

FAMILY PICTURES: THE CODMAN COLLECTION

Every picture tells a story, as the old adage goes. Rarely said but no less true is that every picture collection tells a story — about its collectors. The Codmans of Massachusetts acquired art for nearly 200 years. Like all collectors, they based their choices on prevailing trends and personal taste. A less common, yet abiding, influence — especially on their later generations — was family pride.

Ogden Codman, Jr. (1863–1951), unable to bear familial artworks being sold to “strangers,” bought them back when cash-strapped relatives sold or their estates were auctioned. He was particularly eager to reclaim portraits. An architect and interior designer, Codman gained fame as Edith Wharton’s collaborator on *The Decoration of Houses*. Their 1897 book reintroduced classical ideas to Victorian households “crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery,” to borrow words from the novelist’s memoirs. Cuddy, as Mrs. Wharton called him, had such zeal for his family’s cultural heritage that, largely due to him, a sizable portion of the Codman collection is intact. It decorates what was once the Codmans’ country place in the suburb of Lincoln, northwest of Boston.

Owned and operated as a visitable property by the preservation organization Historic New England, it is known today as the Codman Estate. The land was acquired circa 1707 by British-born Charles Chambers (1660–1743), a Codman ancestor who amassed a fortune in the West Indies trade and whose “interesting but hideous portrait” (Cuddy’s phrase) was painted by John Smibert (1688–1751). Chambers built a structure on the Lincoln acreage circa 1710. The first substantial residence, a two-story Georgian manor house, was completed by 1741. A Chambers married a Russell, who owned it next. Then a Russell married John Codman III (1755–1803) who, in the 1790s, transformed the house into the three-story federal mansion that, with major 19th-century modifications, we see today.

John III’s great-grandchildren — Cuddy and his siblings — were the last generation to own the Codman Estate. When the sole-surviving,



Ogden Codman, Jr., c. 1880, photograph taken by Ordinaire, Dinard, France, courtesy Historic New England

unmarried sister died in 1968, the real estate went to Historic New England. With the house came its contents: the fine art, furniture, decorative arts, and a forest of family papers. Old-time New Englanders have a reputation for being savers, even of the proverbial “string too short to be saved,” but this trove of squirreled-away documents may be unparalleled. Estimated at more than 100,000 items, it comprises diaries, correspondence, financial and legal records, photographs, invoices, and inventories that tell a complicated family saga worthy of a TV miniseries. It also tells the story of the collection, the merit of which does not lie in its masterworks, of which there are, frankly, few. Rather, it is in its pairing of both continuity and change — qualities

that together give it the rare ability to embody, all in one place, the habits of privileged, art-buying Americans from the 18th through mid-20th centuries.

BAD RICHARD

The worldly, profligate Richard Codman (1762–1806) — dubbed “Bad Richard” by some family members — was first to buy art in quantity. Richard and his brother — John III, the one who renovated the Lincoln place in the 1790s — ran a successful import business. While John divided his time between Lincoln and Boston, Richard oversaw their affairs in Europe, taking up residence in Paris in 1794. Many American merchants, speculators, and adventurers were being drawn to the French capital, seeking profits in the unstable aftermath of the revolution. Richard surely discovered it was an optimal time for bargain-hunting.

Resale may have been his aim as he snapped up landscapes, genre scenes, religious subjects, and other Old Master works. Alternatively, he may have bought in quantity and haste because he was impatient to appear the proper, art-collecting gentleman. Perhaps a combination of these motives caused him to ship more than 100 artworks back to Massachusetts, where John, in the end, did not resell but, perhaps to enhance his own social status, decorated his Boston townhouse and the Lincoln home with them.

Richard thought he was buying well, and did so when he shopped at the gallery of legendary artist-turned-dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Le Brun (who later rediscovered Vermeer). Purchases from other dealers, however, did not always pan out. Richard’s oil painting of a moonlit sailing ship, sold to him by a dealer named Brunot, is typical of works by the French marine artist Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–1789). But the painting Richard bought is probably by an unknown artist — “after Vernet” or “School of Vernet” — not Vernet himself.

Richard’s four large architectural views of Italy are of uncertain attribution, too. Later generations thought these depictions of Rome’s Colosseum, Venice, Castle of St. Angelo, and Falls of Tivoli were by Ferdinando Galli da Bibiena (1657–1734). “To think that I lived all those years at

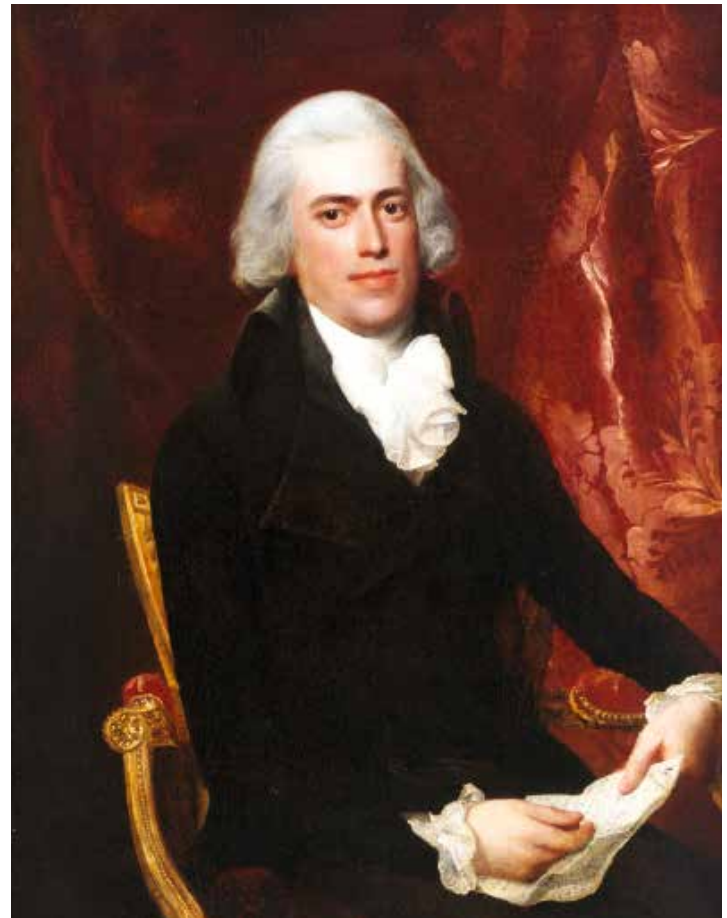


(ABOVE) Attributed to **FERNANDO DEGALLI** (dates unknown), *View of the Colosseum*, 1723, oil on canvas, 36 7/8 x 60 1/2 in., Historic New England ■ (RIGHT) **JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY** (1738–1815), *Richard Codman*, 1793, oil on canvas, 44 3/8 x 36 1/4 in., Historic New England ■ (BELOW) The Codman House today; photo: David Bohl, Historic New England



Lincoln with a Bibiena and did not know it,” Cuddy declared in a 1925 letter to a later Richard Codman (1842–1928) — “Uncle Dick” — whose research had led to the Bibiena claim. Historic New England, however, attributes these works to Fernando Degalli (dates unknown), who painted them after the Dutch-born Gaspar Van Wittel (1653–1736), known as Vanvitelli in Italy.

Bad Richard acquired his nickname not because he spent money on pictures in France, but because, unmarried and still in his 30s, he spent it on wine, women, Parisian townhouses, and country chateaux — and thus went broke. Help came from John, who crossed the Atlantic to extricate him, finding the mess “too confusing and mortifying” to explain in letters home. Those troubles were foreshadowed in themes of at least two paintings Richard bought. *Silenus*, after the Dutch artist Willem van Mieris (1662–1747), shows the subject — foster father of goat-horned Bacchus — in his typical, tipsy state, being helped to walk by Venus and Pan. The other work, perhaps erroneously attributed to Dutch Golden Age painter Cornelius van Poelenburgh (1594–1667), or else by a Utrecht School follower, has a self-explanatory title: *Nymphs Bathing*.



COPLEY'S CORKSCREW

Eighteenth-century Americans who could afford art wanted portraits — straightforward, skillfully executed, preferably flattering likenesses. Four Codmans had theirs painted by one of America’s greatest practitioners, John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), whose canvases gleam like his affluent subjects’ polished mahogany furniture. Richard’s sitting took place in 1793 in London, where the artist had been living for nearly two decades. Purportedly he’d moved there to launch his career as a history painter; more probably he wanted to escape the turmoil of the

American Revolution without seeming a Tory, which he wasn't, but his in-laws were. John III had his portrait painted in 1800, when he went to see about Richard's bankruptcy.

While still living in the colonies in the late 1760s, Copley was commissioned to paint a Codman ancestor, the physician Charles Russell (1738–1780). According to a Codman family story, on a visit to the sitter in Lincoln, when wine was at hand but no corkscrew, Copley's response was a visual "quip." He painted an image of the missing implement in trompe l'oeil on a door. Complete with shadow, it appeared to dangle from a hand-wrought nail. The house would never be without one again, the artist reportedly said.

A succession of non-Codmans owned the Lincoln house and, by default, the corkscrew painting for more than 50 years. That is, between the time Cuddy's grandfather Charles Russell Codman (1784–1852) sold the property in 1807 and Cuddy's father, Ogden Codman, Sr. (1839–1904), repurchased it in 1862. Some of the interim owners treated the place poorly and with little foresight. One sold a seven-acre strip to the Fitchburg Railroad, allowing trains to run, as they still do, less than 200 yards from the house. (The same track clips a corner of Thoreau's Walden Pond.) The painting, which most experts agree is by Copley (though there is some doubt about the family story), might easily have been destroyed. It wasn't, so *Corkscrew Hanging on a Nail*, cut from the door and framed, now hangs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), where its label's credit line reads "Bequest of Ogden Codman [Jr.]" Apparently, the Codmans felt a public collection was the best place for this particular work.

Copley's portrait of Dr. Russell, meanwhile, suffered a curious fate. As told in a letter by Cuddy to an acquaintance, it descended to two sisters, who couldn't decide to which of them it belonged — or quarreled over its disposition. "One morning," he wrote, "to their horror and amazement they found that the face of the portrait had been cut out, and had disappeared, so the remains of the portrait were relegated to the garret." Years later, after one sister's death, a little silk bag she had long hung from her neck was examined. The missing face, tightly rolled, was sewn into it. That fragment is now at the Massachusetts Historical Society. As for Dr. Russell, being a Loyalist, he fled to Antigua after the Revolution began and died there.

BOSTON BRAHMIN

We all know you can pick your friends but not your relatives. What bears reminding is that you can pick your art but not your relatives' art, so when the latter becomes yours, you may find yourself with works that don't suit your taste. C.R. Codman apparently had no such problem. Not long after his father, John III, left him the Lincoln estate in 1803, he jettisoned it but kept the art. He then bought more art, including some of the best works at Codman House today.

One is a Dutch still life (c. 1632) that shows, in typical *vanitas* fashion, an overturned vessel, a pocket watch, a partially peeled citrus — and



(TOP) Attributed to JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY (1738–1815), *Corkscrew Hanging on a Nail*, late 1760s, oil on panel, 5 3/8 x 5 5/8 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston ■ (BELOW) WILLEM CLAESZ HEDA (1594–1680), *Still Life*, c. 1632, oil on panel, 33 3/4 x 38 7/8 in., Historic New England



a fruit knife that the artist signed on its blade: "Heda." Codman believed it to be by Willem Claesz Heda (1594–1680), and Historic New England agrees. (Some present-day art historians think it more likely to be by his son, Gerrit Willemsz Heda [1625–1649], and therefore of a later date.) Why huge numbers of 17th-century Dutch artworks came to rest in so many U.S. collections — indeed, why American holdings rival those of the Netherlands — is the subject of *Holland's Golden Age in America*, edited by Esmée Quodbach. As the book's contributors argue, these collectors identified with Dutch values of thrift and self-reliance. Americans' love of Dutch art was also rooted in awareness of the countries'

similarities. Both waged a war for independence against a foreign oppressor, and excelled in commerce. These affinities, of course, supplemented the appeal of Dutch naturalism to the people of a still young nation who favored the practical notions of representational art. "Even the photograph cannot equal [these Dutch artists'] miracles," Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote.

The Codman Heda was exhibited in 1827 at the Boston Athenaeum. This independent library and cultural institution was the place where prosperous Bostonians enjoyed art and music before the founding of the MFA (1870) and Boston Symphony (1881). Subsequent Athenaeum exhibitions featured other Codman pictures, including the showy Grand Tour memento *Piazza San Marco*. Bought in the 1830s as a work by Canaletto (1697–1768), this Venice view was later downgraded to a work by Canaletto's pupil Francesco Guardi (1712–1793), then to work by a pupil of Guardi. Art historians now consider it more likely a Canaletto follower's work. Still, like the Heda, it is a quality painting, and can be seen at Codman House along with a portrait of C.R. Codman made by that pro-

lific limner of prominent political and social figures of the period, Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828).

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

Until his death in 1852, C.R. Codman and his family lived near the Athenaeum, on Boston's Beacon Hill, the celebrated neighborhood of stately brick townhouses built along the narrow, gas-lit streets tucked in and around Charles Bulfinch's domed state capitol. It wasn't until 1860 that Oliver Wendell Holmes coined the term "Boston Brahmin," but that's exactly what C.R. Codman was.

In 1861, his son Ogden Codman (Cuddy's father-to-be) married the daughter of another



Ogden Codman, Sr., and Sarah Bradlee Codman, 1864, photograph taken by Mayer & Pierson of Paris, courtesy Historic New England

Brahmin family, Sarah Fletcher Bradlee. Initially the newlyweds lived with her parents. The following year, however, the couple, having reacquired the lost Lincoln property, made plans to move to the suburbs.

Ogden filled the Lincoln place with inherited paintings, and bought more — part of the rising demand for European paintings in post-Civil War America. Like most collectors at that time, he steered clear of early and ample opportunities to buy French Impressionism. Instead, he favored idealized landscapes in keeping with the 19th-century enthusiasm for nature, even as industrial “progress” disfigured vast swaths of it.

Boston real estate and insurance were sources of substantial income for Ogden and Sarah. (He listed “gentleman” as his occupation on his marriage certificate.) But the Great Boston Fire of 1872 precipitated a financial calamity from which the family never quite recovered. In its aftermath, they rented out the Lincoln property and, to economize, lived abroad for extended periods — specifically, in Dinard on Brittany’s “Emerald Coast.” This seaside resort was favored by Brahmin expatriates, so the Codmans had plenty of like-minded company, including Edward Darley Boit (1840–1915), whose competent landscapes and seascapes achieved popularity among his social circle. A scene of St. Servan Harbor, inscribed “Dinard ’82” and painted by Boit, was given to the family by the artist.

“COMFORT FIRST, THEN ART”

When Ogden’s Bradlee in-laws died in the 1870s, his wife inherited some of their artworks, which then entered the Codman collection. Many are contemporary American works. A scene by the animal painter Thomas Hewes Hinckley (1813–1896) may have been commissioned by the older couple: Hinckley’s journal

shows the Bradlees paid him \$100 for his rendering of sheep and oxen on a farm they owned in Boston’s Dorchester section. Other associational reasons probably drew them to Benjamin Champney’s *Scene in North Conway, New Hampshire*. The Bradlees summered in that region, where Champney (1817–1907) was a chief practitioner of the White Mountain School of painting.

From the Bradlees also came *A View of the Western Branch of the Falls of Niagara Taken from the Table Rock*, attributed to John Vanderlyn (1775–1852), the first American known to have painted this natural wonder, in 1801. It makes a strong statement in Lincoln, where the family returned to live in the 1880s and where the plenitude of art allowed them to set up each stair landing and corresponding hallway as a picture gallery.

If you go to the Codman Estate, which is open to the public from June 1 through October 15, docents will take you through, remarking that little has changed since Coddy redecorated it in the late 1890s. As for the paintings collection, his sister Dorothy bought the last pictures to become part of it. One of them is *Landscape with Fallen Tree*, after Nicholas Duval (1644–1732) or possibly by Eustache-François Duval, active in Paris from 1784 through 1836. As it happens, this late 18th-century oil’s provenance traces back to Bad Richard, who sent it home from

Paris, whereupon it descended through several generations to Cora Codman Wolcott (b. 1864). Dorothy bought it from her estate in 1954.

Dorothy was posthumously described to a *Boston Globe* reporter by an executor of her own estate as “very vulnerable, fine-grained and reclusive; she seldom ventured outside — in recent years due to illness; her instincts were, however, splendidly humane. I should call her a typical Boston lady of the old school.” Fond of gardening, knitting, needlework, and cats, she had collected stamps, postcards, seashells — and *Dennis the Menace* cartoons. And she had been devoted to family members, especially Coddy.

“I am busy collecting things myself, but [they] are devoid of family interest,” Coddy, perhaps the truest connoisseur of his clan, wrote in a 1925 letter to a cousin. It was posted from France, where Coddy had gone to live about then and where he remained until his 1951 death. He bought “Portraits, Busts, Furniture, china glass [sic], all the things that make a house pleasant to live in.” Stating succinctly his own philosophy of collecting, he added wise words for any family to collect and to live by: “Comfort first, then art.”

Jeanne Schinto is an independent writer living in Andover, Massachusetts. For permission to quote from the Codman family papers, she thanks both Historic New England and the Boston Athenaeum.

Notes

1. See Peter C. Sutton’s assessment at psupress.org/books/samplechapters/978-0-271-06201-3sc.html.



Attributed to JOHN VANDERLYN (1775–1852), *A View of the Western Branch of the Falls of Niagara Taken from the Table Rock*, 1801, oil on canvas, 34 x 42 in., Historic New England