



## THE AMERICAN ART AMALGAM: European Traditions and the Frontier Spirit

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Deemed the little sister to European artwork and the “unwanted stepchild of art history” [Corn: 188], American art has long suffered as an inferior Other in the traditional eyes of the art world elite. American artwork produced prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has been attacked for its lack of sophistication and distinct historical style, even though the country’s past was largely derived from an array of Old World influences and national traits. Apart from this heritage, the insatiable American frontier spirit fostered an investment in democratic ideals and freedom. Because the United States maintains a social and industrial environment in which individuals can rise from rags to riches, American art and its collectors are unlike any other.

In twenty-five years of collecting American art, Daniel J. Terra (1911-1996) amassed more than seven hundred pieces of artwork including sculpture, paintings, drawings, prints, and pastels, and created two American art museums in his name, the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago, Illinois, and the Musée d’Art Américain in Giverny, France. Among the noted artists represented in Terra’s collections are Edward Hopper, James McNeill Whistler, Mary Cassatt, Winslow Homer, and William Merritt Chase. An inventor, business owner, and collector, Terra is representative of America’s self-made, bootstraps, frontier-championing legacy. A first generation American who created a fast-drying ink which revolutionized the printing industry and led to the production of major magazines such as *Life*, the first photo-news magazine that dedicated equal amounts of printed space to images and words, Terra earned prestige and wealth from succeeding in the world of industry. Due largely in part to his unpredictable acquisition choices, competitiveness, and establishment of museums dedicated to his ever-growing collection, Terra and his collecting habits are often viewed with skepticism by members of the art world elite and the public. I argue that American art collectors, like Daniel Terra, embody a distinct amalgam of characteristics, European traditions that the nation and its artwork cannot escape, and the frontier mentality embedded in America’s history.

With regard to character, collecting, and the American businessman, Flaminia Gennari Santori remarks that acquiring artwork is “a representation of national character—bold, aggressive, business-oriented and yet naïve, enthusiastic, and even romantic—[which] reinforced the profile of the American businessman as contemporary hero” [Santori: 95]. Terra’s entrepreneurial collecting pattern and unbridled enthusiasm illustrate Santori’s definition of national character and also exemplify Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential 1893 frontier thesis.

According to Turner, the frontier was a defining factor in the formation of America and in the construction of the country’s national character. A unique geography, acute individualism, and a patriotic self-image were the outcome of a society constantly in search of the new, uncharted, and the seemingly impossible. Turner explains that the geographic frontier produced a set of common intellectual traits amongst colonizers, noting:

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of the mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier [Turner: 37].

Turner’s theory changed the course of American historical studies by declaring that the frontier Americanized the New World, and molded the nation of immigrants into a “composite nationality” [22] governed by democracy. The frontier thesis has staunch critics and supporters, as well as those who fall somewhere in between.<sup>1</sup> Turner’s theory has been challenged for its inclusion of conflicting character traits, such as idealism and materialism and individualism and cooperation; yet, as Jackson Putnam declares, “since when are ambivalence and contradictoriness unheard-of facets of national character?” [Putnam: 396].<sup>2</sup> Just as Putnam accepts Turner’s inclusion of clashing traits within the frontier thesis as representative of common characteristics in America’s national identity, Richard Slotkin argues that “[t]he most potent recurring hero-figures in our mythologies are men in whom contradictory identities find expression” [*In Hine & Faragher*: 475]. To fully understand the implications of Turner’s frontier theory, the mythologies and hero-figures Slotkin alludes to must be addressed. Slotkin utilizes the phrase “myth of the frontier” to account for the legends which provide meaning and encourage reevaluations of past events [474-5]. Yet these myths of the frontier are riddled with heroes who personify conflicting character traits. Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of recent scholarship in American history, including the frontier theory and “westerling” see Bender. For scholarship supporting Turner’s frontier thesis see Potter, a study of the effect of economic abundance on national character and the frontier, and Cronon. For a discussion of the contradictory nature of the frontier thesis see Mikesell and Billington.

<sup>2</sup> Putnam explains that “neither historian nor citizen can ever truly understand the history of the American West without first coming to grips with the subject’s symbolic and aesthetic meanings as revealed by creative artists” [398].

explain America's fascination and acceptance of these contradictory frontier fables in terms of the "good-badman" paradox. They contend:

The progressive narrative of the western is consistently subverted by the presence of pathfinders who are also critics of civilization, outlaws who are Robin Hoods... Americans are drawn to characters of paradoxical impulse, to "good-badmen"... It is an example of what the critic Stuart Hall calls the "double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance" [475].

Although America's history is filled with tales of Robin Hoods, the art world has struggled to support American collectors who epitomize the heroic "good-badman" persona. In the case of Daniel Terra, his attempts to establish himself as an American art collector met with resistance when he created museums in the same manner as he founded business corporations. Apart from frontier myths and contradictory character traits, Turner's analysis of Americanization, expansion, and national character continue to be defining features of a country blessed and cursed by its continuous attempts to redefine itself.

Despite Turner's assertion that the frontier mind was "lacking in the artistic," I propose that his frontier theory can be applied to boldly aggressive and unconventional collectors like Daniel Terra. I suggest that the frontier embraced by the American art amalgam is not comprised of state lines, borders, landmarks, or geography; rather, it is a mindset embodied by American artists and collectors. The frontier mentality was and continues to be competitive, individualistic, patriotic, forthright, domineering, and often unpredictable. According to Ray Allen Billington, the frontier did not create democracy or individualism; instead, "each concept was deepened and sharpened by frontier conditions" [Billington: 5]. The competitiveness and patriotism that were fostered by westward expansion are evident in the attitudes of many audacious American art collectors.

The second half of the American art amalgam is dependent upon Europe. The notion that America was developing its own environment and a national character while continuously detaching itself from European traditions is a Turnerian point of view that can be hard to sell and to accept.<sup>3</sup> America cannot deny nor entirely remove itself from its European roots. This land of immigrants will never be able to deny the fact that Europe influenced and continues to inspire the American art world through its once dominant academy system, renowned art collectors such as the Medici, and large-scale museums.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Turner: 23 and Billington: 5, as he discusses frontier character traits and the differences between the pioneers of the west and the citizens of Europe. Noteworthy is Billington's statement that, "It is obviously untrue that the frontier experience alone accounts for the unique features of American civilization; that civilization can be understood only as the product of the interplay of the Old World heritage and New World conditions. But among those conditions none has bulked larger than the operation of the frontier process" [7]. See Mikesell: 62, for a summary and discussion of Turner's frontier theory, including the concepts of Americanization, national character, and America's turn away from European influence.

<sup>4</sup> Grand European tours by art collectors in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were common. See Scharlach and Greenfeld for two examples of wealthy American collectors travelling abroad to buy artwork.

In the Medici, a Florentine banking family prominent in the Italian Renaissance, American patrons found an inspiration for the individualistic, business-oriented collecting practices and prestige they personally championed. Nancy Einreinhofer explains that American art collectors often looked to European capitalists as models for their collecting choices, noting that “the social motivation for collecting, conspicuous accumulation, served to spark the imaginations of America’s industrial giants [of the 19<sup>th</sup> century] who considered themselves the royalty of a new empire” [Einreinhofer: 2]. Besides the publicity garnered by purchasing works of art, elevated social status could be acquired through art collecting. Although a few art collectors were born into wealth and privilege, America prides itself on the ideal of the self-made individual, a notion that allows anyone who is capable to become a patron and to climb the ranks from rags to riches. “America’s art collecting proclaimed a new society based on the success of industry, commerce, democracy, and capitalism, a society in which the new Medici could flaunt that success by the accumulation of art” [16].<sup>5</sup> Einreinhofer’s correlation of the Medici with 19<sup>th</sup>-century American industrialists such as Henry Clay Frick and William Wilson Corcoran demonstrates the influential role that European art collectors played in the formation of American art collectors’ frontier mentality. Moreover, the tendency of businessmen to rely heavily on capitalists of the past for inspiration is evident not only among 19<sup>th</sup>-century American collectors, but also in the histories of 20<sup>th</sup>-century collectors as well.

A source of inspiration to American art collectors through its legacy of patronage, Europe proved to be a model in ancillary ways. First, the academy and apprentice system that flourished in France took hold in America, although its grip and influence were not nearly as strong [Hirshler: 43-51]. The American Academy of Fine Arts was founded in New York in 1802, followed shortly thereafter by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1805, yet these groups did “relatively little to promote artists beyond the limited confines of their membership” [Kelly: 195]. As the years progressed, the role of academies in America shifted to reflect the changing interests of artists and the increased dominance of wealthy self-made art patrons, who created the National Academy of Design in 1826 and the American Art-Union (formerly known as the Apollo Association) in 1839. Secondly, European museums were precursors and models for many of the museums founded by American patrons. The princely, aristocratic collections that were often the basis of national museums in many of Europe’s largest cities found their counterparts in American donor museums which housed private collections. These collectors’ efforts to create institutions to display their artwork and reflect their social standing are indebted to European influences. Since the nation’s highest social class was not based on birthrights, the private collections of wealthy industrialists took the place of princely galleries. The acquisitions of these collectors and the museums they created remain largely beholden to Old World influences.

Art collectors, who displayed a distinct mixture of European and frontier characteristics, met with resistance when attempting to establish art

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<sup>5</sup> See Kelly: 194, for details of the New World’s interest in property ownership, including artwork as well as a discussion of shifting social classes.

museums and have them accepted by the art world. Even though museum founders such as Terra were interested in exhibiting their collections as a reflection of their patriotism, the press and art world often focus on a collector's ego as the guiding force behind the creation of museums. Carol Duncan argues that public institutions such as princely galleries-turned-national institutions and donor museums are signifiers of pride and patriotism. She explains:

Such public institutions [public art museums] made (and still make) the state look good: progressive, concerned about the spiritual life of its citizens, a preserver of past achievements and a provider for the common good. The same virtues accrue to the individual citizens who, in the Anglo-American tradition, bring about public art museums. Certainly vanity and the desire for social status and prestige among nations and cities as well as among individuals are motives for founding or contributing to art museums, as they were in the creation of princely galleries. But such motives easily blend with sentiments of civic concern or national pride [Carol Duncan: 93].

Although Daniel Terra's desire to display his artwork and his unpredictable acquisition choices are certainly tied to his desire for prestige and power, his innate patriotism should not be forgotten.

Jean Baudrillard explains in "The System of Collecting" that collections merely reflect the identity of the collector and the collector's desires. He argues:

[P]leasure springs from the fact that possession relies, on the one hand, upon the absolute singularity of each item—which means that it is equivalent to the human being, and eventually the subject himself—and, on the other, upon the possibility of envisaging a set or series of like items, in which is implied a prospect of limitless substitution and play [Baudrillard: 10].

In the manner of Baudrillard's collecting system, the artwork Terra amassed was imbued with, and ultimately reflected, his need for a high-profile identity in the art world and his declared "innate patriotism" [Kennedy: 26]. Although Terra was aware of the European art market, having collected 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century English and French works prior to buying pieces by American artists, his frontier mentality dominated his choices. After buying his first American works in 1971, two John Singer Sargent preparatory studies for *The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale*, Terra declared that American art was his passion [Nelson & Chandler: 61; Kennedy: 19] and subsequently sold off his European acquisitions.

Terra's frontier mindset, which includes traits such as competitiveness and dominant individualism, is evident in his auction records and forthright declarations of his spending habits. David Sokol, a former curator at Terra's first art museum noted, "Terra loved talking about why he was attracted to [a particular piece of artwork]. He thrilled to both the increase in individual valuations of a painting as well as winning a desired work of art with the highest bid at auction, which served to validate his aesthetic choices and his business acumen" [Kennedy: 20]. Competitiveness was a clear factor in Terra's efforts to accumulate a large number of artworks and he often paid extraordinarily high prices for paintings by American artists. For instance,

on December 12, 1978 Terra bought George Caleb Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, 1877-1878, and Theodore Robinson's *The Wedding March*, 1892, for record-setting prices. Bingham's oil on canvas was originally purchased at auction in 1978 by Hirschl & Adler, Inc., a New York City gallery, which subsequently sold the painting to Terra for over \$980,000 [18]. The near million-dollar price tag was triple the highest price ever paid for a work of art by an American artist [18]. Furthermore, his desires to be considered the foremost collector of American art and a savvy businessman were projected onto his growing collection.

As the years progressed, Terra continued to buy artwork, compete at auctions, and attempt through his ever-growing collection to gain acceptance into America's art world elite. The year 1980 marked a milestone for him. It was in this year that he opened his own museum in Evanston, Illinois, a residential suburb of Chicago. The museum featured Terra's private collection, and in an attempt to attract attention to his Evanston site, he bought a large group of valuable paintings at very high prices in the early 1980s. This new group of works included sixty Prendergast monotypes and Samuel F.B. Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1831-1833 [Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, Art Institute of Chicago], which was purchased for 3.5 million dollars in 1982, the most money anyone had paid for a single painting by an American artist [Davenport: 28]. Commenting on this expenditure, Wanda Corn notes that "there is an appetite and a pocketbook for the collecting of American art today that is unprecedented. Million-dollar price tags for nineteenth-century masterworks by such artists as Samuel F.B. Morse and Frederic Church have set records that have taken everyone by surprise" [Corn: 188-9].<sup>6</sup> Terra's unpredictable collecting choices and frontier mentality caught the art world off-guard and often evoked criticism from the press and public.

Daniel Terra's desire to own Morse's work, and the record-setting price he paid for the painting are evidence of prominent frontier traits which express both Terra's and Morse's embodiment of the American art amalgam. On one hand, Samuel F.B. Morse was an American scientist, inventor, and artist who painted the Louvre's gallery to "open the eyes of Americans to the great works of European masters" [Beck: 110-111]. On the other hand, Morse promoted American painters as a founding member of the National Academy of Design and as a struggling artist himself. European traditions and American independence collide in *Gallery of the Louvre*. Works by Old Masters hang on the walls of the gallery, including Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Paolo Veronese's *Marriage at Cana*, and Rembrandt's *Angel Leaving the Family of Tobias*. Although Morse took care to replicate artwork by European masters of the past, he interpreted and rearranged the gallery scene. The proportions of the represented works, as well as their locations within the painted exhibition space, were entirely of Morse's own choosing, as were the inclusion of himself-as-teacher, and the placement of the American novelist James Fenimore Cooper within the foreground of the

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<sup>6</sup> In footnote 6 Corn explains, "I am thinking of the Sotheby's sale in 1979 of Church's *The Icebergs* for \$2.5 million, and of the private sale of Morse's *Exhibition Gallery of the Louvre*, owned by Syracuse University, to Daniel Terra in 1982 for \$3.5 million."

scene.<sup>7</sup> Painting for an American audience, Morse portrayed the Louvre as a space dominated by Americans who were in turn influenced by European masterworks of the past. Yet, Morse was not bound to repeating or reproducing specific paintings, rather he was inspired by Europe, returned to America, and created his own images. By choosing his own proportions, individual figures, and spacing of artworks, Morse engaged in a display of frontier spirit, while personifying the American art amalgam.

With the addition of large-scale works to his collection, including *Gallery of the Louvre*, Terra's collection quickly outgrew the Evanston museum's gallery spaces. Just seven years after founding his first suburban museum, he launched the Terra Museum of American Art on Chicago's Michigan Avenue, otherwise known as the Miracle Mile, with banners proclaiming "The Americans Are Coming! The Americans Are Coming!" [Mannheimer: 20]. At the museum's opening in April of 1987, Terra disclosed his motivations when he pronounced; "I think this is a wise investment. This is a milestone for American art. A vertical museum built on the most valuable land in the city bringing art to where the people are—that's a new concept" [Kennedy: 24]. Terra made no effort to separate his business-oriented frontier mentality from his cultural endeavor. Although the museum was dubbed the "star-spangled temple of art" and was lauded by President Ronald Reagan, under whom Terra had been appointed Ambassador-at-large for Cultural Affairs in 1981 for "doing more for American art than any other man in the history of the country," he was ill prepared to handle the difficulties of a metropolitan museum [26]. Because Terra had devoted his time and energy to making money to acquire prestige-garnering artwork and securing his place in high society, his museum knowledge was limited. Even though he sought acceptance by the art world elite, Terra did not defer to the museum professionals he hired.

Unlike the Evanston museum, which was considered charming and dedicated to displaying Terra's love of American artwork, the Chicago site was branded a vanity museum, was generally panned by critics, and ignored by the public.<sup>8</sup> Terra's attempt to create a traditional, rationally-arranged museum in America's heartland failed to produce supporters, entice favorable reviews, or impress the art world.<sup>9</sup> Without the support of the community surrounding the museum, Terra's plans for success never materialized. Constant firing and hiring of museum staff created negative press in and around Chicago and pinpointed Terra's inability to delegate responsibilities as a major factor in the museum's decline. By controlling every aspect of the Chicago museum's daily operations and simultaneously overseeing the development of the Musée d'Art Américain Giverny, Terra spread himself thin and weakened his effectiveness as a museum founder.

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<sup>7</sup> *An American Point of View: The Daniel J. Terra Collection*, 50. See Tatham for a close examination of Morse's painting.

<sup>8</sup> For critical reactions and public views see Bernstein; Artner & Storch; Workman; Lauerman; Schulze.

<sup>9</sup> The Chicago museum's failure did not stop Terra's ambitions or collecting habits. From 1980 to the end of the decade, Terra increased his collection from fifty paintings to just over seven hundred. In the 1990s he made additional acquisitions, including Edmund C. Tarbell's *In the Orchard*, which Terra purchased for more than five million dollars.

Daniel Terra, however, did not abandon the frontier half of the American art amalgam or his role as art collector-hero when designing his museum at Giverny. Unlike the vertically oriented, commercial location of Terra's Chicago museum, the Giverny institution is designed to blend into the surrounding landscape and is enveloped by gardens. Although the museum is located in Europe, its purpose is to display works by American artists from Terra's personal collection. The competitive, individualistic, domineering nature of Terra's frontier mentality served him well in France. Not only was Terra able to connect his museum to Claude Monet's legacy, he was also willing to attach himself and his collection to European stylistic traditions, exhibiting works by American artists who painted in the French Impressionist manner.

Although the Musée d'Art Américain Giverny opened in 1992 to a rocky reception from the French public, by the mid-1990s museum attendance stabilized and Terra began purchasing the houses and land that surround the site [Bourguignon: 35].<sup>10</sup> His intent was to create an English learning center in the French countryside, and to align himself with the painting colony that once existed in Giverny [30, 31, 37]. Among the town's most famous American residents during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were Lilla Cabot Perry, who spent her summers painting in the French countryside, and Frederick Carl Frieseke, who resided in the area from 1906 until roughly 1920. Frieseke's *Lilies*, *Lady in a Garden*, and *Tea Time in a Giverny Garden*, in Terra's collection, represent the Impressionists' emphasis on light and the integration of female figures into landscape scenes. Additionally, Perry's *Autumn Afternoon, Giverny* is dependent upon "the viewer's eye to reconstitute pure hues" through her juxtaposition of colors and representation of fading sunlight in the manner of Claude Monet [*An American Point of View: The Daniel J. Terra Collection*, 116]. In total, Terra's collection includes seven paintings by Frieseke and seven by Perry, who with her family occupied the Giverny home that was subsequently bought by the collector. Moreover, the house was "next door to Monet's property...[and] symbolizes the friendship linking the two families and, in a broader sense, the cultural ties between France and the United States, since other Americans occupied it at various times" [116].<sup>11</sup> Because Terra was willing to integrate the Giverny museum into the surrounding landscape, link his collection and himself to Monet's legacy, as well as to the history of artistic interaction between French and American artists, the French public was generally inclined to accept his cultural endeavors and embodiment of the American art amalgam. Unlike in Chicago, where Terra presented the community with a corporate-minded setting for American artwork, the Musée d'Art Américain symbolizes the amalgamation of influences which impacted the work of American artists.

On October 31, 2004 the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago closed to the public, and even though the Musée d'Art Américain continues to attract visitors today, the role of art collectors in an age of globalization remains in flux. The American art amalgam championed by Daniel Terra can be seen as influential in the collecting practices of America's 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-

<sup>10</sup> See Catherine Montourcy, "L'impressionnisme américain a sa vitrine: un second grand musée à Giverny!" *Le Démocrate* [Vernon] 3 June 1992.

<sup>11</sup> See Cabot Perry and Toulgouat. See also Sellin.

century museum founders such as Alma Spreckles in San Francisco, Norton Simon in Pasadena, Dr. Albert C. Barnes in Philadelphia, and J. Paul Getty in Malibu. Yet, America's shifting national identity could easily throw the amalgam off balance, as patriotism, individualism, and the frontier spirit are tested by the 21<sup>st</sup>-century's emphasis on technological communities and global interaction.

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