The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

The Frick Glows With a Poetic, $220 Million Renovation

The museum, based in Henry Clay Frick's 1914 Fifth Avenue mansion, reopens with a deft expansion worthy of a New York treasure.

The showstopper of the Frick Collection renovation is a new, cantilevered stairway made from veined, Breccia Aurora marble.

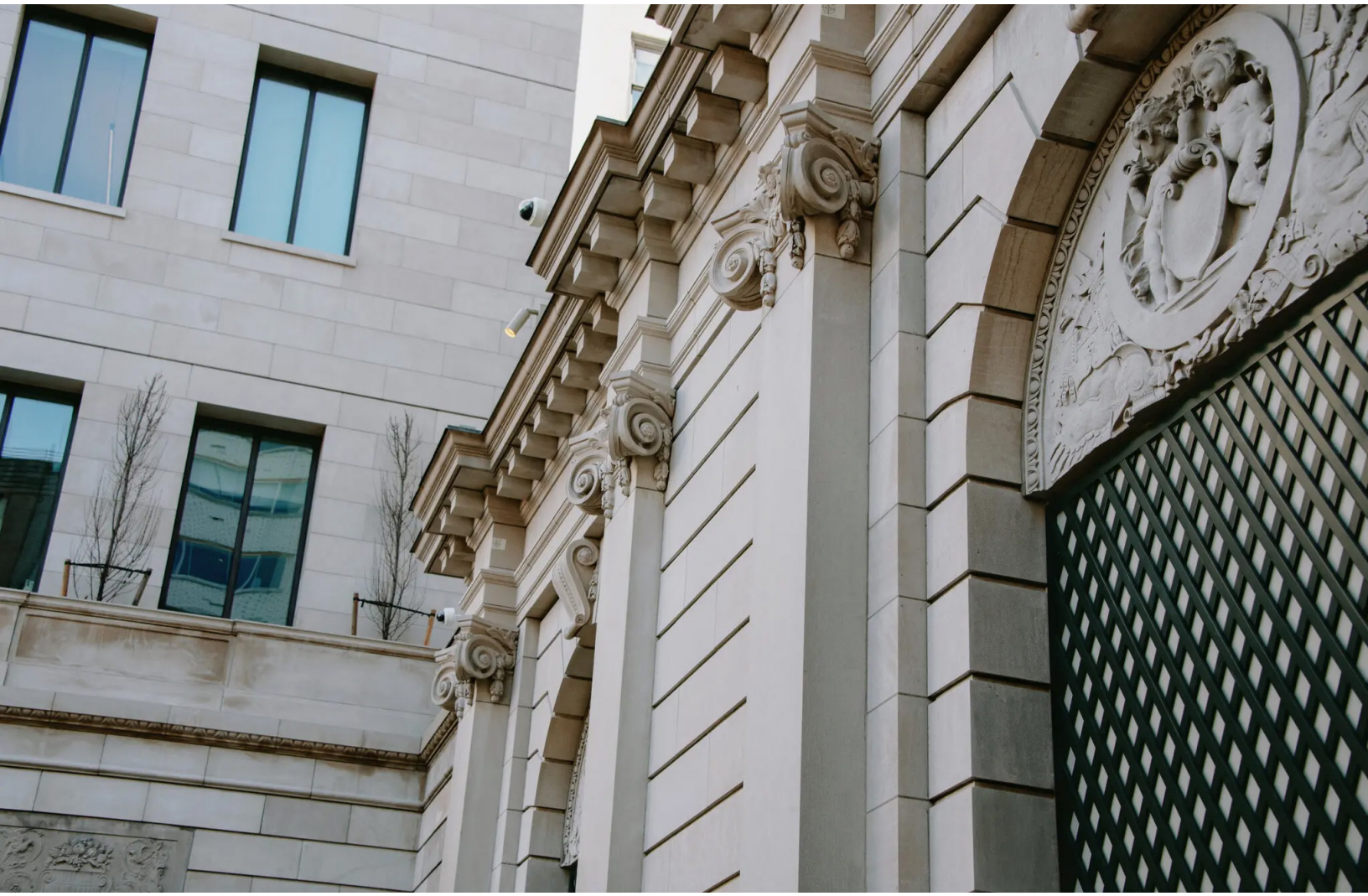
By Michael Kimmelman
Photographs and Video by Lila Barth

March 15, 2025

A corner of New York hasn't seemed quite itself since the Frick Collection shuttered during Covid for the architectural equivalent of a full-body spa treatment.

For a while the museum that luxuriates in Henry Clay Frick's Beaux-Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue decamped with its old masters and other art to Marcel Breuer's former Whitney Museum a few blocks away. Seeing Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert" in a Brutalist building felt like coming across your high school chemistry teacher on spring break in Cocoa Beach.

Next month the Frick reopens after its $220 million expansion and refurbishment. Fretful preservationists have been pinging my inbox for years, venting their anxieties about tampering with one of the city's architectural treasures.



The new limestone-clad addition, left, overlooking the garden, steps back for a row of hornbeams.

I bear good tidings. The expansion is about as sensitive and deft as one could hope for. At moments, as in a voluptuous new marble staircase and airy auditorium, it approximates poetry. It probably won't quiet all the critics. Grumblers will be grumblers. But it does what was intended. It moves the Frick squarely into the 21st century and seamlessly solves multifarious problems. And where it counts, it leaves well enough alone.

The architect is the German-born, New York-based Annabelle Selldorf. She and her colleagues at Selldorf Architects paired with Beyer Blinder Belle, another New York firm, and with the garden designer Lynden B. Miller. These days, Selldorf is a go-to architect for thorny projects like this. In London she is updating a hotly contested wing of the National Gallery designed in the 1990s by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Frick's mansion, completed in 1914, was designed by the firm of Carrère and Hastings, which gave New York the 42nd Street Library. In 2001, Selldorf made her bones converting another Carrère and Hastings landmark from 1914, the onetime Vanderbilt mansion, further up Fifth Avenue. With care and creativity, she morphed it into Ronald Lauder's state-of-the-art Neue Galerie.

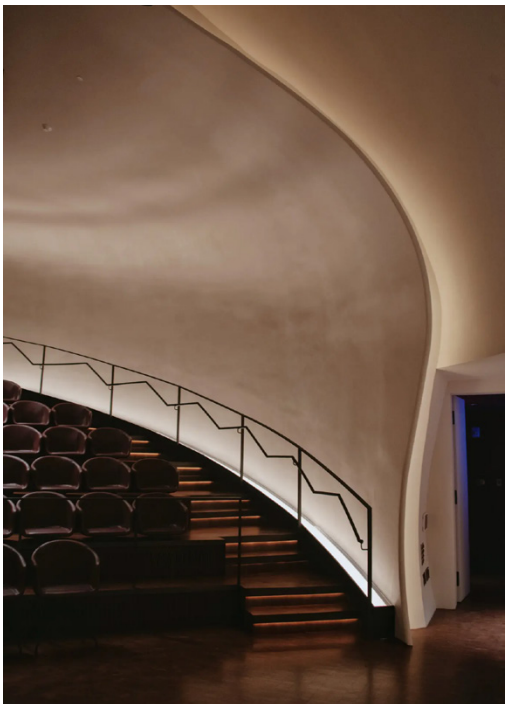



Expanding the Frick was a trickier task. It necessitated sacrifice. For starters, Selldorf has demolished the Frick's beloved music room that John Russell Pope, the august architect for the Jefferson Memorial, added when he oversaw the Frick's mansion-to-museum transformation during the 1930s. Pope doubled the building's footprint.

Like others, I'm sad to lose the music room. Over the years, as opponents of its loss have taken to pointing out, it had become New York's version of a 19th-century salon. Truth be told, with 149 seats it was too small for many events, and its acoustics were mediocre. It also occupied the ideal spot to put new galleries for temporary exhibitions, which the Frick needed and were crucial to Selldorf's plan.

So that's what has happened. Selldorf installed three new galleries.

In the late 1970s, a carriage passes by the Frick, the museum that luxuriates in Henry Clay Frick's Beaux-Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue. Designed by the firm of Carrère and Hastings, the mansion was finished in 1914.
Edmund Vincent Gillon/Museum of the City of New York, via Getty Images



A new underground auditorium is shaped like the inside of a clamshell and seats 218 people.

To replace the music room she excavated underneath the Frick's 70th Street garden, designing a technologically up-to-date, 218-seat auditorium, shaped a little like the inside of a clamshell. Past the new lobby, through a low vestibule, around a curved wood wall made of fluted walnut, you suddenly enter a surprisingly light and roomy hall, as white as an operating theater, mildly erotic with its curvaceous plaster walls.

She then turned to the Frick's reception hall from the 1970s, which never quite worked. On crowded days, gaining entry to the museum could put you in mind of LaGuardia Airport on Thanksgiving eve. A convoluted ticket and coat check arrangement created logjams and funneled visitors into dead ends.

Like a cardiologist, Selldorf has unclogged passageways, invented cunning lines of circulation and improved the reception hall.

Its centerpiece is a showstopper: a new, cantilevered stairway, voluptuous and clad in veined, Breccia Aurora marble, decadent in a dolce vita sort of way. It nods to the grand staircase in the mansion. And it leads to a new second floor that Selldorf has surgically inserted above the hall to fit in a new connection with the mansion, a shop and a 60-seat cafe (the Frick may be the last museum on earth that lacked one) overlooking the gated, 70th Street garden.

A view of the Garden Court from the new halls. Selldorf has unclogged passageways and invented cunning lines of circulation between the expansion and the old parts of the museum.

In 2014, the museum floated an earlier expansion proposal by a different architecture firm that imagined a blocky extension replacing the garden, which the British landscape architect Russell Page designed when the reception hall was built during the 1970s. The Frick assumed at the time that the garden would only be temporary, replaced when the museum needed to grow again.

But with its reflecting pool, shaded pea gravel paths and wisteria, it was a Zenlike pause along the street and came to be prized by New Yorkers as one of those pocket-size serendipities of life in the city. Preservationists were aghast about the proposal to destroy it.

The Frick backed off. Two years later it hired Selldorf and committed to keeping the garden.

That proved easier said than done. Building the underground auditorium required ripping the garden up, then replanting it. It's still growing back. Selldorf treats the garden with deference, organizing her biggest, bulkiest addition — two new floors above where the music room used to be, adjoining an extension of Pope's nine-floor library at 71st Street — to carefully skirt the garden's north end.

Facing the garden, the education center, a first for the Frick, occupies what used to be a yard for lawn mowers and air conditioning units.

The addition repurposes a narrow yard, formerly hidden behind a garden wall, where the Frick stashed its lawn mowers and air conditioning units. A new education center (another first for the museum) occupies that space today, with the cafe above.

Selldorf has then clad the whole puzzle-like addition in Indiana limestone, to match the mansion's exterior and unify an ultimately anodyne facade. The addition steps a couple of feet back where the cafe overlooks the garden, finessing room for a row of hornbeams.

I was among those who urged the Frick back in 2014 to ditch the plan to demolish the garden, and I wrote a column that passed along some alternative ideas then making the rounds among New York architects. These included swapping Pope's music room for temporary exhibition spaces, excavating beneath the garden to construct another auditorium and redoing the reception hall by adding another floor.

Sharing vague thoughts from the peanut gallery in the end resolves none of the challenges of redesigning 87,000 square feet of intricate space. Ideas can be realized differently and badly. Architecture happens in the trenches. Getting the Frick expansion right demanded a million complex decisions, as mundane but meaningful as choosing which varieties of marble, among the 138 different types already in the building, should tile the reception hall, and in which precise block pattern. And it is felt in gestures like that ledge for the hornbeams, whose subtle depth lends the garden a crucial whisper of breathing room.

It entails connoisseurship, in other words, the stock in trade of the Frick. Buying art is one thing. Building a collection like the Frick's is another.

Credit also goes to Ian Wardropper, the Frick director who oversaw the whole expansion and just retired last month. He was a steady hand at the heart of the museum. I mentioned earlier that the renovation knows when to leave well enough alone. The joy of visiting the Frick remains intact. The frisson of prowling around a robber baron's stuffy house is unchanged.

Nothing is altered in the great rooms of Titians and Fragonards, save for wall coverings of hand-woven French silk damask and velvet, which have been scrupulously, and at formidable cost, replaced. The Garden Court is the same but with cleaned skylights and a fountain that now works as Pope intended for the first time in living memory.

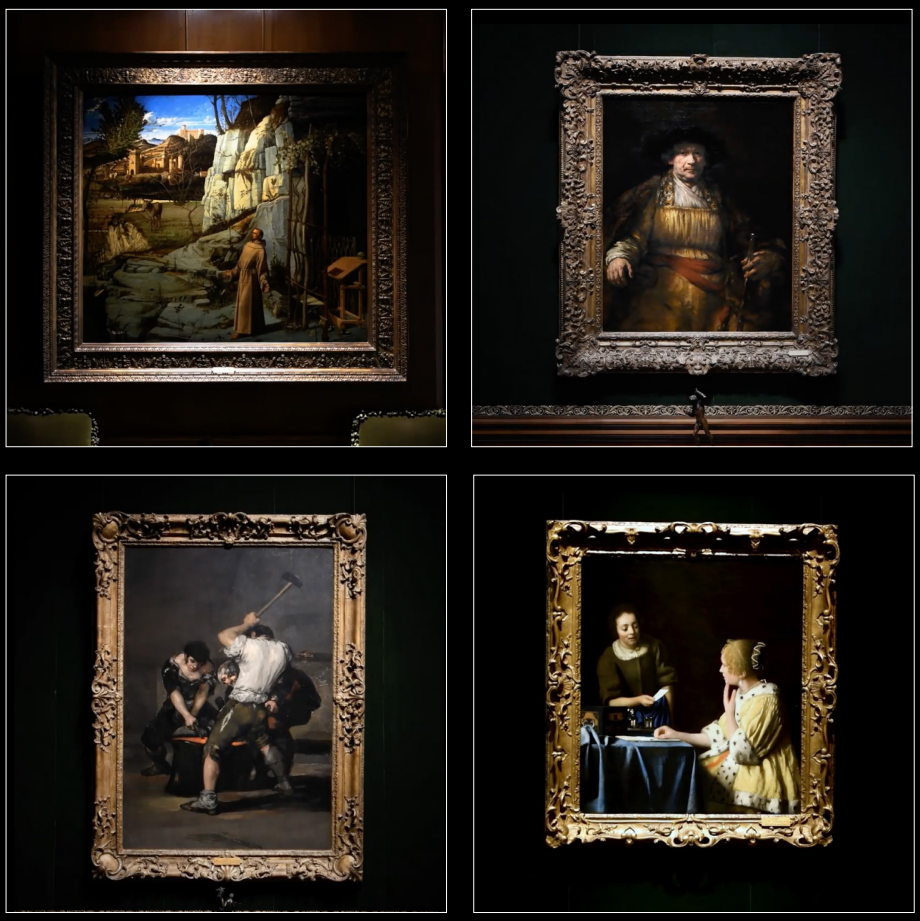
What's new is that visitors can, for the first time, wander up the mansion's grand staircase to the second floor and nose around the Frick family's former bedrooms, repurposed as galleries for Chinese porcelain, Renaissance medals, Bouchers and Constables. What used to be a bathroom is hung with French Rococo pictures. The number of objects on view from the permanent collection has doubled.

I look forward to when the garden blooms.

Good news is in short supply these days. The Frick reopens in mid-April. The city already feels lighter.

The New York Times

A Guided Tour: Inside the Splendor of the New Frick



Our art critic goes room-by-room through New York's Gilded Age house museum, reopening after nearly five years. Don't miss the new upstairs galleries.

By Holland Cotter
Photographs and video by Adrianna Glaviano
March 19, 2025

Politically and culturally we've entered a stormy, seismic spring. Yet early flowers are popping up right on time outside the Frick Collection on Fifth Avenue. And inside the museum, after a nearly five-year closure, the gallery lights are, at last, back on.

➡This interactive article is best viewed online. You can access it via this link.

Not that the museum has been in hibernation. Its low-slung vault of a building, once residence to the coke-and-steel magnate Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919), has been undergoing a $220 million renovation and expansion, inside and out. And during this time its fabled masterpiece holdings — its Vermeers and Van Dycks, Rembrandts and Fragonards, its Turners and Whistlers and single celestial Bellini — were on view in leased premises a few blocks away, at the former Madison Avenue headquarters of the Whitney Museum of American Art, where they looked glamorous as always but lonely for the Beaux-Arts monument they call home.

Monuments are, almost by definition, unitary things, distillations of specific histories and emotions. And the reopened Frick, with its familiar art back in place and some significant new features added — notably an entire second floor of family rooms repurposed as intimate galleries — feels organic in that way.

The House

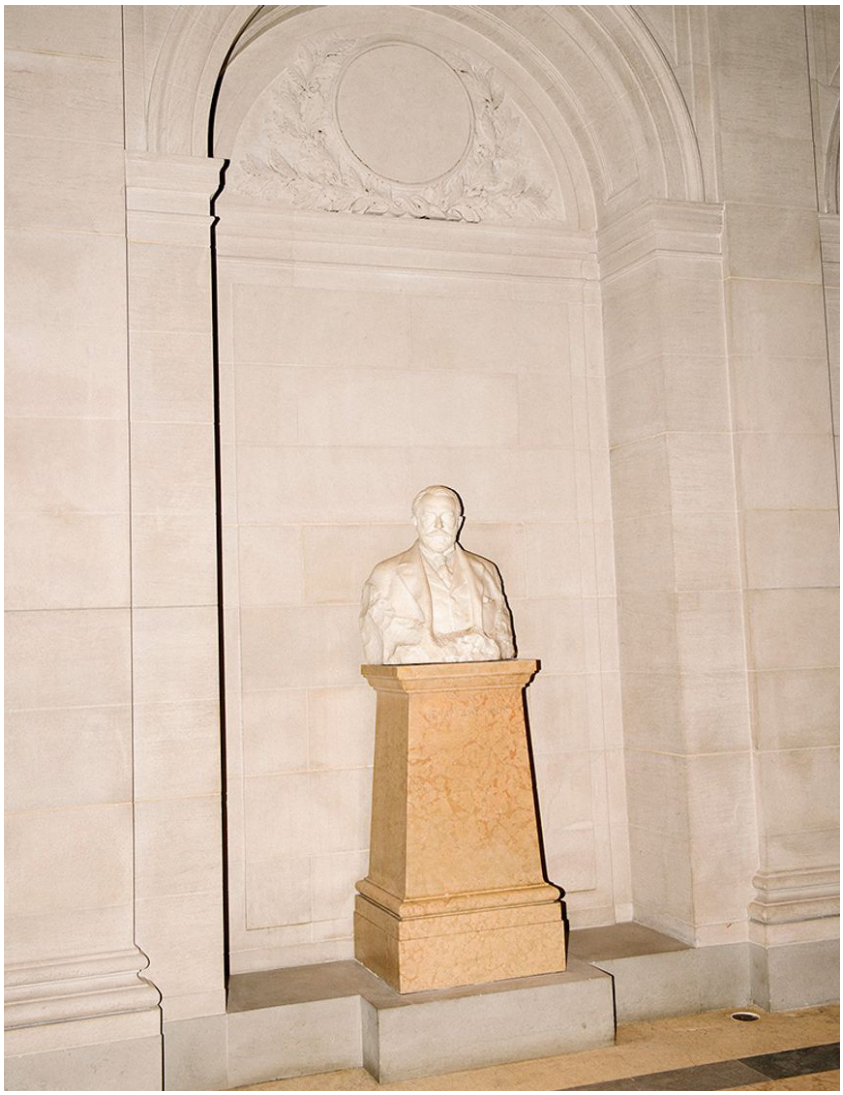
What does this particular monument celebrate? Some would say — certainly Henry Frick would say — a person, Frick himself, who assembled the core collection over a brief few decades, and gifted it to the public. It also celebrates, like many art museums, the complicated power of private wealth. (Frick's benevolent populism had serious limits; he is notorious in the annals of American labor as an adamant anti-unionist.)

And it celebrates the idea of Beauty as filtered through the tastes of an era (the Euro-American Gilded Age of the late 19th and 20th century), and through the tastes of a single family: Frick, who favored mild-mannered modern landscape painting before moving into European old master terrain; his wife, Adelaide Childs Frick, (1) a lover of Rococo painting and decorative arts; and their daughter Helen Clay Frick (2), who, after her father's death, assembled a collection-crowning treasury of early Italian Renaissance religious works.

The Frick is, on a grand scale, a “house” museum, a lifestyle museum, in a way that, say, the Met is not. Most of the Frick galleries we visit today were, when the new owners moved in in 1914, domestic in function, whether as street-level reception spaces or upstairs retreats. In 1935, when the house opened as a museum, it officially transitioned to a monument, one that has been added to more than once over the years.

1 Adelaide Childs Frick

2 Helen Clay Frick



Henry Clay Frick

Walk into the front entrance on East 70th Street and look to the right: There's the brand-new add-on, designed by Selldorf Architects with Beyer Blinder Belle Architects and Planners, which includes a two-level reception hall, a coat check, and cafe, and Special Exhibition galleries, where a three-picture blockbuster titled "Vermeer's Love Letters" will debut in June.

But I suggest choosing the path to the left that leads through the original 1912 Fifth Avenue-facing mansion.

The Dining Room

Describing plans for his future home Frick wrote that he envisioned “a comfortable, well-arranged house, simple, in good taste, not ostentatious.” “Not ostentatious” is, of course, relative, but he did do without a ballroom and had a bowling alley installed in the basement — it’s still intact, but off-view — so he got everything he asked for, served up with a large helping of decorative luxe.

Sumptuously simple might describe the first major gallery you encounter, the Dining Room, a clean-lined, high-ceilinged space with an 18th-century English manor house vibe.

The painter Thomas Gainsborough — a Frick favorite — presides here with female portraits. Tall, silken and placid, two of his subjects — the Hon. Frances Duncombe and Mrs. Peter William Baker — set the aristo tone of the room, while a third, a flushed, alert likeness of Grace Dalrymple Elliott, (3) mistress to the future King George IV and guerrilla player (of a royalist persuasion) in the French Revolution, introduces a spark of sensuous abandon.

Mrs. Peter William Baker (1781) and Frances Duncombe (1777)
Gainsborough

(3) **Grace Dalrymple Elliot, 1782**
Gainsborough

The Fragonard Room

④ **The Progress of Love, 1771–72**
Gainsborough

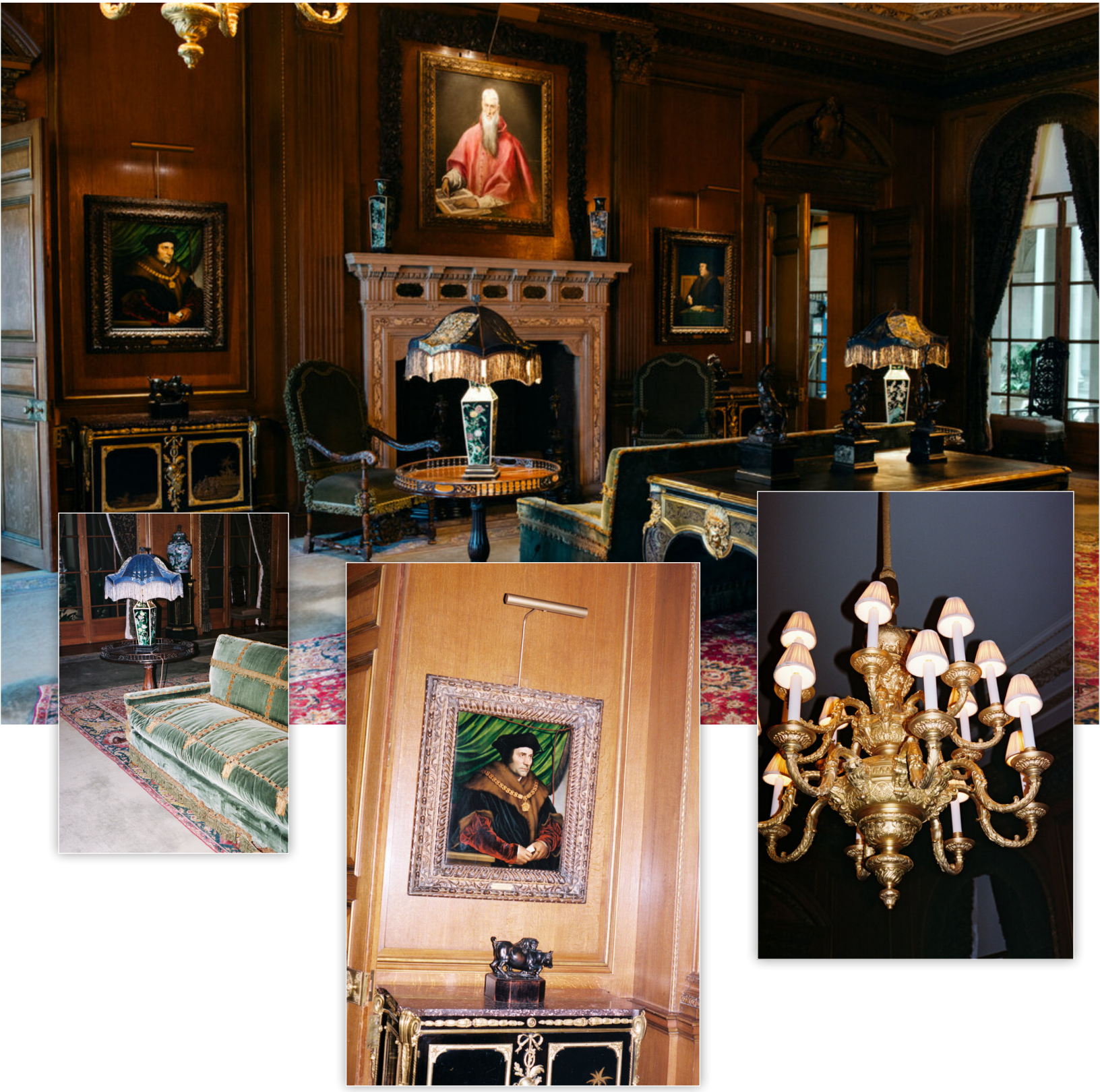
That spark is picked up in the adjoining room, the mansion's Drawing Room, in a wraparound suite of 14 paintings called "The Progress of Love" ④ by the French artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806). The series originated as a four-painting commission by Madame du Barry, lover of Louis XV, who unaccountably rejected the results. Fragonard held onto the pictures and 20 years later, in a kind of self-commission, added 10 more paintings on the theme.

By that point the artist was far from Paris, in retreat from the Revolution, and the new paintings have a fleet, delirious, shut-in feel as if produced in a fever. Politically way out of sync with their time, they passed from owner to owner, eventually ending up in the hands of J.P. Morgan, from whose estate Frick bought them (as he did many of the small decorative objects — Italian Renaissance bronzes, Chinese porcelains, French enamels — that bejewel the Frick Collection).

The Fragonard Room — with its visual pandemonium of vegetation and clouds, like being inside a springtime version of a snow-globe — has always been one of the Frick's signature attractions. And together with the remaining rooms of the original house it constitutes the museum's "masterpiece central."

The Progress of Love: The Meeting, 1771-72
Fragonard

The Living Hall



⑤ **St. Jerome, ca. 1590-1600**
El Greco

⑥ **Thomas More, 1527**
Holbein the Younger

The Living Hall just beyond it holds five of the collection's greatest 15th and 16th century paintings and has the distinction of remaining precisely as Frick arranged it. It was he who positioned El Greco's portrait of Saint Jerome, ⑤ depicted as a gaunt zealot in hot-pink robes, over the fireplace, flanked by Hans Holbein the Younger's portraits of two British ideological combatants, Sir Thomas More, ⑥ who opposed the English Reformation, and Thomas Cromwell , who supported it. (Cromwell was instrumental in More's political downfall and execution, but More won aesthetic immortality by getting by far the better likeness, the one you want to look at.)

And directly across the room is Giovanni Bellini's panoramic "St. Francis in the Desert" (circa 1475-80) , one of the few religious paintings Frick bought, and one he seems to have loved. Who could not? It's a picture as much about the sacredness and miraculousness of the natural world — the bird in the tree, the donkey in the field, the shadow of a cloud — as it is about singular human holiness.

This marvelous painting — my Frick favorite — has rivals in the nearby West Gallery.

St. Francis in the Desert, 1475–80
Bellini

Thomas Cromwell, 1532-33
Holbein the Younger

The West Gallery

A room as long and wide as an airport runway, custom-built for art, the West Gallery was, in 1915, the largest such private space in New York City. Some of the collection's most beloved treasures hang here, in a display pretty much frozen in time after 90 years.

Frick was partial to portraiture, particularly to images of comely women and prosperous-looking men. Anthony Van Dyck's 1620-ish portrait of the Antwerp artist Frans Snyders (7) filled the prosperity bill. Snyders was an Antwerp plants-and-animals painter in the orbit of Peter Paul Rubens. In the history books he has second-tier status but Van Dyck turns him into a fashionable dreamboat, giving his painter's hands a spotlit glamour all their own.

By the time Rembrandt finished the magnificent 1658 self-portrait (across the room) he was in the sunset of his career and broke. But he still presents himself like a star, dressed in imperial scarlet and gold, holding his maulstick like a scepter, his face, half glowing, half sunk in shadow, set in a faint and unfoolable smile.

(7) **Frans Snyders, 1620**
Van Dyck

(8) **King Philip IV of Spain, 1644**
Velázquez

(9) **The Forge, 1815-1820**
Goya

Mistress and Maid, 1666-67
Vermeer

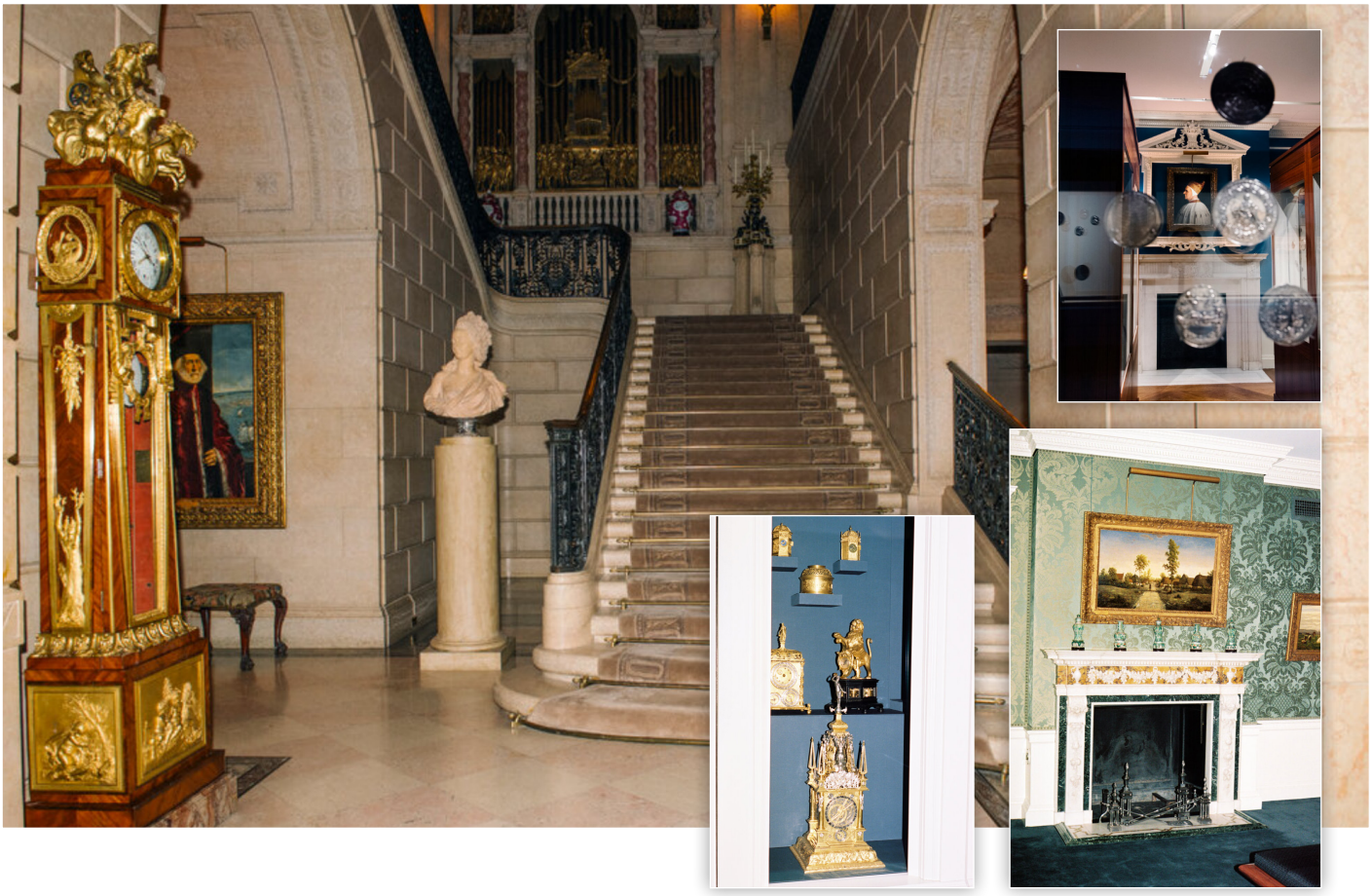
The subject of Velázquez's 1644 portrait of King Philip IV of Spain (8) is the real royal thing: a potentate at the height of his power, and he looks it, dressed in a coat that appears to be cast from silver filigree. Frick didn't collect much Spanish art, but that he did at all put him ahead of the collecting curve shared by fellow industrialists, who mostly invested in French and English art.

And Frick advanced pretty far on that curve when, in 1914, he acquired the large Goya painting titled "The Forge" (1815-20). (9) Its image of three burly, stooped, raggedly dressed workers hammering a sheet of red-hot metal on an anvil would seem an unlikely subject to catch his interest, especially given his fraught relations to labor politics. But he recognized the painterly equivalent of a blast furnace when saw it, and that's what this picture is.

Frick's interest in Vermeer was also unusual for a time when the Golden Age Dutch painter was by no means the trophy artist he is now. Frick collected three pictures by him. The two smaller ones hang in a narrow corridor near the skylit Garden Court (added in the 1930s by the architect John Russell Pope). The largest one, the velvety pollen-gold "Mistress and Maid" (1666-67), is in the West Gallery and was the very last painting that Frick bought.

(It should be said that a rival collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner of Boston, got the jump on Frick in the Vermeer sweepstakes by picking up a painting as early as 1892. Called "The Concert," it was stolen from her house-museum in 1990, and who knows where it is now.)

The Second Floor



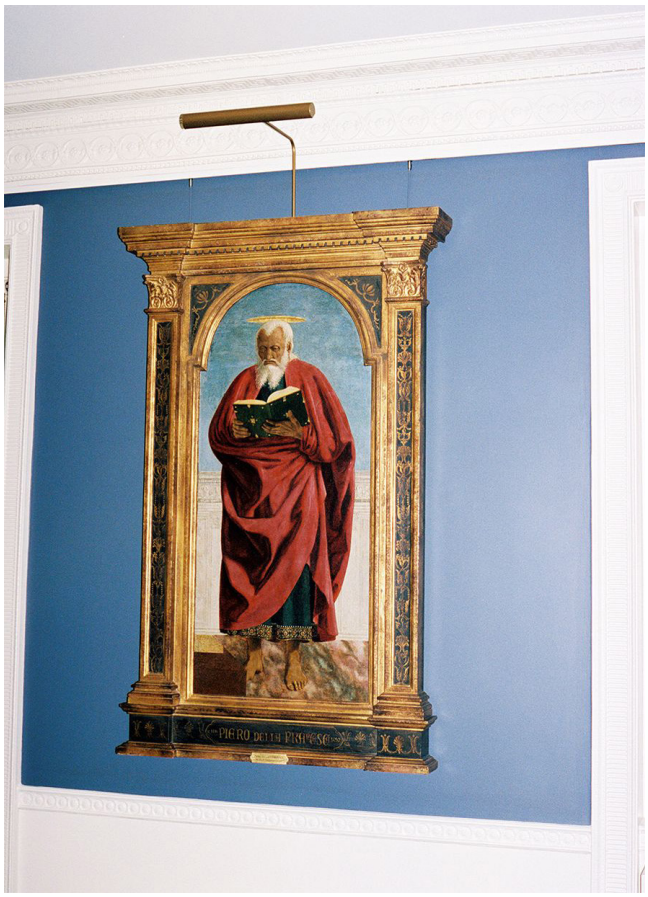
10 The Flagellation of Christ, 1280
Cimabue

11 The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain, 1308–11
Duccio

12 The Lake, 1861
Corot

Until four years ago, if you looked down the West Gallery's length, you'd see, framed by a doorway at the Fifth Avenue end, a brilliant thing: Piero della Francesca's painting of St. John the Evangelist. It was one of several Early Italian altarpiece paintings — others were by Cimabue 10, Duccio 11, Gentile da Fabriano, and Paolo Veneziano — acquired by Helen Clay Frick after her father's death, and installed in a small room that had once been his private office.

For the reopening of the museum, this extraordinary ensemble has been relocated to the second floor, the original family quarters, to which you ascend by two staircases — the Grand one carved of penuche-colored marble and original to the house, the other a sleek Selldorf addition leading up from the new wing. After Adelaide's death in 1931, many of the second-floor spaces were converted to staff offices. Now, after being off-limits to the public for 85 years, 10 of them — bedrooms, sitting rooms, guest rooms — have been turned into galleries, with a few holding the art that was displayed in Frick's day.



St. John the Evangelist, 1454-69
Piero

13 **Vétheuil in Winter, 1878-79**
Monet

14 **The Bullfight, 1864-65**
Manet

15 **The Coronation of the Virgin, 1358**
Veneziano

What was once the family's breakfast room now looks much as it might have when they gathered for morning coffee. Its walls, covered with newly-woven silk damask, are hung with some of the small, vespertine Barbizon landscapes 12 — by Corot, Daubigny, Troyon — that first sparked Henry Frick's collecting drive, but that have never been presented together to the public before.

A few steps way, in a room of comparable size, we find evidence of where Frick's early interest in modernism, always cautious, took him, namely to modest-size works by Monet 13 and (more radically) Manet. 14

Practically speaking, the big advantage of opening space on the second floor is that there's now room to exhibit unfamiliar and specialized parts of the museum's holdings. We get to see, on long-term view and up close, a collection of antique commemorative medals — each a miniature, detail-perfect portrait or narrative relief — that recently came to the Frick as a gift.

And we can groove on such esoteric delights as the museum's collection of clocks. Enameled and gilded and madly ornate, installed under ultra-bright lights in a nook-like space — a former butler's pantry? — the clocks, all eye-stoppers, together suggest a horological high altar.

Detail from the Clock Room

But what makes the experience of the second-floor particularly moving is the presence it evokes of its original tenants.

Helen Clay Frick's early Italian Renaissance paintings, on view for nine decades downstairs, are now gathered — such a nice idea — in what was her second-floor bedroom. Two major examples are away from home at present. (The Frick's beyond-precious Cimabue, its single oldest painting, is on loan to the Louvre; its Duccio, recently seen in "Siena: The Rise of Painting" at the Met, is headed to London with the show.)

But the Piero is here, set between two Fifth Avenue windows, as is Paolo Veneziano's "The Coronation of the Virgin," 15 with its jamming angel band. We know a lot about Helen by knowing she chose and loved this art, even if this particular arrangement, organized by the Frick's curatorial and conservation team, wasn't hers.

The Boucher Room

By contrast, the Boucher Room, named for the set of allegorical paintings by the 18th-century French court painter François Boucher (1703-1770) that cover its walls, is exactly as Helen's mother, Adelaide, knew it. The room was Adelaide's private sitting room. After her death, it was disassembled and moved downstairs for public viewing, and now it's back, replete with the details she no doubt daily savored: Sèvres porcelains, Rococo furniture, and an 18th-century wood floor as soft as a Lululemon yoga mat.

The Arts and Sciences, 1760
Boucher

Henry Clay Frick's Bedroom

16 **Nicolaes Ruts, 1631**
Rembrandt

In some ways the most personal feeling of all the second-floor spaces is the one called, after its dark wood paneling, the Walnut Room, and was Henry Clay Frick's bedroom. None of the original furniture is here, and the big-ticket art item — Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' 1845 portrait of Louise de Broglie, known as the Comtesse d'Haussonville — is a painting he never saw. (It came to the collection in 1927, eight years after his death.)

The Comtesse's image, anatomically implausible and seductive in a self-amused way, has long been a kind of Frick Collection mascot, the one image everyone identifies with the museum. So in that way it makes perfect sense to put it here. But the picture Frick actually did choose for the room, and positioned right at its center, is here too.

17 **The White Horse, 1819**
Constable

18 **St. Francis of Assisi, ca. 1300**

Comtesse d'Haussonville, 1845
Ingres

Titled “Emma Hart, Later Lady Hamilton, as ‘Nature,’” and painted in 1782 by the English artist George Romney, it is a soft-focus portrait of a smiling young woman posed against a distant landscape and a dawn (or maybe sunset) sky. She leans a little toward us, a small, watchful dog in her arms. The painting is not, to my mind, one of the collection’s stellar pieces, but it’s the one to which Frick gave private pride of place, framing, almost devotionally, within a garland of wood-carved leaves, and setting over the fireplace facing his bed, as if to be seen first thing every day, last thing every night.

We have evidence that as he aged and lost his health he spent increasing time alone with his art. In a fascinating new book titled “The Fricks Collect: An American Family and the Evolution of Taste in the Gilded Age,” the museum’s recently retired director Ian Wardropper reports that Helen remembered discovering her father, a week before his death, lying alone on a couch in the West Gallery silently contemplating paintings there.

Emma Hart, Later Lady Hamilton, as “Nature,” 1782
Romney

And the Collection's chief curator, Xavier Salomon, who oversaw the present gallery reinstallation, has floated the idea that Emma Hart's face was the last one that Frick, who died in his bed in this room, saw.

"What will survive of us is love," a poet wrote. Frick was, by many accounts, a cool customer. One of his robber baron peers called him "the most methodical thinking machine I have ever known," adding that "he seemed to lavish on art all the passion he might have bestowed in human beings."

Yet that passion produced a self-monument that has been much-loved by many and continues to grow. Indeed you could do a whole tour of post-Henry additions to the collection. It would include another Rembrandt, the "Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts," (16) purchased in 1943, and John Constable's panoramic tossed salad of a landscape titled "The White Horse" (17) acquired the same year.

And just last year, like a positive omen, a second St. Francis arrived, this one a carved ivory statuette (18), possibly from northern France, that can be found tucked away in Frick's original first-floor office, now known as the Enamels Room.

As in Bellini's painting, Francis holds his hands palms-open to the world, but here self-protectively raised as if he were startled: as surprised to see us as we are to see him. Dating to around 1300, he's one of the oldest objects in the Frick Collection, but also, like the revivified museum itself, brand-new.

The Frick Collection

Opens to the public on April 17, 1 East 70th Street, Manhattan, www.frick.org; (212) 288-0700.

Produced by Maridelis Morales Rosado and Josephine Sedgwick. Design and development by Leo Dominguez and Gabriel Gianordoli.

Images: The Frick Collection (All Artworks); The Frick Collection/Frick Art Research Library Archives (Adelaide H. C. Frick); The Frick Collection Archives (Helen Clay Frick)