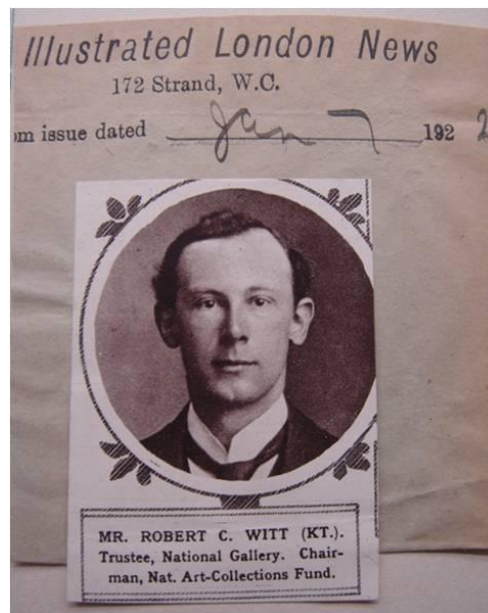


SIR ROBERT WITT: AMBASSADOR OF THE ARTS

By Robin Chung

Collecting and the Courtauld Project, Research Forum, Courtauld Institute of Art
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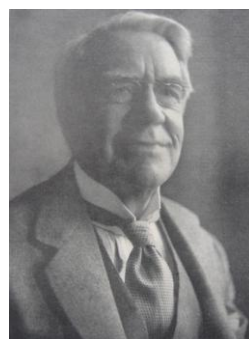
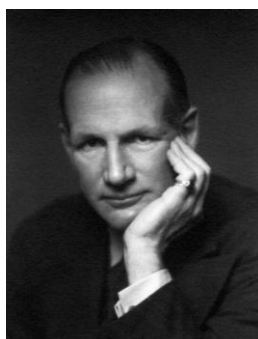


Britain's "imperial century" afforded men of means an avenue to travel across Europe and beyond in their quest to amass first-rate collections. By the turn of the century, it was clear that Britain contained the finest public and private collections in the world. But towards the end of the 19th century, countries such as Germany and the U.S. began to prosper and chip away at Britain's dominance as the world's leading trading nation. Along with the damages sustained from the 1st World War, by the time the 1920s arrived, it became evident that a shift was occurring that would inevitably transform the art world during a pivotal period when European museums were being made open to the entire public. Additionally, due to its new found prosperity and enterprising spirit, the U.S. became the site of intense museum building as well as home to a new class of eager and aggressive collectors. This development resulted in contentious, congenial, and sometimes ireful interchanges between Britain and the U.S. This presentation will examine those crucial years of the early 1920s and, in particular, the role that Sir Robert Witt played in mediating between the established gold ribbon standard in the east and the emerging, inexperienced vanguard to the west. As trustee of the National Gallery & the Tate Gallery, Chairman of the National Art Collections Fund, and one of the only two owners of extensive pictures and reproduction collections in the UK, Sir Robert Witt was well-positioned to police, scrutinize, and supervise the exchanges between these two countries. An avid collector himself, Witt had an exhaustive knowledge of and indisputable passion for the arts.



Sir Robert's Witt Pictures and Reproductions Library

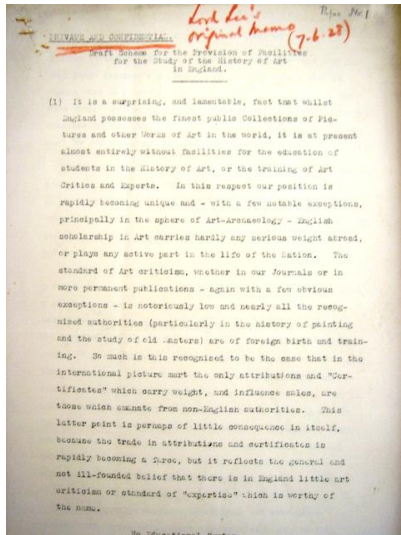
By 1930, his library contained 400,000 reproductions, and dealers and collectors would often consult with his library and/or Witt for guidance to which Witt was more than pleased to offer. As a dedicated scholar himself, he was a strong proponent of art education and, thusly, opened up his collection to the public and eventually bequeathed it to the newly founded Courtauld Institute of Art in 1932.



Samuel Courtauld, Lord Arthur Lee, and Lord Martin Conway

The founding of the Courtauld, the first British art institute, was a product of the efforts of Samuel Courtauld, Lord Arthur Lee, Lord Martin Conway, and Witt. However, it wasn't the first of its kind and, in many ways, drew inspiration from the Fogg Museum at Harvard University which was established at least a decade before. In fact, during the years following the founding of the Fogg, Witt made several journeys overseas and the exchange of ideas that transpired resulted in a myriad of felicitous advancements on both sides of the Atlantic.

Witt had long advocated for the institutionalization of art history programs in Britain, but it wasn't until the Fogg that he was able to witness the actuality of such a program. The new institution extended the traditional objectives of the museum to include rigorous and methodological scholarship.



The “Draft Scheme for the Provision of Facilities for the Study of the History of Art in England” (From the Robert Witt newspaper archives)

In fact, when Lord Lee drew up the “Draft Scheme for the Provision of Facilities for the Study of the History of Art in England,” it is apparent that he drew heavily from materials that either Witt or Courtauld, or both, had brought back from the Fogg in 1927. Forbes and Sachs’s correspondence shows that they had provided Courtauld and Witt with copies of catalogues, annual reports, articles, and handbooks. In fact, Samuel Courtauld and his wife, Elizabeth, visited the Fogg and its director and associate director, Edward Forbes and Paul Sachs. Sachs recalls of the visit: “The first night at dinner it was thrilling to have them develop their ideas, and it was flattering to hear them say that they had come to see just how Forbes and I were grappling with the problems of a university museum in our newly erected building. They hoped that our philosophy about the place of a museum in education at the university level was akin to their own. We saw eye to eye.”¹



RMS Aquitania

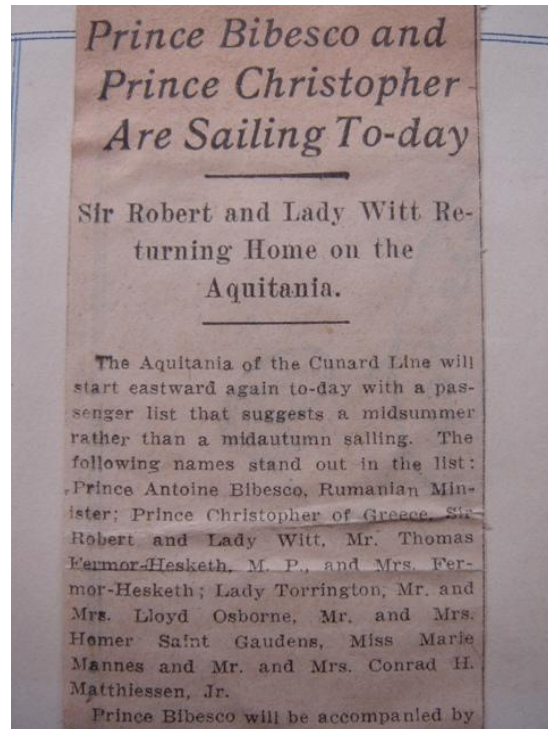
The luxury liners such as the RMS Aquitania that Witt and his wife boarded in 1923, acted as communication lines between east and west. American and British art

¹ Kathryn Brush, *Vastly More Than Bricks and Mortar* (Huam, Cambridge, 2004), p. 185.

historians would travel back and forth, each time inspired by what their counter-parts were doing. Many times these little sparks of inspiration would grow and materialize into a new way of thinking about art education or even into a new library or school.



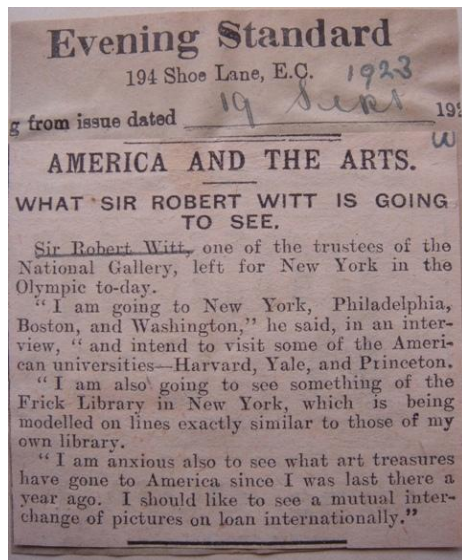
Sir Robert Witt and Lady Witt returning home after a month's trip abroad, 24 October 1923 (from the Robert Witt newspaper archives)



In a letter to Forbes following a visit in 1923, Witt enthuses, “What I feel about your work you know, and the Fogg is the embodiment of it. Who could wish for better? I hope to preach your gospel to better purpose at home with the inspiration I won from you and Sachs – par nobile fratrum!”

And in an essay entitled, “Some Expressions of American Art Museums from a European Point of View,” which was published by *The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* in 1928, Sir Witt opines, “In England at least, though not always on the Continent, we lag behind American methods in having no Art School in which the future Directors and Curators of our Museums can be definitely trained for their important and responsible positions on sound Museum methods and in the technique of Museum science. At the Fogg Museum at Harvard this need has been fully recognized and advanced courses are being held, which we should be glad to imitate, in which, among other subjects, sound methods of technique as affecting the conservation and restoration of works of art and the study of forgeries, imitations and such like are taught together with the use of X-rays in the examination of pictures.”

However, not all comments made of America were so generous. Remember, Witt's journeys to the New World were two-fold in objective.



(From the Robert Witt newspaper archives)

Firstly, he endeavoured to study and appraise the advancements made in terms of art education. But, secondly, if not more importantly, he toured New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington to seek out and monitor the copious number of Old Masters that had made its way from the salons of the British aristocracy to the public and private collections in the U.S. The latter was of particular interest to Witt. In fact, he was partly responsible for the creation of the National Art-Collections Fund in 1903, an organization of which its sole purpose was to purchase important art works and donate them to national collections in order to prevent their exportation, namely, to America. In a letter addressed to the editor of *The Spectator* in 1913, he adamantly states, “Largely as a result of the war, many great European private collections are in course of being broken up. It may well be that America with her enthusiasm and wealth will secure the larger part, but it has not been the practice of this country to sit with folded hands in the great friendly international rivalries of the past.”² So deep was his concern that he revealed that the Fund had manufactured a confidential list of pictures not to leave the UK under any circumstances. It was acts such as these that positioned Witt as the presumptive gatekeeper of art in Britain, a role that he took quite seriously. This seemed to be reflective in general of the relationship between Britain and America at the time. While there was certainly admiration on Britain’s part for the innovation and enthusiasm that resulted in the building of art institutions popping up across the States, this admiration was unquestionably tempered by a kind of apprehensive distrust. And perhaps understandably so.

In auction after auction, artworks that heretofore would have been unimaginable to leave the country were being sold piecemeal to rich American entrepreneurs. At a Christie’s auction in 1925, the estate of Almina Countess of Carnarvon was being sold to dealers from America, Germany, and France. In a *Daily Graphic* article, the journalist describes the feeling of despondency and resistance in the room.

² *The Spectator* (Dec 13, 1919).



(From the Robert Witt newspaper archives)

“‘What a tragedy, what a shame!’ you heard echoed all over the auction rooms as each piece was sold under the hammer. Lord Portsmouth came in and had a look and shook his head. Baroness Schroeder, who is an habitu  of these sale rooms, came and gazed too, and so did Sir Robert Witt.”³ The sales that relocated many valuable Masters overseas was largely due to the efforts of Belgium-born, British-bred art dealer Joseph Duveen.



Family photograph of Joseph Joel and Rosetta Duveen with their nine children, c. 1882. Joseph is in the back row, standing, with arms crossed.

Joseph **Joel** Duveen was born the son of a blacksmith and his wife in a little village named Meppel in Holland. His mother cultured a taste for delft pottery and had her

³ *The Daily Graphic*, (20 May 1925).

sons go around the village trading for pieces of pottery until, finally, in 1866, she trusted her sharp business acumen and sent Joseph Joel (aged 23) to England loaded with Delft pottery to sell. He set up shop in Hull and branched out from Delft (which he viewed as somewhat lowly and insignificant) to furniture and objets d'art. It was this business that would eventually be inherited by Joseph Duveen the future Lord Duveen of Millbank and the greatest art dealer in history.



Sir Joseph and Lady Duveen in 1919

The young Duveen ultimately moved from Hull to London and from furniture and objets to paintings. In 1886, he made the first of many trips across the Atlantic to New York where he tapped into the deep reservoir of opportunity manifested in the American industrialists such as William Randolph Hearst, John D Rockefeller and JP Morgan. Duveen viewed the nouveau riche as members of a new club with money to burn and something to prove. Unlike the European aristocracy with their titles of nobility and long lineages, the American billionaires were looking for immortality whether it was through property or priceless works of art. Joseph Duveen was at the beck and call of these men and understood them in a way that few others did. He knew that these men went about purchasing art in the same manner that they engaged in corporate mergers – with calculating ruthlessness.

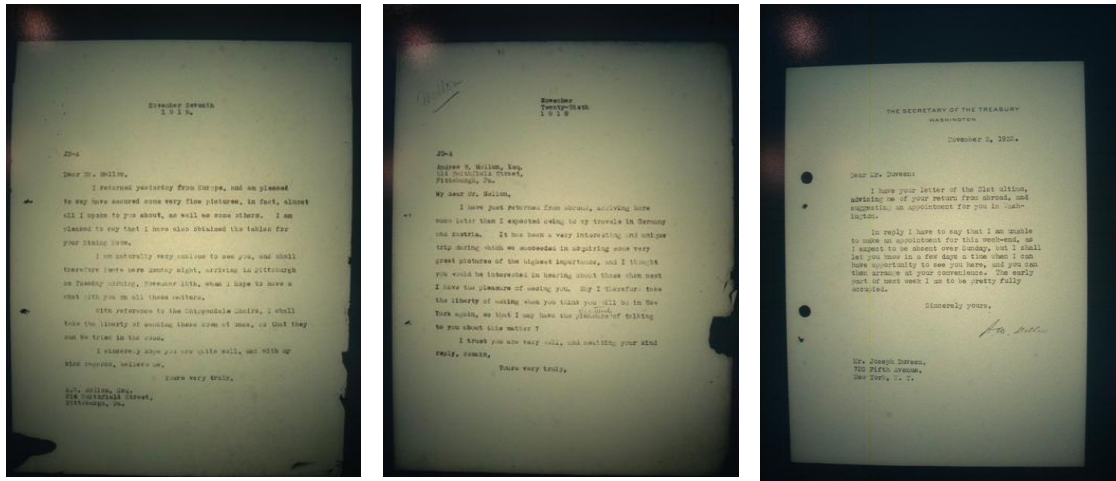
His savvy for business, that swiftly sniffed out worthy clients, also worked to find their counterparts in the perfect sellers. After World War I, aristocratic families, suddenly left without a patriarch and in need of funds, had to resort to selling their heirlooms. Duveen was instrumental as intermediary between these women and American buyers, often doing double-duty as educator. However, because many of the buyers that Duveen dealt with were philanthropists, they would make their purchases then donate them to the blossoming American museums. Therefore, it is because of Duveen that the Frick Collection in New York, the National Gallery in DC, and the Huntington Library in Pasadena contain priceless Old Masters instead of mediocre salon paintings.

Duveen began journeying between Europe and the US in 1886 to stock up on the art that he would then sell to wealthy and eager Americans. I'd like to focus on

Duveen's relationship with three collectors as being very telling examples of how he operated.

Andrew Mellon: The Elusive Prize

Andrew Mellon, future US treasurer and benefactor to the National Gallery in DC, had long been a target for Duveen and their orchestrated encounter is a perfect example of Duveen's unwavering tenacity. For years, Duveen had been soliciting Mellon in the hopes of winning him over from his usual dealer, Knoedler's. These are two examples of the kinds of letters he would send to the industrialist in Pittsburgh.



(From the Duveen Archives)

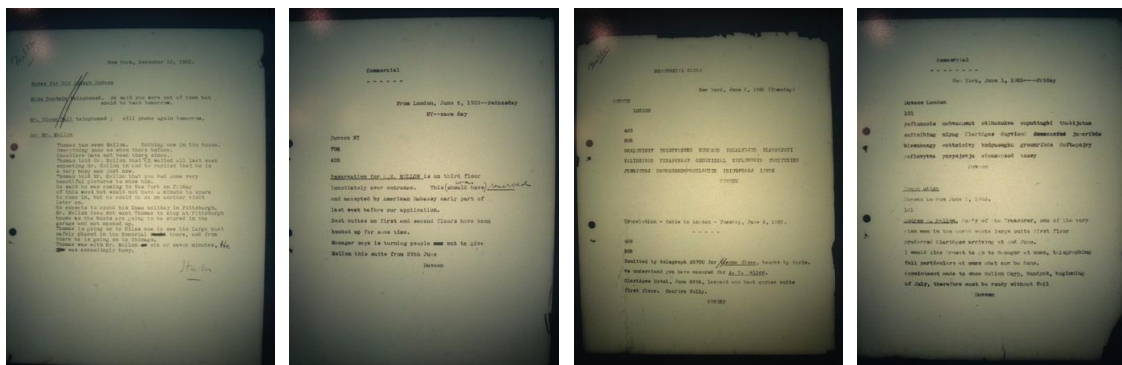
However, Duveen had to tread softly – unlike Duveen, Mellon was a reticent, unassuming man who distrusted ostentatious gestures. In response to Duveen's letters, he would receive polite deferments such as this. Then a few months after this letter, Duveen fortuitously found that he was staying in the same hotel, Claridge's in London. Duveen changed suites to the one directly below Mellon on the third floor then made covert arrangements through his and Mellon's valet.



The Meeting of Mellon and Duveen, by Edward Sorel

When Mellon was headed downstairs in the elevator, he had Mellon's valet tip off **his** and then went to the elevator to patiently await his arrival. Once inside, he feigned:

'How do you do, Mr. Mellon? I am on my way to the National Gallery to look at some pictures. My great refreshment is to look at pictures'.⁴ This slide humorously lampoons the moment. Though Mellon acquiesced and joined him, this meeting would be followed by years of inscrutability on Mellon's part – Duveen would often contact Mellon with possibly acquisitions, but Mellon's pensiveness would keep him silent for what seemed like an eternity to Duveen. Of course, Mellon also had the small task of running the finances of the United States during a period which included the Great Depression. Nevertheless, because of this, Duveen kept close tabs on the reserved millionaire.



(From the Duveen Archives)

These coded cables are a good examples of the way in which he traced Mellon's movements. But the dry spell wouldn't last. When it became revealed that Mellon was planning a National Gallery of Art in DC, Duveen became an integral player in securing much of the collection.

The Wooing of Henry Clay Frick

Like Mellon, Duveen viewed Henry Clay Frick as another big catch. Unfortunately, until 1913, Frick often dealt with Duveen's competitors and, though he had had a good working relationship with Duveen's Uncle Henry, he was a little wary of the younger Joe. Duveen knew he would have to woo Frick with a lure that was too irresistible to refuse. Through his Paris runners, he was informed that a da Vinci painting could possibly be on the market. He invited the potential seller, a Russian noblewoman, to his gallery in the Place Vendôme in Paris to have it verified by Bernard Berenson, the renowned historian of Italian art who confirmed the painting's authenticity as the long-lost picture, 'Madonna with a Flower'. The lady offered the price of one and a half million dollars (hitherto, the highest price tag for a work of art), but stated that according to Russian law, she had to first offer it to the czar at the same price. Frick thought it unexpected that the czar would intercede and happily put a million dollars in escrow, then contacted Frick who was waiting in New York with bated breath. Unfortunately, the men were to be had. The Russian noblewoman was only interested in obtaining a free Berenson consultation and had always intended to

⁴ SN Behrman, *Duveen* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1952), p. 173.

sell the painting to the czar. So instead of the Frick Collection, the da Vinci found a home at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg where it hangs today. Duveen quickly rebounded and became instrumental in the building and decoration of Frick's home. He chose the architects who built Frick's home in 1913 at 70th Street and 5th Avenue in New York. Duveen worked with the architects to design the plans for an unusually sized room with the idea of placing the famous set of eleven Fragonard panels there before even clearing it with Frick.



The Fragonard Room

The panels were commissioned by Louis XV in 1770, as a present to Mme Du Barry who refused them due to its political content. The panels finally ended up in the hands of JP Morgan who had just died and Duveen was offered first buy which he immediately snapped up for over a million dollars. He then turned around and offered the prize to Frick. Duveen decided to sell the panels at cost as an investment to condition Frick as a model client. Plus, Duveen made up the loss in profit in the sale of the other items he sold to Frick in order to decorate the new room.

Inventories	
220 Fifth Avenue	
New York June 4th 1913	
W.L. Frick, Esq. 1 West 70th Street, New York City.	
Duveen Brothers	
From the Morgan Collection.	
29	A Terra Cotta Group Representing Cupid and Psyche. By CLAUDIUS (signed and dated). \$ 84,000-00
47	Small Louis XVI Circular Table, with Lapis Lazuli top. By PIERRE GOSWISSER. 19,000-00
18	A Louis XVI Marqueterie Commode, made for the apartment of Marie Antoinette at St. Cloud by JEAN DUBOIS in 1792. It is signed by DUBOIS and headed on the back with the armor of Marie Antoinette and the Cocarde Noire de la Reine. Formerly in the Madison Avenue Collection and later in the Collection of the Marquis de Fou de Lamoignon, and then in the possession of Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan. 100,000-00
41	A Small Louis XVI Table with base in Burl Walnut Fluted, signed by GALLIE. From the Collection of the Duke d'Albe, Madrid. 28,000-00
48	A Pair of Early Louis XVI Commodes. They are important examples of the decorated transitional period. From the Collection of a Prince in Belgium. (Made in 1755). 100,000-00
Total \$ 311,000-00	

Inventories	
220 Fifth Avenue	
New York June 4th 1913	
W.L. Frick, Esq. 1 West 70th Street, New York City.	
Duveen Brothers	
-	
	Balance \$1,000,000-00
28	Pair of Case Chapel Candlesticks. 42,000-00
31	Two Bronze Busts. Representing a young girl and a youth. By CROTTET. \$1,000 each 20,000-00
	<hr/> \$1,062,000-00
	Plus, by cash 91,000-00
	<hr/> \$1,153,000-00
	Payable as follows:
	\$21,000-00 cash.
	The balance of \$1,132,000-00 in monthly installments of \$30,000-00, beginning June 1st, 1913.
	The unpaid balance being subject to three percent (3%) interest per annum, from June 4th, 1913, to June thirty and fifteen (1913).

(From the Duveen Archives)

Here, you can see just one invoice that Duveen sent Frick in 1915. Among the items, a Louis XVI Marqueterie Commode, made for the apartment of Marie Antoinette for \$138,000. The final total came to a staggering \$1,391,600.



Duveen with wife (right) on one of their innumerable transatlantic voyages (left); H.E Huntington (right)



HE Huntington and ‘The Blue Boy’

The dance between dealer and buying is often a delicate game and it was with HE Huntington that Duveen managed to steal a veritable national treasure. According to the story often told by Duveen in later years, he was on board the HMS Aquitania in the summer of 1921. Huntington and his wife Arabella were staying in the neighbouring Gainsborough Suite and invited Duveen to join them for dinner. Between courses, Huntington looked up at a portrait hanging on the wall. He asked ‘Joe, who’s the boy in the blue suit?’ to which Duveen replied ‘That is a reproduction of the famous “Blue Boy”...It is Gainsborough’s finest and most famous painting’. When Huntington asked where the original one was, Duveen replied, ‘It belongs to the Duke of Westminster and hangs in his collection at Grosvenor House in London’. He continued, ‘It cannot be had at any price... It is the greatest work of England’s greatest master and would be the crown of any collection of English pictures’. Ever the businessman, Huntington asked how much the painting would be if it were ever sold. Duveen paused then responded ‘Six hundred thousand dollars’.⁵ In fact, Huntington had had his eye on ‘The Blue Boy’ for many years, but it took this meal on the Aquitania to set in motion a sequence of events that would make headlines on both sides of the Atlantic. Ever being in-the-know, Duveen had learned through his operatives that the Duke was financially stressed and might be amenable to a profitable sale. A deal was struck within days and Duveen telephoned Huntington (who had debarked in Paris) that ‘The Blue Boy’ was his for \$620,000. When Duveen personally delivered the painting to the Huntingtons in Paris, HE was disappointed that ‘The Blue Boy’ was in fact green due to years of neglect. Duveen promised to have the painting restored and then delivered to Huntington in San Marino. While he was praised for restoring the national treasure and putting it on

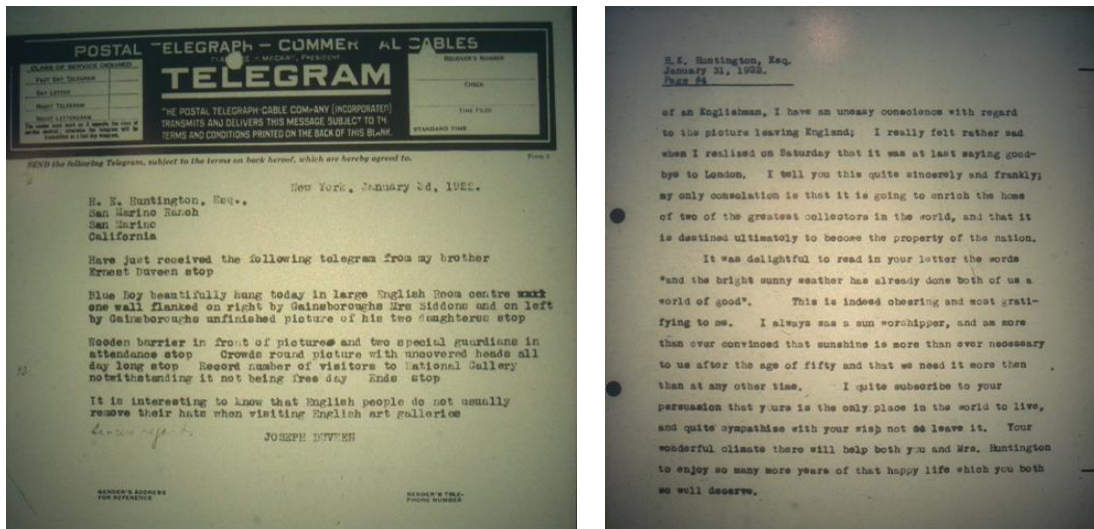
⁵ SN Behrman, *Duveen*, p. 138.

display at the National Gallery in London, he was conversely criticized by the press for deporting it to the US. While Duveen had made a career out of pillaging European estates and selling to foreign buyers, he was adding insult to injury by selling England's finest painting to an industrialist from California.



(From the Duveen Archives)

The sale invoked a flurry of editorials across the country. One particular editorial in *Pall Mall & Globe* wrote: ‘The passing of Gainsborough’s picture “The Blue Boy” to America calls attention once more to the way in which this country is being depleted of all its masterpieces. That something should be done to check the flow of great works of art from this country to America has long been the opinion of those who recognize the value – which is not the price – of famous national heirlooms.’ While ‘The Blue Boy’ was displayed at Trafalgar Square, nearly 100,000 people went to bid farewell. National Gallery director, Sir Charles Holmes, famously wrote on the back of the canvas ‘Au revoir, CH’ as if he knew it would never return. Duveen, was thrilled with the hoopla, which indubitably cemented his reputation as the most important art dealer in the world.



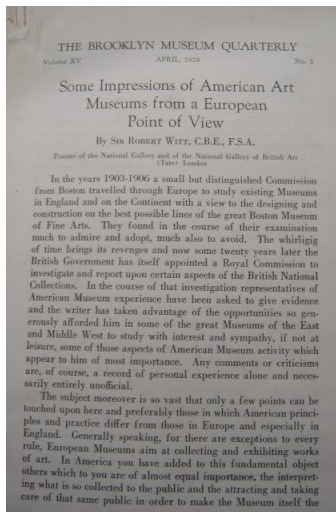
(From the Duveen Archives)

He sent this telegram to Huntington in January of 1922 boasting: ‘Crowds round picture with uncovered heads all day long STOP. Record number of visitors to National Gallery notwithstanding it not being free day Ends STOP.’ Of course, he wasn’t completely without reserve. In a latter letter, he wrote: ‘I must confess that, speaking from the point of view of an Englishman, I have an uneasy conscious with regard to the picture leaving England; I really felt rather sad when I realized on Saturday that it was at last saying goodbye to London. I tell you this quite sincerely and frankly; my only consideration is that it is going to enrich the home of two of the greatest collectors in the world, and that it is destined ultimately to become the property of the nation’. And of course, the work became part of the Huntington collection where it is still displayed to this day.



The ‘Blue Boy’ at the Huntington Art Gallery

To return to Witt, he often would travel to the US where he would survey first hand the new homes of the Old Masters.



(From the Robert Witt newspaper archives)

During his many trips, he witnessed (probably with mixed emotion) the display of these invaluable works of art, but also noticed that ‘America has much space and take care to store art correctly unlike congested palaces, churches, etc. where art wasn’t meant to be stored’. He duly admired how the art was being conserved and the art institutions were being considered as centres of serious art scholarship. He went on to say: ‘In America you have added to this fundamental object others which to you are of almost equal importance, the interpreting what is so collected to the public and the attracting and taking care of that same public in order to make the Museum itself the cultural centre of the community by connecting it intimately with all the arts and sciences and with education’.⁶

However, Witt was not completely against the sale of works of art abroad. Above all, he was a staunch advocate of art education and was for the widespread display of art for the general welfare and enjoyment of the public. In a letter to the editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, Witt waxes enthusiastically: ‘For there is a new spirit abroad in the world of art. The public is now claiming as a right and as a necessity what used to be regarded as a luxury for the few. It has grown more exacting, more critical, and rightly so. A museum is a home in which treasures should be revealed, not buried. Special exhibitions, regrouping, rearranging, rehangings, are giving us the almost new collections to enjoy, at infinite trouble to the staffs it is true, but also with infinite satisfaction to the public’.⁷ However, though he was encouraged by the growing interest in art, as chairman of the National Art Collections Fund, he campaigned for a system of loans with other countries as the most desirable scenario. Not only would the world be exposed to the treasure of Britain’s collections, but Britain would likewise benefit from the modern works coming from America and the rest of Europe.

Witt spent a large majority of his life trying to fruitfully exploit the relationship with America while simultaneously protecting Britain’s interests at home. This was not a simple endeavour, but Witt threw himself in wholeheartedly. He realized the importance of preserving the past while looking towards the future. His legacy is a testimony to this. He played a pivotal role in the creation of the Courtauld and his library of pictures and reproductions are still a rich resource for scholars everywhere.

⁶ *The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly*, Volume XV (April, 1928).

⁷ *The Daily Telegraph* (Feb 5, 1921).