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Anniversary
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On Knoedler & Company's 150th anniversary, we remember the masterpieces that have graced their walls

This month, the New York gallery celebrates its sesquicentennial with an exhibition on its most famous paintings and clients

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The 150-year saga of Knoedler & Company—the longest running fine art gallery in New York and one of the oldest in the nation—is a chronicle of art collecting in America. The protagonists of the story are the legendary robber barons of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, men such as Henry Clay Frick and Henry O. Havemeyer, whose untaxed fortunes allowed them to acquire vast stockpiles of art, and whose munificence fostered that uniquely American tradition of donating great treasures to public institutions.

Name an important museum in the United States, and Knoedler's is likely to have sold pictures to one or more of the collectors whose benefaction helped form that institution's holdings. The Metropolitan is a case in point: Knoedler clients and Met benefactors include Benjamin Altman,

Jules Bache, George Blumenthal, Stephen Clark, Edward Harkness, Henry O. and Lousine Havemeyer, George A. Hearn, Robert and Phillip Lehman, Adolph and Samuel A. Lewisohn, John L. Loeb, J.P. Morgan and Catherine Lorillard Wolfe, to name only the most prominent.

Also among Knoedler's customers were Andrew W. Mellon, Paul Mellon, Ailsa Mellon Bruce, and P.A.B. Widener, the principal founders of the National Gallery of Art. More than half of the famed Frick Collection came through Knoedler's as did two-fifths of the Robert Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. Clients like Duncan Phillips, Norton Simon, John G. Johnson, the Rockefeller family, John Severance, Leonard and Mary Hanna, Potter Palmer, Martin Ryerson, William Drummond Libbey, Mary Emery and Charles Taft, enriched museums across the country. Among the hundreds of thousands of paintings that passed through Knoedler's hands are many of the greatest masterpieces in North America.

For most of its existence, Knoedler's stock in trade was mainly Western painting since the Renaissance, although throughout its history, the gallery has represented contemporary artists, particularly Americans. The most renowned native artists showed with the gallery during their lifetimes, including Church, Inness, Homer, Remington, Sargent, Whistler, Ryder, Chase, Bierstadt, and Wyeth. And more recent additions to the roster include Gorky, Calder, de Kooning, Newman, Motherwell, Tony Smith, Diebenkorn, Rauschenberg, Eva Hesse and Bourgeois.

This year the gallery celebrates its sesquicentennial with an exhibition from 5 December to 12 January 1997 aptly titled "The Rise of the Art World in America: Knoedler at 150". Guest-curated by Sam Hunter, professor emeritus at Princeton University, assisted by gallery librarian and architect Melissa De Medeiros, the show includes paintings by Manet, Degas, Cézanne and others once sold by Knoedler's, supplemented by documentary material from the gallery's 55,000-volume art library and the archive, which dates back to 1863.

Michael Knoedler emigrated from Paris to New York in 1846 to manage a newly opened branch of Goupil Gallery, purveyors of popular prints and art supplies. There were virtually no museums in the United States other than the venerable Smithsonian Institution, which was founded that same year. The Metropolitan would not be born for a quarter century. Nevertheless, fortunes were being made in oil, lumber, railroads, steel and finance and the wealthy were buying pictures, mainly American and some Barbizon, for display in their homes. Knoedler began supplying them, and in 1857 bought out Goupil's interest in the New York branch. By the mid 1890s, his son and successor Roland had teamed up with Charles Carstairs to open branches

in Paris and London, and had expanded into the Old Master trade. Americans were buying most of the Old Masters that came onto the market, frequently with Colnaghi's buying the pictures in Europe and Knoedler's selling them very profitably in America.

Over the years there have been few blots on Knoedler's escutcheon. One was in 1887, when Edmond Knoedler and George E. Pfeiffer, an employee of the gallery, were arrested by order of Anthony Comstock of the Society for the Suppression of Vice and charged with selling lewd and immoral pictures in the print department. Most of the items seized were reproductions after works in the recent Salon in Paris, including a rendering of Cabanel's pseudo-mythological eroticised "Birth of Venus". "If we have offended against the law, we have done it unwittingly", stated Roland Knoedler to the press. "Certainly we do not seek to pander to any depraved taste or anything of that sort. Our patrons are among the most respectable in the community... We do not wish to sell any pictures, prints or photographs which it is unlawful to sell. But... How are our agents in Paris to know that pictures that are considered reputable there will be regarded as improper here? ...All that we desire is a legal ruling on the subject that will clearly define what pictures are to be regarded as improper". They were both found guilty and fined.

When Roland Knoedler retired in 1928, his nephew Charles Henschel took over, assisted by Carmen Messmore, who spent seventy-two of his eighty-nine years with the gallery, and by Carstairs and his son Carroll. In 1930, Henschel and Messmore brokered the landmark sale of masterpieces from the Hermitage to their client Andrew Mellon, who would soon donate them to the nascent National Gallery. When Henschel died in 1956, he was replaced by E.Coe Kerr and Michael Knoedler's grandson Roland Balay, who, at ninety-four, is the last living Knoedler family member to have been involved with the firm.

In 1971, while Xavier Fourcade was director, Armand Hammer purchased the gallery. His business ties with the Soviet Union enabled the gallery to host museum-quality shows from Soviet national collections. Hammer's grandson Michael retains ownership. Lawrence Rubin headed the firm from 1977, shifting ever more into contemporary art, a trend that current president Ann Freedman has continued, showing Helen Frankenthaler, Frank Stella, younger artists Donald Sultan, John Duff, and Caio Fonseca and work from the estates of David Smith, Adolph Gottlieb, Richard Pousette-Dart, Herbert Ferber and Nancy Graves. Ms Freedman says the gallery sells mainly to American private collectors, mainly from outside New York.

A second sesquicentennial exhibition, dealing with postwar and contemporary artists, takes place from 12 January to 8 February 1997, with each of the gallery artists represented by one

work. Knoedler & Company is at 19 East 70th Street, its ninth location in the city.

“...I may have left some out”

In 1930, the isolated Communists, hard pressed for cash, elected to liquidate masterpieces from The Hermitage. That year, Knoedler’s Herschel wrote to Colnaghi, with immense understatement: “Dear Gus: It is a very hard thing to compile a list of all the pictures in the Hermitage in which we might be interested, but I enclose those that that I can think of at the moment, although I may have left some out...” His wish list included works by Giorgione, Botticelli, Raphael, Leonardo, Titian, Veronese, Tiepolo, Velásquez, Murillo, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Ter Borch, Metsu, Meiris, Dou, Ruisdael, de Hooch, Cranach and many others, avoiding seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Italian or French pictures for which a market had yet to emerge. The Berlin dealer Zatzenstein had purchased decorative art objects from The Hermitage on behalf of Portuguese oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian, but Colnaghi and Mathiessen Galleries were offered the pictures, and they turned to Knoedler’s for American financial support. They got it from Andrew Mellon, whose Pittsburgh bank underwrote the deal with the galleries taking a commission.

He kept twenty-one of the pictures for \$6.6 million, including Van Eyck’s “Annunciation”, Raphael’s “Alba Madonna” and his “St George”, Vermeer’s “Woman holding a balance”, Titian’s “Venus with a mirror”. The Louvre and the Rijksmuseum were among the other eventual buyers, and Albert Barnes declined four pictures later sold to Stephen Clark. Had it not been for the Depression, many more works might have left the Soviet Union. Over the years, Mellon purchased from Knoedler over 125 works, most of which were given to the National Gallery of Art in 1937.

1. Winslow Homer “The gulf stream”. Metropolitan Museum, New York

In 1906, the New York Herald reported: “Even before the National Academy of Design has held so much as a private view of its exhibition at the American Fine Arts Building, one of the pictures has been sold, and it is believed for a good round sum [\$4,500]. The picture is Mr Winslow Homer’s ‘The gulf stream’, which every artist who has it pronounces ‘great’. The purchaser is no less an institution than the Metropolitan Museum of Art. ‘The gulf stream’ was sent to the exhibition by Messrs Knoedler & Co., who handle all of Mr Homer’s work... the purchase has an important bearing because the museum acquires the picture of its own motion. There are American paintings in the museum now, but most of them were gifts or bequests. The selection

and purchase of 'The gulf stream' artists believe is an indication that the Metropolitan Museum realises its duty toward contemporary American art, or, to be exact, toward that which is best in contemporary American art".

2. Rembrandt "Self portrait", 1658. Frick Collection, New York

Colnaghi acquired it from the Earls of Ilchester, Melbury Park, England, and offered the painting to Henry Clay Frick, advising Knoedler that "should you be able to assist us in effecting a sale to Mr Frick we will of course make it a matter of business with you". Knoedler bought a half share in 1907 for £15,500, and sold it to their client Frick the same month for \$225,000. This became the pattern: Colnaghi would procure works could serve as a conduit to American millionaires. The informal partnership lasted four decades, yielding profits for both parties and arousing a little envy in Colnaghi. In one instance, having failed to sell a Romney in England, Colnaghi's Gutekunst wrote to Charles Carstairs of Knoedler "I feel sick... because I had hoped and wished to place it before you wanted it over there, and to show you that I also can sell sometimes".

3. Van Dyck "Marchesa Elena Grimaldi", c.1623. National Gallery of Art, Washington

Purchased from Trotti & Cie., Paris in 1907, it is one of five family portraits from the Cattaneo Palace, Genoa, three of which Knoedler's sold to P.A.B. Widener of Philadelphia in 1908 for \$450,000 plus fifty-two pictures for additional credit. Knoedler's sold a number of Van Dycks, including the portraits of Frans Snyders and his wife, now in the Frick Collection. He assembled them for a celebrated 1909 show that drew 17,000 visitors in ten days. A critic for the New York American wrote: "Another evidence of the wealth of private art collections will be given... when nine Van Dycks from the galleries of P.A.B. Widener and H.C. Frick will be exhibited at Knoedler's... Five of them belong to the famous Cattaneo collection and at the time of their export along with two others now in the possession of the National Gallery at London, created a great deal of trouble for J. Pierpont Morgan. The Italian customs officials, believing the financier was smuggling the canvases out of the country, despite regulations to the contrary, stopped, overhauled his yacht Corsair, and in the presence of Mr Morgan, searched the luggage of even the women guests aboard. Much was written about it at the time. In reality the Knoedlers had secured the canvases, the sale of which resulted in the arrest and levying of a large fine on the Italian agent who had disposed of them".

Widener purchased more than two dozen pictures from Knoedler's including Vermeer's

“Woman holding a balance”, which Colnaghi bought from the comtesse de Segur in Paris. Knoedler acquired a quarter-share for £5,500 in 1910, and within a year sold it to Widener for \$145,000. The bulk of his collection was given to the National Gallery in 1949.

4. Velásquez, Philip IV (“Fraga” Philip), 1644. Frick Collection, New York

Long in the possession of the Spanish Royal Family, Thomas Agnew bought it from Prince Elias de Bourbon, Parma, in 1910, turning it over to Scott & Fowles from whom Knoedler took a half interest at £41,500, then sold it to Frick in 1911 for \$475,000.

5. Vermeer “Officer and laughing girl”, 1655-60. Frick Collection, New York

Sold by the artist’s widow in 1696, later owned by Leopold Double and Prince Demidoff di San Donato, Colnaghi bought it from Mrs Samuel Joseph, London. Colnaghi’s Gutekunst enticed Knoedler’s Carstairs in a letter reporting: “The Queen came to inspect the Vermeer at 5 pm and I talked to her for half an hour; also the Prince of Wales”. Knoedler bought it in 1911 for £36,000 and immediately sold it to Frick for \$225,000. Knoedler handled almost half of the more than a dozen Vermeers now in American museums.

6. Bellini, “St Francis in the desert” c.1480, Frick Collection, New York

The greatest Bellini outside Europe, Colnaghi purchased it from Mary Ann Driver (Lady Holloway), Tittenhurst, Sunninghill, with Knoedler taking a half share in 1912 for £17,000 in a sale for £45,000 to Arthur M. Grenfell, London, from whom it was repurchased a year later for £60,000, and sold in partnership with Agnew’s to Frick in 1915 for \$170,000.

This was one of more than 225 pictures that Frick eventually bought from Knoedler, many for his new mansion on Fifth Avenue, built in 1913-14. Knoedler’s Carstairs wrote to Roland Knoedler in 1912: “..Frick..has been extremely cordial and nice and I think will do something big. He talks Vermeers, Turner, and also about the two small Rembrandts he returned. I wish we were in our new place with good stock and I am sure he would do something big....He is deeply interested in his new house and likes the plans and I feel sure will build it. Duveen is trying to sell him the Boucher tapestries he owns for \$750,000 and is after him every minute....”

7. Piero della Francesca “Madonna and Child enthroned with four angels” 1460s. Sterling and Francine Clark Institute

In 1913, Clark had acquired through Knoedler’s this, the greatest Piero della Francesca outside

Europe, a work originally in the Casa Gerardi, Borgo San Sepolcro. Colnaghi had bought it from Jane Margaret Seymour and sold Knoedler's a half share in 1913 for £7,500. When Knoedler's sold it several months later to R.S. Clark, their share was \$79,012. The Robert Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, was established by the collector in 1955.

8. Rembrandt "The Visitation", 1640. Detroit Institute of Arts

Formerly in the collections of the King of Sardinia, the Prince of Savoy in Vienna, and Earl Grosvenor, later the Duke of Westminster, this little masterpiece was acquired by Colnaghi from Alfred de Rothschild of Halton Manor and Seamore Place, London, with Knoedler's taking a half share in 1924 for \$25,048. W.R. Valentiner, director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, procured the picture in 1927 for \$150,000, paid for by the city.

9. Daumier "L'Amateur d'Estampes", c.1860-63. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

George Davey of Knoedler's Paris branch purchased the picture (ex-Peytel Collection) from George Bernheim in 1925 for \$16,966. Davey wrote to his New York colleagues in 1924: "For the present, London as you know is the market for these pictures, and the very man I think, who would buy the painting would be Mr Courtauld as he has always been wanting a fine example by this master, but I think we have a closer friend of whom we must think, both for himself and for ourselves in selling him good things and that is, Mr R.S. Clark who, in my personal opinion ought to possess this picture as it will go so well with his Degas and Renoir which he bought from us this summer. I know if he was here, and knowing so well his high class taste, that he would jump at it right away and not make a mistake in doing so..." But New Yorkers offered it to Duncan Phillips of Washington who was "most anxious to build up his 'Daumier Unit'."

Phillips had acquired from Knoedler's another Daumier, "Les avocats", just four years earlier—one of thirty pictures he would eventually buy from the gallery. In 1925 he penned an urgent memo to Knoedler's: "I must know if the Daumier which you have for sale in Paris and London has or has not been sold". The last word was that it was 'not free'—evidently reserved but not yet sold. I asked you to have it sent over here at once for my immediate consideration. I must be kept informed of its status—whether I am to dismiss it from my calculations or whether it may yet be offered [sic.] to me within the next few months. Please acquaint me more thoroughly with the situation if you know it yourself. As a matter of fact another important canvas has been offered [sic.] to me but I am holding off until I hear whether there is any chance for me to consider the 'Amateurs d'Estampes'...Now I must have some idea of where I stand about this

Daumier so that I can decide about this other canvas before I lose my option on it...” Too late.
The picture was sold to Singer Sewing Machine heir Robert S. Clark for \$26,730

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