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Newberry Library

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BUSINESSMAN, BIBLIOPHILE, AND PATRON

EDWARD E. AYER AND HIS COLLECTION OF AMERICAN INDIAN ART

FREDERICK E. HOXIE

Like communities of people, museums and libraries often carry a distinct set of values into the world. Through shared values, these cultural institutions maintain a special sense of their own identity and mission. This sense of common purpose, while valuable, is not always a good thing. A belief that "this is what we stand for" can carry an institution through adversity, but it can also blind it to new opportunities or foster a distorted sense of its own history.

The Newberry Library is a private research library whose holdings in the humanities attract a large and diverse army of researchers. As one stands beside its front door as readers enter, it seems obvious what the institution is and whom it serves. Its mission seems equally clear: to collect and preserve books and to serve the scholars who use them.

But the founders of the institution articulated no such mission. Created in 1887 with a bequest from the estate of Walter Loomis Newberry, the library took shape amidst Chicago's explosive growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its founding president, Frederick W. Poole, was a pioneer of modern librarianship and its early trustees were an energetic array of businessmen and civic boosters. They reveled in the library's quality as well as its public service: the Newberry's collections would be spectacular and open to the public.

Unique among the early trustees was Edward Everett Ayer (fig. 1). Born in 1841, Ayer came of age in the boom years following the Civil War, parleying his father's extensive mercantile connections into a successful timber business. Ayer called himself a lumberman, but his principal commodity was railroad ties. He sold ties to the Union Pacific and Northwestern railroads in the 1860s and 1870s and later acquired the Illinois Central, Santa Fe, and Southern Pacific as clients. Between times he found customers for his apparently endless inventory of telegraph poles and fence posts.

Ayer amassed a fortune by specializing in one market, moving swiftly to stay ahead of his competition, and developing a reputation for in-
tegrity and reliability. When Ayer promised there would be 100,000 oak ties on the docks at Chicago on 1 May, they were there. But Ayer's position among the Newberry's founders does not derive from his business success. It comes instead from the unique library he amassed over a forty-year period on the five hundred-year-long encounter between Indians and Europeans in the Americas.

The "Ayer Library" (which became the "Ayer collection" when he gave it to the Newberry in 1911) today contains more than 100,000 books, many thousand pages of manuscripts, and hundreds of drawings and paintings. Its history belies and illuminates the library's current self-image, for it reveals that individuals who shaped the institution often had a far broader sense of its mission than the people who administer it today. By placing his collection in a research library and endowing it so that it might grow, Ayer was asserting the significance of Indian history by underwriting the future study of American Indians. He insured that Indians would be the subjects of serious study, and he made it impossible for scholars to ignore the mountain of materials that document the Native American past. In a sense he was charting an area of commitment rather than prescribing what should be done. His goals were open-ended.

The story of Edward E. Ayer's collection deserves brief treatment. When he was nineteen, Ayer—who had grown tired of the predictable

life in his native Harvard, Illinois—signed on with a wagon train bound for California. After a lively trip across the Plains (and a stint as a miner in Virginia City, Nevada), he made it to San Francisco. He arrived in the fall of 1860, just ahead of the news of Lincoln’s election. When the Civil War broke out the following spring, he enlisted in the California Volunteers. Ayer spent the war in the West, far from the well-known battlefields, but in the center of a new cultural world. Army service drew him to Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Tucson, and south to Mexico. He met and fought with Indians, traveled with Spanish-speaking allies, and saw the interior West before it was overrun by railroads and divided into modern ranches and farms. By the time he returned home in 1864, Ayer was hooked on the region’s history and complex mix of cultures. That fall he bought his first book, Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, which he had first read in Arizona.

Although readers at the Newberry and historians of American libraries have long been aware of Ayer’s generosity with his books, they have paid little attention to the art contained in his collection. Dazzled by the books, they have usually considered the visual material an afterthought or an ungainly appendage to the businessman’s great collection. As a result, scholars are far more familiar with the Columbus letter (published in 1493 to report on the Italian sea captain’s westward voyages) or the extensive runs of obscure historical and anthropological journals than they are with the sketchbooks of Frank Blackwell Mayer, the original watercolors Ayer obtained from the estate of Karl Bodmer, or the watercolors of Iroquois false faces by Rufus Grider (fig. 2). Most historians of the American Indian are not aware that the Ayer art catalogue lists several hundred items ranging from a bronze sculpture, “Moqui Runner” by W.H. McNeil, to paintings by Charles Bird King, to a set of 217 drawings by George Catlin (fig. 3).

In fact, the Ayer art collection contains a remarkable set of visual materials that complement the books and manuscripts. The pictures illustrate the texts. But as one examines the collection, a second—and more striking—feature becomes apparent. Ayer did not just gather pictures of proven historical significance; he patronized contemporary artists who were unknown and largely unappreciated but who shared his goal of documenting the story of Indians and whites in North America. Ayer was not only a businessman and a bibliophile. He was a patron as well.

Ayer made his first acquisitions of contemporary art in the middle 1890s, well before the Santa Fe marketplace became a center of international commerce and well before Indian art became a marker of urban chic. He was a pioneer patron of art by and about Indians, bringing him significance beyond his role as a library benefactor and bookman. Ayer’s story
raises questions about him as well as about the role of institutions in the history of art. Why was Ayer interested in contemporary Indian material? What were his collecting goals? What role, if any, did Ayer's collecting practices play in the growth and development of Indian art in the twentieth century? And how did the institution that inherited his collection—the Newberry Library—carry on his commitment?

Answering questions of this kind are surprisingly difficult. Although Ayer's papers were deposited at the library by his family following his death, they only hint at the lumberman's motives and goals. Ayer loved to tell of his youthful trip across the Plains and of his first encounter with Prescott's history, but he recounted the stories so many times that they masked his personal reflections on the value of Indian materials. Even though Ayer never spelled out his art-coll ecting philosophy, surviving letters and other documents—and the art itself—allow us to construct one for him. Piecing together this philosophy helps us see both the values that shaped the original Ayer collection and the way those values are altered when they become a part of a cultural institution.

Edward Ayer thrived in the industrial whirlwind of turn-of-the-century Chicago. Nevertheless, he wanted to assemble a documentary record of American Indian cultures and the encounter between those cultures and Euroamericans. (The description is my own; he would have used terms like American expansion and the westward movement of civilization.) He was largely uninterested in secondary treatments of events or in second-hand depictions of Indian life. His preference for contemporary material that was documentary rather than interpretive, and the way this preference set him apart from other collectors, was made crystal clear in his refusal to purchase or support the work of Edward S. Curtis.

Early in the century, Curtis succeeded in winning the support of Theodore Roosevelt and J.P. Morgan for a project to visit and photograph all of the major Indian tribes in the United States. With Roosevelt's name on his letterhead and Morgan's money to get him started, Curtis was able to begin his project; later fund raising made it possible to continue the work for three decades. Curtis's forty-volume work, The North American Indians, is both an artistic and an ethnographic monument to the photographer's determination to record the life of a "vanishing race." His work has become a hot property: sets of the limited-edition volumes now bring prices in excess of $100,000. In spite of the project's promise even at the time, Ayer wasn't interested. Curtis first approached him in 1909, promising to reserve set #35 for the Chicago
collector. (Morgan got the first twenty-five.) Ayer's librarian turned Curtis down with a brief note. In 1921, the photographer and his backers made another try. This time Ayer felt compelled to answer the inquiry himself and at some length.

Ayer began his reply by agreeing with Curtis's assertion that it would be a "veritable calamity if a vivid and truthful record of the life of the North American Indian were not kept." Here their agreement ended, however, for Ayer went on to lecture the photographer and his patrons about his own career as a collector. "Forty years ago," Ayer wrote, "I commenced to gather paraphernalia and literature on the North American Indian. On paraphernalia I spent over $100,000, the fruits of which are in the Field Museum of Natural History, to whom I presented same. On literature I have spent over $700,000, the proceeds of which are represented in 50,000 titles which I presented to the Newberry Library of Chicago." Ayer then listed his art holdings, his collection of early maps and atlases, and his project of collecting more than 100,000 pages of transcripts from the Archives of the Indies in Seville. He added:

Mr. Curtis approached me very early about the work he was going to do. I told him that I knew he was a fine photographer but it would take at least ten to fifteen of the best anthropologists in America twenty years to write the history of the North American Indian as it should be done and the work of a single individual in this line I considered would be valueless to the original work in my library.

Ayer could not resist a final shot. "I have only given a description of my library," he concluded with mock humility, "that gentlemen so vitally interested as the people connected with your proposition may know where the real data in regard to the North American Indian is." Ayer's drawings and paintings, then, were conceived as a part of his library. His interests were primarily documentary rather than aesthetic.

Second, Ayer was eager for his materials to be used. Like many men who had catapulted from modest means to wealth, he couldn't resist reporting how much he had spent on his collections. Nevertheless, he did not take a mercenary view of his library. He wanted it to be used. He happily supplied paintings and sculpture to the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo and he was eager for researchers to see his treasures. Ayer moved his library—and his librarian—to the Newberry in 1911. He saw that as many Indian paintings as possible were hung in the Ayer room, and he corresponded eagerly with the library staff about visitors. A letter written in 1925 is particularly touching.

Clara Smith, Ayer's niece and librarian, noted in one of her regular letters to her uncle that she looked up from her desk one day as "a man and a lady came to the gate. I saw at once that the man was Dr. Charles Eastman." (Eastman, a Santee Sioux physician, was the most prominent Indian leader of his day.) She continued:

Dr. Eastman told me when he shook hands with me that he had wanted to see the Ayer library for a long time. . . . I told him I had something that I had been wanting to show him for a long time. I brought out one of the Mayer sketchbooks and showed him a pencil sketch of Nancy Eastman, the half-breed daughter of Captain Seth Eastman, and Dr. Eastman's mother. [Eastman's mother died a few months after his birth.] How do you think that you would feel if you were suddenly shown a picture of your mother, of whom you had no recollection, she died when he was a baby, and of whom you had no earthly reason to think that there could possibly be a picture in existence. . . ? When he left [he] said that he was coming again, and he wanted the picture copied. And he patted me on the shoulder and said, "To think that I have seen a picture of my mother."

While the encounter with Eastman was particularly dramatic, it demonstrated Ayer's idea
that his books and art collection should be widely available. During his lifetime Ayer paid for the preparation of a printed guide to his collection and tried to organize a massive bibliography of North American Indians. He also was an eager promoter of Indian history. The principal object of his lobbying was Henry E. Huntington, founder of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Not only did Ayer enjoy friendly competition with Huntington in the European and American rare book markets, but he was proud of having convinced the California philanthropist to copy all of the Newberry’s portraits of that state’s Indians. A second set of Ayer’s California portrait collection is now housed in San Marino.

Finally, Ayer seems to have been distinctly uninterested in the growing popularity of Indian art. While many of his contemporaries were beginning to get in on this new market as collectors and even dealers, Ayer’s interest continued to be scholarly. His response to Curtis certainly reflected this, as did his willingness to make duplicates of California portraits. Another letter, written by his nephew, the artist Elbridge Ayer Burbank, points out Ayer’s distaste for commercialism as well as his pride in his own taste. Burbank, who once wrote that he regretted allowing his uncle to buy blankets from the Navajo trader Lorenzo Hubbell (“If I had known then what I do now I would have kept them myself.”), approached his uncle about making drawings of his blanket collection. Ayer’s nephew hoped to send his drawings to Hubbell who would have copies made by local Navajo weavers. Burbank reported that his uncle refused. “He did not like the idea,” the nephew reported to Hubbell. Apparently Ayer said, “he would rather not have any of [them] duplicated, that he would rather have the only one, so I did not copy them.” One might suspect that Ayer was only trying to protect the value of his blankets, but it is more likely that he wanted to distance himself from Hubbell and his enterprising nephew, who was trying to sell blankets at the Marshall Fields department store at the same time. The collector demonstrated his indifference to the blankets’ value by giving them to the Newberry at the time of his death.

Ayer’s collecting principles are reflected in the contemporary art he purchased and commissioned. He was primarily interested in material that had documentary significance. He acquired paintings and drawings for use and study and he avoided the commercial art world. As a result, the Newberry’s Ayer collection contains a small but significant sample of visual material that documents native cultures during the collector’s lifetime.

Fig. 5. Apache Girl, by E. A. Burbank, 1897. Courtesy Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
The largest portion of Ayer's contemporary collection consists of work by the collector's nephew, Elbridge Ayer Burbank. Like Ayer, Burbank grew up in Harvard, Illinois, in the shadow of his grandfather, Elbridge Gerry Ayer. Burbank's father, Abner J. Burbank, had married Edward Ayer's older sister and settled down to work in her father's dry goods store. Burbank studied art at the Chicago Art Institute and worked as an illustrator for the Northern Pacific Railroad's *Northwest Illustrated Monthly* before leaving to study in Munich in 1886. His first stay was brief, but he returned to Germany in 1888 and stayed for four years, working as a portrait painter.

When he returned to the U.S., Burbank continued with portraiture and began painting sentimental scenes of everyday life. He also continued to struggle with the manic depression that plagued him for the rest of his life. Periods of intense activity alternated with periods of inactivity and he spent nearly twenty years (1917-1936) in a psychiatric hospital. In 1897, when Burbank was casting around for new subjects and his uncle was busily amassing his library, Ayer granted his nephew a commission. He sent him to Oklahoma to execute a portrait of Geronimo. This errand started Burbank on his life's work: "Once in the Indian country, I was fascinated by the wilderness and freedom of the west and delighted with the rich and abundant material which I found at hand, practically untouched."4

The portrait of Geronimo was followed by trips to Arizona to paint and draw other Apaches (fig. 5). While in the Southwest, Burbank met the Hubbells and settled for a time at Ganado, the site of the family's famous Navajo trading post. The artist had success placing his portraits in popular magazines and exhibiting them back in Chicago, and his uncle seems to have stood ready to finance his field trips. Over the next twenty years, he painted individuals from more than 125 tribal groups, traveling to the northern Plains (fig. 6), New Mexico, Oklahoma, and California. The Ayer collection thus contains 1236 portrait drawings and twenty-five oil paintings.

One of Burbank's early subjects was himself an artist: Hawgone (also known as Silverhorn), an Oklahoma Kiowa (1861-1941). Apparently at his uncle's urging (and surely with his uncle's cash), Burbank collected 123 drawings from Silverhorn, thereby adding a brilliant example of plains ledger-style art to the Ayer library (fig. 7). Silverhorn was the younger brother of Ohetonti, one of the famous Kiowa prisoners of war who were incarcerated at Fort Marion, Florida, in the 1870s and who began reproducing traditional drawings with paint and paper to sell to the eager tourists who flocked to visit them in their prison. Upon his return to Oklahoma in 1880, Ohetonti collaborated with his brother Hawgone, painting for both traditional ceremonial purposes and for interested white visitors such as Burbank and Smithsonian anthropologist James Mooney. In the words of a modern art historian, Silverhorn's drawings represent "a culmination" of the plains ledger style and a fascinating bridge to the more "modern" painting of the Kiowa Five artists of the 1930s.5 Professor Oscar B. Jacobson, director of the Oklahoma University School of Art and mentor to the Kiowa Five, wrote to the Newberry in 1929 seeking information on E.A. Burbank.

Burbank was also probably the source for the Ayer collections' paintings by the Apache leader Naiche, a son of Cochise and the hereditary chief of Geronimo's band that was captured by General George Crook in 1886. Like the rebellious Kiowas, Geronimo's Apaches were sent to Fort Marion, but they were later transferred to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Naiche remained a prisoner of war until 1913.

Ayer acquired 160 drawings by children and adults at Fort Yates, North Dakota, in 1913 (fig. 8). These pieces were purchased in part to support the Indians during a time when neither government rations nor their own crops were sufficient to feed them. The largely Hunkpapa Sioux at Fort Yates and the Standing Rock Reservation produced images of traditional life. Unfortunately, these rich images of raiding and hunting lack attribution, so modern researchers cannot identify the individual artists.

Awa Tsireh can be identified. One of the
first Pueblo artists to sell his work to white tourists and art collectors in Santa Fe, Awa Tsireh, also known as Alfonso Roybal, was born in 1898. He was befriended by early patrons such as Alice Corbin Henderson and introduced to Ayer sometime in the early 1920s. Awa Tsireh's paintings documented traditional life at his San Ildefonso pueblo, reflecting the "traditional" approach of his generation of Southwestern Indian artists. Ayer purchased a series of twenty paintings of San Ildefonso dance scenes and two large murals.

Finally, Ayer collected a large number of contemporary photographs and a number of individual pieces. He purchased fifty photographic portraits by Frederick Rinehart of tribal chiefs at the Omaha Exposition in 1899, photographs of Klamath and Hupa Indians by Alice Palmer, and paintings by Grace Hudson (of Pomo life), Herman W. Hansen (1854-1924), and the Hopi Monroe Frederick Quamahongiva.

Ayer's collection of paintings and drawings by contemporary artists reflects a coherent collecting philosophy. Inspired perhaps by the enthusiasm of his troubled but talented nephew, Ayer remained committed to documentary materials and shunned an involvement in more "fashionable" artists of his day such as the Hopi painter Fred Kabotie or Kiowa Stephen Mopope. Ayer also continued to advocate the active use of his library by inviting scholars to study his materials and by exhibiting his growing collection of contemporary art.

Soon after the Ayer room at the Newberry Library opened, a busy schedule of exhibitions...
began to be reported in the institution's annual reports. Many of these exhibits contained contemporary paintings and drawings. Burbank's work was displayed in 1920 and 1928; William Henry Holmes of the Smithsonian Institution had two drawings in a show on Maya culture in 1923. In 1924 there were exhibits of both Rinehart photographs and Grace Hudson's Pomo scenes, and in 1926 and 1927 (the year of Ayer's death) there were group shows that included recently executed pieces. The most important exhibits occurred in 1925 and 1928. The first of these major shows presented Indian dances from different parts of North America and contained twenty paintings and one large mural by Awa Tsireh. This was the largest exhibition of Awa Tsireh's work ever mounted. In 1928 an entire show was given over to Silverhorn's Kiowa art. Interestingly, while exhibits of material from the Ayer collection continued into the 1930s, none of these contained contemporary materials.

But Ayer's death brought an end to more than exhibitions. As his bequest came more fully under the control of the Newberry Library and its staff of professionals, the collecting of contemporary Indian materials stopped. There are three reasons for this. First, modern bibliographers had less freedom to acquire visual materials. When the choice was between a book

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**FIG. 8** Man with Lance on Horseback, artist unknown, Fort Yates, North Dakota, 1913. The notation on the painting reads, "The peculiar white face of the horse shows that the horse and rider were killed; so they both sped away to 'the Land of the West.'" Courtesy Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.
and a painting, it was more prudent to purchase the book. Second, the years following Ayer's death brought an extraordinary growth in the Indian art market. In the process, the distinction between documentary and purely artistic materials grew fuzzy; art acquisitions grew more expensive and more difficult to justify on scholarly grounds. And third, Ayer's successors lacked his determination to document American Indian life up to the present day. Surrounded by a historiography of the frontier and a rising romanticism about the West, book selectors (and art patrons as well) grew increasingly interested in other aspects of westward expansion: white explorers, fur traders, and military history. Amidst this proliferation of new subjects, Ayer's initial interest—the encounter between "civilization" and the Indians—became only one of many bibliographic concerns. At the same time, Indian history receded into national mythology. As people like Ayer died, the institution lost its sense that Native Americans were a vital part of modern history.

Edward Ayer's brief career as an art patron should serve as a reminder that cultural institutions may not make good art patrons. While stable and persistent, institutions and their collection policies—whether in the arts or the humanities in general—run the risk of reflecting conventional academic wisdom rather than a visionary mission. Edward Ayer's determination to collect contemporary documentary material thus provides modern scholars with a rich record of early twentieth-century Indian life while reminding them that visionary patronage can easily be overcome by institutional inertia. Ayer's collection uniquely combines print and visual sources to capture for all time the vitality of modern American Indian communities. The subsequent decline in the collection's acquisition of Indian art has also limited the extent to which the Ayer library can continue to reflect the vivid genius of native life.

NOTES

I am grateful to Jane Levin for assisting me in the research conducted for this paper and for offering suggestions on the text.

1. Edward Ayer to Managers of the North American Indian Fund, 25 January 1921, Ayer Papers, Newberry Library (Hereafter referred to as Ayer Mss.)
2. Clara Smith to Ayer, 8 April 1925, Ayer Mss.
3. Elbridge Ayer Burbank to Lorenzo Hubbell, 27 July 1902, in Hubbell Papers, University of Arizona Library, hereafter cited as Hubbell Mss. For Burbank's regret at letting his uncle buy rugs from Hubbell, see Burbank to Hubbell, 19 May 1903, Hubbell Mss.
6. See Alice R. James to Ayer, 16 February 1926, Ayer Mss., for a description of the painting. It contains (left to right), a hunter, a man buffalo, a woman buffalo, another man buffalo, two deer, two mountain sheep, two antelopes, and five drummers acting as a chorus. For more on Awa Tsireh, see Dorothy Dunn, "Awa Tsireh: Painter of San Ildefonso," El Palacio April 1956: 108–115.