



FROM THE ARCHIVES

DON'T LOOK A GIFT HORSE IN THE MOUTH?

PROBLEMATIC DONATIONS TO THE SMITHSONIAN

Although the Smithsonian always has depended upon the generosity of strangers to provide it with the funds, real estate, work hours, and objects it needs, not all gifts have been ones that we wanted to accept. As we begin our national campaign, it might be interesting to look at some of the “gift horses” that have been offered to the Smithsonian and ask why we didn’t accept—or shouldn’t have accepted—certain gifts. Some gifts can be too specific, some don’t provide maintenance funds, some can be very complex to carry out, and some donors want too much of a say in how their gift will be used.

GIFTS FROM THE IMAUM OF MUSCAT

A gift to the United States from the Imaum of Muscat (now Oman), which later came to the Smithsonian, is one of the great cautionary tales about donations. In 1834, President Andrew Jackson had special 1804 silver dollars minted for the sultan of Muscat and the King of Siam (later Thailand) for trade treaties negotiated by Edmund Roberts, America’s first envoy to the Far East. But when the Omani leader attempted to make a gift in return—a must in Muslim society—Jackson stated he could not accept gifts as the U.S. Constitution prohibited it.

Later, Thomas N. Carr of the United States Consulate in Tangier wrote in despair to Secretary of State John Forsyth on September 3, 1839, about another gift. Despite all of Forsyth’s efforts to discourage him, the Emperor of Morocco



First Ladies Hall with Oman carpet and pearls used as jewelry, 1955

had presented a magnificent lion and lioness to the U.S. Consulate for President Van Buren. When Carr said that the President could not accept gifts, the Emperor directed that the gift would go to the Congress—which also was prohibited from receiving gifts. The lions, said the Emperor, would then go to the people of the United States. Carr was forced to take the lions into the Consulate when the emperor’s nephew threatened to let them loose on the street in front of the building (beheadings were threatened as well).

Then it was rumored that a shipment of horses was on its way as a gift to the U.S. from the Imaum of Muscat. In April of 1840, the ship *Sultanee*, or *Al-Sultana*, arrived in New York. Captained by Ahmed Bin Na’Aman, who spoke English and maintained an import/export trade with Salem, Massachusetts, traders, the ship carried gifts from the Imaum for President Martin van Buren. Included were two magnificent Arabian horses and saddles, a case of attar of roses (rose oil), five demijohns of rose water, four Cashmere shawls, a Persian carpet, a box of pearls (one string containing 150 pearls and two separate large pearls), and a gold-mounted sword. To end the stalemate, Van Buren asked the Congress for permission to accept the gifts. The objects were deposited at the National Institute Gallery in the Patent Office and the horses were then sold at auction.

On December 20, 1841, a thief broke into the “treasure room” at the National Institute Gallery and stole, among other things, the pearl necklace and the two large pearls given by the Imaum. This was the first of a series of thefts of valuable items from that Gallery. The pearls were always recovered but eventually the Patent Commissioner sealed all the valuables up in a metal box and deposited it in the U.S. Treasury. The items did not come to the Smithsonian until the 1880s. Even then, a thief with a Bowie knife and chloroform attempted to overcome a Smithsonian watchman and steal the valuables.

Lessons from this tale include the principle that if you give a gift in diplomatic circles, you must be willing to accept one in return. Valuable gifts can be difficult to care for securely. And sometimes a gift really *is* a horse.

THE HODGKINS MEDAL

Sometimes, as was in the case of the Thomas George Hodgkins bequest, a gift proves difficult to administer because it is outside of the Smithsonian’s area of expertise. In 1891, a gift of \$200,000 was received from Thomas George Hodgkins of Setauket, New York, to be used, in



part, for studies of the atmosphere in relation to human health. Upon Mr. Hodgkins’s death in November 1892, additional gifts totaling \$250,000 were left to the Smithsonian. In recognition of Hodgkins’s generosity, a gold medal was struck, which was awarded in 1899 to Professor James Dewar of the Royal Institution of Britain for his meritorious research on the liquefaction and solidification of atmospheric air. Hodgkins medals have been awarded periodically since

then, but doing so always remains peripheral to the Institution's interests. Fortunately, liberal interpretations of "atmospheric research" have not resulted in any negative repercussions for the Smithsonian.



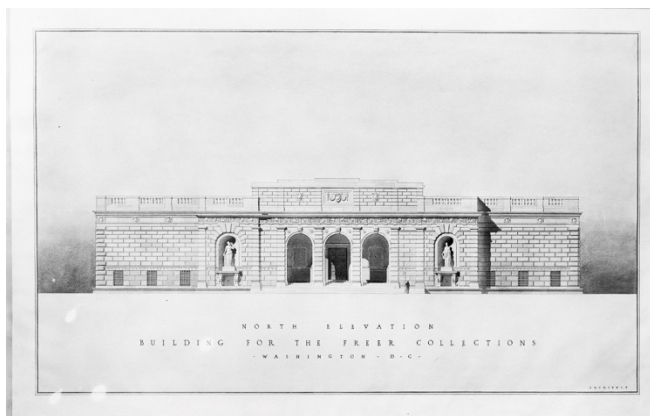
THE GELLATLY ART COLLECTION

On November 8, 1931, art collector John Gellatly died, two years after promising his collection of 1,640 artworks to the United States under the care of the Smithsonian Institution. His very young bride, who had presumed the art collection would come to her when her quite older husband died, was dismayed to find it had already been donated to the National Museum. Charlayne Whiteley Gellatly filed numerous lawsuits, claiming that the artworks were hers and that her husband had never told her they

had been donated. The Smithsonian had not been warned that the gold-digging wife did not know of her husband's intentions. The courts sided with the Smithsonian but Assistant Secretary Alexander Wetmore was not entirely happy with the *National Enquirer* and other scandal-sheet articles on the legal fight that accompanied the gift.

THE FREER GALLERY OF ART

As lovely and successful as this museum is, it is unlikely the Smithsonian would ever accept such a restricted gift again. When Detroit businessman Charles Lang Freer first proposed the gift in 1904, the Board of Regents was reluctant to accept it, since the terms stated the Smithsonian could not claim the items until after Freer's death and that the collection could never be divided, changed, or loaned out. Further, only the pieces in the collection could be shown in Freer's gallery; no visiting exhibits could be presented in the space. President Theodore Roosevelt and others put a great deal of pressure on the Smithsonian to accept the donation. Freer also added funds for a museum building. Eventually, the Regents acquiesced and in 1906 accepted the gift, along with its restrictions. In 1919, Freer appended his will with a codicil that permitted acquisitions of Asian, Egyptian, and Near Eastern (West Asian) art. The Freer will has long been a thorn in the side of Smithsonian administrators, limiting how the art can be displayed in a static collection. When Secretary S. Dillon Ripley considered trying to break the will in the courts, he earned the eternal enmity of Freer board member Agnes Meyer, her daughter Katherine Graham, and the *Washington Post* family. Placing the Sackler next to the Freer has provided a partial solution, but it is not a model for 21st-century gifts to the Smithsonian.





THE HILLWOOD MUSEUM

As noted in an earlier essay on Smithsonian museums that never came to be, the donation of the Hillwood Museum to the Smithsonian was the result of a similarly restrictive will. However, it was accompanied by far less funding, as the stocks that accompanied the museum had depreciated significantly in their value. In addition, Mrs. Marjorie Merriweather Post's will contained detailed instructions about how the house was to be kept on a daily basis, such as the placement of fresh flowers throughout the house. The gift was negotiated by Secretary Leonard Carmichael in the early 1960s, but returned to the family by Secretary Ripley in 1976. In an era of social change like the 1970s, Ripley preferred to spend Smithsonian funds and energies on programs like the Folklife Festival and the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, rather than on a shrine to a single wealthy American collector.

THE BRADFORD DOLL HOUSE

The Miniature World of Faith Bradford consists of several doll houses created, modified, and donated by Faith Bradford in 1951 to what is now the National Museum of American History. Always a popular exhibit, the scale of the 23-room house is one inch to one foot,

accommodating the miniatures that Ms. Bradford (1880–1970) played with as a girl and collected as an adult. She imagined the dwelling as the turn-of-the-century household of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Doll, their 10 children, two visiting grandparents, five servants, and 20 pets. Most of the male curators at the museum rolled their eyes at the idea of such a display (although they did not object to the also-popular and large collection of toy soldiers)



and tried on a regular basis to remove the collection from exhibition. Ms. Bradford, a D.C. librarian, would stop by to decorate the houses for holidays and update furnishing and clothes. Parts of the collections were lost for years in the Suitland, Maryland, storage facilities. In recent years, however, museum curator Larry Bird ensured the house's return to a place of honor and even wrote a book about it. Both the subject matter and Ms. Bradford's constant attentions tried the patience of many a curator, although they never actually got rid of the house. It seems that the attention of a curator can at times be monopolized by an enthusiastic donor who has difficulty letting go of his or her gift.



THE IVY A. PELZMAN MEMORIAL GLOCKENSPIEL

Made in 1976 by Petit & Fritsen, the Ivy A. Pelzman Memorial Glockenspiel at the National Zoo consists of a tower with four figures of zoo animals, including an elephant, a bear, a giraffe, and a lion. A traditional 38-foot-high carillon of 35 bells, it is presently inoperable. Ivy A. Pelzman (1890–1970), a native Washingtonian, graduated from Georgetown Medical School and served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps in World Wars I and II. Pelzman was a pioneer in sperm donation and artificial insemination, with a clinic at Georgetown University. He lived for a while in New York City, and many of his happiest hours were spent with his nieces and nephews by the glockenspiel in Central Park’s

Children’s Zoo. “Uncle Doc” planned a \$250,000 donation for a similar glockenspiel for the National Zoo, but left only \$100,000 for the glockenspiel when he died, earmarked to the memory of his wife, Katherine.

After much too-ing and fro-ing, because this was not an easy or inexpensive item to construct, the National Zoological Park dedicated the Pelzman Clock Tower Glockenspiel on May 16, 1976, at the Connecticut Avenue entrance. Getting the steam engine to work to move the animals proved exceptionally difficult and it soon became inoperable; the glockenspiel was later moved near the Harvard Street entrance. At the time, the glockenspiel was the largest cash gift given to the Zoo since it was founded. For Zoo director Ted Reed, however, the time, energy, and additional funds it took to carry out this very specific donation were not worth it, especially because the upkeep proved quite expensive—so expensive that after a few years, the Zoo stopped repairing it. Flickr sites comment on how attractive but dysfunctional it is since even the glockenspiel’s clock does not work. The glockenspiel is an example of a gift that is both overly specific and lacks sufficient funding for maintenance.

THE CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES

As part of the International Center envisioned for the Quadrangle by S. Dillon Ripley, a center for Middle Eastern Studies was to be established at the Smithsonian to teach the American people about this increasingly important part of the world. Ripley continued fundraising for the project to the end of his tenure as Secretary and, when Secretary Robert McCormick Adams arrived, the Smithsonian was holding in trust a \$5 million gift from Saudi Arabia for the center. However, a significant group of members of Congress opposed this Middle Eastern studies center and, at their urging, Secretary Adams canceled the center and returned the gift. Doing so strained relations between the two countries for a period of time.



Quadrangle International Center plans



THE O. ORKIN INSECT ZOO

An Insect Zoo at the National Museum of Natural History was opened in 1976 as an educational center that allows visitors to observe and interact with live insects. It was made possible in part by grants from the Ciba-Geigy Corp., Diamond Shamrock Chemical Co., Dow Chemical USA, FMC Corp., Shell Chemical Corp., and Stauffer Co. In 1992, Orkin Pest Control made a \$500,000 gift for the renovation of the Insect Zoo and provided

additional funding to develop educational materials and programs specifically for teachers and students. Public reaction to the naming of the Insect Zoo after Orkin was negative, since the company's pest control activities focus on killing insects. To mitigate these concerns, the Insect Zoo was named the O. Orkin Insect Zoo after the company's founder, Otto Orkin, rather than the corporation. The 1990s saw many debates as the Smithsonian moved to allow more naming opportunities. In this case, concerns focused on the small size of the gift, the lack of an end date to the naming, and the appropriateness of the name, given its association with pest control.

THE SCIENCE IN AMERICAN LIFE EXHIBIT

In 1991, a grant of approximately \$5 million was donated by the American Chemical Society for a new exhibit, *Science in American Life*, for the National Museum of American History. The exhibition's purpose was to help improve science literacy in America. When the exhibition opened in 1994, the American Chemical Society was very unhappy, as they expected it to celebrate the role of science in American life. The post-modern exhibit in fact took a critical look at both the benefits and the problems caused by science, and the Society felt that their funds had not been used as they expected.

In a 1994 article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Snoopy at the Smithsonian," the author bemoaned what he called the "political makeover of the Smithsonian." This piece was prompted by Secretary I. Michael Heyman's recent approval of the National Air and Space Museum's proposed *Enola Gay* exhibit, which the author viewed as the latest example of how the Smithsonian seemed to be transforming its museums over recent years into "vehicles for political re-education." He wrote that this trend began during the tenure of Secretary Robert McCormick Adams, who started in 1984 and hired individuals from the "Academic Left." According to the author, the Board of Regents and the U.S. Congress had not been paying attention to what he saw as the intentional creation of exhibits that presented ideological views, rather than the facts, to the general public. Under pressure, the Smithsonian made some revisions to the exhibit to moderate criticism of the effects of science on society. None of the parties, however, were ultimately



happy with the outcome. The issues raised by the exhibit demonstrate how important it is for donors to have a clear understanding of their role from the outset, as well as the wisdom of keeping donors apprised of how their funds are being used. Negative surprises don't turn out well.

THE HALL OF FAME OF AMERICAN ACHIEVERS

In 2001, self-made multimillionaire Catherine B. Reynolds offered \$38 million to the National Museum of American History to create a permanent "Hall of Fame of American Achievers." The gift was negotiated by the new Secretary, Lawrence M. Small, and produced a negative outcry from staff, historians and other professionals, and the press. The Organization of American Historians, the nation's largest organization of historians and history professors and teachers, condemned the head of the Smithsonian for giving a wealthy donor a major say in the nature and content of an exhibition. Critics argued that the agreement gave Ms. Reynolds too much say over the content of the exhibit, specifically regarding the selection of who the "achievers" would be. Whereas museums usually reserve space for those whose lives have stood the test of time, many of the proposed "achievers" were alive and at the heights of their careers. This position was reinforced when Martha Stewart, one of the proposed individuals, was arrested and convicted of insider trading. In response to the criticism, Ms. Reynolds withdrew the gift in 2002. The museum had little or no input in the negotiations for the gift, and an inexperienced Secretary accepted terms that most museums would not allow. This case again illustrates how clear negotiations with donors about their role are critical to the success of a gift.



While these cautionary tales raise issues to think about during donor negotiations in a capital campaign, nearly all of the Smithsonian's thousands of donors have been truly dedicated to the Institution and had very positive relationships with the Smithsonian. Clear understanding of terms, rights, and roles is crucial for a successful gift. From James Smithson forward, most donors have asked for very little in return, not even naming rights, as was the case with Steven F. Udvar-Hazy and the National Air and Space Museum. Most donors to the Smithsonian give of their time, resources, collections, and expertise so they can be part of the very special institution that James Smithson's bequest established for the American people.