

Lesson: First Public Art Museums

Scavenger Hunt

Visit the Walters Art Museum (Wed, Fri to Sun 10am to 5pm; Thurs. 1-8pm).

Take the Hopkins shuttle to the Peabody stop and walk to the museum's original entrance on Charles Street.

Some background:

William Walters (1819-1894) and his son, Henry (1848-1931) formed their collection over the course of 80 years, from the mid-1850s until 1931. They traveled internationally, worked with multiple dealers, and made purchases at World's Fairs and auctions. William Thompson Walters, born in the village of Liverpool in central Pennsylvania, was drawn to Baltimore in 1841. Initially Walters became a grain merchant, but by 1852 he had established a wholesale rye liquor business. Subsequent investments in steamships, railroads and banking yielded a considerable fortune. Following his father's death in 1894, Henry Walters took over the family business interests and began to expand the family art collection. He added to his father's holdings, buying in New York and abroad, and collected Egyptian, ancient Near Eastern, Renaissance and Baroque and Islamic art, manuscripts and early printed books and a number of key classical and western medieval objects. In 1904, he commissioned an Italianate palazzo building at Charles and Centre Streets as a gallery to display the collection. He bequeathed the building and its contents of art, his family home, and a quarter of his fortune to the mayor and city council of Baltimore "for the benefit of the public."

As you now know, the public art museums found in Europe's capitals today mostly started as the private collections of European rulers. Rulers eventually opened their collections to the general public in a space dedicated to that purpose between 1740 and 1826. The buildings' location, architecture, and decoration often include traces of the art collection's original owners.

This is also true of the Walters Art Museum.

One example of a reference to the founder you can find above the original entrance to the Walters on Charles Street:



Above the original entrance to the museum is the name of the family who gave the art collection to Baltimore: Walters. The museum is named after them. Right above it is a sculpted portrait of William Walters. When Henry commissioned a building to house his art collection, he included a representation of his father as a tribute.

And European museums' founding contents reveal the tastes of the European elite of the mid-seventeenth through early eighteenth centuries. The Walters collection reveals the tastes of the Walters – which was informed by nineteenth century ideas about what counted as great art (as much as it was informed by their own personal likes and dislikes). One example of a collection item from the Walters is:



Raphael or Workshop of Raphael

Madonna of the Candelabra, ca. 1513

Oil on panel

37.484

Acquired by Henry Walters.

This is the first painting by Raphael (or his workshop) to enter an American collection and it was a major coup for Henry Walters when he acquired it. It shows that in 19th century America the paintings of the Italian masters (ie: Italian artists of the 15th and 16th centuries) were considered as essential for a truly great art collection as they were in 18th century Europe.

Finally, public art museums grew to adopt the so-called "art-historical hang" style of display (which became "the" standard by 1800). That approach lent itself well to nationalistic narratives (among other storylines), as we see at the Louvre Museum as Dominique Vivant Denon installed it. This is distinct from the earlier "connoisseurial hang" which invited knowledgeable aesthetic exploration.

Keeping all this background in mind your scavenger hunt assignment is to:

1. Find other traces of the founders/original owners. Take ONE photo of what you found to share as a post to our discussions board on CANVAS and write 50-75 words explaining how it functions as a trace of the founder. You are allowed to ask for help from museum staff.

Things to look for:

- The Walters family home
- The passageway that connected the home to the museum building
- Portraits of the founders

- And anything else that you can make a case for being a trace of the owner
2. Take ONE photo of an object collected by either William or Henry Walters (hint: object labels include a credit line). Identify the artwork (or share a photo of the object and of the label). Tell us how this collection item compares to the kinds of objects that would have been on view in Europe's early public art museums when they first opened.
 3. Examine how the Walters' organizes its different collecting areas and positions them around the building. Take ONE photo of a gallery or installation and describe the hidden messages it conveys either by virtue of its contents & sequencing of objects or by virtue of where the collecting area is located compared to other collecting areas in the museum.