

THE POWER OF SELECTION

THE FRENCH FAMILY'S ART COLLECTION AT CHESTERWOOD

Art has long been considered a commodity, a way to show off personal net worth and pave a path into higher echelons of society. Thus the field of art collecting has often been dominated by those with enormous means, and so it is hardly surprising that most scholarly attention has been directed to their acquisitions.

Comparatively overlooked, however, are the collections formed by artists themselves, who often seek to feed their creative souls, decorate their studios and domestic living spaces, and gather tokens of treasured personal relationships. For example, the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907) adorned his New Hampshire home with artworks by fellow Cornish Colony artists such as Thomas Wilmer Dewing; a portrait of his wife, Augusta, and their son, Homer, by John Singer Sargent; and a tasteful mix of Flemish tapestries, Japanese prints, commercial plaster casts, and art from his travels abroad. In Falmouth, Virginia, the home and studio of Gari Melchers (1860–1932) now holds over 400 works amassed by that painter and his wife. Perhaps the best-known artist/collector of that era was William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), who enlivened his Manhattan studio with richly patterned textiles, paintings, and decorative objects.¹ Aesthetically curated studios like Chase's functioned as social spaces for regaling patrons while projecting the artist's persona and cosmopolitan taste.

Visitors to Chesterwood, the historic home, studio, and gardens of sculptor Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, rightly expect to see French's maquettes and models related to his well-known monuments and memorials, as well as portraits and allegorical works. What may surprise them is discovering that French was also interested in interior design and an avid collector of textiles, eclectic furniture, commercial plaster casts, Old Master paintings, and art by friends, colleagues, and other contemporary artists.

Today, the Chesterwood collection includes important sculptures by Saint-Gaudens, Herbert Adams, Evelyn Beatrice Longman, and Bessie Potter Vonnoh, as well as notable paintings by American impressionist Robert Vonnoh, portraitist John C. Johansen, and visionary Abbott Handerson Thayer. The collection also has many works



Interior of Daniel Chester French's Concord studio, c. 1885, photograph by Alfred Winslow Hosmer, Courtesy William Munroe Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library, Concord, MA

by French's assistants, friends and family, lesser-known artists, and unknown makers. Nestled in the scenic Berkshire hills, Chesterwood may be the largest repository of works by a single sculptor, but it also represents an artistic family's vision of curating a creative environment.

RIGHT FROM THE START

Early in his career, working in Florence in the mid-1870s, French wrote to his father of his frustrated art collecting attempts: "...unless you happen to have a certain amount of ready money you cannot afford to purchase. ... I have neither the money, nor the time, nor the power of selection that I wish I had."² Upon his return to the U.S., he lived in Washington, D.C., where, thanks to his father's position in the U.S.



Vincenzo Camuccini (1771–1844) and Tommaso Piroli (1752–1824) after Antonio Canova (1757–1822), *Death of Priam*, 1794–95, hand-colored engraving, 9 x 17 in., Chesterwood Works on Paper Collection, Chapin Library, Williams College, Gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood, A National Trust Historic Site, Stockbridge, MA



Chesterwood studio “cozy corner,” c. 1930s, showing German-school *Madonna and Child with St. Dominic* (NT 69.38.852); Lorenzo di Bicci / Florentine School, *Saint James and Two Female Saints* (NT 69.38.851); and Evelyn Beatrice Longman’s bronze *Torso* (NT 69.38.567); photograph from Chesterwood Archives, Chapin Library, Williams College, Gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood, A National Trust Historic Site, Stockbridge, MA

Treasury Department, French won commissions for sculpture for new government buildings in St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Boston. He often traveled back to his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, and with money now in the bank, he built a sculpture studio next to the family home. Finally commencing his collecting journey, he filled that studio with “pretty things” and asked his friend Ellen Ball to pick up “any old rags (rich & handsome) that you see lying about Florence.”³ A later photograph of French’s Concord studio shows it completely filled with artworks ranging from plaster busts and screens to tapestries and pottery.

A popular way for young artists to perfect their talents was to trade portraits. In this way, one of the first artworks French acquired was by Benjamin Curtis Porter (1843–1908), who would develop a successful career as a society portraitist. Acquaintances through William Rimmer’s drawing classes in Boston, the two artists decided to swap portraits in 1874. French excitedly reported to his brother: “Porter yesterday made the proposition to me, that if I would make a bust of him, he would make a portrait in oils of me ... He certainly makes the best pictures I know of.”⁴ This endeavor was put on hold as the two traveled to Italy. Although they saw each other often there, it wasn’t until they later took up studios in Boston that the portraits were finally executed. In August 1877, French told his sister that he had “... the bust well under way. It is even now a good likeness & promises well. My portrait is also progressing, and being by Porter will undoubtedly be good.”⁵ French always kept Porter’s accomplished portrait and displayed it in the dining room at Chesterwood; at the time it had as much cachet as a portrait by Sargent. Today French’s bronze bust of Porter is owned by New York University.

Over time and with more disposable income, French developed a more refined “power of selection” to create a notable collection for his homes in New York City and Stockbridge. A photograph of the Manhattan townhouse on West 11th Street shows framed works lining the walls; his wife, Mary Adams French, is a secondary blur within their tastefully curated interior. As his sculpting career gained traction, so did French’s involvement in art clubs, societies, and philanthropic institutions. He



Unknown, possibly Flemish, *Adoration of the Shepherds* (fragment), 1600s, oil on wood, 49 x 28 in., Chesterwood, Gift of the Daniel Chester French Foundation, NT 69.38.854; photo: Williamstown Art Conservation & Preservation Center ■ (BELOW) ALBIN POLASEK (Czech-American, 1879–1965), *Forest Idyll*, 1924, bronze, 25 x 16 3/4 x 6 1/4 in. Chesterwood, Bequest of Margaret French Cresson, NT 73.45.1426; photo: Gregory Cherin

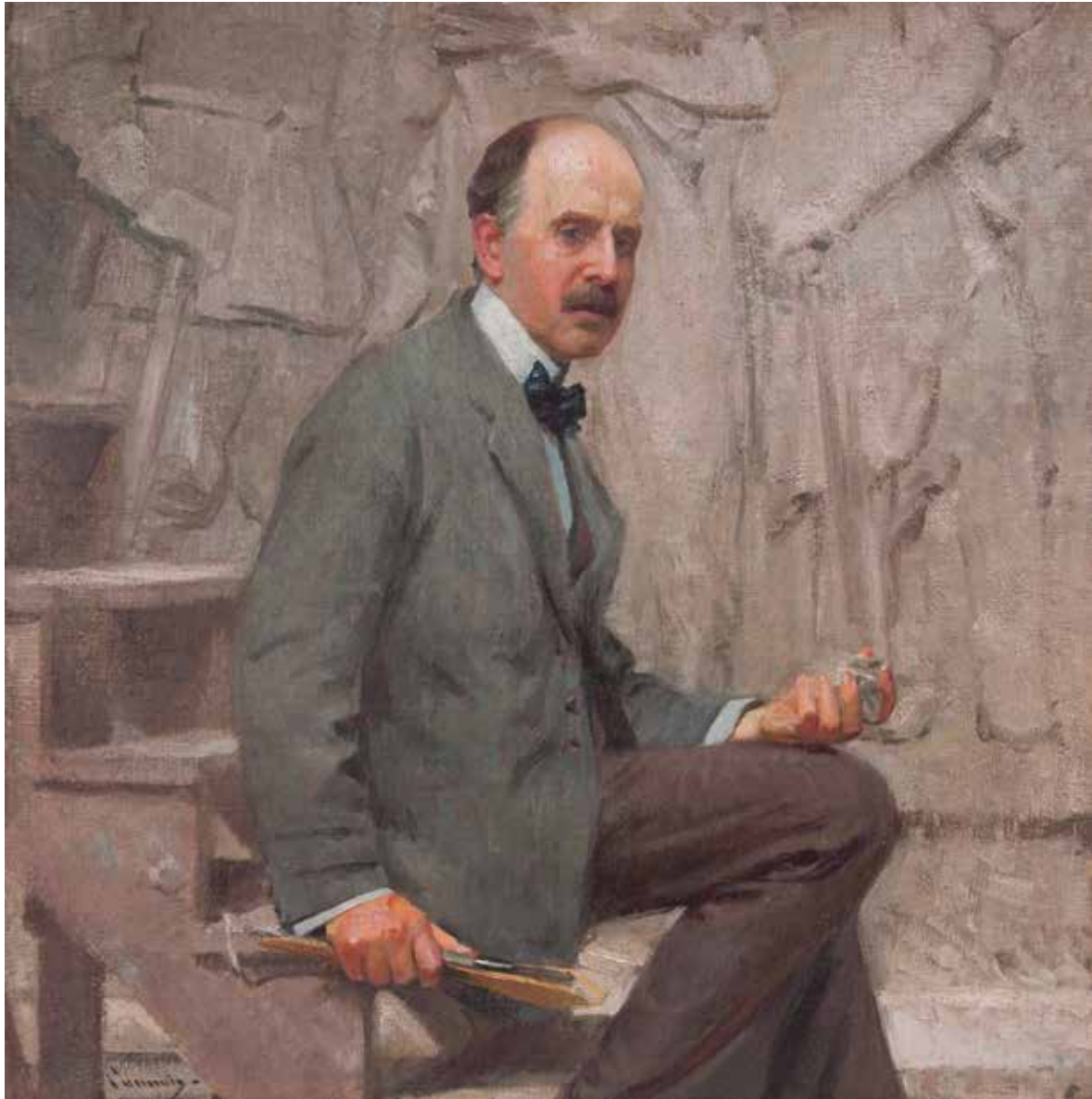


Seated from left to right: William Penn Cresson, Margaret French Cresson, Mary Adams French, Daniel Chester French, 1929; Chesterwood Archives, Chapin Library, Williams College; photo: *The Boston Post*, Boston, MA

exhibited nationwide and sat on selection committees for exhibitions and competitions. His circle grew to include not only fellow sculptors, but painters, architects, and interior and landscape designers.

Thus his art collection grew as well. He had met Abbott Handerson Thayer in New York in 1872; visiting Paris in 1876, the two “talked art & roamed through the galleries,” activities that could only have improved French’s appreciation for fine art.⁶ He eventually acquired four works by Thayer, including a marvelous self-portrait of the painter presented to French in 1882–83, and the tender *Old Sailmaker*, which French later hung in the study at Chesterwood. In 1889 French visited Thayer at his home in Dublin, New Hampshire, where the sculptor, who enjoyed painting in his leisure time, worked on his own canvases “under Thayer’s eye.”⁷ French often acquired works directly from other living artists, such as a series of dream-like oil paintings of women dancing by Theodore Baur; moody, atmospheric forest scenes by Robert Loftin Newman; and a sensitive portrait of a girl by tonalist George Fuller.

French developed his art appreciation by reading and clipping images from magazines, purchasing photographic reproductions of famous paintings and sculpture in European museums, and visiting exhibitions and artists’ studios. In 1885, he attended an exhibition of paintings by the British symbolist George Frederic Watts at the Metropolitan Museum of



ROBERT VONNOH (1858–1933), *Daniel Chester French in the Chesterwood Studio, 1913*, oil on canvas, 31 x 32 in., Chesterwood, Gift of the Daniel Chester French Foundation, NT 69.38.786; photo: Cassandra Sohn

Art. “Roused to a high pitch of enthusiasm,” French wrote his father, “they are very strange and very powerful, not to be measured by any ordinary standard, impressing you with the fact that there was a man of genius behind them.”⁸ In London a year later, he visited Sargent’s studio, where he saw *Madame X*. French called it a “powerful picture, but a disagreeable one to me as most of his things are—but he does know how to paint. I am very glad to know him.”⁹ On a later European trip, he spent a day in Brussels to see the “marvellous [sic] collection of Flemish paintings that they have brought together there,—100 Rubens and 100 Van Dykes [sic] among them.”¹⁰ French greatly admired Antonio Canova’s work in Venice, where he saw “some statues ... the best that I have seen of his I think.”¹¹ He might have marveled at Canova’s masterful bas-relief *Death of Priam* and was moved to purchase a tinted engraving made after it by Vincenzo Camuccini and Tommaso Piroli, the added color heightening the already exaggerated gestures, raw emotions, and epic tragedy.

With Yankee frugality, French enjoyed antiquing in New York and the Berkshires; his daughter Margaret French Cresson recalled, “My Father would buy things wherever he saw them in an auction room or an

antique shop. They were almost always ‘unknowns’ as he was not buying many originals. But being an artist himself, he knew enough to buy good things.”¹² One “good thing” he snagged at auction was a German school *Madonna and Child with St. Dominic* that he displayed in his New York studio, where it announced his good taste to visitors.¹³ After the 1921 sale of that townhouse, French moved the altarpiece to the reception room in the Stockbridge studio. Now considered the most important Old Master painting at Chesterwood, the original remains safely in storage while a reproduction in the original frame hangs in its place.

Other works French purchased at auction include a Flemish school *Entombment of Christ* and two portraits then attributed to Peter Lely, *Lady Frances Hamilton* and the *Duchess of Portsmouth*.¹⁴ He hung these, along with *Frau Maria Koerter* after Marten Jacobsz van Heemskerck the Elder, and *Portrait of a Court Lady* attributed to Thomas Hudson, alongside likenesses of his own ancestors and contemporary portraits of the French family by William H. Hyde, John C. Johansen, and Robert Vonnoh. Together they created visual connections between the U.S. and Europe, the present and the past, and real and imagined pedigree.



HERBERT ADAMS (1858–1945), *La Jeunesse*, modeled c. 1894, cast c. 1899, glazed terracotta, 20 1/4 x 27 1/4 x 9 7/8 in., Chesterwood, Gift of the Daniel Chester French Foundation, NT 69.38.3710; photo: Gregory Cherin

As a member of the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York City, French was entitled to throw his name into an annual lottery. In 1924, he won Albin Polasek's bronze *Forest Idyll*, which features a young woman holding a faun while its mother looks on. French wrote Polasek: "I consider myself very fortunate that I have drawn ... your charming bronze group. It is a delightful piece of sculpture and I shall value it not only for itself but as an example of a man whom I value as a friend and respect very much as a sculptor."¹⁵ He proudly displayed it in his new Gramercy Park apartment. Later, French's daughter installed it on Chesterwood's breakfast porch; it is now on view in the Collections Gallery at Chesterwood.

A FAMILY LEGACY

The collection also grew with objects bestowed by members of the French family, who had deep roots in New England's colonial past. While the Frenches were not wealthy by Gilded Age standards, many held prestigious positions in banking, law, and government; names on the family tree include Stuyvesant, Vanderbilt, and the Barony of Cheylesmore. French was proud of this heritage and prominently displayed family heirlooms, including a silhouette of Judge Daniel French (1769–1840) in Chesterwood's main hallway. A paternal uncle, Phineas P. Wells, with whom French had stayed in Brooklyn in the early 1870s, left him a small but fine collection of early Italian and Old Master paintings purchased on a European trip in the 1850s, including a Pisan School *Madonna and Child* and a magnificent Florentine School gold ground panel painting, *Saint James and Two Female Saints*. French displayed the Florentine painting in his Concord studio and later in the cozy corner of his studio at Chesterwood.

Artists flocked to Chesterwood for pleasure and inspiration, and they subsequently gifted works of art to his family. French's sister-in-law, the artist Alice Helm French, was inspired by the expansive views of the surrounding Berkshire hills and intimate views of the garden; she gave the family her oil painting *Monument Mountain* and a colorful pastel of the studio garden, which French considered a "great delight."¹⁶ A watercolor by Edward Lind Morse is equally attractive and documents the garden before French and Henry Bacon designed a decorative fountain as a centerpiece. Impressionist Robert Vonnoh painted a sparkling garden scene, as well as portraits of French in his studio and of Margaret in French's study, bathed in light. Swedish-born John C. Johansen, who with his artist wife, Jean MacLane, spent summers at Weybourne Hill in Stockbridge, painted double "conversation piece" portraits of French



AUGUSTUS SAINT-GAUDENS (1848–1907), *Sarah Redwood Lee*, 1881, plaster, 26 x 11 1/4 in., Chesterwood, Gift of the Daniel Chester French Foundation, NT 69.38.1170; photo: Paul Rocheleau

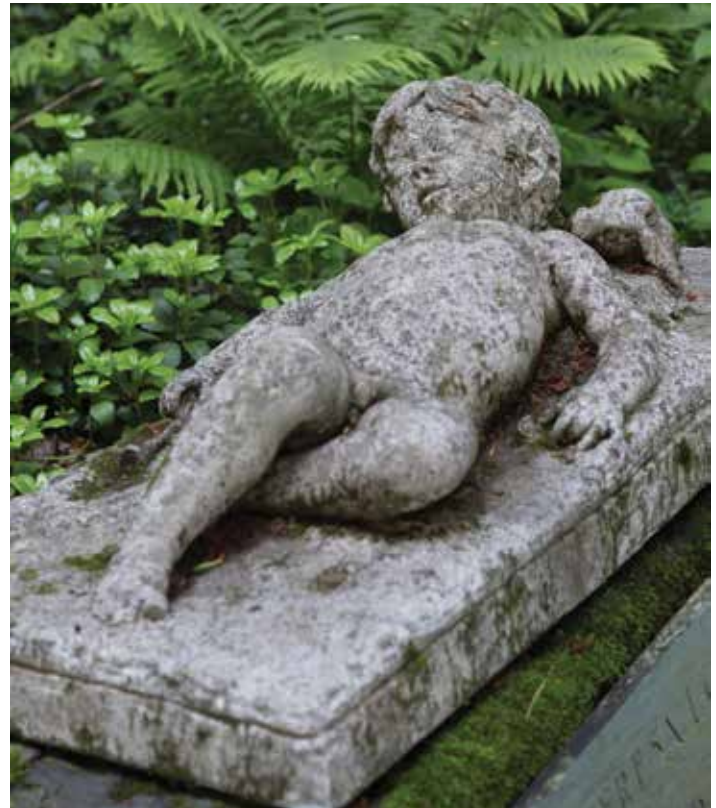


BESSIE POTTER VONNOH (1872–1955), *Girl Dancing*, 1897, cast c. 1906, bronze, 14 1/2 x 12 x 8 1/4 in., Chesterwood, Bequest of Margaret French Cresson, NT 73.45.1686; photo: Gregory Cherin

and his wife in the Chesterwood residence's parlor, and also Margaret and her husband, William Penn Cresson, at the Dormouse, their small cottage down the road. Milton Bancroft's 1904 pastel portrait of French's student and protégée, sculptor Evelyn Beatrice Longman, who was considered part of the family, was likely much treasured. A replica usually hangs in the residence while the original is now in the Chesterwood Works on Paper Collection at Williams College's Chapin Library.

Additional gifts from artist friends include sculpted portraits of Margaret by Longman, as well as *Poetry* and *Prosperity*, two drawings by muralist Edwin H. Blashfield, whom French thanked in a note saying, "I am positively embarrassed by the magnificence of your present to me."¹⁷ Around 1899, sculptor Herbert Adams gave French a polychromed terracotta, *La Jeunesse*; French later recommended that the Metropolitan Museum acquire a magnificent marble and applewood version, declaring that this head had "received the applause of the best artists in New York."¹⁸ An even more significant friendship is explored in the exhibition *Monuments and Myths: The America of Sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French*, now traveling across the U.S. French is known to have worked on tinting the plaster Parthenon frieze at Saint-Gaudens's studio in Cornish, but little else by him is found in the collection there. At some point Saint-Gaudens gave French a plaster portrait of *Sarah Redwood Lee*, which Saint-Gaudens considered one of his most successful bas-reliefs. French treasured it, and most likely attempted to emulate his friend's masterful technique in his own bas-relief work.

Along with *Sarah Redwood Lee* and *La Jeunesse* (now in the studio's reception room), important American sculptures at Chesterwood



EDWARD CLARK POTTER (1857–1923), *Sleeping Faun Visited by an Inquisitive Rabbit*, 1888, marble cement, 13 1/2 x 39 x 16 1/2 in., Chesterwood, Gift of the Daniel Chester French Foundation, NT 69.38.3534; photo: Paul Rocheleau

include Longman's bronze *Torso*, Bessie Potter Vonnoh's bronze *Girl Dancing*, and Edward Clark Potter's charming *Sleeping Faun Visited by an Inquisitive Rabbit*. French considered Potter's marble version "one of the very finest pieces of... sculpture in the country,"¹⁹ and he installed a marble cement version in "the Circle," an outdoor room along the woodland walks at Chesterwood. It is not surprising that the Metropolitan acquired versions of these same works during French's three-decade tenure as its *de facto* sculpture curator.²⁰

Important works in marble at Chesterwood include the neoclassical *Eve*, a gift from sculptor Thomas Ball, in whose Florence studio French had worked in the 1870s. In his 1875 essay "The Studio of Thomas Ball," French marveled at seeing the original full-size statue of *Eve Just Created*; today Ball's bust of *Eve* is displayed in Chesterwood's parlor. A Renaissance-style *Bust of an Italian Woman* carved in the studio of Larkin Mead, another American working in Florence, sits on the dining room mantel. According to a handwritten label on its reverse, Mary Adams French purchased it for \$70 with "the first money earned in literature in 1900." Perhaps she had recently sold one of her short stories, though her best-known publication, *Memories of a Sculptor's Wife*, was not published until 1928.²¹ Although not as active as her husband in collecting art, this purchase indicates she had refined taste and an eye for quality.

Margaret and Penn Cresson were also art aficionados. Wed in Sicily, they began their life together by acquiring watercolors of Taormina street scenes. A talented portraitist, Margaret French Cresson continued sculpting after her marriage, and in 1925 made a sculpted portrait of the landscapist Henry Parton, a family friend and frequent participant in Stockbridge's annual art exhibitions. She gave Parton this bronze and in return received *Tom Ball Mountain*, an autumn view of Monument Mountain from the west porch of the Chesterwood residence. Parton later gave her two more paintings; one of these, *Berkshire Storm*, has traditionally hung in the residence's stairwell.²² Like her father, Margaret



GARI MELCHERS (1860–1932), *A Wayside Madonna*, 1925, etching on paper, 8 x 6 1/4 in., Chesterwood Works on Paper Collection, Chapin Library, Williams College, (Bequest of Margaret French Cresson, NT 73.45.5308)

French Cresson was a member of art committees and societies, and her social circle included artists, photographers, and writers. Often in thanks for her hospitality at Chesterwood, she received numerous gifts from artists such as Donald De Lue, Jerry Farnsworth, and Isabella Banks Markell. Berkshire neighbor Frank Crowninshield sent a 1921 Rockwell Kent woodcut and inscribed Gari Melchers's poignant etching *A Wayside Madonna* "To Peg and Penn."

Penn Cresson was from a wealthy Pennsylvania/Delaware family related to the Quaker settler William Penn. The Chesterwood collection includes works he inherited, such as a reproduction of Thomas Sully's portrait of his ancestor Elliott Cresson (1796–1854), which Margaret displayed at Chesterwood. Penn's uncle George Vaux Cresson left him a notable landscape by Scottish-born Hudson River School landscapist William Hart, and many other objects at Chesterwood also have a Cresson provenance. Penn Cresson also amassed a large collection of art and ephemera during his travels and consular appointments abroad, including Persian "miniatures" from Tehran and watercolors by the Armenian artist Sarkis Katchadourian. The Chesterwood Works on Paper Collection includes many of Cresson's own accomplished drawings and watercolors. Trained as an architect at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he made a detailed drawing for a house in Sheridan Square, Washington, D.C., now the Irish Embassy. In 1923 he purchased a Saint-Gaudens bronze statuette of *Diana* at a sale at the Stockbridge estate of Daniel Rhodes Hanna. The Cressons displayed their prized

Diana in their Washington townhouse; when Margaret moved to Chesterwood, she installed it on the breakfast porch, later in the residence main hallway, and finally in the dining room. More recently, it was on long-term loan in the Metropolitan's Luce Study Center, but now is back on view at Chesterwood.

As Chesterwood continues to evolve, additional works by artists in French's circle will be placed on view throughout the site. It is hoped that along with an appreciation for French's creative process and achievements, visitors will gain an understanding of how an artist and his family decorated their surroundings to foster a creative environment, support living artists, and reaffirm their place in society. The Frenches' collection was deeply personal and rewards close looking; the works tell stories of aspiration, connection, discovery, experience, family, and friendship. ●

Information: chesterwood.org. Details about the national tour of *Monuments & Myths* are available on the website of its organizer, the American Federation of Arts: amfedarts.org.

Dana Pilson is a curatorial researcher and collections coordinator at Chesterwood, and a frequent contributor to *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

Notes

- 1 For Chase's studio and collecting practices, see Isabel L. Taube, "William Merritt Chase's Cosmopolitan Eclecticism," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* (online), Autumn 2016.
- 2 Daniel Chester French (DCF) to Henry Flagg French, 11 June 1876. Daniel Chester French Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter DCFP/LOC).
- 3 DCF to Ellen Ball, wife of Thomas Ball, 18 May 1879; DCFP/LOC.
- 4 DCF to William Merchant Richardson French, 16 Aug 1874; DCFP/LOC.
- 5 DCF to sister Harriette Van Mater French Hollis, 26 Aug 1877; DCFP/LOC. French's portrait of Porter was cast in bronze before 1914 at the John Williams Foundry; it is now in the collection of New York University's Hall of American Artists, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library.
- 6 DCF to Henry Flagg French, 15 July 1876; DCFP/LOC.
- 7 DCF to William Merchant Richardson French, 2 Aug 1889; DCFP/LOC.
- 8 DCF to Henry Flagg French, 15 April 1885; DCFP/LOC.
- 9 DCF to William Merchant Richardson French, 10 Nov 1886; DCFP/LOC.
- 10 DCF to William Merchant Richardson French, 13 Aug 1910; DCFP/LOC.
- 11 DCF to Henry Flagg French, 10 August 1875; DCFP/LOC.
- 12 Margaret French Cresson (MFC) to Mrs. Henry Howell, Jr., Frick Art Reference Library, 24 April 1967. Curatorial files, Chesterwood.
- 13 MFC suggests the work was purchased at a 31 May 1907 auction in New York. She recalls that her father purchased it before her 1909 debut party, for which French fixed up the "old Studio" in New York; she remembers seeing it in the studio then. Oral History, 28 Sept 1972, curatorial files, Chesterwood.
- 14 Cataloguing information at Chesterwood indicates French purchased *Lady Frances Hamilton* for \$300 at a 26 March 1909, auction. According to MFC, this was the most expensive painting he ever purchased. (Mary Anne Christy to Michael Richman, 28 June 1964. Curatorial files, Chesterwood.) French purchased *The Duchess of Portsmouth* at the Fifth Avenue Auction Rooms, New York, 31 March 1903, for \$82.50.
- 15 DCF to Albin Polasek, 28 Oct 1924; DCFP/LOC.
- 16 DCF to William Merchant Richardson French, 30 Dec 1900; DCFP/LOC.
- 17 DCF to Edwin H. Blashfield, 3 Feb 1906; DCFP/LOC.
- 18 DCF to Robert W. de Forest, 1 Feb 1907; DCFP/LOC.
- 19 DCF to Oliver D. Russell, 1 April 1892; DCFP/LOC.
- 20 Thayer Tolles, "'One of the greatest interests of his life,' Daniel Chester French and the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Fine Art Connoisseur* (May/June 2016), 48–53.
- 21 Curiously, French's 24 June 1900 letter to Newton Mackintosh states that while in Florence he ordered "thirty flower pots for the garden ... and a renaissance marble bust!" It is possible he is referring to the *Bust of an Italian Woman*, as it resembles an Italian Renaissance marble bust more than almost any other object in the collection.
- 22 MFC's bronze bust of Parton is in a private collection.