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# Framing Cultural Capitalism: William Wilson Corcoran and Alice Walton as Patrons of the American Art Museum

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FRAMING CULTURAL CAPITALISM: WILLIAM WILSON CORCORAN AND  
ALICE WALTON AS PATRONS OF THE AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

by

Kelsey E. Tyler

A THESIS

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FRAMING CULTURAL CAPITALISM: WILLIAM WILSON CORCORAN AND  
ALICE WALTON AS PATRONS OF THE AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Kelsey E. Tyler, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2012

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In 2011, Alice Walton opened what is now considered to be among the most important American art collections in the country, in a museum called Crystal Bridges, in Bentonville, Arkansas. What is remarkable is not only the exorbitant amount of money spent to open the museum - over \$800 million dollars - but also that she was the primary financier. William Wilson Corcoran, a mid-nineteenth-century banker, in many ways is a better comparison than Morgan or Gardner, as like Walton he intended to found a museum dedicated specifically to American art. His museum, which he hoped would become a national gallery, would in the nation's capital advocate for American artistic achievements rather than European ones. His gallery – open free to the public on two nights a week – would also expose the common man and woman to artwork that expressed beliefs about the unique nature of American identity, behavior and politics.

This thesis will show how and why Corcoran, as a private individual, was able to position his gallery as one of the most important American art museums in the country. Before Paul DiMaggio and Lawrence Levine described the process, Corcoran took steps toward the sacralization of his art collection, distinguishing himself from existing art associations and their structures of governance. I will then demonstrate how Crystal Bridges operates as an illustration of what might be called “post-sacralization.” DiMaggio and Levine argue that in the late nineteenth century, cultural gatekeepers

began to erect new spatial and functional barriers between high culture and popular culture, in order to secure control over the definitions of high art. They did so partly through institutional frameworks like museums that repositioned private interests and collections in terms of public aims and education.

In 2011, Alice Walton opened what is now considered to be among the most important American art collections in the country, in a museum called Crystal Bridges, in Bentonville, Arkansas. What is remarkable is not only the exorbitant amount of money spent to open the museum - over \$800 million dollars - but also that she was the primary financier.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as a glowing *New York Times* profile said, reveling in this modern display of American financial power, “The era of the world-class museum built by a single philanthropist in the tradition of Isabella Stewart Gardner, John Pierpont Morgan Jr. and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney may seem to have passed, but Alice L. Walton is bringing it back.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike these forebears, however, Alice Walton established her museum in the twenty-first century, and in a location far from a major urban center. But as the *New Yorker* said in an equally admiring profile, Walton does share their mission: “Crystal Bridges has something in common with the great institutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which sought to infuse a populace with high-cultural literacy.”<sup>3</sup> William Wilson Corcoran, a mid-nineteenth-century banker, in many ways is a better comparison than Morgan or Gardner, as like Walton he intended to found a museum dedicated specifically to American art. His museum, which he hoped would become a national gallery, would in the nation’s capital advocate for American artistic achievements rather than European ones. His gallery – open free to the public on

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<sup>1</sup> This figure purports to be Alice Walton’s alone but is, in fact, a combination of three endowments from Walton family foundations. Leslie Newell Peacock, “Crystal Bridges is making it, with new \$800 million,” *Arkansas Times*. Accessed June 25, 2012. <http://www.arktimes.com/arkansas/arhistory/Content?oid=1694284>.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Vogel, “A Billionaire’s Eye for Art Shapes her Singular Museum,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2011. Accessed June 25, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/arts/design/alice-walton-on-her-crystal-bridges-museum-of-american-art.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Mead, “Alice’s Wonderland,” *The New Yorker* June 27, 2011. Accessed June 25, 2012. [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/06/27/110627fa\\_fact\\_mead](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/06/27/110627fa_fact_mead)

two nights a week – would also expose the common man and woman to artwork that expressed beliefs about the unique nature of American identity, behavior and politics.

Alice Walton hopes her museum will become a similar landmark for American art, but one that instead brings these monuments to a region not known for its museums. Crystal Bridges in fact does sustain a mid-nineteenth-century notion akin to Corcoran's of the possibility of creating a unique American high culture, one that is distinct from Europe or the rest of the world. Given not only the global reach and markets of Walmart, the corporation Alice Walton's father founded in Bentonville, but the transnational aspects of present-day American culture generally, it may not be surprising that this insistence on the existence of a national canon of high art finds a twenty-first century home in the Ozarks.

As American art museum founders, William Wilson Corcoran and Alice Walton have much in common: they both had a privileged upbringing, they both made their money in the financial sector, and they both turned their private collections into celebrated galleries. Corcoran amassed his fortune as a banker in the early 1800's and went on to invest profitably in D.C. real estate. A native of Georgetown, Corcoran's father was a prominent figure in business and politics in Washington D.C. Corcoran quite early became interested in supporting the art community in D.C., which was relatively small in comparison to cities like Boston and Philadelphia or even Baltimore, which had active art schools or exhibitions and patronage based in the prosperous merchant class. In order to garner support for the arts in his smaller city, he founded Washington D.C.'s Mechanics Institute and sat on the Board of Directors of the Washington Art Association, a group that combined artists and patrons. These

organizations emphasized both education and contemporary art. Libraries and reading rooms were set up in association with the Mechanics Institute and the Washington Art Association with the intention of cultivating knowledge of the arts, the technical skills necessary to exercise artistic skill, and help in bridging the gap between historical art practices and contemporary ones.

American art was only collected by a few private patrons at this time, who typically displayed it in private galleries inside their homes. What few institutions existed, including the U.S. government, also purchased from Europe, even for commissions for the U.S. Capitol building. European originals and copies flooded the high-end market for oil paintings in particular. Many nineteenth-century museum collectors and gallery founders considered European art, specifically that considered to be “Old Masters,” to be the most appropriate art to improve the taste and manners of Americans. Corcoran instead emphasized the value in art that was being made by Americans. Its freedom from European conventions was its virtue, for this made it suitable for educating citizens of a new nation in a republican culture. He accordingly conceived of the idea of a public “national” gallery to display artwork by prominent contemporary artists in the nation’s capital, giving citizens excluded from the largely private realm of European high culture access to it. James Renwick, who had already designed the Gothic Revival buildings for the Smithsonian Institutions (located across the White House lawn from the Corcoran Gallery), was hired as architect of the gallery. The building was built in the French 2nd Empire style -- a distinctively up-to-date style different from the neo-classicism of official Washington -- and located on the street adjacent to both the White House and the bank Corcoran had founded. Corcoran funded

the building and bought the core collection before granting a Board of Trustees control over the gallery in 1870<sup>4</sup>.

Alice Walton is also a banker and broker, though a considerable portion of her fortune comes her family's business. Her father, Sam Walton, founded Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the leading international supplier of food and household goods known for low-prices that make it challenging for other retailers to compete. Like Corcoran, Walton built her museum, Crystal Bridges, in her native city of Bentonville, Arkansas, where her father's original "five and dime" store was located. Again like Corcoran, it is clear that her collecting was done almost from the start with public as well as private purposes and tastes in mind. The interest in influencing the public perhaps led to the unusual decision to concentrate on American art. Crystal Bridges is the first major American art museum since Gertrude Whitney founded the Whitney Museum in 1929. Most twentieth-century museums are museums of contemporary art, a field which is defined internationally. Contemporary art museums typically collect non-regional work from artists around the world. In a maneuver that critics have called attention to, though Walton and her family have profited from international markets and globalized work forces, she follows Corcoran's precedent in collecting specifically American art and seeming thereby to promote a modern narrative of cultural nationalism.

To assure that she acquired unquestionable "old masters" of American art for the museum, Walton hired prominent Princeton University art historian John Wilmerding. With his assistance, but also following her own understanding of the canon of American art, she bought celebrated nineteenth-century artists and artworks. Her purchase of Asher

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<sup>4</sup> *Corcoran Gallery of Art Catalogue* (Washington D.C.: Gibson Brothers, 1893) 8.



Brown Durand's *Kindred Spirits* in 2005 is the most notable example of this and it is in many ways the cornerstone of the collection, as will be discussed further in this thesis.

Walton's collection is not intended to feature lesser-known forms of art, or even art specific to the Ozark region where the museum is located, but to bring iconic American art to a part of America some may see as having contributed little of importance to high culture. Like Corcoran, Walton hired a major architect, Moshe Safdie, to design the museum in a fashionable contemporary style and established a Board to oversee its direction. Funding continues to come from Walton foundation, supplemented by donations from the Wal-Mart corporation to provide free admission.

This thesis will show how and why Corcoran, as a private individual, was able to position his gallery as one of the most important American art museums in the country. Before Paul DiMaggio and Lawrence Levine described the process, Corcoran took steps toward the sacralization of his art collection, distinguishing himself from existing art associations and their structures of governance.<sup>5</sup> I will then demonstrate how Crystal Bridges operates as an illustration of what might be called "post-sacralization." DiMaggio and Levine argue that in the late nineteenth century, cultural gatekeepers began to erect new spatial and functional barriers between high culture and popular culture, in order to secure control over the definitions of high art. They did so partly through institutional frameworks like museums that repositioned private interests and collections in terms of public aims and education. Walton is operating in a world in

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<sup>5</sup> Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," *Media, Culture and Society*. 4 (1982) 33-50. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 83-169.

which those divisions between sacred art (removed from utility, sought because of its qualities of originality and genius) and popular art (reproductive, mixed genre, commercial), while often questioned and undermined by post-modernist scholars and artists, are nevertheless largely still in place, thanks to the longevity of museums and academies themselves. So while Walton's collection follows earlier models for sacralization in many respects, she achieved this in part by removing artworks from the historical contexts which had given them their canonical significance -- *Kindred Spirits* was strongly tied to New York – and removing them to a setting which re-emphasized their status as art, and as commodities in the market.

Although William Wilson Corcoran's gallery didn't achieve the permanent National Gallery status he had intended, the institution he established in 1859 succeeded in accomplishing something others had failed to do: create a lasting and permanent gallery of art in the city. The two institutions that publicly exhibited art and preceded it in the city, the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute and the Washington Arts Association, were both unsuccessful. The former lacked sufficient boundaries between high culture and popular culture to attract consistent patronage from elites, while the latter, composed primarily of artists, fell victim to sectional politics before the Civil War. However, Corcoran's status as benefactor to artists and his wealth put him in a position to ensure the economic stability of his private institution.

Cultural institutions that, like Corcoran, tried to show contemporary American art for public benefit, emerged in most American cities by the mid-nineteenth century. Not coincidentally, this was a time when the franchise underwent significant expansion to include non-property holding white men, and dominant elites were accordingly

concerned with combating “incivility” and “mental darkness” in the civil realm. Incivility was most generally characterized as an attribute of the immoral, uneducated and illiterate.<sup>6</sup> However, the condition of incivility was not thought to be ingrained – it could be reformed. In an essay outlining the history of the Ohio Mechanics Institute, Judith Spraul-Schmidt suggests that an individual’s failure to progress in society stemmed from a lack of opportunity, not a personal predisposition. As Spraul-Schmidt states, the lack of educational opportunity was understood to be “unfortunate for the affected individuals but disastrous for a democratic republic.”<sup>7</sup> Thus the underlying motive in establishing educational institutions like the Mechanics Institutes was to inspire widespread genius through improvement of the individual. Similar initiatives to counteract incivility also surfaced in the form of public schools and individual reformation policies in the penitentiaries, among others.<sup>8</sup> The payoff to this private investment in the public sphere, according to one historian, was “to the interests of the community, both in respect to wealth, morality, and happiness.”<sup>9</sup>

The mechanics institutes of nineteenth-century America were inspired by the European models of the same name. These institutes proliferated in the industrial landscape of England especially. Run by wealthy philanthropists, their purpose was to provide instruction and training for uneducated urban populations. The most common programs offered were lecture series, workshops, and most enduring, lending libraries.

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Spraul-Schmidt, “The Ohio Mechanic’s Institute: The Challenge of Incivility in the Democratic Republic,” in *Technical Knowledge in American Culture: Science, Technology, and Medicine Since the Early 1800’s*, ed. by Hamilton Craves, Alan I. Marcus, and David M. Katzman, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996) 20-36; 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Spraul-Schmidt, “The Ohio Mechanic’s Institute,” 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 22.

Through these means, the mechanics institutes sought to promote “civility” through the diffusion of knowledge, particularly the scientific and mathematical principles underpinning modern industry, but also the liberal arts.

It was thought that an individual’s moral as well as economic fiber could be improved by way of the resources provided by such institutions. Mechanics institutes sought to enlighten “mechanics” (a term that referred to artisans - generally men involved in manufacturing goods) in the broadest sense, a sponsorship they extended to those who wished for training in the principles of design and the fine arts, which were also understood to be necessary for competitive industrial development. Annual fairs and exhibitions were held to display the achievements generated within the institutes and to spur competition and invention, often with engravings, oil paintings, and daguerreotypes hung in proximity to leather and machine goods.<sup>10</sup>

Two decades after the Ohio Mechanics Institute was established, the citizens of Washington, D.C. organized their own Institute.<sup>11</sup> In his address to Washingtonians in August of 1852, Charles Stansbury, the original facilitator of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute, identified its goal: to prove America’s abilities on an international stage.<sup>12</sup> The United States’ lackluster appearance at the Great Exhibition of London in 1851 had left many feeling embarrassed by America’s inability to measure up to Europe’s exhibited achievements. To compensate for this inferiority, Stansbury thought

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<sup>10</sup> Wendy Katz, *Regionalism & Reform* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002) 1-26.

<sup>11</sup> The Ohio Mechanics Institute was first established in 1828. Judith Spraul-Schmidt, “The Ohio Mechanic’s Institute,” 21.

<sup>12</sup> Stansbury credits the London Society of Arts as first developing a society for these purposes of promoting raw materials, machinery, manufactured products and works of art. Charles F. Stansbury, “Address Delivered at a Meeting of the Citizens of Washington held at the Smithsonian Institution for the Purpose of Taking Measures to Organize a Mechanics Institute, Given August 17, 1852.” (Washington, D.C.: Henry Polkinhorn, 1852) 3.

“the remedy will only be found in an enlarged familiarity with works of art, rendered possible by extensive public collections freely accessible to all, and by the direct instruction for the artisan in a school of design.” His proposition for an establishment for the promotion of the mechanic and useful arts was six fold: forming a library, establishing a lecture series, incorporating an apprentice program, providing a school of hard sciences, establishing an exhibition series, and publishing pertinent materials. An important addition to the aforementioned features was the erection of a building to accommodate the needs of the institution, which would also itself be a city landmark, a national cultural institution.<sup>13</sup>

The notion of establishing a National Gallery in the nation’s capital was not unique to the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute or even to that generation. In the correspondence of First Lady Dolly Madison she states that the portrait painter of the presidents, Gilbert Stuart, bought land in the capital to build a “temple of art.” Stuart would not live to see such a building be erected, but subsequent institutions would still seek to establish such a patriotic temple.<sup>14</sup>

Eager to develop an organization to promote the arts, Corcoran donated \$1,000 to the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute, which was used to furnish a library named after him.<sup>15</sup> Lending libraries operated much like modern public libraries with circulation

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Leila Mechlin, “Art Life in Washington,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, (Washington, D.C., 1922)165.

<sup>15</sup> Davira Taragin, *William Wilson Corcoran*, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976) 16, presents this information, but little evidence was found to support this assertion. W. Dawson Johnston, in “The Earliest Free Public Library Movement in Washington, 1849-1874,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, 9 (1906) p. 5, states, “There was only one more suggestion of a public library [in Washington, D.C.] before the war. In 1854 it was said that Mr. W. W. Corcoran was erecting a handsome and substantial building on H Street between

materials made available to members and fines on overdue books. They too tried to promote civil and moral attributes in their patrons.<sup>16</sup> The structure of the lending library allowed men and women of various cultural and economic backgrounds to acquire knowledge. Corcoran's involvement didn't stop at his pocketbook. He became the second president of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute, succeeding scientist Joseph Henry, who would become the first director of the Smithsonian Institute.

The Metropolitan Mechanics Institute's importance lay in the public stage it provided for people of widely divergent skills. Craftsmen such as carpenters, technicians, manufacturers, textile makers, metal workers, sculptors and painters, among others, were all given an opportunity to display their inventions and innovations for an audience. Famous Metropolitan Mechanics Institute medal recipients include Henry Steinway, Jr., who entered his Steinway Piano into the annual Metropolitan Mechanics Institute's annual fair and won first prize.<sup>17</sup> For Steinway and other winners, the annual fairs were a platform in which to advertise a product, for with awards comes publicity. For this reason, there was a great impetus for artisans and craftsmen to enter their best

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Thirteenth and Fourteenth for a Mechanics Library. But this appears to have been mere rumor: for in 1857 the *Union* (December 5) complained that the building had been monopolized by a society, and that those who wanted books were still forced to beg members of Congress to obtain them from the Library of Congress, directly in opposition to the rules of that institution." However, by 1857, the Washington Art Association was in its second year of existence and, as Taragin claims, the library was taken over by this society after the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute folded around the same time. *Keim's Illustrated Hand-Book* claimed that the building on H Street between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> street, founded in 1824 was a \$40,000 gift from Corcoran in 1864 and originally intended for a mechanic's library. The building had two lecture rooms, a chemical laboratory and dissecting room as well as a dispensary open daily, except Sundays from 1 to 3 pm to the poor. De Bonneville Randolph Keim, *Keim's Illustrated Hand-Book: Washington and its Environs*, (Washington, D.C.: De B. Randolph Keim, 1887) 201.

<sup>16</sup> Spraul-Schmidt, "The Ohio Mechanic's Institute," 30.

<sup>17</sup> James Baron, *Piano: Making of a Steinway Concert Grand*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2006) 101.

work for national attention. It did not hurt that the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute held two of their fairs in the Patent Office.<sup>18</sup>

The Metropolitan Mechanics Institute held only three fairs, from 1854-1856. The Institute didn't formally cease until the beginning of the Civil War, but interest in the organization dwindled well before that, as evidenced in the decreasing number of members.<sup>19</sup> The Metropolitan Mechanics Institute's fate was caused by too broad a reach. The Institute attempted to fill every cultural void that existed in Washington. By incorporating art exhibitions into their annual fairs the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute was equating work being produced by some of the most accomplished artists of the time with craft or manufacturing, such as pianos. This was problematic because when art is democratized in this way, its ability to elevate the morals of viewers or patrons is compromised. It becomes a utilitarian good, competing in a market for buyers, rather than a good in and of itself.

Even before the last exhibition of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute in March of 1857, Corcoran had moved on, taking with him his monetary investments as well as his lending library. He would continue to try to establish a national gallery and library to rival the institutions in neighboring metropolises, but he would follow a different path. Around 1856 he became involved with the newly formed Washington Art Association. Headed by Horatio Stone, the association was comprised of artists, art patrons, buyers, booksellers and dealers from the D.C. area. Stone, as well as many other members, was

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<sup>18</sup> William Wilson Corcoran, *A Grandfather's Legacy: Containing a Sketch of his Life and Obituary Notice of Some Members of his Family Together with Letters from his Friends*, (Washington, D.C.: Henry Polkinhorn, 1879) 523.

<sup>19</sup> Spraul-Schmidt, "The Ohio Mechanic's Institute," 30.

already an accomplished sculptor in his own right by the time this group had formed. Though the group in some ways resembled mutual benefit and exhibiting organizations like the National Academy of Design in New York, which had a school and an annual exhibition of contemporary art, unlike that group it permitted non-artists to be involved with the organization as more than honorary members. It is perhaps a testimony to the smaller number of artists in Washington, D.C. that it borrowed some of the organizational strategies and inclusiveness of the popular Art Unions – which did not try to educate artists – rather than the art academies.

The Washington Art Association was formed with a threefold purpose: “to advance the fine arts in regard to comprehensive national interests, to promote the welfare and power of usefulness of the fraternity of artists, and to establish a gallery of art at the seat of Government ‘having in view not only local and temporary interests but those of the whole country and the far future.’”<sup>20</sup> These statements are almost identical to those of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute, albeit with a narrower focus on the fine arts. Charles Stansbury had similarly included the following items in his proposition to establish the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute: open a school of design, in which apprentices are instructed in the kind of drawing and design necessary for their trade, establish an exhibition to illustrate national industry and erect a building to accommodate the institute, “which shall be an ornament to the city.”<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on a special role for Washington was key to why Corcoran made the transition between the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute and the Washington Art Association.

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Cohen, *Business and Politics in America from the Age of Jackson to the Civil War: The Career Biography of W. W. Corcoran* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), 101.

<sup>21</sup> Stansbury, “Address Delivered at a Meeting of the Citizens of Washington,” 12.



No study has conclusively demonstrated why Washington, D.C. took longer than other Eastern cities to develop cultural institutions, but it is possible to suggest some reasons. The city, though serving as the seat of national government, lacked significant industries other than politics, unlike Boston, Philadelphia, and New York which were centered around overseas commerce and eventually manufacturing as well. The nearest large city to Washington, D.C. is Baltimore, Maryland, which despite being home to the Peale Museum, built in 1814 and like the Charleston Museum in South Carolina one of the nation's first museums to exhibit art and natural history items, like other southern towns did not develop artistic networks comparable to those in the north.<sup>22</sup>

Corcoran's involvement with the Washington Art Association was vast. He was elected director of the association and later the president of the National Gallery and School of Arts in 1860, which were extension projects of the Washington Art Association.<sup>23</sup> He held these appointments with the Association with great distinction. He became an influential advisor, not to mention important investor and patron, buying for his own collection almost anything produced by a Washington Art Association artist.<sup>24</sup> He funded artists' trips abroad to see the work of the European masters. To add

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<sup>22</sup> National Register of Historic Places, "Peale's Baltimore Museum" granted by the Municipal Museum of the City of Baltimore. Records for the City of Baltimore, established February 28, 1975.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Cohen, *Business and Politics in America*, 290. Cohen does not explained how exactly the directorship is distinguished from the presidency insofar as their bureaucratic differences but the National Gallery and School of Arts was a subsidiary of the Washington Art Association, and thus, under the direction of the director of the Washington Art Association.

<sup>24</sup> There are dozens of letters thanking Corcoran for purchasing works by Washington Art Association artists as well as letters detailing the patronage Corcoran provided for artists to travel for shows and sometimes abroad for study in Corcoran, *A Grandfather's Legacy*. See pages 107, 285 387, and 512.

to the existing library collection, Corcoran bought \$4,000 worth of books.<sup>25</sup> He worked hard to achieve a non-profit status for the association and thus end the taxation of art and book collections ‘not held as a means of gain’.<sup>26</sup> This was an important claim of the organization as it meant that it really did see its value in its public service. The non-profit status of the organization also meant that it could work within insulated circles of the director’s choosing, whether artists, art buyers, or others.<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, a non-profit, privately funded institution could avoid the market-based influences on culture that had shaped the Mechanics’ exhibitions.

Upon the inauguration of the Washington Art Association’s second exhibition, President Stone revealed plans to assemble a National Art Association, made up of artists from all over the country, with the intention of persuading the government to patronize American artists. This proposal stemmed from government commissions for Capitol decorations being given to foreign artists. The National Art Association, which was explicitly affiliated with the Washington Art Association, asked Congress to establish the United States Art Commission, a committee they believed could be lobbied on behalf of American artists. By petitioning the federal government to create an arts commission, the Washington Art Association was trying to ensure not only that art would have a formal place in the nation or at least in federal buildings, but that commissions would be awarded on a patriotic or national (or political) basis rather than

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<sup>25</sup> Corcoran purchased the \$4,000 worth of books from the Secretary of the Legislation in London. Henry Cohen, *Business and Politics in America*, 290.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> The Mechanics Institute was governed by a Superintendent who presided over the President of the Institute, Officers of the Institute, Directors of the Institute, and lastly, the Committee members, in that order. “A Record of the First Exhibition of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute,” (Washington, D.C.: H. Polkinhorn, 1853) 4.

“outsourced” to foreign competitors. Although the Washington Art Association had itself abandoned annual exhibitions with the onset of the civil war, perhaps due to political factors, applying to the government for patronage seemed to still be a step towards fulfilling the initial purpose of the group to establish a place for “American” art at the seat of government.<sup>28</sup>

The National Art Association, the advisory committee to the United States Art Commission, was short-lived.<sup>29</sup> The National Art Association was formally authorized in June 1858 but dismembered with the onset of the Civil War. Capitol commissions would continue after the Civil War but would be administered by the Joint Committee on the Library instead.<sup>30</sup> The Civil War forced many of the members of the Washington Art Association and the National Art Association back to their native states or at least into taking a divisive political position. Corcoran found himself in a compromised position among his political and social circles because of resentment towards his own Southern sympathies.

The failures of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute and the Washington Art Association demonstrate that before the Civil War, America’s elite was not able to define the line between high culture and popular culture in a way that gave them sufficient control and prestige. Sociologist Paul DiMaggio writes that:

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<sup>28</sup> Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998) 32.

<sup>29</sup> The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts was established in 1910, replacing the U.S. Art Commission. “About the Commission of Fine Arts,” last modified 31 October, 2002, <http://www.cfa.gov/about/index.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Lillian Miller, “The Artists’ Protest,” in *Patrons and Patriotism; the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790-1860*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London), 1966, 84.

“The distinction between high and popular culture, in its American version, emerged in the period between 1850 and 1900 out of the efforts of urban elites to build organizational forms that, first, isolated high culture and, second, differentiated it from popular culture... Once these organizational modes developed... they shaped the role that cultural institutions would play, the careers of artists, the nature of the works created and performed, and the purposes and publics that cultural organizations would serve.”<sup>31</sup>

DiMaggio attributes the failure of earlier organizational models, the for-profits, the co-operatives, and the communal associations, to just this inability to separate “art” from craft, as in the Mechanics Institute, or artists from wealthy patrons, as in the Washington Art Association.<sup>32</sup> Without this shielding from the market, from public perceptions of self-interest (artists serving their own interests in awarding public commissions, for example), early art institutions were vulnerable to accusations of lowering rather than improving taste and exposed members to political accusations and divisions, preventing elite unification.

According to DiMaggio, culture had to be entirely monopolized by the elite in order for it to be “sacralized.” It had to be made less accessible (and therefore more valuable) and separated from entertainments appropriated by popular culture. By structuring culture in this manner, giving it the value associated with rarity and genius, the public would be more inclined to make pilgrimages to pay homage to artistic masterpieces. Art would only be seen in specialized locations predetermined and controlled by cultural capitalists who selected the art to fit within their definition of quality, often donating art from their own collections.

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<sup>31</sup> DiMaggio, “Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston,” 377.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Three bases: entrepreneurship, classification and framing, must be present in order to institutionalize high culture in a fashion that gives elites control over it without opening them to accusations of self-interest, according to DiMaggio. First, the elite must privatize their organization in order to exercise autonomy and control. By doing so, they are able to make decisions independent of the judgments of the market or popular tastes. Secondly, the elite must establish defined boundaries between their definition of art and that of popular culture. It is through this classification that the elite become the sole determinants of what is high culture. This boundary, once in place via institutional settings, conditions society to see the determinations made by the elite as legitimate. Lastly, the upper class must frame their art in a manner that creates an alluring dynamic with the public. By placing art in a space outside the home, in a particular building devoted solely to that purpose, the art acquires a quality apart from utility, of sacralization.<sup>33</sup>

By developing versions of DiMaggio's structural bases, Corcoran was able to establish his gallery. When his earlier philanthropic endeavors mixing art and mechanics collapsed, Corcoran determined to create a private museum, albeit still with the aim of giving the public a place to view American art in the nation's capital. This public purpose was reinforced when a Board of Trustees was granted a charter by Congress in 1870, and Corcoran became advisor to the museum, giving control over the collection to a director and the Board.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike most museums of the 1870's, Corcoran did not purchase primarily copies

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<sup>33</sup> DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston," 377.

<sup>34</sup> "William Wilson Corcoran," *American National Biography*, 1 (1991): 505.

of European masterpieces. He bought works from American artists living and working around him, the origins of which were easier to determine than the often shady provenances of European art. The nationality of the artist also resonated with Corcoran to the extent that it symbolized an identity unique to his country. It educated viewers in what was characteristically American, not only in what constituted high art, and tied the aura of the original hand of the artist, the uplifting experience of viewing originals in a place dedicated only to that, to a specifically national context. The museum was also bound to Corcoran's personal taste since he served as collector. Buying with the guidance of his artistic acquaintances helped to ensure that his taste would not be questioned. And though he would eventually cede the collecting responsibilities to his successor as Director, Corcoran would select that person, too. Moreover, the physical building of the gallery, which framed the art, was designed by a prominent architect, adding an element of sacralization.

Seeking to continue patronage of American artists, Corcoran hired James Renwick and Moses Ezekiel to build and decorate the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Renwick's reputation added to the collection's prestige, as he not only designed the original Smithsonian Castle on the Washington Mall (1847-55) but also St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City (1858). The Gothic Revival style of both buildings romantically suggested that the modern nation had inherited and sustained historical custom and tradition, whether for education or the church. The Gallery, rather than following Renwick's Gothic precedents, announced itself as distinctly contemporary and internationally competitive. It was influenced by Napoleon III's new wings for the Louvre, with mansard roofs, corner pavilions and portrait statues adorning the exterior.

Moses Ezekiel, a southern artist living abroad, sculpted eleven statues modeled after the great artists of history. They were each placed in the niches of the façade. The result differed both from the Smithsonian and from neo-classical Washington's republican temples, and in separating from these traditions, imagined a vocabulary that mixed the private and the public.

When the Civil War broke out construction on the Gallery ceased and Corcoran fled to Europe where he spent the remaining war years. Upon his return to the States and after the government reluctantly returned the gallery to him, building resumed and it was opened to the public (free, two nights a week) in 1871.<sup>35</sup> It exhibited his collection of the acclaimed names of American art of the first part of the century, including most famously Frederic E. Church's *Niagara* of 1857. Other works in his early collection included Hiram Power's *Greek Slave* 1844, as well as artwork by friends and associates such as James C. McGuire who sat on his board of trustees.<sup>36</sup>

Art historian Alan Wallach claims the Corcoran Gallery of Art failed to become the country's "national gallery" because of extenuating circumstances surrounding the timing and location of the opening of the gallery. He asserts that although the upper class was certainly capable of creating outstanding art collections designed for public use, as a class they "remained too divided to establish a national gallery of art" even after the Civil War.<sup>37</sup> The very fact that Corcoran was trying to build his museum in the nation's

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<sup>35</sup> The federal government had seized the Gallery in Corcoran's absence during the Civil War. It was first used as an infirmary and later used as the headquarters of the Quartermaster General "William Wilson Corcoran," *American National Biography*, 1 (1991): 505.

<sup>36</sup> Helen Weston Henderson, *The Art Treasures of Washington*, (Boston: L.C. Page & Co., 1912) 28.

<sup>37</sup> Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*, 9.

capital further thwarted his attempts to have it represent a national gallery, as it would presumably be showcase a collective American consciousness.

Those who profited from the system of sacralizing culture in institutions like the Corcoran Gallery are people whom sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capitalists. They are cultural capitalists both in the sense that they invested money in the culture industry and in the sense that they are familiar with the “styles and genres that are socially valued and that confer prestige upon those who have mastered them” so that their money becomes transformed into a kind of intellectual status, the knowledge of what is best.<sup>38</sup> Corcoran, for example, transformed his wealth into a prestigious art gallery -- prestigious in part because of its claims to serve the nation rather than himself by exhibiting great American art to the public. Artists cooperated with his efforts to define their work in this way, as they early on regarded the Corcoran Gallery of Art as the most prestigious place in Washington, D.C. to show their work. Davira Taragin states, “the role of the Corcoran Gallery of Art as a repository in the nation’s capital of American masterpieces caused artists to believe it was a great honor to have their works included in the collection.” One particular artist, Albert Bierstadt, was so relentless in his pursuit to have his artwork hung in the Corcoran gallery that he altered the title of a mountain in one landscape to Mt. Corcoran.<sup>39</sup>

Once established, Corcoran’s gallery enjoyed esteem among Washingtonians and visitors to the city. It expanded later into a Beaux-Arts style building comparable to rivals in New York and Boston, and added an art school; in the 20th century, other

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 376-377.

<sup>39</sup> *Mt. Corcoran* is presently on view at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The painting is of an unknown Rocky Mountain peak. Cohen, *Business and Politics in America*, 218.



donors would add significant collections of European art. But it was Corcoran's early efforts to sacralize art, removing it from politics as well as from the market that led to its success. He refined the aims of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute to focus solely on fine art and he offered many American artists a national or at least capital showcase at a time when the federal government did not. Corcoran's successful institutional model came by way of trial and error and his experience with predecessor organizations. He may not have had DiMaggio's research insights, but he came to understand that his position as a wealthy financier permitted him to determine the character of American art through a private organization, albeit one carefully kept at a rhetorical and organizational distance from his financial and personal interests. For a short time, the Corcoran Gallery was in fact referred to by many as the National Gallery. Although it relinquished that title to the Smithsonian Institution's National Gallery, now called the Renwick Gallery -- ironically, given Corcoran's past experience with the Mechanics Institute, for showing its collection of crafts -- the Corcoran Gallery is the oldest museum in Washington, D.C. and one of the oldest museums in America. But one reason it is not usually given its due is because Corcoran in establishing it never tied it to the social functions of a broader Washington elite in the way that Boston's educators and businessmen coalesced around the Museum of Fine Arts and the other civic cultural institutions of the Gilded Age on whose boards they served. That is, the Corcoran remained in some sense a personal museum and collection, tied to Corcoran and his aims for a national art, rather than the joint project of a broader social group interested in exerting cultural hegemony.

The pattern for art institutions during the period between the Gilded Age Museum Movement and the present has seen little in the way of newly minted museums

dedicated solely to American art. Walton's is the first since the Whitney Museum of Art opened about fifty years prior, and even that museum was arguably dedicated as much to modernism as to a national school, in the sense that it was meant to provide exhibition space for artists whose work fell outside academic convention and so was often excluded from mainstream exhibitions. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in 1935 donated her collection of American folk art to a house museum in Williamsburg, Virginia, and it was only in the 1950s that her son would—after adding artworks earlier donated to the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art—turn her collection into a museum named after her.<sup>40</sup> The domestic space of the house, a realm women controlled, offered female collectors some protection from questions about their connoisseurship that arose when they tried to found public museums. Women, however, were nonetheless increasingly significant in museum building in the twentieth-century. Though not a collection of American art per se, Wilhelmina Holladay and her husband incorporated the National Museum of Women in the Arts in 1981 as a private, nonprofit, and purchased a building near the White House. The response of critics was to question the quality of the art.<sup>41</sup>

Alice Walton's collection at Crystal Bridges is also for better or worse viewed as a personal museum reflecting the ambitions of its patron. This is not necessarily due to her gender. Women like Isabella Stewart Gardner, a social leader in Boston, had formed even more personalized collections and museums, but Gardner was understood as a connoisseur and art world insider. Her collection, hung in a house she helped design and

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<sup>40</sup> Rockefeller Archive Center, "Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1874-1948."

<http://www.rockarch.org/bio/abby.php>

<sup>41</sup> Harriet Shapiro, "To Bravos and Boos, a Daring Wilhelmina Holladay Brings Women a Museum They Can Call Their Own," *People Magazine* April 27, 1987. Accessed July 20, 2012. <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20096155,00.html>

decorate, was meant to showcase her exquisite eye and aesthetic sensibility.<sup>42</sup> Walton is instead closer to the model of Corcoran, who distanced his collection from his private life, and whose art reflects contemporary consensus on style rather than a uniquely personal taste.

However, Walton's close ties to the Wal-Mart corporation encourages fears that the museum and its approach to art is not about Walton's social or artistic motives, whatever they might be, but an extension of Wal-Mart's corporate practices and commercialization of what it deems "American" business values: giant size, standardized or generic goods, bargain deals. In an effort to quiet critics, the museum has distanced itself from Wal-Mart in public statements from the Director, art historian Don Bacigalupi, but as importantly has framed itself in such a way as to appeal to the most educated tastes for art in the country, housing works that are highly regarded in academia as well as in broader circles. In doing so, the museum tries to thwart accusations of commercialization and kitsch. Even the gift shop, which was designed by an architect as well, sternly avoids the tawdry and inexpensive, in favor of designer brands and the handmade.<sup>43</sup> The name of the museum – not Walton, but Crystal Bridges – itself has raised brows with its country flavor, but in explaining it, museum publicity makes it clear that only snobs could object. John Wilmerding, Walton's art adviser, describes the origin of the museum's name: "We all went to bed, and the next morning she said, 'I have decided on Crystal Bridges.' I said, 'Oh Alice, that is so kitschy – it

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<sup>42</sup> Wanda Corn, "Art Matronage in Post-Victorian America," in *Cultural Leadership in America: Art Matronage and Patronage*, ed. Wanda Corn (Boston: Gardner Museum, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "At Wal-Mart a Microcosm of U.S. Inequalities," *Bloomberg* December 19, 2011. Accessed July 10, 2012. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-12-20/at-wal-mart-a-microcosm-of-u-s-inequalities-jeffrey-goldberg.html>

sounds like a second-rate country singer.’ She laughed at me and said, ‘Well, I like it.’ I said, ‘Oh Alice, I do, too.’<sup>44</sup>

Alice Walton’s account of her own collecting practices similarly emphasizes strong personal motivation rather than investment or marketing value. She claims to have had an interest in art stemming from her youthful efforts as watercolors. Watercolors were also what she first began collecting in the 1970s and they helped put her on the radar of the art world when, on December 1, 2004, she bought over twenty million dollars worth of American art, including the landscape *Spring* by Winslow Homer, a watercolor.<sup>45</sup> This was followed by a series of controversial purchases that took advantage of the financial weaknesses of many of the country’s major public and private institutions, including the New York Public Library, Jefferson Medical College, Fisk University, and so on, in the wake of shrinking endowments and declining public support.

For example, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, still a private institution supported by admission fees and donations as well as its endowment, is at the time of this writing, in millions of dollars of debt. In June of 2012, the Corcoran announced that it was considering selling the building that has housed its collection since moving at the turn of the twentieth century to the block adjacent to the White House. In a statement the Corcoran released regarding this move they said, “we recognize that the Corcoran is like

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<sup>44</sup> Ben Davis, “Seeing Through Crystal Bridges: An Analysis of the New Yorker’s Profile of Walmart Heiress and Museum Patron Alice Walton,” *Artinfo* June 23, 2011. Accessed May 20, 2012. <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/37934/seeing-through-crystal-bridges-an-analysis-of-the-new-yorkers-profile-of-walmart-heiress-and-museum-patron-alice-walton/>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

most other museums throughout the country in having to struggle with the effects of a difficult economy.”<sup>46</sup>

The other museums the Corcoran is alluding to are presumably the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, which resorted to admission fee hikes during the summer of 2011 to cope with rising operation costs. In a statement similar to the Corcoran’s, the price increase is explained: “Like many private museums in the country, MoMA receives only a small amount of support from the government, relying upon its endowment of over \$600 million, ticket sales and membership fees to mitigate operating costs.”<sup>47</sup> The Met and MoMA are two of the most widely visited museums in the country. The fact that they are in financial straits illustrates the exceptional nature of Crystal Bridges.

The endowment of Crystal Bridges is four times larger than landmark American art institutions like the Whitney Museum in New York City.<sup>48</sup> In August of 2001 it was announced that a sponsorship gift from Wal-Mart equaling twenty million dollars would allow free admission to visitors to Crystal Bridges. Eighty million dollars had already been given to the museum from the Walton Family Foundation.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the Willard and Pat Walker Charitable Foundation of Springdale, Arkansas, established a

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<sup>46</sup> Jonathan L. Fischer, “Corcoran: ‘We Need to Respect Financial Realities,’” *The Washington City Paper*, June 4 2012. Accessed accessed June 20, 2012.

<http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/artsdesk/visual-arts/2012/06/04/corcoran-we-need-to-respect-financial-realities/>

<sup>47</sup> Amy Lee, “Museum of Modern Art to Raise Ticket Prices \$5 to \$25,” *The Huffington Post*, September 28, 2011 accessed June 10, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/29/moma-ticket-prices\\_n\\_913272.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/29/moma-ticket-prices_n_913272.html)

<sup>48</sup> In 2011, the Whitney’s Endowment totaled \$192 million dollars. “Whitney Museum pares bond yield on high demand,” *Bloomberg News* July 13, 2011. Accessed July 10, 2012. <http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20110713/FREE/110719965>

<sup>49</sup> Kyle Chayka, “\$20 Million Walmart Gift Makes Crystal Bridges Museum Free for Visitors, Forever,” *Blouin Artinfo*, August 2, 2011, accessed June 10, 2012. <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/38222/20-million-walmart-gift-makes-crystal-bridges-museum-free-for-visitors-forever/>

\$10 million endowment to Crystal Bridges targeted specifically towards school children in the Ozark region. The Foundation covers all of their transportation expenses, meals, and education materials.<sup>50</sup>

Willard Walker has close ties not to the museum itself, but to the corporation that allowed the museum to be possible. Walker was the first manager of the Wal-Mart Five and Dime in Bentonville and a close friend to Sam Walton. According to a biography of Walker published by the University of Arkansas's Business School website, "Willard J. Walker's name will be forever linked with Sam Walton, the man whose business he helped build."<sup>51</sup> His name also adorns a lecture hall on the Walton College of Business's campus at the University of Arkansas. Certainly one idea conveyed by the Walker donation is that like Sam Walton and Willard Walker, opportunities exist for Ozark children to achieve economic success.

Walker's connection to Wal-Mart first, and Crystal Bridges second, nevertheless emphasizes ways in which the museum is connected to the Wal-Mart corporation and the image and values associated with that corporation. The museum states explicitly on its website how it wishes to be associated with the corporation; essentially, only in their shared connection with the Greater Bentonville community. On the Frequently Asked Questions page, the question, "How is Crystal Bridges Tied to Wal-Mart?" is answered:

"Crystal Bridges is a nonprofit organization focused solely on creating a world-class museum for the benefit of the public. The museum was founded by Alice Walton, who also serves as chair of the Crystal Bridges Board of Directors. Because of its commitment to the educational and cultural development of Northwest Arkansas, the Walton Family Foundation has provided significant funding to help

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<sup>50</sup> Crystal Bridges, "Press Release: Crystal Bridges Receives Funding for School Group Visits." <http://crystalbridges.org/about/News/News-Details?id=70b4028c-e831-4755-9ae5-f92e5610f01f>

<sup>51</sup> University of Arkansas, "Willard J. Walker Hall." <http://waltoncollege.uark.edu/walkerhall/content.asp?show=walker>

make the dream of Crystal Bridges a reality. In July, 2011, Wal-Mart announced a grant that will sponsor general public admission to the Museum. However, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. is in no way connected to the development, construction, or planning of the Museum or the development and ownership of the permanent collection.”<sup>52</sup>

Walton also sits on the Board of Directors for the Walton Family Foundation. Other members of the Board include John Tyson, chairman of Tyson Foods, and C. Douglas McMillon, the president and chief executive of Wal-Mart International.<sup>53</sup> These connections, not to the art world, but to major industrial business leaders of America undermine the assertion that “Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. is in no way connected to the development, construction or planning of the Museum.”

At a time when cultural institutions were in financial despair, Walton was able to take advantage of their predicament to build a museum to rival the most impressive American art collections in the country, purchasing works by Charles Willson Peale, Thomas Cole, and Albert Bierstadt, along with notable modern and contemporary artists. It is perhaps not coincidental that difficult financial times often mean that Wal-Mart prospers in comparison to upscale competitors, as consumers turn to bargain stores to save money. Walton’s purchase of Asher B. Durand’s *Kindred Spirits* (1849) for thirty-five million dollars from the New York Public Library in 2005 is widely regarded by art critics as the moment Walton and Crystal Bridges became controversial figure in the art world. This purchase was followed by the equally sensational near-success at purchasing Thomas Eakins’ *Gross Clinic* (1876) from the Jefferson Medical College. Both paintings were not only art historical landmarks, but had close historical connections with the cities and institutions where they were located. The horror that greeted these attempts

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<sup>52</sup> Crystal Bridges, “FAQ.” <http://crystalbridges.org/About/FAQ>

<sup>53</sup> Carol Vogel, “A Billionaire’s Eye for Art Shapes Her Singular Museum,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2011.

seemed to have less to do with the museum in Arkansas, and more to do with what appeared to be a display of power on the part of Wal-Mart or its proxies. A gigantic international corporation showed its (financial) muscle: its ability or the ability of capital generally to extract valuable objects from anywhere in the country without objections from the “public” being able to stop them, in a manner that mirrored for some critics Wal-Mart’s erasure of local businesses in places where it located its superstores.

Because Crystal Bridges was a private endeavor on the part of an individual, it presumably reflects the values of the founder more than anything else. But Alice Walton is not herself always necessarily interested in distinguishing her approach to art from Wal-Mart’s business model. In an anecdote retailed in the *New Yorker*, Walton describes her efforts at creating a collection in this fashion: “One of the great responsibilities that I have is to manage my assets wisely, so that they create value. I know the price of lettuce. You need to understand price and value. You buy the best lettuce you can at the best price you can.”<sup>54</sup> Equating art with lettuce makes her sound like a housewife or grocer rather than a connoisseur, putting her at a distance from collectors of “priceless” masterpieces, and impressing the reader with her shrewdness. In actual practice, Walton had help with her purchases from art historians and dealers and like any good competitor, took advantage of rivals’ struggles to buy their assets. But even without Walton, Crystal Bridges can be understood as an expression of Wal-Mart’s cultural influence and hegemony, enshrining the values of the wealthy individuals sitting on the Board of Trustees. This is poignant because Crystal Bridges, to the extent that it expresses modern corporate values, in some respects is in direct opposition to the themes that the museum’s collection itself celebrates, often centering around the close

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<sup>54</sup> Mead, “Alice’s Wonderland.”



relationship of American art to nature. If Crystal Bridges is an extension of the exploitative practices of Wal-Mart, its collection serves to draw attention away from that underlying business model.

For cultural critic and writer Rebecca Solnit, Walton's purchase of Asher B. Durand's *Kindred Spirits* (1849) illustrates how exploitative Wal-Mart industries, and by extension, Alice Walton and her museum are. Solnit says, "Durand's painting is a touchstone for a set of American ideals that Wal-Mart has been savaging."<sup>55</sup> In *Kindred Spirits*, Durand, who was Thomas Cole's successor as leader of the Hudson River School, America's best known nineteenth-century style of landscape painting, represents his friends: the landscape painter Cole and poet William Cullen Bryant. They are shown standing on an outcropping overlooking a valley in the Catskills in upstate New York. At the time when Cole and Bryant made this wilderness region famous, in the 1820s and 1830s, the most highly regarded landscape painters and nature poets were all European (Cole himself was born in England). Cole and Bryant are shown calling attention to the splendors of a distinctively American wilderness, with the implication that it ought to be preserved - that nature and the wilderness are the source of inspiration for truly American art.

During the summer of 2012, Crystal Bridges organized an exhibition called "The Hudson River School: Nature and the American Vision" in association with the New York Historical Society, and anchored by *Kindred Spirits*. "The Hudson River School" exhibition press kit ties artistic inspiration and national or "manifest" destiny to westward expansion in the nineteenth century: "During this time, a loosely knit group of

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<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "The Wal-Mart Biennale," *Tomdispatch*, February 18, 2006. Accessed May 20, 2012. [http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/60904/tomgram%3A\\_\\_rebecca\\_solnit\\_on\\_wal-mart\\_art/](http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/60904/tomgram%3A__rebecca_solnit_on_wal-mart_art/)

artists and writers in New York gave birth to the first truly American vision for art and literature. That vision --which still speaks to us today -- looked to nature as a source of spiritual renewal and venerated the American landscape as a romantic expression of national identity.”<sup>56</sup>

Solnit sees Walton’s purchase of *Kindred Spirits* as undermining the seemingly conservationist and spiritual ideals of the painting. She understands Wal-Mart as intrinsic to the museum’s existence, seeing the museum and its collection as a public relations veil for a dark corporation. Solnit acknowledges that “art patronage has always been kind of a money-laundering, a pretty public face for fortunes made in uglier ways.”<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, whether or not Walton founded Crystal Bridges with the intention of remaking the image of her family’s corporation is seemingly not the major issue for Solnit. What is more important for her is that the collection, exemplified by *Kindred Spirits*, represents ideals, as described in Crystal Bridge’s own press kit, that Wal-Mart unabashedly undermines as it imposes standardization and bland big-box stores across rural and urban America.

In *Big-Box Paradox*, Ned Cramer, an architectural critic and curator, pursues this contradiction. Cramer concludes that because Wal-Mart sees sales rise during hard times in comparison to upscale retailers, the corporation has an economic interest in seeing the rest of the country in financial trouble. More pointedly for Crystal Bridges, with its architecturally-acclaimed design that incorporates views of the lush landscape around it, Cramer points out that Wal-Mart, though famous for its inexpensive warehouse-style stores, has invested in a green initiative for its buildings, something which often

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<sup>56</sup> Crystal Bridges, “The Hudson River School: Nature and the American Vision.” <http://www.crystalbridges.org/exhibitions/Hudson-River-School>

<sup>57</sup> Solnit, “The Wal-Mart Biennale.”

increases costs in the short term. Cramer suspects the initiative is a ruse, a public relations move rather than an integral change in a corporate culture, to pander to an audience concerned with sustainability. That audience is largely urban, which is the new frontier for Wal-Mart expansion, and urban communities have been shown to be resistant to the existing “faux-folksy” Wal-Mart brand.<sup>58</sup> But to a considerable extent, Crystal Bridges has been successful. Its design and even more its survey of American art have drawn attention away from the way in which the museum parallels Wal-Mart.

Don Bacigalupi, the Walton-appointed Director of Crystal Bridges, introduces *Celebrating the American Spirit: Masterworks from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art*, the only publication to date that Crystal Bridges has authorized, by saying, “conventional wisdom would suggest the impossibility of starting a new museum of American art from scratch in the 21st century.” He quickly qualifies this statement by speaking to the fortitude of the museum’s benefactor, saying, “Conventional wisdom... has never deterred the Waltons, a family that embodies the “can-do” spirit that is a hallmark of their Northwest Arkansas region. This is a place where families like the Waltons, the Tysons, and the Hunts started small businesses that became international powerhouses.”<sup>59</sup>

For Solnit, Bacigalupi’s comment – his equation of corporate powerhouses and capitalist wealth with an American or rural work ethic -- is exactly what she takes issue with in her 2006 essay, “The Wal-Mart Biennale.”<sup>60</sup> For Solnit, “local” corporations like

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<sup>58</sup> Ned Cramer, “Big-Box Paradox,” *Architect Magazine* April 6, 2011. Accessed June 25, 2012. <http://www.architectmagazine.com/sustainability/big-box-paradox.aspx>

<sup>59</sup> Don Bacigalupi, “Forward and Acknowledgments,” in *Celebrating the American Spirit: Masterworks from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art*, ed. Christopher B. Crosman and Emily D. Shapiro. (New York, Hudson Hills Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>60</sup> Solnit, “The Wal-Mart Biennale.”

Wal-Mart, Tyson Foods, and Hunt Transport stand in direct opposition to the “can-do” spirit of the actual people of the Northwest Arkansas region and by extension the larger nation. Solnit and Cramer both understand Crystal Bridges in this sense to be again a public relations measure and expression of corporate hegemony, redefining what is “American.” The art and architecture of Crystal Bridges suggests that the tradition of labor in the U.S. is that of independent yeoman farmers (depicted in the collection’s landscapes and genre scenes) or independent creators (the artists themselves), both of whom maintain a close relationship to the natural world. This is an ideal very different from most actual labor in the twenty-first century. Since the museum would not exist were it not for Wal-Mart and its other corporate patrons, the museum context somewhat disingenuously permits continuity to be maintained between modern business practices and older forms of labor.

Cultural news correspondent Jeffery Goldberg critiques Crystal Bridges for a related aspect, focusing on the immorality of a museum being built with money made by exploiting Wal-Mart employees. He states that “Walton has the influence to help Wal-Mart workers, especially women, earn more money and gain access to affordable health care. But her response as far as the people whose sweat pays for her paintings is a simple one: Let them eat art.” Goldberg asserts that the museum represents an ugly truth: Wal-Mart will not provide health insurance to people working fewer than 24 hours each week, but it will offer an \$800 million endowment for an art collection.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Jeffery Goldberg, “Wal-Mart Heiress’s Museum a Moral Blight,” *Bloomberg*. December 12, 2011. Accessed June 25, 2012.  
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-12-13/wal-mart-heiress-s-museum-a-moral-blight-commentary-by-jeffrey-goldberg.html>

According to *Forbes* magazine in 2005, Alice Walton was the second richest woman in the world and the ninth richest person. As Solnit notes, Walton lives a very different lifestyle from the majority of employees at her family's company. "The average Wal-Mart cashier makes \$7.92 an hour and works only 29 hours a week for an annual income of \$11,948."<sup>62</sup> Solnit concludes her essay by dramatically stating, "Imagine video-portraits of the people who actually make the stuff you can buy at Wal-Mart, or of the African-American truck-drivers suing the corporation for racism or of the women who are lead plaintiffs in the nation's largest class-action suit for discrimination."<sup>63</sup> There are problems with this argument, which while it may point to the social inequities that corporate capitalism relies on even as it bankrolls charities, almost proposes that funding for the arts should end until social ills are cured. And while it is a conservative, or at least nineteenth-century stance, to emphasize elevating the poor by sharing with them the cultural riches of the rich, much public education is based on somewhat similar principles.<sup>64</sup>

As for the art world, much of the critical response to Walton and Crystal Bridges has been fairly ambivalent. Rebecca Mead, writing for the *New Yorker* in June 2011, expounds upon Walton's extravagant lifestyle, sharing details about her buying habits, which in aristocratic fashion have a history of taking place on horseback.<sup>65</sup> Carol Vogel for the *New York Times* similarly does not steer the opinion of her piece clearly in one

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<sup>62</sup> According to Solnit, Wal-Mart "likes to keep people on less than full-time schedules." This accounts for the annual salary of a Wal-Mart cashier being \$11,948. Solnit, "The Wal-Mart Biennale."

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Lee Rosenbaum, "Crystal Bridges vs. Wal-Mart Workers: Jeffery Goldberg's Irrational Either/Or," last modified December 21, 2011. [www.artsjournal.com/culturegrill/2011/12/crystal\\_bridges\\_vs\\_wal-mart\\_wo.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/culturegrill/2011/12/crystal_bridges_vs_wal-mart_wo.html)

<sup>65</sup> Mead, "Alice's Wonderland."

direction or another, but does remark on the feelings of the East Coast art establishment. She quotes Walton saying that “a lot of people there don’t really know this part of the world [Arkansas], really don’t know the people here and the desire and the need for art. But once they come and see what’s here and what we have, their attitudes will change.”<sup>66</sup> The effect is more to point out art world snobbery about the provinces, than portray Walton unsympathetically. Art world resistance to Crystal Bridges remains, but it was strongest when Walton was buying art – when her actions seemed to demonstrate that art was like lettuce, another commodity, and not made sacred by sentiment, or civic pride. Once the museum was complete, detaching art from other commodities as well as from labor and patrons, and even daily life, art critics could give their full approval.

Roberta Smith, art critic for the *New York Times* and a supporter of boundaries between fine art and popular art, writing six months after Vogel gave what can only be considered a glowing review of the museum. Her only criticism was that there was a “blind spot” in the collection’s lack of self-taught or folk artists.<sup>67</sup> This was not precisely a blind spot, as folk art is exactly what Walton did not want her museum to be known for. Folk art, sometimes called outsider art, is usually defined as produced by individuals without training in the fine arts, often times because of social or educational barriers, and often including women, African-Americans and the poor. At least initially, excluding folk art may have been an effort to disassociate her cultural ambitions from the region’s

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<sup>66</sup> Vogel, “A Billionaire’s Eye for Art Shapes her Singular Museum.”

<sup>67</sup> Roberta Smith, “Crystal Bridges, the Art Museum Walmart Money Built, Opens,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2011. Accessed June 25, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/27/arts/design/crystal-bridges-the-art-museum-walmart-money-built-review.html?pagewanted=all>

folksy image, but it also emphasizes a commitment to a certain national standard or national culture that itself blandly assumes certain social groups will remain invisible.

Walton is willing to play the role of art world outsider. She is generally regarded as reclusive and does not spend much time courting the artists she collects or forming relationships with gallery or other museum directors. In her profile on Walton for the *New Yorker*, Rebecca Mead describes the confusion in the auction room during a sale when the high-valued lots were being bought up by an anonymous phone bidder. As far as everyone present knew, any collector or museum that could have any interest in these lots was in the room that day.<sup>68</sup> David Houston, the curatorial director for Crystal Bridges speaks to this directly saying that “Walton’s secrecy and interloper status irked art world insiders, and critics resorted in speculation, innuendo and “snarkiness.”<sup>69</sup> Bourdieu might suggest that an older elite’s acquisition of culture through education and the academy is being threatened by the nouveau riche’s buying power. Walton however does not usually put herself on display. She typically keeps a low profile in the museum as well as in the auction room, leaving the museum’s large professional staff and Board to determine the museum’s direction. Their professionalism further reinforces the connections of the museum to the world of art, not to Wal-Mart.

The location of Crystal Bridges in Bentonville, Arkansas, helps support this idea that Crystal Bridges is bringing masterpieces and the world of art to the rural masses. The most significant cultural attractions are two hours away: a museum of Western and American Indian art in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the tourist town of Branson, Missouri. Artistic masterpieces are a new novelty. The closest other art collection of distinction is

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<sup>68</sup> Mead, “Alice’s Wonderland.”

<sup>69</sup> Steven C. Dubin, “The Meet and Greet Museum,” *Art in America* February (2009) 63.

about four hours north in Kansas City, Missouri. As a small town of about 36,000 people, Bentonville seems an unlikely place to house a world-renowned art collection. But because of Wal-Mart's headquarters there, the town has attracted a number of businesses representing Wal-Mart's chief suppliers, along with a middle class population to staff them. By locating the museum there, Walton addressed these partners, reminding them of Wal-Mart's origins amid the people, and created an institution that was meant to bridge class cultures by serving everyone. In addition to the Wal-Mart sponsored free admission, gallery attendants provide information about the works on display. Instructions to visitors to stand at least three feet from each work are generally disregarded. The phrase, "please do not touch the paintings," accordingly echoes throughout the galleries as a reminder that the museum serves those who may be inexperienced with museum protocols. Perhaps not surprisingly, local responses to the museum have been overwhelmingly positive.<sup>70</sup>

Crystal Bridges can be viewed as an extension of DiMaggio's axioms. Walton has framed her art museum in such a way as to veil the corporation with which she is affiliated. She has done so by insisting on the personal and the national character of her collection, funneling millions of dollars to support her claims to the museum's wider relevance. But what does it mean that a museum collection comprised of a similar breadth of artists as the Corcoran and Crystal Bridges should be conceived one hundred and fifty years apart? If nothing else, it speaks to the continuing relevance of cultural nationalism in an age of globalization.

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<sup>70</sup> Mike Norman, "Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art a great new attraction for North Texans with limited getaway time," *The Star Telegram*, May 3, 2012, accessed July 10, 2012. <http://www.star-telegram.com/2012/05/03/3934364/crystal-bridges-museum-of-american.html>



Cultural nationalism is the use of art—or music, or theater, or literature—to develop ideas and expressions or sentiments about what constitutes the nation, for political purposes. It doesn't mean waving the flag, but celebrating “local” distinctiveness as national character—though of course the consciousness of that distinctiveness, or what makes it visible, is precisely that it is part of and being compared to an international context. When patrons found institutions dedicated to creating or confirming a canon of “American” art, they are trying to define what a national high culture should be and their definition may serve political ends: bridging sectional divisions for Corcoran as well as erecting a barrier to imported culture from Britain and Europe, and reconciling Wal-Mart's global sourcing and plans for expansion with its claims to exemplify America—as in the Wal-Mart founder's autobiography, *Sam Walton, Made in America: My Story*.<sup>71</sup>

It may seem peculiar that in what scholars and corporations increasingly view as a transnational world, cultural nationalism should retain its usefulness. The Sheldon Museum of Art, for example, an American art museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, employs a full-time Curator of Transnational American Art and runs exhibitions featuring artists who may identify as both American and other nationalities. Art historian Meiqin Wang in fact argues that cultural nationalism and transnationalism are complementary in her study of “Confrontation and Complicity: Rethinking Official Art in Contemporary China.” In her observations of government-sanctioned contemporary Chinese art, one could exchange the word “Chinese” for “American” and still have an apt description of why Crystal Bridges is part of a global strategy. Wang says: “nationalistic projects with intentions of setting out the uniqueness of Chinese culture and civilization, asserting past

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<sup>71</sup> Sam Walton, *Sam Walton, Made in America: My Story*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1992).

glories and present achievements go hand in hand with international projects that aim to present China as an open and modern nation, to de-emphasize cultural and political differences, and to package China for its acceptance into the global system."<sup>72</sup> That “America” can be so easily exchanged for “China” suggests how definitions of authentic and traditional American art, culture and values may still operate to successfully position contemporary institutions in an international market. For example, the Walton-appointed architect for Crystal Bridges is Moshe Safdie, an Israeli-born architect who has spent most of his career in Canada. His design for Crystal Bridges is meant to integrate the building into the landscape, via a structure that allows two transepts to hover over the creek beneath the building so water can freely pass below. This design further supports the collection’s concept of American art’s reliance on nature. Yet Walton chose Safdie presumably because of the qualities that led the National Gallery of Canada in 2010 to describe his architecture as that of a “Global Citizen.”<sup>73</sup>

If anything, Corcoran and Walton exemplify the peculiarities in defining a strictly American sensibility. In the nineteenth century as well as today, and particularly in the world of finance and banking where both Corcoran and Walton worked, success meant understanding international money markets, investments and exchanges. Present day business and industry, at the time of this writing, rely heavily on global exchange. Furthermore, the high culture sanctioned by both museums as American itself owes a particularly strong debt to Anglo-European traditions and training, something evident in the choice of architecture for the buildings, down to the statues of great European artists

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<sup>72</sup> Meiqin Wang, “Confrontation and Complicity: Rethinking Official Art in Contemporary China.” (Phd diss., State University of New York, 2007) 99-100.

<sup>73</sup> National Gallery of Canada. “Global Citizen: The Architecture of Moshe Safdie.” Accessed July 26, 2012.  
<http://www.gallery.ca/safdie/en/index.htm>

Moses Ezekiel placed on the Corcoran façade. The Corcoran Gallery of Art indeed states: “Though American art is the collection’s emphasis, the art of other nations and cultures is, when appropriate, acquired and exhibited.”<sup>74</sup> And this was true of the Corcoran when it first opened as well. While much of the exhibited art was by American artists, European copies were kept in the museum too. In the nation’s capital, where many foreign dignitaries visit on political business, the Corcoran, which originally intended to become the country’s National Gallery, presents American art on an international stage. Because of its location in the center of the country, Crystal Bridges presents its collection to a different audience – presumably mostly American and, moreover, presumably regional. But this is still representative of an American culture, one that because of its worldwide access and distribution, has decentralized production. Perhaps there is a reason “celebrating the American spirit,” the declared goal of Crystal Bridges, is such a vague description.<sup>75</sup> The American spirit, including those who would attempt to define it, remains diverse.

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<sup>74</sup> Corcoran Gallery of Art. “About the Gallery.” Accessed June 25, 2012.  
<http://www.corcoran.org/about-gallery>

<sup>75</sup> Crystal Bridges. Press Releases. Accessed July 10, 2012.  
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