

# The Collection of Alfred Atmore Pope at Hill-Stead Museum



Edgar Degas, "Dancers in Pink," 1893.  
Alfred A. Pope Collection, Hill-Stead Museum

We all descend from hunter-gatherers, so it's really no surprise that so many of us collect one thing or another. In childhood, our collecting interests often begin with stuffed animals or dolls; we move on to trading cards, trains, seashells, insects, or coins, gathering items just for fun. But when we become adults our relationships to material things can change. We collect in part to help furnish our homes, and what we collect may reflect our growing disposable income. Yet the collections of young and old alike express not only our personal interests but often those of society as a whole. In addition, what we as individuals, and as a society, consider valuable and worthy of study changes over time.

No personal collection embodies these ideas more than that of Alfred Atmore Pope (1842-1913), whose country home in Farmington was

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built for him by his architect daughter in 1901 as a showplace for his art collection. In the 1907 book *Noteworthy Paintings in American Private Collections*, American painter, teacher, and critic Kenyon Cox (1856-1919) wrote:

Farmington, in Connecticut, is a little, straggling New England town with tree-lined streets and an old, white painted wooden church with a singularly graceful spire—a town set among low hills in a pleasant country...In this quiet village—for it is little more—stands a large, rambling, old-fashioned looking house with wide verandas and big, comfortable, low-ceiled rooms which contain a somewhat surprising treasure. There is no museum-like crowding of beautiful things, yet beautiful things are everywhere; a few good pieces of old china here and there, Japanese prints, a Dürer engraving or two, etchings by Meryon and Haden and Whistler, some thirty paintings of the most modern schools, choice works, selected with fine discrimination and hanging well apart with a luxury of space that emphasizes their individual beauty. Even the bedrooms have each a picture or two chosen with evident personal predilection and placed where they are that they may be enjoyed, not that they may be shown, though the stranger is courteously given every facility to inspect them. Whistler, Manet, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Mary Cassatt, these are Mr. Pope's favorite artists, and while there are many low-toned and somber canvases on his walls, and a few examples of the extremer forms of Impressionism, yet the general effect is of coolness and freshness and light, the paintings harmonizing admirably with the airy brightness of such a country house.

Pope was born in Maine, but his family headed west to Ohio before the Civil War. He made his money as an iron industrialist, and with his growing wealth he built a grand home for his family on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, which in its day was referred to as "Millionaire Mile." A fine new home required beautiful things. But while Cleveland was a place to make money, it wasn't the place to build an art collection. To acquire art, wealthy Americans traveled to Europe. Pope made his first extended trip to Europe to celebrate his daughter Theodate's completion of her studies at Miss Porter's School in 1888. Pope wrote from Paris to his business colleague J.H. Whittemore of Naugatuck, Connecticut in November 1888:

We have visited the finest private gallery in Paris that was the greatest treat we enjoyed...Generally the works of French artists are not as pleasing as they would once have been .... Masters like Gerome and Cabanal are turning out wretched stuff in their old age. Other men whose names I know but can't spell are going the same way. The new school the "impressionists" I have been studying. Was invited to the House of Durand-Ruel to see a collection of "Monets," the master of this school. I may become educated up to understanding & liking one out of two of this man's work.

And educated he became. Pope returned home from his 10 months in Europe with three paintings by Claude Monet, along with numerous pieces of pottery from Italy and England, Japanese prints, Chinese porcelains, and much more. Several years later Pope became acquainted with the American expatriate artist James McNeil Whistler. In an 1894 letter to Whistler, Pope wrote from Cleveland,

Our city is growing and there is all sorts of interests being promoted; among others a booming interest in

art. Everybody, that don't know anything about it, talking and writing, discovering their ignorance. As yet, since our return and getting the house in order, we have not had one genuine appreciator of the objects.... On our return, we shall have a visit from my young chum, my partner's son, Mr. Harris Whittemore who is keenly alive and digests understandingly good surroundings. This is a great pleasure in anticipation.

Pope had established his identity as a collector of modern pictures and as such had found few fellow collectors who shared his interest or who were willing to become educated about the latest in French art. America's prosperity after the Civil War spurred a mania for building and collecting, but few shared Pope's acumen for choosing the finest Impressionist pictures. Pope's taste has been borne out, as today works from the artists he favored are widely sought by art collectors, and their value continues to rise even in today's tough economy.

While Pope lived, only his circle of friends and guests invited to his home had access to the works of art he owned. Today, though, people from all walks of life enjoy Pope's collection. His daughter inherited Hill-Stead along with his collection of fine and decorative

arts. Her appreciation for art, her commitment to her community, and her interest in memorializing her father compelled her to establish her family's home as a museum. Today the paintings at Hill-Stead are viewed by people from all over the world who are still "courteously given every facility to inspect them," just as when Kenyon Cox visited in 1907.

Alfred Pope (c. 1910) sitting on Hill-Stead's North Porch.  
Hill-Stead Museum



## Explore

Pope's collection is on view at Hill-Stead Museum, 32 Mountain Road, Farmington, Connecticut. For more information call (860) 677-4787 or visit [www.hillstead.org](http://www.hillstead.org).



Pope's receipt for the Degas painting now known as "Dancers in Pink." Hill-Stead Museum