

THE BEGINNINGS OF SAN FRANCISCO'S ART MUSEUMS

by Ann Harlow

Art museums have burgeoned in San Francisco in recent years. Between 1995 and 2005, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the de Young Museum moved into newly constructed buildings, the Asian Art Museum moved from Golden Gate Park to the remodeled Old Main Library in Civic Center, and the Palace of the Legion of Honor completed a major addition. Now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is making plans for a 100,000-square-foot expansion.

San Francisco is justly proud of these four museums. But how did a city of its size come to have four major public art museums rather than one?¹ The norm in this country, at least outside of New York, is for a city to feature a single art museum with a “comprehensive” collection representing more or less the entire history of art.² This encyclopedic model was envisioned for San Francisco in the late nineteenth century, but it never materialized. A number of fascinating stories involving determined women, colorful personalities, and family feuds are behind this phenomenon. This article explores how three of the city’s art museums emerged between the 1890s and the 1930s.

When the San Francisco Art Association was established in 1871, its founders intended to create an art museum as well as an art school. In fact, the association’s first headquarters were in the

Museum Room of the Mercantile Library. By the end of the century, the association had on display a sizable art collection, as well as exhibits of works on loan from artists and collectors. However, it was not until 1935 that a permanent art museum affiliated with the San Francisco Art Association finally opened. The city government showed fluctuating interest in creating a municipal art museum. This interest was stimulated at times by private philanthropy, but never developed into a strong civic proprietary interest in maintenance and growth.

In nineteenth-century California, wealthy individuals, not organizations or cities, came closest to developing art museums. (The word *gallery* was used more frequently than *museum* in those days, but permanent collections were a key part of the concept.) Woodward’s Gardens, the famous public pleasure grounds, included a “picture gallery” by the 1870s. In the 1880s David Hewes, best known today for commissioning the Golden Spike for the transcontinental railway completion ceremony in 1869, had an art gallery in his home. The Crockers, Stanfords, and Hearsts also were developing large art collections and invited the public in on occasion. The Sutro Baths-Cliff House complex of the late 1890s had “galleries of sculptures, paintings, tapestries and artifacts from Aztec, Mexican, Egyptian, Syrian, Chinese and Japanese cultures.”³



*The original Golden Gate Park Memorial Museum, in a style evoking ancient Egypt, with damage from the 1906 earthquake.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

DREAMS OF GRANDEUR

The Stanford family was especially interested in creating a world-class museum. Leland Stanford, Jr. already had begun buying Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art and artifacts when he died in 1884 at age fifteen. Traveling in Europe with his parents, he visited dozens of museums and expressed a keen interest in creating a major museum in San Francisco. After his death, the senior Stanfords set out to create a fitting memorial to their son, which they decided would take the form of a university and a museum. In 1887 they were talking about building a museum in Golden Gate Park that would rival the “grandest”

museums in the world.⁴ However, they soon decided instead to build the museum on the grounds of Stanford University. Jane Stanford took on the project with great vigor and added more than fifteen thousand objects to the collection by the time the museum opened in 1894. There were also other donors, including David Hewes, whose wife was Jane Stanford’s sister. He contributed his substantial art collection to the Stanford Art Museum in 1892.

The museum at Palo Alto was indeed grand—larger than the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts at the time that it was built. Many civic-minded San Franciscans must have been chagrined that the Stanfords had

decided not to build the museum in their city. A local journalist editorialized in 1891, "It seems a pity that a city the size of San Francisco cannot boast a single museum or an art gallery worthy of the name. We have millionaires by the score, but not one of them public-spirited enough to endow the city with a few pictures."⁵ Later that year, there were several public exhibitions of private art collections to raise funds for charities. These prompted a longer article in the *Overland Monthly*, "A Revival of Art Interest in California." This author, too, decried the lack of an art museum in San Francisco, and he conjured up an intriguing image:

What San Francisco needs is an art building, eligibly and centrally located, constructed entirely of California marbles and other building stones, and of California metals, and decorated and furnished entirely with California woods. It should be a ten or twelve story building, upon the most advanced modern designs. In it there should be a large and fine collection of paintings in one portion, and collections of California minerals, flora, fauna, birds, etc., as well as historical objects of curiosity and interest. Its art museum should contain the best possible specimens obtainable of local art . . . [and] foreign art, old or modern.

Much time would of course elapse before a collection suitable could be secured, but a beginning could be made, and meanwhile such an edifice would not only be an enduring monument to the public-spirited interest of the citizens or citizen who should undertake it, but the building would here, as in Chicago, prove a source of some profit to its projectors. The rentals obtained from stores and rooms within the area of its walls not devoted to art and museum interests, would make such a building an immediate source of revenue, at the same time that the entire construction was proving itself to be a public educator and benefit to us all.⁶

The writer of this essay, Charles Dormon Robinson, was a well-known landscape painter. He was ahead of his time in proposing non-museum, revenue-generating space. In 1891 there was indeed an art museum building being planned for Chicago, but any plan to include rental spaces must have been short-lived. A building was erected in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 with the plan that it would then serve as the home of the Art Institute of Chicago, as it does to this day.⁷

THE MARK HOPKINS INSTITUTE OF ART

For a short thirteen years, from 1893 to 1906, the San Francisco Art Association's school and museum occupied very luxurious quarters. This came about because the ornate mansion on Nob Hill built by railroad baron Mark Hopkins and his wife was given to the University of California by her second husband, Edward Searles, after her death, "for the exclusive uses and purposes of instruction in and illustration of the Fine Arts, Music, and Literature, or any of them, including the maintenance of galleries, reading-rooms, and other suitable means of such instruction and illustration." The Institute of Art became a division of the university, its graduating students received a Certificate of Proficiency from the university, and the regents held meetings in one of the mansion's thirty-four rooms. Part of the art association's permanent collection was on display, first in the 25- by 50-foot main hall and then, beginning in 1900, in a newly added 43- by 105-foot gallery, and the public was encouraged to visit.

Some people hailed this as the perfect time for San Francisco to develop a world-class art museum:

There is here offered an opportunity for all good citizens who can do more than pay taxes for its support to play a worthy part. . . . [T]here can be no better answer to the reproach of mammonism and provincialism than to demonstrate our capability of appreciating the higher life by pointing to a collection of the greatest art treasures of

the civilized world. . . . It remains with our Californian millionaires to decide whether the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art of the University of California shall be not only the school of future but home of past and present masters.⁸

However, this one had hardly established itself when it burned to the ground in April 1906. The collection was considered so valuable that University of California professor Edmund O'Neill and a group of volunteers risked their lives rescuing artworks just ahead of the fire. They cut many of the paintings out of their frames, rolled them up and took them to Berkeley for safekeeping.⁹

The art association and its school made do with much simpler quarters, rebuilt on the Nob Hill site, until 1924.

THE GOLDEN GATE PARK MEMORIAL MUSEUM

One San Francisco millionaire who was thinking about museums in 1893 was Michael Harry de Young, publisher of the *Chronicle*. His personal hobby of collecting antiques, stuffed bird specimens, and "curiosities" had outgrown the space in his home in which he kept and displayed them. He had offered the birds to the city, hoping they would be displayed in Golden Gate Park, but was told there was no suitable building.

However, there was the Chicago model: host a world's fair in a large park, and when all the temporary buildings are torn down, leave a permanent museum standing.¹⁰ M. H. de Young was a national commissioner for the 1893 Chicago fair and became the prime mover behind the California Midwinter International Exposition held in Golden Gate Park the next year. As de Young later wrote:

. . . the Mid-Winter Exposition was launched and during its progress the desire to create a museum took possession of me, and I gave a great deal of study to the matter. I had repeated interviews with Mr. Stowe, president of the Park Commission,

urging on him the desirability of such an institution. At first he seemed very fixed in his determination not to allow any of the Exposition buildings to be kept in the park. But I persisted and finally got his consent to keep the Art Building by impressing upon him that there was only one suitable place in San Francisco to establish a museum, and that was in Golden Gate Park, where the people could enjoy it on the days when they take their outing, when whole families would visit the Art Building both for amusement and education.¹¹

In time, de Young and his fellow Midwinter Fair commissioners were able to persuade city and park authorities to accept their gift of the Egyptian style Fine and Decorative Arts Building and the Royal Bavarian Pavilion, to be combined and made into a museum. It was to be a permanent memorial to the world's fair (not to de Young, who lived another thirty years) and admission was forever to be free (which it has not been in recent memory, except for non-gallery spaces). After some renovation and some fast collecting using proceeds from the fair—including the purchase of numerous objects that had been exhibited in the fair—the Midwinter Memorial Museum opened in March 1895. De Young continued to take a personal interest in the project for the rest of his life, going on enthusiastic buying trips to Europe and donating his finds to the museum. He collected antiques more than fine art, focusing at different times on particular types of objects, such as knives and forks, powder horns, keys, and fans. He encouraged pioneer families to donate Gold Rush memorabilia. The collections of objects from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas also began in these early years. The museum was nicknamed the attic of San Francisco for years.

There were departments of art, history, and natural history by 1910. The curator hired that year, George Barron, made a point of exhibiting contemporary local artists' work as well as historic art, which pleased the artists of the San Francisco Art Association. By 1913 one space in the museum



M. H. de Young, about 1915. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



*The Golden Gate Park Memorial Museum expansion designed by Louis Christian Mullgardt, the coordinator for architecture of the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition, about 1919. In the 1940s the Plateresque-style concrete ornamentation began falling off, was declared a hazard to the public, and was removed.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

was an Oriental Room. It included 10- and 12-foot-tall Japanese vases and a Chinese jade bowl 12 inches in diameter, among other objects.

Not surprisingly, de Young's *Chronicle* ran many glowing articles about the importance of "the city's museum in Golden Gate Park" and the crowds that visited it. It reported that the museum's "collections, in many departments, surpass anything in the world—the Metropolitan Museum, the British Museum or the Smithsonian Institution by no means excepted!"¹² De Young hoped and assumed that the citizens of San Francisco would be proud to support "their" museum, but it seems most of the support came from him. The rival newspaper, the *Examiner*, editorialized that San Francisco should

have an art museum in its Civic Center, stating in 1913 that "already there is considerable agitation over the raising of funds for an art museum This is something worth waiting for."¹³

The Golden Gate Park Museum did get some donations from citizens other than de Young, including a \$10,000 bequest in 1916 from Alice Skae for purchasing work by California artists.¹⁴ As the museum's collections grew, de Young paid for an addition, repairs after the 1906 earthquake, and a new building in Spanish Plateresque style designed by Louis Christian Mullgardt that opened in 1919, followed by further additions. In 1921 the institution was renamed the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in his honor.¹⁵

SETBACKS

In the early 1890s, as the museum at Stanford University was under construction, Phoebe Apperson Hearst was living in San Francisco and dreaming of a museum for the University of California. Because of her intense interest in the university, yet another San Francisco collection of art and antiquities left the city (although the anthropology museum she founded was located in San Francisco in its early years).¹⁶ Her son, William Randolph Hearst, went on to collect European art voraciously in the 1920s and 1930s. He was not as philanthropically inclined as his mother, and placed most of his collection at San Simeon. In doing so, he, like her, turned his back on San Francisco, the city where he was born and had launched his media empire with the *Examiner*.

The unfortunate epilogue to the grand dreams and hard work of both Jane Stanford and Phoebe Hearst was that once they were dead, neither university had the resources to support the kinds of museums they had envisioned. In the case of U. C. Berkeley, although a monumental museum was included in the 1900 master plan, no art museum was built until 1968; and in the case of Stanford, a large portion of the building collapsed in the 1906 earthquake and was not rebuilt. Jane Stanford, having died the previous year, was spared what otherwise would have been another heartbreak following the deaths of her son and husband. In 1901 she had donated her house in San Francisco to Stanford University, and the plan was to convert it to a museum and art gallery, but this evidently never happened.

The 1906 disaster also set back the potential development of a major fine arts museum in San Francisco. Thousands of art works in homes, artists' studios, and the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art were destroyed in the fire. The Golden Gate Park Memorial Museum building and contents were badly damaged. On the positive side, the post-quake reconstruction of the city generated the idea of the Panama Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) of 1915, which indirectly spawned the city's second and third art museums.

The Legion of Honor museum building was patterned after the French pavilion at the PPIE, and the first home of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was the fair's Palace of Fine Arts.

THE CALIFORNIA PALACE OF THE LEGION OF HONOR

Not long after two other Bay Area women had almost single-handedly created significant new museums, along came Alma de Bretteville Spreckels to create a third, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor.¹⁷ Of course, none of the three could have achieved what they did without their husbands' fortunes, but they also showed a remarkable degree of initiative and tenacity for women of the period. The only other individual



Alma de Bretteville, about 1903. She met Adolph B. Spreckels, 24 years her senior, at about this time and married him in 1908. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

women in the United States to found major art museums in the early twentieth century were Isabella Stewart Gardner in Boston and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in New York.

Stephen Birmingham has referred to the emergence of the de Young and Legion of Honor museums as “the Great Museum War.”¹⁸ Alma de Bretteville (1881–1968) was married in 1908 to Adolph Spreckels (1857–1924), son of the “sugar king” Claus Spreckels. The Spreckels family had become very wealthy through land speculation, Hawaiian sugar plantations, and Pacific steamship travel. They owned the *San Francisco Call*, a rival to the de Young family’s *Chronicle*. Accusations of immorality and criminality flew back and forth between the families, and in 1884 Adolph Spreckels stormed into Michael de Young’s office and shot him twice. The wounds were serious but did not prove fatal. In 1898 the *Call* built a lavish tower across the street from that of the *Chronicle*, which had been the first skyscraper in the West.¹⁹ The family feud continued, establishing the Legion of Honor and de Young museums as competitors for many years. Alma Spreckels developed a reputation for startling, stage-whispered (or louder) remarks, one being that “those de Young girls are nice, but of course we’ve never been intimate since my husband shot their father.”²⁰ It was only after “Big Alma” died in 1968 that a merger of the two museums into the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco could take place, although both were owned and operated by the city.

At the turn of the century, Alma had been a San Francisco art student of humble origins who



*Alma de Bretteville was the model for this “Victory” figure for the top of the columnar monument in Union Square. Its sculptor, Robert Aitken, looks on. The rest of the trident handle shaft is not yet in place.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

helped support herself by modeling for artists. She was the model for the diaphanously garbed figure at the top of the Dewey Monument in Union Square. Adolph Spreckels chaired the commission that selected this design by sculptor Robert Aitken in a 1901 competition. Adolph met Alma in person by 1903 and they dated for five years, even traveling to Europe together.



Loïe Fuller, friend of Alma Spreckels, Auguste Rodin, and many others. Photograph by Frederick Glasier, 1902. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

intended to make it “a museum to house Rodin’s bronzes, as well as an institution which is intended to encourage the endeavors of California painters and to develop and promote international art in all the thousand and one phases.”²² But later that year she became smitten with the French pavilion at the exposition, a replica of the *Palais de la Légion d’Honneur* in Paris that opened months into the fair. She also became heavily involved in fundraising for war relief projects in France and Belgium, which distracted her from museum planning. Eventually,

Once she was married to Adolph (shortly after his father Claus’s death), Alma had the means to travel in Europe on her own and buy art. In Paris in 1914 she met Loïe Fuller, another strong-willed and quirky American woman, whose experimental dance performances had captivated Paris since the 1890s. Loïe introduced Alma to one of her famous friends, Auguste Rodin, and Alma was entranced with his sculpture. She decided to bring his work back to San Francisco, and despite the outbreak of war was able to present five Rodins in the “greatest celebration ever held in the West, and at the same time, one of San Francisco’s most brilliant social functions.”²¹ The event at the new Spreckels mansion, 2080 Washington Street (now the home of novelist Danielle Steel), honored the French commissioners to the Panama Pacific exposition and included a slide lecture on Rodin by Loïe Fuller. There was a Rodin Room, a California Room, a room for bronzes by local sculptor Arthur Putnam, and an Oriental Room.

That was just the beginning. On May 29, 1915, Alma Spreckels began presenting art exhibits in her former residence on Vallejo Street. She



Adolph B. Spreckels, about 1910. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

in early 1920, she and Adolph formally offered to the City of San Francisco Board of Park Commissioners to build a museum and dedicate it to the memory of the Californians who had died in France in World War I. With permission from the French government, the building took the form of a three-quarter-scale adaptation of the *Palais*. Ground was broken in 1921 and the museum opened to the public on Armistice Day, November 11, 1924. Within its neoclassical exterior, the building was designed to the latest museum standards of climate control. During the opening ceremony, which was somewhat marred by Adolph's death six months earlier, it was announced that Alma had been awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor by the French government.

The Park Commission, headed by Herbert Fleishhacker, hired Arthur Upham Pope as the museum's first paid director. Pope was another interesting character, best known later as an expert on Persian art. In 1915, while teaching aesthetics in the philosophy department at the University of California, Berkeley, he had served as an advisor to the Panama Pacific fair and co-designer of its Japanese Pavilion. In 1916 he and one of his graduate students, Phyllis Ackerman, wrote catalog essays to accompany the rugs and tapestries of the Hearst collection exhibited at the Palace of Fine Arts. They had an affair, and the university fired him. They moved to New York, where she became an art writer for the *New York Globe* and he became a consultant to art collectors, which he found to be much more lucrative than teaching. In 1920 they married and opened a gallery, in which they presented a major exhibition of European tapestries. Some fine examples were borrowed from San Francisco col-



Entrance to the Spreckels mansion at 2080 Washington Street, 1913.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

lections, which, Phyllis remarked, "speaks well for San Francisco's standing in the art world."²³ She also wrote about art for *International Studio and Arts and Decoration* magazines between 1921 and 1923 and again wrote an essay on tapestries for the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1922.

So when Arthur Upham Pope, M.A., was named director of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in April 1923, it was not surprising that Phyllis Ackerman, Ph.D., was named assistant director. Soon Alma Spreckels invited them along on a trip to Europe to further build the collection prior to the museum's opening. Phyllis wrote to her friend Albert Bender in San Francisco that they were "trying under all sorts of difficult circumstances to get the very best things for San Francisco and protect her from heaps of trash that all kinds of interested persons are trying to dump in one way or another." Nevertheless, they were still optimistic that they could "make a really great museum for San Francisco."²⁴



*The California Palace of the Legion of Honor under construction, about 1924.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

However, Alma Spreckels and the Popes were not compatible for long. In October Phyllis wrote to Bender:

It was a hell of a summer in Paris. Mrs. Spreckels is tied up with the most persistent and ingenious bunch of scoundrels who have been making use of her for years headed by Loië Fuller who has boasted of having lived off other people for twenty years, Mrs. Spreckels having been the principle "other" [sic] for the last ten. They are determined to get us out and from what I have heard indirectly in the last few days have renewed the campaign and may even be going to succeed. Meanwhile they have made the museum the laughing stock of Europe, so that people in the art world were amazed that we would even attempt to do anything with it, so that we have had to work desperately to give it some sort of respectable status and prevent them from doing more

fool stunts, too. I do not know that the whole thing is worth the struggle under the circumstances, except that having begun it and incurred all the loss of scrapping our business, and become internationally identified with the project we have got to carry it through if possible. If that gang does succeed in putting us out it means S.F. will get another Mike De Young fiasco at the public expense and to the detriment of her reputation. If you see Herbert Fleischhacker [sic], find out what you can from him.

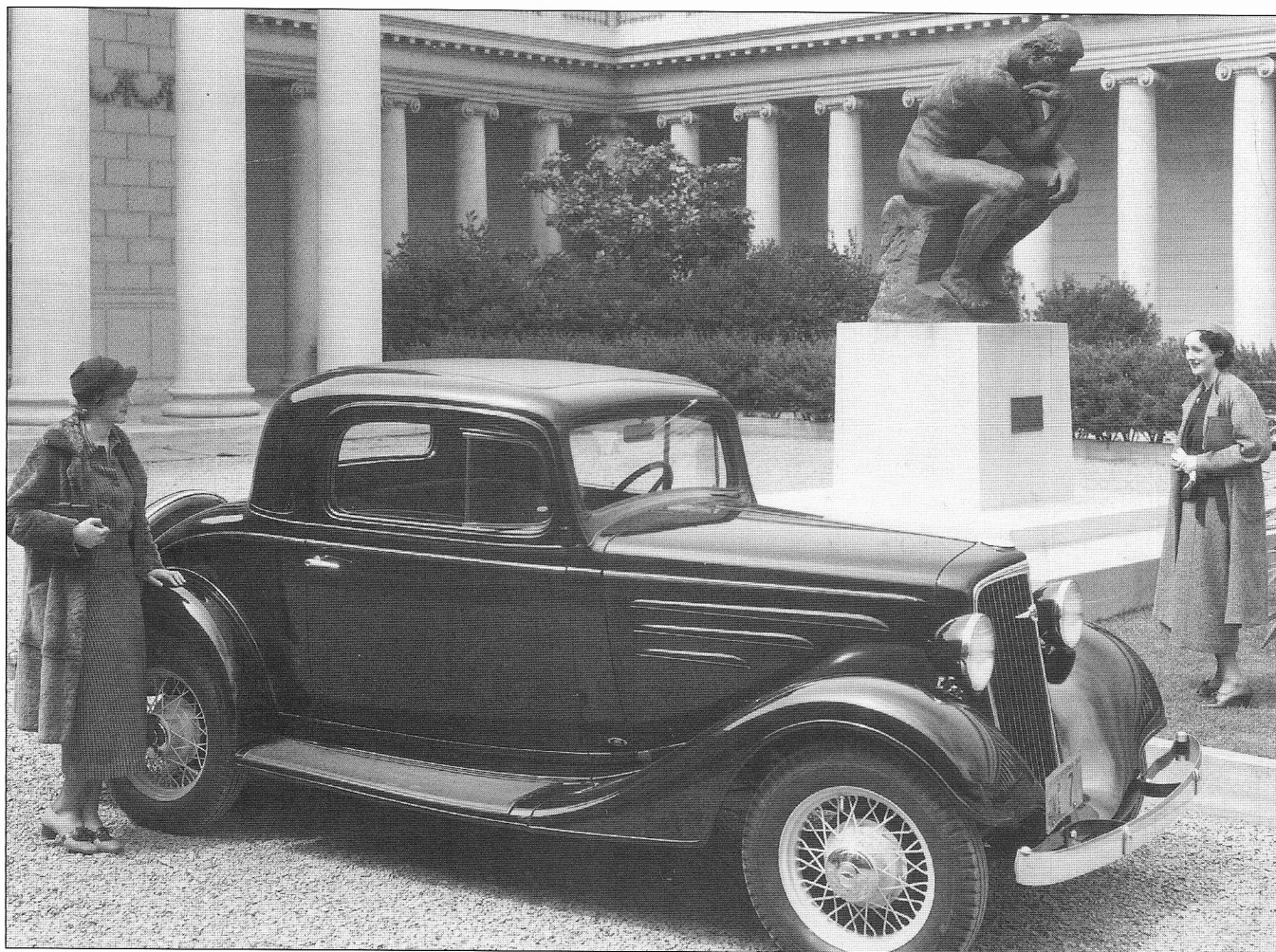
Meanwhile we have been getting some more splendid presents for the Museum, arranging more fine publicity in the important art journals and getting started a splendid committee in Belgium to work for gifts there.²⁵

Alma Spreckels saw to it that Pope was replaced by someone she had met and befriended at the same Paris dinner where she met Loië

Fuller in 1914: Cornelia Bentley Sage Quinton, Ph.D., director of the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. Quinton is considered the first woman director of a major art museum in America, and her well-established international network of contacts helped put the Legion of Honor on a strong footing during its first five years. In another husband-wife collaboration, Cornelia's husband, Major William Quinton, became the museum's curator at some point. This couple, too, had their problems with Alma Spreckels. In March 1925 Alma wrote a letter to the Board of Park Commissioners full of complaints ranging from what she considered neglect of the collection to Cornelia's habit of hugging people and William's shaving habits.²⁶ The following month Cornelia Quinton had to contend

with objections to three nude images in the San Francisco Art Association Annual Exhibition held at the Legion of Honor. Their removal from the show by the Park Commission created an outcry from the artist community, along with the more cynical comment that all this was great publicity for the three artists in question: "This free advertising makes their pictures priceless."²⁷

Both of these 1925 tempests blew over, and Cornelia Quinton remained the director until June 1930, when she and her husband resigned "for health reasons." Although the board cited influenza, it was rumored that she had developed a cocaine habit that interfered with her work. The two were "in Southern California recuperating" when the resignation was announced.²⁸



In the Legion of Honor courtyard, with Rodin's Thinker. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF ART

While Michael de Young and Alma Spreckels were developing museums that were partly dedicated to demonstrating their individual wealth and taste, other San Franciscans had other, more community-spirited ideas. Some declared after the 1906 earthquake and fire that the rebuilt and expanded Civic Center complex would be incomplete without a civic art museum. In a book published during the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition, Ben Macomber probably spoke for many when he recommended that the Palace of Fine Arts, designed by Bernard Maybeck and intended to be temporary, be rebuilt to the same design in more permanent materials. He added:

Every other considerable city in the civilized world has its art gallery. San Francisco has already the full-sized model of surely the most beautiful

one in the world. Made permanent in the Park, this Palace of Art would not only honor San Francisco, but would be “a joy forever” to all America.²⁹

The park he referred to was Golden Gate Park, because the Palace of Fine Arts had been built on land that was merely on loan from the Presidio for the fair. But instead, after much deliberation, negotiation, and an act of Congress, the piece of Presidio land and the building were ceded to the city.

Behind the famous domed rotunda and colonnade of the Palace of Fine Arts stood a hall nearly three acres in size, divided into more than a hundred galleries (now housing the Exploratorium). Hoping to demonstrate the viability of the space as a permanent museum, the art association organized a large art exhibition that allowed the palace to stay open beyond the closing of the rest of the Panama Pacific Exposition. This transitional exhibition included some of the European



*Palace of Fine Arts, built for the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*



Gallery of the Futurists, Palace of Fine Arts, 1915. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

works from the exposition as well as hundreds of new loans surveying contemporary American art.³⁰ It was agreed that the association would be put in charge of the museum permanently if it could raise \$30,000 for preservation of the building by May 1, 1916. With the help of a major membership drive, several women's clubs, the *Examiner*, and even a benefit baseball game and collections taken up by schoolchildren, they managed to get close enough to the \$30,000 goal to gain possession of the building. It began functioning under the name "San Francisco Museum of Art, Palace of Fine Arts" in May 1916.³¹ In September the association board optimistically resolved to launch a campaign for a \$5 million endowment fund.³²

The first director was J. Nilsen Laurvik, a New York art critic who had written a book on modern art in 1913 and co-edited the *Catalogue de Luxe* of the PPIE Department of Fine Arts.³³ One of his first projects was to give California artists significant exposure by showing their work in the Palace and by organizing an exhibition that traveled in 1916–1917 to the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago. (He had in mind a longer national tour, but it did not materialize.) In December 1916 the museum began showing a long-term loan of Phoebe Hearst's collection: 24 paintings, 102 prints and drawings, 28 tapestries, 77 rugs, 153 other textiles, and 100 other objects occupied some 40 galleries. There were more than 3,000 visitors the first Sunday.³⁴ Two other note-



West entrance, Palace of Fine Arts, 1915. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

worthy exhibitions organized by Laurvik featured Rembrandt drawings and prints from the Pierpont Morgan Collection, and a memorial exhibition for American modernist Rex Slinkard.

Laurvik also worked on expanding the permanent collection. As is the case with most museums, this involved long-term cultivation of potential donors of both art and purchase funds. In a letter to Marius de Zayas, a New York art dealer, he wrote about wanting to buy a Cézanne painting and a Brancusi sculpture of a head for the museum.³⁵ His plan was to create “a great Museum of Comparative Art, wherein one may study the interrelationship of all the arts.”³⁶ He was determined to treat textiles and other “applied” or “minor” arts as aesthetically equal to the traditional “fine” arts. He also made a point of

presenting dance, music, and other performing arts in the museum. In addition to gallery spaces, the museum included a tea room, a conference room for study clubs, a space for displaying children’s artwork, and a recital hall. By 1922 the museum’s annual attendance was over 232,000, the sixth largest among art museums in the United States.

However, the idea kept resurfacing that the San Francisco Museum of Art really should be in Civic Center. The museum that eventually opened there was a direct descendant of the one at the Palace of Fine Arts, although the Palace had to close in 1925 due to the lack of funds required to adequately maintain the deteriorating building.³⁷ By that time, a fundraising campaign and architectural plans for a new San Francisco



Alma Spreckels with brother-in-law John D. Spreckels, June 1926. Adolph died in June 1924, the Palace of the Legion of Honor opened in November of that year. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



*Opening day of an architecture exhibition at the renamed M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, 1927.
Photograph by Gabriel Moulin. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

Museum of Art building were well underway.

Ever since the earthquake, opera lovers in San Francisco had wanted to build a civic opera house. By 1919 the concept had expanded to include an art museum surrounding the performance hall.³⁸ But fundraising efforts failed to develop much momentum at first. Then it was suggested that, if the building could be a memorial to San Franciscans who had died in the recent war, it might be possible to get significant backing from the American Legion and other veterans' groups. At a mass rally in May 1920, attended by some 10,000 people, individuals pledged more than \$600,000 to the project, in addition to \$1 million that had already been promised by

William H. Crocker and other community leaders.³⁹ The University of California became involved again, holding the pledges in trust and eventually selling the Nob Hill property, with the proceeds restricted to the original purposes of the Searles's gift. The San Francisco Museum of Art incorporated in August 1921 as a separate entity from the San Francisco Art Association, although the two remained closely linked. Like the San Francisco Opera and Symphony, the Museum of Art was a private nonprofit organization occupying a city-owned building. Rather ironically, the Civic Center museum received less ongoing support from the City of San Francisco than the de Young and the Legion of Honor, which were

staffed by municipal employees.

The continuing relationship between the art association and the museum of art was complex and more than a little ambiguous. An agreement dated May 31, 1921, states that the Trustees of the San Francisco Museum of Art would have legal title to all artworks then owned or later acquired by the association, and would receive at least 80 percent of the association's unrestricted income. The museum would in turn provide, at no cost, "suitable executive offices" for the association, meeting space for the association's directors and the U.C. Regents, gallery space for the association's annual exhibitions, and a venue for association lectures. The planned War Memorial Buildings are mentioned as the location of these facilities, or "such other places as shall from time to time be approved by the Association."⁴⁰

Between 1921 and 1924, while the museum continued to occupy the Palace of Fine Arts, tensions seem to have developed between the artist members of the art association and director Laurvik. One of their concerns was that he wasn't trying hard enough to get publicity for association exhibitions, although in 1919 he had succeeded in getting a review in *International Studio* magazine.⁴¹ He was also heavily involved in trying to make long-term plans for the museum, its collection, and its future location. On his recommendation, in 1921 the museum board hired a fundraiser named T. J. Haggerty to raise money through art association memberships. Haggerty was to be paid on a commission basis varying from 20 percent of a \$500 "Patron" gift to 50 percent of a \$6 Artist membership. He had written to Laurvik, "there is no question but that I can more than meet your expectations" and "I have every confidence that I shall be able to accomplish the desired results as I have never yet failed." But he found San Francisco art patronage a tougher nut to crack than he had confronted in various Eastern cities.⁴²

However, planning for the new museum building proceeded. Asked to submit a list of projected space needs, Laurvik continued to envision a comprehensive museum. His list dated June 14, 1923, includes rooms for Egyptian, Babylonian,



Unidentified woman posing with military equipment at de Young Museum exhibition of World War I trophies, 1935.

Evidently the museum was not yet devoted exclusively to art; nor were the "do not touch" rules as stringent as they are today. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Phoenician, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Etruscan, Medieval, Renaissance, Modern, Far Eastern, Near Eastern, and "Indigenous and Peasant" art. These plus the necessary support spaces totaled 87,180 square feet. A few years earlier Laurvik had requested 175,000 square feet, but clearly the city was not ready to build a museum of that size.

In May 1924, as Laurvik and the trustees had given up on staying in the Palace of Fine Arts and were trying to arrange a temporary home for the museum until the War Memorial buildings were erected, Laurvik found "the town full of all kinds of conflicting and harmful rumors."⁴³ Alma Spreckels agreed to house the collection temporarily in the Legion of Honor museum, which was still under construction, but she was reported



*Dr. Grace McCann Morley, director of the San Francisco Museum of Art in the Veterans Memorial Building from 1934, the year before it opened, to 1958.
Courtesy of SFMOMA Archives.*

to be telling people that the San Francisco Museum of Art was “busted” and “down and out”—as she had expected all along.⁴⁴ According to one source, Adolph and Alma Spreckels had offered early in 1923 “to consolidate their museum with the San Francisco Museum of Art, but after careful consideration by the trustees the plan was found impracticable and the offer was not accepted.”⁴⁵

By June 1924 Laurvik was barely holding on to his job. The board president wrote to the treasurer:

I don't think men who delve into the Arts, or are Artistic, are ever practical, and whereas our Director does not make friends in a general way, yet, many of those interested in the Museum appear to be very

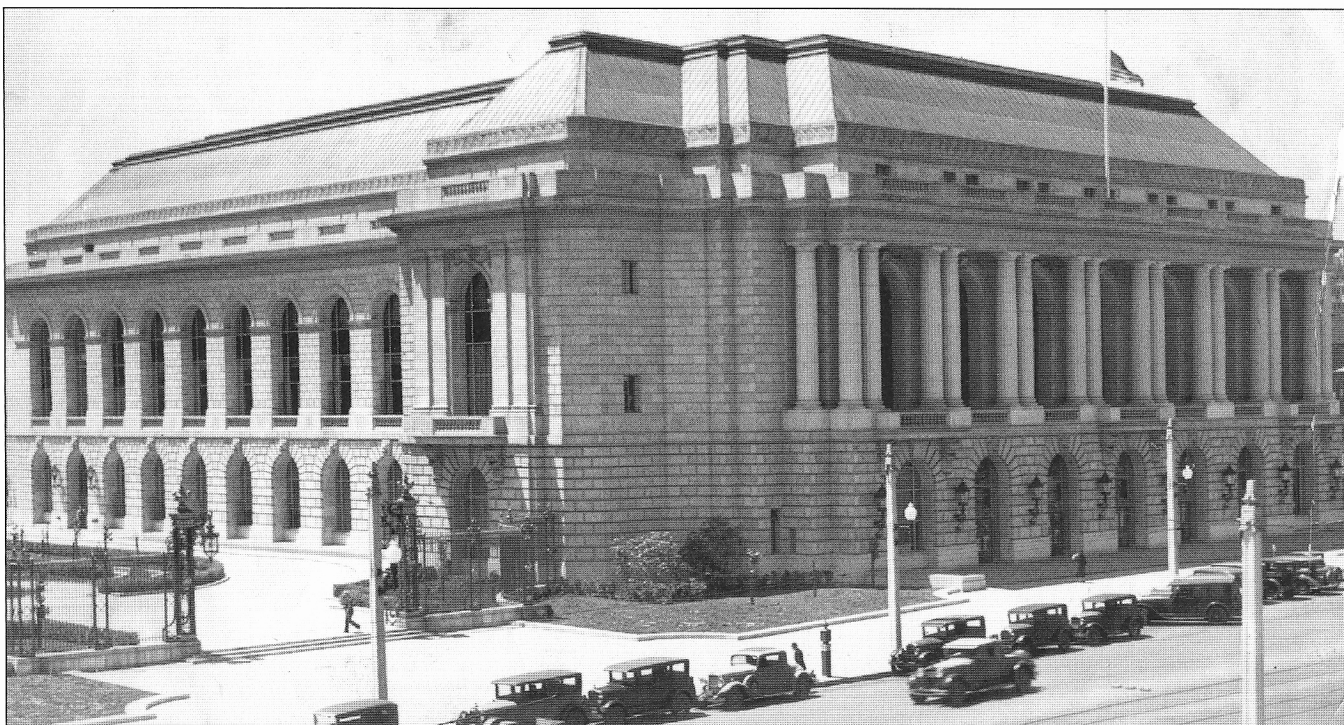
friendly towards him. I think our Director's strong point is in arranging and laying out exhibits. He has a way of placing works of art, etc., in a very attractive way for exhibition purposes. If one could only close his mouth so he could not talk so much I think it would be a great advantage to the Museum.⁴⁶

Soon thereafter, the museum closed and Laurvik left San Francisco.

By early 1927, the art association's school was “seriously in need of funds,” and the directors asked the museum trustees to revise the 80:20 income split established in 1921. Matters became more serious for the school when a gala Artists' Ball in April 1927, projected to raise more than \$8,000, instead lost about \$3,000.

Around this time Arthur Upham Pope, the former Legion of Honor director who had been a guest curator for portions of the Hearst collection show at the Palace of Fine Arts, was hired as a consultant for the design process of the War Memorial complex. (He was also at the time designing the interiors of the Ahwahnee Hotel and the sumptuous Fairmont Hotel penthouse.) Pope recommended two separate buildings rather than trying to combine a museum and opera house into one. He gave lectures and wrote articles about a new museum plan for San Francisco.⁴⁷ “By their art museums are cities judged,” he wrote, and “every city of importance in the world now has decided that a museum of the history of art is one of its most essential institutions.” He asserted strongly that there should be a new museum of the history of art in the civic center. He claimed that the Legion of Honor had set out to be and was “admirably suited to be a museum of contemporary art, both fine and applied, but it is not so well fitted to serve as a museum of art history.” He thought the de Young Museum should focus on the history of San Francisco, not art. There would be at least three museums and probably four, since there was also “considerable agitation for an Oriental museum.”⁴⁸

These recommendations were not implemented, but in 1927 the voters of San Francisco did pass a \$4 million bond issue that enabled the construction



*War Memorial Veterans Building, home of San Francisco Museum of [Modern] Art, 1935-1994.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

of the War Memorial Opera House and the War Memorial Veterans Building. The latter was finished in 1932, after various delays including squabbles between the veteran groups and the museum planners. The San Francisco Museum of Art occupied one of the four floors (later two); it had been scaled back dramatically from the 175,000-square-foot space proposed by Laurvik.

The new San Francisco Museum of Art opened to the public in January 1935. The opening exhibitions included the Art Association Annual; Gothic and Renaissance tapestries from the collection of Mrs. W. H. Crocker; forty-six examples of "Modern French Painting" that included Cézannes and Renoirs; and Chinese sculpture, which was "to remain at the museum as the nucleus of a permanent display of Oriental art."⁴⁹ This diversity suggests that the museum started out in the "comprehensive" art-historical vein that had been envisioned by Laurvik and Pope. But soon, under the directorship of Grace McCann Morley, it developed a focus on modern and contemporary art. As she remembered later,

"that was the field that needed to be served in the Bay Area community. It would then not duplicate in any way work carried on by any other museum."⁵⁰ Twentieth-century art was also what most interested the artist members of the art association, which remained closely allied with the museum. Morley and the trustees decided their challenge was "to find a way of stimulating the artists, giving them the chance to see what the contemporary trends were, and at the same time, to accustom the public to the modern currents of art and to encourage it to support the artists, their own artists in the community, but also, the general stream of contemporary art as there would be an opportunity to acquire as well as to appreciate the best in the contemporary movements."⁵¹

The museum had received an important boost when Albert M. Bender joined its Board of Trustees in late 1934. A decade earlier, as a trustee of Mills College, Bender had helped launch the college's art museum. He had also donated Asian art to virtually every museum in the Bay Area and the National Museum of



*Albert M. Bender, patron of many museums and trustee of the San Francisco Museum of Art.
Photograph by Peter Stackpole. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

Ireland. Bender was a successful insurance broker and book collector who through his cousin, the artist Anne Bremer, had become interested in contemporary art and artists. He was San Francisco's leading patron of the arts until his death in 1941. People often praised him as the most generous person they had ever known, and some even called him "Saint Albert of San Francisco." This nickname and his annual Saint Patrick's Day party belie the fact that Bender was Jewish, and as such one of many Jews who played important roles in the cultural development of San Francisco. His memorial service at Temple Emanu-El was attended by 3,000 people, according to Elise Stern Haas (who years later became board president of SFMOMA), and "everyone in that place felt that he or she was Albert's closest friend. . . . I don't think anyone like that will ever exist again."⁵²

When the San Francisco Museum of Art opened in the Civic Center in 1935, its collection was tiny, although it did include almost 100 modern French prints. One of the trustees had asked Grace Morley, "Well, do you think you can fill the galleries without bothering us?"⁵³ Nine months after it opened, the museum had acquired 186 art works—180 from Bender and six from other donors. Bender's gifts that first year included paintings by Diego Rivera and other Latin American artists, as well as sculptures by the renowned African American artist Sargent Johnson and the Los Angeles modernist Peter Krasnow. Many other Bender gifts of art followed, along with cash donations for purchasing art. In 1937 Bender wrote to Grace Morley, in a letter enclosing a thousand dollars, "I do most earnestly hope that the plan we have often discussed to inaugurate a purchasing fund for the works of



*Grace Morley posing with a painting, perhaps in preparation for the opening of the San Francisco Museum of Art.
Courtesy of SFMOMA Archives*

such living artists as Picasso and Matisse may be established within the new year. I need hardly say that such a movement would be of immense value in securing exhibitions and laying the foundation of an international collection."⁵⁴ He played a key role in establishing an important photography collection at the museum, simultaneously with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, to which he also gave a number of photographs.

Morley was able to secure exhibitions organized by the Museum of Modern Art and to organize pioneering shows of Cézanne, Gauguin, and Matisse. At the same time, the San Francisco Museum of Art continued to maintain an affiliation with the San Francisco Art Association and to exhibit and collect the work of local artists. Morley described the mission of the museum:

We thought that we had two functions in San Francisco. First, to inform the artists on what was going on in art of their time, for their benefit, and incidentally to help the public by informing it, to understand what their own artists were doing, as well as about living artists in general. And second, to do our part in bringing to wider attention, locally, nationally and internationally, the art of the area, because we were, in a sense, regional—representing the region.⁵⁵

The museum formalized its commitment to the art of our time by renaming itself the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in 1975. The commitment to Bay Area artists, on the other hand, seems to have declined steadily since then, with the exception of international stars like Richard Diebenkorn. Many of the California works acquired in the 1930s were deaccessioned and sold at auction in the 1970s under the directorship of Henry Hopkins. SFMOMA moved from Civic Center to the new arts district south of Market Street—and from a Beaux Arts style building to a modern one—in 1995.



*The stripped-down de Young Museum as it appeared in 1962.
Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.*

Fortunately, Civic Center was not left without a museum for long, as the Asian Art Museum relocated from Golden Gate Park to the former Main Library (which became a Beaux-Arts shell with a modern interior).

The genesis of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco is not exactly germane to this essay, which focuses on the 1870s to 1930s—but it is related. Albert Bender had a great interest in Asian painting, sculpture, and decorative arts. He purchased what he understood to be objects of value and importance and donated them to the de Young, the Legion of Honor, U.C. Berkeley, Mills College, and Stanford University. Although Bender and other collectors talked for years about how the city should have a museum dedicated to Asian art, the cause was set back when Alfred Salmony, a prominent art historian from Germany, came to the Bay Area in 1934 and declared Bender's Asian art donations unworthy of museum collections. It wasn't until 1966 that a

kind of proto-museum of Asian art opened as the Avery Brundage Wing of the de Young Museum. This was yet another millionaire's gift to the people of San Francisco that became a public-private partnership, funded in part by the city and through voter-approved bond issues (in 1960, 1988 and 1994), yet heavily dependent on private philanthropy.

SAN FRANCISCO'S MAJOR ART MUSEUMS TODAY

Through various interwoven strands of development since the late nineteenth century, San Francisco has emerged with four nationally prominent museums, each having its own specialties. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco include the Legion of Honor, focusing on European art, and the de Young, concentrating on American and indigenous art. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art collects and exhibits modern European and American art, overlapping significantly with the Fine Arts Museums' scope. The Asian Art Museum owns one of the world's foremost collections of the arts of Asia.⁵⁶

San Francisco museum visitors cannot walk through a comprehensive overview of art history in one building—but how many people would want to? Any one of these four museums provides more than enough material, including educational interpretation in both traditional and state-of-the-art electronic forms, for a day's visit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Harlow is an independent art historian specializing in California art from 1850 to 1950. She has worked with the California art collections at the Oakland Museum, Mills College Art Museum, and the Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California, where she served as director from 1982 to 1998. She is currently writing a dual biography of Albert Bender and Anne Bremer and serving as president of the Institute for Historical Study.

NOTES

1. The author is aware that the de Young and the Legion of Honor are administratively a single institution, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, but their different locations, emphases, and histories make them seem like two separate museums to the public.
2. Comprehensive museums founded in the 1870s and 1880s included the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Detroit Institute of Art, and Saint Louis Art Museum. Many more American cities developed museums on this model over subsequent decades.
3. <http://www.cliffhouse.com/history/sutroBaths.htm>. The Sutro Egyptian Collection, about 700 objects, is now owned by San Francisco State University.
4. See Carol M. Osborne, *Museum Builders in the West: The Stanfords as Collectors and Patrons of Art, 1970–1906* (Stanford University Museum of Art, 1986).
5. John O'Hara Cosgrave, *The Wave*, 2 January 1891, p. 5.
6. C. D. Robinson, "A Revival of Art Interest in California," *Overland Monthly*, June 1891, pp. 649–651.
7. Perhaps Robinson was thinking of the building's use for housing delegates to the scholarly congresses during the fair, or perhaps the planned uses for the building changed between 1891 and 1893. The Art Institute building, several miles north of the main site of the fair, is not to be confused with the fair's Fine Arts Building, now occupied by the Museum of Science and Industry.
8. Harry M. Wright, "Art in the University," *The Berkeleyan*, February 8, 1893.
9. "Paintings at Hopkins Are Saved," *San Francisco Call*, April, 22 1906, p. 4.
10. The first American art museum planned in conjunction with a world's fair was the Philadelphia Museum of Art, originating in a building of the 1876 Centennial Exposition. St. Louis acquired an art museum building out of its 1904 world's fair, and the first San Francisco Museum of Art was housed in the Palace of Fine Arts, also an exposition building.
11. From *California Living*, 1916, at <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist10/mhdeyoung.html>.
12. "What Do You Know About Your Museum?," *San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Magazine*, 28 September 1913. The article also boasts about the dollar value of some of the objects.
13. Michael Williams in *San Francisco Examiner*, October 19, 1913.
14. *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 9, 1916, p. 23.

15. As Gray Brechin and others have pointed out, de Young was operating out of more than purely magnanimous motivations. He stood to benefit financially, socially and politically from the fair, the museum, and, of course, his newspaper. See Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
16. The University of California anthropology museum was founded in 1901, primarily as a research institution in conjunction with the first university anthropology department west of the Mississippi. It opened to the public at the university's affiliated site in Parnassus Heights, San Francisco, in 1911 and remained there until 1931. In 1959, when it reopened in the new Kroeber Hall on the Berkeley campus, it was renamed after Professor Robert H. Lowie, and in 1991, the name was changed again to honor its founder and greatest benefactor, Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Many objects in the collection are very worthy of showing in an art museum and do appear on occasion in the University of California Berkeley Art Museum.
17. See Bernice Scharlach, *Big Alma: San Francisco's Alma Spreckels* (San Francisco: Scotwall Associates, 1990).
18. Stephen Birmingham, *California Rich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), p. 80.
19. The 1890 de Young Building at Market and Kearny streets, designed by the Chicago architects Burnham and Root, was restored in 2007 after years of being hidden behind a modern cladding of metal and glass.
20. Birmingham, p. 77.
21. *San Francisco Examiner*, April 1, 1915. Hearst's Examiner tended to favor the Spreckels projects over those of its rival, M. H. de Young, and became a valuable ally as the Legion of Honor museum developed.
22. *San Francisco Examiner*, May 20, 1915, p. 3.
23. Jay Gluck and Noel Silver, eds., *Surveyors of Persian Art: A Documentary Biography of Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman* (Ashiya, Japan: Mazda Publishers, 1996), p. 72.
24. Phyllis Ackerman to Albert Bender, Hotel Foyot, Paris, 14 July 1923 (Bender Papers, Mills College Library). Perhaps one category of donations she considered "trash" was the regalia of Queen Marie of Romania, which ended up in the Maryhill Museum in Washington state, another pet project of Alma Spreckels and Loie Fuller.
25. Phyllis Ackerman to Albert Bender, London, 7 October 1923, Bender Papers, Mills College Library. Herbert Fleishhacker, with one of the most frequently misspelled surnames in San Francisco history, was president of the San Francisco Park Commission.
26. *San Francisco Examiner*, March 21, 1925, p. 17.
27. *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 1, 1925, p. 4.
28. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 May 1930, p. 3; Scharlach, *Big Alma*, p. 189.
29. Ben Macomber, *The Jewel City*, SF: Newbegin, 1915, text at http://www.books-about-california.com/Pages/The_Jewel_City/The_Jewel_City_Chap_12.html
30. These American works were selected by John E. D. Trask, chief of the PPIE Department of Fine Arts, and Francis McComas, president of the San Francisco Art Association. Some of "the ultra moderns" were included. *San Francisco Examiner*, January 5 and January 8, 1916.
31. *San Francisco Examiner*, 28–30 April 1916. The "San Francisco Museum of Art" name was used as early as November 1915 at the head of a letter seeking support for the project (San Francisco Art Institute Archives). Although the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is celebrating 2010 as its 75th anniversary because it opened in Civic Center in 1935, a case could be made for the founding date being 1915, 1916, or 1921, the year it was incorporated.
32. *San Francisco Examiner*, September 19, 1916.
33. J. Nilsen Laurvik, *Is It Art? Post-Impressionism, Futurism, Cubism* (NY: The International Press, 1913). Laurvik, a native of Norway, previously wrote about modern art and photography in *Camera Work*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Evening Transcript* and *The Century Magazine*. Side note: At the time of his arrival in California he was married to Elma Pâlos, who played a role in the early history of psychoanalysis as a patient of both Freud and Sándor Ferenczi.
34. *San Francisco Examiner*, December 18, 1916, p. 9.
35. Laurvik to de Zayas, 21 March 1917, San Francisco Museum of Art Collection, San Francisco Art Institute Archives (SFMA Archives).
36. Laurvik, Catalogue, Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst Loan Collection (San Francisco Art Association, 1917)
37. Bliss and Faville, Architects, had estimated in March 1917 that it would cost \$341,000 to make the Palace building semi-permanent. The exhibition hall was used for a variety of rather mundane purposes from the late 1920s to the late 1950s. Finally, in 1964, the entire complex was torn down and rebuilt in concrete, minus some of its original ornamentation. It has been occupied since 1969 by the Exploratorium, a hands-on science museum that includes some art.
38. This plan is mentioned by Grace McCann Morley in two oral history interviews (Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1960, pp. 30-31, and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1982 [<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/morley82.html>]).

-
39. Using the Computer Price Index, the value of that \$600,000 today would be well over six million dollars.
 40. SFMA Archives.
 41. An interesting side note here is that Laurvik got Willard Huntington Wright to write this review, but it had to appear under the pen name "John Norton" because the publication's manager did not like Wright.
 42. SFMA Archives, "1921-23 Museum Subscription Campaign" file.
 43. Laurvik to Walter S. Martin, May 23, 1924, SFMA Archives.
 44. George A. Pope to Walter S. Martin, 17 June 1924, SFMA Archives.
 45. "L.M.T.," "Art in San Francisco," *The American Magazine of Art* 14:6 (June 1923), p. 333.
 46. Pope to Martin, *ibid.*
 47. Arthur Upham Pope, "Our Museums: A Plan to Reorganize and Extend Them," *San Francisco Business*, 8 February 1928, pp. 2ff; Aline Kistler, "New Museum Program is Planned Here," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 February 1926, p. D7; Pope, "A Museum Program for San Francisco," *The Argus* 2:6 (March 1928), pp.1-3.
 48. Kistler, *loc. cit.* Pope also wrote about "museum fatigue" and warned against crowding overwhelming numbers of art works together in the traditional European style.
 49. *San Francisco Art Association Bulletin*, January 1935.
 50. Morley oral history interview, University of California, p. 48b.
 51. Morley oral history interview, Archives of American Art, *loc. cit.*
 52. Elise S. Haas, "The Appreciation of Quality," an oral history interview conducted by Harriet Nathan in 1972, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, p. 140.
 53. Jackson M. Dodge, "Patrons and Collectors: Albert Bender and the Early Years of the San Francisco Museum of Art," in Joseph Armstrong Baird, Jr., ed., *From Exposition to Exposition: Progressive and Conservative Northern California Painting, 1915-1939* (Sacramento: Crocker Art Museum, 1981), p. 42.
 54. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 55. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 56. There are also, of course, many other museums and galleries in the city that also exhibit significant art but are smaller and more specialized than the "big four."