



A History of the Smithsonian American Art Museum: The Intersection of Art, Science, and Bureaucracy

Lois Marie Fink

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Dedicated to the art of the United States, the Smithsonian American Art Museum contains works by more than 7,000 artists and is widely regarded as an invaluable resource for the study and preservation of the nation's cultural heritage. But as Lois Marie Fink shows in this probing narrative, the history of the museum is hardly one of steady progress. Instead, it reads like a nineteenth-century melodrama, replete with villains and heroes, destruction by fire, dashed hopes, and periods of subsistence survival?all leading eventually to a happy ending. Originating as the art gallery stipulated in the 1846 founding legislation of the Smithsonian, the museum developed within an institution that was essentially controlled by scientists. In its early years, the museum's holdings included a diverse selection of art and artifacts, mostly donated from private collections. Government support varied in response to shifting attitudes of officials and the public toward American art, ranging from avid admiration at the turn of the twentieth century to a tepid response and an almost total withdrawal of funding a generation later in favor of European masterworks. For decades the museum followed scientific organizational principles in exhibitions and collection strategies. Far into the twentieth century, accessions remained tied to nineteenth-century figurative art, reflecting the strength and influence of anthropology and biological sciences at the Smithsonian. A key breakthrough for modern art came in 1964 with the appointment of Smithsonian secretary Dillon Ripley, a scientist who strongly promoted the art side of the institution. With renewed support for expanding the collection and programs, the museum moved in 1968 to its present location in the Patent Office Building. In recounting the history of the museum from 1846 to 1980, Fink unravels the various levels of institutional authority, power, governance, and bureaucracy and shows how people at each level influenced the fortunes of the collection. She also places changing concepts of art and museum practice in the context of national ideals and Washington realities.

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