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"To Draw Pleasure and Instruction": Robert Gilmor, Jr and Collecting the Early Republic

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“To draw pleasure and instruction”: Robert Gilmor, Jr. and Collecting the Early Republic

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ABSTRACT

Robert Gilmor, Jr. (1774-1848) spent fifty years amassing a private collection of American art, coins, autographs, and minerals. Although scholars have divided his collections in scholarship, my research will look at Gilmor’s remarkable collection as an integrated whole. Gilmor’s collecting was a method of self-cultivation justified in his mind by his preservation of American artifacts and the promotion of national culture during the Early Republic. During this time, art, coins, autographs, and minerals all had national connotations and imperatives. By collecting these cultural artifacts, Gilmor was participating in the national attempt to define “America” and preserve its history. His donations and loans to public exhibitions, participation in civic committees, and final attempt to integrate his collection into the newly formed Smithsonian Institution upon his death further reveals his commitment to public cultivation and civic responsibility. My research provides insight into the culture of the Early Republic, the formation of national identity, and collecting through looking at an individual and his remarkable collection.
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Introduction

This thesis began as an examination of the audience for fine art during the Early American Republic. Robert Gilmor, Jr. appeared in many sources related to the development of American art and stood out because he patronized many early American artists. In spite of different interpretations of Gilmor’s role as patron – benevolent, stifling, generous, stingy – scholars agree that he was an important figure in the world of fine art during the Early Republic. Upon further inquiry, the scope of Gilmor’s collection revealed itself. Over the course of nearly sixty years, Gilmor not only collected art but also numismatics, autographs, minerals, and antiquities. The research question turned from an art historical focus to a more encompassing material one: why would Robert Gilmor, Jr. devote so much time and energy into collecting these various objects and how were they related?

This question is relevant to current thinking about cultural production. People visit museums and take the collections for granted while assuming the artifacts displayed are important. Most people do not think about where these materials originated. Why are they culturally important? Why are some artifacts preserved while others are neglected? What is the value of the many cases of minerals that fill exhibits in natural history museums across the country? Frequently, private collections and donations formed the foundations of today’s public collections. Understanding why Gilmor collected certain artifacts provides insight into why certain objects can be found in American museums.
Robert Gilmor, Jr., born into a wealthy Baltimore merchant family in 1774, spent most of his life amassing a large collection of materials. This collection included works of art, numismatics, minerals, autographs and historic documents, illuminated manuscripts, and ancient artifacts. By the time he died in 1848, intellectuals and amateurs in the United States and abroad respected Gilmor’s collection. Throughout his life he vigorously pursued artifacts based on their national associations for inclusion in his extensive collection. Their preservation transformed the collection from a mere cabinet of curiosities into a story about Gilmor’s quest to define “American” for himself, as well as for his fellow citizens. By actively organizing the display and records of his collection, Gilmor created a material expression of his worldview and understanding of America.

The collection accumulated over roughly sixty years, from 1790 to 1848, encompassing the early national period. This time in America was marked by cultural conflicts that were in conversation with Gilmor’s collection. As a result, scholarship about the Early Republic and the formation of American nationalism inform this study.¹ Gilmor, as an art patron and collector, actively participated in

the concurrent debate over the role of fine arts in America. Many believed that the fine arts and other luxuries were signs of moral decay. Others, like Gilmor, felt embarrassed by the lack of cultivated arts in America and believed that all civilized nations should support artistic production.² Literature on the museum movement and public collections in the Early Republic provide perspective and context for Gilmor’s collection.³ There is relatively little scholarship addressing private collecting in America, especially in the Early Republic, though much has been written about European collecting. Shorter pieces that engage with particular collections and collectors form the bulk of existing American


scholarship. This thesis seeks to add to the literature of the Early Republic and private collections during this period.

There exists some research on Robert Gilmor, Jr.; Lance Lee Humphries' dissertation "Robert Gilmor, Jr. (1774-1848): Baltimore Collector and American Art Patron" is indispensible for its biographical information and thorough catalogue of Gilmor's art collection. Humphries discusses Gilmor's American and European art collections separately, although he argues that Gilmor did not view them independently. Humphries also discusses the private and public display of Gilmor's collections as well as Gilmor's role as a public figure. He argues that Gilmor invested in the creation of national imagery and the cultivation of American taste. Humphries devotes only one chapter to the extra-art aspects of Gilmor's collection. He briefly discusses Gilmor's mineral, coin and medal, autograph, medieval manuscripts, and antiquity collections as distinct from his art collection. He states that no other contemporary had such broad collecting interests nor approached collecting with such vigor. This thesis seeks to understand Gilmor's collection as an integrated whole and to ground the discussion within Gilmor's historical context.

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There are a number of art historical sources that discuss Gilmor's role as art patron, especially his relationship with Thomas Cole and Horatio Greenough. These articles discuss Gilmor's discerning taste and assertive behavior as patron.6 In 1949, Anna Wells Rutledge published an article about Gilmor's art collection. It was the first article to discuss Gilmor's importance as a collector of both Old Master and American art.7 Most scholarship considers Gilmor an important collector of either one or the other. For many scholars, Gilmor's larger European collection and his supposedly overbearing role as patron overshadowed his importance as an American art collector.

However, Gilmor's collection extended beyond fine art. His numismatics, autographs, and minerals, among other artifacts, are equally important to understanding Gilmor's conception of American civilization.8 This paper will bring

these various aspects of Gilmor’s collection together. Robert Gilmor, Jr. left a
variety of papers to posterity. All of these papers reveal his lifelong interest in
the fine arts and his collection, as well as information regarding daily activities
and his understanding of the world.

This thesis intends to contribute to the scholarship of the early national
period by examining the cultural production of Robert Gilmor, Jr., his life’s work.

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(Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984); Philip L. Mossman, *Money of the American
Colonies and Confederation, A Numismatic, Economic, and Historical
Correlation*, Numismatic Studies 20 (New York: The American Numismatic
Society, 1993); Howard Linecar, *Coins and Coin Collecting* (New York: Hamlyn,
1971). There is little on the cultural significance of numismatic collection. For a
discussion of autograph collecting in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America
see, Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New
Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Minerals fall into the more general
scholarship on scientific pursuits during the nineteenth century. This thesis
draws heavily on the recent publication, Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of
Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 2011); see also George Daniels, *Science in American

9 Robert Gilmor, Jr. Papers, 1774-1848, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore
(MdHS), MS 387, also on microfilm, 3 reels, includes letters written to his brother
while on his Grand Tour in 1800-1801 and a family memoranda; Howard
Papers, 1662-1919, MdHS, MS 469, contains letters between Gilmor and his
nephew-in-law, Benjamin Chew Howard; Robert Gilmor, Jr., "Notes taken in a
tour through the states of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, 1806-
1807," South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, S.C.; Robert Gilmor letters to
Charles Graff, 1825-1844, Thomas J. Watson Library, The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York, N.Y.; The David McNeely Stauffer Collection, 1757-1884,
Smithsonian Archives of American Art (AAA), Microfilm, 1 reel, Historical Society
of Pennsylvania, 1955; and Frank M. Etting Collection, 1797-1889, AAA,
Microfilm, 2 reels, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1955, contain
correspondence between Gilmor and various artists; Robert Gilmor Papers,
AAA, Microfilm, 1 reel, Robert Gilmor VI, 1983 has a catalogue of paintings;
Howard Merritt, ed., "Appendix I: Correspondence between Thomas Cole and
Robert Gilmor, Jr.", *Studies on Thomas Cole, An American Romanticist*, Annual
His dedication to collecting artifacts for preservation, future study, and his own enlightenment was one part of his lifelong commitment to civic duty and self-cultivation. This thesis will enter into conversation with literature regarding construction of national identity using Gilmor’s collection as a site of cultural production. It will engage with material and visual culture studies of the Early Republic and collecting.

Gilmor collected for a variety of reasons. He believed he had a civic duty to preserve artifacts, improve society, and promote American culture and science. But not all of his motives were altruistic. Gilmor enjoyed public recognition for his collection as a cultural repository with national potential. Furthermore, the ownership of cultural capital gave Gilmor power. Knowledge is power and possession of knowledge in the form of these materials made Gilmor a member of a privileged elite. In structuring his collection, Gilmor created an idiosyncratic taxonomic system. As a personal curator, he had power to organize knowledge and order the world represented by his artifacts. He granted access to his collection to both scholars and amateurs but in doing so asserted his power over the knowledge to be gained through study.

Artifacts from the Gilmor collection have made their way into a variety of museums and archives across the nation. In many cases, private collections, such as Gilmor’s, formed the nucleus of public collections. This study is relevant for understanding the types of objects we encounter in museums today. The birth of public American institutions took place during Gilmor’s lifetime.
Understanding why Gilmor and his contemporaries preserved certain items for posterity enhances our reception of the cultural constructions we encounter in museums and provides insight into the development of a national cultural identity.

Collecting the Early Republic

Born in 1774, Robert Gilmor, Jr. was among the first generation of Americans who did not need to renounce British citizenship. Gilmor matured during a time of social anxiety. Part of this anxiety was a consequence of severing colonial ties with Great Britain. Americans felt the pressure of creating and maintaining a democratic republic. Gilmor was part of the national discourse that revolved around the question, “What does it mean to be American?” Americans created various answers to this question of national identification according to their social status, region, and personal experiences.

The possession and organization of the artifacts in Gilmor’s collection offer a statement embodying the worldview of its owner. Gilmor’s collection consisted of a variety of artifacts that are loosely organized into four categories, for the purposes of this thesis: art, numismatics, autographs, and minerals. These categories are based on the way that Gilmor recorded and organized them for display. Represented in all four of these categories were artifacts of both American and foreign origin. Though carefully documented as either American or European, all of the objects were stored and displayed together.
The preservation of American artifacts was a relatively new venture in the Early Republic. While Gilmor limited his American artifacts to natural specimens and Euro-American materials, collectors like Charles Willson Peale and Thomas Jefferson pursued Native American artifacts. As Joyce Henri Robinson states, "The drive to explore and understand the culture of the Native American was, in a sense, a form of self-exploration." The Native American curiosities emphasized what Americans were by showing what they were not. Exploring indigenous culture also provided North Americans with a history of imperial progress. Gilmor did not collect Native American materials but he shared the national agenda espoused by these other collections. By actively pursuing and preserving American artifacts, collectors like Gilmor suggested that Americans had a history that was worth preserving and competitive with their European counterparts.

A nationalistic impulse drove the collecting of American art, numismatics, autographs, and minerals. Embedded in every object, from a Thomas Cole painting to a mineral specimen, was an implicit patriotic message. It was patriotic to encourage and cultivate the fine arts and sciences. It was a patriotic gesture to preserve the papers of American heroes. It was patriotic to preserve for future generations the artifacts of America's noble past. For citizens of wealth and education like Gilmor, it was a civic responsibility to preserve artifacts for future generations and less privileged contemporaries.

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Art

Most scholarship considers Gilmor either the forerunner of American collectors of European works or as an important early patron of American art. Rarely do scholars consider him both.¹¹ This distinction is a reflection of American bias, what Joel Orosz calls “cultural nationalism.” Orosz defines cultural nationalism as the “effort to cultivate American accomplishments in intellectual endeavors, to the exclusion of European influences.”¹² Early scholars of American art found the collecting of European art a hindrance to the development of American art. This trend started with William Dunlap’s A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, the first comprehensive American art historical survey, published in 1834. In a chapter regarding American art collections, Dunlap stated,

¹¹ For documentation regarding the art collection see: Robert Gilmor’s 1823 Catalogue, Robert Gilmor Papers, AAA; For each work he documented “date,” “subject,” “master,” “size in inches,” “cost,” and “how disposed of.” He used this catalogue from 1823-1825 after which he began a new catalogue (now lost), occasionally adding new comments regarding listed works in the 1830s and 1840s. There is a partial list of works, furnished by Gilmor, published as “List of some of the Pictures in the Collection of Robert Gilmor, of Baltimore” in William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States (Boston: C.E. Goodspeed & Co., 1918; originally 1834): vol. 3, 272-275; The 1849 Inventory of Robert Gilmor’s Estate taken upon his death does not contain a well-documented list of artworks but it provides some descriptions and information about where the works were found in Gilmor’s house. Humphries, “Robert Gilmor,” vol. 2 contains detailed information regarding each piece’s documentation and provenance drawing on the aforementioned and other sources, correspondence, and exhibition catalogues.

¹² Orosz, Curators and Culture, 4.
Notwithstanding the gratitude due to those who bring us the works of the old masters, I cannot but feel as a living artist, that the collectors of the pictures and statues executed by their contemporaries, and those who otherwise give them encouragement and employment, are more entitled to praise that any purchaser of the works of bygone days. In this point of view I think Dr. Hosack, James Fenimore Cooper, Philip Hone, George P. Morris, Luman Reed, G.C. Verplanck and many others...more entitled to thanks in these pages, than any collector of the works of antiquity without denying the utility of such collections of their effect upon art.13

Dunlap ignored Gilmor in his praise of patrons of American art, though he included a partial list of works from Gilmor’s collection in his history. This list contained mostly European works but included a few American pieces.

Contrary to Gilmor’s exclusion from a list of important collectors of American art, Dunlap cited Gilmor as a source of information and named Gilmor as a patron in the biographies of ten American artists in his history.14 Dunlap referred to Gilmor as, “Our highly esteemed correspondent, Robert Gilmor, Esq., of Baltimore, an enlightened patron of art, and friend to artists” and cited Gilmor on several occasions.15 Dunlap clearly respected Gilmor’s knowledge of art and acknowledged him as a supporter of American artists, but preferred acknowledging collectors with a larger proportion of American art. Perhaps Gilmor’s list of works, which was overwhelmingly European, prompted this

15 Dunlap, *History*, vol. 1, 150; Letters between Dunlap and Gilmor are part of the David McNeely Stauffer Collection, AAA.
exclusion. As Dunlap explained, “I have had but one object in view: to show the steps by which the arts that place the civilized man so far above the savage, not only in power, but enjoyment have arisen in America, to a level with those of any community now in existence.” Later art historians followed Dunlap’s example.

Over the course of his lifetime Gilmor collected prints, statues, and more than 400 paintings, though he never possessed that number at one time. Of these 400 paintings about 34% were Dutch, 15% Flemish, 14% Italian, 17% American, with the remainder comprised of works from the British, French, German, and Spanish schools. The percentages of schools represented corresponded with contemporary collections in England, with the exception of the inclusion of American works. In his home, American works hung side-by-side with European works. By adopting this practice, Gilmor equated American talent with European talent and encouraged thoughtful comparisons. He was an active patron of American artists and believed that his support would help foster a national school of art, an important goal among the “enlightened” Americans who connected the fine arts with civilization. For Americans like Gilmor, cultivating a taste for the fine arts was part of a larger effort to legitimize the young nation in the eyes of Europe in order to compete culturally.

18 For more on the promotion of American art, see Neil, Toward a National Taste; Harris, The Artist in American Society.
Gilmor expressed his concern for the state of fine arts throughout his correspondence with Charles Graff, a contemporary art collector from Philadelphia. These two men regularly exchanged letters regarding their collections and sales. With respect to his collection, Gilmor wrote, "It is no doubt equal if not superior to most in the country both for number and originality," and if it "only stimulates my countrymen to cultivate a taste for the Fine arts, I shall be well compensated for my expense in making it even such as it is." Gilmor thought his collection had the potential to educate Americans about refined taste and fine art through its mere presence. Sharing his collection with the public and providing commissions to artists were part of a ritual of noblesse oblige traditionally expected of British gentry and the American elite.

Gilmor's American art collection depended on commissions he gave to artists. Scholars consider him a particularly important patron to Thomas Cole and Horatio Greenough. Most scholarship dismisses Gilmor as an overbearing patron who offered unsolicited advice to artists. Art historian Barbara Novak finds it "unfortunate" that Cole had Gilmor for a patron. Gilmor requested specific elements in his commissions, which conflicted with Cole's personal style, such as requesting a figure in a landscape. In contrast, Gilmor saw himself as a

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19 Robert Gilmor (RG) to Charles Graff, 1 May 1837, Gilmor-Graff letters, Watson Library.
20 Novak, "Thomas Cole and Robert Gilmor," 48; see also, Wallach, "Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy"; both authors argue that Gilmor frustrated Cole's artistic vision; For the landscape debate between Cole and Gilmor see, Merritt, "Correspondence," 44-52.
supportive patron. Gilmor helped finance trips to Europe for artistic study, provided loans, showed artists leniency in regards to their repayment, exhibited private commissions and split the receipts with the artists, and encouraged other patrons and the government to support their work.\textsuperscript{21} The correspondence between Gilmor and Cole reveals the position that Gilmor imagined for himself: “Believing that an artist should be left as much to himself as possible, I will not shackle you in executing your next picture, and it is for this reason that I always prefer purchasing a picture of any master, ancient or modern, after having seen it, because then I can judge how far he has conformed or deviated form the principles I lay down in its execution.”\textsuperscript{22} Many art historians interpret Gilmor’s pronouncement of judgment as inhibiting to artists. Here, Gilmor stated that he believed an artist created his best work when left alone, yet he also asserted that he desired specific characteristics in his work. However, Gilmor also wrote that he preferred to see works of art before buying them in order to assess its value, but he paid Cole and others in advance. This preference is a partial explanation for why the American collection was smaller – it was a bigger risk to commission works from unknown American artists, especially when the work was incomplete. Gilmor displayed generosity in paying American artists for their work before its completion. Without such commissions, Gilmor knew that American artists would

\textsuperscript{21} Wright, “Horatio Greenough, Boston Sculptor, and Robert Gilmor, Jr.” and Merrit, “Correspondence.” Wright and Merritt present a more generous discussion of Gilmor.

\textsuperscript{22} RG to Thomas Cole, 13 December 1826, in Merritt, “Correspondence,” 44-45.
struggle more than they already did. He saw himself as a benefactor of American art, supporting artists for the sake of promoting the fine arts in America.

His complex view of American art patronage is made explicit in a letter to Jonathon Meredith, a Baltimore lawyer. On March 27, 1844, the New York Herald insulted Gilmor. In an article describing the private collections of men such as Luman Reed and Henry Carey, the newspaper remarked that they were better patrons than Gilmor because the paintings they “obtained by paying a fair price, and not by haggling with the artist, or by an attempt to exchange some worthless daub” in contrast to Gilmor’s supposed methods. Upon reading this article, Gilmor wrote to Meredith, “This was the reward for patronizing when no one else in their native city would do it, [Thomas] Cole, [Robert W.] Weir, [William Sidney] Mount, [Charles] Ingham, [Henry] Inman, [William] Dunlap, [John] Trumbull & to all of whom I could refer to show that I had paid them large sums in advance & told them to paint me a picture such as they care [?] for it. [sic]” To further demonstrate his generosity to American artists, Gilmor continued, “Dunlap, poor fellow sold nothing & seeing a sketch of his, I asked him out of mere charity to let me have & name his price. – He immediately said 20 D. I gave him 50.” Gilmor described himself as charitable while revealing an expectation of recognition for his troubles. Gilmor confirmed Alan Wallach’s

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23 Alan Wallach, “‘This is the Reward of Patronising the Arts’: A Letter from Robert Gilmor, Jr. to Jonathan Meredith, April 2, 1844,” American Art Journal 21, no.4 (Winter 1989): 76-77.
24 Ibid., 76.
25 Ibid., 76.
argument that the American elite had two motives for patronage: social status and affirming or promoting their worldview.  

Patrons benefited from an uneven power dynamic in the Early Republic. Artists relied on patrons for commissions, exhibitions, and money. As a self-trained connoisseur, Gilmor had a greater knowledge of art than most American patrons. He therefore felt comfortable discussing art with artists and voicing his opinions. Connoisseurship in the early nineteenth century involved the ability to recognize an artist’s work, distinguish between copies and originals, and appreciate artistic talent. It took a long time and much study to master these skills. For this reason, most people equated connoisseurship with wealth and leisure. Gilmor was a wealthy merchant and could afford the time to enhance his knowledge of art through European travel and reading European connoisseur manuals. By 1799, when Gilmor and his brother, William (1775-1829), were made partners in Robert Gilmor & Sons, Robert Gilmor, Sr. (1748-1822) was one of the wealthiest men in Baltimore. Gilmor’s assets totaled approximately 600,000 dollars in the early 1830s. Artists, needing Gilmor’s financial assistance, complied with his requests. Instead of acknowledging the limits he placed on artists, Gilmor wanted respect and recognition for his knowledge, charity, and status as patron. The public disapproval expressed in The New York

28 Ibid., 45, 89.
Herald stemmed from Gilmor’s open display of wealth combined with his power over American artists.

Further upsetting his contemporaries, as well as later art historians, was Gilmor’s apparent lack of dedication to creating a unique American school of art. Many early patrons were cultural nationalists and supported the idea of an American school developed on native grounds and depicting American subjects, with minimal influence of Europeans. Gilmor fell into a different school of thought. He understood American art as part of an art history continuum based on European tradition. To Cole he wrote, “Your two former pictures hang in my dining room opposite a fine Ruysdael & a fine Berghem [Berchem], with a fine copy of Raphael by Mignard between them.” For Gilmor, the subject matter and style did not demand a new definition of domestically produced art as exceptionally “American.” Gilmor visualized a taxonomic structure of art when he arranged his collection in the house. Salomon van Ruysdael and Nicolaes Berchem were popular Dutch artists and Raphael a famous artist of the Italian Renaissance. These three European artists were high on the artistic hierarchy. Thomas Cole was accorded a place among eminent artists. Gilmor let Cole know that he had the power to bestow this honor on the struggling artist.

29 Ibid., 224-225.
30 RG to Cole, 2 April 1833, in Merritt, 77; Humphries identifies the Ruysdael as a work by Salomon van Ruysdael, “Robert Gilmor,” 325 n.26.
31 Minty, “Dutch and Flemish Seventeenth-Century Art” discusses the popularity that Dutch art enjoyed in the United States.
For Gilmor, supporting American artists and collecting their works engaged them in an international history of art and encouraged the refinement of American culture. He believed all great nations supported their artists through government commissions. As a young man, Gilmor embarked on a Grand Tour of Europe where he saw public cultural productions. His letters from this period are full of rich descriptions of buildings, monuments, and art seen across Europe. It was in Europe that Gilmor developed his connoisseur skills. While in the Netherlands visiting with an art collector Gilmor wrote, “He had formed a high opinion of my judgment [sic] from several observations I made the day I dined with him, for my fondness of and attention to paintings has given me the facility of knowing … a painting almost instantly. The Gallery of the Louvre has been my academy, and there I have learnt to know + admire these fine works of art.” The Dutch collector’s reception of his opinions flattered Gilmor. By this time, he fancied himself a connoisseur. These opinions of fine art formed in Europe transferred to American art.

In conclusion, patronage defined Gilmor’s American art collection. Gilmor saw himself as a charitable benefactor for struggling American artists. He believed it was his patriotic duty to support the developing arts in the United States because without fine arts, the country did not measure up to the great civilizations of Europe and the past. In spite of Gilmor’s generosity, his actions

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were not entirely philanthropic. Gilmor asserted his social status through the acts of patronage, consumption, and display.

**Numismatics**

Gilmor pursued coins and medals as vigorously as art because he believed they were nationally and historically significant. In many ways, Gilmor was a pioneer of American numismatics. According to Joel Orosz and Lance Lee Humphries, Gilmor’s cabinet contained a nearly complete set of U.S. minted coinage, the first such collection at the time of his death in 1848. While on his Grand Tour, Gilmor visited the Imperial Cabinet of Natural History in Vienna in 1801. He wrote to his brother, “The Cabinet of Medals is extremely valuable, and contains gold medals a size I had no conception of,” revealing his early interest in numismatics. Upon his return, Gilmor began collecting not only antique coins, but colonial and American coins as well. He formed this collection without the aid of guidebooks (of which none existed pertaining to American coins) and without the presence of dealers. Gilmor described his collection as “consisting of

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34 RG to WG, June 27, 1801, Vienna, Letters, MdHS.  
Greek, Roman, and Colonial coins in gold, silver, brass, bronze, copper, lead with Asiatic and African colonial coins, and several finely executed ones of the Brettie, an ancient people who occupied the lower part of Italy. The modern coins are of gold, silver, and bronze or brass and some of them scarce and valuable.”

By 1848 Gilmor had a collection as varied as the Imperial Cabinet’s.

Gilmor used his political and social connections to aid his numismatic collecting, much as he relied on patronage to build his art collection. He used his relationship with his niece’s husband, Benjamin Chew Howard, a Congressman, and his friendship with Adam Eckfeldt, chief coiner of the Federal Mint. He wrote to Howard in 1848 stating, “I was the first to conceive the plan of forming a collection of American gold, silver + copper coin from the establishment of the mint to the present time, and Eckfeldt the excellent mintmaster at Philada. aided me in it, + afterwards set the Mint to make a similar collection.”

According to this letter, Gilmor believed himself to be the intellectual founder of the federal collection of coinage, currently part of the Smithsonian Institution. Howard sent Gilmor the congressional mint report to help Gilmor in his pursuits while Eckfeldt sent Gilmor newly minted coins, medals, and samples unapproved for circulation.

Emmanuel Joseph Attinelli, the earliest bibliographer of numismatic auction catalogues, described Gilmor in 1876: “This gentleman had at one time

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36 Gilmor, “Interesting Collections for sale.”
37 RG to Benjamin Chew Howard, January 13, 1848, Baltimore, Howard Papers, MdHS; Howard married Jane Gilmor, daughter of William Gilmor, in 1818 and served in the House of Representatives in 1829-1833 and 1835-1839.
one of the largest and finest collections of his day, which he disposed of at private sale. 'From the Gilmor collection' was a recommendation, which immediately gave high character to a coin or medal."³⁹ Despite the disappearance of Gilmor's complete numismatic catalogue, he clearly established a lasting reputation in the nineteenth century as a premiere coin collector.

Collectors had long cherished coins and medals of antiquity because they believed the artifacts provided a tangible connection to the past. Each coin or medal provided a guide for studying history. In 1790, American diplomat William Vans Murray sent Gilmor fossil specimens and ancient coins. This gift was probably the start of Gilmor's personal collection. In an accompanying letter, Murray wrote of the coins' practical use explaining, "Their use is to be found in their connection with authors and times of which no scholar should be ignorant, + in serving as "occural [sic] demonstration" of the deeds of heroes and princes long bury [sic] in the dust."⁴⁰ As contemporary artifacts, they could be preserved

³⁹ Emmanuel Joseph Attinelli, A Bibliography of American Numismatic Auction Catalogues, 1828-1875 (Lawrence: Quarterman Publications, Inc., 1976), 8; originally published as Numismagraphics, or A List of Catalogues, in which occur Coins or Medals, which have been sold by auction in the United States, also, a List of Catalogues or Price Lists of Coins, issued by dealers, also, a List of Various Publications of More or Less Interest to Numismatologists, which have been published in the United States, compiled by E. J. Attinelli (New York, 1876).
for future Americans to remember the glorious days of the young nation. These American coins were to serve the same purpose as their ancient counterparts.

The commemorative power of coins, which typically feature the visages of historic personalities, was attractive to Gilmor. In 1821 Gilmor minted medals to memorialize his parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary (fig. 1). The medals feature the profiles of both parents drawn by the American artist Thomas Sully in 1820 and commissioned specifically for the anniversary medal. On the reverse side is a cherub. Gilmor had the medals minted in gold, silver, and bronze and they were 1 5/8 inches in diameter. As the eldest son, Gilmor retained for himself a gold medal worth seventy dollars. His siblings, wife, and sister-in-law received silver ones, and grandchildren and close friends received bronze medals. The originals were minted in England, but in 1844 Eckfeldt oversaw the minting of at least two more at the United States Mint. At an unknown time, the dies, from which the medals were cast, passed into the ownership of the U.S. Mint.41 Gilmor used his wealth to exercise the power of memorialization through the creation of a medal and the use of federal equipment. As the owner of the dies he had the ability to distribute the medals amongst his family and acquaintances. Intriguingly, the dies became part of the federal collection. Gilmor created

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41 Ibid., 1331, 1387-1389; It is unknown how or exactly when the dies became part of the national collection. The director of the Mint from 1853 to 1861, James Ross Snowden used bronze restrikes of the Gilmor commemorative medal to trade for medals not represented in the national collection. The medal became a valuable collectible though Gilmor did not live to see it.
cultural capital that commemorated his family in a similar manner as Roman emperors whose faces grace antique coins.

The relative absence of American manufactories probably enhanced the significance of coins as uniquely American objects. In Europe, Gilmor visited manufactories remarking on their products. At the textile factory in Ebling, France, Gilmor “met with treat of the highest kind...all the beautiful tapestry exhibited there for sale. We saw the people at work, and admired the manner in which this inimitable tapestry is executed.”42 Over the course of his travels Gilmor commented on several other manufactories as well, including those of furniture and porcelain. Their production techniques awed Gilmor, as there was no precedent of such factories in his country. These factories created a number of material goods that attested to the prosperity of their nations. Not until the 1830s and 1840s did the industrialization of America result in comparable manufactured products.43 Coins similarly represented the material presence of a great civilization – the United States.

**Autographs and Historic Documents**

As collectors thought coins connected the beholder with the societies that created them, so too did they believe autographs provided personal connections with their writers. Autographs in the nineteenth century included historic

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42 RG to WG, 5 May 1800, Paris, Letters, MdHS.
documents, letters, receipts, and any other document with a person’s handwriting. The term was not limited to a person’s signature. The “cult of the autograph” began in late eighteenth-century England and appeared soon after in America. The interest in handwriting, according to Tamara Plakins Thornton, began following the development and proliferation of typed print. Handwriting became a more personal means of communication and an expression of individual character.44 Like coin collectors’ fascination with coins, “autograph collectors engaged in an almost mystical encounter with their subjects, savoring the greatness that emanated from the handwriting of remarkable individuals...the experience of collecting autographs was even more profound than the experience of reading them, for physical contact with the actual stuff of individuality seemed alive with magical possibilities.”45 Gilmor collected autographs from Americans and Europeans alike. Most collectors at the time preferred to collect autographs through ruse rather than explicit request or purchase.46 Gilmor’s social connections proved profitable for his autograph collection. He was acquainted with many of the people whose autographs he desired.

46 Ibid., 87.
Through the 1830s and 1840s, Gilmor's autograph collection became well known. Friends and acquaintances enhanced his archive by donations. Historians solicited information found in letters and documents in his collection. He had power over the cultural information, which he obligingly shared. For example, Gilmor sent historian Jared Sparks, who was in the process of writing a biography of George Washington, anecdotes found in letters regarding Washington's life.47

In 1826 the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on July Fourth coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. These events triggered anxiety over the continuation of the America envisioned by the Founding Fathers. Only one signer of the Declaration survived after 1826.48 Autograph collecting began in earnest and Gilmor was one of the early participants. Collectors wanted to preserve the Founding Fathers' heroic characters through writings. In 1832 Gilmor published a catalogue of his collection that numbered 1,244 autographs, of which 624 were American. In 1845 he became only the second collector to complete a set of autographs from the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the most desired autographs in America at the time.49

47 Humphries, "Robert Gilmor," 121.
48 Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 243-244.
49 The first autograph collector to obtain the complete set of signers of the Declaration of Independence was William B. Sprague of Albany, New York; Orosz, "Cradle Age," 706.
Gilmor stated his belief that such documents were of national importance and worth preserving. In 1828 he wrote to mineralogist Parker Cleaveland that his autograph collection might “hereafter be deposited in one of our public institutions for the general benefit. My chief object is to preserve these fugitive [sic] documents, particularly those of the Signers of Decl. of Ind. which are hourly lessening + being destroyed by the thoughtless possessors.”

The general lack of public museums and archives to protect important artifacts encouraged Gilmor to provide for their preservation for public benefit. The anxiety over vanishing artifacts was a symptom of modernity.

Gilmor carefully recorded his autographs. He kept a ledger with a list of desired autographs from esteemed personages and a checklist. On a catalogue from 1823, he included a “List of Desirable Autographs - foreign” and a list of “American Autographs Wanted,” marking them off as they were acquired.

A visitor to Gilmor’s home who viewed the autograph collection in 1835 described it as follows:

It consists of about twenty large quarto hollow wooden volumes, filled with loose letters, notes, royal decrees and proclamations, Papal bulls, state papers, single signatures pasted upon white sheets, and all the other variety of documents commonly comprised in similar boards, lying flat and neatly labeled with ... authenticity, and whatever is of interest in their history or character at large. Each volume is finished with a sort of “table of contents,” properly numbered, so that the nature of what it contains may be seen at a glance, and any particular specimen selected for examination at a moment’s notice. Then there is a general programme, or scheme,

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50 RG to Parker Cleaveland, March 29, 1828, reprinted in Humphries, 118.
51 1823 Catalogue, Robert Gilmor Papers, AAA.
applicable to the whole; and showing the various divisions and subdivisions of the classification, as in the case of a library; such as foreign and domestic, political, literary, scientific, military, naval, miscellaneous, &c. including reference to different nations, and times.\textsuperscript{52}

This visitor also wrote that although Gilmor’s collection was not the largest that he had seen; it was the most diverse in terms of the people represented. The careful organization of his documents set Gilmor apart from other autograph collectors. According to the visitor, Gilmor methodically catalogued all of the documents. He created an autograph taxonomy to organize the documents based on place of origin, time, and profession. The method of organization reflects practices of naturalists who ordered the world through taxonomy. He exercised power in labeling the writer with terms he saw fit. He also claimed the power to deem a person’s worth by collecting or discarding their papers. He carefully recorded the “authenticity” of the autograph, a reflection of the search for authenticity in a world that was quickly changing.

On the back of a letter from Thomas Doughty, Gilmor inscribed, “Thomas Doughty was a landscape painter of Philad. self taught – I bought several of his pictures especially his studies from nature or the spot which are his best performances. He painted two views from my country seat. RG.”\textsuperscript{53} This short notation reveals the importance Gilmor ascribed to Doughty as an American

\textsuperscript{52} "Visitor to a Gentleman’s Cabinet," \textit{Daily National Intelligencer}, Washington, D.C., Thursday August 27, 1835.

landscape painter and provides a brief evaluation of Doughty’s skill allowing Gilmor to exercise his judgment as a connoisseur. It also documents the personal relationship between artist and patron. The act of collecting the papers of American artists, scientists, politicians, and others further revealed Gilmor’s dedication to improving America’s cultural prospects because he was claiming that they were important enough to merit preservation.

Gilmor’s interest in American autographs corresponded with contemporary popular interest. Unlike many of his American contemporaries, however, Gilmor collected European autographs (historical and contemporary) with equal vigor. A well-educated gentleman, familiar with European culture, Gilmor placed distinguished Americans on the same level as Europeans. He participated in the Early Republic’s hero-making of revolutionary leaders by finding and placing intrinsic and financial value in the physical writings of such figures as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. He extended the popular fascination with historical figures by collecting writings of figures from various fields, which did not enjoy widespread interest, such as authors and painters. He had faith in America’s cultural potential.

Minerals

Finally, a collection of minerals completed Gilmor’s American collection. Gilmor’s collection held both American and European specimens. Regarding a donation to the University of Maryland in 1821, the following description provides
some insight into the collection: “This collection consists of more than 500 species, chiefly of foreign minerals ... many of the varieties of the mineral kingdom, and is embellished by an extraordinary number of diamonds, rubies, topazes, emeralds, and the rest of the gems.”\(^{54}\) Gilmor collected indiscriminately, possessing foreign and national specimens, minerals and gems. That most of the specimens were foreign may indicate that he kept most of his American specimens for himself. The description shows how large his mineral collection was by 1821, twenty-seven years before his death.

In an 1848 advertisement for the sale of part of his collection, Gilmor described his large and varied collection of minerals:

made in this country as well as in Europe, containing most of the species and many of the varieties mentioned by Professor Cleaveland in his treatise, and many, perhaps more crystalline forms than are to be found in other American cabinets, with few exceptions; among them there is a fine crystal of gold, which attracted the notice of Professors Vanuxem and Shepard, a double terminated euclase, double terminated topazes, and two imbedded in quartz crystals, and a perfect crystal of the gieseckite brought from Greenland by Professor Giesecke of Copenhagen, probably the best in the country. Most of the specimens are of moderate cabinet size, calculated to be contained in a case convenient to occupy nearly one side of a room, and almost all are ticketed; many with the original labels of the Abbe Hauy [Hauy], Brongniart, Brochant, Klaproth, Gillet, Laumont, Lucas, and Patrin, as well as of other distinguished mineralogists. The duplicates which are not arranged, containing larger specimens, and one especially of the Ackworth Beyrl, being a fragment of a crystal about fifteen inches

\(^{54}\) From an untitled article in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, Washington, D.C., Thursday, November 29, 1821. For another description of Gilmor’s minerals, see “Interesting Collections for sale.” These two articles provide the best-known documentations of the mineral collection in the description of a donation to the University of Maryland.
long and near a foot in a diameter, the sides of the prism are six inches across. There are also geological and fossil specimens.\(^5\)

Gilmor carefully organized the specimens according to the latest scientific methods, using the systems of esteemed mineralogists to show his awareness of scientific practices and contemporary taxonomic debates. Naturalists in the Early Republic created classification systems for utilitarian reasons. They hoped to gather more information about specimens by understanding their physical characteristics.\(^6\) Taxonomies provided a way to order the unfamiliar in familiar terms. Contemporary mineralogists engaged in a lively debate over classification schemes revolving around which physical characteristics were the best ways to organize geologic specimens.\(^7\) Gilmor’s reference to the “labels” of various mineralogists attests to his self-education, awareness of professional debates, and participation in ordering the natural world. At the end of the description Gilmor briefly mentions that “geological and fossil specimens” are included but does not provide detailed information.

The study of natural science in the Early Republic had already developed patriotic associations. From the perspective of Americans in the early nineteenth century, America did not have a long history, a refined taste for arts, prestigious educational institutions, or thriving industrial centers according to European

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\(^5\) Gilmor, “Interesting Collections for sale.”
\(^6\) Lewis, *Democracy of Facts*, 54.
standards. Advancements in the natural sciences could improve American agriculture and industry. Following economic success, cultural institutions could flourish. The nation’s prospects became attached to what distinguished it from Europe – their natural resources.58

Europe was the center of scientific study. European naturalists desired specimens from the New World. Minerals, plants, and animals from the United States became an international commodity. Americans could trade “exotic,” native specimens for manufactured goods, scientific training, and information from European scientists.59 European interest in America’s natural resources during the Early Republic assured Americans of their nation’s potential.

Furthermore, there was a desire to defend the American continent from the claims made by the eminent naturalist, George Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon. In a thirty-six volume account of natural history published between 1749 and 1800, Buffon argued that “the American natural environment was deleterious to all animal life. There was in fact something terribly wrong – something inherent in nature itself – that made the climate of the New World harmful.”60 Collecting and studying America’s resources helped counter Buffon’s claim. Refuting European claims of American superiority stimulated naturalists in America to study and collect.

58 Lewis, Democracy of Facts; Daniels, Science in American Society.
59 Yokota, Unbecoming British, 155-159.
60 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 386.
The practice of natural sciences in the Early Republic occurred during the transitional phase from natural philosophy to a professionally disciplined science. Various institutions encouraged citizens to collect specimens for research and send information to scientists. Historian Andrew J. Lewis explains, “Natural history...was a tool to investigate, to catalog, to explore, and, ultimately, to know the new nation. It was a method and means for a new citizenry to take ownership of a new nation.”

Gilmor’s interest in minerals and fossils was not unique. Many non-professionals collected minerals as a hobby because it was a relatively cheap endeavor open to the masses. It gave Americans the power to claim the nation’s resources for themselves and helped to propel America’s westward expansion – perhaps best exemplified by the Louis and Clark Expedition of 1803.

The minerals in Gilmor’s collection represented nationalistic aspirations to scientific improvement as well as the nation’s wealth and potential. The ideology behind the collection was a result of natural philosophy that was losing currency while its organization revealed the increased professionalism of science. Like the American art, coins, and autographs in Gilmor’s collection, minerals were signifiers of the national anxiety to promote American culture.

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Antiquities and Foreign Artifacts

As alluded to earlier in this paper, Gilmor’s collection included antiquities (e.g. Greek vases, imperial Roman coins), medieval illuminated manuscripts, European fine art, and foreign autographs, coins, and minerals. However, while an in-depth discussion of these aspects of his collection lies beyond the scope of this project, they do provide a historical framework for understanding the significance of his American collections.

Gilmor described the American genre painter William Sidney Mount as “A young talented artist of New York celebrated for his scenes of humble and ordinary life + equal to Wilkie + almost as good as Teniers.”63 This description is similar to the one Gilmor sent Cole regarding his work. He created an idiosyncratic hierarchy of culture in which European and American artifacts vied equally for praise. There was no favoring of Mount over Wilkie or Teniers simply because Mount was American. Similarly, it did not seem strange to compare, for example, an American fossil to a European specimen. The European materials, with their longer history and greater supply of information from Europe, provided familiar references for organizing the world.

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63 William Sidney Mount to RG, July 14, 1837, Frank M. Etting Collection; The notation on the letter apparently was part of Gilmor’s autograph collection. Gilmor owned 2 works by Mount. Sir David Wilkie (1785-1841) was a Scottish painter and was represented in Gilmor’s collection by one painting. The Teniers work referred to is probably by David Teniers II (1610-1690), a Flemish painter. Gilmor owned five works by Teniers. Humphries, “Robert Gilmor,” vol.2, 26-29, 61-62, 162-166.
In this context, Gilmor placed American artifacts, and through them, American history, on the same level of importance as European history. Through the taxonomic organization of his collection, Gilmor suggested that the United States was destined to be the culmination of civilization. His understanding of European civilization as progressing from the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans to the present placed the United States as the best of the great civilizations. The collection allowed Gilmor to visualize this progress. The American artifacts were the most recent objects in his collection and were the direct result of cultural progress that Gilmor bore witness to. During Gilmor’s lifetime the United States rapidly expanded across North America, sustained a democratic republic, developed a thriving economy, and established a number of educational and cultural institutions. No major European power rivaled the United States in terms of internal improvements. Gilmor materially arranged his collection to reflect his country’s success and potential for even more improvement.

In a reflective passage to his brother in 1800, Gilmor commented upon the assemblage of ancient Greek and Roman monuments in France by Napolean:

It seems to me that the removal of such monuments of art [sic] from a nation is unseparably [sic] connected with its decline. What further voyages they may still make, are tho’ uncertain at present, not wholly improbable. – Who knows but one day or other the Apollo and the Laocoon [Laocoön] may attract the future ages in our Capitol; and the horses of St. Mark’s leave the banks of the Seine for the shores of the Potomack.⁶⁴  

⁶⁴ RG to WG, 29 May 1800, Paris, Letters, MdHS.
Here Gilmor expressed his hope for the United States to surpass France as a nation powerful enough to claim monuments of ancient civilization. He suggested the possibility of the most admired works of art such as the Laocoön and the Apollo Belvedere being brought to the United State capitol. In offering this possibility Gilmor adopted Europe's cultural heritage as America's own and expressed his imperial vision of America. As an avid collector Gilmor succeeded in bringing many of Europe's great works of art, coins, autographs, minerals, and other cultural artifacts to the United States. If an imperial nation claimed its success through sacking the cultural monuments of its dependents, Gilmor was making a statement of American power by claiming American ownership of European cultural capitol.

Patriotic chauvinism was common during the Early Republic. Pride for America's commitment to republicanism filled Americans with a sense of moral superiority. Americans believed the United States was destined to lead the entire world into a "new era of republican liberty." Even though Gilmor enjoyed the sights of Europe he wrote of his desire to return home repeatedly saying, "I declare the more + more I see of foreign countries the more I am attatched [sic] to my own. We have a happy state of society which I never sufficiently knew the value of till I came to Europe. We are hospitable to a fault, when compared with most other countries and it is with satisfaction I hear the praises of my nation ..."

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by strangers who have visited it. While traveling in Europe Gilmor encountered a more progressive state of the arts and industry but was secure with the thought that Americans were superior in other ways. Gilmor and his fellow Americans believed their moral superiority would eventually allow them to surpass Europe in every way. The arrangement of American artifacts reflected this assurance and provided reassurance through comparisons.

Cultivation & Instruction

Wealthy Europeans had been collecting “curiosities” for centuries. Collectors displayed oddities, curiosities, books, and paintings. Many scholars have studied these *wunderkammers*, or cabinets of curiosities. A cabinet of curiosities signified the owner’s pretension to encyclopedic knowledge of the world. They were products of the Renaissance in Europe and the desire to understand the natural world. The grandest cabinets were worlds in miniature featuring eclectic and often eccentric displays of scientific objects, oddities from the natural world, and art. By the time Gilmor traveled to Europe in 1800, cabinets in general had become more scientific and specialized. Gilmor visited a

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66 RG to WG, 8 August 1800, Amsterdam, Letters, MdHS.
number of cabinets while on his Grand Tour, remarking on their various size and collections.\textsuperscript{68}

Eighteenth-century Britain became the leading center of art and antiquity collecting. The British transformed the cabinets of curiosities from the Continent into refined private art galleries. Iain Pears, in \textit{The Discovery of Painting}, discusses the sudden growth of interest in art in Great Britain between 1680 and 1768, which resulted in the development of an art market and artistic production. Prior to this period, Britain was the least artistically engaged of the great European countries.\textsuperscript{69} They developed a notion of “taste” that carried over into the American colonies. British taste in art linked beauty and morality. More specifically, a beautiful object was associated with moral behavior when correctly interpreted by the viewer. According to this theory, the viewer was led to moral improvement through the intellectual interaction with beauty.\textsuperscript{70} Patrons and artists became responsible for improving the country’s artistic production, defending morals, and preserving national heritage for the glory of the nation.

Collections of art were signs of social status functioning on two levels. Explicitly, the collection flaunted the wealth of the collector. Implicitly, the collection displayed the taste of the collector. A true connoisseur of the arts possessed a variety of art, of both British and continental schools, showing an understanding

\textsuperscript{68} Letters, MdHs.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., chapter 2.
of taste. Collecting became a means of self-cultivation whereby one could educate himself on artistic taste and moral beauty while proclaiming a high social status. Gilmor observed these duties and appropriated them for an American purpose.

While visiting England on his Grand Tour, Gilmor encountered these private British collections. The most expansive ones had rooms with art hung from floor to ceiling and cabinets of antiquities. Collectors and connoisseurs published elaborate catalogues as guidebooks for tourists. At the same time there was a proliferation of publications dedicated to the subject of collecting: what to collect, guides for connoisseurs, notable collections, and so on. Gilmor’s extensive library contained many of these manuals.

Gilmor collected a variety of European and American art to preserve for the future and to show his understanding of taste. He hung his art collection in his house in a similar manner to that of European collectors, who placed works of different schools and nations side-by-side. The main difference was the presence of American art, which was rare in Europe. He claimed a spot for American artists in the artistic hierarchy. Gilmor was not the only American to adapt British ideas of taste and the function of art. As J. Meredith Neil wrote of

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71 Ibid., chapter 6.
early American art, “By the early nineteenth century a strong critical consensus demanded that American art illustrate the democratic values of optimism, health, cheerfulness, and morality.” The American public tasked American artists and patrons with creating art with moral sentiment, not unlike the British public. Art was supposed to be functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. American patrons imitated these public roles but also adopted the aristocratic pretension of collecting art.

The wealthy elite in the Early Republic were confronted with the problem of justifying their existence in a democratic society. What role was the upper class supposed to play in a republic where, theoretically, all men were created equal? Tamara Plakins Thornton addresses this question in her book, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite*. Thornton argues that the wealthy Boston merchant class turned to country estates and agricultural societies to enhance their status in society while simultaneously using them as republican symbols of morality. They imitated their British counterparts known for their large country manors but promoted them as signs of democratic progress through agriculture. As Thornton argues, “If they rejected the decadence of the British nobility, they nevertheless embraced the elegant simplicity and the enlightened benevolence of the gentry’s style of

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These men represented an ideal of personality of living that they yearned to approximate in their private characters and lives. Rational and restrained, genteel and cultivated – it was an ideal befitting an aristocracy in America.76 As a member of the wealthy Baltimore merchant class, Gilmor dealt with this problem in a similar manner. Gilmor owned a country house and participated in agricultural societies. More importantly, he utilized his collection as a symbol of republican morality and a means to enhance his social standing through ownership of cultural capital. His collection served to preserve the Republic's artifacts and refine the nation's taste. It allowed him to sophisticate himself according to the British standard and remain a model American citizen.

During the Early Republic modern consumerism and democratic ideals spread refinement. The middling classes began buying more goods and participating in gentrified activities, such as furnishing parlors and buying silverware.77 Apart from justifying their existence, the American elite differentiated themselves from the new middle class through better education and consuming higher quality goods. Gilmor cemented his membership in the elite class of Americans by possessing cultural material as well as consumer goods. He also owned the knowledge that could be gleaned from the artifacts while his methodical organization of the collection revealed his level of education and worldliness. He knew the international methods of arranging art, the latest

mineral taxonomies, and the history represented in his assortment of numismatics and autographs. His meticulous attention to detail also reflected his elite ideals of an orderly republican society, in which democracy governed through an educated upper class.

Many Americans associated the fine arts with luxury and European decay. Modesty and self-restraint became one way for Americans to assert moral superiority over Europeans. Others, like Gilmor, needed to defend themselves from allegations of moral laxity represented by large art collections. These Americans argued that supporting the fine arts was important for establishing a national identity. Following the American Revolution, they justified supporting the arts with several arguments concluding that art provided rational enjoyment, developed a sense of beauty and taste through contemplation, had moral and didactic characteristics, created national imagery, and nurtured an intellectual environment for the nation. In this sense, supporting cultural productions was virtuous.

Americans in speeches and writings invoked the word “virtue.” Virtue was supposed to maintain the republic. Jean Matthews defines virtue as “essentially the willingness of citizens to subordinate their private desires and conveniences to the public good.” Luxury and wealth were potentially detrimental to virtue. Many Americans understood history as cyclical. At the beginning was a savage

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78 Miller, Patrons and Patriotism, 8-23.
79 Matthews, Toward a New Society, 5.
state that evolved into an agrarian one and eventually into an industrial, commercial society. Once society became too commercial, luxury and idleness caused moral decay and the downfall of society. The fall of the Roman Empire was often cited as an example of luxury ruining a great civilization. Americans saw themselves between the savage state of the Native Americans and the decadent European nations. This positioning gave Americans a sense of moral superiority. It also tasked them with maintaining their ideal society through displays of public virtue and duty. For Gilmor, this sense of virtue translated into preserving history for the public good. By collecting, he served his private desire of refinement while fulfilling his responsibility as a virtuous citizen. He was not alone in this endeavor.

Daniel Wadsworth (1771-1848) and Luman Reed (1784-1836) provide interesting comparisons to Gilmor as they had similar interests, collections, and public-mindedness. Daniel Wadsworth of Hartford, Connecticut, collected a variety of American and European art. Wadsworth was also the son of wealthy merchant with little interest in working. Like Gilmor, Wadsworth was interested in preserving important American artifacts. He bought a late seventeenth-century colonial armchair, showing his interest in American antiquarianism beyond what Gilmor was collecting and displaying early interest in colonial revivalism. Wadsworth is famous for founding the Wadsworth Athenaeum, a public museum in Hartford, Connecticut. Wadsworth donated land and money to build the

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80 Wood, Empire of Liberty, 42-43.
Athenaeum and buy paintings for its public galleries in 1841. Upon his death in 1848, most of Wadsworth’s personal collection of art was donated to the Athenaeum.\(^8^1\)

Luman Reed of New York developed a reputation for being a patron of American artists despite only being an active collector from about 1830 to 1836. Reed was the son of a farmer who became a successful merchant. His patronage focused on New York painters, though early in his collecting pursuits he did invest in a few European works. The scholar Malcolm Goldstein speculates that Reed devoted his attentions to American art after being duped by an art dealer into buy fakes. Commissioned art directly from American artists simplified the problem of verifying authenticity.\(^8^2\) He is best known for his commission of Thomas Cole’s “Course of Empire” series, a project that Gilmor rejected. Reed devoted the third floor of his house to a picture gallery. This gallery was open to the public once a week. According to Reed’s estate inventory, he also collected shells, rocks and minerals, and globes, all of which were displayed in his public painting gallery.\(^8^3\) Like Gilmor, Reed had a wide interest in collecting various specimens and he sponsored contemporary American artists. Unlike Gilmor’s private collection, Reed’s was open directly to

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the public weekly. This willingness to open his home to the public for their edification may have been the result of his humble beginnings. Reed also allowed artists more freedom than Gilmor when commissioning paintings. Gilmor’s taste and behaviors were more cosmopolitan than Reed’s, the result of travel in Europe and his connoisseurship.

Charleston, South Carolina, art collectors actively emulated British collections. Charleston was arguably the most Anglophilic city in the United States during the Early Republic. Many wealthy Charlestonians used the European Grand Tour to develop an appreciation for the fine arts and hone the skills of a connoisseur. The Grand Tour enhanced their identification with European manners and tastes. The social elite of Charleston collected art as a way of distinguishing themselves and reflecting experiences of the Grand Tour. By the 1820s, there were many large collections of paintings in Charleston with a large proportion of European works. However, private collectors in Charleston did not possess a democratizing impulse, loaning fewer works for public exhibition than their northern counterparts. As art historian Maurie D. McInnis explains, there was a “prevailing belief among Charleston’s upper class that

control of the arts should remain in the hands of the learned elite."\textsuperscript{86} Gilmor travelled to Charleston several times and was connected to many wealthy Charleston families through his wife, Sarah Reeves Ladson. He noted many of his wife’s acquaintances in a travel journal kept during the winter they met, stating “Mrs. Gilmor is connected by father and mother with most of the respectable families in Carolina particularly the Middletons, the Gibbes’, the Manigaults, the Haywards and the Izards.”\textsuperscript{87} The Charleston connection is important to note, though it is hard to know how it influenced his art collection. Gilmor was certainly more open to public education and art than his southern acquaintances but he retained a similar aristocratic attitude at the same time.

Despite the nation’s desire to be independent from Great Britain both culturally and politically, Americans were caught in a net. They still relied on British imports and cultural institutions. The process of “unbecoming British” involved separating from Great Britain while proving their equality. Americans

\textsuperscript{86} Maurie D. Mclnnis, \textit{The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005): 135; Of course, there were exceptions, Mclnnis writes about the South Carolina native Joseph Allen Smith (1769-1828) who collected art with the intention of donating pieces to public institutions. Smith was an acquaintance of Gilmor and spent much of his adulthood in Philadelphia, 141-143.

\textsuperscript{87} Gilmor, “Notes taken in a tour through the states of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.” Gilmor’s first wife was Elizabeth Cooke (1783-1803) of Annapolis. They married in 1802 and she died a year later. His second wife was Sarah Reeves Ladson Gilmor (1790-1866), the daughter of Major James Ladson (1753-1812), an officer of the American Revolution and wealthy plantation owner. He served in the South Carolina legislature and as lieutenant governor. Sarah Gilmor’s mother was Judith (Smith) Ladson (1762-1820), a daughter from one of Charleston’s wealthiest banker-merchant families. Neither marriage produced a child. Humphries, “Robert Gilmor,” 65-66, 71-72.
had inherited the cultural standards of Great Britain, which made this process confusing. They paradoxically relied on Britain for validation while striving to establish a separate identity. At the same time, Americans dealt with defining the shifting roles and boundaries of social classes in a socially mobile and democratic society. These cultural dilemmas illuminate Gilmor’s behavior. By collecting and promoting the establishment of American artifacts and art, he was participating in the forging of a national identity that was both separate from and dependent on Europe’s cultural heritage. The act of collecting was part of the class struggle. He claimed ownership of cultural material for the upper class and attempted to improve himself to justify his membership in the upper class.

Gilmor’s involvement with intellectual societies attests to his lifelong commitment to education. He was at one time President of the Library Company of Baltimore and of the Maryland Academy of Sciences and Belles Lettres; Vice President of the American Geological Society; honorary member of the Belles Lettres Society of Dickinson College and the South Carolina Academy of Arts; a corresponding member of the Royal Bourbon Academy of Science of Naples, Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, American Academy of Language and Belles Lettres, and the Maryland Association for the Promotion of Fine Arts; and a founder of the Maryland Historical Society. These societies provided members with a network of intellectuals who promoted scholarship and the

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dissemination of knowledge. His collections were born of the same desire to improve his mind.

In 1810 Gilmor was published in the American Mineralogical Journal. He wrote,

It has often occurred to me that it would facilitate and advance the object of your Journal, if the different gentlemen who are attached to the study of mineralogy, would carefully examine and furnish a list or description of the mineral substances in their immediate neighborhood ... a collection of such information would prove an useful manual ... soon furnish a mass of interesting knowledge respecting every district of our country. The advantages to the community at large from this knowledge being so extensively derived, are sufficiently obvious.

Gilmor continued by offering to supply such information regarding the minerals found near Baltimore. This passage shows that Gilmor studied his mineral collection and was willing to share that information. In exchange, he simply asked to be further enlightened regarding mineralogy from other parts of the country. Similar to his collection, gathering information regarding specific objects had implications for national and personal improvement.

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Gilmor was mostly self-educated. He never attended university because his father believed a merchant needed practical skills instead of a classical education. He travelled extensively, maintained acquaintances with intellectuals and politicians, and sustained a large library of more than two thousand volumes. Despite the lack of schooling, he was a respected figure in intellectual circles. His desire to educate himself was part of his impetus to collect. After visiting a cabinet of butterflies in Frankfurt, Gilmor wrote about

a room filled with bureaus, each of which contains several thousand, all arrayed in the most beautiful singular order. He has spent forty years in collecting them ... I never was more tired of anything in my life ... it is impossible I think to have a taste more frivolous, contemptible + with less use, for there is no earthly purpose it can be applied with for the intention, or benefit of mankind, and without such an object, all such pursuits are ridiculous.

The interaction with objects provided the beholder with greater understanding of the world. To collect objects that did not benefit education was “frivolous.” Beauty without moral improvement had no purpose. There was something noble about collecting the objects Gilmor pursued, as they would “benefit mankind.” Gilmor’s collections revealed to others that he had taken the initiative of improving himself and that all the materials had purpose.

Pleasure & Fame

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91 Humphries, “Robert Gilmor,” 51, 84.
92 RG to WG, 24 September 1800, Coblantz, Letters, MdHS.
Letters from Robert Gilmor, Jr. to his brother during his Grand Tour reveal his genuine appreciation of history and art. In his last letter from Europe, Gilmor informed his brother that he had collected some items and “the materials I have collected both for my improvement in art + science will I trust be a rich fund for my friends as well as myself to draw pleasure + instruction from.” The collection fit the genteel requirement of rational entertainment.

In a more poetic passage, Gilmor described the public collection of Petits Augustin in France. The French government had converted the convent of Petits Augustin into a gallery for preserving cultural monuments in 1791. Writing of this collection Gilmor stated,

This you will acknowledge a curious and unique collection when the antiquarian may have before him the finest monuments of the different ages and so classed as to facilitate the study he perceives and the comparison of the progress of the arts + manners + dress down to the present day. There never was as interesting a national museum in the world and serves so great an opportunity to investigate the rise + progress of the arts, manners, + dress of any country. Besides, who would not delight in meditating among the tombs of worthies of his county, long since laid in the dust ... here in lofty cenotaphs lay the hollowed bones...of men who did honor to their country.

Gilmor continued on to describe at length the “principal” monuments. He concluded his letter by stating that he was prolific in describing the monuments in order that

you might in a manner see what I have seen, and feel as I have felt...your reflections upon the venerable remains of Kings whose

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93 RG to WG, 5 August 1801, London, Letters, MdHS.
arms once shook the world, Philosophers whose depth of wisdom have enlightened mankind, and of artists whose monuments outlive their very names, and form a sigh of tribute to their memory. To afford you a little opportunity for meditation on ages that are past.\footnote{Ibid.}

This lengthy passage reveals the emotion Gilmor experienced upon visiting the ancient monuments. He genuinely subscribed to the notion that beholding artifacts brought one closer to their makers. It is easy to understand why visiting Europe motivated Gilmor to amass a collection of artifacts. His own collection replicated the “comparison” of “progress” seen in Europe’s institutions. The inclusion of American materials extended the cultural progress.

Of course, there was also potential for achieving national fame by amassing a respectable and useful collection of artifacts. Gilmor knew that one man was responsible for conceiving of the Petits Augustin collection. In the same letter he wrote, “But no one was more active in the preservation of these reliques more than a citizen and artist named [Marie] Alexandre Le Noir, whose name in every opinion deserves to be held in veneration by his countryman, and whose exertions have laid the foundation of a history of the antiquities of France, which otherwise could never have been understood so well.”\footnote{Ibid. Marie Alexandre Lenoir (1762-1839) was a Frenchman who saved and restored paintings and sculptures from destruction during the French Revolution. He assembled a chronologically arranged the collection at Petits Augustin beginning in 1791.} Perhaps Gilmor longed for the respect and “veneration” afforded to Lenoir by his countrymen.

The desire to preserve America’s artifacts was partially motivated by a quest for
national recognition. The invocation of the term “citizen” to describe Lenoir and the acknowledgement that his work laid the foundations for understanding his country’s history also hint at the idea of civic responsibility.

A National Legacy

The Early Republic was a time of social upheaval. The middle class grew, the nation expanded west, franchise spread, immigration increased, and political parties were taking their modern form.97 As a young man Gilmor was a Federalist in favor of centralized government and using federal funds for cultural development.98 After the dissolution of the Federalists, Gilmor supported the Whig party. Politics show up in the correspondence between Gilmor and Charles Graff. Their letters are concerned mostly with each other’s art collections, acquisitions, local sales, and so on, but the letters of November 1844 introduce a concern for politics that was absent in previous correspondence. A clear supporter of Henry Clay, the Whig candidate, Gilmor wrote in response to state election results, “The miserable, rowdy, cut throats, the dregs of Society have carried the State, by flooding the country with hand bills entertaining the most reckless falsehoods and villainous slanders against the character of Clay...at the

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97 For a history of the Early Republic and the Jacksonian period see, Wood, Empire of Liberty; Howe, What Hath God Wrought.
polls have defeated us."\(^{99}\) The spread of the franchise during the first quarter of the nineteenth century affected the political climate and popular culture of the period. Politicians and the upper class had a new social position and needed to appeal to the masses to enjoy political and economic support.

According to Daniel Walker Howe, there were three important tenets of Whig ideology: dedication to improvement, morality, and social unity. Each of these tenets had both a public and individual component, which imparted to the individual the duty to participate in community improvement and suppress disunity.\(^{100}\) Whigs believed that public education could make voters better informed. The assumption was that once educated, voters would make the "right" choice. Gilmor collected to improve himself, and as an extension, the community. He donated to public institutions, creating opportunities to further societal improvement through the cultivation of other minds. Perhaps exposure to refined culture could improve the minds of the "miserable, rowdy cut throats, the dregs of Society." The artifacts, through their scope and national associations, also suggested a shared national identity during this age of fracture.

The Maryland Historical Society asked Gilmor to write a recent history of Baltimore in 1844. Gilmor presented his report at a meeting with the intent that it

\(^{99}\) RG to Graff, November 4, 1844, Gilmor-Graff Letters; See Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* for an account of the 1844 election, "one of the closest and most momentous in American history," 682-690.

would be "afterwards preserved as a record of some of the changes in the face of our city, for the benefit of younger as well as future members" and such a request was "felt by me as obligatory."\textsuperscript{101} He concluded that his recollections intended "to induce the present generation, and especially the members of our Society, to note down all those which occur within their own recollection from time to time. By doing so a mass of information will in the course of a few years be accumulated to aid materially in the history of our thriving city, and facilitate future enquiries."\textsuperscript{102} Gilmor felt obliged to record his memories of Baltimore's history. He further believed that all citizens had a duty to preserve information for future scholars. It was a matter of civic responsibility and community pride.

Gilmor's commitment to civic improvement extended to his participation in Baltimore's monument committee. The Maryland state legislature commissioned twenty-three committee members to erect a monument to George Washington in 1809. By 1820, Gilmor was the President of the Board of Managers, a position he held for twenty-three years.\textsuperscript{103} Gilmor oversaw the design competitions, the construction, and the funding of the Washington Monument. By overseeing the Monument, he committed to the use of public commissions as way to refine city

\textsuperscript{101} Robert Gilmor, Jr., "Recollections of Baltimore," \textit{Maryland Historical Magazine} 7, no. 3 (September 1912), 233.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 242.
spaces, pay homage to American heroes, and prove to Europeans and other Americans that the United States could support the production of national monuments.

He remained interested in public commissions, paying close attention to commissions in Washington, D.C. and lobbying for the employment of American artists. Regarding the possibility of a National Mausoleum in Washington, Gilmor wrote to Rufus King,

Such a Mausoleum...having niches for the reception of busts + statues of those public servants whom Congress or the Nation might be disposed to distinguish by such means, might be made an incentive to public spirit + public virtue, and if so embellished may prove a school of art for our sculptors as well as an ornament to the Capital which would become more and more a city of National interest, + serve to cement the Union with the mingled ashes of the distinguished of all the States [sic].

This argument for a National Mausoleum extended to a national monument the same principles that shaped his personal collection: public improvement, patriotism, and the cultivation of the arts at home. His interest in creating an American monument to deceased public servants of the Republic is reminiscent of his descriptions of monuments he saw in Europe on the Grand Tour. Furthermore, Gilmor invoked the ideal of national unity that transcended all the states.

In 1836, Gilmor’s nephew-in-law, Benjamin Chew Howard, joined the Select Committee to choose artists to paint four paintings to hang in the U.S.

Capitol alongside John Trumbull’s four paintings of the American Revolution. Throughout the process Howard corresponded with Gilmor, who offered advice on the artists to be chosen and praised the decision to commission four American artists.105

A number of artists visited Gilmor’s house, copying and studying works of art from his collection. The artists included Horatio Greenough, Thomas Doughty, Henry Inman, and several members of the Peale family.106 These artists made use of Gilmor’s intent to develop the fine arts through his collection. His large collection of Old Master paintings was especially attractive to the American artists. Scholars and amateurs also passed through Gilmor’s halls. In his 1826-1827 diary Gilmor noted showing his collection to interested visitors.107 However, for a man who kept careful documentation of his collection he paid little attention to recording visitors’ names. Newspaper accounts provide evidence that Gilmor’s collection was known across the nation. A correspondent from New

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106 Ibid., 330.
107 Gilmor, Diary 1826-1827, MdHS. Unfortunately, at this time more detailed information about who Gilmor’s immediate audience was is not available. Gilmor’s friends and intellectual acquaintances visited his house and collections. A few newspaper accounts provide evidence that his collection was somewhat open to the inquiring public. The larger public could have experienced parts of Gilmor’s collection in public institutions, like the Peales’ Baltimore Museum. David Brigham discusses the public audience for museums in Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale’s Museum and Its Audience.
Orleans recounted his visit to Gilmor's house, specifically describing his autograph collection. Another account from Boston states,

The collection of ancient and modern paintings in the cabinet of Robert Gilmor, Esq., was to me the lion of the Monumental city. I have repeatedly heard the merits of these pictures discussed by artists, amateurs, and connoisseurs, but not till within a few days have I enjoyed the opportunity of seeing them for myself...I only regret that there is not any suitable public hall in Baltimore, where so princely a collection of works of art... can be opened to the public. I need not say how much it would increase and elevate the taste of the citizens, or how rich a treat it would to those strangers who have not honor of an acquaintance with the gentleman to whom they belong.

This second article is more telling because it implies the general recognition of the national importance of Gilmor's collection. Others were aware of its potential to cultivate the minds of the American public.

Gilmor's belief in the national value of his collection was apparent in his relationships with cultural institutions. Gilmor regularly loaned artifacts for public exhibition at museums. Humphries claims that Gilmor publicly exhibited nearly 200 works of art in Baltimore, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. He was especially important as an exhibitor at the Baltimore Peale Museum, which was open from 1814-1830.

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108 "Visit to a Gentleman's Cabinet."
109 "Mr. Gilmor's private Cabinet of Paintings (extract of a letter from a gentleman to a friend in this city)," *Boston Courier*, Issue 1038, Thursday, June 21, 1838.
As early as 1821 Gilmor donated portions of his collections for the benefit of the public. That year, the *Daily National Intelligencer* announced Gilmor’s donation of minerals to the University of Maryland.\(^{111}\) Gilmor made multiple donations of historic documents relating to the history of Maryland to the Maryland Historical Society, which he participated in founding in 1844.\(^{112}\) As for his works of art, he donated *Portrait of Rosalba Carriera* by Nicolas de Largillière to the newly founded South Carolina Academy of Fine Arts in 1823. Years later he donated Trumbull’s *Portrait of George Temple-Nugent-Grenville, Marquis of Buckingham* to the Trumbull Gallery at Yale University founded in 1832.\(^{113}\) According to Humphries, Gilmor continued to donate works of art to other institutions later in life.

There appears to have been rumors that Gilmor planned to establish a public gallery in 1844. *The New York Herald* published an article stating,

> It will be gratifying no doubt to the friends of the fine arts, to learn that it is the intention of Robert Gilmor of this city [Baltimore], a gentleman well known throughout the country for his taste and liberality, to establish a public gallery, and present to the people of Baltimore his valuable collection of paintings. In doing which, Mr. Gilmor will add to his reputation, not only as a lover of painting, but also in laying a foundation for the establishment of correct principles in the arts, in a quarter of the union, where, we regret to say, they have, until within a few years back, been but imperfectly

\(^{111}\) *Daily National Intelligencer*, November 29, 1821.


\(^{113}\) Humphries, “Robert Gilmor,” 335; According to Humphries, later in life Gilmor continued to donate works of art to new institutions.
It is unknown whether Gilmor actually intended to open such a public gallery. As the article notes, it was not uncommon for private collectors to establish public institutions in the United States and Europe. Gilmor certainly had enough artifacts to fill a public museum and opening one would have conformed to Gilmor’s idea of civic responsibility and ensured posterity remembered his name. Unfortunately, his finances would not allow for it.

Meanwhile, public museums and historical societies sprang up across the United States in the Early Republic. The purpose of these museums and societies was to develop public collections and present educational materials. Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum is the best studied of these museums. Peale created a museum that displayed collections of art, fossils, minerals, archaeological artifacts, and ethnographic materials. Through public appeals and advertisements, Peale defined his museum’s purpose as to “diffuse a knowledge of the wonderful works of creation, not only of this country but of the whole world. Also to show the progress of arts and science, from the savage state to the civilized man; displaying the habits and customs of all nations; to show the progress of arts and manufactures from the raw materials to their

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Peale's museum had a broader range of collections than Gilmor's private enterprise but shared an imperial and optimistic vision of the United States. Peale's taxonomic organization of his museum exposes more similarities to Gilmor's collection. The stated purpose "to show the progress of arts and science, from the savage state to the civilized man" closely echoes the sentiments expressed by Gilmor. He structured his natural history exhibits based on the Linnaean classification system and formed a hierarchy of importance to manage his artifacts. He displayed Native American artifacts as less advanced than Americans of European descent, but implied the possibility of improvement through influence. Portraits of important men hung above taxidermy animals. An American mammoth skeleton demonstrated America's superiority by towering over Europe's animals and fossils. Peale, Gilmor, and a handful of other collectors saw national potential for their artifacts and supported the idea of a national museum.

In 1846 James Smithson donated a fund to the United States to form a national museum and support research. A building was planned with rooms included "for the reception and arrangement, upon a liberal scale, of objects of natural history, including a geological and mineralogical cabinet; also a chemical cabinet."

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115 From an address delivered by Peale to the Corporation and Citizens of Philadelphia, July 18, 1816, Academy Hall, Fourth Street, Philadelphia, reprinted in Sellers, Mr. Peale's Museum, 18.
laboratory, a library, a gallery of art, and the necessary lecture rooms."\textsuperscript{117}

Knowing this plan, Gilmor determined to place his collections in the newly formed Smithsonian Institution.

Accordingly, Gilmor prevailed upon Benjamin Chew Howard in 1848 to exert influence on George Dallas and Joseph Henry, men involved with managing the Smithsonian fund. In a letter, he referred to the grand public museums of Europe and their public value. He saw the same potential in the Smithsonian Institution and envisioned his collections as the starting point for the national museum:

my collections of virtue, which without extravagance, I may say are among the best in the Country, as I have not only expended much time and research from my youth upwards, and spared no expense, to make them such as are to be met with in old families in England + on the Continent but never here. There, the accumulations of generations, here, the acquirement of a single individual with moderate means, whose chief object was to preserve in his family such objects of art + taste, as might serve for their instruction + perpetuated in it...I have sunk a large fortune in the vain endeavor to save a noble estate...I am therefore determined to part with everything I have, + unwilling to see it go to pieces + scattered over the Continent...that they [the trustees] would invest part of their fund in objects of art, with a view to its forming a nucleus for a larger collection.\textsuperscript{118}

As a democratic institution open to all citizens and dedicated to preservation and education, Gilmor thought his collection would be a perfect foundation for its

\textsuperscript{117} "Act Establishing the Smithsonian Institution," in \textit{Report of the Organization Committee of The Smithsonian Institution: with the Resolutions Accompanying the Same, and Adopted by the Board of Regents; Also, the Will of the Testator, the Act Accepting the Bequest, and the Act Organizing the Institution} (Washington: Blair and Rives, 1847), 30.
\textsuperscript{118} RG to Howard, January 13, 1848, Howard Papers, MdHS.
national collection. He wanted his entire collection to stay together following his death. Parcelling it out would ruin the taxonomic structure and diminish its educational value because it would no longer have the sense of progress found through comparison of materials.

Ultimately the trustees of the Smithsonian Institution refused to divest funds to purchase Gilmor’s collection. Joseph Henry, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian, argued that the Smithsonian fund was for promoting scientific research and not for acquiring collections. Henry wrote, “Will the diffusion of knowledge be much promoted by a large expenditure of the income of the institution in the purchases of curiosities, minerals, and other objects for the illustration of natural history? We think not.”\textsuperscript{119} Collections were simply not a priority for the first Smithsonian trustees. Unfortunately for Gilmor and the nation, the politics involved with the Smithsonian interfered with the acquisition of his collection.\textsuperscript{120}

As a result, the collection was divided. Gilmor had accumulated debt trying to save his niece and her husband from financial ruin.\textsuperscript{121} He sold parts of

\textsuperscript{119} Humphries, “Robert Gilmor,” 437.
\textsuperscript{120} For a comprehensive discussion of the early years of the Smithsonian Institution see, Orosz, \textit{Curators and Culture}, 155-168; Wilcomb E. Washburn, “Joseph Henry’s Conception of the Purpose of the Smithsonian Institution,” in Bell, \textit{A Cabinet of Curiosities}, 106-166.
\textsuperscript{121} The Gilmors raised Sarah Gilmor’s niece, Isabel Ann Baron and treated her as a daughter. Isabel married John McPherson Brien, owner of Antietam Iron Works and Cotactin Iron Works. Brien struggled financially trying to run the businesses. During the late 1830s and 1840s Gilmor became a security for Brien, loaned him money, and took over his mortgage to save Brien’s estate for
his collection to family, friends, and collectors to help pay his expenses during
the last few years of his life. To settle his debts, the executors of his estate sold
parts of his collection after his death. A number of objects were given to his wife
Sarah and his nephews Robert, William, and Charles Smith Gilmor. Several
nieces inherited works of art. As his nieces and nephews had families of their
own, they divided the collection further. A relative lack of information regarding
sales makes it difficult to trace many of Gilmor’s original pieces, though the art
collection has been fairly well documented.\textsuperscript{122}

Conclusion

Robert Gilmor, Jr. passed away on November 30, 1848. Upon his death,
his friend Benjamin Silliman published his obituary in his \textit{Journal of Science and
Arts}.

We cannot permit one of our earliest and most constant friends to
pass away without a brief tribute to his memory... He early attached
himself to the cultivation of mineralogy, and his affluence and
extensive personal acquaintance with eminent mineralogists in
Europe, and his travels in various foreign countries as well as his
intimate intercourse with our rising mineralogists at home, enabled
him to collect a cabinet remarkable for its richness in fine and rare
minerals; for he selected his specimens with the spirit of both a
man of science and of an amateur. The notice of his cabinet in our
last number was communicated by himself, and the other treasures
of his richly endowed mansion made it a beautiful museum for
science, literature and the arts. His collection of autographs is

\textsuperscript{122} For a discussion of the dispersal of Gilmor’s collections, the various sales,
inheritance, and donations see Humphries, “Robert Gilmor,” 440-466.
distinguished not less by its extent than by its high value. Mr. Gilmor moved in the most elevated circles in Europe and had access to literary treasures, some of which are very peculiar... He was a fine example of a gentleman of the old school; polite, cheerful, frank, affectionate hospitable, and liberal both with his money and his influence. He was a decided supporter of the religious and moral institutions of Christianity, and of all good benevolent efforts.¹²³

This obituary neatly sums up Gilmor's accomplishments as a collector and American citizen. Silliman, a friend and fellow intellectual, recognized Gilmor's lifelong work. The tribute in a scientific journal represented his success at self-education and improvement. Surely, Gilmor would have enjoyed such recognition.

Gilmor constructed an American identity for himself and a cultural conception of America through his private collection, both the materials within the collection and his interaction with them. He understood himself as an enlightened gentleman, patriotic citizen, and benevolent patron. His motives were not entirely selfless, however, as he expected respect and recognition for his intellectual pursuits. Furthermore, the ownership of cultural artifacts firmly placed him among an elite class during a time of social struggle. He believed America was destined to succeed Europe as the preeminent home of civilization. He appropriated Europe’s cultural heritage, which shaped his understanding of his own country, and imagined an imperial expansion of America’s influence. Though Gilmor's collection failed in becoming the nucleus of a national museum,

pieces from his collection can now be found in museums and archives across the
nation, including the Smithsonian Institution, Baltimore Museum of Art, Walters
Art Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Gibbes Art Museum, Detroit Institute
of Arts, and many others. Today, when visitors walk into these museums,
unbeknownst to them, they experience the fruits of Gilmor’s genteel labor and
share his perception of the United State’s greatness and destiny.
Figure 1. MEDAL, English, Die caster: Faulkner, 1821, Silver alloy, 1 5/8 in. diameter, The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Ellen Howard Bayard, BMA 1936.47.23
Figure 2. Reverse, MEDAL, English, Die caster: Faulkner, 1821, Silver alloy, 1 5/8 in. diameter, The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Ellen Howard Bayard, BMA 1936.47.23
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