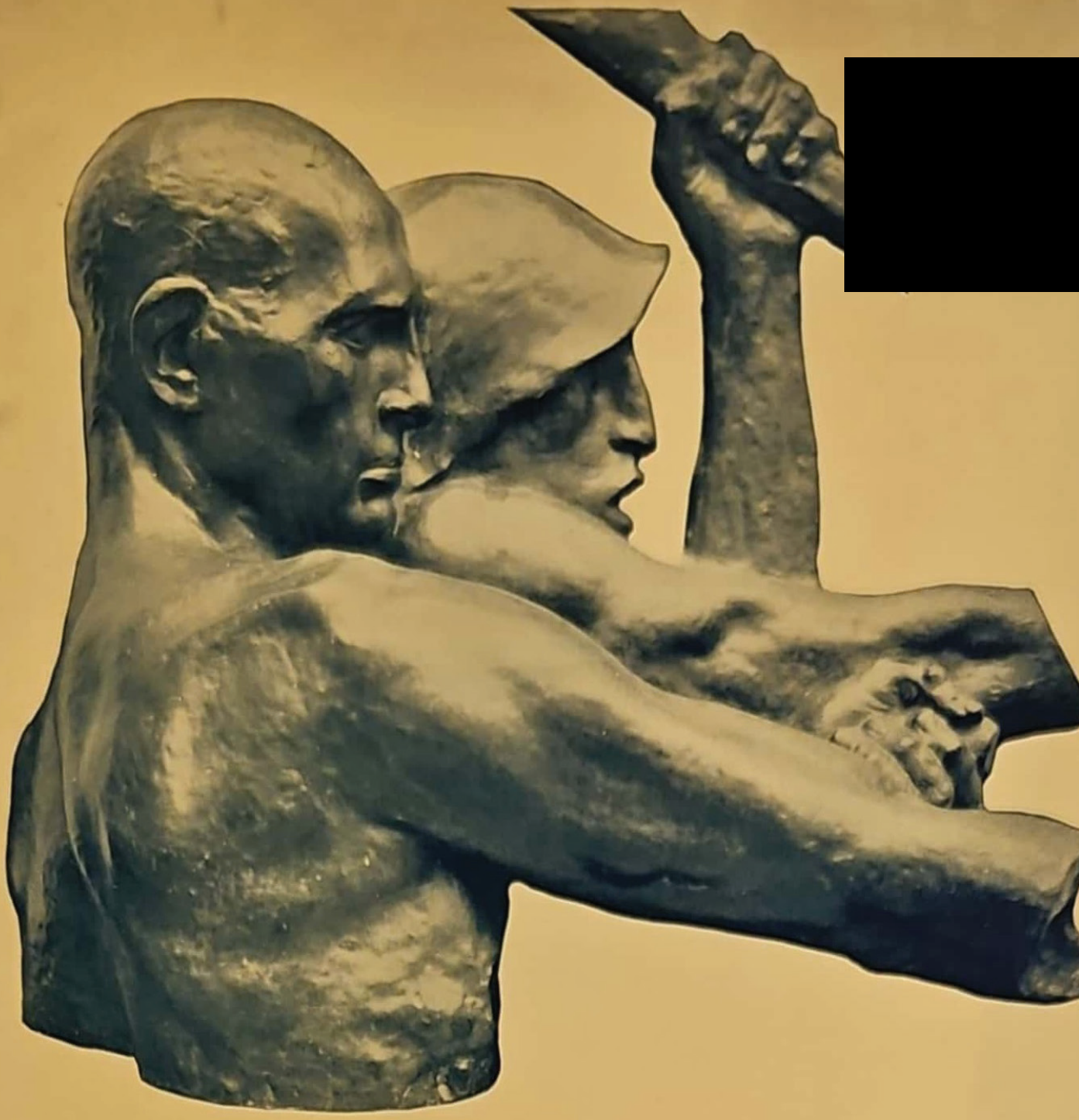

Constantin MEUNIER

Modern Masters on the Move: The Professionalisation of American Art Museums Through Travelling Exhibitions Before MoMA, ca. 1900-1929

Ulrike Müller

Keywords:
Travelling Exhibitions; American Art Museums; Modern Art; Cornelia B. Sage; Exhibition History.

ABSTRACT:

Between 1900 and 1929, a dynamic network of American museums emerged to organize travelling exhibitions of modern art. This development was driven primarily by smaller, recently-established institutions such as the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo (now the Buffalo AKG Art Museum), the Detroit Museum of Art, and the City Art Museum of Saint Louis. This article focuses on the Albright Art Gallery under the directorship of Cornelia B. Sage (1876-1936, director 1910-1924) to shed light on the rapid professionalisation of museums and art exhibitions in early twentieth-century America. Drawing on extensive archival records from the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, the study examines how travelling exhibitions were strategically employed to transform museums into modern, professional institutions. Through an analysis of Sage's activities, objectives, and networks, it highlights the role of travelling exhibitions in shaping the profiles and operations of American art museums during this period – and demonstrates how these earlier initiatives created the groundwork on which The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) would later build its influential exhibition strategies.

Tra il 1900 e il 1929 emerse una rete dinamica di musei americani per organizzare mostre itineranti di arte moderna. Questo sviluppo è stato guidato principalmente da istituzioni più piccole e di recente costituzione come la Albright Art Gallery di Buffalo (ora Buffalo AKG Art Museum), il Detroit Museum of Art e il City Art Museum di Saint Louis. Questo articolo si concentra sulla Albright Art Gallery sotto la direzione di Cornelia B. Sage (1876-1936, direttrice 1910-1924) per far luce sulla rapida professionalizzazione dei musei e delle mostre d'arte nell'America dell'inizio del XX secolo. Attingendo a vasti documenti d'archivio del Buffalo AKG Art Museum, lo studio esamina come le mostre itineranti siano state strategicamente utilizzate per trasformare i musei in istituzioni moderne e professionali. Attraverso un'analisi delle attività, degli obiettivi e delle reti di Sage, si evidenzia il ruolo delle mostre itineranti nel plasmare i profili e le operazioni dei musei d'arte americani durante questo periodo – e mostra come tali iniziative abbiano creato le basi su cui il Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) avrebbe successivamente costruito le proprie influenti strategie espositive.

Opening Picture:

Poster announcing the *Constantin Meunier* Exhibition at Columbia University's Avery Library, New York City, 1914. Columbia University Archives.

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Introduction

In 1953, UNESCO published the *Manual of Travelling Exhibitions*, a comprehensive handbook on organising touring exhibitions authored by Elodie Courter Osborn (1911-1994).[1] Osborn, the first director of the Department for Circulating Exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City from 1933 to 1947, provided practical, technical, administrative, and managerial guidance that established the manual as the "most complete survey of all aspects of travelling exhibitions" of the time.[2] Her work, rooted in extensive practical experience – MoMA organised no less than 461 touring exhibitions between 1931 and 1954[3] – has been credited with playing a pivotal role in professionalising the field of museum exhibitions, particularly travelling exhibitions.[4] The significance of Osborn's contribution is often viewed in conjunction with MoMA's modernist ethos and activities. Reflecting its mission to bring modern art to audiences across the United States, "travelling exhibitions were central to the Museum's educational goals from the start."[5] Thus, the department under Osborn's leadership held an almost "missionary" responsibility.[6]

While the narrative of modernity surrounding MoMA often emphasises innovation and a break from tradition in artistic styles, display modes and communication strategies,[7] it can obscure the museum's reliance on earlier methods that contributed to the professionalisation of museum work. Notably, Osborn's *Manual* remains remarkably silent about the earlier wave of travelling exhibitions that occurred in the United States between approximately 1900 and MoMA's founding in 1929.[8] During this period, a significant number of temporary, often travelling, modern art exhibitions took place in American museums. These efforts – largely initiated by smaller institutions in so-called "peripheral" cities – created foundational structures of exhibition practice, networking, and logistics upon which MoMA would later build.

This phenomenon remains underexplored, with existing studies focusing primarily on fragmented case studies of individual artists, curators and art critics. For example, recent research on the Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923) has revealed that temporary exhibitions of his work in New York, Chicago, Buffalo, and Saint Louis in 1909 and 1911 greatly influenced the dissemination, popularity and collection (both private and public) of his art in the United States.[9] Similarly, the "scholar-agent" Martin Birnbaum (1878-1970) has been recognized as "one of the foremost innovators" in the exhibition of prints in America before 1920 through the exhibitions of graphic art he arranged for various museums.[10] Additionally, Andrew Walker's research highlights how the proliferation of circuit exhibitions during the 1920s helped establish modern art and criticism in America before MoMA institutionalised modernism.[11] These studies make clear that the modern art exhibitions resulted from extensive networks and collaborative efforts among museum curators, directors, and other agents, yet the precise nature and impact of these strengthening networks on the professionalisation of emerging art museums remains understudied.

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This article seeks to address this gap by examining the professionalisation of American art museums and exhibitions in the early twentieth century through the lens of travelling exhibitions. While scholarship on museum professionalisation often focuses on collection formation and museum management,[12] the design and display of permanent presentations,[13] or the profiles of museum workers and their emerging professional associations,[14] less attention has been paid to the organisation of temporary travelling exhibitions and related curatorial practices.[15] By examining the travelling exhibitions of modern art organised by a network of emerging American art museums, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the processes of professionalisation in art museums. Specifically, it explores how these exhibitions helped shape museums into modern and professional organisations prior to MoMA's emergence as central institution for Classical Modernity – and how MoMA's later dominance built upon infrastructures and relationships developed in this earlier period.

This study benefits from a recent shift in museum history towards an increased focus on network analysis, means of exchange, and the introduction of the concept of the "relational museum", which draws attention to the "relationships between objects and people within an institution".[16] These approaches have allowed, among others, the examination of the personal relationships that often underlie the formation of museum collections,[17] and the extent to which evolving national and international networks "facilitated an exchange of materials and ideas among museum specialists and administrators as they established increasingly similar standards of museum practice".[18] Additionally, the networks museum professionals developed significantly influenced these institutions' role as "knowledge enterprise", shaping knowledge, taste, and public benefit.[19] With regard to specific professional activities such as museum exhibition design, a rigorous theoretical focus on deconstruction and decentralisation has further broadened our understanding of museum work as a collaborative and creative practice.[20]

Further building on these research trends and frameworks, this article examines the professionalisation of art museums through travelling exhibitions of contemporary art, with a focus on the role of professional exchange. It delves into practices such as networking, project coordination, and the standardisation of processes related to insuring, packing, shipping, and publicising artworks. Moving beyond canonical modern art centres like Paris, Vienna, Munich, and New York City,[21] this research draws on the well-documented case of the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo (now the Buffalo AKG Art Museum), which opened in 1905, and featured an active programme of temporary circulating exhibitions from its inception.

The study is grounded in the extensive archival records of Cornelia B. Sage (1876-1936), the first female director of a major American art museum, who led the Albright Art Gallery from 1910 to 1924. Her detailed records, preserved in the archives of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, include correspondence and admin-

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istrative files related to numerous exhibitions she organised, such as the *Exhibition of Pictorial Photography* (1910), the first of its kind in the United States,[22] and the retrospective on Constantin Meunier (1913-1914) (Fig. 1).[23] These materials also detail the work of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), a network organisation co-founded by Sage in 1916 that significantly advanced the flourishing of circulating exhibitions during the 1920s.

The article begins by outlining the evolving exhibition cultures in Europe and the U.S. during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with the changing cultural, economic, and fiscal conditions that facilitated the rise of travelling exhibitions. It then focuses on the Albright Art Gallery under Sage's directorship, analysing her aims, strategies, and achievements through a case study of the Meunier retrospective. The study explores aspects of the exhibition's organisation, administration, logistics, and communication to illustrate how Sage used travelling exhibitions to position her museum as a modern, professional institution. Finally, the article examines the broader role of the AAMD in developing travelling exhibitions as a collaborative endeavour, demonstrating how these exhibitions contributed to the professionalization of American art museums and their emergence as promoters of modern art.

Evolving exhibition practices and the rise of art museums in America

In her 1953 *Manual*, Elodie Osborn highlights a series of 1850s loan exhibitions organised by London's South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) and circulated among various art schools as prototypes for the type of travelling exhibitions she and her team later developed at MoMA.[24] By framing her work within a tradition of didactic aims, Osborn emphasized the educational mission underpinning her initiatives to make modern art accessible to broad audiences in the 1930s and 1940s. However, this focus omits other origins of exhibition practices, which began in the late

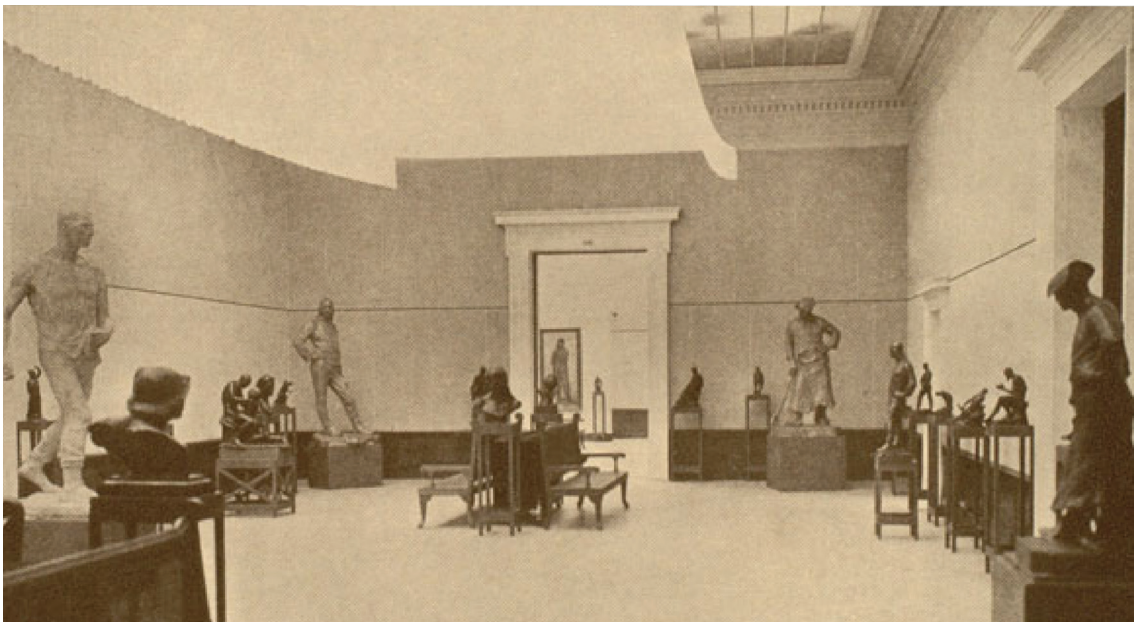

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Fig. 01: Installation view of *Constantin Meunier* (20 November-22 December, 1913, Albright Art Gallery), *Academy Notes*, Volume IX, Number 1, January 1914-October 1914, page 13. Buffalo AKG Art Museum Archives and Digital Assets Collection.

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eighteenth century and shaped exhibition cultures through the organisation of shows featuring works by living artists.

In Europe, the development of contemporary art exhibitions was closely tied to the academic system and networks centred in traditional art hubs. Until the late nineteenth century, these efforts were dominated by the annual Salons organised by the academies. These exhibitions, governed by strict juries, determined access to exhibition opportunities and the sale of artworks, profoundly shaping the careers of artists.[25] Salons typically occurred in fixed locations, at times within the nascent museums that often evolved out of the academies themselves.

By contrast, the United States, with its vast geography and emerging infrastructure, saw the early adoption of travelling exhibitions as a means to bring art and culture to remote areas. As early as 1820, artist Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860) pioneered the concept of touring exhibitions to promote artistic literacy, elevate public taste, and achieve personal fame. Lacking centralized institutions for art exhibitions, the U.S. relied on travelling exhibitions to reach its growing population.[26]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, opportunities for living artists expanded with the advent of International Exhibitions, which included sections dedicated to contemporary art.[27] The first official World's Fair in the United States was held in Philadelphia in 1876, followed by events like the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo (1901), and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis (1904). These fairs not only showcased the booming American industry and economy, but also demonstrated a growing appetite for luxury goods and cultural experiences. The increasing art production for American audiences in Europe further reflected the demand for European art and the desire of European artists and dealers to expand their markets overseas.[28]

By the late nineteenth century, a new, wealthy middle-class community in America was increasingly "hungry for art".[29] During the Gilded Age, collectors sought canonical European artworks to bolster their cultural status and ambitions, while American artists aspired to emulate established models to enhance their professional development.[30] As collectors, philanthropists, and museums multiplied, the U.S. began to emerge as a major player in the global art market.[31]

Initially, this boom was concentrated along the East Coast, where institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (both founded in 1870) created prominent public collections. Wealthy individuals such as William Henry Vanderbilt, Henry Clay Frick, and Isabella Stewart Gardner further expanded the cultural landscape by founding private galleries. Demand for art and cultural goods soon spread to the so-called "Rust Belt", prompting the establishment of museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago (1879), the Saint Louis Art Museum (1879), the Detroit Museum of Art (1885, today Detroit Institute of Arts), the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh (1895, now the Carnegie Museum of

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Art), and the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo (1905, now the Buffalo AKG Art Museum). The directors of these institutions, including William M.R. French (1843-1914, Chicago), Halsey C. Ives (1847-1911, Saint Louis), and Charles M. Kurtz (1855-1909, Buffalo), were deeply involved in organising the Fine Arts sections of the World Fairs of 1893, 1901, and 1904, giving them extensive experience in the logistical, administrative, and financial aspects of temporary exhibitions, including the administration of loans.[32]

However, the importation of European art to the U.S. was hampered by high tariffs, which were a frequent subject of public debate.[33] Between the 1880s and 1913, import duties on art ranged from 10 to 30 percent, significantly increasing costs for collectors and museums. While the Payne-Aldrich Act of 1909 exempted works over twenty years old from these duties,[34] it had little effect on the circulation of contemporary art. Only with the Underwood-Simmons Act of 1913 were tariffs on modern art abolished, a reprieve that lasted until rates were raised again in 1918.[35]

A key exception, introduced with the Dingley Tariff Act of 1897, allowed artworks imported for the encouragement of the arts and sciences during temporary exhibitions to enter the U.S. duty-free, provided they were not for sale and their exhibition duration did not exceed six months (with a possible six-month extension).[36] This regulation facilitated the organisation of exhibitions by reducing costs and provided the legal and administrative framework for events orchestrated by Cornelia Sage and her colleagues. The developments – alongside growing economic prosperity, an expanding middle-class audience, and the establishment of new museum collections – created fertile ground for a flourishing exhibition culture in early twentieth-century America.

According to Elodie Osborn, "The circulating exhibition has come into being for two principal reasons: the usefulness of temporary exhibitions to museums, and the educational opportunities offered by a concentrated collection of material on one or more related subjects."[37] Osborn's observation highlights the advantages of travelling exhibitions, particularly for smaller institutions with limited resources. These exhibitions offered access to high-quality works, enabling museums to provide diverse and engaging displays that educated the public and elevated cultural tastes, objectives equally relevant in the early twentieth century.[38]

For many of the emerging museums in turn-of-the-century America, temporary exhibitions were central to shaping their profiles and collections. For example, the Art Institute of Chicago organised multiple exhibitions annually from 1883 onward.[39] At the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, founding director John W. Beatty (1850-1924) established an annual survey exhibition of modern American and Western European art in 1896, which became the longest-running North American exhibition of international contemporary art and contributed directly to the museum's acquisitions.[40]

Similarly, the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, under its first director Charles M. Kurtz, implemented an ambitious program of tempo-

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rary exhibitions beginning in 1905. Starting with three special exhibitions in the inaugural year, the number of temporary shows and associated events organised under Kurtz' direction increased annually, reaching a climax in 1909, with no less than 22 exhibitions and six lectures.[41] From the beginning, temporary exhibitions were used to build the institution's identity, educate the public, and shape its collection. Kurtz' prior experience and network – he had served as an assistant of Halsley C. Ives from Saint Louis and had been the art director for the Louisiana Purchase exhibition in 1904 – proved invaluable in organising successful exhibitions such as the Sorolla retrospective of 1909, for which Kurtz also closely collaborated with Ives.[42]

For Kurtz' successor, Cornelia Sage, temporary exhibitions were equally important. As director of the Albright Art Gallery from 1910 to 1924, Sage curated up to sixteen exhibitions annually.[43] While focusing on fewer events than Kurtz, she prioritized quality, using these exhibitions to sustain public interest in Buffalo's young museum and enhance its reputation.

Travelling exhibitions and professional strategy

Cornelia Sage was a key figure in the growing circulation and exhibition of modern art in early twentieth-century America. Her extensive personal and professional networks, coupled with collaborations with other emerging art museums along the East Coast and in the Rust Belt, were instrumental in realising significant exhibitions.[44]

One of Sage's notable exhibitions was the retrospective of Belgian sculptor and painter Constantin Meunier (1831-1905), who had become a leading and widely exhibited modern artist in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, internationally recognized for his representations of the working class that combined naturalism with classical idealism.[45] Between 26 November 1913 and 1 June 1914, this exhibition toured six venues: the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo (26/11-22/12/1913) (Fig. 1), the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh (27/12/1913-18/1/1914), the Avery Library of Columbia University in New York City (28/1-15/2/1914), the Detroit Museum of Art (24/2-14/3/1914), the Art Institute of Chicago (24/3-17/4/1914), and the City Art Museum in Saint Louis (26/4-1/6/1914).[46] The exhibition featured nearly 150 works, including plaster and bronze sculptures, paintings, and works on paper, all on loan from Meunier's daughter, Charlotte (1866-1942), and her husband, Charles Jacques (1859-1938), who managed the artist's estate in Brussels. The American exhibition was part of a broader strategy by Meunier's heirs to promote his legacy internationally and solidify his reputation as a leading figure in modern realist art.[47]

Sage's familiarity with Meunier's work began during her visits to European exhibitions, although she never met the artist personally. In June 1913, she visited his preserved studio and collection, initiating discussions with Jacques to bring the works to America (Fig. 2).[48] For Sage, this undertaking offered important opportunities to boost her network and professional develop-

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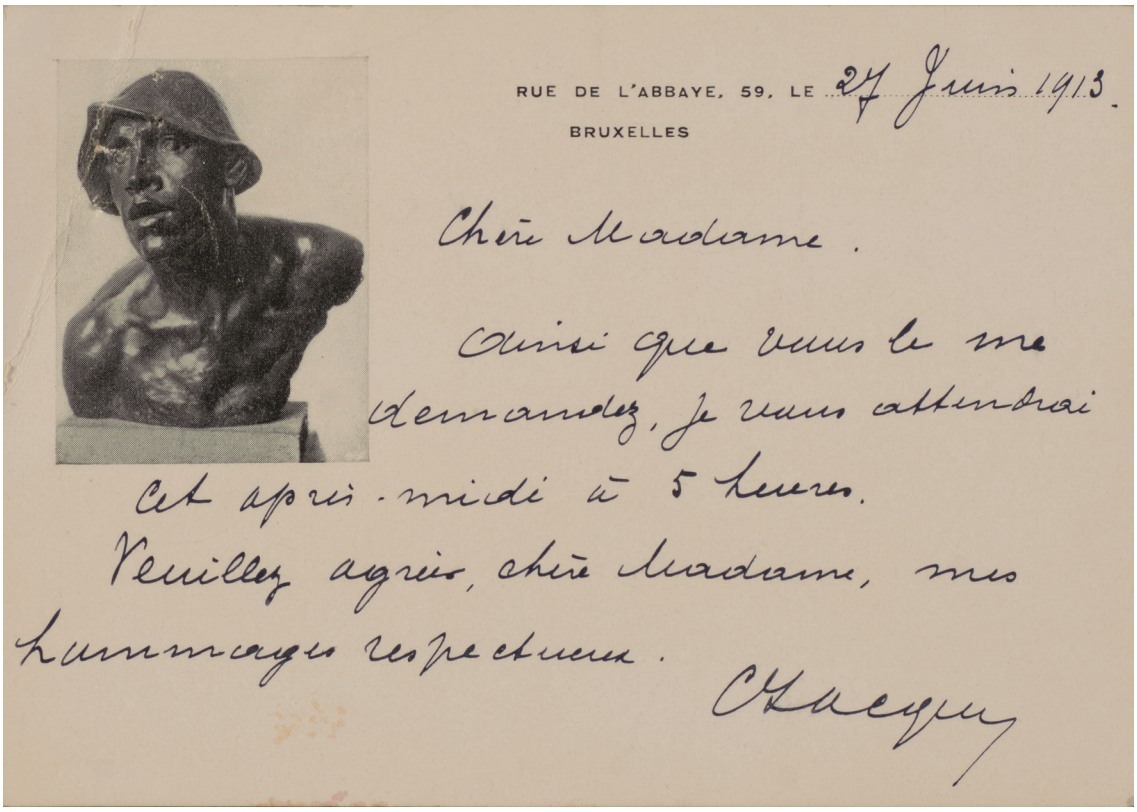

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ment. A year report described the exhibition as "one of the greatest one-man exhibitions ever shown at the Albright Art Gallery" and "one of the most notable ever brought to this country".[49] Early in her tenure as director, the exhibition underscored Sage's ambition to elevate her institution. In a letter to Edward Robinson, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she stated her intent to make the exhibition "the greatest collection of modern sculpture ever shown in America."[50]

Sage's vision was articulated in a 1913 directive that prioritized fewer but higher-quality exhibitions, a decision that had been taken because exhibitions were often installed and dismantled "in such a rapid succession that they have no educational value whatsoever [...]. Besides a useless expense, it does no one artist any real good. It would be far better to have one exhibition at a time and by thus economizing increase the possibilities of buying pictures for the permanent collection of a museum".[51] Ensuring greater educational value while reducing expenses were thus important motivating factors. Sage's correspondence with her director colleagues reveals her determination to use this strategy to refine the gallery's programming and boost the profile and scope of her museum. Developing her own vision, she wrote that she aimed to organize "fewer and greater exhibitions", accepting only collections of the very highest standard,[52] as exemplified by the Meunier retrospective.

The logistical and financial complexities of organising a multi-city tour required Sage to establish an intricate network of collaborators. Her strategy was driven by both cultural and practical goals: expanding Meunier's visibility in the United States and sharing costs among participating institutions. Each museum had

Fig. 02: Postcard from Charles Jacques to Director Cornelia Bentley Sage on 27 June, 1913. Buffalo AKG Art Museum Archives and Digital Assets Collection.

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to "pay their share of the costs" in order to "pay all the expenses of insurance, transport, packaging, etc.",[53] thus making the exhibition financially viable. By organising a travelling show, Sage thus avoided the high costs of a one-venue retrospective, which had deterred Edward Robinson to hold a Meunier exhibition at the MET a few years earlier.[54] Her effort proved effective, with her final report noting that, thanks to the pro-rata system for fixed expenses, the exhibition's costs for Buffalo were lower than those of the gallery's typical summer exhibitions.[55]

Initially, Meunier's heirs envisioned to bring the collection to New York, Boston, and Chicago.[56] Sage expanded the programme to include six venues, ensuring representation from "the most important and progressive museums in the United States".[57] Addressing Jacques hesitation about including Saint Louis, which he considered little developed in cultural and artistic terms, Sage emphasized the city's significant acquisition funds and its importance in promoting modern art.[58]

Joining forces with fellow museums for the organisation of the exhibition had not only financial benefits, but also practical and logistic ones. The collection, packed into 49 crates, arrived in New York City by steamboat on 28 October 1913, and travelled by railroad to Buffalo, reaching the Albright Art Gallery on 3 November.[59] Sage entrusted the installation and care of the artworks to A. Leeder, the gallery's Building Superintendent. Leeder accompanied the exhibition to each venue, overseeing unpacking, condition reporting, installation, and repacking, while providing regular updates to Sage.[60] Writing to Clyde H. Burroughs of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Sage praised Leeder's experience, calling him "a whole host in himself and most efficient. [...] All I can say is that Mr. Leeder is worth his weight in gold and I feel that it will be advisable for you to arrange to have him come" to install the Meunier show in Detroit.[61]

An additional challenge was the provision of pedestals for Meunier's sculptures, which were not included with the collection. But also in this regard, collaboration and the strengthening network proved beneficial. While the Albright and the Carnegie Institute (the first two venues of the show) had their own pedestals, Sage arranged with John W. Beatty for Carnegie's pedestals to be borrowed by other venues, because "the expense of transportation of 'Carnegie Institute' pedestals would be much less than the cost of making them yourself."[62] A photograph of the Detroit installation reveal the pedestals' plain and functional design, allowing for easy installation and flexible use (Fig. 3). They also accommodated drawing sessions for art students in the exhibition.[63] The large reliefs of Meunier's *Monument to Labour* – visible in the background of the same photograph – had a special architectural setting, designed and constructed by Leeder in Buffalo, which was likewise borrowed and shipped to each location.[64]

A robust communication and promotional campaign further ensured the exhibition's success. For this purpose, securing a considerable number of photographs of the most important artworks and rights

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to reproduce them from Meunier's heirs was a great concern for Sage.[65] These images were used for illustrated posters to announce the shows (Fig. 4), the exhibition catalogue, and press materials. Sage enlisted Christian Brinton, a respected art critic and personal friend of Meunier, to author the catalogue and contribute articles, including a widely disseminated piece in *The International Studio*.[66] Brinton also gave lectures while the show was in Buffalo and New York, attracting additional audiences.[67]

Sage worked hard to maximize press coverage. She secured lavishly illustrated articles in prominent newspapers to promote the exhibition. During the preparation of the show, Sage aspired "to get an article, with photos, in some of the N. Y. daily papers: NY 'Times', 'Sun' or 'Pact', to awaken the general public and prepare them before the opening day".[68] The article in the *New York Times* appeared on 9 November 1913, in time to inform the public about the entire circuit of the exhibition.[69] Throughout late 1913 and early 1914, numerous publications featured detailed articles with high-quality reproductions of Meunier's works (Fig. 5), making his oeuvre widely known and accessible also to those who did not visit the exhibition but read popular journals.[70] The widespread publicity attracted large audiences, with attendance figures of 21.000 in Buffalo, 27.000 in New York City, 63.600 in Detroit, and 91.700 in St. Louis.[71]

The exhibition's impact extended beyond public visibility. It strengthened the professional networks of participating institutions and advanced the Albright's reputation as a leading promoter of modern art. Clyde H. Burroughs of the Detroit Institute of Arts expressed his gratitude, writing that Sage had "won the confidence of our entire Board of Trustees" and inspired him to adopt a similar strategy of prioritizing fewer but more significant exhibitions.[72] Lastly, the exhibitions also helped to place Meunier's art in public and private collections. Several museums acquired sculptures from the exhibition or com-

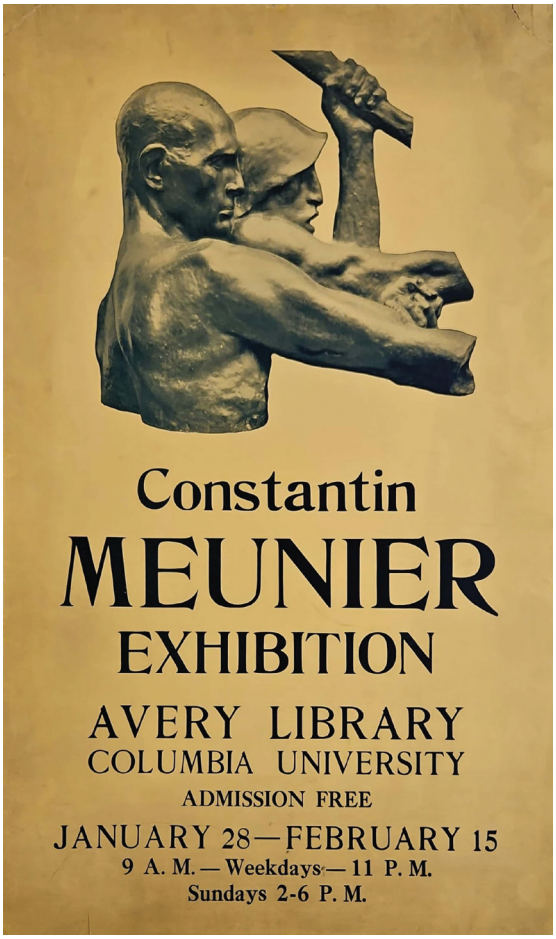
Fig. 03:
Class from the Detroit School of Design drawing from sculptures at the *Constantin Meunier* Exhibition, Detroit Museum of Art, 1914. From: *Bulletin of the Detroit Museum of Art*, Vol. VIII, no. 2 (1914), p. 35. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/BULLDETMUSART41934897

missioned new casts, a practice that was not unusual during the period, but rather aligned with broader aims towards fostering collection development.[73]

The Association of Art Museum Directors and its exhibitions

The active exhibition strategies developed by Cornelia Sage and her colleagues – exemplified by events like the Constantin Meunier retrospective – played a crucial role in fostering professional development and networking among American art museums. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) in 1916, which explicitly aimed to professionalise the organisation of travelling exhibitions. Over the later 1910s and 1920s, the AAMD advanced an ambitious exhibition policy for modern art, significantly contributing to the expansion and standardisation of travelling exhibitions.[74]

The composition of the AAMD's founding board reflected the close networks forged in the preceding years. Among its twelve founding members were Cornelia B. Sage of the Albright Art Gallery, Clyde H. Burroughs of the Detroit Museum of Art, N. H. Carpenter of the Art Institute of Chicago, Robert A. Holland of The City Art Museum (Saint Louis), John W. Beatty of the Carnegie Institute (Pittsburgh), and F. Allen Whiting of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Carpenter was elected the association's first president, while Sage – who had led much of the correspondence leading to the Association's foundation – served as its inaugural secretary-treasurer.[75] The founding meeting took place



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in Cleveland in June 1916, during which collectors and philanthropists Archer M. Huntington and Charles L. Freer were named honorary members.[76]

As secretary-treasurer, Cornelia Sage played a central role in shaping the AAMD's early direction. Correspondence preserved in her archival records provides insights into the motivations behind the association's founding, its main objectives, and its organizational structure. Writing to Henry R. Howland, president of the American Association of Museums, which had existed since 1906,[77] Sage outlined the unique needs of art museums, emphasizing the importance of creating a separate network for their directors "to take care of large special exhibitions of paintings, sculpture, etc.", and to sustain public interest.[78] She

Fig. 04: Poster announcing the *Constantin Meunier* Exhibition at Columbia University's Avery Library, New York City, 1914. Columbia University Archives.

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MEUNIER

THE SCULPTOR OF THE PROLETARIAN

CONSTANTIN MEUNIER.

MINER'S WIFE WITH SHOVEL (PAINTING)

THE HARVEST.

FOR the first time in America the sculpture and painting of Constantin Meunier, the Belgian master, is being shown. Reflected in these stalwart, these honest and uncomplaining figures is the spirit of the typically American man. Here in this country, of all places on the civilized globe, the message of Meunier should be understood and appreciated. For this message is the glorification of toil, the honest portrayal of the dignity and grace of work; of its force and power and possibilities, hidden though it is beneath an exterior of pressure and distress.

Meunier's spirit and sympathy were with the man of the factory and the forge, the worker in the mine and in the quarry, and the toiler before the blast furnace and the blowpipe. No work was too hard, too monotonous, too wearying, but this sculptor could wring from it its element of honorable dignity. His work is the epic of modern industrialism. He is the apostle of labor.

INDUSTRY.

THE HAMMER MAN.

A DOCK HAND.

Years ago there were reproach and incomprehension when Millet portrayed the peasant at work in the fields. Realism had no place in art, the critics said. But his realism is only a faint shadow of the truth beside Meunier's courageous portrayal of the most common types of everyday life, the basic features of our industrial world, the minute cogs which before have been only recognized as a part of the machine, not of human beings.

His "Smith" he calls the "knight of labor," and his "Puddler" is a perfect representation of the dignity and grace of the proletarian spirit. The artist's constant theme is the struggle of man against the eternal fatalities of nature and the pressure and strain of work.

* *

Not an Appeal or a Protest.

Meunier knew what he was portraying. Born of humble people, he spent his youth in the suburbs of Brussels, and watched ever with keenest interest the struggles of the miners, the ambitions and hopes of the quarrymen, and the patient endeavor of the workers at the forge and the blast furnace.

At first he was draftsman only—later painter, and last as the finished product, sculptor. And these two early occupations have given to his work a finesse and precision not to be found in many of the modern sculptors where so often the energy is put entirely into the idea instead of into line and modeling.

It was at the glass works of Val Saint-Lambert that the great vision of his future work came to him, and as he watched the earnest preoccupation of the workers, their spirit of unity and cooperation, there came to him the idea of the great "esthetics of work."

His art is not an appeal to the sympathy or to the emotions. He scorns sentimentality or weakening pity. It is not an appeal or a protest. It is a courageous acceptance of conditions as they are, and an effort to wrest from these conditions all that is noble and fine. He gives esthetic expression to the modern worker as the Greeks gave it to the gladiator or the wrestler. In his work the social and the artistic interests are welded. To the Greek idealism has been added a deep modern humanitarianism. His sympathy is for that section of labor where the toil is great and the reward small.

In the catalogue written for the present American exhibition, Christian Brinton says of Meunier:

"There can be no question concerning the relative status of Constantin Meunier. Though in a measure restricted in scope, it ranks in general significance beside the pellucid and spacious vision of Puvis de Chavannes, the penetrant humanity of Eugene Carriere, and the sensuous unrest of Auguste Rodin. At once the poet of the past and the present, his artistic heritage may be traced through the sober majesty of Millet and graphic vehemence of Honoré Daumier, back to the fountain heads of medieval and ancient sculpture. Bearing with manful mien their burden of earthly toil and tribulation, these sombre figures take up their position in the plastic procession of all time. And just as assuredly does their earnest souled creator find his place in the pantheon of modern art. He possesses, indeed, dual claim to his hard won haven. His triumph was not alone esthetic but spiritual. He wrought in beauty and nobility and his also was a conquest of human hearts."

* *

Exhibition to Come to Chicago.

So far the exhibition has not been the success that one could have predicted for America. The collection of about 150 of the best pieces of this master has been shown in Buffalo and Pittsburgh and in New York. In all of these places the exhibition was free, the time was limited, and it was announced that this would be the only opportunity to see these works. In view of this one might suppose that the galleries would be full. But M. Jacques-Meunier, son-in-law of the sculptor, said significantly to an interviewer recently:

"On week days practically nobody came. On Sundays there were more people in the buildings, and as they wandered through the halls they might peer into the room which held the sculpture and wander in as if saying, 'Eenie! There's something here, too!' In Pittsburgh the exhibition seemed to be in competition with the elephants and giraffes which fill the near-by zoological gardens, and in New York people seemed to regard it as a serious pilgrimage to get to Columbia, and it suffered there."

Surely when the exhibition comes to Chicago March 24 there will be no excuse, with the institute at the foot of Adams street, for not going to see the sculpture which is representative of the root and core of our working nation—the ordinary man at the ordinary work, and yet so dignified and idealized that the tribute to industrialism cannot be missed. In the nobility of his esthetic philosophy and in the grave beauty of the modeled figures, the pity of which is breathed from his work, there is an invigorating joy in life, a renewed pride in labor, and a lesson to the rebelling and dissatisfied.

THE CHICAGO SUNDAY TRIBUNE.

Ulrike Müller
Modern Masters on the Move: The Professionalisation of American Art Museums Through Travelling Exhibitions Before MoMA, ca. 1900-1929
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further described the AAMD as "a small group of Art Directors who are working for special exhibitions and who talk over things once or twice a year".[79] Unlike "large museums which have great permanent collections and are therefore not dependent upon special exhibitions to educate the people", the AAMD explicitly targeted smaller museums, which depended heavily on temporary shows to fulfil their educational missions.[80] The association's primary purpose, Sage explained, was "to secure better conditions for art exhibiting, better rates from express and insurance companies etc.".[81]

In its early years, the AAMD focused on practical improvements and administrative streamlining for temporary exhibitions. For example, during its first meeting, the association adopted a standardised policy for participating museums to take a 10 percent commission on sales made during exhibitions.[82] It also prioritised agreements on insurance policies for artworks and developed shared guidelines for packaging, shipping, and installation.[83] Also in 1916, the AAMD circulated a survey among its members on their use of and experience with insurance.[84] One year later, the association proposed to ship exhibitions without frames and use standardised frames by the institutions, as a means to reduce costs and increase efficiency as well as object security during transportation.[85] These initiatives seem to build on earlier efforts to rationalise the planning and execution of temporary exhibitions, such as those that had been a matter of concern when Sage circulated the Meunier collection in 1913-1914.

The AAMD's efforts significantly advanced the professionalisation of museum practices, particularly in the logistical and administrative aspects of organising exhibitions. Simultaneously, the association itself organised numerous travelling exhibitions of modern art that circulated among its member institutions. While more research is necessary on the concrete programming, composition, and organisation of the exhibitions circulated by the AAMD, these exhibitions mainly showed works by American as well as European artists, the latter frequently shipped from overseas. Understandably, the reintroduction of import tariffs in 1918, set at 10 percent,[86] posed challenges. The AAMD, like other art and cultural associations, protested these tariffs, arguing they hindered artistic exchange. In 1921 the AAMD passed a resolution against another tariff change.[87] Despite this opposition, Congress doubled the art rate to 20 percent in 1922, targeting especially modern and contemporary works, while exempting artworks over a hundred years old,[88] and thus further complicating the organisation of international exhibitions.

Fig. 05: *Meunier. The Sculptor of the Proletarian*, in "The Chicago Sunday Tribune", 22 February, 1914. The Art Institute of Chicago, Museum Archives.

Conclusion

By the late 1920s, the AAMD faced mounting challenges that ultimately led to the decline of its travelling exhibitions programme. Financial pressures, combined with competition from artists' associations such as the American Federation of Arts that organised their own shows, strained the viability of the initiative. Additionally the programme's strong emphasis on European art sparked growing criticism from American artists and curators, who

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sought greater representation of domestic artistic movements. These debates about the scope and focus of modern art exhibitions were eventually overshadowed by the emergence of MoMA. With its more narrowly defined vision of modern art, MoMA introduced the influential concept of "Classical Modernity" and would reshape the exhibition landscape.[89]

This article has demonstrated that significant efforts to develop a thriving network for travelling exhibitions of modern art preceded the establishment of MoMA. Emerging from practices introduced during American World Fairs, the first decades of the twentieth century saw important strides toward the professionalisation of exhibitions. Initially driven by initiatives of individual curators like Charles M. Kurtz and Cornelia B. Sage, these efforts relied on expanding personal and institutional networks. Later, these networks were formalized through the AAMD, which standardised and institutionalised many of the tools and strategies developed during the 1910s, and applying them on a larger scale.

Travelling exhibitions organised during this period – such as the Constantin Meunier retrospective of 1913-1914 – not only had a positive impact on professionalising the institutions that hosted them, but also served as a model for collaborative practices that would later be central to MoMA's programme. These exhibitions, supported by active communication and promotional strategies, enhanced the profiles of participating museums as dedicated and modern institutions for the arts. They also strengthened the collaborative networks and professional practices of America's young museums, helping to position them as promoters of modern art.

While further research is needed to fully assess the long-term impact of these exhibitions on shaping public collections and institutional profiles, this study suggests their significance in fostering American art museums. It also highlights the need to reconsider the dominant narrative that positions MoMA and the New York art world as singular pioneers. Through exhibitions and networks, museums outside of the traditional artistic centres not only advanced their cultural and educational missions but also laid the foundations upon which MoMA would later build – repositioning the periphery as a formative space in the making of American modernism.

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Endnotes:

1 Osborn Courter 1953.

2 Weismann 1954, p. 246.

3 *Circulating Exhibitions*…1954, p. 3.

4 Silver-Kohn 2024, p. 186. See also Beck, Bregengaard, Eckert, Eisenbrand 2018.

5 Silver-Kohn 2024, p. 171.

6 Silver-Kohn 2024, p. 171.

7 Temkin, Silver-Kohn 2024, pp. 7, 12. See also Porter, Zalman 2020; Lorente 2011.

8 Osborn Courter 1963, pp. 58-59.

9 Colomer, Pons-Sorolla, Roglán 2015.

10 Codell 2021.

11 Walker 1999.

12 See, for example, Meijer-van Mensch, van Mensch 2010.

13 See, for example, Guy, Williams, Wintle 2023; Staniszewski 1998.

14 Meyer 2021. See also the recent (2022-2024) AHRC Research Network *Making Museum Professionals, 1850-the present*: Hill, Russel, Wintle 2025.

15 An exception is Anguix-Vilches, Fabrizi, Papini 2023, which, however, generally focuses on the mid- to late-twentieth century.

16 Longair 2011, p. 4.

17 Micklewright, Mirza, Simavi, Smith 2023.

18 Kohlstedt 2008.

19 Codell 2021.

20 Guy, Williams, Wintle 2023, pp. 2, 8.

21 See, for example, Mulloli 2021; Altshuler 1998; 2008; Staniszewski 1998.

22 Paysant 2025.

23 Müller, Depelchin, Jacobs forthcoming.

24 Osborn Courter 1963, pp. 58-59.

25 Kearns, Mill 2015; Pointon, Binski 1997.

26 Pohrt 2020.

27 See, for example, Pergam 2011.

28 Catterson 2017.

29 Codell 2021, p. 317.

30 Zalewski 2012; May 2010.

31 Feigenbaum, Van Ginhoven, Sterrett 2024, pp. 1-2.

32 Walker 1999, p. 54.

33 Feigenbaum, Van Ginhoven, Sterrett 2024, pp. 6, 22-23; May 2010; Orcutt 2002.

34 May 2010, p. 84.

35 May 2010, pp. 88-89.

36 United States Congress 1897, § 701, 702. See also United States, Treasury dept., Division of Customs 1908, pp. 64-65, and May 2010, p. 72. I am grateful to Anne Helmreich for bringing the original source to my attention.

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37 Osborn Courter 1963, p. 60.

38 Osborn Courter 1963, p. 60.

39 https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/history.

40 https://carnegieart.org/art/carnegie-international/history-of-the-carnegie-international/. See also Clark 1996.

41 The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy Albright Art Gallery 1911, p. 66; The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy Albright Art Gallery 1914, p. 23.

42 Colomer, Pons-Sorolla, Roglán 2015, p. 154.

43 The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy Albright Art Gallery 1914, p. 64.

44 Paysant 2025.

45 Jerome-Schotsmans 2012.

46 Brinton 1913.

47 Müller, Depelchin, Jacobs forthcoming.

48 *Postcard from Charles Jacques to Cornelia B. Sage, 27/06/1913,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 5.13.

49 The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy Albright Art Gallery 1914, p. 28.

50 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Edward Robinson, 26/9/1913,* MET Archives.

51 *Editorial* 1913, p. 72. Also cited in: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy Albright Art Gallery 1914, p. 23.

52 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Clyde Burroughs, 6/8/1913,* DIA Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 1.9, 1914b.

53 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Charles Jacques, 16/7/1913,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 5.13.

54 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Edward Robinson, 4/9/1913,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 5.12.

55 *Cornelia B. Sage, Report on the Meunier exhibition,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 4a.3.

56 *Charles Jacques to Cornelia B. Sage, 25/9/1913,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 5.14.

57 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Charles Jacques, 23/12/1913,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 5.14.

58 *Letters from Charles Jacques to Cornelia B. Sage, 19/12/1913,* and *Cornelia B. Sage to Charles Jacques, 23/12/1913,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 5.14.

59 *Correspondence and shipment invoices,* AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, Files 4a.2, 5.16, 6.6.

60 See, for example, *Letter from A. Leeder to Cornelia B. Sage, 20/2/1914,* and *Letter from Clyde H. Burroughs to Cornelia B. Sage, 25/2/1914,* DIA Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 1.9, 1914a.

61 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Clyde H. Burroughs, 13/2/1914,* DIA Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 1.9, 1914a.

62 *Letter from A. Leeder to Clyde H. Burroughs, 4/2/1914,* DIA Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 1.9, 1914a. See also: *Letter from Clyde H. Burroughs to Cornelia B. Sage, 9/2/1914,* DIA Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 1.9, 1914a, and *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Frank D. Fackenthal, 26/4/1914,* CU, Central Files, Box 666, Folder 19: Cornelia B. Sage File.

63 *Bulletin of the Detroit Museum of Art*...1914, pp. 37-39.

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64 *Letter from Clyde H. Burroughs to Cornelia B. Sage, 7/2/1914*, DIA Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 1.9, 1914a.

65 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Charles Jacques, 15/9/1913*, AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 5.13.

66 Brinton 1913; 1914.

67 *Meunier Exhibition Popular*…1914. See also *Letter from Frank D. Fackenthal to Cornelia B. Sage, 12/2/1914*, CU, Central Files, Box 666, Folder 19: Cornelia B. Sage File.

68 *Letter from Kate La Montagne Butler to Cornelia B. Sage, 15/10/1913*, AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 4a.5.

69 *Meunier's Remarkable Sculpture to Be Shown Here*…1913.

70 Dabakis 2011, p. 116.

71 *Cornelia B. Sage, Report on the Meunier exhibition*, AKG Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 4a.3. The exceptionally high number in St. Louis was because the show coincided with the Pageant and Masque, a historical festival celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of the city.

72 *Letter from Clyde H. Burroughs to Cornelia B. Sage*, 15/4/1914, DIA Archives, Meunier Exhibition, File 1.10, 1914a.

73 Müller, Depelchin, Jacobs forthcoming.

74 Walker 1999, p. 8.

75 https://aamd.org/celebrating-100-years/timeline.

76 Files relating to the first meeting of the AAMD, Cleveland, 6/7/1916, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2.

77 Meyer 2021, pp. 10, 55.

78 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Henry R. Howland, 26/09/1916*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2.

79 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Henry R. Howland, 26/09/1916*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2.

80 *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Henry R. Howland, 26/09/1916*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2.

81 *Letter from Henry R. Howland to N.H. Carpenter, 23/09/1916*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2. See also the association's constitution, as formulated during the first meeting of the AAMD, Cleveland, 6/7/1916, *Letter from Cornelia B. Sage to Henry R. Howland, 26/09/1916*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2. The AAMD's mission has evolved over time. Today, its explicit goals are to "advance[…] the profession by cultivating leadership capabilities of directors, advocating for the field, and fostering excellence in art museums", https://aamd.org/about/mission.

82 *Minutes of the first meeting of the AAMD, Cleveland, 6/7/1916*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2.

83 *Minutes of the second meeting of the AAMD, Detroit, 16/10/1916*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2.

84 *Insurance Questionaire*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 5, Folder 2.

85 *An exhibition framing proposition*, AKG Archives, AAMD, 2:3, Box no. 7, Folder 1: correspondence 1917.

86 May 2010, p. 90.

87 https://aamd.org/celebrating-100-years/timeline.

88 May 2010, p. 89.

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89 Walker 1999, pp. 225–227, 235.

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