



HILL-STEAD

A FAMILY'S HAVEN OF ART AND NATURE



The western façade of Hill-Stead

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isiting Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington, Connecticut — 10 miles northwest of Hartford — is like stepping back in time, which is just what its creator, Theodate Pope Riddle (1867–1946), intended. The Colonial Revival retirement home she built for her parents was as precisely orchestrated as her last will, which established a trust that would ultimately turn it into a museum for the “enjoyment of the public.” Because Riddle wanted it to reflect how her family lived, she stipulated that “the house and its contents remain intact, not to be moved, lent, or sold.” By this she meant that every object was to stay not only in the same room, but also in its same location.

Hill-Stead is home to a sizeable assemblage of European, American, and Asian paintings, sculptures, works on paper, books, ceramics, furniture, rugs, textiles, metalwork, glass, and other decorative arts — together formally known as the Alfred Atmore Pope Collection, in honor of Theodate’s father. “Unlike

other historic house museums, Hill-Stead has no railings or text panels and very few ropes, so visitors are able to get close to the paintings and decorative artworks,” says Susan Ballek, the museum’s executive director and CEO. “They have the full experience of being a guest in the Popes’ home as it appeared in 1901.”

A REMARKABLE FAMILY

Theodate Pope fell in love with Connecticut’s bucolic landscape when she arrived from Ohio at age 19 to attend the prestigious Miss Porter’s School in Farmington. She was the only child of Alfred and Ada Pope, who hailed from New England but resided in Cleveland, where Alfred was president of the Cleveland Malleable Iron Company, which manufactured materials for the agricultural and railroad sectors.

Upon graduating in 1888, Theodate joined her parents on a “grand tour” of Europe, an experience that proved pivotal in shaping her future and in laying the groundwork for Hill-



In the dining room hangs James McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in Violet and Blue* (1893).

Stead. Within 10 months, the family visited 50 cities, where they were exposed to many different types of art and architecture. While exploring museums and private collections, they admired the Italian, French, and Spanish masters, but they became particularly interested in Impressionism, a young movement starting to take hold in the art world. The Popes established relationships with Impressionist-oriented dealers and galleries in Paris, and eventually New York City. In France, Alfred purchased his first two paintings by Claude Monet: *View of Cap d'Antibes* (1888) and *Grainstacks, White Frost Effect* (1889). Later, he added Monet's *Fishing Boats at Sea* (1868) and *Grainstacks, in Bright Sunlight* (1890), as well as Édouard Manet's *The Guitar Player* (1866), for which he paid \$12,000 in 1894. These, Ballek feels, "are finer examples of Monet's and Manet's paintings than those possessed by larger museums and are displayed in their original locations to showcase the collector's eclectic taste."

Theodate kept a detailed diary throughout the grand tour, commenting on the buildings, furnishings, artworks, and landscapes that intrigued her. She toyed with the idea of becoming an artist, but found herself drawn instead to architecture, soon declaring it her vocation. Ultimately, she became one of America's first female architects, designing an array of Connecticut homes and institutions, including the Avon Old Farms School, Westover School, and Hop Brook School.

When the Popes returned to the U.S., Alfred and Ada headed home to Cleveland, but Theodate remained in Farmington. There she rented, and later purchased, an 18th-century saltbox house that she named *The O'Rourke* (after its previous owner) and spent the next few years restoring it while operating a small farm and "Odd & End" shop. The restoration provided Theodate with hands-on experience in all aspects of building, including heating, plumbing, and lighting systems, and introduced her to a professional network of carpenters, stonemasons, and antiques dealers. This constituted her entrée to the world of architecture and the beginning of her informal education, as she would never receive any formal training.

In 1898, Theodate convinced her parents to finance the "farmhouse" she had conceived of building for them while on their grand tour. In reality, this would be a Colonial Revival mansion atop a hill, to be christened Hill-Stead. Because Theodate was "untrained," Alfred suggested they work with a reputable architecture firm that could translate her exacting drawings into working blueprints. The Popes selected McKim, Mead & White, the firm that designed New York's Pennsylvania Station, the Boston Public Library, and the main campus of Columbia University, among many notable buildings.

The result is a refined structure with a Mount Vernon-style portico added shortly after 1902, the year Ada and Alfred moved in. The large size of the house (29,000 square feet) and

its rooms' generous proportions signaled the Popes' high social status, yet — in keeping with Theodate's Colonial aesthetic — it seems simply furnished when compared with the opulent interiors of other Gilded Age estates. Though spacious, the rooms have low ceilings that feel welcoming; this was important to Theodate because she envisioned Hill-Stead as a place for her family to entertain. Indeed, many prominent artists, writers, poets, politicians, physicians, suffragettes, and educators slept and dined here during the house's heyday. Wall coverings and the arrangement of furniture and textiles were carefully selected to complement the superb artworks on view.

Ballek notes that Theodate designed not only the house, but also "the views from its windows, the grading of the land, the driveway and approach, the trees and gardens, and the Make-shift Theater." Even the stone walls ringing the property were meticulously planned; Robert M. Thorson, professor of geology and coordinator of the University of Connecticut's Stone Wall Initiative, notes that they "do more than frame the landscape. They support it physically, anchor it chronologically, and lend it unique character. Most importantly, they channel the visitor's experience, both on to and off of the site."

Originally, the house presided over 250 pastoral acres that had been pieced together from 10 parcels of land; 152 of those acres remain today. The Popes hired local farmers to manage their livestock, orchards, greenhouses,



The drawing room contains two paintings by Claude Monet: at left is *Grainstacks*, *White Frost Effect* (1889) and at right *View of Cap d'Antibes* (1888).



Claude Monet's *Fishing Boats at Sea* (1868) hangs over the fireplace in the morning room.



Édouard Manet (1832–1883), *The Guitar Player*, 1866, oil on canvas, 25 x 31 1/2 in., photo: Anne Day

and vegetable gardens, and they constructed several outbuildings to house the animals and a collection of early 20th-century carriages still on view. A sunken garden designed by Theodate and Ada flourished until World War II, when Theodate turned her flowers into turf as labor and supplies dwindled. In the 1980s, fortunately, the Connecticut Valley Garden Club and the Garden Club of Hartford revived this garden using an undated plan in the University of California (Berkeley) archive of the great landscape designer Beatrix Farrand; this had been intended for Hill-Stead but did not come to fruition in Theodate's lifetime. (In 1916, a year after surviving the torpedoing of the ocean liner *Lusitania*, Theodate married the diplomat John W. Riddle, accompanying him briefly to Argentina while he served as U.S. ambassador there from 1922 to 1925.)

All 19 of Hill-Stead's rooms, excluding a large servant wing, are open to the public during docent-led tours offered year-round. The museum's curator, Melanie Bourbeau, explains that all of the rooms "are appointed with original, or precisely duplicated, wall coverings, carpets, rugs, and window treatments. The original light fixtures and chandeliers are also in place." Further encouraging the impression that the family has just stepped out, Theodate's bedroom closet contains an array of her dresses, jackets, and boudoir caps, some designed by Britain's Lucy Duff Gordon, who did business as "Lucile, Ltd." Hill-Stead tours are unscripted, giving docents the flexibility to tailor each experience to suit the interests of their visitors, including children. Some of the guides, who are artists themselves, speak dynamically about the paintings, while others focus on the family, architecture, furniture, farm, etc.

FINE ART

Approximately 85 percent of the Alfred Atmore Pope Collection is on display, which makes sense because the Popes lived with their treasures, and also because Theodate's bequest precluded any artwork from ever leaving the estate — for example, as a temporary loan to another museum. During the tour it quickly becomes clear that Alfred did not feel obliged to follow convention when choosing artworks for his collection. (He was, for example, one of the first Americans to collect Italian majolica.) Among his boldest choices are James McNeill Whistler's *The Blue Wave, Biarritz* (1862) and *Symphony in Violet and Blue* (1893), Edgar Degas's *The Tub* (1885–86) and *Jockeys* (1886), and Mary Cassatt's 1901 *Sara Handing a Toy to the Baby*. Susan Ballek observes, "Lacking a formal art education, Alfred made purchases based on his refined and enlightened personal taste." Melanie Bourbeau adds, "The Popes had personal relationships with Whistler and Cassatt, so our archives contain correspondence between the family and these artists, along with original receipts for the paintings from such Parisian dealers as Durand-Ruel and Boussois Valdon." Other then-progressive artists represented in the European collection include



(TOP LEFT) In the corner of the parlor bedroom hangs Edgar Degas's *The Tub* ■ (TOP RIGHT) Edgar Degas (1834–1917), *The Tub*, 1885–86, pastel on paper, 27 1/2 x 27 1/2 in.

William Nicholson, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Jozef Israëls, and Eugène Carrière.

Bourbeau continues, “While the French Impressionist paintings take center stage at Hill-Stead, the works on paper collection is considerably larger and more varied. These include three engravings by Dürer, 18 etchings and lithographs by Whistler, one aquatint by Cassatt, one crayon drawing by Millet, a limited-edition portfolio of heliograph prints by Degas, one pen-and-ink wash by Manet, one etching by Matisse, 28 color woodblock prints by Hokusai, Harunobu, Hiroshige, and Utamaro, more than 50 British mezzotints, and 20 photographs by Gertrude Käsebier.”

Among the other treasures are 3,300 books encompassing art, architecture, literature, poetry, botany, psychic phenomena, and world history. These include John Ogilby’s *America* (1671), complete with pull-out maps; a 1755 edition of Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*; a first edition of

James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922); and an 1863 first edition containing 82 of Goya’s engravings for *The Disasters of War*. The collection’s oldest object is a Corinthian pyxis vessel (590-579 BCE); Bourbeau says that it is “one of only 77 known. It was purchased in 1907 by Mr. Pope on his final trip to Europe for about \$300, along with a few Japanese woodblock prints from the Parisian gallery run by Siegfried Bing, who was instrumental in promoting Japonisme, Art Nouveau, and the integration of diverse international styles in interior decoration.” (The collection’s second oldest object is a Chinese vessel from the Han Dynasty, 206 BCE–220 CE.)

It is worth adding that artworks, objects, and archives not on regular view are accessible to scholars for study, and also to members of the public seeking a more in-depth experience. The latter can pre-register for a longer, behind-the-scenes VIP or Gold Tour led by a curator or premier guide.

Ballek is right to call Hill-Stead “a rare example of a fully intact, early 20th-century Country Place Estate, providing visitors with a truly turn-of-the-century experience. Some people may view our inability to lend artworks as a limitation for the museum, but we prefer to think that this provides an incentive to visit in person,” says Ballek.

For these and many other reasons, readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* are sure to feel at home at Hill-Stead. ●

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