



640 5th Avenue, circa 1892. Museum of the City of New York, Byron Co. Collection.

Aspiration and Obsession

HENRY CLAY FRICK AND THE W. H. VANDERBILT HOUSE AND COLLECTION

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The house at 640 Fifth Avenue, New York City, was the site of the intersection of the lives of two “eminent Victorians.” One was a scion of wealth; the other, a farmer’s son who spent his evenings doing bookkeeping standing up. The men were from two different generations of Gilded Age prosperity. These were William Henry Vanderbilt (1821–1885) and Henry Clay Frick (1849–1919). While it is not common for two men of such different backgrounds to move in the same circles, these two crossed paths due to Frick’s admiration for Vanderbilt’s house, collection and position.

William Henry Vanderbilt, the second son of Cornelius “Commodore” Vanderbilt, was known as “the richest man in America...probably the richest man in the world,”¹ according to the *New York Times*. He hadn’t always been so: Vanderbilt had spent the early years of his adult life making his own living in business and later, due to health issues, living on a farm on Staten Island. Vanderbilt’s turn as a titan of the Gilded Age came thanks to his father’s belief in male primogeniture.

The Commodore had left his eldest son the bulk of his estate – \$90 million – in 1877, at which point the younger Vanderbilt promptly began making up for the long years of eking out his own modest living. He began amassing a spectacular collection of art, with the help of art dealer Samuel Avery. He bought paintings by mostly European artists, a fact for which he was criticized in the American press, favoring genre paintings and Barbizon landscapes. Meissonier, Turner, Tissot and Bouguereau were all represented, as well as the rare female artist, Rosa Bonheur.

Vanderbilt’s art needed a home. His wife, Maria Louisa Kissam Vanderbilt, is said to have begged him “to add a wing to the old house to provide the space he needed for his growing collection of paintings,” but Vanderbilt stood firm.² He commissioned the decorating firm of Herter Brothers, who collaborated with architects John B. Snook and Charles Atwood to design and furnish a new residence. The resulting mansion located at 640 Fifth Avenue, at the corner of Fifth Avenue and East 51st Street, became known as “the Triple Palace.” Although listed in the popular press as a double house, 640 was actually three homes in one; Vanderbilt occupied one section,

while the other section was divided into two dwellings for his daughters, Emily (Mrs. William Douglas Sloane) and Margaret (Mrs. Elliott Fitch Shepard).

Vanderbilt’s portion was elaborately – some would say ostentatiously – decorated, with each room in a completely different style from all the others. The design was centered around an art gallery whose three-story height culminated in a large skylight. Oil paintings were hung salon-style, but despite the enormous size of the room, Vanderbilt quickly ran out of space for his collection, necessitating the addition of a smaller gallery,

which he used for watercolors and drawings.

Though often confused (perhaps wishfully so) by contemporary scholars with the more spectacular 660 Fifth Avenue – the châteauesque-style house of William Henry’s son William Kissam Vanderbilt and his wife Alva – 640 was the stuff of Henry Clay Frick’s dreams.

Frick, for his part, was something of a social climber. He had maneuvered his way from being the son of a



The art gallery in 640 Fifth Avenue, New York City. Courtesy Carnegie Mellon University Libraries, Posner Memorial Collection.

farmer in rural western Pennsylvania to a hardworking businessman spending his evenings doing bookkeeping standing up to becoming a self-made millionaire and member of the upper class – if *nouveau riche*. He had managed to marry a woman, Adelaide Howard Childs, who had been groomed to be an upper-class man’s wife and he had been able to shower her and their four children with the finer things in life: modern household conveniences, carriages and automobiles, Tiffany & Co. baubles and gowns from Worth. For Frick, 640 Fifth Avenue represented the essence of what it meant to be a respected member of the upper class and he spent his adult life striving toward that goal.

Frick first encountered 640 in the summer of 1880 while en route to his first trip to Europe with his closest friend, banker Andrew Mellon. Biographer George Harvey recounts that the two men, both then bachelors, came across the Triple Palace, then under construction, while on a drive up Fifth Avenue. “That is all I shall ever want,” Frick is said to have remarked of the place.

Frick spent the intervening twenty-five years forming his own art collection and growing his coke and steel empire, all the while dreaming of Vanderbilt’s holdings. In 1884 and 1885, he purchased four volumes of *Mr. Vanderbilt’s House and Collection*, the privately published ten-volume catalog of Vanderbilt’s portion of the Triple Palace. The books, printed in a numbered, limited edition of one thousand copies, included color plates of the home’s rooms and possessions, including five volumes devoted solely to artworks. In addition to these book purchases, Frick paid for a set of twenty satin photogravure reproductions of Vanderbilt’s paintings, hanging several of the facsimiles at Clayton, his Pittsburgh home. One imagines Frick dreaming of Vanderbilt’s collection, hanging prints of it on the walls of his home the way young boys today plaster their rooms with posters of cars they someday hope to own.³

It is fair to say that Vanderbilt’s collection influenced the one Frick was just beginning when he purchased his copies of Vanderbilt’s catalog. Eventually, the two collections had many artists in common, including

Turner, Breton, Millet, Diaz de la Peña and Bouguereau. But Vanderbilt and Frick differed widely on what should be done with these collections following their deaths. Frick knew he wanted to leave his collection as his legacy to be enjoyed by the public; his eventual decision to move permanently to Manhattan in 1905 was the result of many years of careful consideration of where best to locate his gallery. In contrast, Vanderbilt thought it was enlightening enough simply to bring his art to the city and give it a grand showcase, albeit a restricted one. In *Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age*, the authors expound on the implied, though not quite executed, benevolence of Vanderbilt’s having brought his vast trove of cultural gems to the city. The house and collection were regarded as “proof and promise of national artistic growth...a private museum promoted as evidence of cultural progress about which the public, banned from its doors, could feel proud.”⁵ Once per week, Vanderbilt did invite certain individuals to view his collection, but the treasures remained more talked of than seen for many years.⁶

Indeed, Vanderbilt intended for his collection always to remain private. He attempted to set forth terms in his will that would keep both his house and art collection in family hands in perpetuity. Vanderbilt willed 640 Fifth Avenue to his wife and then to his youngest son, George Washington Vanderbilt, since all the young man’s other siblings had already built or purchased houses of their own by the date the will was executed. The will stated that if George died without a male heir, the house should pass to one of the patriarch’s grandsons. The will further directed said grandson to will the collection in its entirety to another male relative. His intention was that his “present residence and [his] collection of works of art be retained and maintained by a male descendant bearing the name of Vanderbilt.”⁷

Though Vanderbilt’s wealth had been inherited, he proved to be just as shrewd as the self-made Frick; in the eight short years between his inheritance and his sudden death at age sixty-four in 1885, Vanderbilt had more than doubled his father’s estate. The fortune was beyond anyone’s comprehension at the period: \$200 million

dollars (\$5.17 billion in 2012 dollars). The sum made Vanderbilt one of the richest men in the world. The house at 640 Fifth Avenue passed as intended to Maria Louisa Kissam Vanderbilt and then, at her death in 1896, to their son George.

By that time, George was twenty-three and already owned a townhouse.⁸ He had no use for 640 and its vast dark interiors and unfashionable stylings.



(L to R): “Spring Flowers” by Jean-Louis Harmon, as seen in *Mr. Vanderbilt’s House and Collection*. Courtesy Carnegie Mellon University Libraries, Posner Memorial Collection. Satin photogravure of “Spring Flowers” hanging in Clayton’s yellow guest room, left of dresser. Courtesy Frick Collection/Frick Art Reference Library Archives.



Henry Clay Frick, circa 1884. Courtesy Frick Collection / Frick Art Reference Library Archives. Henry Clay Frick house, 1 East 70th Street, circa 1914. Courtesy Library of Congress.

He did attempt to make over the property to his liking, removing some of the flourishes on the façade and replacing the iron balustrade surrounding the house's modest yard with stone and installing baroque-style lanterns along it.⁹ In 1902, he began construction of a porte cochère in front of the house, though the City of New York cited a violation of zoning ordinances and forced its destruction.¹⁰ In any case, George was far too preoccupied with Biltmore, his enormous country estate in North Carolina, to worry further about his father's house, now becoming something of an albatross since it could not be sold. George, who appears to have been somewhat more altruistic than his father, lent 135 paintings from the 640 collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The works were to be exhibited to the public for one year, a period that was extended many times. The choice of which works would go to the museum was explained somewhat derogatorily in the press as those pieces "believed to represent most satisfactorily the painters for whom Mr. [W. H.] Vanderbilt had a predilection, if indeed there was any particular predilection in one whose taste in art was a distinctly catholic one."¹¹

By 1903, Frick's business interests "had taken on Vanderbilt proportions," writes Martha Frick Symington Sanger, his great-granddaughter.¹² After divesting himself of his stock in Carnegie Bros. Steel, Frick reinvested in railroads, singlehandedly becoming the industry's largest private stockholder. Sanger posits that "the 640 Fifth Avenue residence, built by William H. Vanderbilt, 'Railroad King' of 1880, became, therefore, the perfect home for the burgeoning art collector and 'Railroad King' of 1905."¹³

When Frick was approached by Douglas Robinson of the Robinson, Brown & Co. real estate company in January 1905 regarding the availability of 640, it was inevitable that he would take the place. Perhaps Robinson knew of his client's earlier obsession with the house, or perhaps he was just a persuasive and dogged salesperson, but in either case he wrote Frick "to call your attention to

Mr. George Vanderbilt's house on the corner of Fifty-first Street and Fifth Avenue, in case you have in mind, in the near future, renting a house in New York."¹⁴ But Frick played hard to get, obliging Robinson to write him again the following month, using the time-tested sales tactic of "another applicant" for the property to urge Frick along. By March 24, a lease had been executed guaranteeing Frick ten years and the furnishings of the house, with George to get a yearly rent of \$50,000, paid in quarterly installments.¹⁵ The public was enthralled by these negotiations, with rumors flying in the press of Frick's supposed "enormous annual rental, said to be in the six figures."¹⁶

It was ironic that Frick had so coveted 640 in his youth; it was widely regarded to be architecturally inferior, especially when compared with the homes of Vanderbilt's own children. Likened to a "gigantic knee-hole table"¹⁷ and "brown-stone packing boxes"¹⁸ among other unsavory things, the façade and design of the Triple Palace seemed to have more detractors than fans.

Frick himself always consulted with the preeminent architects of the day for his building work, with he and his wife contributing their opinions at all stages of the design process. It is unsurprising, then, that the Fricks immediately began extensive renovations to their new home, overseen by Hunt & Hunt, George's architectural firm of choice. The press reported that Frick was "putting in electric lights, modern baths, and other improvements that the millionaire of a generation ago knew nothing about."¹⁹ Frick was especially concerned about "electric plugs in galleries,"²⁰ and both owner and architects agreed to make the "picture lighting in the North and South Galleries"²¹ conform to his needs. While advanced technology had always been important to Frick, picture lighting in particular had always been at the forefront of his concern. The paintings at Clayton had always been expertly lit to better show off his collection. In all, the Fricks spent nearly \$100,000 on improvements to the structure and décor of their new home.²²

The family moved to 640 in the fall of 1905. Although Frick finally had attained what he had admired for so long, the residence itself still was not enough. He had his eyes on an even bigger prize: Vanderbilt's art collection. Frick suggested to Hamilton McKown Twombly, George's brother-in-law, that he would like some of the paintings that had been lent to the Metropolitan to be returned to the house. Twombly wrote to George, who was firm in his reply. "This I would not be willing to do," George wrote. "It is a pleasure to me to feel that my father's collection is on view to the public at all times and performing its educative function."²³

Frick had to be satisfied with displaying his own collection with the remainder of Vanderbilt's. To Frick, art represented his entire future, both while living and after his death. It is perhaps symbolic that he wanted his daughter Helen's 1908 society debut to take place in the art gallery at 640 as Sanger claims, though the event took place in Pittsburgh instead.²⁴ The residence at 640 was a place that had influenced Frick's earliest forays into art collecting and would spur him to create a building to rival it that would preserve his own legacy.

It is a testament to the strength of Frick's aspirations to W. H. Vanderbilt's position that he eventually tried to buy 640 despite its criticisms. Archival evidence indicates that Frick seriously contemplated purchasing the home and property, provided Vanderbilt's heirs gave him what he deemed a good price. "I would not care to entertain the property at more than \$1,500,000.00," Frick wrote to his agent, Howard Taylor. "If you think it is hardly worth while to take it up on that basis we will drop it." Frick had already secured land for his own house and museum shortly after settling in New York in 1906, so his desire to purchase 640 can be seen either as the crowning achievement of his aspiration or as a practical investment. However, given the terms of W. H. Vanderbilt's will, George was not permitted to sell 640, and so the negotiations went no further.

Construction began on Frick's new house, which would become the Frick Collection, in 1913. Designed by Carrère and Hastings, it was nearing completion when tragedy

struck. In March 1914, George Vanderbilt died suddenly a few days following an appendectomy. He was survived by his wife, Edith, and one child, a daughter, Cornelia, meaning his heirs would not inherit 640. The house passed to the next grandson in line, Brigadier General Cornelius Vanderbilt III, who allowed Frick ample time to vacate the house. In June of that year, the Frick family left 640 and moved twenty-one blocks to their new home at 1 East 70th Street, where they remained until Mrs. Frick's death in 1931, at which time it became a public museum.

Though W. H. Vanderbilt's will stated his intention for his home and art collection to always remain within the family, the law in 1885 did not allow him to place restrictions on property inherited by a grandson. Thus, in 1940, his heir, Brigadier General Cornelius Vanderbilt III, sold the property to the William Waldorf Astor estate, stipulating that his wife, Grace, be allowed to remain in the house for one year following his death. Cornelius died in 1942; three years later, his widow put her grandfather-in-law's famous art collection up for sale.²⁵ The fabulous collection of Millets, Meissoniers and Corots sold for a somewhat disappointing sum of \$323,195—a far cry from the millions W. H. Vanderbilt had spent to acquire it.

The Triple Palace finally met its demise in 1947, when it was torn down and replaced by commercial buildings. Though the razing of 640 was lamented in the press, it was seen as inevitable. Robert King and Charles O. McLean write of the sad event, "By the time of its demolition, the building had long been an anachronistic remnant of a former age."²⁶

While W. H. Vanderbilt's collection was dispersed and his home demolished, Frick was able to ensure that his legacy would remain intact. Though additions have been made to its founding bequest, The Frick Collection remains as one of the few cohesive reminders of an era when stately homes with fantastic collections of fine and decorative arts lined Fifth Avenue.



Notes

1. "The Contentment of Croesus," *New York Times*, October 10, 1882.
2. Arnold Lewis, James Turner, and Steven McQuillin, *Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), 114. Figures originally published in two volumes as *Artistic Houses* by George William Sheldon (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883–1884).
3. George Harvey, *Henry Clay Frick: The Man* (New York: The Frick Collection, 1928).
4. Earl Shinn [Edward Strahan, pseud.], *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection* (Boston: George Barrie, 1838–1886).
5. Lewis et al., 116.
6. "W. H. Vanderbilt's Pictures on View," *New York Times*, May 4, 1902.
7. William Vanderbilt, "Last Will and Testament," [n.d.], Henry Clay Frick Papers, Series 640 Fifth Avenue.
8. Robert B. King and Charles O. McLean, *The Vanderbilt Homes* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 25.
9. Michael Kathrens, *Great Houses of New York 1880–1930* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2005), 332.
10. King and McLean, 25.
11. "W. H. Vanderbilt's Pictures on View," *New York Times*, May 4, 1902.
12. Martha Frick Symington Sanger, *Henry Clay Frick: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 298.
13. Sanger, 298.
14. D. Robinson to Henry Clay Frick, 9 January 1905, Henry Clay Frick Papers, Series 640 Fifth Avenue.
15. George Vanderbilt, Lease Agreement for 640 Fifth Avenue, 24 March 1905, George W. Vanderbilt Papers, Biltmore Company Archives, Asheville, NC.
16. "Frick Remodeling Vanderbilt Mansion," *New York Times*, April 16, 1905.
17. Jerry Patterson, *The Vanderbilts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 108.
18. *The Century*, February 1886.
19. "Frick Remodeling Vanderbilt Mansion," *New York Times*, April 16, 1905.
20. George Vanderbilt to Henry Clay Frick, 12 April 1905, Henry Clay Frick Papers, Series 640 Fifth Avenue.
21. Hunt & Hunt to Henry Clay Frick, 2 May 1905, Henry Clay Frick Papers, Series 640 Fifth Avenue.
22. "Vanderbilt Home Bows to Business," *New York Times*, August 11, 1944.
23. George Vanderbilt to Henry Clay Frick, 20 October 1905, Henry Clay Frick Papers, Series 640 Fifth Avenue.
24. Sanger, 444.
25. "Vanderbilt Home Being Torn Down," *New York Times*, 18 September 1947.
26. King and McLean, 27.