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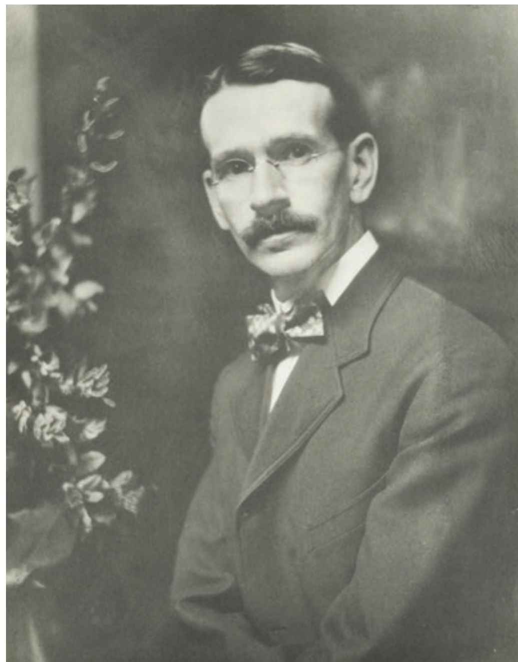
Lillie Bliss and Arthur B. Davies: The Collector and Her Adviser

BY JEANNE SCHINTO

The romantic relationships of Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928) with his wife and his mistress have long titillated people interested in the libidinous side of artists' lives. His love triangle has been explored in two published biographies of Davies, and indeed his name is rarely mentioned anymore without some reference to his duplicity. As the husband of Lucy Virginia Meriwether Davies, a country doctor, he lived on a farm in Congers, New York, along the Hudson River. With his model Edna Potter, a dancer, he lived in Greenwich Village, and later Paris and Florence, under the pseudonym "David A. Owen." To complicate matters, each woman bore Davies children. (Potter's child, when old enough to wonder, was told that her father's work — as an engineer — often called him away.) But it is Davies's relationship with a third woman, the collector and arts patron Lizzie "Lillie" Plummer Bliss (1864-1931), that deserves the lion's share of our attention today: it was Davies's role as her adviser that has impacted every American who loves art today, whether they realize it or not.



Arthur B. Davies, photographed by Peter A. Juley & Son, c. 1908
Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum

Lizzie (Lillie) Plummer Bliss, photographed by The Misses Selby (Emily, b. 1868, and Lillian, b. 1866), c. 1904
Photo courtesy Arthur B. Davies Papers, Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Bennard B. Perlman, 1999

Before she met Davies, this never-married daughter of a dry-goods merchant-turned-textile titan had spent most of her time, well into middle age, fulfilling social obligations and overseeing the care of her invalid mother. The family had a mansion in Manhattan, a summer place in Oceanic, New Jersey, and a residence in Washington, D.C., where Mr. Bliss, a member of the Republican National Committee, served as secretary of the interior under President William McKinley. Reportedly required to sleep in her mother's bedroom, Bliss surely would have suffocated had she not found an outlet in the arts. An accomplished pianist, she supported the fledgling Juilliard School and the once-famous Kneisel Quartet. She loved theater and collected decorative objects, including items from the prominent antiquities dealer Dikran Kelekian. Then one day, in 1908, the 44-year-old Bliss found her way, or was directed by Kelekian, to Arthur B. Davies's latest exhibition at the successful Manhattan gallery of William Macbeth.

Davies, a symbolist painter of dancing nudes and mythological beasts, especially unicorns, was one of the most revered American modernists of the period. Bliss was undoubtedly already familiar with his work, but her encounter with it at Macbeth's changed everything. She returned to the show several times, finally buying the oil *After Rain* for $750 (about $18,000 today). Quintessentially Davies, this painting (now unlocated) is not hard to decode: it's a dream vision of the borderland between innocence and eroticism, embodied by a young female nude dance-walking through a field of flowers toward a nude man. (Edna Potter posed for many such Davies paintings, but not this early one, which dates from about 1897.) We can only imagine what Bliss's mother thought of her daughter's new acquisition. What we do know is that Bliss soon requested and received an invitation to visit Davies's Manhattan studio — and that Mrs. Bliss insisted on going along, the invalid apparently able to rise from her sickbed when she felt chaperoning was needed.

Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928)
After Rain
c. 1897, Oil on canvas, 30 1/2 x 18 3/8 in.
Unlocated (presumably in a private collection)
Photo courtesty Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Over time, Bliss would become the artist's most convinced fan, buying hundreds of Davies's works and telling her art-buying friends about him — friends like Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Under his guidance, Bliss also began buying works painted by European modernists, making some of her first purchases at the Armory Show of 1913, which Davies, as its chief organizer, had persuaded her to help finance. In fact, she was its biggest supporter, contributing anonymously through Davies. (For more about the Armory Show, see page 47.)

The Armory Show was a *cause célèbre*: from the moment it opened, the press pounced and the public streamed in, thrilled to be appalled at its artworks by impressionists, post-impressionists, cubists, fauvists, and symbolists. The Washington, D.C.-based collector Duncan Phillips was among the naysayers, pronouncing the show "quite stupefying in its vulgarity," finding Cézanne and van Gogh "unbalanced fanatics" and Matisse "a deliberate fakir." (Years later, his about-face was partly inspired by Davies, who "undeniably influenced Phillips to buy his first Cézanne in 1925," notes the Phillips Collection's definitive history, *The Eye of Duncan Phillips*.)

Bliss, by contrast, joined the vanguard, buying from the Armory Show the oil painting *Silence*, by the French symbolist Odilon Redon, plus one of his pastels and a number of his prints. She could have bought Picasso's *Les Arbres*, but Davies acquired it instead. Or Kandinsky's *Improvisation*, which went to the New York dealer-photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Bliss also passed on works by Cézanne, Degas, Gauguin, van Gogh, Matisse, Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Marcel Duchamp, whose *Nude Descending a Staircase* was the show's most controversial piece by far.

Yet Bliss was just getting started. Over the next decade, under Davies's tutelage, she would buy steadily and courageously from auctions, and from New York galleries such as Bourgeois, Knoedler, and Kraushaar. Among her primarily European acquisitions were such major works as Daumier's *The Laundress*, Matisse's *Interior with a Violin Case*, and Picasso's *Woman in White*. The last can be considered a revealing choice: the seated young woman, with her diaphanous clothing, hair hanging loosely down her back, and gently crossed arms painted in layers of white wash and soft shades of brown and gray, exudes exactly the aura that Bliss did not. In fact,

Odilon Redon (1840-1916)
Silence (Le Silence)
c. 1911, Oil on prepared paper,
21 1/2 x 21 1/4 in.
Museum of Modern Art, New York, Lillie P. Bliss Collection,
113.1934
Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

Abraham Walkowitz later revealed in an oral history for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art that he and his fellow artists called Bliss "the Lady in Black." In his own oral history, the artist Charles Sheeler compared her to "a warm ice cube, you know. You never actually sunburned in her presence, nor did you get chilblains."

But Walkowitz also called Bliss "a princess," and Sheeler declared her "a perfect person." They saw, and appreciated, that she bought voluminously when she fell in love with an artist's work. Over the decades, therefore, she came to own more than 20 Cézannes, both oils and drawings, including *Still Life with Apples, Landscape: Pine and Rocks, The Bather*, his self-portrait in a lawyer's hat, a portrait of his wife, and another of his uncle Antoine. Bliss bought 16 works by Gauguin, who was characterized by Davies in a letter to Walter Pach as "a true artist, who has the spiritually enlarging vision." She also bought eight Degas works, including one of his important pastel toilette images, *After the Bath*. It came from the Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris, where Davies had seen it, recommended it, and brought it home to her sight unseen.

Such was the quality of Bliss's collection that, when it was formally bequeathed to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1934, it became the cornerstone of the institution she had helped found five years earlier with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and another friend, Mary Quinn Sullivan. How and why they came to found MoMA, and what controversy it generated, is a story often told. Abby's son Nelson recalled that this trio "had the resources, the tact and the knowledge of contemporary art that the situation required. More to the point, they had the courage to advocate the cause of the modern movement in the face of widespread division, ignorance and a dark suspicion that the whole business was some sort of Bolshevik plot." Indeed, the Bliss bequest was hailed by MoMA's first director, Alfred H. Barr, as "almost the entire roster of those pathfinders whose present fame is equalled only by the neglect or contempt which they endured so often when they were alive."

WHAT IF, AND WHY?

We must ask, what if Davies had instead steered Bliss toward, say, his fellow members of The Eight — e.g., William Glackens, Robert Henri, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan — all of whom were also represented in the Armory Show? Or what if he had championed George Bellows, Edward Hopper, Childe Hassam, Marsden Hartley, and John Marin? Bliss might well have made them stars through her bequest to MoMA. But that's not what happened, no more than Julia Child taught us how to cook American rather than French cuisine.

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)
Still Life with Apples
1895-98, Oil on canvas, 27 x 36 1/2 in.
Museum of Modern Art, New York; Lillie P. Bliss Collection, 22.1934

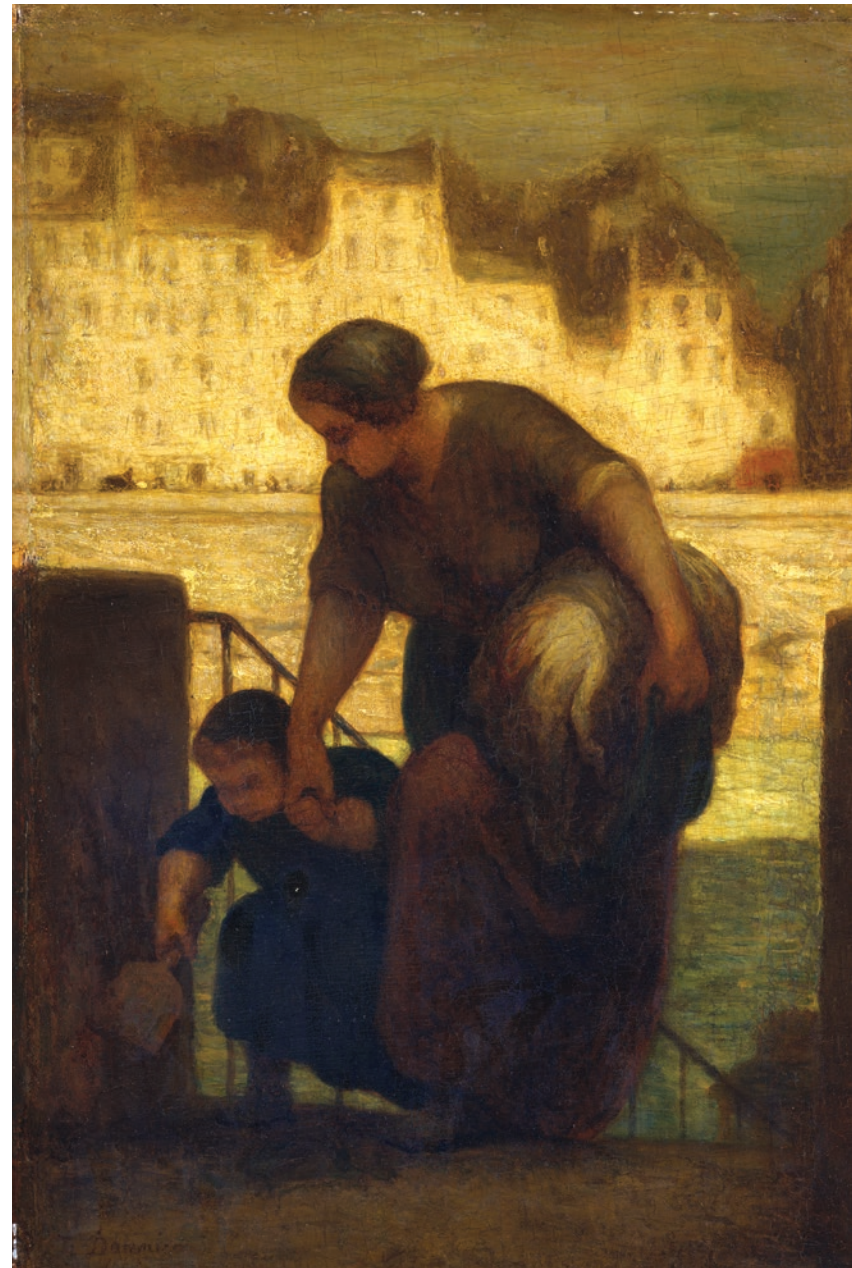
Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Woman in White
1923, Oil, water-based paint, and crayon on canvas, 39 x 31 1/2 in.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1951; acquired from the Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Collection, 53.140.4
© Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Exactly how and why Davies became such an influence on Bliss is not well understood. The Smithsonian curator-archivist Garnett McCoy wrote in an essay about Davies that, with women collectors, "he dwelt on another plane, one of deliberate romantic flattery whose tone of mystical, incoherent profundity must have left them stunned." Some of his paintings' titles — *Afterthoughts of Earth, Doorway to Illusion,* and *Garden of the Living Infinite* — speak volumes of obfuscation. On the evidence of Bliss's collecting choices, however, she leaned toward the concrete. Ethereal abstraction would not have enthralled her.

We may never fully comprehend their bond. The trouble is, both adviser and advisee were preternaturally private. Bliss inherited this tendency at her blue-blooded birth in Fall River, Massachusetts. There are few manuscript items related to her in public research collections, and certainly no cache like the correspondence that documents the collector-advisee relationship of Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner and Bernard Berenson. On the contrary, a shoebox full of letters to Bliss, some possibly from Davies, was burned after she died by family members at her written request. As for Davies, the son of a Welsh tailor who immigrated to Utica, New York, he needed to be circumspect because of his secret private life. According to his biographer Bennard B. Perlman, Davies did tell three people about his second family, however: the artist Walt Kuhn, the gallerist William Macbeth, and Bliss.

To be sure, neither Bliss nor Davies looked the part of cultural rebel. Sheeler said of his fellow artist: "He was slender, wiry, with a tightly drawn mouth that hardly opened as he talked. He would sit on the edge of his chair with his elbows held closely to his sides, briefly discussing pictures or baseball." The artist Guy Pène du Bois wrote that Davies was "a rather perfervid dweller in the land of romance, an invention of his or of his Welsh blood" who "would escape from a gallery which contained more than two or three visitors." At meetings of artists, "he would be the most reserved and quiet one present." But when he was made organizer of the Armory Show, a metamorphosis took place. "His presidency produced a dictator, severe, arrogant, implacable," du Bois asserted. "The isolationist strode out in the open, governed with something equivalent to the terrible Ivan's rod of iron."

Bliss was not a formidable presence, ever. Described by a friend as "quiet," even "somewhat unimpressive," she remained her mother's obedient servant. Indeed, even after bringing home her avant-garde art purchases, she abided by the household edict that she not hang them. Instead, she chose one work at a time to be propped on an easel while the rest were stored. And yet she did prevail. Her mother died in 1922,



Honoré Daumier (1808-1879)
The Laundress
186[3?], Oil on wood, 19 1/4 x 13 in.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Bequest of Lillie P. Bliss, 1931; 47.122
Image courtesy Art Resource, NY

Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928)
Unicorns (Legend—Sea Calm)
c. 1906, Oil on canvas, 18 1/4 x 40 1/4 in.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Lillie P. Bliss, 31.67.12
Image courtesy Art Resource, NY

but eight years earlier, Bliss had commissioned Davies to paint the walls of her music room with floor-to-ceiling murals.

Bliss also enjoyed progressive music. Davies loved Wagner, and both dance and music themes are prominent in his paintings. This shared interest beyond the visual arts may have helped forge their special relationship. According to Monroe Wheeler, who became director of exhibitions and publications at MoMA in 1935, it's pertinent to Bliss's taste in visual art that she was an adventurous listener. When he asked her, tongue-in-cheek, how she had come to appreciate such "outlandish pictures," she answered him in two words: "modern music."

We have too few of Bliss's words verifiably verbatim, but an undated letter published in the catalogue of her memorial exhibition at MoMA proves that she spoke her mind about what mattered most to her. "I yield to no one in my love, reverence and admiration for the beautiful things which have already been created in painting, sculpture and music," she wrote the artist-entrepreneur Louis Comfort Tiffany. "But you are an artist absorbed in your own production with scant leisure and inclination to examine patiently and judge fairly the work of the host of revolutionists, innovators and modernists in this widespread movement through the whole domain of art or to discriminate between what is false and bad and what is sometimes crude, perhaps, but full of power and promise for the enrichment of the art which the majority of them serve with a devotion as pure and honest as your own."

LEGACIES

One wonders exactly where Bliss felt Davies fit into the art-world hierarchy. True, she bought and bought his works, but these purchases, rather than a genuine expression of her taste, may have partly been her payment for his time and expertise. It is true, of course, that her memorial show at MoMA included nearly an entire room of Davies's paintings, drawings, and graphics, but the way Bliss directed her executors to disperse these and other artworks may actually offer a more reliable gauge of her judgment. She gave only two Davies pictures to MoMA, including what is perhaps his best-known work, *Unicorns (Legend—Sea Calm)*. (In 1947, this painting was transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art along with Daumier's *The Laundress*, among others from MoMA's collection. That year, three New York museums — the Met, MoMA, and the Whitney Museum of American Art — agreed to coordinate their activities to better serve the public, and that included the exchange of specific works of art. That collaborative strategy did not endure, however.) Bliss gave only two other Davies pictures to a major institution, London's National Gallery. (The Tate, then known as the National Gallery Millbank, refused the pair she offered.) The rest went to more modest repositories: the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts; the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; the San Francisco Art Association; the International House in New York City; and institutions in cities like St. Paul, Rochester, Providence, Cleveland, Newark, and Davies's hometown of Utica.

After Davies's heart attack and death in Florence in 1928, the news of his two families spread slowly. Amazingly, his wife and mistress worked together to keep his reputation alive. Through the 1930s, museums and galleries mounted Davies shows, and still more marked the centenary of his birth in 1962. Today, however, Davies isn't much in demand in the marketplace, and his last important exhibition occurred 17 years ago at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica.

Now, as we celebrate the centenary of the Armory Show, Davies is being recalled for his role in introducing European modernism to America. Less likely is a revival of interest in his own art, and a prediction that Duncan Phillips made in 1929 seems prescient: "Looking back on his accomplishments, it seems probable that [Davies] will be considered less great as a painter than as an original artist and as a progressive leader of prestige and influence" who created "a new epoch of art in America." It's not such a shabby legacy, especially coupled with his other major achievement, that of helping to shape one of the most influential art collections of the early 20th century.

As for Bliss, she remains the enigmatic Lady in Black, who probably always intended to let her collection speak for itself.

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