THE HISTORY OF A COLLECTION

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Recently, when I was examining a volume of old catalogues issued by the Museum in the 1880’s, there, looming upon a page idly turned, appeared a familiar name which caught my eye. The name? James Jackson Jarves, a man who was perhaps the most noteworthy of all nineteenth-century American art collectors. Though it was buried in an Introductory Note, his name started forward to quicken curiosity and propose a little search that has led into many forgotten corners and byways among an odd group of men. The search has not been without its rewards; it has not only disclosed some facts about Jarves’s connection with this Museum but it has also turned up from a much deeper obscurity an eighteenth-century Italian artist, collector, and antiquary whose career is, curiously enough, in some respects a parallel to that of Jarves. This second gentleman is the Count Alessandro Maggiori.

Since the history to be recounted started with the Introductory Note, it might be well to set it all down here at the beginning. The pamphlet, published in the spring of 1881, is entitled “The Vanderbilt Collection of Drawings in the East Galleries . . .” The note reads:

“This collection was begun in the latter part of the last century by Count Maggiori, of Bologna, a learned scholar and connoisseur, and a member of the Academy of Sciences in that city. It has gradually been increased by additions from the celebrated collections of Signor Marietta, Professor Angeline, Doctor Guastalla, and Mr. James Jackson Jarves, our Vice-Consul at Florence.

“In 1880, it was purchased from the latter gentleman and generously presented to the Museum by Mr. Cornelius Vanderbilt, one of its Trustees.

“The attributions of authorship and the division into schools are by former owners. . . .”

The information given in this note seems to have been somewhat overshadowed with the passage of the years. By its light we now see that the Vanderbilt collection of drawings was, before its presentation to the Museum, in the possession of Jarves and that the original collection was made by Count Maggiori. By chance another bit of information was discovered in the Museum’s archives. This was contained in a clipping from an English magazine called The London Academy, dated June 21, 1879. It states: “Mr. Jarves has lately acquired a collection of . . . drawings with a view to securing it for his own country. . . . The collection was made mainly in the last century by Count Maggiori of Ferno. . . .” An undated clipping from the New York Times states further that Jarves bought the collection from some member of the Leopardi family of Ferno.

In recent years interest in Jarves has been greatly advanced through the pioneering efforts of Theodore Sizer, Director of the Yale University Art Gallery, where the finest of all the Jarves collections is now on display. In 1933 Mr. Sizer published a biographical study, James Jackson Jarves: A Forgotten New Eng-lander. This was the first modern attempt at an accurate and complete account of the busy life of this remarkable man. Mr. Sizer writes: “The ‘Jarves Collection’ at Yale, the Holden Collection in the Cleveland Museum of Art (both of Italian pictures), a collection of Venetian glass at the Metropolitan Museum . . . and another of textiles at Wellesley College now form the chief monuments to this far-sighted and disappointed Bostonian.” To this imposing group we may now add the Vanderbilt collection of drawings, which was secured for this Museum through the efforts of Jarves and with the generous aid of Mr. Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr.

Everyone who has read Mr. Sizer’s biography of Jarves will agree that this man is certainly one of the most interesting to be encountered in the American art world of the last century.
His art collections, however, are not the only monuments to his patience, intelligence, and enthusiasm. There are also his interesting series of books on art published between 1855 and 1876. Though these are now quite outmoded they are the best art criticism by an American author of that time. One finds them filled with keen judgments on the artists of the time and pervaded with a tone that is sensible, sound, and sincere—not a general characteristic of the mass of adulatory prose written about art and artists in those days.

Jarves’s collections of paintings were assembled with a purpose—to illustrate the history of early Italian painting—and his books were written to explain this purpose and to educate the American public generally in matters of art. He attempted to explain the meaning and value of art as an educational and moral instrument. And he proposed, by bringing his collection of paintings to this country, to give to those American artists who were unable to afford a trip to Europe a source of inspiration and instruction. He entered on this essentially romantic project, with its didactic and moral New England overtones, with wholehearted enthusiasm.

But he failed to take into account the indifference and ignorance of the unprepared American public of 1860. He failed also to anticipate the destructive power of one James W. Stillman, a hack writer who harried Jarves for thirty years with published attacks on his collections, his motives, and his reputation. This one man, through innuendo and outrageous direct accusations, seems to have effectively killed the negotiations for the sale of Jarves’s pictures in New York, in Philadelphia, in Boston, and in Cambridge. Finally Jarves was brought to the brink of financial ruin and the paintings were sold at a private auction to Yale University for a moderate sum. Jarves returned to Italy undaunted, still determined to collect art objects with the hope of selling them to the newly formed American art museums.

His ordeal with Stillman, however, was far from ended. The cause of this rancorous animosity has long been forgotten—it is quite astonishing to discover that it was Stillman’s narrow belief that American artists owed nothing to the art of Europe and that they would not profit by any knowledge of the history and techniques of their craft. On this dubious and dull point he built his structure of calumny, and with the sweeping bravado of ignorance he damned Jarves’s early Italian paintings as frauds, daubs, and forgeries and called Jarves
a dishonest rogue. In 1883 and 1884, when Jarves was Italian Commissioner to the Foreign Art Exposition in Boston, the attacks were renewed with such ferocity that Jarves's friends proposed a public demonstration to refute Stillman.

When the Vanderbilt collection of drawings was first shown in the Museum Stillman wrote a long letter to the New York Times attacking Jarves, the drawings, and the Museum. Not content with this, he went on to question the authenticity of every object and painting in the Museum. All this would seem to be a rather ambitious indictment, coming as it did from a man whose knowledge of art was derived chiefly from a rather feeble amateur talent for landscape painting and from his experience as editor of a short-lived art magazine, The Crayon. His real talent seems to have been invective.

To return to the Introductory Note in the catalogue of the Vanderbilt collection; so far no information of any kind has been discovered about Signor Marietta. Dr. Guastalla is almost equally elusive, though two auctions in Florence of parts of his art collection are recorded for the years 1864 and 1867. In all probability the Professor Angelini mentioned is Tito Angelini (1806-1878), who was professor of sculpture at the Royal Academy in Naples and a director of the drawing school.

All accounts agree that the bulk of the Vanderbilt collection was formed over a long period of years by Count Alessandro Maggiori. An examination of the drawings themselves shows that most of them were at one time mounted in uniform style (probably on the pages of an album), each one framed in heavy ink lines. The drawings so mounted we suppose to be the original Maggiori collection.

Count Alessandro Maggiori was born in Fermo, a small city in the March of Ancona, in 1764. Though he was educated as a lawyer in the Collegio di Montalto in Bologna he soon decided that his real interests lay in the field of art. Shortly after winning his doctoral laurels he proceeded to Rome to study painting with an artist named Corvi. In the pursuit of his art studies he remained in Rome for a number of years.

This practical interest in art would seem to
throw a new light on his collection of drawings, as it may now be considered to represent the type of accumulation which formed part of the traditional studio equipment of all Italian artists—a mass of sketches preserved and handed down from master to pupil—a sort of workshop library of graphic ideas and notes, a hodge-podge of scraps with technical interest. In this respect the Vanderbilt drawings are perhaps unique among the drawing collections in American museums, for very few of this kind have been preserved. It is the accumulation of an eighteenth-century artist antiquary rather than the more selective collection assembled by a connoisseur. Many of the drawings are architectural studies and designs for decorative ornament. These undoubtedly reflect Maggiori’s interest in renaissance architecture—perhaps they were collected while he was writing his book on the life and works of the renaissance architect Sebastiano Serlio. One of the drawings was attributed by Maggiori to Serlio.

Since Maggiori was first an artist it is reasonable to suppose that his collection at least began in the traditional way as an aid to his study and practice of painting. One drawing in the collection, a sort of Bolognese sketch in red chalk of dancing children, is inscribed on the reverse: “Aless Maggiori comprò a Bologna nel giugno del 1792” (bought in Bologna in June 1792). At that date Maggiori was twenty-eight years old—it would be pleasing to conjecture that here is the first old drawing bought by the young artist and that it was inscribed by him in later years to mark the foundation of his collection.

Maggiori, like Jarves, was intensely interested in the progress of art in his own country and in his way tried to forward the cause. While he was studying art in Rome, he started to publish an art magazine titled *Capriccio* in an effort to raise the standards of art, at that time at a low ebb in Italy. Though this journal was well thought of by the general public and all educated men, its frank criticisms, according to Maggiori’s biographer, aroused “una turba di letteratuzzi e di artefici de poco conto,” a rabble of hack writers and artisans of little account, who accused him of having neither the taste nor the knowledge to advise them. Their accusations and recriminations forced him to suspend publication after the first volume, and finally, in search of peace from the annoying attentions of these people, he retired from Rome to the tranquility of his country house on the Adriatic coast near his birthplace.

Here he passed the rest of his life absorbed in his studies and traveling now and again to examine and take notes on the works of art in Italy. His first book was an annotated edition of the poems of Michelangelo published anonymously in Rome in 1817. His second book was his *Dialogo intorno alla vita e le opere di Sebastiano Serlio*. These activities suggested to him his greatest work—a series of guidebooks to the art treasures of Italy based on the notes taken on his travels. During this time he also wrote notes on agriculture for almanacs, designed to improve local farming methods, including an essay on the cultivation of Indian corn.

In the closing eulogy his biographer writes, “Maggiori kept up a correspondence with other learned men; and did not neglect to provide himself with books, drawings, and prints, of

*Kneeling saint with an angel and a putto. By a follower of Guercino, xvii century*
which he left his heirs a great treasure. If he withdrew from urban pursuits, it was not for lack of urbanity; one should rather praise his purpose, which was to further useful works.” In this he was not unlike James Jackson Jarves.

The Maggiori collection of drawings (now known as the Vanderbilt collection) suffered somewhat from the overenthusiastic publicity accorded it when it was placed on exhibition in the Museum in 1881. It was then widely advertised in the press both here and in England as a collection of drawings by the most famous old masters—everyone overlooked its true character. This attitude was encouraged by the published catalogue compiled by Jarves, which retained all the eighteenth-century attributions given to the drawings by Maggiori. In those days, before art scholarship aspired to be a science, it was the custom to attribute works of art indiscriminately to the leading artists of the schools to which they seemed to be related in style. Thus any sketch “in the style of” Michelangelo was called a Michelangelo sketch. The printed catalogue of the Vanderbilt drawings is therefore a curiosity—a monument of eighteenth-century Italian taste, with attributions based on tradition and hope rather than on the kind of comparative study that has only recently become possible with the aid of a complicated apparatus of photographs, illustrated books, and all the other paraphernalia of the modern art historian.

In 1906, during a reorganization of the Museum’s galleries, the Vanderbilt collection, after twenty-five years of continuous showing, was removed from exhibition and examined by Roger Fry, then Curator of Paintings, Bryson Burroughs, and Frank Jewett Mather. In this first modern critical examination of the entire lot of more than 650 drawings a few “genuine” forgeries, if they may be so called, were discovered (about half a dozen items fell into this interesting category), hardly justifying Mr. Stillman’s hysterical charges. During this examination most of the drawings were relieved of the weighty names given to them by Maggiori. This change in attribution from famous individuals to general schools, combined with
the earlier Stillman affair, rather cast a cloud over the collection, and it was retired to the storerooms. But it has not been entirely forgotten. It would gratify Mr. Jarves to know that the most frequent and appreciative users of the collection today are artists and art students who are interested in the drawings as such and not in the troubled questions of attribution. The collection is also occasionally examined by scholars. Only recently A. Hyatt Mayor discovered in it and published the drawings of baroque stage settings by members of the Bibiena family. Perhaps in the light of the foregoing history of the collection other drawings may be found of sufficient interest to warrant further study.

One subsidiary event remains to be considered in relation to the history of this collection presented by Mr. Vanderbilt to the Museum to mark his election as a Trustee. In 1881 Jarves was enabled, by the sale of the Maggiori collection, to carry out his conviction that "persons who are able to do so should form collections in special departments of art and place them where they will do the most good—in public museums." Putting his belief into action he presented to the Museum his important collection of Venetian glass. In his communication to the Museum announcing the gift Jarves said, "Another reason which induces me to give the glass is that my father, Deming Jarves . . ., was perhaps the first man to introduce into America the manufacture of flint glass on a large scale [he started the Sandwich glass factory]. . . . Besides adding to the collections of the Museum, it seems to me also a fitting tribute to his memory, and an act which would have been grateful to him were he living."

A biography of Alessandro Maggiori appears in Emilio Tipaldo's Biographia degli Italiani illustri nelle scienze, lettere, ed arti del secolo XVIII, e de' contemporanei, Venice, 1834, vol. iv, pp. 7 ff.

Studies of peasants. Flemish school, xvii century