from the elaborately patterned shawls to the sumptuous ermine robe.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* also noted McCormick’s participation in charitable causes, whether she was serving as a delegate for the YWCA as in 1897 or contributing to a Paris-themed charity fair benefitting a local hospital.<sup>22</sup> This kind of volunteer work was lauded for women in McCormick’s class. Historian Kathleen D. McCarthy argues that before women were granted the vote, “philanthropic endeavors—giving, voluntarism, and social reform—provided the primary means through which the majority of middle- and upper-class women fashioned their public roles.”<sup>23</sup> In particular, McCarthy points out, work that promoted arts and culture was a popular, non-political realm for women to devote their time, one that would not fall in or out of favor by election cycle. This was the culture in which McCormick was raised: the women in her family were active in both tenement reform and the Antiquarian Society of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “Chicagoans at Home and Abroad,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 11, 1897, 42.  
“Why Go to Paris? It’s Coming Here,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 2, 1906, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women’s Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xii.

<sup>24</sup> “Wealthy Women Rip ‘False Front’ From Their Ward,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 13, 1917, 17.

The Antiquarian Society represented McCormick's first experience with the interrelated work of collectors and museums. The society was founded in 1877 as the Chicago Society of Decorative Art. It was inspired by Candace Wheeler's New York Society of Decorative Art, formed after Wheeler saw the Royal School of Needlework's display at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition. The initial mission of these societies was to train women in needlework as a moral trade that could provide them with some income, providing a combination of social and cultural betterment. By 1894, driven in part by economic difficulties of sustaining this kind of work, the Chicago Society of Decorative Art had become the Antiquarian Society, a body dedicated to collecting decorative arts for the Art Institute and still primarily a women's organization.<sup>25</sup> Though it is unknown when McCormick joined, it was likely after this change in focus.

The Antiquarians no doubt influenced McCormick strongly. They operated relatively independently within the museum, and, as cultural historian Celia Hilliard put it, they "considered themselves cultivated and discerning, and though few had college degrees, many were well-read and widely traveled."<sup>26</sup> This was the kind of education that mattered for participation in a group that was responsible for both the acquisition of fine antiques for a serious institution as well as for highly regarded society functions. One of the few surviving photos of McCormick is from an Antiquarian Society event (fig. 3). Many Antiquarians were also collectors, and the Art Institute benefitted from these women's taste and expertise in selecting objects for the museum. McCormick loaned items from her collection for display at the Art

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<sup>25</sup> Celia Hilliard, "'Higher Things': Remembering the Early Antiquarians," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies: Gift Beyond Measure: The Antiquarian Society and European Decorative Arts* 29, no. 2, 1987–2002 (2002): 7, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Hilliard, "Higher Things," 9.

Institute as early as 1923, if not earlier.<sup>27</sup> Seeing other Antiquarians' personal collections, whether on exhibition or in their homes, as well as the objects the society purchased for the museum, must have influenced McCormick's desire to collect. Exhibition content and lectures sponsored by the Art Institute were likely another resource.

The social dimension of the Antiquarian Society extended into members' homes, where "atmosphere" created by one's collection was highly prized.<sup>28</sup> This was a general principal of interior decoration in the late nineteenth century, but one that likely resonated with collectors of all kinds. Curator Marilyn Johnson, writing about interiors of the Aesthetic movement, identified in many interiors "a horror vacui, or aversion to blank surfaces" that was placated by the acquisition of objects. Johnson described "the American collector abroad" in the 1880s fitting in "swift visits to antique dealers and flea markets, Parisian ateliers and Near Eastern bazaars, for his social standing might depend upon his acquisition of artistic objects."<sup>29</sup> McCormick was a young girl during the 1880s, but would have witnessed this aesthetic and practice among her parents' friends and relatives, including the Antiquarians. Collecting solved a dilemma of style—it was a fashionable look—and it reinforced one's worldliness and social status among friends. On a very basic level, McCormick could have absorbed the idea that collecting was a worthy activity from these cues.

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<sup>27</sup> "Needle-Work Exhibitions," *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 17, no. 3 (March 1923): 31.

<sup>28</sup> Hilliard, "Higher Things," 10.

<sup>29</sup> Marilyn Johnson, "The Artful Interior," Doreen Bolger Burke, et al, ed., *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rizzoli, 1986), 128.

After McCormick moved out of her parents' house in the 1920s, the press admired her new abode.<sup>30</sup> McCormick's Chicago apartment "contained a number of beautiful and rare objets d'art, gathered from her trips to distant corners of the world, and she brought with her this time many pieces to add to her collection." The repository for McCormick's collection was still in Chicago, though by the 1920s she was beginning to spend more and more time abroad. That "chic dwelling place" was well known to Chicago society, as the columnist notes its damage in 1925 was "a real deprivation to a Chicago winter, for Miss McCormick is an expert ... hostess."<sup>31</sup>

In 1925, McCormick was fifty-two years old, and settling into her role as a prominent member of society, a tastemaker, and a "natural born collector."<sup>32</sup> Nine years earlier, McCormick's choice of residence had been commented upon in an article about her efforts to set up a studio for reproductions of antique textiles. The article stated that McCormick "was once a pioneer in Chicago for girls wishing to live in their own separate establishments. Her father allowed her a very pretty apartment in Rush street [sic] with her own corps of domestics, and [illegible] much envied by other girls."<sup>33</sup> By the time the article was written in 1916, McCormick again lived

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<sup>30</sup> It is not clear exactly when McCormick moved out. The newspaper article quoted here lists McCormick living at 220 E. Walton Place in Chicago, which was built in 1919 according to the Chicago Architecture Info Building Database, accessed February 14, 2011, <http://www.chicagoarchitecture.info>. McCormick's mother passed away in 1922 and her father had died in 1917, so she may have moved out of the family home after that.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy R., "Pile Driver Lays in Ruins Apartment of Miss Elsie McCormick," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 5, 1925, 19. The title of the article refers to the damage to McCormick's Chicago apartment at 220 E. Walton Place, the result of construction to a neighboring building.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy R., "Apartment of Miss Elsie McCormick," 19.

<sup>33</sup> Cinderella, "Society and Entertainments: Elsie McCormick Pioneering Again," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 14, 1916, 17.

with her parents, and no other details of this earlier strike for independence are covered in the newspaper archives. This off-hand comment made by the writer to introduce McCormick's new project suggests that in Chicago, McCormick was regarded as an independent individual known for doing things her own way.

McCormick's "studio shop" is of interest because it combines her dedication to collecting, studying, and recreating historic textiles with the philanthropic culture in which she was raised. The columnist praised McCormick as "an artist in tapestry and silks and wools, and also in the reproduction of intricate and rare antique lace patterns," and described an exhibition of McCormick's needlework the previous spring to which "people not only flocked to see them [the needlework] but went quite crazy over what they saw."<sup>34</sup> McCormick was clearly regarded as an expert and an artist in her craft. At the studio, she was found "supervising the flock of Scandinavian girls and designing and searching for pieces of ancient lace and pieces of needlework." The employment of "a number of foreign girls" with the goal of teaching them marketable skills recalls Wheeler's original goals for the New York Society of Decorative Art. McCormick may also have been influenced by settlement houses like Hull House, a Chicago institution designed to support immigrant communities and provide educational opportunities.

It is not clear how long McCormick operated her studio. This newspaper article for the society pages, which is the only documentation of the studio's existence, emphasizes the quality of the textiles and their appeal for consumers over the charitable aspect of providing jobs for immigrant women. It is unknown how McCormick envisioned her work. What is clear from the few newspaper accounts of McCormick's life in Chicago is that she was increasingly regarded as an expert in her

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<sup>34</sup> Cinderella, "Elsie McCormick Pioneering Again," 17.

field, above and beyond the socialite who collected to convey her worldliness. This enabled her ability to collect on the scale that she did, and it is visible in the breadth and depth of the collection itself as it survives today at the MFA.



**Figure 1.** Seated portrait of Elizabeth Day McCormick, ca. 1891. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 2.** Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Baldwin in Eastern Dress*, Oil on canvas, 1782, 141 x 110 cm, © Compton Verney.



**Figure 3. Elizabeth Day McCormick (right) and unidentified woman attending an event hosted by the Antiquarian Society in 1938 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Centenary. Courtesy of the Chicago Sun-Times.**

## Chapter 2

### DESCRIBING THE COLLECTION

In 1944, Elizabeth Day McCormick wrote of her collection that “it was my deep desire to bring across here to our new continent of America the wonders and intricacies of this especially feminine art of the needle.”<sup>35</sup> Though little is documented about how McCormick created her collection, statements like this one, as well as the objects themselves, invite speculation about her tastes and collecting criteria. The majority of the McCormick collection as it survives is composed of textiles, costumes, and accessories, and the majority of those objects were created outside North America, certainly. But her reflection in 1944 was aided by decades of hindsight, and McCormick’s intentions and parameters do not always seem to have been so clearly defined as she created the collection.

In this chapter, McCormick’s words and the objects that remain in her collection at the MFA will demonstrate her collecting criteria and areas of focus. She favored needlework as well as textiles with woven or painted patterns, and she also sought out rare and unusual pieces made of precious materials like metallic threads and high quality silks. Above all, McCormick looked for beautiful, finely made objects to create her collection—always seeking, as she put it, “the beauty and preciousness of those gems of a past civilization.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from EDM to Mr. Crawford, December 30, 1944. Crawford’s first name is not given, but it is possibly Morris De Camp Crawford, who later praised the McCormick collection and its significance for the Museum of Fine Arts in *The Ways of Fashion* (1948).

<sup>36</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, December 26, 1947.

### **Describing McCormick's Collection: Facts and Figures**

An understanding of the significance of McCormick's collection requires a close examination both of the overall organization and of particular objects. First, a description of the types of objects McCormick selected is necessary. Second, several exemplary objects demonstrate key qualities that characterize many collection objects. These give evidence of McCormick's visual preferences and personal taste in assembling her collection.

The best evidence of McCormick's collecting habits is, of course, the objects themselves as they exist today at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. However, it is important to realize that there are two ways in which the collection at the MFA does not represent McCormick's collection in its entirety. First, McCormick did not give her entire collection of art and antiques to the MFA. Particularly toward the end of her life, she offered many objects that the MFA was not interested in accepting. These were mostly non-textile items like furniture and ceramic figures. Secondly, with McCormick's permission in the gift agreement, MFA curators deaccessioned certain pieces from her collection over time if they did not fit into the museum's collection. Nevertheless, the MFA's McCormick collection is the best representation of McCormick's full range of collecting habits that exists, and it is worth describing in greater detail.

Today, the McCormick Collection at the MFA totals approximately 6,000 objects. The major categories and approximate numbers for each category are listed in the table below. The first number indicates the number of objects in that category at the time of donation. The second number represents the number of objects in that

category accessioned in 1953 or earlier at the time of this study, August–November 2010.<sup>37</sup>

**Table 1. Three Major Categories of Objects in the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**

Category	No. of Donated Objects	No. of Objects in 2010
Costume and accessories	2,056	1,893
Textiles	1,189	920
Non-textiles	3,858	3,266

The textile and costume collection was and is the most significant group in the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection at the MFA. In general, this collection can be divided into three groups: costume, that is clothing items such as dresses, jackets, and skirts; accessories that complete a costume, such as bags, shoes, hats, and gloves; and non-costume textiles, including samplers, embroidered panels, furnishing textiles, bed linens, and cloth fragments.

For all three groups, McCormick focused on acquiring European objects. France, England, and Italy are best represented, though objects from Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Greece appear as well. Some objects originated in non-European

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<sup>37</sup> These numbers are derived from the MFA's electronic catalogue. One factor that must be taken into account is the practice of the museum to deaccession McCormick collection (and other) objects and use the resulting funds to make new purchases. When this happens, the new purchase may be catalogued with McCormick's name in the credit line as "purchase by exchange." I attempted to eliminate this factor by limiting the number of current objects to those with pre-1953 accession numbers, but in general these numbers should be regarded as approximate.

countries, including India, China, Turkey, Russia, the Balkan region, and Persia.<sup>38</sup> Some of these, particularly from India and China, were created for the export market, like Chinese painted silks. In other cases, an object may represent both European and non-European production, such as Indian printed cottons made into dresses in England or France. Overall, objects date from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries.

The costume collection features women's urban high-style dress, with a few examples of men's and children's clothing as well. Many have surface patterns. In addition to the painted silks and printed cottons mentioned above, many of the pieces are made of elaborately patterned brocades and damasks, including some with metallic threads. The eighteenth-century European gowns made of these luxurious fabrics are among the most celebrated pieces in the collection (fig. 4).

Aside from the high-style pieces, McCormick also had several other specific collections of costume. These include a collection of French regional costume from Provence and a collection of vestments and liturgical textiles from the Eastern Orthodox Church, which are heavily embroidered. Each represents an aspect of McCormick's specialized collecting based on her own interests. She was, for example, enamored of in French culture. She was skilled in and knowledgeable about embroidery and needlework. The costume collection also includes a few objects made in the United States, including the nineteenth-century dress and mantle which McCormick was photographed wearing for the *Chicago Sun-Times* (fig. 5). This undated photo depicts McCormick and two other women in historic dress, but the occasion is not noted.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Persia is the term used in the MFA's catalogue of the McCormick collection and it is used here to remain consistent. McCormick and Townsend also used the term in their letters.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Boyden, "Elsie McCormick's Gift to Boston," *Midwest Magazine, Chicago Sun-Times*, January 12, 1964, 7.

McCormick's extensive assemblage of costume accessories is a second major group in her collection. This includes hats, gloves, shoes, purses, and numerous other objects. The shoes and hats range from high-style European fashions to regional variations, including a pair of delicate silk pumps with a painted portrait miniature on each shoe and rustic sabots (figs. 6 and 7). A study of McCormick's collecting habits in the chapter three suggests why some of the accessories seem to fall outside McCormick's collecting interests. She may have been buying complete collections created by other collectors. McCormick's large collection of pocketbooks and purses includes examples of *sablé*, an intricate woven beadwork technique. Printed and embroidered gloves, knitted socks, and hats and bonnets decorated with feathers and ribbons round out the collection.

When McCormick donated her collection to the MFA, the groups of costume and costume accessories were among the most celebrated and publicized, but her collection of non-costume textiles should not be overlooked. This group includes samplers, embroidered panels, furnishing textiles, bed linens, and cloth fragments. Many of the objects, though not all, feature needlework and reflect similar geographic and cultural distribution to the costume and costume accessory groups. Finely embroidered caskets display many of the same characteristics of surface pattern, high quality materials, and a sense of uniqueness as do the other objects in the collection. This category also includes needlework completed by McCormick herself, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The non-textile objects, while not a focus of this study, are important to describe, especially because their number gives the appearance of significance. Why are there so many non-textile objects in a collection whose reputation rests on the costumes, accessories, and textiles? This may reflect a desire by Townsend to accept as much of what McCormick offered as she could, as a gesture of goodwill, but it is

worth pursuing further. McCormick's non-textile collections tell us nearly as much about her as do her textiles. The following table details the non-textile categories of her collection at the MFA.

**Table 2. Non-textile Objects Donated by Elizabeth Day McCormick to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**

Category of non-textile objects	No. of Donated Objects	No. of Objects in 2010
<b>Prints</b>	2,718	2,686
<b>Glass</b>	144	132
<b>Drawings and watercolors</b>	79	78
<b>Figures, ceramic</b>	55	4
<b>Miniatures</b>	50	0
<b>Ceramics</b>	47	18
<b>Paintings</b>	32	11
<b>Enamels</b>	23	17
<b>Jewelry</b>	24	21
<b>Furniture</b>	19	5

These numbers raise two important points when considering McCormick's collection as a whole. First, it is not precisely known what portion of McCormick's non-textile collection was donated to the MFA. It is clear that she collected many decorative arts objects and used them to furnish her home. Those items may not all have been donated. For example, no silver was donated to the MFA, and only nine pieces of metalwork. It is not known if McCormick collected silver or metalwork, but since she used her objects for table settings, entertainment, and interior decoration, it seems logical to assume that she might have done so. If she owned silver pieces, those may have been gifted or passed on to family members, rather than donated. In part because McCormick passed away without leaving a will, it is unknown what happened

to any other parts of her collection that were not donated to the MFA.<sup>40</sup> Second, McCormick donated a range of objects that were not sought by Gertrude Townsend or the other curators. Subsequently these were deaccessioned by the MFA. For example, all fifty miniatures listed above were deaccessioned, as well as the majority of the furniture, figures, ceramics, and paintings. Consequently, the physical record of the McCormick collection as it exists today at the MFA should not necessarily be seen either as McCormick's complete collection or as an exact indication of her conception of her collection.

Although McCormick saw herself and was seen by others as a collector of textiles, her other collections are noteworthy. These were primarily decorative arts objects, referred to by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in one article as "a number of beautiful and rare objects d'art gathered from her trips to distant corners of the world" that furnished her Chicago apartment.<sup>41</sup> McCormick collected furniture, glass, books and manuscripts, drawings and paintings, ceramics, jewelry and a variety of small decorative objects, including boxes, baskets, carved ivory and wood, and lacquer trays. Of these, both the furniture and glass collections were used and exhibited in Chicago. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted, on the occasion of McCormick's glass exhibition in her home for the Scribblers club, "it is something of a commentary on this charming hostess's character that instead of [leaving] the group to gaze at her possessions in a glass cabinet ... she spread out the choice pieces [amid] the 22 luncheon places."<sup>42</sup> In 1917, McCormick exhibited "her own bedroom set of early

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<sup>40</sup> "\$250,000 is Left by Elizabeth Day McCormick," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 30, 1957, A2.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy R., "Apartment of Miss Elsie McCormick," 19.

<sup>42</sup> Thalia, "The Scribblers at Luncheon See Rare Glass," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 8, 1969, 37.

American design, black heavily enameled in quaint flowers ... which serve as a foundation for the wonderful exhibition of needlework” at the Art Institute. This was likely in conjunction with McCormick’s participation in the Antiquarian Society, as discussed in chapter one.<sup>43</sup> Note that McCormick exhibited her non-textile objects in what seem to be both formal and informal settings, in her home and in a museum, and that at least the furniture exhibition was interpreted by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* as in support of the needlework exhibition.

McCormick clearly derived pleasure from living with her finds and sharing them with friends and colleagues, whether in the context of an exhibition or in her home. In 1943, when McCormick was living at the Hotel Pearson, she wrote to Townsend:

I put away in safe keeping beautiful things as a plain hotel room is a reproach to them. They are inharmonious—I get all of my satisfaction in picturing these lovely things in my mind, of the past but those luxurious times are gone, and in these later years I have lived in the beauty of my collection.<sup>44</sup>

These sources show that McCormick collected non-textile objects for a different purpose than textiles, costumes, and accessories. McCormick’s decorative arts collection was something that she acquired to live with and use. She collected the textiles to study and preserve them. From the wistful tone of this letter, however, it is clear that living with her decorative arts collection was something she enjoyed and, later, truly missed.

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<sup>43</sup> Cinderella, “Society and Entertainments: Elsie McCormick Steals a March on the Furniture Exhibit,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 15, 1917, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, November 23, 1943.

One group of McCormick's non-textile collection stands out in terms of sheer numbers: her collection of prints, many of which depicted French dress in the eighteenth century. McCormick described her collection:

It is largely composed along lines not yet explored even in Paris, representing to a large extent just the passing phases of the Social Upheaval caused by the first French Revolution exemplified by the emancipation from court conventionality and on that account of such human appeal.<sup>45</sup>

As well as providing "such human appeal," these prints must have been an invaluable resource for McCormick as she studied costume and selected pieces for her collection, and it has similarly been an important resource for curators at the MFA. Interestingly, McCormick and Townsend rarely mention the prints in their correspondence compared to their discussion of textiles. However, Townsend did praise the collection after it arrived at the MFA, writing:

We are all amazed and delighted by the quality, extent and variety of the collection. The collection of prints in itself would be sufficient to make your name famous as a great collector even if your fabulous collection of costumes were unknown.<sup>46</sup>

McCormick responded, "I cannot tell you the thrills I had in acquiring these groups," referring not just to her enjoyment of the pieces, but also her role in "rescuing" them as "the Germans came crashing into Paris."<sup>47</sup> McCormick clearly appreciated and was proud of her print collection, but, like the decorative arts, it served a secondary role to the costume and textiles collections, perhaps amplified by the prints' status as a documentary source for those primary collections.

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<sup>45</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, June 18, 1944.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, June 5, 1944.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, June 18, 1944.

### **Describing McCormick's Collection: "Beauty and Preciousness"**

Having outlined the contents of McCormick's collection, it is worthwhile to explore what they reveal about McCormick and the identity of the collection. What characteristics do these objects have in common? What do they reveal about McCormick's aesthetic preferences and collecting criteria? Answering these questions will help illuminate how McCormick shaped her collection and what influence it had on the Museum of Fine Arts when she eventually donated it there.

First, McCormick was known as a skilled needleworker in Chicago, and the presence of needlework is visible in many types of textile objects in the collection. There is a simple narrative in many newspaper articles about McCormick that seems plausible. The oft-repeated story is that McCormick collected needlework because it was a craft she loved and wanted to study. She also wished to promote needlework through her studio and through her relationship with the Art Institute, clubs, and other organizations.<sup>48</sup> If McCormick's desire to collect did stem from her own practice of needlework, it follows that she may have sought out objects that were great examples of that craft, or that had similar qualities.

McCormick gave the Museum of Fine Arts twelve pieces of her own needlework, ranging from samplers to embroidered cushion covers and curtains. It is notable that these include original designs as well as copies of items in her collection. For example, McCormick copied almost exactly a set of eighteenth-century Portuguese covers embroidered with flowers and vines in vibrant colors, showing her technical and artistic skills.<sup>49</sup> A pictorial panel worked by McCormick also showcases

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<sup>48</sup> Various *Chicago Daily Tribune* articles mention McCormick in connection with the Scribblers, the Brush and Pencil Club, the Municipal Art League, the Alliance Française, and the American Friends of Poland, in addition to the Antiquarian Society.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Day McCormick, cover, United States, 1900-40, silk embroidery on silk ground. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection

her skill, depicting an angel holding an open book surrounded by two cherubs, golden festoons, and a flat, geometric border of circles filled with a rectangular basket weave pattern (fig. 8). Fine stitches form the details and contours of the angel's face and robes, creating movement in the picture and reflecting McCormick's skill.

The repeating geometric pattern, formed of circles and rectangles in the background of the pictorial panel, establishes a second visual characteristic of McCormick's objects. Although not always expressed in needlework, pattern is a recurring theme. Whether it is an embroidered hat, a painted silk court dress or a ball gown with three-dimensional embroidered flowers, all the pieces in the collection have some kind of visual interest or surface pattern (figs. 9 and 10). Though McCormick collected objects from a range of historical periods and cultural traditions, some of the same patterns and motifs are repeated. The silk embroidery on a cotton dress from Turkey, purchased at Liberty of London, is another example of a repeating geometric pattern worked in vivid colors.<sup>50</sup> The embroidery includes abstracted and simplified natural forms of flowers as well as hexagon medallions that are reminiscent of the size and shape of the repeating geometric pattern on the background on McCormick's needlework panel. Regardless of its culture of origin, the dress is an example of these two identified qualities: skillful needlework and a lively, colorful pattern combining to create a pleasing whole.

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43.800a-b. Embroidered cover, Portugal, 18<sup>th</sup> century, silk embroidery on silk plain weave. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection 43.798. Cover, Portugal, 18<sup>th</sup> century, silk embroidery on silk moire and cotton-sateen backing. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection 43.799.

<sup>50</sup> Cotton dress, Turkey, embroidered cotton. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection 43.739.

A third quality shared by many objects in the McCormick collection is the use of rich materials. “Rich” is defined here as including both materials of economic value like gold and silver thread, silk, and textiles with a complex weave structure, and objects that appear rich or sumptuous, whether or not they were made of expensive materials. Metallic embroidery abounds on eighteenth and nineteenth century pieces. A nineteenth-century Turkish walking costume on which silver embroidery of leaves and vines flourishes over a purple velvet ground embodies this idea (fig. 11). A French man’s suit from the late eighteenth century of unembellished silk taffeta seems a simple design for the McCormick collection until moving the piece in the light reveals tints of red and orange shot through the gold silk (fig. 12). This piece may lack the use of pattern seen in other McCormick objects, but it still demonstrates visual movement and sumptuous materials.

Susan Ward, a former researcher at the MFA, suggested the quality of “preciousness” as describing many of McCormick’s objects.<sup>51</sup> In this context, preciousness implies small scale of production, highly valued materials, and precise, skilled workmanship. This applies especially well to the accessory collection, with objects like the portrait miniature shoes (fig. 6) and the hundreds of tiny drawstring purses, both sablé and knitted. McCormick’s caskets and embellished boxes also give evidence of this idea. Some are elaborately worked with pearls, beads, and silk threads to depict Biblical and allegorical scenes (fig. 13). The cuffs of one pair of early seventeenth-century gloves are embroidered with silk and metallic threads, depicting a forest scene which carries over from one glove to the other (fig. 14). In McCormick’s letters, she often referred to a new acquisition as “rarissime,” a superlative of the word

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Ward, interview with the author, December 7, 2010.

“rare” that itself sounds rather precious.<sup>52</sup> That quality comes across in the number of objects that are precious for their uniqueness, their rich materials, or their size.

A slightly different aspect of the idea of “preciousness” manifests itself in the collection through McCormick’s acquisition of objects of important provenance or historical association. This is most obvious in the jacket and coif supposedly belonging to Queen Elizabeth I of England (figs. 15 and 16). These were regarded by McCormick and others, before, during, and after her ownership, as true stars within the collection.<sup>53</sup> The fact that an eighteenth-century English silk gown was worn by Lydia Catherine Van Hatten, Duchess of Chandos and cousin to Sir Isaac Newton, is noted on a paper label sewn inside the garment (fig. 17). The label also reads “Lent by Miss Edkins,” and likely was written by a previous owner, not McCormick. In collecting costume, accessories, and textiles, it does not seem that McCormick based her choice on finding an object with important provenance. Rather, she made sure to maintain the associative information when she had it.

For the non-textile objects, the focus on famous associations is stronger. Of the few books that McCormick donated to the MFA, one was a copy of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* designed and printed by William Morris’s Kelmscott Press.<sup>54</sup> McCormick did not donate many ceramics, but two were Wedgwood copies of the

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<sup>52</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “rarissima,” the noun form of this word, is often applied specifically to manuscripts, books, and prints, so it may have been a more common term among collectors. McCormick was not consistent in her spelling of “rarissime” or “rarissima” for nouns or adjectives, but used both interchangeably. “Rarissima, n.,” Third edition, December 2008; online version March 2011, accessed March 30, 2011, <http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/158270>.

<sup>53</sup> See chapter three for further discussion of these objects.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, January 9, 1952. William Morris (1834–1896) was an English artist, designer, reformer, and political activist who founded Kelmscott Press in 1891 to print books using traditional techniques.

famous Portland vase.<sup>55</sup> McCormick valued unique and desirable objects, whether for their aesthetic beauty or their association with someone or something important. The latter criterion seems less discerning, and is most often visible in her non-textile collection. With non-textile objects, where she may have felt herself to be less expert, perhaps historic association was more important to make.

### **McCormick's Collection and the Aesthetic Movement**

McCormick's collection is united by qualities of beauty, pattern, texture, rich materials, and an ineffable sense of preciousness, qualities that make a great and highly desirable collection for any museum. What does it tell us about her? McCormick's collecting activities cannot be divorced from their time. When McCormick came of age in the late nineteenth century, Americans actively collected objects inspired by European and other foreign cultures in a variety of ways, whether through architectural styles or collecting new or antique objects to fill their houses. With her primary collections of costume and textiles, McCormick was clearly collecting for more studious reasons than interior decorating or occasional use and display, but she was still part of these trends. Greek, Egyptian, and Renaissance revivals combined with an interest in Asian cultures to form an aesthetic with numerous and sometimes confusing references to modern observers. At the time, these motifs signified Americans' wealth, worldliness, and as much access to the prestige of the past as any European aristocrat. Searching for a coherent set of principles that drove McCormick's collection is almost as futile as trying to parse the decorative schemes of places like Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt's Marble House in

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<sup>55</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, February 23, 1950. Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) was the proprietor of an English ceramics manufactory who from 1786–1790 attempted to copy the Portland vase, a Roman glass vessel dating from 5–25 AD and named for owner William Cavendish-Bentinck, Third Duke of Portland.

Newport, Rhode Island, inspired by the Petit Trianon at Versailles but adjacent to a Chinese Tea House.

One lens which clarifies McCormick's collecting criteria is that of the Aesthetic movement, an ideology of design that promoted the beautiful and harmonious over the intellectually or historically coherent. Roger B. Stein described a key theme of the Aesthetic movement thus:

By liberating the artist, the decorator, the collector, and the perceiver more generally from a responsibility to the historical past and geographically distant cultures, by making artifacts available as individually beautiful objects for home consumption, the Aesthetic movement made possible a kind of creative play with form and color and texture that helped to revolutionize our ways of seeing and knowing.<sup>56</sup>

McCormick does not precisely fit this model, as she clearly cared about the historical past and significance of objects in her collection beyond their aesthetic value. Yet their aesthetic beauty is what unites the otherwise disparate segments of the collection. As beautiful objects with some qualities in common—whether pattern, texture, or opulent materials—they fit together well.

The characterization of the Aesthetic movement as “creative play” is also relevant. McCormick did not collect as a mere hobby or frivolity; she called it her “profound purpose in life.”<sup>57</sup> She was seriously dedicated to collecting and studying these objects, but she could also ‘play’ with them. She enjoyed arranging loan exhibitions for the Art Institute of Chicago, showing her finds to fellow club members and friends, and pursuing and juxtaposing new objects together in different ways. This freedom to pursue very diverse objects because they could all be regarded as

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<sup>56</sup> Roger B. Stein, “Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in its American Cultural Context,” in Burke, *In Pursuit of Beauty*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, August 30, 1946.

individual, beautiful things informed and influenced the variety and overall aesthetic quality of McCormick's collection.<sup>58</sup>

McCormick's collection is so broad that a comparison to entire interiors is revelatory. Published in 1883, when McCormick was ten years old, *Artistic Houses* documented the homes of prominent Americans of good taste. McCormick may not have known this source as a child, but doubtless her parents, relatives, or friends, as members of elite society, would have. Of William H. Vanderbilt's Fifth Avenue townhouse, depicted in *Artistic Houses*, curator Marilynne Johnson, scholar of the Aesthetic movement, writes:

[T]he house resembled nothing quite so much as a beautifully tooled and embellished jewel box inflated to inordinate proportions. The analogy becomes even more appropriate when one considers the objects and interiors of the house, from the towering malachite Demidoff vase of the atrium to the Barbedienne gilt-bronze copy of Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* and the Pompeian-style vestibule of marble and mosaic.<sup>59</sup>

The jewel box analogy is apt for McCormick's domestic display of her collection as well. No images or detailed descriptions exist of any of McCormick's homes, so it is unknown exactly how she arranged her collection. Imagining all the components of McCormick's collection if they were ever all in one room—rich textiles, small

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<sup>58</sup> Beverly Gordon writes about the idea of "play" specifically in the context of women of McCormick's generation and what she identifies as "the saturated world," an "aesthetically and sensually charged" environment in which women could elevate domestic spaces to be sites of creative and emotionally satisfying activities. Collecting is just one of the activities Gordon identifies, but her idea of a saturated interior space in which one could "play" creatively with objects resonates with McCormick's collection. Gordon, *The Saturated World: Aesthetic Meaning, Intimate Objects, Women's Lives, 1890–1940* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Marilynne Johnson, "The Artful Interior," in Burke, *In Pursuit of Beauty*, 120–22. See also George W. Sheldon, *Artistic Houses*, 2 vols., (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1883).

miscellaneous treasures, costumes worn or artfully displayed, hundreds of shoes, purses, hats, and gloves—suggests a very fashion-centric treasure vault, no matter how the room was arranged. McCormick herself referred to items in her collection as “jewels” or “gems.”

The Aesthetic movement’s heyday in the 1880–1890s predated the years when McCormick did most of her collecting, the first decades of the twentieth century. It was, however, a significant design trend when she was growing up and may have influenced the adults around her. While McCormick’s collecting criteria do not perfectly fit with the movement’s values, her emphasis on beauty and preciousness does suggest similarities. The MFA deaccessioned many of the non-textile items McCormick donated, particularly the small, precious “jewels” that McCormick found so charming but that lacked the historical significance or the fine condition of her textiles. Still, this exploration of the qualities that McCormick valued illuminates her larger frame of reference when collecting both textile and non-textile objects. Understanding both the visual and conceptual qualities that characterize McCormick’s collection sheds light on the collection the MFA staff accepted, kept, and continues to study, interpret, and display.



**Figure 4.** The silk of this dress has large fields of gold thread used to depict rocks, boats, and flowers, creating a luminous and luxurious effect. Dress, petticoat, stomacher. Possibly Dutch. About 1735; dress restyled about 1770. Silk satin with supplementary discontinuous silk and metal-wrapped patterning wefts. Center back: 160 cm, center front 112 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1871a-c. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 5.** In this undated photo from the Chicago Sun-Times, McCormick (left) wears an American printed wool dress from about 1845 (44.342) and an American silk and velvet mantle, also from the mid-nineteenth century (44.341). Courtesy of the Chicago Sun-Times.



**Figure 6.** Each shoe has a portrait miniature on the toe, surrounded by gold fringe. A pair of woman's pumps. Probably French, 1780–90. Silk figured, gilt metal coiled fringe and sequins, red foil, silk string, paper painted, linen and leather lining, and leather heel and sole. 23.6 x 8.7 x 11.4 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 44.509a-b. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 7.** Pair of sabots. French (Foix, Bethmale Valley), probably 19th century. Wood, steel and leather, and brass. 27.2 x 10.2 x 25.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1760a-b. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 8. Elizabeth Day McCormick, American, 1873–1957. Pictorial panel. American (Chicago, IL). About 1900. Linen, embroidered with metallic threads and silk. 52 x 54 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.2502. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 9.** The sinuous pattern of this painted silk displays dynamic visual interest, augmented by the three-dimensional ruching. Court dress (robe à la française and petticoat) in four parts. France, 1770s. Silk; floral motifs painted on silk taffeta ground; trimmed with ruching. 163 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection 43.1633a-d. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 10. This dress is embroidered with highly reflective metallic threads, including three-dimensional elements in which gold flowers protrude from the dress. Ball dress. French. About 1825. Silk satin, embroidered with metallic threads. Center back: 121.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1650. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 11.** In this ensemble, brilliant metallic embroidery on a sumptuous purple velvet embodies the idea of “richness.” Woman's ensemble in two parts. Turkish, 19th century. Embroidered velvet. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1618a-b. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 12. This shot silk of this suit displays visual movement and play when held in the light. Man's suit in two parts (coat and breeches). About 1785–90. Silk plain weave (taffeta); linen plain weave lining, metal buckle. Coat: 113 cm, breeches: 72 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.674a-b. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 13.** The scene on this box was worked with valuable materials like pearls, coral, and metallic threads, and the minute detail indicates a highly skilled worker. Box with scene from the Judgment of Solomon. 1650–75. Silk, linen; embroidered with silk and metallic threads, seed pearls, glass beads, and coral; raised work; appliqué; wood, metal. 27 x 33 x 18 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.525. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 14.** The animals embroidered on these gloves leap from one hand to the other. Pair of gloves. England. Early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Leather embroidered with silk yarns and gilt-silver spangles, metal trim. 14.3 x 14.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection 43.411a-b. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 15.** The embroidery on this jacket depicts undulating and swirling vines surrounding a pattern of daffodils with silk and metallic threads. Woman's jacket. English. About 1610–15, with later alterations. Linen plain weave, embroidered with silk and metallic threads and spangles; metallic bobbin lace. Center back: 43 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.243. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 16.** This coif and forehead cloth have a similar embroidery pattern to the jacket. Woman's coif and forehead cloth. English, about 1610–15. Linen plain weave, embroidered with silk and metallic threads and spangles; metallic bobbin lace. Coif: 25 cm, forehead cloth: 17 x 36 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.244a-b. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 17.** The brocade of this dress depicts a pattern of ribbons and flowers that also suggests visual movement. Dress in two parts (dress and petticoat). English. About 1745, dress restyled about 1760. Silk plain weave, brocaded. Dress: 130 cm, petticoat: 88 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1639a-b. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

### Chapter 3

#### FORMING THE COLLECTION

Little documentation survives regarding exactly how and when Elizabeth Day McCormick assembled her collection. It must have been well established by 1916, when she set up her studio, to provide source material for her students. In 1917, the Art Institute of Chicago exhibited a selection of her needlework and decorative arts collection, including “church hangings from old Spain, cross stitch from ancient Mexico, Bohemian laces, old silk embroideries from Portugal, and early Victorian petit point on silk with the duckiest designs.” Furnishings on display included “colonial chairs and fire screens,” a bedroom set, benches, and a sofa “from her boudoir,” and a range of Bavarian, English, and American glass, “as well as p’raps a dozen unusually lovely old handbags.”<sup>60</sup>

By the time of this exhibition, McCormick was in her early forties and the decision to devote her life to collecting rather than to pursue marriage or other paths that women of her class commonly took must have been established some years before. The newspaper report also reveals two aspects of her collecting criteria. First, there is no mention of costume. This would be unremarkable for an exhibition of decorative arts, but it does indicate that McCormick was not known primarily as a costume collector. McCormick later recalled,

My costume and accessories collection was incidental to the former [embroidery], but comes right along with it. In fact, I did not know if Miss Townsend would accept the latter, as it had always been so

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<sup>60</sup> Cinderella, “Elsie McCormick Steals a March on the Furniture Exhibit,” 19.

frowned upon as being very low brow and frivolous, but I simply, at all cost, could not resist the beauty and charm that I reacted from them.<sup>61</sup>

From McCormick's own characterization of her collection, it seems she may have begun collecting primarily non-costume textiles and decorative arts and branched into costume and accessories later.

Part of the reason this thesis focuses on costume rather than the other objects in McCormick's collection is because it was the costume and accessories, donated to the MFA, that were most valued at the museum and most related to the history of costume in art museums in the United States. However, it is important to note the beginnings of McCormick's interest in collecting, inasmuch as they can be reconstructed. Her statement that the costume and costume accessories "had always been so frowned upon as being very low brow and frivolous" suggests that collecting decorative arts was encouraged and even mainstream among her peers, whereas the collecting of costume reflects McCormick's independent streak and unique eye.

The second point about McCormick's collection gleaned from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* article is the international origins of the different items featured. There is American furniture and glass and "ancient" Mexican cross stitch, but everything else listed is European. This is consistent with her costume collection, which is strongest in Western European but contains Greek, Turkish, Indian, and Chinese export pieces as well. Notably, the pieces from the United States are those McCormick used in her home, or were part of a smaller, non-textile collection.

American antiques grew in popularity throughout McCormick's lifetime—the centennial occurred when McCormick was only three years old—and studying and collecting "objets d'art," as her collection was often characterized by the *Tribune*, was an acceptable hobby for women of her social class, as discussed in

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<sup>61</sup> Letter from EDM to Mr. Crawford, December 30, 1944.

chapter one. This suggests a division in McCormick's collecting criteria other than nationality. Clearly, she devoted her life to collecting textiles with an emphasis on embroidery and needlework. The non-textile objects seem much more characteristic of what the average elite woman invested in the arts might acquire. It was the textile collection and the devotion of time and resources to tracking down objects abroad that sets McCormick apart.

### **Living and Buying in Paris**

Focusing on McCormick's textile collection prompts a closer look at how she bought pieces and her life abroad. The fact that McCormick was interested in European and Eastern textiles meant her collecting was best supported by buying overseas. By the 1920s, she spent part of each year in Paris, returning to Chicago for the winter social season. In 1925, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported McCormick had taken over the Paris apartment of another Chicagoan, Mrs. Joseph Winterbotham, who was returning to the United States.<sup>62</sup> This suggests McCormick's life in Paris was connected to her life in Chicago, as she must have maintained friendships and social circles from home. Interestingly, an article from later that year framed her travels this way:

Miss McCormick is not deserting us altogether for Paris. She has her own apartment there and will spend part of each year across the Atlantic, but she's not giving up her pied à terre in this part of the world, and we'll probably have long visits from her here every winter.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Nancy R., "Elizabeth McCormick Will Pass September 'Doing' Greece in Auto," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1925, 19. The journalist also commented on McCormick's "venturesome spirit" and "charming personality."

<sup>63</sup> Nancy R., "Apartment of Miss Elsie McCormick," 19.

This suggests McCormick's main residence was in Paris, and she made visits to her Chicago "pied à terre," rather than the other way around—living in Chicago full time, and making visits to Paris to work on her collection. A year later, McCormick's lifestyle was settled, as an article reported, "she does spend the greater part of the year in the gay French metropolis, where her apartment is a gathering place for the elite and the intellectual."<sup>64</sup> The columnist reported on McCormick's search for "a house in or near Paris, where she can assemble her collection and give it a background suitable to its worth and interest," but there is no record her having accomplished this.

### **McCormick's Sources**

Based on the amount of time McCormick spent in Paris and her interest in European objects, it seems likely she acquired most of her collection abroad, though how she did so is largely unknown. Letters from one dealer survive with the McCormick papers at the MFA: H. Hassan of 29 Rue des Saints Pères, 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, Paris. Hassan's letters contain photographs and descriptions of objects for McCormick's consideration, including Turkish caftans and Greek Orthodox ecclesiastical embroidery.<sup>65</sup> In a letter to Gertrude Townsend in 1944, McCormick described an unsuccessful transaction with "my young Turkish antiquaire," almost certainly Hassan:

On account of the outbreak of the war in 1939, I failed to get possession of a very rare specimen that my young Turkish antiquaire left Paris in June for Mount Athos to acquire. On account of all the war disturbances prior to the actual outbreak of the war, my antiquaire was

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<sup>64</sup> Nancy R., "Elsie McCormick Sails from France for American Visit," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1926, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Hassan's letters are addressed to McCormick at the Hôtel Métropolitain, 8 Rue Cambon, Paris, suggesting she either did not find a house to buy to display her collection, or had moved again by the mid-1930s.

unable to smuggle this treasure out of Greece and had to place it in some location for safety, and goodness knows what has happened to it since that time.<sup>66</sup>

The object in question was a piece of Greek ecclesiastical embroidery, of which McCormick wrote in the same letter, “I prize them at the top of my different groups.” The letters from Hassan date between 1936 and 1939 and concern solely Eastern textiles, so McCormick’s experiences of working with him cannot necessarily be extrapolated to her other purchasing habits. What she prized in 1944 may not have been the same as what she prized in the 1920s. Still, the Hassan letters show that McCormick did work with dealers and even deputized them to travel widely and track down acquisitions on her behalf—in 1939, McCormick was 66 years old, and it is possible she did not relish “smuggling” objects out of unstable countries herself.<sup>67</sup>

The surviving correspondence from Hassan is an anomaly, but McCormick did mention other dealers in her letters to Townsend. Many of these dealers ran antique shops in Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s, where McCormick continued to buy a range of decorative arts objects after she returned to the United States permanently in 1939. These were often sent directly to Gertrude Townsend at the MFA, though they were frequently not textiles and not necessarily desired by the museum. McCormick mentioned dealers she had worked with in the past much less frequently. She noted a “rarissime” fourteenth-century panel had come from “Arnauld

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<sup>66</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, September 26, 1944.

<sup>67</sup> With modern concerns about legal acquisition of cultural patrimony and ongoing debates over repatriation of objects in museum collections, McCormick’s word choice of “smuggling” naturally raises questions. It is important to remember that she collected in an era when these concerns were not in the mainstream. She believed removing the objects from Greece would protect them, a common perspective in her time. For a discussion of recent controversy over repatriation and the idea of the “universal museum,” see Mark O’Neill, “Enlightenment Museums: Universal or Merely Global?” *Museum and Society* 2, no. 3 (November 2004): 190-202.

Seligman,” presumably the Arnold Seligmann who split with brothers Simon and Jacques in 1912 and set up his own shop in Paris.<sup>68</sup> Jacques Seligmann counted among his clients major American collectors like J. P. Morgan and William Randolph Hearst, as well as numerous collectors in Europe and institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There is no record of McCormick buying from his offices in either New York or Paris, although other McCormicks appear in his correspondence.<sup>69</sup>

### **“Curating” the Collection**

Though McCormick was never a professional museum curator, she engaged in many curatorial activities relating to her collection: acquiring objects, studying them, putting them on display, and even repairing them. McCormick’s collection was large, but she did not acquire for the sake of acquiring. She truly regarded herself as a custodian of the objects, and her actions demonstrate this.

McCormick did not often record how she acquired objects, except when that information elevated the status of the object. This indicates McCormick cared about validating the objects in her collection through their connections to other collectors or experts who had owned them, and also reveals she bought at auction both individual items and wholesale collections.<sup>70</sup> Much of her extensive collection of shoes, which includes earlier pieces and greater geographical diversity than other parts of her collection, was bought from the auction of the Attilio Simonetti collection.

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<sup>68</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, June 17, 1947.

<sup>69</sup> Patricia C. Craig, et al., *A Finding Aid to the Jacques Seligmann & Co. Records, 1904–1978, Bulk 1913–1974, in the Archives of American Art*, 2010, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/jacques-seligmann--co-records-9936/more>.

<sup>70</sup> It is likely McCormick’s collection of nearly three hundred pieces of sablé was purchased as a group, or in several smaller units. The scale on which McCormick collected demanded this kind of strategy.

Simonetti was an artist and used the shoes as props when painting historical scenes.<sup>71</sup> McCormick noted at least one piece of her Elizabethan embroidery came from the collection of “Mr. Seligman,” in this case George Saville Seligman. He was an English collector who wrote *Domestic Needlework* in 1926 with Talbot Hughes as well as a number of articles on textiles for *The Burlington Magazine* and the *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*.<sup>72</sup>

McCormick also purchased individual objects at auction, including some of the most prized in her collection. The star of the McCormick collection, from the time it was donated to the MFA and in numerous subsequent shows, has long been the “Queen Elizabeth” jacket from the Wodehouse Collection at Kimberley Hall in Norfolk, England (fig. 14). This woman’s jacket, elaborately embroidered with silver and gold daffodils, was originally thought to date to the fourth quarter of the sixteenth century, and to have been given to Sir Roger Wodehouse when Queen Elizabeth visited Kimberley Hall in 1578.<sup>73</sup> There is no documentary evidence that confirms this link, and later research suggests the cut of the jacket is more appropriate to the early seventeenth century, after the time of Queen Elizabeth’s death in 1603.<sup>74</sup> Still, the object holds obvious mystique. McCormick purchased it as well as two pairs of

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<sup>71</sup> Artists made up an important group of early costume collectors. The Victoria and Albert Museum’s first costume accessions came from the collections of genre painters John Seymour Lucas, Edwin Austin Abbey, Ernest Crofts, and Talbot Hughes in the early twentieth century. For more on this subject, see Julia Petrov, “‘The Habit of Their Age:’ English Genre Painters, Dress Collecting, and Museums, 1910–1914,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 20, no. 2 (2008): 237–251.

<sup>72</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, December 14, 1941.

<sup>73</sup> Gertrude Townsend, “Notes on Elizabethan Embroidery,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 40, no. 238 (April 1942): 26.

<sup>74</sup> Pam Parmal, interviewed by the author, February 16, 2011. This reattribution was done in the 1990s.

embroidered gloves from Acton Surgey Inc. in London, where it was exhibited in the British Antiques Dealers' Association's "Art Treasures Exhibition" at Christie's in 1932. As well as antiques, Acton Surgey sold historic architecture to museums and ambitious renovators in the early twentieth century. In this instance they represented a number of objects from Kimberley Hall for sale, including an embroidered canopy under which Queen Elizabeth supposedly sat during her visit.<sup>75</sup> *Apollo* reported that some of the textiles had been found in "a large Japanese lacquered box of the eighteenth century which had been used as a muniment chest and lined with a copy of the *Morning Post* of a hundred years ago" and represented "the finest specimens of the English embroiderer's art."<sup>76</sup> These descriptions highlight two of McCormick's collecting priorities: objects of the finest quality and workmanship that had been preserved with little damage over time.

In fact, condition was very important to McCormick, and repairing objects in her collection gave her the opportunity to put her needlework skills to work. In her letters to Townsend, McCormick mentions mending "slits and frays and creases" as well as making "a large work of reparations [sic]" before sending various pieces to the museum.<sup>77</sup> This encompassed both repairing damage to textiles as well as mounting fragile pieces to new fabric. Presenting an object as stable and in good condition was prioritized over maintaining it as it was found. McCormick's mends are a reminder not

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<sup>75</sup> A. F. Kendrick, "Textiles and Furniture: Art Treasures Exhibition," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* Vol. 61, no. 355 (October 1932): 172. For more information on Acton Surgey Inc., see John Morris, *Moving Rooms: The Trade in Architectural Salvages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Carfax, "The Elizabethan Relics of Kimberley," *Apollo* 16, no. 94 (October 1932): 164.

<sup>77</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, August 12, 1945. Letter from EDM to GT, January 3, 1947.

only of her background in needlework, but also of her close interaction with and investment in the objects in her collection. This connection to the objects in her collection continued even after they had been donated to the MFA. In 1949, she offered to assist the museum with mending, writing to Townsend:

I hope that the vestments are in fairly good condition—Possibly you might send me on one, that was in most needs of repair, and I might see what I could do by way of repairs—If worse came to the worse I could line it with black and I have a supply of wonderful galloon I could restore any shortage in.<sup>78</sup>

The fact that McCormick made this offer even after the collection had been formally donated demonstrates how strong her connection was to these objects and how important it was to her that their condition be maintained. It also demonstrates that she was aware of the challenges faced by Townsend or any proprietor of such a collection, and wanted to be of assistance.

The Queen Elizabeth jacket was featured in McCormick's first loan exhibition at the MFA and mentioned in much of the press coverage when the donation became public. McCormick's attendance at an event like the Art Treasures Exhibition and the Kimberley Hall sale shows that she was not only seeking out hidden treasures in anonymous shops or pursuing obscure items like regional French costume. She was also actively pursuing objects of the highest quality and greatest desirability. The Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased a seventeenth-century dress at the same sale, and while it is unknown if they bid on the same things, the fact that McCormick was buying at the same sale as a major museum is significant.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, October 15, 1949. The letter is inscribed, "received 12/15/49," so it is not exactly clear when it was written.

<sup>79</sup> Adolph S. Cavallo, "The Kimberley Gown," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 3 (1970): 199-217. Cavallo wrote this article on the Metropolitan Museum's dress from the Kimberley sale while he was still curator of textiles at the MFA.

McCormick may have written that costume and accessories were always “incidental” to her collection of textiles and that she simply “could not resist the beauty and charm” of “frivolous” pieces, but her accomplishments seem to belie this statement. To museum visitors today and in McCormick’s time, the Queen Elizabeth jacket represented an expensive “coup,” not a frivolous or lowbrow diversion. It is valuable as an example of needlework as well as a constructed garment. This shows a slight divergence between the way McCormick wrote about different parts of her collection and the physical evidence of what she created. Perhaps the historical associations of the jacket transcended the categories she had constructed to define her collection. In any case, it is clear she succeeded in bringing “wonders” to America.

### **Comparable Collectors**

Comparing McCormick to other collectors of her time provides an important context for understanding what kinds of objects she chose and why. McCormick lived in an age when collecting a diverse range of art objects was an acceptable and lauded activity for the wealthy. While she had many contemporaries, McCormick does not fit comfortably into any of the categories of collectors whose stories are better known today. Identifying and defining, if only simply, a few of those categories shows both how elements of McCormick’s collecting criteria and style were influenced by different social norms and how they were unique. Three relevant categories are collectors of “Old World” objects, collectors of colonial revival objects, and collectors of contemporary art. Additionally, it is important to compare McCormick to other costume and textile collectors of her time who may have collected similar kinds of materials, but for different reasons.

“Old World” collectors affirmed their cultural and political authority by the astounding quality and quantity their objects. The final quarter of the nineteenth century brought significant wealth to industrialists in the United States, many of whom were dedicated to accumulating markers of social status and good taste on par with the collections of European royal and aristocratic estates. Henry Clay Frick, J. Pierpont Morgan, and Henry E. Huntington were all dedicated collectors drawn to the highest-quality European artifacts that would be displayed in their homes and, later, museums. Art historian Carol Duncan has described these collectors as “self-made businessmen whose knowledge of high culture was limited but whose willingness to spend money was not.”<sup>80</sup> The collector’s level of knowledge varied, and many employed or worked with expert dealers and art historians to assemble their collection. The Old World collectors were not limited to men. Both Isabella Stewart Gardner and Bertha Honoré Palmer, a McCormick family friend, could be counted in this category. Many collectors in this category were a generation older than McCormick, and more similar to her father, R. Hall McCormick, who collected European paintings, with a special focus on English portraits.<sup>81</sup> McCormick herself was clearly not a member of this group, but they are her collecting lineage, particularly by setting the precedent of the wealthy American scouring the Old World for treasures to bring back home.

Collectors of colonial revival objects represent a second comparable category. These collectors were more often McCormick’s contemporaries, energized by the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 to take a closer look at America’s own cultural heritage. R. T. H. Halsey, Francis P. Garvan, and Henry

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<sup>80</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 72.

<sup>81</sup> “Sale of McCormick Art Collection is Waited with Interest,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 23, 1920, 19.

Francis du Pont collected American antiques and promoted them heavily, whether through their associations with institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University, or their individual status as tastemakers, in the case of du Pont. As well as celebrating the artistry and craftsmanship of American-made objects, the colonial revival promoted what Elizabeth Stillinger called “a genealogical orientation toward old things.”<sup>82</sup> Americans found solace in the perceived simplicity and homogeneity of the past in the face of rapidly changing urban landscapes, new technology, and an influx of immigrants.

Organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution and Colonial Dames of America, both founded in 1890, proliferated, and their preservation efforts and charitable events offered some women an active role in the movement.<sup>83</sup> Many early costume collections in American museums were generated by colonial revival impulses. Old clothes were eagerly sought and valued for colonial teas and fancy dress balls, and later donated to museums. An undated photograph from the *Chicago Tribune* shows McCormick participating in this tradition, as she posed with two women all wearing historical dress (fig. 5). McCormick wore a printed cotton dress with a brown and blue feather and dendritic pattern and a black silk mantle, topped with a straw bonnet embellished with flowers and ribbon. Both the dress and mantle were made in the United States and date from the mid-nineteenth century, neither the country nor period that were the focus of McCormick’s collection. However, this image shows that she was influenced by the colonial revival at least on a social, personal level. In her more serious costume collecting, however, as

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<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Stillinger, *The Antiquers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980), xii.

<sup>83</sup> Ann Pamela Cunningham’s Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association predated these organizations by about forty years, but the movement gathered more momentum toward the end of the century.

mentioned in chapter two, she pursued objects for their beauty and rarity rather than for their ancestral connections, real or imagined.

Another similarity between McCormick and the colonial revival collectors is found in figures like Wallace Nutting, the collector, photographer, and furniture designer who was one of the movement's great advocates. Nutting's reproduction furniture was closely based on objects in his collection and fooled collectors throughout the twentieth century, although that was not his intention. Nutting collected, wrote, and developed related businesses on a much larger scale than McCormick, but each was clearly inspired and compelled by the objects in their collection to create their own copies and share those with others. McCormick accomplished this through her social circle and her short-lived studio and Nutting did it through the marketplace.<sup>84</sup>

The third relevant category of collectors among McCormick's peers is found in collectors of contemporary art. Many of the most famous collectors, then and now, belong in this category. Interestingly, many of these were women who, like McCormick, were independently wealthy and found their life work in art collecting. Art historian Charlotte Gere and critic Marina Vaizey argue that "the independent-minded woman endowed her collecting with a proselytizing zeal, attempting to convert an audience to the significance of the art that was being collected." This applied especially to the work of living artists.<sup>85</sup> The founders of the Museum of Modern Art, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie Plummer Bliss, and Mary Quinn

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<sup>84</sup> For more on Nutting, see Thomas Denenberg, *Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>85</sup> Charlotte Gere and Marina Vaizey, *Great Women Collectors* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 14.

Sullivan, were dedicated collectors of contemporary art, but also shared, as Gere and Vaizey put it:

a belief in the power of art, in its importance, and a profound interest in the art of their own time. Their belief in the spiritual and high educational power of art led naturally to the idea that for art to function in this way it had to have a public face: and in order for public and art to meet as soon as possible institutional arrangements had to be made.<sup>86</sup>

This publicly motivated collecting is also seen in the work of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, whose devotion to collecting contemporary American art resulted in the founding of the Whitney Museum. These women were successful in collecting contemporary art both because of their dedication to civic improvement and because of the affordability of the art. Contemporary art was a more affordable realm in which to collect, and therefore perhaps more accessible to women.<sup>87</sup>

McCormick had much in common with these women demographically. They were of a similar age and had family fortunes and social prominence. Many of the women in this category were single. And yet their collecting parameters and motivations were very different. Sisters Dr. Claribel and Etta Cone of Baltimore seem comparable to McCormick because they acquired a broad range of antique decorative arts from around the world while living in Paris. But the heart of their collection was works by artists like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, whom they knew personally through their friendship with Gertude Stein. Contemporary art collectors were less interested in historical association, obviously, and they also did not necessarily display the same search for beauty that animated McCormick. Many, though not all, of the

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<sup>86</sup> Gere and Vaizey, *Great Women Collectors*, 169.

<sup>87</sup> Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects. American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800–1940* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008), 156.

contemporary collectors were motivated by a desire to share their collections with the public. McCormick always enjoyed sharing her collection with friends and within her social circle and her collection eventually entered a public institution. However, it does not seem her initial purpose in building the collection was public access.

Textiles may not have been the focal point for all of the collectors who participated in the three trends discussed above, but they were often collected in addition to other art objects. Antique textiles of all kinds were a popular component of interior decorating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This extended beyond furnishing textiles to include costume, as period dresses provided yardage that could be used to upholster antique furniture. Costume was also collected for its historical associations, as seen in Mrs. Julian James's 1915 exhibition of dresses worn by First Ladies at the Smithsonian Institution—an exhibition that remains popular today.<sup>88</sup> In 1904, Elisabeth McClellan published *Historic Dress in America*, which, she prefaced, “should teach you ‘the nice fashion of your country,’ and help you ‘to construe things after their fashion,’” referring to the fad for colonial pageants and teas.<sup>89</sup> Anthropologists and ethnographers had long collected costume as part of their work, often with studies of non-western “exotic” cultures. C. W. Cunnington conducted Freudian analyses of “the psychological background of women” based on his significant collection of western dress.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 186. Today, the First Ladies' gowns can be seen at the National Museum of American History.

<sup>89</sup> Elisabeth McClellan, *Historic Dress in America, 1607–1800* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs and Company, 1904), note from the author, unnumbered page.

<sup>90</sup> Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 51-2. For a detailed history of ethnographical collections, see Taylor, pp. 66-104.

Whether their motivations were decorative, historical, or scientific, these collectors represent models and priorities for collecting textiles and costume that were different from McCormick's. She was more closely aligned with textile collectors like those in the Needle and Bobbin Club, a New York organization founded in 1916 dedicated to the study of "handmade" textiles. It is not clear that McCormick was ever a member of the Club, though her sister Mildred, a resident of New York City, was.<sup>91</sup> The *New York Times* described the circumstances of the club's founding:

During the war [World War I] women interested in laces were unable to visit other countries in search of their specialties, and, being seriously interested in the art of lace making and in the advancement of the needle and bobbin arts, they formed the club. In its own words its aim is "to stimulate and maintain an interest in hand-made fabrics—lace, embroidery, and tapestry—and to centralize such interest."<sup>92</sup>

The *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club* published articles by members on topics like an exhibition of Binche and Valenciennes laces or a survey of printed cotton patterns.<sup>93</sup> Club members were mostly elite women (Richard C. Greenleaf, editor of the *Bulletin*, was the notable exception) who collected textiles to preserve and study as

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<sup>91</sup> Gertrude Townsend and her stepmother and predecessor at the MFA, Sarah Gore Flint, were members. Jean Reed Lopardo lectured to the Needle and Bobbin Club on McCormick's collection after it was donated to the MFA. McCormick attended at least one meeting in 1949, about which she wrote to Townsend, "this gracious courtesy, represents on the part of you and the Executive Committee, the most distinguished courtesy that could be conferred—to an amateur enthusiast." Letter from EDM to GT, February 19, 1949.

<sup>92</sup> "A Book of Old Laces," *New York Times*, December 14, 1919, SM7.

<sup>93</sup> Frances Morris, "The Exhibition of Binche and Valenciennes Laces," *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club* 1, no. 2 (June 1917): 3–10. Nancy Graves Cabot, "Some Pattern Sources of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Printed Cottons," *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club* 33, nos. 1 & 2 (1949): 3–22. Cabot was a longtime volunteer in the textiles department at the MFA and worked closely with Townsend to catalogue McCormick's collection.

well as to enjoy. There was likely a social aspect to the club, just as there was in the Antiquarian Society in Chicago. The contents of the *Bulletin* suggest a quite thorough study of objects, however, and reflect an interest in collecting beyond interior decorating or participation in a socially acceptable hobby. McCormick may have collected a wider variety of textiles than did members of the Needle and Bobbin Club, but there is some overlap in their perspectives.

McCormick does not fit easily into any of the categories outlined above, but they do provide some context her collecting activities. Though the content of her collection is unique, her interest in collecting was informed by the people and social trends that surrounded her. The MFA did not receive an Old World, colonial revival, or contemporary collection, but instead accepted McCormick's personal collection, defined by her individual tastes but inflected with the trends of her time.

## Chapter 4

### DONATING THE COLLECTION TO THE MFA

“The [McCormick] collection represents not only profound research on the part of the collector, but a lifetime of discriminating selection to build up something which must be regarded as unique in the field in this country. Without hyperbole, one can say that the donation represents the gift of a Museum to a Museum.”<sup>94</sup>

Museum of Fine Arts Director George H. Edgell’s enthusiastic report of the donation of the McCormick collection reveals its landmark status in the history of the museum, derived from both its scale and content. Rapturous in his praise of the collection, Edgell did not neglect to acknowledge Gertrude Townsend’s role in the donation, recognizing that “Miss Townsend had long been familiar with this superb collection, and had persuaded Miss McCormick to lend pieces at various times.”<sup>95</sup> Edgell wrote diplomatically that

She [McCormick] had long intended to give her entire collection to some institution where she thought it would best be cared for, most appreciated, and eventually best displayed. She finally came to the conclusion that she would give her entire collection to the Museum.<sup>96</sup>

In truth, the gift was a testament to Townsend’s careful cultivation of the museum’s relationship with McCormick, as well as their personal friendship. This chapter will trace how Townsend worked with McCormick to bring about this monumental gift.

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<sup>94</sup> George H. Edgell, “Report of the Director,” Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Sixty Eighth Annual Report for the Year 1943* (Boston: T. O. Metcalf Company, 1944), 22.

<sup>95</sup> Edgell, “Report,” *Annual Report 1943*, 21.

<sup>96</sup> Edgell, “Report,” *Annual Report 1943*, 21.

### **The Department of Textiles and Gertrude Townsend**

First, it is helpful to describe the Department of Textiles at the MFA and Townsend's role as curator there before McCormick's involvement. The development of the department and Townsend's career are intertwined, and her impact on the museum even aside from the McCormick collection was significant.

The MFA had a long history of collecting textiles from its inception in 1870. Its first accessioned object was a tapestry.<sup>97</sup> In part, this was due to the fact that the museum was founded with design education as part of its mission. In 1869, Charles Callahan Perkins, an early supporter of and donor to the MFA, proposed a museum of art in Boston with this reasoning:

Their ["collections of great works of art"] humblest function is to give enjoyment to all classes; their highest, to elevate men by purifying the taste and acting upon the moral nature; their most practical, to lead by the creation of a standard of taste in the mind to improvement in all branches of industry, by the purifying of forms, and a more tasteful arrangement of colors in all objects made for daily use.<sup>98</sup>

Establishing and disseminating a "standard of taste" was also one of the founding principles behind the formation of the South Kensington Museum, now called the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London in 1852. Henry Cole, educator, designer, and first director of the South Kensington Museum, believed strongly in the role of museums to educate the public in good design, particularly relating to the industrial products that they manufactured and purchased.<sup>99</sup> Perkins's proposal shows

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<sup>97</sup> Gertrude Townsend, "A Recent Gift of Embroidery, Lace, and Weaving," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, 37, No. 220 (April 1939): 20.

<sup>98</sup> Charles Callahan Perkins, Feasibility Report in *Journal of Social Science* vol. 2, 1869. Quoted in Walter Muir Whitehill, *Museum of Fine Arts Boston: A Centennial History*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 9.

<sup>99</sup> Elizabeth Bonython and Anthony Burton, *The Great Exhibitor: The Life and Work of Henry Cole* (London: V&A Publications, Distributed by Harry N. Adams, Inc.,

that these ideas had crossed the Atlantic. When the MFA opened in 1876, he declared it would grow “to rival ... the great industrial museums at Kensington and Vienna.”<sup>100</sup> When the MFA opened to the public in 1876, Trustee Dr. Samuel Eliot commented that “Every museum, every museum of fine arts, particularly, is not only a museum, but a school—a school in which some of the best and noblest faculties of our nature find their daily, their yearly, their constant claim.”<sup>101</sup> The School of the Museum of Fine Arts opened the same year, offering instruction in the fine arts displayed in the museum’s galleries, but Eliot’s assessment described the whole institution.

The educational emphasis, with particular focus on the industrial arts, led the MFA to collect objects of fine design for study by artists and designers and viewing by the general public. Because New England was a major center of textile production in the nineteenth century, textiles were an important component of the museum’s collection.<sup>102</sup> In the early years of the institution, lacking funds to make purchases, the staff relied on loans and gifts to augment the collection.<sup>103</sup> The textiles collection benefitted considerably from art historian, collector, and MFA founder Denman Ross. Ross taught at Harvard and was an active collector of a broad range of

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2003), 60. Cole’s ideology and the South Kensington Museum influenced many museums in the United States, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>100</sup> “Remarks of Charles C. Perkins,” *Proceedings of the Opening of the Museum of Fine Arts, With the Reports for 1876* (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, 1876), 8.

<sup>101</sup> “Remarks of Dr. Samuel Eliot,” *Proceedings*, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Benjamin Ives Gilman, in 1907: “The Museum collection of Textiles, with its six thousand examples, has become well worthy the capital of a commonwealth which already, in 1642, had passed an act to encourage instruction in weaving.” Benjamin Ives Gilman, “The Museum Past, Present, and Future,” *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 4 no. 27 (June 1907): 44. Gilman was the Secretary of the MFA from 1893 to 1925.

<sup>103</sup> Benjamin Ives Gilman, “The Museum Past, Present, and Future,” *MFA Bulletin*, 44.

fine and decorative arts from around the world. Much of his collection was lent and eventually donated to the MFA, including paintings, bronzes, ceramics, and thousands of textiles, with diverse origins from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Walter Muir Whitehill, author of the institutional history of the MFA, described Ross's collecting criteria as a search for beauty, wherever it appeared:

Ross's entire life was spent in a search for beauty, for high artistic achievement, wherever and in whatever form it could be found. Whether an object were Eastern or Western, exotic or commonplace in its use, popularly esteemed or ignored, made not the slightest difference. If it met his standards of design and if it were for sale, he bought it, with a high probability that it would eventually reach the Museum of Fine Arts, either as a gift or a loan.<sup>104</sup>

Like McCormick, Ross's collecting criteria and his pursuit of beauty wherever he found it owed something to the tastes of his day, possibly including the Aesthetic movement. Ross's philosophy had a major impact on the textiles collection of the MFA because he was so involved from the moment of its formation, and because he acquired so broadly. By 1930, he had donated three-fifths of the 9,000-piece collection, approximately 5,000 pieces.<sup>105</sup> The common thread that would influence later curators and staff was the requirement that objects be examples of fine design.<sup>106</sup>

Until 1930, textile donations were received by whichever department best suited the object, usually relating to culture of origin. That year the Trustees formally founded the Department of Textiles and appointed Gertrude Townsend curator.

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<sup>104</sup> Whitehill, *MFA Boston: A Centennial History*, 138.

<sup>105</sup> "Miss Gertrude Townsend Appointed Curator of Textiles," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 28, no. 165 (February 1930): 17.

<sup>106</sup> Gertrude Townsend continued to apply the same criteria as Denman Ross to textiles collected for the MFA. According to Adolph Cavallo, who succeeded her as the MFA's curator of textiles, Townsend always emphasized fine design in the objects she sought for the department.

Gertrude Townsend was part of an established Boston family, with roots stretching back to David Townsend, surgeon at the battle of Bunker Hill. She was described as a proper lady by her nephew, Thomas Townsend, and Adolph Cavallo, the curator who succeeded her. Thomas Townsend's words were "formidable but kind."<sup>107</sup> These comments and her letters suggest that she was a very polite and gracious woman, but one who was also extremely effective at her job. This latter quality is certainly borne out by the story of how McCormick's collection came to the MFA.

Townsend joined the museum in 1919 as Assistant in Charge of Textiles. She succeeded her stepmother, Sarah Gore Flint, another descendant of prominent Boston families, who became Advisor to the Department upon her marriage to Townsend's father. Townsend was educated at the Winsor School, a private girls' school founded in Beacon Hill, as well as the School of the MFA where she studied fine and decorative arts. Like McCormick, she became interested in art as a working artist rather than as an art historian.<sup>108</sup> In 1926 she was promoted to Keeper of Textiles and in 1930, with the establishment of the department, she was made full curator. She spent over four decades at the MFA working closely with the textiles collection and shaping it into a distinct entity within the museum.

There are three important moments in Townsend's early career as curator of textiles that provide important context for how Townsend would receive

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<sup>107</sup> Thomas Townsend, interviewed by the author, August 13, 2010. Adolph Cavallo, interviewed by the author, November 15, 2010.

<sup>108</sup> "Obituaries—Gertude Townsend, 86, Museum textiles curator," *Boston Globe*, March 23, 1979, 43. Cavallo, interview.

McCormick's collection in the 1940s.<sup>109</sup> First, in 1933, eight years before she met McCormick, Townsend rejected a donation of costume because she did not feel it fit into the museum's collection. The MFA's policy for its earliest costume accessions had been to catalogue them by the technique of the textile from which they were made.<sup>110</sup> When a donor offered the MFA a gown by Charles Frederick Worth, a leading designer of late-nineteenth-century haute couture, Townsend pointed out in her recommendation to the Committee on the Museum, it was "hitherto understood that it has been the policy of the Committee ... to add to the collection of Textiles only such costumes whose material either as an example of weaving, embroidery or lace, would have a place in the collection."<sup>111</sup> She did not feel the Worth gown qualified, and the MFA did not acquire the gown. This statement by Townsend is worth keeping in mind as a marker of how she envisioned the museum's collection and policy toward acquisitions in 1933, which would not remain static over the course of her career.

The second significant moment was Townsend's first exhibition designed to illustrate the history of costume, a 1933 loan exhibition organized by the Colonial Dames of Massachusetts. Mary E. Lowell, President of the Colonial Dames, proposed to show eighteenth-century costume from the Dames' own collection at the MFA, inspired by a similar show by the New York chapter at the Metropolitan Museum of

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<sup>109</sup> These three instances are highlighted in Tiffany Webber-Hanchett's history of the textiles department (Webber-Hanchett, "Collecting and Exhibiting Dress as Fine Art"), but are not analyzed specifically in relation to the McCormick collection.

<sup>110</sup> Adolph Cavallo argues that this is how Townsend was trained, how she ran the collection as curator, and how she trained him as her successor—seeking out examples of fine design in textiles, not attempting to show the history of dress specifically. Still, further events show that Townsend's definition of fine design in textiles must have been broader than her predecessors'. Cavallo, interview.

<sup>111</sup> Curatorial recommendation to the Committee on the Museum, 27 April 1933. Quoted in Webber-Hanchett, "Collecting and Exhibiting Dress as Fine Art," 1.

Art the previous year. Lowell wrote, “Our idea would be to make it of definite historical value by covering a century of dress, and having each costume correctly dated.”<sup>112</sup> Townsend responded that the exhibition would “undoubtedly be interesting,” though the museum lacked the correct kinds of cases for showing costume. Townsend undertook to coordinate the reception of pieces from the Dames to be used in the exhibition, secure gallery space, and seek out dress forms from New York and Boston.<sup>113</sup> It is not clear whether the exhibition was truly “curated” by Townsend or by the Dames, but Townsend did play a significant part in putting together the exhibition. As an exhibition that purported to provide “definite historical value” about the history of costume, this represented an important benchmark in the history of both Townsend’s, and the museum’s attitude toward costume.

The third revelatory event in Townsend’s career prior to the McCormick donation is another major gift, the Carrie L. Lehman Collection. Art collector and banker Philip Lehman donated this collection in his wife’s memory in 1938. The Lehman Collection comprises 350 textile objects of European origin from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries, including extremely fine examples of embroidery, lace, knitting, and some accessories like purses, hats, and gloves. There are a few pieces of infant’s clothing, such as a christening gown. Townsend wrote that the Lehman Collection filled a “gap” in the MFA’s collection that “a year ago I should have placed

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<sup>112</sup> Letter from Mary E. Lowell to Edward Holmes, undated [probably 1932]. Photocopy in the Textile Department History Papers. Textile and Fashion Arts Department, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from GT to Edward Holmes, August 29, 1932. Letter from GT to Mrs. Delano Wright, October 19, 1932. Photocopies in the Textile Department History Papers.

in the category of things for which we might have hoped in vain.”<sup>114</sup> In part, Townsend accepted this donation because many of the objects represented techniques for weaving or needlework not represented in the MFA’s collection. She was upholding the MFA’s tradition of accessioning only textile objects made of interesting materials, as she had stated in 1933. However, it is important to note that many items in the Lehman Collection may be characterized as similar to objects donated by McCormick, particularly those that were first loaned and exhibited to the MFA. The Lehman Collection was donated only a few years before Townsend met McCormick, and it is noteworthy as it reveals developments in Townsend’s curatorial interests. Overall, these three moments in Townsend’s career demonstrate her commitment to collecting high quality and important textiles, including items of dress that exemplified interesting techniques and ornamentation.

### **McCormick and Townsend Meet**

One of Gertrude Townsend’s major accomplishments was cultivating Elizabeth Day McCormick as a donor and securing her collection for the MFA, a multi-year undertaking that required dedication and diplomacy. Townsend was first introduced to McCormick’s collection through a mutual friend, the landscape architect and activist Rose Standish Nichols, another daughter of one of Boston’s prominent families. The first correspondence between McCormick and Townsend that appears in the McCormick papers is a letter from Townsend dated September 25, 1941. She writes of a planned trip to Chicago: “I particularly want to see your collection of textiles. The pieces you showed us at Miss Nichols’ house were so lovely and so

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<sup>114</sup> Gertrude Townsend, “A Recent Gift of Embroidery, Lace, and Weaving,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 37, no. 220 (April 1939): 20.

interesting that I would not be content to go to Chicago without seeing them again...”<sup>115</sup> Later, McCormick wrote:

[T]he Museum is indebted to the good auspices of Miss Rose Nichols of Boston, who crossed the ocean with me a few years ago and also stopped in the same little hotel with me in Paris and often listened to me as I told her about my purchases and amusing experiences. But never at that time did I dream that they were destined for Boston.<sup>116</sup>

In another letter, she remarked to Townsend on “the anniversary of the great day in my life and the fruition of which you and Rose Nichols played so large a part.”<sup>117</sup>

McCormick had a flair for the dramatic in her letters, and her collection’s “destiny” was not an uncommon topic. She valued the fact that her collection went to a prominent museum, which she called “very fastidious” and “exclusive,” and she saw Nichols as playing a quite important role in that event.<sup>118</sup>

Rose Nichols devoted her professional life to both landscape history and design and political activism, promoting causes like women’s suffrage and pacifism. She was the niece of sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens and spent time as a child with his family at Cornish Colony. This artists’ colony in New Hampshire inspired her love of gardens. Living with the Saint-Gaudens family, she studied architecture in New York City, and later at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, as well as in England. She wrote three books on historical gardens of Europe and designed gardens for clients in Newport, Rhode Island; Lake Forest, Illinois; and Southampton, Long Island, New York. At the same time, she followed world politics closely. When letters encouraging

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<sup>115</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, September 25, 1941.

<sup>116</sup> Letter from EDM to Miss Lyman, November 15, 1943.

<sup>117</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, April 15, 1946.

<sup>118</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, February 28, 1943.

First Lady Edith Galt Wilson to lobby the president to include a woman at the 1919 Paris peace talks fell upon deaf ears, Nichols invited herself.<sup>119</sup> Nichols was engaged in international political networks as well as the social networks that brought her garden commissions in the United States. Although those were not McCormick's or Townsend's circles, they were still mostly composed of an elite, educated, worldly class, of which McCormick and Townsend were a part.

Like McCormick, Nichols loved needlework. She enjoyed it as a hobby and an alternative to her work. Although it is not documented, Nichols apparently embroidered a set of bed hangings as copies of objects at the MFA.<sup>120</sup> She traveled frequently, whether to study gardens or influence politicians, and collected postcards from the places she visited. The surviving card collection, few ever inscribed or posted, suggest that she spent some time in museums when visiting major cities in the United States and Europe.<sup>121</sup> Tapestries, brocades, embroidered panels, furnishing textiles, and other items from the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other institutions are represented, as well as several postcards made by the MFA featuring objects from McCormick's collection. The images depict Western items for the most part, with an emphasis on the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, showing a similar taste to McCormick's. Nichols did not collect or study textiles the way McCormick and

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<sup>119</sup> For more on Nichols's gardens, see Judith B. Tankard, "Rose Standish Nichols, A Proper Bostonian," *Arnoldia* (Winter 1999-2000): 25-32. Nichols's house in Boston is now the Nichols House Museum, and her papers are archived at that institution and at Harvard University.

<sup>120</sup> Flavia Cigliano (director, Nichols House Museum), interviewed by the author, August 13, 2010.

<sup>121</sup> The postcard collection is housed at the Nichols House Museum.

Townsend did, but her postcard collection serves as a kind of mirror collection to McCormick's own. Her personal dedication to needlework, even if it was something she reserved for her leisure time, places her in a network of textile enthusiasts of which McCormick and Townsend were a part.

The circumstances under which McCormick and Townsend were brought together at Nichols's house are not known, but it is safe to assume McCormick visited Nichols after their chance meeting on the steamer. A letter from McCormick in 1946 suggests one possible meeting, as she wrote to Townsend about visiting Gimbels Department Store:

My first visit to Gimbels Art Antique dept [sic] was early July, I think it was '41, a short time after visiting Rose Nichols when I brought with me three or four of my fine cloth of gold purses, and samplers—as specimens of my fine textiles to show the Committee on needlework at the Fine Arts Museum.<sup>122</sup>

No evidence at the MFA confirms the existence of this committee on needlework. It may have been that Nichols invited Townsend, who lived just a few blocks away on Beacon Hill, to see some of McCormick's collection informally.<sup>123</sup> In any case, based on this letter it seems McCormick selected pieces knowing they would be seen by MFA staff. Choosing samplers and gold purses, McCormick could show off two of the strengths of her collection: needlework and “precious” objects finely crafted of rich materials.

McCormick then invited Townsend to come to Chicago and see her complete collection, which she did in November of 1941. Townsend stayed at the

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<sup>122</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, May 30, 1946.

<sup>123</sup> Nichols lived at 55 Mt. Vernon Street, now the site of the Nichols House Museum, and Townsend lived at 48 Chestnut Street. The houses are approximately a three-minute walk apart.

Hotel Pearson, which had become McCormick's residence by this time.<sup>124</sup> Townsend made plans to see medieval tapestries at the Art Institute of Chicago, and to visit the Field Museum and the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.<sup>125</sup> McCormick arranged for the two to attend the symphony and opera together. They also lunched with McCormick's friends, Belle M. Borland and Pauline K. Palmer (Mrs. Potter Palmer, Jr.), both active members of the Antiquarian Society. Palmer was the daughter-in-law of Bertha Honoré Palmer, the famous Chicago socialite, art collector, and philanthropist who served as president of the Board of Lady Managers for the 1893 World Columbian Exposition and ensured female artists were included and celebrated.<sup>126</sup> Bertha Palmer was a leader among her peers and role model for elite clubwomen of Chicago committed to civic betterment, whether at settlement houses or the Art Institute.

The series of events in which McCormick and Townsend came to know each other and eventually work together to bring McCormick's collection to the MFA reveal much about how women accessed and influenced the arts, and in particular, art museums, in this period. Compare Townsend, a lifelong museum professional and the head of her department, to McCormick, who began collecting as a hobby and over time dedicated her life to it. And compare these two to Rose Nichols, who balanced two separate "careers," landscape design and political activism, with an enthusiasm for

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<sup>124</sup> Nichols continued to play a role in the development of the two women's friendship, as McCormick wrote to Townsend, "Why do you not stop at my hotel as Rose Nichols did last year?" This reference to their mutual friend would have helped smooth any awkwardness about their unfamiliarity with each other.

<sup>125</sup> Letters from GT to EDM, October 7, 1941, and November 14, 1941.

<sup>126</sup> Eleanor, Dwight, ed. *The Letters of Pauline Palmer: A Great Lady of Chicago's First Family* ([New York]: M. T. Train/Scala Books, 2005), 15.

needlework that stayed firmly in the realm of leisure activity. Though McCormick may have come from the most famously wealthy family, Nichols and Townsend also came from upper class backgrounds and probably would not have had to work for a living, especially if they had married. Instead, they chose to pursue work about which they were passionate. Nichols, particularly, presents an interesting case, as she was paid for her work in landscape design, but not for her political work. All three women came from wealthy enough families that they could choose to devote their lives to causes and projects about which they cared deeply. If a paycheck accompanied that work, it was an added boon. More than that, at least for Nichols and Townsend, an income likely made it much easier for them to remain single if that was their preference.

These three women were brought together by their knowledge and appreciation of an art form in a casual rather than a professional way. Townsend and Nichols were neighbors, while McCormick and Nichols met by chance while traveling. When Townsend first visited McCormick in Chicago, their lunch companions were McCormick's friends and social peers, including members of the Antiquarian Society. Involvement with organizations like the Antiquarians had social and familial significance beyond an individual's personal interest in the subject matter. Both McCormick and Pauline Palmer represented the second generation of their families to join. The way McCormick and Townsend met and their working relationship underscore an important theme: that women's involvement in museums and the arts was part of an interpersonal social network regardless of whether they viewed themselves as professionals or were paid for their work.

A few years later, McCormick wrote to Townsend, “You have provided me great joy and contentment by carrying on my profound purpose in life.”<sup>127</sup> Though McCormick was neither a curator nor professionally trained, collecting textiles was her “profound purpose in life.” To say that Townsend was “carrying on” that purpose implies that donating the collection to the MFA was not merely a “final resting place” for her work. McCormick clearly envisioned what she had begun with her collection would be ably continued in Townsend’s hands. McCormick was doing more than accumulating objects and saw her “profound purpose” as more significant than just preservation.

### **The Loan Exhibitions**

The first outcome of Townsend’s Chicago visit was the agreement to install a loan exhibition of McCormick’s Elizabethan embroidery at the MFA in the spring of 1942. The exhibition included thirteen pieces from McCormick’s collection, focusing on the embroidered jacket, coif, and gloves supposedly owned by Queen Elizabeth. Of this group, Townsend wrote, “These are so amazingly fine that I hesitate to ask you to lent [sic] them to the Museum but I want to repeat that we would be greatly honored if you should decide to do so.” Townsend had seen the jacket when it was up for sale and depicted in the *Illustrated London News* in 1932, and she had saved the illustrations.<sup>128</sup> Townsend had known about these pieces for nearly a

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<sup>127</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, August 30, 1946.

<sup>128</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, December 8, 1941. Townsend wrote, “The jacket and the gloves are, I believe, those which are illustrated in the *Illustrated London News* for October 1932. At that time I was so much interested that I had the illustrations mounted and can send them to you to compare if you would like.” Two pairs of gloves supposedly belonging to Queen Elizabeth were also sold by Acton Surgey in 1932, but it is unclear if McCormick bought them. McCormick did own gloves from the correct time period.

decade. Imagine her reaction to learning not only of their whereabouts but also that they were within her own and the MFA's reach, if not as a gift, then at least for a loan. The star power of the Queen Elizabeth pieces should not be underestimated in this sequence of events.

The winter of 1941, when the exhibition was being planned, was hardly peaceful. In the same letter quoted above, dated December 8, 1941, Townsend wrote, "Since writing you from Ipswich so much has happened that it seems strange to be talking about exhibitions of embroidery. Nevertheless I hope we shall be able to carry out our plans." Townsend referred, of course, to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that was launched the day before and prompted the United States' entry into World War II. Interestingly, Townsend's attitude that the two women could continue their plans despite world-changing events is consistent throughout their letters during the war. While it initially seems odd that the war is not mentioned with greater frequency, this may be the bias of the historian. For McCormick and Townsend, the war was the background to daily life, and it was not necessary to comment on it when it did not directly impact their discussions. Later in December of 1941, Townsend wrote that "Since enemy action is something which we cannot foresee [sic] Mr. Edgell has asked us to write to all who have lent objects to the Museum to explain that we cannot be responsible for damage due to war," which seems a fairly standard precaution for the museum to take.<sup>129</sup> Other comments suggest Townsend was aware that the war meant plans should not be made too far in the future. A few years later, McCormick commented that, "after all that the world has been through, during these last few years,

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<sup>129</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, December 18, 1941.

that [the collection] would be very hard to replace.”<sup>130</sup> Overall, the war was not discussed in detail.<sup>131</sup>

Townsend wrote an article on Elizabethan embroidery in the MFA’s *Bulletin* to accompany the loan exhibition. She praised the condition and quality of the embroidery on the Queen Elizabeth jacket and undertook a detailed investigation, using documentary evidence as well as comparable garments, into the possibility that it could have once belonged to the queen. Frustratingly, though perhaps not unexpectedly, Townsend did not draw a strong conclusion regarding the objects’ provenance, other than saying “it seems very possible.”<sup>132</sup> As discussed in chapter two, McCormick purchased the jacket from the inhabitants of Kimberley Hall, the family of Sir Roger Wodehouse. Would Wodehouse’s wife have been likely to own such a luxurious object if it were not a gift from the queen? Townsend left the question unanswered.

Regardless of the ambiguity surrounding the jacket’s provenance, Townsend and the museum were clearly happy with the loan exhibition. Edgell wrote

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<sup>130</sup> Letter from EDM to Mrs. Coolidge, a wife of one of the Trustees, November 22, 1943.

<sup>131</sup> Later letters show Townsend was following how the war had impacted her European colleagues. In 1947, Townsend wrote, “I understand that conditions are still very difficult for collectors in Europe. A friend of mine, a collector, left for France during July. I have not heard from her since then and await her return for first-hand reports of conditions as far as they affect traveling and collecting. I am afraid matters are not improving.” Letter from GT to EDM, September 5, 1947. When Townsend did eventually travel to Europe herself in 1949, she commented, “Everything is so much more complicated than it was before this last war that I find myself very busy complying with regulations and trying to arrange my day by day schedule well in advance.” Letter from GT to EDM, July 15, 1949.

<sup>132</sup> Gertrude Townsend, “Notes on Elizabethan Embroidery,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 40, no. 238 (April 1942): 25.

to McCormick, “ I could not help writing you and telling you what a joy it is to us all to have these things on loan, and actually to be making a beautiful exhibition at a time when so many people are taking things down from the walls.”<sup>133</sup> This vague reference may be to the MFA’s decision to send some of their “most precious objects” secretly to Williams College for part of the war.<sup>134</sup> Edgell later wrote:

In a time of horror, suffering, sorrow, and of grim fighting determination, it is good to the morale of an individual to come occasionally to a great Museum of Fine Arts to look at beautiful things, to remember that the world was once a sane and beautiful place, and to realize that it will be again.<sup>135</sup>

While McCormick and Townsend may not have discussed the war in great detail, it was clearly at the forefront of Edgell’s mind. This is logical as he was responsible for a large cultural institution in a major port city. McCormick’s loan exhibition supported his vision of the role of museums during wartime as a place of beauty and respite.

Throughout 1942, McCormick and Townsend continued to discuss the collection and the success of the exhibition. They planned a second loan exhibition of embroidery for the spring of 1943. In addition to being featured in the *Magazine Antiques*, the first loan exhibition was admired by textiles expert and museum advocate M. D. C. Crawford and Museum of Costume Art founder Polaire Weissman, both of whom requested study images from Townsend.<sup>136</sup> By 1943, illustrations of the

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<sup>133</sup> Letter from George H. Edgell (GHE) to EDM, April 2, 1942. Museum Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

<sup>134</sup> George H. Edgell, “Report of the Director,” Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Sixty Ninth Annual Report for the Year 1944* (Boston: T. O. Metcalf Company, 1945), 13.

<sup>135</sup> George H. Edgell, “Report of the director,” Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Sixty Seventh Annual Report for the Year 1942* (Boston: T. O. Metcalf Company, 1943), 18.

<sup>136</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, May 4, 1942. Crawford called the Queen Elizabeth jacket “an amazing document.” Letter from GT to EDM, December 28, 1942.

collection and word of the exhibitions had circulated widely enough that Townsend could pass on the compliments of A. F. Kendrick, Keeper of Textiles at the Victorian and Albert Museum. He wrote,

What a fine series of illustrations they make. I wonder how she [McCormick] managed to get together so many good pieces—anyhow I am very glad that she did, and I am sure they ought never to be separated, for it would be most difficult to bring together such a collection again.<sup>137</sup>

The loan exhibitions launched McCormick and her collection into a new setting with a new audience: specifically, a network of museum professionals and collectors in the northeastern United States. Collectors Lucy Aldrich, Mrs. Horatio Lamb, and Aimée Lamb also admired the collection.<sup>138</sup> Townsend wrote to McCormick, “Mrs. Lamb has traveled abroad a great deal and among other things has collected some very fine embroideries. She is, therefore, in a position to understand the real value of your collection,” and Townsend made similar comments about the others.<sup>139</sup> McCormick responded to Townsend’s letter, “It is good to know what the public thinks of it and it seems to be passing the critics.”<sup>140</sup> Though McCormick knew curators at the Art Institute of Chicago, it seems from her letters that her main contacts were often collectors or enthusiasts from her social circle, and perhaps people she viewed as friends rather than “critics” whom she did not know personally. This is consistent with the fact that McCormick and Townsend were introduced to each other

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<sup>137</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, April 15, 1943.

<sup>138</sup> Lucy Aldrich and sisters Aimée and Rosamund Lamb donated extensively to the MFA Boston. Mrs. Horatio Lamb was Aimée and Rosamund’s mother, and many of their donations were in her memory.

<sup>139</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, April 27, 1943.

<sup>140</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, April 16, 1943.

through a mutual friend and in an informal manner. The loan exhibitions drew attention to McCormick, her collection, and the MFA from new and prestigious populations.

### **Securing the Donation**

McCormick must have been gratified to learn that Townsend and other experts, whom she did not know personally, affirmed the quality and significance of her collection. This probably contributed to McCormick's willingness to plan the second loan exhibition, and, eventually, to donate the collection outright to the MFA. Townsend visited McCormick in early February 1943 to help select pieces for the second loan exhibition. It was during that visit that the question of donating the collection was first broached. After thanking Townsend for her visit, McCormick wrote, "I am so pleased that the Boston Art Museum is interested in acquiring my art groups and appreciate all your efforts in bringing it about. And I feel the greatest satisfaction that they will fall into such understanding and documented supervision as yours."<sup>141</sup> McCormick's comments are a testament to Townsend's skill not only as a curator, but also as what we would call today a development officer, cultivating and obtaining support for her institution. McCormick continued:

[Robert Hall McCormick, her brother] is perfectly delighted that all of these precious documents of mine that I have spent my lifetime in assembling are going to be placed so advantageously, where they will be in as loving hands as my own ... And you have negotiated and managed it all in the most understanding and executive manner and it

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<sup>141</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, January 12, 1943. While this letter is dated January 12, it is written in the margin "Received February 15," and because it clearly refers to Townsend's visit in early February, it seems likely the letter was actually written February 12.

will be my pleasure to cooperate with you in every way in furthering your plans.<sup>142</sup>

Donating the collection to the MFA was satisfactory to McCormick for two reasons. First and foremost, it represented the transfer of her collection to the care of a like-minded individual, Townsend. McCormick trusted her friend to “care” for the collection and to “carry on” her work, the “profound purpose” of her life. Secondly, the MFA represented a prestigious and established institution that could handle the donation in “the most understanding and executive manner,” a manner appropriate for the stature of the collection and, perhaps, McCormick herself. While it would be an over simplification to say McCormick conflated her own identity with that of her collection, it is true that she devoted decades of her adult life to collecting these objects, researching them, repairing them, and, essentially, caring for them. Naturally, she would assess very carefully where the collection would come to rest and ensure that it was a worthy repository.

McCormick’s pride in her collection and her role as a donor to the MFA is palpable in her statements as she planned to travel to Boston for the opening of the second loan exhibition. She called the exhibition “the triumphal occasion of the crowning recognition of the merit of my embroideries, openly proclaimed by the very fastidious exclusive Boston Museum of Fine Arts.”<sup>143</sup> She confided in Townsend her response to a letter from Nancy Cabot, textiles department patron and volunteer:

Words fail me to express my overwhelming emotion in reading her expressions of deep appreciation and discriminating evaluation of my sensibilities, in assembling all of these precious treasures of the cultural past ... I am so happy to feel that all of my precious specimens are to be established among friends that are so appreciative.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, January 12, 1943.

<sup>143</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, February 28, 1943.

<sup>144</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, February 28, 1943.

Not only was McCormick flattered by the MFA's interest in her collection, but she also felt Townsend and Cabot truly understood her and her collection. This feeling of acceptance and respect must have mingled with her pleasure at making the donation.

In the same letter, McCormick indicated she had already "gone public" with the decision to donate her collection, though nothing was yet formalized. She wrote, "I have told my friends, indeed even Mr. and Mrs. Potter Palmer, that the Boston Museum of Fine Arts are taking over my collections so that your Museum may feel themselves under no reservation in the matter or speaking about it in Boston."<sup>145</sup> It is interesting that McCormick felt it was her friends who ought to be notified, "even Mr. and Mrs. Potter Palmer," who represented the highest echelons of Chicago society, before the MFA announced the gift. McCormick's collection had significant social power. It marked McCormick as a cultured, artistic individual and enabled her to cultivate the right kind of relationships. This is not to say McCormick was calculating or that social ambitions inspired her to collect. She could have achieved great social status by her family name alone. It is clear, however, that the collection provided her with great social benefits.

McCormick's statement about notifying the Palmers suggests her sensitivity to her Chicago connections. The Palmers had a longstanding relationship with the Art Institute of Chicago. McCormick and Pauline Palmer, like their mothers before them, were members of the Antiquarian Society and great benefactors to the Art Institute, where McCormick had loaned many objects from her collection for exhibition.<sup>146</sup> In 1931, she clarified the status of those objects in a letter to the director, writing

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<sup>145</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, February 28, 1943.

<sup>146</sup> Pauline Palmer also served as president of the Antiquarian Society beginning in 1919. See Hilliard, "Higher Things," 16.

I have had it very clearly understood with [Curator] Miss Bessie Bennett in regard to my collections... that none of these collections have I donated to the Art Institute at any time and that you are holding them in storage for me to be used from time to time as a special exhibition...<sup>147</sup>

A few years later, another letter reveals that McCormick did offer her collection to the Art Institute. The museum declined the offer due to her demands that the entire collection be kept on view permanently:

The Trustees realize that Miss McCormick has certain conditions that she would like to attach to this gift, some of which they feel are impossible and not consistent with best museum of management. ... [The Trustees] cannot agree that the Collection shall be exhibited as a whole in perpetuity ... The Trustees feel that they have not the right to put such binding conditions on future Boards forever.<sup>148</sup>

The Trustees made clear they were still interested in McCormick's collection, should she alter her conditions. This was apparently unsatisfactory, however, as correspondence from the Art Institute's registrar the following year shows museum staff attempting to sort out which McCormick items were gifts, which gift agreements had been reversed after McCormick's 1931 letter, and which were loans.<sup>149</sup>

This exchange with the Art Institute occurred eight years before McCormick and Townsend began working out the details at the MFA, but it must have been on McCormick's mind. Her notification of the Palmers and other Chicago friends

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<sup>147</sup> Letter from EDM to Robert B. Harshe, Director of the Art Institute, February 17, 1931. Art Institute of Chicago Archives. Photocopy in the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers.

<sup>148</sup> Letter from the Board of Trustees, Art Institute of Chicago, to EDM, February 13, 1935. Art Institute of Chicago Archives. Photocopy in the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers.

<sup>149</sup> Letter from Museum Registrar (unnamed) to Mr. Rich, March 23, 1936. Art Institute of Chicago Archives. Photocopy in the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers.

may have been her way of ending her relationship with the Art Institute as a possible repository for her collection. In the context of this previous interaction with museum curators over a possible gift, it is easy to understand McCormick's appreciation for Townsend and her ability to handle the process so diplomatically.

Behind the scenes, correspondence between Townsend and Edgell makes clear that they were working hard to secure the donation. In one note, Townsend cited the letter from McCormick quoted above as "certainly indicat[ing] Miss McCormick's intentions very clearly. I think at this moment a letter of appreciation from you would be well received." She recommended that the Committee on the Museum attend the opening of the loan exhibition, "so that if Miss McCormick would like to take legal steps to make over the collection to the MFA they would be prepared to discuss the matter." Townsend also noted it would show McCormick that the committee was truly interested in the museum's collections.<sup>150</sup> Edgell began writing to McCormick with greater frequency, as well as to her brother, Robert Hall McCormick, who became increasingly involved in the donation process.

Townsend proceeded carefully with the gift agreement following the second loan exhibition. She wrote to Edgell:

I ... think that some of [McCormick's] pleasure might be marred if she were forced to reach a decision. However her intentions seem to be clear. ... Since she must recognize that at the time even if she were prepared to provide the money it would be impossible to build a gallery, I should like to suggest that at the close of the Special Exhibition we plan to show groups of her embroideries in various parts of the Museum.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Letter from GT to GHE, March 2, 1943. Museum Archives.

<sup>151</sup> Letter from GT to GHE, April 10, 1943. Museum Archives.

Though McCormick did not insist her collection be on view permanently, she initially suggested she would help finance the building of a new wing for the museum to house her collection. It is unclear when this suggestion first arose, but it may have been while Townsend was in Chicago in February of 1943. Conversations about the wing and its financing continued throughout the spring. McCormick and her brother were prepared to liquidate some properties in Chicago after the war to secure funds. While waiting, Edgell suggested McCormick could still donate her collection to the museum “where it could be housed, properly cared for, and in part exhibited from time to time.” He assured her that, at the MFA, “We have a reputation over many years of which I am very proud, of keeping faith with our benefactors and our donors. I am jealous of our reputation, and, as long as I am here, shall see that it is maintained.”<sup>152</sup>

McCormick’s response indicated her strong advocacy for her collection’s treatment as well as Townsend’s wisdom in proceeding carefully with the donation. While reminding Edgell that “you gave me to understand that in due course your museum would undertake to erect a wing to house my collection as a whole, and my donation must be conditional to this understanding,” McCormick outlined the highlights of her collection again, emphasizing what the museum would most value:

I have various groups that are quite extensive, my Byzantine liturgic [sic] pieces now on exhibition, together with a very important group of from six to eight pieces Spanish church vestments of the 16th and early 17th centuries, from the Hearst Collection, also a large group of embroideries still to be sent including laces and my historic collection of French Sablé and beadwork. Besides all of these I have, as you know, a whole department of historical and court costumes including all of the accessories, curchiefs [sic], aprons, shoes, stockings, collars, embroidered skirts, etc., all taking up a great deal of room, not to mention my large collection of shoes and boots from the early ... days. Also there is my exhaustive collection of costume prints de l’epoc [sic]

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<sup>152</sup> Letter from GHE to EDM, April 28, 1943.

dating back to the 16th cen. All of these groups require a sizeable wing to house, but certainly here in America there is nothing to touch my collection of costumes.<sup>153</sup>

This is a long quotation, but it reveals McCormick's thoughts about her collection in the context of donating it to the museum. She privileged the embroidery, laces, and sablé by listing them first. This is consistent with her correspondence with Townsend, in which she stated the costume and accessories had always been "incidental" to her other textile collections. However, at the end of the list she singled out the costume collection as being unique in the United States, and alone worthy of its own wing, even without the other groups. This suggests that, in some ways, McCormick was being just as strategic as Townsend and Edgell in negotiating the gift agreement. She played up the aspects of her collection that were most rare and therefore the most attractive to the museum.

It took until the fall of 1943 for the arrangements to be settled. Edgell and Townsend traveled to Chicago in mid-September to discuss the matter in person and to look further at the collection. McCormick and her brother planned to raise funds when the war ended to build the additional wing, and if not, she would simply donate her collection, groups of which she had been sending in shipments to Townsend all year.<sup>154</sup> After their September meeting, Edgell agreed to table the discussion of the

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<sup>153</sup> Letter from EDM to GHE, May 22, 1943. Museum Archives. The "Byzantine liturgic" pieces McCormick wrote were "now on exhibition" may have been part of the second loan exhibition, for which no object list survives.

<sup>154</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, July 6, 1943. McCormick wrote: "We want to be all in readiness to proceed with the erection the moment the war breaks, if we can raise the money—and until that time I would rather not make any specific transfer. If the project goes through I would be able to do everything—build the building, endow it, etc. etc. If we were not able to raise the fund all of my inheritance is trust for my sisters and brother and I could merely donate my collections to this Fine Arts Museum without providing for them. ... In the meantime I would like to get all of my textiles, costumes, accessories, shoes and costume on to Boston."

wing until finances became available, writing, “We shall, of course, have hopes, but we are more interested in the collection than in an addition to the plant.” He established that the MFA would have rights to deaccession objects from the collection if duplicates were found and that Robert Hall McCormick would be made Honorary Curator of the collection, an honor requested by McCormick. Robert Hall McCormick’s daughter and son-in-law, Sargent and Eleanor Collier, residents of Boston, were made Visitors to the Textiles Department, an honorary position for patrons of the department.<sup>155</sup> McCormick approved all of Edgell’s suggestions.

In November of 1943, Townsend returned to Chicago to help McCormick sort through and pack more of her collection to be sent to the museum. Upon her arrival, she immediately sent Edgell a telegram asking him to intercept and return unopened a letter from McCormick to the Board of Trustees of the MFA. In a following letter, Townsend wrote to Edgell, “[McCormick] asked me to send [the telegram] after we had talked over something that had been troubling her. I shall not attempt to explain it until I have had time to talk it over with Mr. McCormick. ... I regret the mystery!”<sup>156</sup> The letter in question, addressed to the Board of Trustees and apparently never delivered, is now in the Museum Archives of the MFA. In it, McCormick wrote:

As I have received no letter of acknowledgment of the acceptance of my [illegible] gift of a whole department of textiles, embroideries, costumes, and accessories to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts I do feel that the transfer of my collection has been [illegible], and this letter is to say that I wish to cancel my gift until I find [illegible] of how much

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<sup>155</sup> Letter from GHE to EDM, September 16, 1943.

<sup>156</sup> Letter from GT to GHE, November 2, 1943. Museum Archives.

importance it is to the museum and what the museum is going or is prepared to do about it.<sup>157</sup>

Edgell replied to Townsend that he had intercepted the letter, was “agog with curiosity,” and was glad that “had there been trouble, your arrival in Chicago put an end to it in time.”<sup>158</sup>

Despite the mysterious letter, McCormick chose to move forward with the donation. Earlier in the fall, Townsend and Edgell had both written to McCormick about the meeting of the Committee on the Museum in late October, at which some of McCormick’s embroideries were displayed and the Committee voted to recommend her gift to the Board of Trustees. Edgell told McCormick it was “a red letter day in my museum career.”<sup>159</sup> It seems McCormick regarded this as the formal acceptance of her gift and was disappointed when it passed by unremarked by the trustees. Townsend was able to smooth things over when she arrived in Chicago, but in her letter to Edgell she wasted no time in requesting further action on his part:

Have the Trustees, and the President of the Trustees, sent Miss McCormick an official and formal document thanking her for the gift of her collection? Possibly it has not been the custom of the Museum to do this but if one could be sent I believe she would feel more satisfied with the reception of her collection, and feel that the Trustees appreciated the significance and value of her collection.

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<sup>157</sup> Letter from EDM to the Board of Trustees, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, November 2, 1943. It is not clear how this letter entered Museum Archives or when it was first opened. There is no evidence indicating whether the trustees read it at the time.

<sup>158</sup> Letter from GHE to GT, November 2, 1943. Museum Archives.

<sup>159</sup> Letter from GHE to EDM, October 21, 1943. Museum Archives. Edgell also wrote to Robert Hall McCormick and Eleanor Collier to tell them their new roles, Honorary Curator and Visitor to the Textiles Department, respectively, had been approved. Robert responded, “I am very much pleased and particularly as it identifies me with the glorious collection of my sister to which she has devoted her life.” Letter from Robert Hall McCormick to GHE, October 28, 1943. Museum Archives.

This may seem strange to you but she feels the official note is missing. Has the President of the Trustees written? It occurs to me that possibly Miss Chapman could design and execute a document which would represent the museum's official acknowledgement of the gift which is momentous both to Miss McCormick and to us.<sup>160</sup>

These contested interactions with the Board of Trustees, managed by Townsend, indicate two important points, one about Townsend, and one about McCormick. First, this exchange shows the significance of the collection to Townsend, and her comprehension of its significance to the museum. She was willing to prod Edgell and, through him, the Board, to act in a way that was not their "custom."

Second, the letter complicates our understanding of McCormick's thoughts about donating her collection to the MFA. McCormick reacted quite differently to Townsend than to the Board. The gracious, friendly, and even emotional tone of McCormick's letters to Townsend shows the quality of their personal relationship. Townsend was a like-minded individual who would carry on McCormick's "profound purpose" in life, as was discussed earlier. The contrast between the tone of her letters and her strong reaction to the Board of Trustees underscores how much collecting was, for McCormick, participation in a network of people, often women, much like herself. The Board of Trustees represented a much more formal, organized body whose authority was based on institutional structure. She could not assume the same kind of friendship and sympathy she had built with Townsend and, to a lesser degree, Edgell. McCormick had had no qualms about removing her collection from the Art Institute when their Board of Trustees rejected the conditions of her gift in 1935. She apparently wished to wield the same power with

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<sup>160</sup> Letter from GT to GHE, November 3, 1943. Museum Archives.

the Board of the MFA, power derived from the perceived value of her collection, not from personal relationships.

It is worthwhile to consider McCormick's actions in the context of the model of female philanthropy in America proposed by historian Kathleen D. McCarthy. McCarthy contrasts "separatists" like Candace Wheeler, who formed philanthropic organizations to aid women and promote good design; "assimilationists" who worked within traditional, male-dominated institutions, including many female patrons and curators; and "individualists" like Isabella Stewart Gardner or the founders of the Museum of Modern Art, who struck out on their own, championed new kinds of art, and founded their own museums.<sup>161</sup>

At first glance, McCormick would seem to best fit with the assimilationists, a word that hardly seems appropriate to her independent character. McCarthy comments on a key characteristic of the assimilationists:

The moment that the majority of these women passed through museum portals they became markedly more docile and more deferential. And this was as true of the most fiery feminist—women like [Bertha] Palmer and [Louisine] Havemeyer, who had the money and the will to make their presence felt, if they so chose—as it was of the most self-effacing collector of fans and lace.<sup>162</sup>

"Docile" and "deferential" do not describe McCormick, particularly in her dealings with Boards of Trustees. In 1948, years after the first donation was secured, McCormick offered a group of "Moorish" textiles to the MFA with no uncertain terms:

[I]f after all that I have donated to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, they [the trustees] take the position of rejecting such a unique

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<sup>161</sup> McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, xiv-xv.

<sup>162</sup> McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 142. Palmer donated her collection to the Art Institute of Chicago, and Havemeyer to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

educational collection, derivative and reminiscent of the Moors who built the Spanish Alhambra, I will stand by my Moorish group and decline further contributions to the Museum.<sup>163</sup>

McCormick used not only the value and quality of her collection, but also her own expert status as a connoisseur, even though she might not have described herself that way. The MFA had affirmed her taste by pursuing the bulk of the collection; therefore she believed they should trust her judgment regarding this group as well. Though McCormick donated her collection to an influential art museum, her interactions with the Board of Trustees were often fraught with tension, showing she felt uneasy about acquiescing to museum's demands.

It is clear McCormick did not wish to cede control and ownership of her collection to an entity she did not trust. By appointing her brother honorary curator, she secured an entrée into the masculine world of the Trustees, and ensured her interests would be represented. McCormick's collecting prerogative, as discussed in earlier chapters, was neither to establish new organizations nor to promote social or artistic causes like the separatists or individualists. Yet this did not make her an assimilationist. Just as McCormick's collecting criteria and motivations did not fit precisely with contemporary collecting trends, neither did her strategies for working with museums necessarily match her peers' experiences. McCormick's unique perspective and priorities for her collection emerge through the process of making the donation.

Finally, this series of events surrounding the donation of McCormick's collection to the MFA highlights Townsend's great skill in donor development and negotiation. Townsend essentially instructed Edgell and the Board of Trustees on what steps they must take to ensure McCormick was satisfied. Her comment that the gift

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<sup>163</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, April 28, 1948.

was “momentous both to Miss McCormick and to us” shows that she was thinking about the needs of both sides. It likely served as a reminder that the MFA ought to take these extra steps to ensure they received the collection. Thanks to Townsend’s careful handling, the gift arrangements proceeded unhindered, and McCormick received letters from Edgell himself and Edward Holmes, President of the Board of Trustees, within the week.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Letter from GHE to EDM, November 4, 1943. Letter from Edward Holmes to EDM, November 5, 1943. Museum Archives. Holmes acknowledged the miscommunication: “It is the very depth of our appreciation that has led to the misunderstanding. The ordinary form of acknowledgement seemed so empty and inadequate that we have been planning when the whole collection has arrived to have a special document designed which will express the gratitude of the trustees in a manner and with a dignity befitting the distinction and importance of the gift.”

## **Chapter 5**

### **THE COLLECTION'S PLACE AT THE MFA**

In 1945, the Museum of Fine Arts held an exhibition to celebrate Elizabeth Day McCormick's achievements and the donation of her collection to the museum. It also presented the opportunity and inspiration for Gertrude Townsend to show how the textiles department was expanding both physically and conceptually. The McCormick collection represented material that the department had not previously actively acquired. With this foundational collection of costumes and accessories, the department faced the challenge of determining the appropriate roles for these objects within an art museum. Over the next sixty years, curators at the MFA employed the McCormick collection in diverse ways to challenge and advance ideas about how museums collect, display, and interpret textiles, and particularly costume. From today's perspective, in which costume collections are widely accepted within art museums and, often, among their most popular and publicized exhibitions, the impact of the McCormick collection may seem gradual rather than immediate. Tracing its influence on the museum shows the cultural factors and personal preferences that guided institutional practices.

This chapter focuses on the significance of McCormick's collection for the MFA as an institution, and particularly its textiles department. Three themes are important. First, the museum's preparations for an exhibition celebrating the donation in 1945 reveal what the MFA valued and chose to promote about the collection. Second, Townsend's efforts to engage the fashion industry and promote the MFA as a resource for fashion designers were part of a larger context of art museums'

relationships with the industry, particularly in New York City. Finally, the McCormick collection's impact on the MFA's textile department played a role in the development of costume collections within art museums in the United States and abroad during the mid-twentieth century.

### **The 1945 Exhibition**

Having finally settled the donation with McCormick, Townsend returned to Boston and planned a press conference to formally announce the gift of the "Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection of Embroideries, Costume, and Costume Accessories."<sup>165</sup> Townsend targeted a variety of media outlets, including major local papers the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, local radio stations, and specialized publications with national audiences, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Art News*, and the *Magazine Antiques*. She invited two radio hosts, Louise Morgan and Priscilla Fortescue, specifically because of their "interests in the occupations and activities of women."<sup>166</sup> The way Townsend described the collection and advertised it to different groups reveals much about how the MFA's staff conceived of the collection and its meaning for the museum.

Townsend began planning for an exhibition of the McCormick collection following the press conference, originally scheduling the exhibition for the spring of 1944. However, Townsend and her staff, including Jean Reed, Assistant to the Department since 1941, and Nancy Cabot, a volunteer, needed to complete a

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<sup>165</sup> Letter from GT to Alice Myers, *Christian Science Monitor*, November 15, 1943. Museum Archives. The wording in all Townsend's letters to journalists is nearly identical.

<sup>166</sup> Letter from GT to Miss [Louise] Morgan, November 16, 1943. Museum Archives. Morgan worked for the Yankee Network. Letter from GT to Miss [Priscilla] Fortescue, November 16, 1943. Museum Archives. Fortescue worked for WEEL.

significant amount of preparatory work before detailed planning could begin.<sup>167</sup> The scale of this work suggests how significant the McCormick collection was, as Townsend wrote to McCormick:

Our carpenter's shop is busy working on cases for the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection. I think I told you that we are remodeling our Textile Offices & Study Room so that your collection can be taken care of suitably. The room in which I showed you the Lehman Collection will have new cases be devoted [sic] to the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection. We are moving the other things elsewhere. Only after this room is completed can we begin to prepare for the exhibition of your collection.<sup>168</sup>

It is possible that Townsend wanted to please McCormick with the story of the hard work undertaken to accommodate and care for the collection. However, remodeling projects, purpose-built cases, and swapping out objects from another named collection seems significant. Considering the scale of McCormick's donation, there was perhaps no way around these alterations. The fact that Townsend undertook such an extensive project involving the complete textile collection demonstrates her commitment to acquiring the donation, if nothing else.

Following Townsend's fifth visit to Chicago in January of 1944, she decided to postpone the exhibition until the next year. This was in part related to the slow pace of preparatory work, a result of war-related labor and material shortages.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Jean Reed's appointment as Assistant to the Department is listed in the MFA's Annual Report for 1941; in the MFA's Annual Report for 1946 she is listed as Assistant in Charge of Costume. In 1949, Reed married and changed her last name to Lopardo (Letter from GT to EDM, February 7, 1949). It is not clear if Townsend had other assistants, paid or volunteers; Reed and Cabot are mentioned the most frequently. Another secretary was hired in April 1944 (Letter from GT to EDM, April 16, 1944). Townsend wrote to McCormick, "I am sure you can understand why I found this to be necessary."

<sup>168</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, December 24, 1943.

<sup>169</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, January 8, 1944.

Townsend also wished to allow more time to select pieces and launch a publicity campaign, on the advice of Irma Kierman, a former journalist for the *Boston Herald* and costume historian. Townsend wrote to McCormick:

[Kierman] is tremendously interested in your collection and we are going to discuss plans for a costume exhibition. She has volunteered to help with publicity. In order to arrange such an exhibition in the best possible way, and also to prepare suitable publicity, it seems better to postpone the exhibition until next winter or even the Spring of 1945.<sup>170</sup>

Kierman, who taught costume history at the Massachusetts School of Art, seems a natural proponent of a costume-centric exhibition. But it is unlikely Townsend was simply taking the suggestion of a friend; she must have supported the idea as well. Choosing to focus on the costume in McCormick's collection was a significant decision for Townsend. The two previous loan exhibitions had featured embroidery. Choosing costume allowed the MFA to showcase a new part of the McCormick collection.

Throughout 1944, Townsend continued to update McCormick on their progress as they catalogued the collection and prepared for the exhibition. They used at least fifty figures, dressed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century costume with accessories displayed in cases (fig. 18).<sup>171</sup> Installation photographs show that

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<sup>170</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, February 1, 1944. In the letter, Kierman is only referred to as "Mrs. Ray Kierman," but she seems to be the same Irma Whitney whose papers relating to her career as a journalist are now at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. The papers were donated by husband, Ray Kierman, upon her death in 1970. "Summary of the Irma Whitney Papers," *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, accessed March 21, 2011, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/irma-whitney-papers-8735>.

<sup>171</sup> "List of figures for 18<sup>th</sup> century costumes (including Empire)," undated. "List of figures for 19<sup>th</sup> century costumes (exclusive of Empire)," undated. Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers.

Townsend selected many beautiful eighteenth-century gowns, and the figures were adorned with hats, bags, and other accessories (figs. 19, 20, and 21).

The exhibition opened on April 10, 1945, to great fanfare. McCormick and her brother traveled to Boston for the occasion (fig. 22). Townsend arranged for three days of luncheons and dinners in their honor with Edgell and the Trustees.<sup>172</sup> McCormick described her experience, “There everybody and indeed it was a mighty crowd came up eagerly and showed so much enthusiasm in greeting me, expressing their hearty appreciation of the collection that it warmed my heart.”<sup>173</sup> Considering the challenges in securing McCormick’s donation, it appears the MFA spared no effort to ensure McCormick did not feel underappreciated. From the enthusiastic and effusive tone of McCormick’s letters, it certainly seems they were successful.

The exhibition was noticed outside Boston as well. The *New York Times Magazine* devoted a two-page spread to the exhibition, featuring photographs of objects on display.<sup>174</sup> In another article, the *Times* declared the exhibition “what promises to be one of the most extensive and elaborate collections of costumes in the world,” praising McCormick’s “aptitude for needlework” and marveling at her devotion to collecting: “Frequently, while in this country, she would learn of some rare collection to be put on sale in Europe. Soon she would be aboard a ship en route to Paris or London, arriving in time to make her bid for a desired object.”<sup>175</sup> Reaction in Chicago was less uniformly positive. McCormick wrote to Townsend of the exhibition:

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<sup>172</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, March 13, 1945.

<sup>173</sup> Letter from EDM to Mrs. Lyman, April 20, 1945.

<sup>174</sup> Virginia Pope, “The Eloquent Past,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1945, 84.

<sup>175</sup> Virginia Pope, “Costumes on View Span 4 Centuries,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1945, 37.

It had pronounced repercussions out here in Chicago although the 'Powers that be' at the Art Institute were very mummm [sic] on the subject. Except for Mrs. Palmer who showed a very broad understanding attitude in regard to the situation.<sup>176</sup>

McCormick did not elaborate on who the "powers that be" were or what exactly she thought their reticence signified, but it did not seem to mar her satisfaction with the whole event.

After the exhibition, McCormick maintained an interest in the collection at the MFA. For nearly a decade, she continued to send both textile and non-textile objects to the museum, writing that "all of these treasures ... seem to flow my way to a sanctuary after that mondially [sic] upheaval the world has just emerged from."<sup>177</sup> Some of these Townsend accepted, though many were tactfully rejected either for space concerns or a lack of relevance to the collection. The McCormick Wing was never built and discussion of the project dropped out of her correspondence by the end of the decade. Though McCormick's involvement with the museum lessened over time, she retained a positive memory of the opening and its significance for the museum and her own life, which she described in 1947:

[T]he magnificent reception and the outpouring of the Public of Boston, in my honor, several years ago, at which occasion I was so lavishly honored and feted and entertained by President and Mrs. Holmes, Mr. and Mrs. Cabot and your most gracious Board of Trustees.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, June 13, 1945. Palmer hosted a tea for McCormick and fifteen "intime" (McCormick's word) friends to hear about McCormick's experience at the opening of the exhibition. This seems a very gracious move on Palmer's part, and further evidence that personal relationships and social networks outranked formal and institutional associations where McCormick was concerned.

<sup>177</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, January 3, 1947.

<sup>178</sup> Letter from EDM to GT, June 17, 1947.

McCormick's collection had reached its "happy journey's end," and her own status was fixed in the constellation of donors, patrons, and benefactors of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

### **The Fashion Industry and Museums**

In 1945, Gertrude Townsend contributed an article to the *Prince Alumnae News*, a publication of the Prince School of Retailing at Simmons College. After describing the McCormick collection, highlighting the Queen Elizabeth jacket, Townsend argued for the collection's function as design inspiration. She sought to promote its use beyond academic research and aesthetic enjoyment. Townsend wrote,

Miss McCormick's gift, coming as it does at a time when the eyes of the world of fashion are necessarily turned towards America, draws attention in a dramatic manner to one of the important sources of inspiration of the European designer. ... it can be said without hesitation that appreciation of, and ready access to the treasures of art, including fine costumes from the pre-machine age, were important factors in keeping alive the creative imagination of the designer. It is true that these were to be found not only in museums but in their immediate surrounding; but even in Europe it was generally to museums that designers went in search of the inspiration to be derived from the study of costumes, fabrics, and needlework. Has there not been a tendency among American manufacturers, in their eagerness to follow current fashion trends, to overlook opportunities which might have placed their own designers among the leaders in the field?<sup>179</sup>

This quotation contains several noteworthy points. First, Townsend's emphasis on the timeliness of McCormick's donation is a common theme in their letters and the museum's publicity about the gift. The impact of the war was significant. Though Townsend and McCormick did not discuss the war often in their early correspondence, it became clear to both that destruction in Europe would impede or prevent assembling

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<sup>179</sup> Gertrude Townsend, "The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection," *The Prince Alumnae News* 30 (February 1945): 7.

a collection like McCormick's again. World War II also affected the traditional transfer of styles from Europe to the United States. American designers' reliance on European tastemakers was interrupted, and the shift in economic power from Europe to America by the end of the war only underscored this change.<sup>180</sup>

Second, Townsend pointed out that European designers had already been using museums as resources for their work. She argued that their "ready access to the treasures of art" raised their stature in the field. Townsend called for American manufacturers and designers to look for resources in their own country, including, now, the rich design source of the McCormick collection. It is worth noting that while Townsend sought to guide designers and manufacturers to American resources—that is, American museums—she was not privileging historic costume made in the United States. The majority of McCormick's costume collection is European, and the country with the greatest representation is France, the traditional leader of the fashion industry. Townsend was not arguing for a radical departure in fashion design sources, but rather advocating for the use and purpose of American museums. Concluding that the McCormick collection "can and should make an important contribution to the industrial as well as to the artistic life of America by developing its facilities for service to professional designers," Townsend recalled the MFA's roots and its mission to "inspire and instruct."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Elizabeth Ann Coleman, "The Brooklyn Museum," Phoenix Art Museum, *In Pursuit of Elegance: Costume Treasures from American and Canadian Treasures*. (Phoenix Art Museum, 1985), 18. Dilys E. Blum's *Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) gives one account of how constricted the fashion industry in Paris was during the war.

<sup>181</sup> Townsend, "The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection," *Prince Alumnae News*, 10.

In November and December 1944, even before the exhibition opened the following spring, Townsend invited designers from New York for private viewings of the collection (fig. 23). She wrote to McCormick that, “There are so many people, professional designers, schools of design, and people connected with the dress and textile industries, professional and amateur needlewomen as well as the general public, who will be interested in the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection.”<sup>182</sup> The guest book (1944–1949) for the McCormick collection reads as a who’s who of the American fashion industry from the 1940s, including prominent fashion designers Adele Simpson, Lilly Daché, Florence Reichman, and Nettie Rosenstein, magazine editors Diana Vreeland (*Harper’s Bazaar*) and M. D. C. Crawford (*Women’s Wear Daily*) and representatives from Bergdorf Goodman and Filene’s department stores. The appointment book for November 1944 shows at least two or three groups visiting per week.<sup>183</sup>

By early 1945, Townsend was planning the opening of the exhibition. She specifically cultivated connections with the fashion industry for the event. Robert Drake, New York Manager for *Harper’s Bazaar*, provided Townsend with a list for invitations, writing, “I promised to send you a list of the important people at Harper’s Bazaar, as well as the important stylists and executives of leading New England textile manufacturers.”<sup>184</sup> Townsend sought and received similar lists from Adelia Bird Ellis, executive director of the New York Dress Institute, and Dervin O’Brien of Boston department store E. T. Slattery Company, who wrote, “I shall impatiently look

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<sup>182</sup> Letter from GT to EDM, October 31, 1944.

<sup>183</sup> “List of designers who visited the Museum of Fine Arts by appointment during November and December 1944, for previews of the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection,” Museum Archives.

<sup>184</sup> Letter from Robert Drake to GT, February 2, 1945. Museum Archives.

forward to seeing the collection myself.”<sup>185</sup> Another memo on MFA stationary lists “Women’s Page & Fashion Editors—Boston Press.”<sup>186</sup> Townsend made a dedicated effort not only to market the McCormick collection to the fashion industry but also to ensure that designers could use the collection. Hosting several designers a week to look at collection objects was a significant undertaking, and must have taken time away from Townsend’s other work.

It is clear from these lists and the many other slips of paper in the MFA Archives with assorted names and addresses of “important people” that Townsend was reaching beyond her area of expertise. Costume had not previously been Townsend’s focus as curator of textiles at the MFA, and she did not have connections either to costume historians or curators, or to the fashion industry. The McCormick collection put the MFA on the map for new audiences interested in historic costume, and Townsend quickly had to educate herself about those audiences. One typed memo in the Museum Archives titled “Names of people in the Merchandise world and others who might be interested, especially costume” lists “Mr. F. C. C. Crawford” at *Women’s Wear Daily*, likely referring to M. D. C. Crawford.<sup>187</sup> It is unknown whether Townsend wrote this memo, but it was obviously not someone who had been following women’s fashion. Townsend chose to expand her area of expertise and the MFA’s traditional view toward costume both to do justice to the McCormick collection and to promote a philosophy about the museum’s role as a design source—and she did both these things by enlisting expert help.

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<sup>185</sup> Letter from Dervin O’Brien to GT, February 13, 1945. Letter from Adelia Bird Ellis to GT, March 15, 1945. Museum Archives.

<sup>186</sup> “Women’s Page & Fashion Editors – Boston Press,” undated. Museum Archives.

<sup>187</sup> “Names of people in the Merchandise world and others who might be interested, especially costume,” undated. Museum Archives.

What was the impetus to focus on costume? A clear answer comes neither from McCormick, who stated that her costume collection was “incidental” to her textiles and needlework collections, nor from Townsend, whose steps toward collecting costume before 1941 were only tentative. There is no evidence that McCormick asked the museum to focus on her costume collection, nor is there evidence of Edgell or the trustees pressuring Townsend to take one point of view or another.<sup>188</sup> It seems the focus on costume and the outreach to the fashion industry both originated with Townsend, although it marked a new tactic for her.

The idea of museums providing design sources for fashion designers had been implemented in New York, if not in Boston. As early as 1916, M. D. C. Crawford advocated for the use of museum collections by textile designers with his “Designed in America” campaign. A collaborative effort between *Women’s Wear Daily*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Brooklyn Museum, and a range of textile firms, the campaign encouraged textile designers to use ethnographic artifacts for design inspiration. The campaign culminated in exhibitions of participants’ designs. As curator Lauren D. Whitley points out, however, the end of World War I lifted the pressure for American designers to become independent of European dominance in the market, and the practice of using museum collections failed to become widespread.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Edgell had a reputation for letting curators take the lead, as MFA paintings curator W. G. Constable recalled, “He was very good. He left it all to his curators, if he really knew them. In that way he was a very good director. He didn't interfere.” Oral history interview with W. G. Constable, 1972 July–1973 June, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>189</sup> Lauren D. Whitley, “Morris De Camp Crawford and the ‘Designed in America’ Campaign, 1916–1922,” Textile Society of America, Inc., *Creating Textiles: Makers, Methods, Markets: Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial Symposium* (Earlville, MD: Textile Society of America, Inc., 1999), 410–419.

In terms of institutions, the Brooklyn Museum led this movement in the United States. Like the MFA Boston, the Brooklyn Museum supported industrial arts and design by amassing inspirational collections. Also like the MFA Boston, its costume collections were somewhat haphazard until the mid-twentieth century. With the establishment of the Industrial Division in 1939, overseen by curator Michelle Murphy, the staff began seriously to cultivate relationships with designers and others in the textile and fashion industry, offering access to its collections and sponsoring fashion shows and exhibitions on costume history. In 1944, the Edward C. Blum Design Lab opened, providing dedicated space for offices, exhibitions, and study rooms. Murphy worked with designers like Charles James, who conducted research at the museum. James ensured that many of his famous clients, from Dominique de Menil to Gypsy Rose Lee, donated his designs to the museum. Bonnie Cashin, Sally Victor, and Claire McCardell all made use of the Design Lab and later donated their own designs.<sup>190</sup> The legacy of those efforts in the 1940s is an extremely strong collection of American fashion from the twentieth century, and one that has a direct relationship to the museum's costume collection as a whole.

The Brooklyn Museum was not the only institution collecting costume in New York City, the capital of American fashion. In 1937, philanthropist sisters Irene Lewisohn and Alice Lewisohn Crowley, and theater designers Aline Bernstein and Lee Simonson founded the Museum of Costume Art, which would later become the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They envisioned a museum that would:

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<sup>190</sup> Jan Glier Reeder, *High Style: Masterworks from the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 10–11, 118, 160.

serve industrialists, artists, art historians, craftsmen, and students of all kinds as well as stimulate in the general public an awareness of the importance of dress in the development of the human race and the relation of this field of design to the present and future creative impulses in American life.<sup>191</sup>

As at Brooklyn, they emphasized how the history of costume design could be useful to contemporary practitioners. Although perhaps a smaller industry than fashion and textile manufacturing, costume design for theater influenced two key players in the Museum of Costume Art's early years. They certainly would have been attuned to the uses of museum collections for designers of all kinds.

The years 1944 and 1945 were key to these three museums and their costume collections. In 1944, the Metropolitan Museum of Art announced it would be acquiring the Museum of Costume Art's collection of 10,000 objects to form the Costume Institute.<sup>192</sup> The Design Lab opened at the Brooklyn Museum, and Townsend was planning the McCormick exhibition. Curators at each institution were rethinking the role of costume collections within art museums and connecting to the fashion industry. Polaire Weissman, executive director of the Museum of Costume Art, assisted Townsend in installing mannequins for the 1945 exhibition (fig. 24). When thanked for her efforts, Weissman commented, "I have always been a staunch believer in the pooling of talents and of closer cooperation between museums."<sup>193</sup> Weissman may have been a particular influence on Townsend, since they worked

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<sup>191</sup> Quoted in Jean L. Druesedow, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Costume Institute," Phoenix Art Museum, *In Pursuit of Elegance: Costume Treasures from American and Canadian Treasures*. (Phoenix Art Museum, 1985), 36.

<sup>192</sup> Jean L. Druesedow, *In Style: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Costume Institute* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987. Reprinted from *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Fall 1987), 3.

<sup>193</sup> Letter from Polaire Weissman to G. H. Edgell, April 25, 1945. Museum Archives.

closely together. But Townsend could have been observing her colleagues and their work at other institutions for the past few years.

Townsend embraced the trend of collaboration between museums and the fashion and textiles industries. In addition to inviting designers to study the collection and attend the opening, the MFA collaborated with Boston department store Filene's for the exhibition preview. The preview included speeches from Edgell and Townsend as well as H. D. Hodgkinson, general manager of Filene's, and a "showing of modern clothes inspired by the McCormick Collection" produced by Filene's.<sup>194</sup> These events preceded the evening reception for McCormick at the MFA. The program showcased a rayon fabric, produced by Belding and designed by Filene's staff, to reproduce a floral print on a nineteenth-century cotton skirt in the McCormick collection (figs. 25 and 26). The laundering instructions on the exhibition opening program suggest that guests received a sample. In the program, Filene's congratulated both Belding and Ponemah Mills for producing the fabric, as well as designer Lilly Daché for her accessories inspired by the McCormick collection. These accessories may have been on view at the opening.

Townsend's efforts to connect with the fashion and textile industries had mixed results, perhaps because of the distance from New York City. It is unknown whether the clothing Filene's produced for this preview enjoyed commercial success beyond this "demonstration" that historic costumes "could be used as a basis for modern wearing apparel."<sup>195</sup> Filene's was not as influential as New York retailers. The designers from New York who visited the collection responded positively, but the

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<sup>194</sup> "The Elizabeth Day McCormick Costume Collection Preview," April 10, 1945. Museum Archives.

<sup>195</sup> Letter from Arthur B. Barnes, Treasurer, Ponemah Mills, to GHE, April 16, 1945. Museum Archives.

distance meant it was not practical for the MFA to become their major design resource. However, Townsend's attempts to establish a relationship were important. The donation of the McCormick collection represented a new kind of acquisition for the MFA, both in scale and content, and Townsend responded to that challenge by exploring new ways to promote and use the collection. Townsend was aware of trends at other major art museums and their new investment in their costume collections. Overall, the story of the MFA's engagement with the fashion industry shows that the McCormick collection prompted Townsend and others at the museum to think more broadly about what the institution and the department could be, and what services they could provide.

#### **Costume in Art Museums: Where Does the McCormick Collection Fit?**

Like other art museums of its age, the MFA did not dedicate time and resources to the collection, study, and interpretation of costume, rather than textiles, until well into the twentieth century. In *Establishing Dress History*, the only detailed study of this subject, Lou Taylor argues that art museums and decorative arts departments, traditionally dominated by men and often with a gendered perception of costume history as feminine and frivolous, did not begin to take costume seriously until women entered the field in greater numbers in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>196</sup> The history of the MFA's interpretation of costume is more complicated, largely because of the McCormick collection. As the first curator for the department of textiles, Townsend created the foundation for her department's identity within the museum over the course of her career, as her own theories developed. Clearly, when she

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<sup>196</sup> See Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, 183–192 for costume collections in museums in the United States.

became curator in 1930, she accepted the traditional view of costume, that the objects were valuable for their materials. As discussed in chapter four, she had declined the offer of a Charles Frederick Worth gown in 1933. Townsend's actions regarding the McCormick collection show a changed perspective.

As previous chapters have shown, Townsend worked hard to acquire the McCormick collection. This multi-year process involved cultivating a relationship with McCormick, multiple visits to Chicago, and days of packing, unpacking, and cataloguing thousands of objects, all while maintaining a conciliatory and gracious attitude to McCormick, who could sometimes be challenging. Once the scale of McCormick's collection was evident to Townsend, she must have known that this would be a major undertaking. She chose to follow through with it.

Another anecdote proves Townsend's commitment to seeking this collection for the MFA and ensuring its successful integration into the museum's collection. After the donation was made, Rose Nichols offered to donate her house on Beacon Hill to the MFA specifically to hold the McCormick collection as a satellite museum. Townsend rejected this idea, largely because it would not be economically efficient for the museum to staff multiple facilities. Aside from the financial reasons, however, the fact that Townsend wanted to bring the McCormick collection into the main museum building is a major statement of her support for the collection.<sup>197</sup>

Townsend's efforts to advance costume's place in the museum's collection is further shown by her publicity and promotion of the collection for the 1945 exhibition. The exhibition, ostensibly celebrating the entire donation, highlighted

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<sup>197</sup> Cavallo, interview. Cavallo stated strongly that he and Townsend had each been trained in the fine arts, and they sought examples of fine arts and fine design in what they acquired for the MFA—neither was interested in collecting costume to interpret cultural or social history the way museums sometimes do today.

only the *Costume and Costume Accessories in the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection*. Some of McCormick's embroideries had been exhibited before, but those loan exhibitions were not publicized on the same scale. As discussed above, Townsend worked hard to promote the costume collection to important people in the fashion and textiles industries, as she saw her colleagues at other art museums doing. These efforts suggest her perception of the objects' value as three-dimensional constructions, not only as sources of fine textiles. Perhaps it was this developing conception, in addition to the example from her colleagues, which drove Townsend's work in connecting to fashion design, manufacture, and retail.

After 1945, Townsend continued to acquire more costume for the museum. In the 1950s, she accepted several Worth gowns, exactly what had been rejected twenty years before. She acquired contemporary pieces by such designers as Elizabeth Hawes and Madame Etta. In 1952, she installed an exhibition titled *The Changing World of Fashion*, which featured costume from 1700 to 1940.<sup>198</sup> Although Townsend retired from the position of curator in 1959, she stayed on at the MFA as a Fellow for Research. She contributed to Nell Giles Ahern's series on the history of fashion in the *Boston Globe* that same year. In a series titled "Why Women Dress That Way," Ahern wrote about the history of hats, waistlines, menswear, and the influence of architecture on fashion, guided by "an authority on all this," Gertrude Townsend, who shared examples highlighted from the McCormick collection.<sup>199</sup>

In 1979, the year of Townsend's death, she donated to the MFA a pair of her own pumps made by Joseph Antell of Boston from the 1960s (fig. 27). These

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<sup>198</sup> Webber-Hanchett, "Collecting and Exhibiting Dress as Fine Art," 5–6.

<sup>199</sup> Nell Giles Ahern, "Smaller World Grows, More Fashion Changes," *Boston Globe*, March 22, 1959, A27.

silver leather shoes with rhinestone buckles are something of an enigma. Townsend's other donations to the MFA are mainly pre-industrial textiles and decorative arts. What did this donation represent to Townsend? After receiving the McCormick collection and subsequent costume donations, Townsend did not make either costume or contemporary fashion the first priority for the department. But the shoes serve as a reminder of the McCormick collection's impact. McCormick provided the foundation for the costume and costume accessories collections at the MFA, and without her, it is unlikely Townsend would ever have donated these pumps.

In 1954, Townsend wrote to the Board of Trustees that with the donation of McCormick's "fabulous embroideries and costumes,"

Our Museum of Fine Arts suddenly advanced to the forefront in this field in which we had been relatively poor. This gift came at a time when most of the major museums in the United States were placing the collection of costumes in a far more important position than hitherto, and when the general interest in the history of costume among historians and sociologists had greatly increased.<sup>200</sup>

Townsend clearly recognized that McCormick's collection filled a gap at the MFA. Looking back after ten years, she saw how the gift positioned the MFA in relation to other large urban art museums. Regarding continuing acquisitions, she wrote:

To complete the collection and to make it a growing collection, not one frozen into a pattern, we have by great good fortune, been able to add to it through gifts received from many sources. Because of the richness of the offers we have been able to select only those pieces which seemed to us fine, important, and in some particular aspect, truly significant from the point of view of cut or material.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Gertrude Townsend, "Report from the Department of Textiles," February 11, 1954, 7. Typed manuscript for Annual Report. Photocopy in Textile Department History Papers.

<sup>201</sup> Townsend, "Report," 7.

Townsend knew that a “growing collection” would, appropriately, weaken the imprint of McCormick’s collecting criteria, and Townsend’s own. She wished to avoid a collection that was “frozen into a pattern” of the original collector, though a shadow of that pattern always remains. Townsend still emphasized the quality of materials and cut when selecting items but she clearly considered costume as an established category of the collection. By 1954, she was demonstrating a significant change in her thinking about costume since becoming curator in 1930.

The McCormick collection did not spark a revolutionary change at the MFA. The textiles department did not immediately begin collecting costume from all periods and places, including contemporary designs. These developments awaited several decades, changes in staff, and changing trends toward the interpretation of cultural history within art museums. In a gradual process, however, the McCormick collection represented an important tool and foundation for later changes. Townsend deserves a significant credit for her foresight and willingness to push boundaries not only for the MFA’s collecting criteria but also for the role of museums in society. She set the precedents and established a framework for the MFA’s costume collection today.



**Figure 18. View of Recent Accessions Room with Costume, 1945. Photograph  
© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 19. Jean Reed (right) and unidentified woman, with dressed figures, 1945. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 20.** Members of the Museum staff select accessories to add finishing touches to some of the costumes, 1945. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 21. Mrs. Jean Reed of the Museum's Dept of Textiles and Frank Mooney of the Maintenance Dept. lift one of the models into position. Gown is of Chinese embroidered satin, English, 18th cent., 1945. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 22.** April 1945; Etta, Elizabeth Day McCormick, Phoebe and Mildred at the McCormick Collection Opening Reception. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 23. Gertrude Townsend (center) showing the McCormick collection to New York designers, 1944 or 1945. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 24. Polaire Weissman, Executive Technician of the Costume Institute, New York, who came to Boston to assist with the installation of the exhibition, 1945. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 25. Skirt. French (Arles). Early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cotton; printed, quilted. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection 43.544. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**



**Figure 26. Jean Reed (in light colored dress) with dressed figure, 1945. The figure is wearing a nineteenth-century French quilted cotton skirt (43.544). Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.**

## CONCLUSION

In 1963, the Museum of Fine Arts launched a major exhibition of historic costume titled *She Walks In Splendor: Great Costumes, 1550–1950*. Townsend's successor, curator of textiles Adolph Cavallo, declared in the catalogue's introduction:

There is magic in the very nature of costume. Clothes merely cover and protect the body; but when the wearer chooses or makes those clothes to express a specific idea, then the clothes become costume and the whole process, from designing and wearing, becomes an art.<sup>202</sup>

Cavallo defined a new understanding of costume and, implicitly, its role in art museums. Costume was an art to itself, and the relationship of the garment to the body, the wearer, was inherent to its status as such. This statement shows a significant change from the MFA's traditional designation of costume as valuable for the textile from which it was made. Cavallo argued that, as an art object, costume was more than the sum of its parts.

*She Walks In Splendor* placed costume front and center, featuring over 200 pieces of costume and costume accessories. As MFA director Perry Townsend Rathbone wrote in the catalogue's foreword, the exhibition was designed "to emphasize [costume's] conception and creation as works of art rather than as props in a tableau."<sup>203</sup> Backdrops and lighting by theater designers Raymond Sovey and

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<sup>202</sup> Adolph Cavallo, *She Walks In Splendor: Great Costumes, 1550–1950* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1963), 7.

<sup>203</sup> Perry Townsend Rathbone, "Foreword," *She Walks In Splendor*, 5. Rathbone was not related to Gertrude Townsend.

Horace Armistead complemented the dressed mannequins.<sup>204</sup> The dramatic presentation, popular subject matter, and high-quality objects made the exhibition a great success. Promotional materials for the exhibition attributed this to the museum's commitment to acquiring "every piece for its merit as an example of fine design—regardless of its period, material, function, or historical significance."<sup>205</sup> Here was an interpretation of costume based truly on its aesthetic value, and it was displayed in a designed context that showed it in its best light. Cavallo's landmark exhibition inspired a tradition for big costume exhibitions in the twentieth century, further promoted by Diana Vreeland and her blockbuster exhibitions at the Costume Institute beginning in the 1970s, and continuing there today.

In Rathbone's foreword, he attributed the strength of the MFA's costume collection to a single event:

When Miss Elizabeth Day McCormick gave to the Museum her fabulous—no lesser word fits here—collection of costume material, embroideries, and other textiles during a ten-year period beginning in 1943, the Department of Textiles organized a subdivision devoted to the collection of costume material in its own right. Miss McCormick's collection still figures as the nucleus of that division.<sup>206</sup>

As this thesis has shown, the transition to collecting costume "in its own right" was neither smooth nor immediate. Still, the impact of the McCormick collection was significant for the MFA, a fact clearly recognized by museum leadership twenty years

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<sup>204</sup> Pamela Parmal, et al, *MFA Highlights: Textile & Fashion Arts* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006), 20.

<sup>205</sup> "Pageant of splendor opens at Boston museum depicting five centuries of the art of the couturier," Press release, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. October 1963. Museum Archives.

<sup>206</sup> Rathbone, "Foreword," *She Walks In Splendor*, 5.

later. Without McCormick's collection and the subsequent donations it inspired, the MFA would not have had the material that enabled Cavallo to mount this exhibition.

The donation of McCormick's collection to the MFA represents a case study for examining the relationship between collectors and museums. When a collection moves from private to public ownership, the individual collector's personal taste becomes a statement about the institution's identity. In the case of the MFA and McCormick's collection, the relationship was, in a sense, reciprocal. McCormick and her collection were validated by the MFA's cultural authority. The collection, in turn, contributed to the museum's status. In both scale and content, the collection was a landmark acquisition for the MFA. McCormick's quest for objects that displayed beauty, pattern, texture, rich materials, and an ineffable sense of "preciousness" made the collection highly desirable to the museum. Her criteria resonated with contemporary fashions like the Aesthetic movement. Simultaneously, her particular "eye" for objects distinguished her work from other collecting trends exemplified by "Old World," colonial revival, and contemporary art collectors. These qualities were imprinted on McCormick's collection and stayed with it even when the collection entered public ownership.

Throughout the process of transferring the collection to the MFA, McCormick and Townsend remained the key players. Their relationship highlights how female networks of collectors, professionals, philanthropists, and enthusiasts influenced museum development in the twentieth century. In this case, these networks did not transcend or replace traditional male-run institutions, but worked with them and wielded significant influence. Townsend was an important figure in the MFA's history, shaping the textile department from its earliest days. Her status and great skill in donor development and negotiation certainly contributed to McCormick's decision to entrust her with the collection. McCormick grew up surrounded by similar circles of

collectors and philanthropists composed of Chicago's wealthiest women. Townsend and McCormick were brought together initially by another skilled networker, Rose Standish Nichols. Women's involvement in museums and the arts was part of an interpersonal social web regardless of whether they viewed themselves as professionals or were paid for their work. McCormick's fraught interactions with Boards of Trustees at the MFA and Art Institute of Chicago suggest she was more comfortable with these female networks than in traditional structures of power. Still, McCormick and Townsend accomplished significant work in building and acquiring the collection, showing that these networks could be extremely effective.

The McCormick collection's impact on the MFA was intertwined with and enhanced by other priorities and realities that were driving institutional development. By pursuing the collection, Townsend made a commitment to the role of costume within the textiles department, which was strengthened by her decision to focus on costume for the exhibition celebrating McCormick's donation. Her outreach to the fashion industry in conjunction with that exhibition demonstrates her engagement with a larger trend occurring in art museums. Particularly in its influence on Townsend, the McCormick collection played a significant part in the gradually shifting attitudes toward costume in art museums in the mid-twentieth century. The presence of the collection enabled Townsend to participate in this shift and to take on projects she might not have earlier in her career.

In 1954, Gertrude Townsend wrote to the Board of Trustees, "There has been an immediate and enthusiastic response from the public to the costumes which have been collected by the Museum ... but the true value of our collection will be

understood only after a passage of time.”<sup>207</sup> Townsend and McCormick worked together to bring McCormick’s collection to the MFA, and the museum’s collection would not be the same today without it. McCormick’s personal collecting criteria were a product of her time as well as her individual taste. Her preferences remained encoded in the collection as it was transferred to and then transformed by its status as part of an institution. At the MFA, the McCormick collection provided an important tool for Townsend and her successors, enabling them to expand the textiles department both physically and conceptually.

Overall, the story of McCormick’s collection at the MFA touches on some of the major factors of museum development in the mid-twentieth century, including the historical context for collecting, the role of women in cultivating the arts, and the evolution of institutional identities as the meaning of museums changed. Together, Gertrude Townsend and Elizabeth Day McCormick made a major contribution to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, one that has become part of the fabric of the museum.

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<sup>207</sup> Townsend, “Report from the Department of Textiles,” February 11, 1954, 78  
Typed manuscript for Annual Report. Photocopy in Textile Department History  
Papers.

**Appendix A**  
**RESOURCES CREATED FOR THE ELIZABETH DAY MCCORMICK  
COLLECTION**

When I began researching Elizabeth Day McCormick in June 2010, the Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection Papers were organized by general subject in files kept by the Textile and Fashion Arts Department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The papers did not have a finding aid or other supplementary documents. As I conducted my study, I created a number of resources for the papers that may be useful for other researchers. These resources, listed below, are located in the Textile and Fashion Arts Department at the MFA as well as in the Winterthur Library.

**Finding Aid:** This document lists each folder in the McCormick Collection Papers and summarizes its contents.

**Chronology:** This chronology documents Elizabeth Day McCormick's relationship with the MFA, including when she met Gertrude Townsend, exhibitions of her collection, and her decision to donate her collection to the museum.

**Database of McCormick Collection Papers:** This database, created in Excel, contains every letter between Elizabeth Day McCormick, Gertrude Townsend, and others in the McCormick Collection Papers. The database can be sorted by date, author, and recipient. Each entry includes a summary of topics mentioned in the letter, including names of dealers, collectors, and museum professionals.

## **Appendix B**

### **MCCORMICK FAMILY TREE**

The following family tree was created using the *McCormick-Hamilton Lord-Day Ancestral Lines* and obituaries in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and *New York Times*. It does not include all members of the McCormick family, but focuses on those closest to Elizabeth Day McCormick.



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Elizabeth Ann Coleman, former David and Roberta Logie Curator of Textile and Fashion Arts, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Interviewed by the author, December 20, 2010.

Sargent Collier, great-nephew of Elizabeth Day McCormick. Interviewed by the author, August 20, 2010.

Titi Halle, Owner, Cora Ginsburg LLC. Interviewed by the author, December 15, 2010.

Pam Parmal, David and Roberta Logie Curator of Textile and Fashion Arts, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Interviewed by the author, February 16, 2011.

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### Reynolds image

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1782

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Caption: In finery of a former age, Elsie McCormick (right) assisted at the Antiquarian Society as a hostess in 1938. The reception was held in honor of Queen Victoria's Centenary.

Name of photographer: Unknown.

Which paper did it appear? Midwest, Magazine of the Chicago Sun-Times

Section: Unknown

Page #: 4

Run date: January 12, 1964

Photo 2:



Caption: Socially tireless, Miss Elsie was an acknowledged authority on rare textiles. Photo by Carmen Reporto.

Name of photographer: Carmen Reporto

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Section: Unknown

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Hannah Freece  
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ART OBJECT SCHEDULE

1. *Woman's jacket*  
English, about 1610–15, with later alterations  
Linen plain weave, embroidered with silk and metallic threads and spangles; metallic bobbin lace  
Center back: 43 cm (16 15/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.243
2. *Woman's coif and forehead cloth*  
English, about 1610–15  
Linen plain weave, embroidered with silk and metallic threads and spangles; metallic bobbin lace  
Coif (center back): 25 cm (9 13/16 in.)  
Forehead cloth: 17 x 36 cm (6 11/16 x 14 3/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.244a-b
3. *Pair of gloves*  
early 17th century  
Leather embroidered with silk yarns and gilt-silver spangles, metal trim  
14.3 x 14.5 cm (5 5/8 x 5 11/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.411a-b
4. *Box with scene from the Judgment of Solomon*  
1650–75  
Silk, linen; embroidered with silk and metallic threads, seed pearls, glass beads, and coral; raised work; appliqué; wood, metal  
27 x 33 x 18 cm (10 5/8 x 13 x 7 1/16 in.); Legacy dimension: 18.0 x 33.0 x 27.0 cm  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.525
5. *Skirt*  
French (Arles), early 19th century  
Cotton; printed, quilted  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.544
6. *Man's suit in two parts (coat)*  
about 1785–90  
Silk taffeta  
Center back: 113 cm (44 1/2 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.674a
7. *Man's suit in two parts (breeches)*  
about 1785–90  
Silk plain weave (taffeta); linen plain weave lining, metal buckle  
side seam L: 72 cm (28 3/8 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.674b
8. *Woman's ensemble in two parts*  
Turkish, 19th century

- Embroidered velvet  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1618a
9. *Woman's ensemble in two parts*  
Turkish, 19th century  
Embroidered velvet  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1618b
  10. *Court dress (robe à la française and petticoat) in four parts*  
1770s  
Silk; with non-period accessories: modesty, engageantes; Louix XVI style; floral motifs painted on silk taffeta ground; trimmed with ruching  
163 cm (64 3/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1633a-d
  11. *Dress in two parts (dress)*  
English, about 1745, dress restyled about 1760  
Silk plain weave, brocaded  
Length: 130 cm (51 3/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1639a
  12. *Dress in two parts (petticoat)*  
English, about 1745  
Silk plain weave self-patterned and brocaded  
L: 88 cm (34 5/8 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1639b
  13. *Ball dress*  
French, about 1825  
Silk satin, embroidered with metallic threads  
Overall (Center back): 121.5 cm (47 13/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1650
  14. *Sabot (wooden shoe) (one of a pair)*  
French (Foix, Bethmale Valley), probably 19th century  
Wood, steel and leather, and brass  
27.2 x 10.2 x 25.2 cm (10 11/16 x 4 x 9 15/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1760a
  15. *Sabot (one of a pair)*  
French (Foix, Bethmale Valley), probably 19th century  
Wood, steel and leather, and brass  
26 x 10.6 x 26.5 cm (10 1/4 x 4 3/16 x 10 7/16 in.)  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1760b
  16. *Dress, petticoat, and stomacher (dress)*  
possibly Dutch, About 1735; dress restyled about 1770  
Silk satin with supplementary discontinuous silk and metal-wrapped patterning wefts

Center back: 160 cm (63 in.)  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1871a

17. *Dress, petticoat, and stomacher (petticoat)*  
 French, About 1735; dress restyled at a later date  
 Silk satin with supplementary discontinuous silk and metal-wrapped patterning wefts  
 Center front (Petticoat (now attached)): 112 cm (44 1/8 in.)  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1871b
  
18. *Dress, petticoat, and stomacher (stomacher)*  
 French, About 1735; dress restyled at a later date  
 Silk satin with supplementary discontinuous silk and metal-wrapped patterning wefts  
 Center front (Stomacher (now attached)): 112 cm (44 1/8 in.)  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.1871c
  
19. Elizabeth Day McCormick, American, 1873–1957  
*Pictorial panel*  
 American (Chicago, IL), about 1900  
 Linen, embroidered with metallic threads and silk  
 52 x 54 cm (20 1/2 x 21 1/4 in.)  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 43.2502
  
20. *A pair of woman's pumps*  
 probably French, 1780–90  
 Silk figured, gilt metal coiled fringe and sequins, red foil, silk string, paper painted, linen and leather  
 lining, and leather heel and sole  
 23.6 x 8.7 x 11.4 cm (9 5/16 x 3 7/16 x 4 1/2 in.)  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, 44.509a-b
  
21. *Pair of women's pumps*  
 American (Boston), 1960–63  
 Silvered leather  
 25.7 cm (10 1/8 in.)  
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 Gift of Miss Gertrude Townsend, 1979.76a-b



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Schedule I

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## ART OBJECT SCHEDULE

1. Seated portrait of Elizabeth Day McCormick, ca. 1891
2. Jean Reed (in light-colored dress) with dressed figure, 1945
3. Jean Reed (in dark-colored dress) and unidentified woman, with dressed figures, 1945
4. Members of the Museum staff select accessories to add finishing touches to some of the costumes, 1945
5. Mrs. Jean Reed of the Museum's Dept of Textiles and Frank Mooney of the Maintenance Dept. lift one of the models into position. Gown is of Chinese embroidered satin, English, 18th cent., 1945
6. Polaire Weissman, Executive Technician of the Costume Institute, New York, who came to Boston to assist with the installation of the exhibition, 1945
7. View of Recent Accessions Room with Costume, 1945  
Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
8. April 1945; Etta, Elizabeth Day McCormick, Phoebe and Mildred at the McCormick Collection Opening Reception
9. Gertrude Townsend showing the McCormick collection to New York designers