

# The Great KRESS GIVEAWAY

Dime store founder disperses \$75 million art collection to U.S. museums



COLLECTOR WAS SAMUEL H. KRESS

For half a century the name of S. H. Kress has been a familiar, brassy sight on the facades of five and ten cent stores. Today, in chaster letters, it is becoming a familiarity on other walls—in the galleries of the nation's art museums. This has come about through one of the greatest art giveaways in modern history. For more than a decade the Kress Foundation has been dispensing to museums works selected from the vast collection of European art which Samuel Kress, founder of the dime store chain, spent years and millions of dollars acquiring (p. 159). To date, 35 museums have benefited from Kress donations and still others are earmarked for future contributions.

This wholesale dispersal of art got off to a huge start in 1939 when Kress gave the National Gallery, soon to open in Washington, 375 paintings and 18 sculptures by Italian masters. Later he contributed some 100 additional works. In 1945, at 82, Samuel Kress suffered a stroke and his brother Rush was put in charge of the collection. Faced with the staggering accumulation of art, Rush decided to extend his brother's bounty to other art institutions around the country. Big museums and small alike were singled out for donations; the only requirement was that they be in states where there were Kress stores. Today the Kress Foundation is busily documenting, restoring and framing the 600 paintings that remain. By 1960 it hopes to have distributed the entire \$75 million collection.



THE DISTRIBUTOR IS RUSH H. KRESS

HEMMED IN BY RENAISSANCE ART, TECHNICIAN AT THE KRESS LABORATORY PREPARES TO X-RAY A SMALL VENETIAN PANEL TO DETERMINE ITS CONDITION







BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM OF ART  
**The Allegory of Vigilance**  
BY TINTORETTO

When Birmingham opened its first art museum in 1951, it had little more to exhibit than some iron art objects lent by a pipe company. A year later the museum got an enormous boost from Kress who presented it with 30

paintings, mostly by Italians of the 13th to 18th centuries. Highlight of the donation is an allegorical work (*above*) by the Venetian Tintoretto, who in 1580 portrayed Vigilance greeting the dawn in the company of a watchful cock.





PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

### The Meeting of Dido and Aeneas

BY FRANCESCO DI GIORGIO

Though famed for its collection of Northwest art, the Portland Museum had little to show of early European work until 1952 when Kress donated 27 Renaissance paintings. Among Flemish, Dutch, German and Italian works was a panel

from a marriage chest by the 15th Century Sienese, Francesco di Giorgio. It shows Aeneas leaving his ship (right) and making his fateful encounter with the Queen of Carthage, who later killed herself for love of the wandering Trojan.







NELSON GALLERY OF ART  
**Journey of the Queen of Sheba**  
 BY THE VIRGIL MASTER

Because Kansas City's Nelson Gallery already had a good sampling of late Italian art, Kress rounded out the collection in 1950 with early Italian works—22 paintings and six sculptures. Like Portland, Kansas City received a marriage

chest panel (*below*), depicting the cortege of the Queen of Sheba going to meet King Solomon. It is by an unknown Florentine whom art historians call the Virgil Master because he produced numerous illustrations for Virgil's *Aeneid*.







UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
**Church of Santa Maria della Salute**  
BY FRANCESCO GUARDI

Eight years ago the University of Arizona's art gallery became a full-fledged museum when it received the Pfeiffer donation of contemporary American paintings (*LIFE*, Feb. 18, 1946). Two years ago, to serve the educational needs

of the university as well as a wide area of the Southwest, the Kress Foundation donated 25 paintings spanning five centuries and representing artists of five nationalities, including Del Sarto, Ribera and Cranach. Prize among





the 18 Italian works is a glistening view of Venice (*above*) by the 18th Century Venetian, Francesco Guardi, who painted gondolas and sailboats skirting the customs house and the baroque church of Santa Maria della Salute.



HOUSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

### Moses Spurns the Crown of Pharaoh

BY GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO

The largest of current Kress donations was unveiled this fall at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Houston's group of 37 paintings consists of works by three Spanish masters, including a Goya, and 32 Italians, including this rich

scene by the 18th Century Venetian painter, Tiepolo. It portrays a Hebrew legend in which the infant Moses, tempted by Pharaoh, pushes aside the king's crown with his foot to indicate his contempt for earthly power and riches.

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HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS

**Madonna and Child with Saints**

BY LUCA SIGNORELLI

Most remote museum to benefit from a Kress gift is the Honolulu Academy. Once given over chiefly to Asiatic art, it now houses 33 Italian paintings from Kress, including a monumental work (*above*) by Signorelli, who in 1510 painted the Madonna with St. Michael, St. Augustine, two Evangelists (*foreground*) and reverent angels.

SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

**Portrait of Charles of Amboise**

BY BERNARDINO DE'CONTI

This portrait, once owned by King Henry VIII of England, now hangs in the Seattle Art Museum, one of 23 Italian paintings and two sculptures given by Kress in 1952. Painted by a Milanese artist named de' Conti, it depicts Charles of Amboise, governor of Milan around 1500, a great patron of the arts and close friend of Leonardo da Vinci. →









ON OPENING DAY, MEMPHIS CROWDS CLUSTERED AROUND WINDOWS TO SEE NICKEL PANS

## FIRST HE COLLECTED DIMES

Like most of the fabulous art collectors of his time, Samuel Kress grew up in a world devoid of art, dedicated to hard cash and shrewd business. His German ancestors migrated to America before the Revolution and became solid and saving citizens of Northampton County, Pa. When Samuel was born in 1863 his father was making a comfortable living running a drugstore and two coal-mine commissaries. Young Sam started in early to pick up extra money, peddling papers and working in local stone quarries. At 17 he got a job teaching school. Though his salary was only \$25 a month, he managed to save enough in seven years to buy a novelty store in Nanticoke, Pa. and retire from teaching. As his business grew, Sam

looked around for a way to expand, was impressed by the "Five and Ten" stores which F. W. Woolworth had recently established in Pennsylvania. Kress decided to try out the system in the South and in 1896 launched his first "Five and Ten" in Memphis (above). From the beginning the store was mobbed and within nine months had taken in more than \$31,000. Ten years later 51 S. H. Kress Co. stores were in operation and doing a trade of well over \$3 million. Though he had headquarters in New York, Kress kept on the go from store to store and during the first decade spent all but 20 nights a year in Pullman sleepers. Today his great "Five and Ten" network numbers 261 stores and extends all the way to Hawaii.

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COLLECTION OF KRESSES was photographed in Cherryville, Pa. around 1895. In back row, from left, are: Samuel, Brother Rush, Brother Claude, Brother-in-law John Williams, Brother Palmer. In front row, from left,

are: Palmer's wife Helen, Mother Margaret Connor Kress, Nephew Earl Williams, Father John Franklin Kress, Sister Mary Williams. Claude, who died in 1940, became president of S. H. Kress, Rush is vice-chairman of board,





ITALIANATE PARLOR OF KRESS'S APARTMENT WAS LINED WITH MASTERPIECES WHICH ARE NOW IN U.S. MUSEUMS

## HE BOUGHT ART BY THE LOT

In his late 50s, Samuel Kress paid his first visit to an art gallery and was shown a painting tagged at \$300. Studying the picture in silence for a few minutes, he turned to the dealer and asked, "Are they paying *that* kind of money for these things?" Less than 20 years later Kress himself was to pay almost a million dollars for a single painting—*The Adoration of the Magi* by Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi, now in the National Gallery. By the time he had finished collecting he had shelled out more money for art than any other man in U.S. history.

The person who got Kress started on a collector's career was Mrs. de Lora Kilvert, the cultured and beautiful ex-wife of an American illustrator. About 1920 Mrs. Kilvert, determined "to get Sam interested in beautiful things," began to lead him on a round of art galleries. In 1921, on a trip to Italy, they made the acquaintance of Alessandro Contini, an art dealer of great persuasiveness and numerous resources. Contini immediately commandeered Kress, launched him on a full-scale purchase program of Italian art. By 1929, when Kress moved from a modest, businesslike apartment in midtown Manhattan to a palatial duplex on upper Fifth Avenue, his art crowded his walls and stairways and even adorned his ceilings. True to his mass-merchandise training, Kress generally bought art in big lots, and because of this passion for wholesale buying ended up with a sizable number of second- and third-rate paintings. But he also obtained many prizes in the shiploads of art which Contini brought over from Italy almost every spring. A special curator was installed in Kress's apartment to compile books on the collection and to be always on hand to help Kress out of a sticky moment when he might be asked about one of his art works. Kress always ducked such questions by parrying with a hasty call to the curator: "Get out the books."

Although Sam Kress never seemed to arrive at a wholehearted love of a work of art for its own sake—he once admitted a fondness for a particular picture because it reminded him of a lady he admired—he became a shrewd appraiser of the commodity. For months and sometimes years he pored over photographs of paintings and sculpture he was considering buying. He disliked going to museums and art galleries but he would tramp time and again through the long corridors of the Metropolitan to compare its possessions with his prospective purchases. When face to face with a dealer, he hassled and haggled: "How much for the paintings without the sculpture? How much with it? Isn't there a reduction when you buy by lot?"

This hard-bargain approach to buying art came from his business training and frugal upbringing. He was as careful of small sums as of large and always kept a watchful eye on change doled out in taxi fares and tips. A sturdy, silent man with steel-blue eyes and a sphinx-like smile, Kress never married, made few friends and was always on his guard lest someone take advantage of him and his fortune. Yet, when he saw the ruinous state of some famous landmarks of Italy, he donated thousands of dollars for their repair. More and more his preoccupation with art crowded his thoughts and soon even invaded the realm of his business. On a memorable day in December 1938, New Yorkers hustling by the Kress five and dime store on Fifth Avenue were halted by an unexpected sight. In the store window, not far from a gleaming array of saucepans and glassware, was Giorgione's celebrated painting, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. Kress had recently bought it from the art dealer, Joseph Duveen, and had installed it in the window, where it served both as a proud symbol of his cultural empire and as a means of attracting Christmas shoppers.



IN FIRST LOT of art bought by Kress was this Italian Madonna.





STOREROOM in Pennsylvania houses some 400 paintings which hang on sliding panels. In background is painting of Mocenigo family by Tintoretto.

## RESTORING CREW

From his earliest days in business Kress was preoccupied with the proper display of his wares. Photographs of model counters and window exhibits were sent to Kress stores around the U.S. and managers were advised to imitate them. Kress showed this same preoccupation when he began to collect art. He spent hours with his art advisers discussing frames and choosing pieces of velvet for shadowboxes. When he decided to give his art to the National Gallery, he had models of the gallery rooms built and for weeks hovered over the miniature museum, plotting the hanging of his pictures by tacking tiny photographs of the collection on the walls, first in one arrangement, then another.

To restore his art to its former brilliance, Kress imported a whole crew of craftsmen from Italy. Amid loaves of bread, bottles of wine and an aroma of roasting coffee, the restorers set up a "Little Italy" in a Manhattan studio and fell to work on the collection. In 1951 the crew was transported to a secluded spot in Pennsylvania where a combined storehouse and laboratory had been built for the Kress Foundation. There the remainder of the collection is stored in heat- and humidity-controlled rooms. Each picture is X-rayed; restorers clean and repair any damaged surfaces; frame makers equip every painting with an antique frame or create new frames out of ancient carved moldings. Periodically museum directors visit the storehouse to see works which the foundation will give them. Although most of the jewels are in the National Gallery, the remaining paintings are sound and often outstanding examples of important artists and schools.

Far from the busy activities of the foundation, Samuel Kress, now partly blind, is confined to his bed in New York. From time to time visitors drop in, and the old man lies silent but pleased as they tell him how well his pictures look in Washington, in Portland, in Tucson.



RESTORERS work in a row by window of studio. They live in roomy quarters above studio during week, commute to homes in New York on weekends.