

Building American Collections
of European Tapestries:
The Role & Influence of French & Company

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French & Company was one of the premier art dealers in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. For more than fifty years, from 1907 to 1959, it sold a wide range and enormous volume of art works to an extensive list of wealthy American businessmen and their families. From singular masterpieces to the simpler antique fixture the co-founder of the firm, Mitchell Samuels, helped a litany of prominent clients develop their taste, assemble their collections, and even decorate their homes. The clients list reads as a Who's Who of men and women whose art collections have since formed the nucleus of so many American museums today: Hearst, Widener, Hewitt, Post, Astor, Vanderbilt, Harriman, Huntington, Rockefeller, Prentiss, Severance, Gould, Chrysler, du Pont, Mellon, Duke, Getty, Lehman, Mackay, Kress, Schiff, and Satterwhite to name just a selection. There is hardly an American art museum collection today that does not include works of art with a French & Company provenance. From North to South, from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, and from East to West, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, French and Company either had direct dealings or did business with one or several of the institutions' benefactors.

It is therefore surprising and inexplicable that the firm has been so little studied. Unlike its main competitor Duveen Brothers, French and Company has not been the subject of dissertations and published books. Certainly, specific enquires have been made in the surviving archive to document works of art on an individual basis but few have looked comprehensively at the business, or attempted to understand and communicate the major role the firm had during these vital years of the birth and growth of the American public museum.

French and Company was particularly renowned for its dealings in tapestries and within this specialization, it was probably the foremost dealer worldwide. An estimated 6,000 European tapestries passed through French and Company to be distributed throughout the United States and abroad. Many went directly into the newly forming collections of American museums or to collectors who later donated their weavings to public institutions. Cumulatively, the dealings of French & Company had a major impact on the growth of American collections of tapestries. For example, twenty-seven of the forty-one tapestries in Minneapolis Institute of Art alone have a French and Company provenance.

This summary will begin with a short biography of French & Company and a description of a few of the essential operating practices. Then, it will focus on the tapestry side of the business in order to identify the initial sources of the stock, name the major clients who purchased the high-end tapestries, and explore French & Company's role in the development of the private & public American collections.

Formation of the Business

In 1907 Mitchell Samuels (1880-1959) and Percy W. French purchased the firm of Sypher & Co (reputedly a successor to another business, Matley & Company, originally established in 1840), with backing from Charles M. Ffoulke (1841-1909), a Washington wool merchant and collector of tapestries. The name of the business was changed to French & Company. Initial stock came from Charles Ffoulke and, after his death in 1909, from his estate which included an estimated 76 significant tapestries.

Just two years later, in March 1909, the United States Congress approved new tariff regulations that included the abolition the 20% import duty on works of art into the United States. This paved the way for the transfer of major art collections built-up by Americans overseas, such as J. P. Morgan (1837-1913), an active collector who stored his objects in England & France until 1912 when he had them shipped to New York. After his death in 1913, French & Company's Mitchell Samuels purchased Morgan's entire collection of tapestries (amassed primarily in Paris through the dealer, Jacques Seligmann) for a reported \$1,600,000.

During the second decade of the 1900's, French & Company's clientele base grew quickly through Samuels' acquaintance with Miss Eleanor Hewitt, whom he originally met while a student enrolled in night classes at the Cooper-Union, New York. Miss Hewitt, founder of the "Museum for the Arts of Decoration of the Cooper Union," supported Samuels from very early by introducing members of the board of this organization to French & Company. Several of these prominent men became active and long-term customers.

Ultimately, the burden of debt of associated with the purchase of the Morgan tapestries caused bankruptcy proceedings to begin against French & Company in

May/June/July 1922. An inventory conducted at that time counted about 10,000 art objects in stock, 400 of which were tapestries. The business was reorganized into a new corporate identity and all assets in the form of art works were transferred to French and Company, Incorporated. Percy French & Mitchell Samuels were kept on as employees based on the premise that they were the most informed parties in a position to know both the stock and the client base. The upwards economy of the 1920's was nevertheless profitable for the business and by 1932 Mitchell Samuels had bought out not only Percy French but also the shareholders. From that point onward, French & Company, Incorporated was operated almost exclusively by the extended Samuels family; Mitchell was joined by his brothers Robert and Milton and then by his son, Spencer (1914-1999).

Following the crash of 1929, however, the decade of the 1930's was full of financial difficulties. In 1936, a third of the business's assets was in tapestries, predominantly those of large size which were unsuitable for the smaller, reduced interiors of their clients recovering from the Depression. By 1941 the business was once again in bankruptcy court. French & Company survived in a reorganized state, re-emerging in June 1945 with Mitchell Samuels again at the helm. During these years, it was the interior decoration side of the business that kept French & Company afloat.

Despite the financial uncertainties of the Depression and war eras, Mitchell Samuels' reputation as a pre-eminent art dealer was untarnished. On August 25, 1942 he appeared before the United States Senate as an expert witness in the evaluation of Joseph E. Widener's works of art before the nation accepted title to that collection. Buoyed by Samuels' public success, French & Company moderately expanded in the arena of commercial real estate holdings, acquiring through a subsidiary a large parcel on

Madison Avenue, between 76 & 77 Streets. For more than 30 years, from 1950 to 1981, the Parke-Bernet Galleries (later Sotheby's) were the main tenant at that location. In 1958 French & Company moved to these same premises and from that time, had a close business relationship with this auction house.

In 1957, Mitchell Samuels - aged 77 - resigned as president of the corporation in favor of his son, Spencer, who undertook steps towards consolidation. Between May and June of that year, Spencer Samuels held a major sale of stock in advance of relocating the business from 210 East 57th Street to the Madison Avenue address in 1958. And in 1959 he began a developing program of supporting and showing contemporary artists. But in that same year, with the death of his father, Spencer Samuels closed the sale of the business to City Investments, a public investment firm. He stayed on, under City Investments, lending the family name and reputation of Samuels to the business until 1963 when he left to work with Duveen Brothers.

In 1968 City Investments sold French & Company to Martin Zimmet, from whom Burton Fredericksen of the J. Paul Getty Museum negotiated the purchase of the business archives in 1969-1971, then comprising about 28,000 negatives, 10,000 photographic prints plus stock sheets and negative ledger books. When the deal closed in 1971 with Mr. Getty's approval, it was the first archives of a dealer to be purchased for that Museum. Spencer Samuels moved to California in his later life and during the 1980's, lived near the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities in Santa Monica. During this time Spencer Samuels, Burton Fredericksen and the Getty staff maintained cordial communications that resulted in the eventual donation of an additional four linear feet of French and Company business records to the institution in 1999 upon the death of

Spencer. These combined business records and archives are a primary source of information on the American art market during the first half of the Twentieth Century.

Operation & Procedures

The August 24, 1922 certificate of incorporation clearly laid out the extent of the business' operations, point by point:

(1) "To manufacture, purchase, sell, exchange and deal in all kinds of furniture, rugs, carpets, tapestries, curtains, hangings, draperies, laces, pictures, paintings, bronzes, antiques, statuary, fireplaces, marbles, mantels, mosaics, ornaments, jewelry, precious stones, books, china, silverware, glassware, metal and wooden ware, lamps, "bric-a-brac," ornamental metal work, works of art, and all other articles capable of being used to furnish, ornament or beautify private or public buildings, homes, dwellings, offices, gardens, parks and pleasure resorts

(To those of you familiar with eighteenth century trade labels of marchands-merciers, this language will ring bells.)

(2) "To carry on, as principals, agents, commission merchants or consignees, the business of gold and silver smiths, and dealing in antiques, tapestries, paintings, etc"

(3) "To carry on the business of decorative work consisting of constructing, altering, decorating, painting and furnishing dwellings and apartment houses, hotels and offices, yachts and ships, etc using in the said business any kind of merchandise for ornamentation in decoration or furnishing"

General stock at French & Company ranged from architectural elements, including wood paneling (another specialty of the business) and mantelpieces, to sculpture,

paintings, furniture and textiles, metalwork, glass and ceramics. It was the practice of French & Co to assign all stock an inventory number in consecutive order upon its arrival at the warehouse. Items were marked or stamped with this number and it referenced all paperwork and photography. From before the 1922 bankruptcy, each stock number was documented with a printed form providing the following information: the stock number, a description, the source from which the item was acquired, the date of purchase, the purchase price, the date it was checked into place and its location in the gallery show room or warehouse. The stock sheet could also include other information such as the dimensions, the condition, a history repairs or upholstery, a track of its consignments and returns, its sale and, in some cases, art historical information such publication citations or exhibition history. The documentation was not complete until the in-house photographers photographed the object. These stock sheets together with their corresponding photographs form the bulk of the archive.

Initial Sources of Tapestry Stock

Surviving business records are sparse before 1922, the year of the first bankruptcy proceedings, and they do not identify the initial sources of stock. One must turn to the actual stock sheets and peruse them in order to see the early buying patterns of Percy French and Mitchell Samuels. Not surprisingly the two men were opportunists buying at local auctions, often from the American Art Association / Anderson Galleries, other New York dealers, especially Henry Symons, Parish-Watson & Company and Antique Rug Studios, or from estate sales such as Havemeyer in 1915. They also bought directly from individual collectors such as Charles Mackay.

The single largest source of start-up stock came through their backer, Charles M. Ffoulke, and later from his estate. Ffoulke was an exceptional collector of tapestries who succeeded in 1889 purchasing 135 important tapestries from the legendary Barberini family collection in Rome. Returning with the collection to Washington, D.C. he built a gallery in his home to display the hangings. It is not clear whether expenses forced him to sell some of the tapestries, or whether he always intended to do so, but the subsequent sale of thirty-one of the hangings to his wealthy friends & peers sparked the American long-term love affair with European tapestries. A book commemorating Ffoulke and the Barberini collection was printed posthumously in 1913. The remaining bulk of his collection, some exceptionally fine seventy-six tapestries many of them containing metallic thread and hundreds of lesser weavings, was consigned by his estate to French and Company.

The second major source of stock came in 1916 with the purchase of J. P. Morgan's collection of tapestries for a reported \$1,600,000. Morgan's tapestry collection was formed primarily through the expertise and advise of that great Parisian dealer, Jacques Seligmann. Until its transfer to the United States in 1912, little was publicly known of the collection, though some hangings were lent to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Following Morgan's death in 1913, it gained greater American notice through an exhibition of Morgan's collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art galleries in 1914.

The third major source of important tapestries was the Parisian dealer Jacques Seligmann who sometimes consigned works of art for sale to French & Company following the acrimonious split in 1912 from his New York based brother Arnold Seligman.

Early Activities that Established Mitchell Samuels and French & Company with Young American Museums

One of the earliest documented actions of Mitchell Samuels was his involvement in the combined sale/gift in 1916 of the “Crucifixion” tapestry from the Morgan collection to the Metropolitan (now conserved at the Cloisters). Woven in South Germany, about 1325-50, it is the earliest European tapestry in North America. Also during the years of 1915/1916 Samuels meet Ella S. Martin, a trustee of the recently founded Minneapolis Institute of Arts, who decided in conjunction with museum staff, to acquire tapestries amongst other art works in memorial to her deceased husband, Charles Jarius Martin. One of her first purchases was a fifteenth century tapestry, circa 1480, from Tournai showing scenes from the “Story of Esther.” It had an illustrious provenance, coming from the renowned Georges Hoentschel Parisian collection and then J. P. Morgan.

It was also within this period, that French & Company sold the eight piece Antwerp set of “Dido and Aeneas,” formerly in the Barberini and Ffoulke collections, to Mrs. Francis F. Prentiss of Cleveland. The series was woven circa 1679 in the workshop of Michael Wauters after cartoons designed by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli, circa 1630-35, which miraculously survive in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. Mrs. Francis Prentiss in turn presented all eight tapestry panels to the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1915 in memory of Dr. Dudley Allen.

Relationships between French & Company and those Private Collectors

Whose Works of Art Eventually Entered Public Collections

The single, most important private customer of French & Company was William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951) who actively purchased from them for over a thirty period,

from before 1917 to 1950. The range and depth of Hearst's acquisitions are exemplified by the 378 ex-French & Company items that survive today at Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California, and by the dozens of other objects and tapestries from his collection that were dispersed across American museums through the Hearst Foundation after his death in 1951.

Hearst had an apparent passion for European tapestries and his purchases from French & Company included two sets of "Scipio Africanus" after designs by Giulio Romano. The first set of four "Scipio" scenes, woven in Brussels about 1550, was bought in 1921 for the Assembly Room of the Casa Grande at San Simeon. The position of the four tapestries above the choir stalls (another French & Company purchase) in that space necessitated the raising of the room's ceiling in order to accommodate the additional height of their display. These hangings remain in situ and can still be seen as originally intended by Hearst and his architect, Julia Morgan. Hearst's second set of "Scipio Africanus" tapestries was even more splendid than the first, since they were woven with gold and silver thread in the Brussels workshop of Cornelis and Hendrick Mattens in about 1580. They hang today in the National Geographic Theater lobby at San Simeon. Hearst purchased these four from French & Company in 1927, as the subjects complemented those already hanging in the main house on site. Hearst was so valuable a customer that Mitchell Samuels presented him with a gift of a Renaissance rock crystal and ebony casket in 1927.

As busy as Hearst's relationship was with Mitchell Samuels, it was in many ways representative of the personal rapport the firm nurtured with its clients. French & Company was lenient, lax even, in sending objects out on approval in good faith,

allowing customers time before making a decision to buy or return, and accepting goods in kind as a form of payment. Furthermore, French & Company bought goods from their clients, especially when the latter faced financial hardship. For example, a Brussels weaving of about 1525 showing “September” from the “Medallion Set of the Twelve Months,” was a tapestry that French & Company actually bought from Hearst in 1938, at a point when Hearst faced bankruptcy and was forced to liquidate his assets. French & Company, it turn, sold it shortly afterwards to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts where it remains today.

In the years following Hearst’s death in 1951, the estate and the foundation he established distributed much of his art collection that was outside San Simeon, stored in several west and east coast warehouses. This meant that Hearst purchases from French & Company passed onto diverse American institutions. For instance the Brussels set of four tapestries known as “The Ages of Man” was given by the Hearst Foundation to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1953. Additionally, four of Hearst’s five “Redemption of Man” tapestries were given in 1954 by the Hearst Foundation to the de Young Memorial Museum of San Francisco while the fifth panel, the “Manhood of Christ,” was presented to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts that same year.

Another prominent French & Company client was the Satterwhite family of Kentucky. Both Susan Barr Satterwhite and her brother Dr. Preston Pope Satterwhite were avid tapestry collectors, so active at French & Company that Mitchell Samuels was named as one of the co-executors of Dr. Satterwhite’s estate upon his death on December 1948. The Satterwhite joint gift to the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky formed the nucleus of that museum’s collection of decorative arts and foremost amongst their gift

were the six tapestries woven with metal thread from French series portraying the wars of Louis XIV, known as the “Conquests of Louis XIV.” The hangings were just recently conserved and are the focal point of the museum’s installation today.

A third client whose art purchases gave birth to a museum collection was J. Paul Getty. Apparently, Getty initially encountered Mitchell Samuels in 1936 and the resulting relationship rapidly developed beyond the simple activities of buying and selling. Mr. Getty regularly sought the advice and expertise of Mitchell Samuels, and subsequently his son Spencer. Getty relied on French & Company for price comparisons and other services. For example, this Gobelins portière, a “Chancellerie” woven for the *garde des sceaux*, Chauvelin, marquis de Grosbois, about 1730 was acquired by Getty at auction in London in 1938. By June 1939 it was with Fr & Co in New York, not as stock, but for the purpose of storage and safe keeping during the war years. It was even photographed by French & Company in June 1939, presumably at Mr. Getty’s request, and its photographic negative can still be found in the archive. In 1965 Getty gave the tapestry to his young museum in Malibu, California.

Of course, French & Company had hundreds of clients whose purchases were not so numerous but nevertheless contributed to the growth of American museum collections. In the early 1960’s a donor, a Mr. Keller, presented six French tapestries to the Detroit Institute of Arts, five of which he had previously acquired from French & Company including the “Month of February,” woven around 1712 at the Gobelins manufactory after the earlier sixteenth century Flemish cycle known as the “Months of Lucas.”

French & Company in Its Role as Agent for Museums

In addition to providing an array of services to private clients, Mitchell Samuels was also an active agent for many American museums: representing them as buyers at auction, accepting their de-accessions on consignment or as stock, or taking “duplicate” art objects as trade-ins in order to “up-grade” the institutional collection – that is, he brokered deals in which an object was traded for another of greater rarity or better condition. With Samuels’ insider knowledge of the New York art market, he was able to play “match-maker” between the quickly paced salerooms and glacially moving acquisition committees. It is in these matters that French & Company had a significant & direct impact on collection development in American museums.

A case in point was the sale and acquisition of the great tapestry set “The Story of Artemisia” to the Minneapolis Art Institute. When in May 1948 these celebrated ten pieces came up at auction in New York, from the estate of John McLean, Samuels succeed in purchasing them all in ten separate lots and immediately sold them as a group to the museum. They were among those famous tapestries purchased by Charles Ffoulke from the Barberini collection in 1889 that were brought back to Washington, D.C. Ffoulke subsequently sold all ten to Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, a notable collector of tapestries herself who surely instilled in her son, William Randolph Hearst, a similar passion at a young age. In about 1903 or 1904 Mrs. Hearst sold them to John McLean. Their appearance on the New York art market after some forty-five years sparked a keen interest as they were among largest and most extensive tapestry sets in North America, certainly worthy of display in a public institution.

One more example of French & Company’s influence as a museum agent involves yet again a Barberini/Ffoulke set of tapestries, the Minneapolis Institute of Art,

the 1948 John McLean sale, Mitchell Samuels, but also the Samuel Kress Foundation and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. “The History of Constantine” originally consisted of seven pieces, woven in the early seventeenth century at the Faubourg Saint-Marcel manufactory of François de la Planche after cartoons by Peter Paul Rubens. The set was presented as a diplomatic gift from Louis XIII to Cardinal Barberini in 1625.

Subsequently, the Cardinal decided to expand this set and commissioned Pietro da Cortona to design five additional cartoons, which were then woven in the newly established Barberini tapestry workshop in Rome over the period 1630-1641. The combined set of twelve hangings remained in the Barberini collection until the late nineteenth century when Charles Ffoulke purchased five of the Roman weavings and one of the Parisian weavings in 1889. These tapestries passed then to John Mc Lean in 1913, selling after his death in the 1948 Parke-Bernet auction. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts acquired the one French hanging, “The Foundation of Constantinople” and the other five tapestries were dispersed as separate lots. Meanwhile the original six Faubourg Saint-Marcel tapestries that were left in the Barberini collection were sold, eventually landing in an English private collection. At this point Mitchell Samuels embarked on a personal mission to re-unite the set, all twelve pieces, with the goal of having them displayed all together within one American public museum space. While simultaneously searching for a suitable institution with enough gallery space to accommodate the hangings, he started tracking the dispersed tapestries and purchasing them. This he finally accomplished in 1956 when, after having gathered together all the pieces but one, he acquired the last one “The Foundation of Constantinople” from Minneapolis Institute of Art on December 31, 1956. He then sold all twelve to the Samuel Kress Foundation, which in turn presented

the set to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in October 1959, just one month before Samuels' death. The fulfillment of this goal must have been deeply satisfying to Samuels in his last months.

Conclusion

Based on the surviving records of French & Company we have been able to reconstruct a few of the most important contributions of Mitchell Samuels and his business towards the growth of tapestry collections in American museums. This archive is, also, a crucial primary source of information for the broader concerns of wartime provenance, the dispersal of tapestry sets, and historic trends in restoration and conservation. It, furthermore, documents cases of the sometimes brutal alterations that separated tapestry borders from their narrative fields. Beyond this focus on the tapestry component of the business, the French & Company archive embodies a history of the American art market during the first half of the twentieth century and we are extremely fortunate that it has survived.