



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

In July 1962, Benedict Nicolson, longtime (1947-1978) editor of the venerable *Burlington Magazine*, dedicated his monthly editorial essay to relating “how the great Kress Collection came into being, and how by stages it became the property of the American nation. It is,” Nicolson wrote, “the success story to end all success stories. One event follows another with such preposterous inevitability that, had it all been invented by a novelist, his novel would have been condemned out of hand as being quite untrue to life.” His thoughtful editorial deserves renewed attention today, as we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the distribution of the Kress Collection:

The story of how Kress as a young man purchased with his seven years' savings a small stationery store belongs to the world of fiction. We could have predicted in advance that his little store would prove so successful that he would be able to build up chain stores all over the South where they were as yet unknown. The story goes on to relate how Kress stores were opened in one city after another as the money rolled in; how on his travels in Europe in the 1920's Samuel Kress turned himself into a modest collector of paintings, growing more and more ambitious as his knowledge and enthusiasm increased; how, by the late 1930's his 5th Avenue apartment was bursting with works of art, and how he was on the point of purchasing property for the installation of a private museum, when he was persuaded to abandon his plans and to hand over the greater part of his collection to the National Gallery [of Art in Washington, DC] ...

Simultaneously with the project of improving the National Gallery's collection there evolved, as a natural corollary, the project of forming... regional gallery collections made possible both by the return to the Foundation of part of the collection originally in Washington, and by the Foundation's new acquisitions. No less than eighteen regional collections have thus been formed, as well as Study Collections consisting of over 200 paintings and some

sculpture given to universities and colleges... The Kress Collection now extends from Puerto Rico to Honolulu, from Miami to Seattle. Never in the history of art collecting has so much been owed by so many to so few.

Whether the inhabitants of these distant towns yet appreciate what has been done for them is quite another matter. One would like to know what the drug-store assistants of El Paso (Texas), Birmingham (Alabama), Columbia (South Carolina), or Hawaii (Honolulu) make of their Bellotto, their Paris Bordone, their Magnasco, or their Salviati portrait... So typical of America is the confidence with which extravagant schemes of this kind are launched, on a scale, never before contemplated, with no very clear object in view, but in the unshakeable belief that in time the scheme will bring in its rewards. We can be sure that these altar-pieces from Italian churches, these allegorical panels from French *châteaux*, which now stray across the American continent like bewildered refugees, will one day work their way, like every other foreign body in this astonishing country, into the very fabric of American life.*

As I append this coda to the Kress Foundation's 2011 fiscal year, I am pleased to be able to report that Nicolson's forecast has proved to be accurate. The hundreds of old master paintings in the Kress Collection – as well as its thousands of coins, medals, sculptures and other works of art – have indeed “worked their way in to the very fabric of American life.” As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the project Life Magazine hailed as “The Great Kress Give-Away,” which culminated in 1961, we celebrate a singular – and singularly sustained – gesture of cultural philanthropy.

The Kress Foundation is surely unusual among private foundations in having its origins in an art collection and, still more, in retaining its ties

*Editorial: “The Samuel H. Kress Collection,” *Burlington Magazine CIV* (July 1962): 279-280.

and strong commitment to the stewardship of that collection. These ties and that commitment inform our grant-making to this day. While we seek to support the broad community of art museums, both in the United States and abroad, the dozens of regional and campus museums that collectively steward the Kress Collection remain, as it were, *primi inter pares* – first among equals – as we seek to advance their efforts to sustain the mission that shaped the “Great Kress Give-Away” half a century ago. Our support takes many shapes, including direct support for their programs and professional staff. On occasion, however, it also takes the shape of systematic support for the distributed Kress Collection as a whole.

Such systematic support is most visible in the Kress Program of Paintings Conservation at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center. With the ongoing support of the Foundation, this program provides a wide range of conservation services to the dozens of regional and campus museums which collectively steward the Kress Collection, not all of which are in a strong position to secure such specialized services locally. The program also provides a unique training opportunity for graduate art conservation students wishing to learn about the study and conservation of Old Master paintings. The close proximity and active interest of art historians and art conservators, both at the Institute of Fine Arts itself and at art museums and universities throughout the city, often results in collaborative examinations and the discovery of new information about attribution, workshop practice, painting technique, original display, and later alterations. Finally, the program provides an occasion for local scholars to see many art works from other regions of the country which they might not otherwise visit with any regularity. We hope to find further opportunities to expose these visitors from all around the nation to the local art historical community.

More recently, the Foundation has funded two important projects at the National Gallery of Art, intended to shed new light on the history – and

prehistory – of the Kress Collection. One project, under the leadership of the General Archives at the National Gallery of Art, is building an online archive about the history of the Kress Collection. This pioneering archive will assemble in one place the rich archival record of the entire Kress Collection, ranging from the initial acquisition of the individual works of art by Samuel H. Kress and the Kress Foundation, through the distribution of these works to dozens of museums around the country and the technical analysis and conservation treatments performed on these works of art, to the most current scholarship on these objects. The second project, under the leadership of the Department of Curatorial Records at the National Gallery of Art, focuses on the significant prehistory of the Kress Collection. National Gallery staff are undertaking systematic research into the early provenance of the entire Kress Collection, with a special focus on acquisitions made during the WWII era. This project is meant not only to richly document the provenance of the Kress Collection, but to leverage the power of performing such research systematically. In this regard it is an experiment in an especially promising approach to provenance research, and should help inform the art museum community on the most effective and efficient ways of performing this essential type of research. Finally, by spearheading this project, the National Gallery of Art is performing a service on behalf of dozens of art museums nationwide, advancing their shared goal of adhering to the professional standards advocated by the art museum community while alleviating at least some of the considerable burden posed by such research programs. We look forward to seeing and sharing the results of both these important projects, and are profoundly appreciative of the National Gallery of Art's readiness to serve the larger art museum community in these ways.

Finally, the Foundation has recently taken a fresh look at the two dozen Kress "study collections" at campus art museums around the country. We have sponsored a qualitative study of "the campus art museum," prompted in part by recent developments which have underscored the vulnerability of campus museums in challenging economic times.

Our sponsored study, intended to enhance our understanding of the manifold contributions campus art museums can make to their host institutions and host cities, was undertaken by Corrine Glesne, a professor emerita at the University of Vermont and author of the standard textbook on qualitative research. For purposes of this qualitative study, we invited campus museums with Kress collections to self-identify as in some meaningful way exemplary, and ultimately selected a small subset of responding museums for closer study. These museums included: the Allen Memorial Art Museum (Oberlin College), the Snite Museum of Art (Notre Dame University), the Indiana University Art Museum, the David and Alfred Smart Museum (University of Chicago), the Museum of Art and Archaeology (University of Missouri), the University of Arizona Museum of Art, and the Spencer Museum of Art (University of Kansas). Professor Glesne visited each of these schools, interviewing 130 individuals, ranging from museum directors and staff to faculty, senior administrators, students and alumni/ae, supporters and community members. The rich results of this study are currently being analyzed and summarized for publication in forthcoming books and periodicals and at professional conferences. The entire report will be made available on the Kress Foundation's website in the near future. Our hope is that this sponsored study will remind us all of the importance of our campus museums to teaching and learning, research and scholarship, and, finally, to the life of our great colleges and universities.



Max Marmor
President

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Doge Andrea Gritti, 1546/1548,
Titian, (Italian, 1488-1576);
Samuel H. Kress Collection,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC