

Celebrating and Reflecting on an Artistic Legacy

The Frick Collection/Frick Art Reference Library Archives



Helen Clay Frick in 1908

The Frick Art Museum
marks its
50th anniversary
by looking back and
moving forward.

BY **TINA TUMINELLA**

The Frick Pittsburgh



Garlands adorn the entrance to The Frick Art Museum for the holiday season.



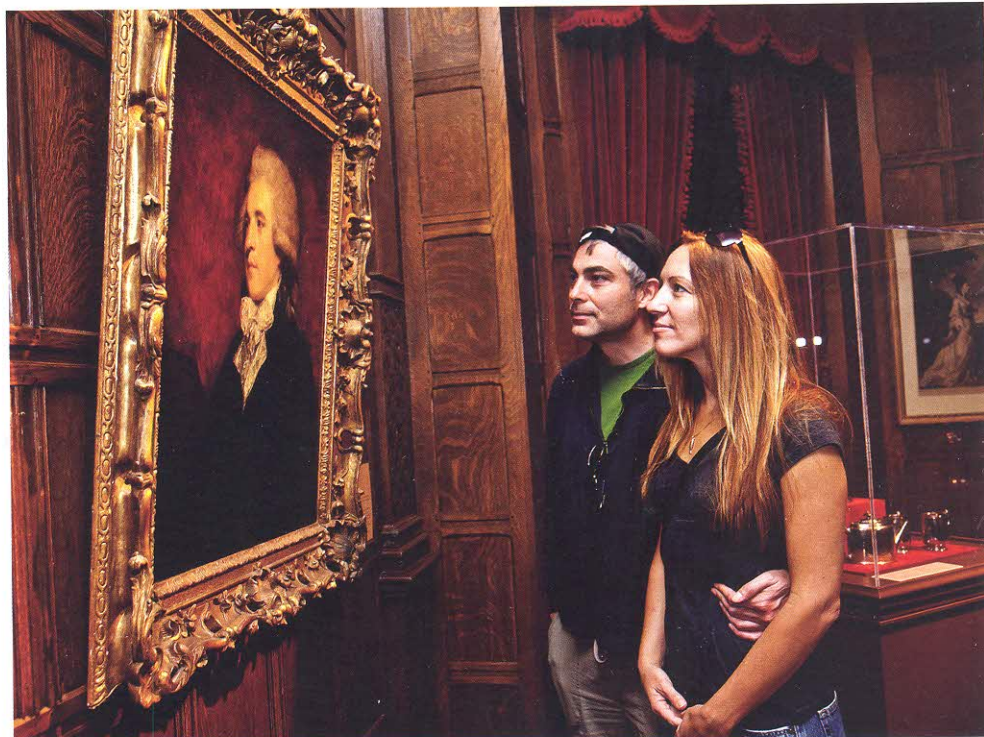
War and Pieces, an installation by Dutch contemporary artist Bouke de Vries, is on exhibit at The Frick Art Museum through January 24.

lawns and gardens that were once the Point Breeze estate of the Frick family, the Frick, as the art and historical center is most commonly known, includes the Car and Carriage Museum, a charming café, the Grable Visitor Center and its museum store, an education center, and Clayton, the historic mansion that was the Frick family's home. But for many visitors, it is the galleries of the art museum, showcasing unique special exhibitions and exquisite pieces from the permanent collection, that are the main draw.

From childhood, Helen Clay Frick, daughter of Adelaide Howard Childs Frick and industrialist and art collector Henry Clay Frick, showed great interest and aptitude in art, often traveling abroad with her family to visit art dealers and attend art auctions, even creating a catalog of her father's collection.

After his death in 1919, Helen became the country's wealthiest unmarried woman, and with her resources and passion for art and art history, she developed the Frick Art Reference Library, one of the largest art reference libraries in the world. She was integral to the success of The Frick Collection, the New York museum launched in 1935 that comprises her father's art collection. And in 1970, when she was 82, Helen opened The Frick Art Museum to share her personal fine and decorative arts collection with the people of Pittsburgh. This year, the museum celebrates its 50th anniversary.

The art museum is one of a cluster of buildings that collectively make up The Frick Pittsburgh. Situated on 6 acres of manicured



Visitors view a portrait inside the museum.

The Frick Pittsburgh

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Celebrating and Reexamining an Artistic Legacy

"Helen was thoughtful and methodical in her collecting," says Dawn R. Bream, the Frick's associate curator of decorative arts, a type of arts that she describes as "furniture, glass, ceramics, silver—objects meant to be used in daily life—that have a utilitarian function outside of paintings and sculpture."

While Helen's early collecting reflected her father's artistic taste, "what sets her collecting apart are her Italian Renaissance paintings," says Bream. "That is where her personal tastes come into play. She had a love of Italy."



The Frick Art Museum Italian Gallery

Even the museum structure was built in the Italian Renaissance style, with Helen modeling its layout and architecture on Florentine palazzos.

Visitors often point out the small scale of the art galleries and how manageable they are to tour. This was intentional: the museum was designed to exhibit the collection in an atmosphere of intimacy. Helen "wanted the building to be domestically, intimately scaled, to follow the example set forth by The Frick Collection that her father founded, which was a residence built to be a museum," explains Bream. "She wanted this to have that same domestic quality of seeing paintings and artworks as if you were wandering through a friend's house."

Helen's collection spans early Italian Renaissance panel paintings, 18th-century French paintings and decorative arts, Renaissance and Baroque bronzes, and extraordinary Chinese porcelains, many of which were collected by her father. Highlights from the permanent collection include a portrait by Peter Paul Rubens, a pastoral scene by Francois Boucher, and Italian panel paintings by Giovanni di Paolo and Sassetta.

In recent years, a series of fashion-related traveling exhibitions have been touted for good reason and well received by the public. Fun, lively, and original, they have primarily



Chinese porcelains belonging to Henry Clay Frick on display from the museum's permanent collection.

highlighted women's fashion as art and personal expression, exploring the social history of decorative arts with style and panache.

The first of these popular shows was 2016's *Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe*, which featured nearly 160 historical and contemporary shoes on loan from designers and museums. It was followed by the 2017 blockbuster exhibition *Undressed: A History of Fashion in Underwear* and the innovative *Isabelle de Borchgrave: Fashioning Art From Paper* show in 2018, which displayed replicas of Renaissance Italian gowns and recreations of the fantastical modernist costumes of the Ballet Russes created entirely from artfully painted, pleated, and crumpled paper. The *Katharine Hepburn: Dressed for Stage & Screen* 2019 exhibit featured a range of costumes and fashions of characters portrayed by the acclaimed

"Printz" shoes by Christian Louboutin, were part of the 2016 exhibition *Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe*.



Jay Zukerorn, courtesy of Christian Louboutin



The 2017 exhibit *Undressed: A History of Fashion in Underwear* featured this cotton and whalebone corset, circa 1890.



Inspired by a 1776 engraving in the Louvre Museum in Paris, this paper sculpture stood on display as part of the 2018 show *Isabelle de Borchgrave: Fashioning Art From Paper*.



In 2019, *Katharine Hepburn: Dressed for Stage & Screen* highlighted fashions worn by the actress, like this ensemble from the film *The Philadelphia Story*.

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actress. Most recently, *Maker & Muse: Women and Early Twentieth Century Art Jewelry* celebrated the impact of women on the innovative and imaginative jewelry of the early 1900s.



Elizabeth E. Barker, Ph.D., the executive director of The Frick Pittsburgh.

Shortly before the art museum's 50th anniversary year began, the Frick's board of trustees named Elizabeth E. Barker, Ph.D., as the cultural center's new executive director, the first woman to lead the institution. The timing of her appointment brought challenges far beyond the usual ones associated with a new position.

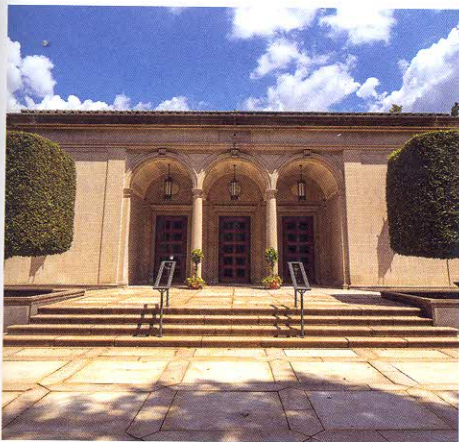
"So much has changed since we began planning the Frick's anniversary year," says Barker. "The pandemic prompted us to take much of our programming online."

But 2020 also brought opportunities, she notes. "The global uprising for racial justice spurred a process of reflection on our past and present and renewed our commitment to equity and inclusion."

Those key themes of this transformative year are shaping the way The Frick Art Museum is marking its milestone year. The newest of the museum's special exhibitions, *The Frick Reflects: Looking Back, Moving Forward*, focuses on the social context of the Gilded Age era in which the Frick family lived, the perspective with which Helen Clay Frick founded the organization that bears her family name, and the values and viewpoints the the Frick's permanent collection reveals, sometimes unwittingly.

"Henry Clay Frick is a tough figure," says Bream, candidly. "He has a reputation that is not so stellar—and deservedly so. Because we interpret him as a family man, and as a husband and father, there are a lot of perspectives to gain."

The Frick Reflects, which runs through February 7, turns the spotlight on rarely seen objects from both Clayton and The Frick Art Museum, with the intention of considering the collection from new perspectives. It aims to acknowledge and confront the inherent privi-



Built in the Italian Renaissance style, the design of The Frick Art Museum was inspired by Florentine palazzos.

lege and bias the collection represents, while asking what the Frick can be in the future.

"We are really broadening the stories that we tell," explains Bream. "Some people consider us to have a more traditional or conservative outlook, and when people visit, they'll see that's not quite so. We are working with contemporary artists to subvert your expectations of 18th-century art."

That includes a partnership with Homewood-based artist Vanessa German,

who will conduct intervention conversations prompted by the permanent collection, demonstrating a new way of doing things.

"What values should be guiding and shaping our actions into the future?" asks Bream, as The Frick Art Museum marks the half-century point. "Yes, we are the legacy of Helen Clay Frick," she notes. "But we need to acknowledge the varied perspectives on her and on [Henry Clay] Frick himself. It is vital that we do so, and it's beyond time to do so."

The Frick Pittsburgh will conclude the year with a holiday gift to the community that organizers describe as "a sort of outdoor extended festival." It will feature five weeks of late hours, food and drink, music, art, and, during the last week of the year, a pop-up skating rink. Details were not firm as this publication went to press. Visit thefrickpittsburgh.org for current information.

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