

JAMES J. HILL ART COLLECTION

James Jerome Hill was born in Ontario Canada on Sept. 16, 1838. His father was sporadically employed as a hired hand on farms, but James was able to get an education at Rockwood Academy until the age of 13 when his father became ill and died the following year. Hill traveled to the United States to become a fur trapper and trader. He briefly worked as a clerk in Kentucky and learned bookkeeping. He later moved to Saint Paul, Minnesota and worked for a steamboat company.

In 1867, Hill married Mary Theresa Mehegan, born in New York City. They had ten children.

Hill was rejected from serving in the Civil War due to a childhood injury from a bow and arrow that left him blind in his right eye. Hill helped to form a volunteer corps in Minnesota. He worked for various employers, including the St. Paul and Pacific Railway, doing bookkeeping and handling freight. Later, Hill and partners transformed the bankrupt St. Paul and Pacific Railway into a successful business that later became the Great Northern Railway Company and continued the railway to the Pacific. Hill became known during his lifetime as, "The Empire Builder."

In Hill's later years he became a great philanthropist donating thousands of dollars to various institutions. Hill died in his home on Summit Ave. on May 29, 1916.

James J. Hill began collecting art in 1873 when he commissioned a local artist (name unknown) to commemorate a favorite view, "Lake Pepin by Moonlight." By 1883, Hill was buying from the top dealers in New York, M. Knoedler and Company, Samuel P. Avery and the Durand Ruel firm. In 1883, Hill bought the Troyon, "Landscape with Cattle and Sheep," part of the Mia collection.

In 1883, Hill also purchased the only two paintings he ever owned by American artists. Both were by William Trost Richards and included Mia's "Quiet Seascape." Like many of his contemporaries, European art was valued over American art at that time.

In 1884, Hill acquired his first painting by Corot, "Evening," which is now in a private collection. Corot became Hill's favorite artist. Hill concentrated on French paintings, particularly of the Barbizon School.

In 1891, Hill purchased Courbet's, "Chateau D'Ornans," in Mia's collection. In that year, he also purchased a Renoir, "Landscape of the Riviera," for \$600.00 from Durand Ruel and it is now in a private collection. Hill also purchased Renoir's copy of a famous Delacroix, "The Jewish Wedding," now at Worcester Art Museum. Mia has the Renoir, "Tamaris France" that once belonged to Hill.

Hill also purchased Eugene Boudin's "Port of Le Havre," now at the Musee D'Orsay.

Hill's annual expenditures on art increased with his wealth and he continued to increase the price he was willing to pay for paintings. In 1890, Hill purchased Delacroix's, "Fanatics of Tangier" (now in Mia collection) for \$25,000.

By 1891, Hill's budget for art was \$125,500 for 24 items. This was also the year he moved into the new house on Summit Avenue that had an art gallery designed for his collection.

In 1914, Hill bought, "Madonna," by Joos Van Cleve. He bought it for his wife, Mary, who was a devout Catholic. This was the only painting Hill purchased that was not created in the 19th century.

Hill bought his bronze sculptures in 1891 all at the same time. It was probably prompted by a proposed import duty of 45 percent. Hill did not continue to collect sculpture and did not include them in his inventory or photograph them. The bronze sculptures by Bayre include Theseus Slaying the Centaur and Panther Devouring a Rabbit in the Mia collection.

Hill's pace of buying art subsided in the 1890s and he purchased no art in 1894, the worst year of the depression of that time. But Hill's purchases increased and were his most expensive artworks between 1912 and 1916, just prior to his death. These included Corot's "Silenus" and Millet's "Seated Shepherdess," in Mia collection. Hill had retired as chairman of the board of the Great Northern and spent more time on personal interests.

Hill sold many of the paintings that he collected during his lifetime. To refine his collection, Hill sold paintings to purchase paintings that reflected his current interests and to improve the collection. Hill was not primarily motivated to buy or sell art for profit and most of the sold art resulted in losses.

Hill also donated works from his collection. In 1889, Hill donated works to the Minneapolis Public Library and to the St. Paul Public Library in 1901, and to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1904. In 1914, Hill donated Courbet's, "Deer in the Forest" to Mia.

Hill also received many requests for loans of his paintings which he originally obliged but later refused. He sent 13 artworks for the grand opening of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1887. Apparently there was a problem with potential damage to a Millet and Rousseau painting in Chicago and he later refused to loan out paintings. He did make an exception for the opening of the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 1915. Mia was loaned six Corots, six Millets, two Rousseaus and two Troyans. Hill attended and spoke at the opening. Hill did request the paintings be returned. Hill also gave away some paintings as gifts to business associates and family.

Hill died in 1916 without a will and no notes regarding the disposition of his art collection. His estate, including artworks, were divided among his widow and children. Hill's widow, Mary, died in 1921.

Hill family members have donated works from the Hill collection to Mia over the years.

The Mia website currently lists 79 items that once were in the collection of James J. Hill. Of those 79 artworks, 36 are Seth Eastman prints that once belonged to Hill. The others include 30 paintings, a few works on paper and decorative arts.

Bibliography

Homecoming: The art Collection of James J. Hill
By Jane H. Hancock, Sheila Ffolliott and Thomas Sullivan
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