The Character of an Art Collection: Isabella Stewart Gardner, Henry Clay Frick, Albert C. Barnes, David Lloyd Kreeger, and the Donor Memorial in the U.S.

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Abstract:

Donor memorial museums represent a unique group of American art collections. These museums, created by private art collectors to perpetuate their own legacies, are among the most interesting institutions in the American art world. House museums like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Frick Collection, and the Kreeger Museum are especially intriguing because each iconoclastic collector conceived and implemented a specific vision for how visitors would view the collection. These museums, along with one of the most controversial private art collections in the country, the Barnes Foundation, share many similarities in format and creation. Each is an anomaly in its respective setting and fully projects the force and personality of its creator. The architectural styles of the buildings especially convey the eccentricities of the donors, who chose ostentatious, incongruous architectural vocabularies for 20th century Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Strong desires and wishes of the collection creators, coupled with virtually iron-clad legal wills, ensure constancy and permanence for these institutions. Although it no longer seems to be the fashion or convention of the wealthy to devote energies and resources to cultivating such private art collections, these institutions remain popular destinations for art lovers. Their continued existence allows us to understand how people of another age created monuments to themselves—museums that still fascinate and attract us today.
THE next time you visit an art museum, look around — not at the paintings, but at the people in the galleries. It’s a fair bet that women will outnumber men; even government statistics say so. Think J. P. Morgan, J. Paul Getty, Albert Barnes, Norton Simon, Paul Mellon, Henry Clay Frick, Robert Lehman. The list goes on and includes contemporary barons of industry and finance like Leon Black, Steven A. Cohen, Paul Allen and Eli Broad. In the United States, there were Isabella Stewart Gardner, one of the very few women with a major museum to her name here, and Louisine Havemeyer, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, Peggy Guggenheim, Gertrude Stein (an American in Paris), the Cone sisters and Doris Duke. The Barney A. Ebsworth Collection represents an extraordinary achievement in the history of collecting, one that illuminates the rise of American art across the 20th century. The origins of this singular assemblage, however, lie across the Atlantic in France. Ebsworth was serving in the US Army at the time, having ‘willed himself to France’ after completing his basic training. In the tradition of such esteemed American collectors as Henry Clay Frick, Isabella Stewart Gardner and Albert C. Barnes, Ebsworth, with his third wife Pamela, conceived of his residence, designed by the renowned architect Jim Olson outside Seattle, Washington, as a dialogue between art and architecture.