

The Artistic Patronage and Transatlantic Connections of Florence Blumenthal

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Florence Blumenthal (née Meyer, 1873–1930) played an important role within the discipline of early twentieth-century collecting in the United States and Europe. She was fundamental to the patronage and formation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and architectural elements and objects from her New York and Paris residences are incorporated today within the museum site, including the Cloisters. As a result of Florence's premature death at the age of fifty-seven, with no direct descendants or surviving residences, her legacy has been somewhat overlooked and undermined and she is seldom included in the histories of the Met.¹ A brief reference to Florence in such accounts argues that her 'absorbing interest in art collecting literally saved her life' following the loss of her only child, disregarding her artistic and philanthropic contributions (Tomkins, pp. 221–22).

As a result, the role of her husband George Blumenthal (1858–1941), banker, collector, and museum president and benefactor, has been privileged over Florence. This is partly due to the exclusion of Florence's name in the 1941 Metropolitan Museum bequest and the subsequent gifts that came to the museum after George's death. Consequently, Florence has not received adequate recognition for her leadership role in orchestrating the design of the couple's three houses and building their collections. Florence's family background and French heritage played a critical role in developing and achieving these endeavours and many of her siblings and nieces became leading patrons and benefactors in their own communities. This article will showcase Florence's active role in the formation of one of the most important collections in New York and France; her role as a key arbiter of taste in choreographing the various homes she occupied; her relationship with leading artists, decorators, and designers of the day; her important patronage of several philanthropic organizations; and her transatlantic influence, sociability, and artistic circles.

¹ See Calvin Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Dutton, 1970), pp. 220–21.

The Meyer women

Florence Blumenthal was an active collector during her lifetime, and according to close friends, exuded perhaps more confidence and better judgement of works of art than her husband.² Many family members, dealers, and contemporaries of the Blumenthals observed that it was Florence's taste, eye, and knowledge of art that guided the formation of the Blumenthal collection. Florence's brother, Eugene Meyer Jr, spoke very candidly about his sister's leading role in collecting:

My sister had the taste and she really had a great collection of early Italian and early French art. It was renaissance art. They built a very beautiful house on Park Avenue. The interior was Italian renaissance. There was a renaissance patio, which was brought over from Spain in its entirety. George was like J. P. Morgan and Henry Clay Frick and all of those people who had a lot of money and tried to make themselves important by art collection under the guidance of crooked dealers. But my sister had real taste. He tried to, but he really didn't know anything about art.³

Few testimonials survive that as clearly pinpoint Florence's primary role as the tastemaker and the true proprietor of the Blumenthal art collection. It also illustrates Eugene Meyer Jr's somewhat biased view of wealthy financiers and industrialists, like his brother-in-law, who presumably relied on untrustworthy dealers and were uninformed about the art they collected. While this statement usefully highlights Florence's central contribution, it undermines George Blumenthal's philanthropy and generosity and, like Morgan, his significant leadership role as president and benefactor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It also implies a degree of animosity between the two men, perhaps a result of a business or philanthropic dispute.⁴ It is one of the contentions of this article that pitting one member of the couple against the other only increases the confusion.

² Guy de Rougemont, *Lazard Frères, banquiers des deux mondes (1840–1939)* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), p. 446.

³ 'Eugene Meyer, Interviews, 6 January 1952–6 May 1952', Columbia University Oral History Research Office, p. 69, in Agnes Elizabeth Ernst Meyer Papers, Washington DC, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 169.

⁴ Eugene Meyer Jr and George Blumenthal were not only brothers-in-law by marriage, but also overlapped professionally — first at Lazard Frères, following which Blumenthal became an investor in Meyer's new firm — as well as socially, as they both sat on the board of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. See Katharine Graham, *Personal History* (New York: Vintage, 1997), pp. 9, 24; and Mount Sinai Hospital Annual Report, 1914–1916, p. 156, George Blumenthal records, Icahn School of Medicine, Mount Sinai, New York.

The international dealer to many newly wealthy collectors of the Gilded Age, Sir Joseph Duveen (1869–1939), also complimented Florence Blumenthal’s taste during their early correspondence in 1919, perhaps in an effort to flatter a potential lucrative client: ‘I know so well what you like, and am conscious enough (if I may say so!) to think that I can gauge your taste as well as anyone.’⁵

By 1919 Florence was considered by the press to be ‘one of the best known and most fastidious of collectors of art objects and a recognized connoisseur of French Gothic Art’. She often frequented annual art exhibitions at the Paris salons to identify young talent, as well as artists’ studios after finding a work she liked.⁶ Florence no doubt possessed a breadth of cultural interests, from medieval to contemporary, and has been referred to as a ‘collectionneuse éclairée’, or enlightened collector, by family members and those closest to her (Rougemont, p. 446). This reference is perhaps a response to the prejudiced assumption concurrent at the time that women had taste, but could not have a ‘good eye’.⁷ As Meaghan Clarke and Francesco Ventrella have appropriately illustrated, women played an active role in the history of connoisseurship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the quality of a ‘good eye’, which has been accepted as the chief tool of the connoisseur, should be considered an artificial construct that assigns value based on gender.⁸

Much has been written about the concept of separate spheres for women and men in America and how, from the confining private sphere of domesticity, women created and ran their own organizations, established themselves as capable fundraisers, staunch advocates, dedicated volunteers and leaders, powerful forces for social change, and tireless workers for many causes.⁹ Within this new sphere, the Meyer women were pioneering female

⁵ Papers regarding scouts, dealers, restorers, and collectors 1910–1965, Mrs George Blumenthal 1916–1941, Duveen Brothers Records, Paris, Institut national d’histoire de l’art (INHA), MF466, Box 353, Folder 8, Reel #208.

⁶ Arthur R. Blumenthal, *George Blumenthal: Art Collector and Patron* (New York: Institute of Fine Arts, 1965), p. 5.

⁷ Francesco Ventrella, ‘Constance Jocelyn Ffoulkes and the Modernization of Scientific Connoisseurship’, *Visual Resources*, 33 (2017), 117–39 (p. 117).

⁸ Meaghan Clarke and Francesco Ventrella, ‘Women’s Expertise and the Culture of Connoisseurship’, *Visual Resources*, 33 (2017), 1–10 (p. 5).

⁹ ‘A Sense of Place: A Short History of Women’s Philanthropy in America’, *The Women’s Philanthropy Institute at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University* (March 2010) <<http://www.philansci.com/we2014/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-Sense-of-Place.A-short-history-of-Womens-Philanthropy-in-America.pdf>> [accessed 4 November 2020], pp. 1–2. For more references on this topic, see Jill Conway, ‘Women Reformers and American Culture, 1870–1930’, *Journal of Social History*, 5 (1971), 164–77; Linda K. Kerber, ‘Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History’, *Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), 9–39; *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy and Power*, ed. by Kathleen D. McCarthy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); and Kathleen D. McCarthy,

patrons on both the west and east coasts. Florence Blumenthal was the third of eight children, and one of five girls, born into a prominent Jewish family in Los Angeles to parents Marc Eugene Meyer (1842–1925), known as Eugene, and Harriet Newmark (1851–1922).¹⁰ Eugene Meyer, born in Strasbourg, France, settled in California following the Gold Rush and attained great wealth as a financier. In 1883 he was offered and accepted the position of head of the San Francisco branch of the London, Paris, and American bank, Lazard Frères, relocating his family from Los Angeles in 1884. They remained in San Francisco until 1893 when Eugene was promoted to senior partner of Lazard Frères in New York.¹¹ It is extremely likely that Florence's father introduced her to her future husband, German-born financier George Blumenthal, as the two men were colleagues in the same office.

Like Florence, many of the Meyer siblings maintained a strong commitment to philanthropy, art, and education and married into other prominent Jewish families. Florence's eldest sister, Rosalie 'Ro' Meyer Stern (1869–1956), served as an important philanthropic role model for Florence as a civic and social leader of San Francisco, a patron of music, as well as a member of several boards in France, and she developed close relationships with contemporary artists.¹² Florence's younger sister, Aline Meyer Liebman (1879–1966), was also an avid collector of modern paintings, drawings, and sculpture and visited galleries and artists' studios in Paris, acquiring works by such artists as Gauguin, Vlaminck, Van Gogh, Maillol, Degas, Picasso, and Cézanne.¹³ Through her travels and collecting, Aline developed a connection to modern art collectors and influential artistic circles, such as Sarah Stein (sister-in-law of Gertrude and Leo Stein), as well as contemporary artists, such as Constantin Brâncuși, Diego Rivera, and

Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Irena Narrell, *Our City: The Jews of San Francisco* (San Diego: Howell-North, 1981), p. 356; Michele Siegel, 'Florence Meyer Blumenthal, 1875–1930', in *Jewish Women's Archive* <<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/blumenthal-florence-meyer>> [accessed 22 October 2020].

¹¹ Narrell, p. 148; Margaret Liebman Berger, *Aline Meyer Liebman: Pioneer Collector and Artist* (Canandaigua: Humphrey, 1982), p. 43; Graham, p. 6.

¹² Rosalie's only child, Elise Stern Haas (1893–1990), likewise became an active philanthropist and patron of the arts, hospitals, and Jewish organizations. She was also an early collector of modern art and was instrumental in the formation of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, serving as its first female president and bequeathing her collection to the museum. See Narrell, pp. 351–52, 360, 369; Rosalie Meyer Stern Papers, 1842–1977, Berkeley, University of California, Bancroft Library (BL); Grace Glueck, 'Photography Review; Women Who Focused Lenses on Old New York', *New York Times*, 4 April 2003, section E, p. 38.

¹³ Berger, p. 43. For more information on Charles and Aline Liebman's art collection, see the auction catalogue, 'The Liebman Collection of Valuable Modern Paintings, Drawings, and Sculptures', Parke-Bernet Galleries, Inc., New York (7 December 1955).

Georgia O’Keeffe. Aline played an active role in the inception and early years of the Museum of Modern Art in New York during the 1930s where she served as chairman of the executive committee of exhibitions, collaborating with Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, wife of financier and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr, and lent several paintings and sculpture from her collection (Berger, pp. 68–70).

Florence’s family’s involvement with philanthropic activities and charitable work is consistent with contemporary upper- and middle-class women’s roles during the mid-nineteenth century when the ‘Woman Movement’ developed in America in order to improve their status in society, resulting in the debut of the ‘New Woman’ at the turn of the twentieth century and a national redefinition of gender roles (McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, p. 149). This involved the initiation of charitable benevolence, social welfare and freedoms, civic rights, higher education, remunerative occupations, and women’s suffrage.¹⁴ For Florence, collecting, philanthropy, and the involvement with artistic circles were all natural extensions of her family upbringing and served as platforms for cultural leadership. Artistic patronage and vibrant arts organizations offered women, like Florence, an entrée into the public sphere and provided them with a venue for shaping culture.¹⁵ As Dianne Sachko Macleod has argued, collecting and consumerism prompted increased female self-expression, individualism, confidence, and the ability to network outside the home amid an otherwise confining environment (pp. 11, 92). Florence’s ability to launch new initiatives and unite leading artistic talents was a means of establishing her own identity, independently from her husband.

New York interiors and the development of the Blumenthal aesthetic

There is less information known about the early years of George and Florence Blumenthal’s relocation to New York in the late nineteenth century compared to their activities in the first quarter of the twentieth century. However, letters from Florence to her siblings in San Francisco, as early as 1894, just one year after the Meyer family’s permanent relocation to New York, illustrate that she was already immersed in an elite Jewish and artistic social circle, frequently dining with prominent collectors and businessmen, including Sidney Rothschild, Arthur and George Herzog,

¹⁴ Susan M. Cruea, ‘Changing Ideals of Womanhood during the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement’, General Studies Writing Faculty Publications, Paper 1 (2005) <http://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw_pub/1> [accessed 22 October 2020], p. 187.

¹⁵ Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 220.

Henri Blum, Helen Rothschild, Gertie Rothschild, David David-Weill, the Guggenheims, Arthur Lehman, Allie Wuttenberg, Jessie Strauss, Eugene Hellman, and Herbert Kahn, among others.¹⁶ While George and Florence were a generation younger than the first wave of German-Jewish banking families who emigrated to New York in the mid-nineteenth century, the Meyer family would have overlapped with many of these figures. As senior partners of Lazard Frères, both Eugene Meyer Sr and George Blumenthal would also have interacted and socialized with many of the founders and partners of the prominent international banking houses.¹⁷

The year 1898 proved to be a fundamental moment for George and Florence Blumenthal in the formation of their partnership. It was not only the year of their marriage, but also that of the birth of their only son, George Jr, and the relocation to a temporary furnished rental home at 36 West 46th Street in Manhattan, their first joint residence.¹⁸ In a letter to her sister Rosalie Stern in San Francisco, Florence described the interior furnishings of the couple's first home together:

There is a sculpture hall with large carved cabinets, benches, etc. and only a few plants [...]. Walls [...] are hung with tapestries. To the right is a door leading to the side entrance, kitchen etc, all very light and cheerful. Going upstairs, a large foyer hall furnished with very beautiful tapestries, especially the furniture. The parlor is the finest of all — it is hung in red striped satin and there are fine tapestries, each with a narrow gilt frame around. The furniture is red brocade and white enameled frames. A number of tables of all sizes [...]. From the foyer hall is the dining room. The dining room is a little small — also hung in tapestries and old furniture. The chairs are over 100 years old and very comfortable. Their silver looks lovely on the sideboards one on each side of the room. The library is also red, dark wood and open bookshelves. In this room, they have most of George's paintings which add to the heart of the room which is not very large not anything grand but very easy and comfortable [...]. Above are two splendid bedrooms, a nice bath and a small ballroom which the maid has.¹⁹

The decoration of this early apartment undoubtedly had a lasting effect on the Blumenthals. The use of tapestries, satin-covered walls, and antique

¹⁶ Rosalie Meyer Stern Papers, BL, Cartons 1:36, 2:1; Berger, p. 43.

¹⁷ For more information on the Jewish upper-class life in New York, see Stephen Birmingham, *'Our Crowd': The Great Jewish Families of New York* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1967).

¹⁸ Germain Seligman, *Merchants of Art, 1880–1960: Eighty Years of Professional Collecting* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961), p. 144; Rosalie Meyer Stern Papers, BL, Carton 2:15.

¹⁹ Rosalie Meyer Stern Papers, BL, Carton 2:15.

furniture provided an initial introduction to a New York, Gilded Age aesthetic and served as a model for their future homes. While perhaps not yet seasoned collectors during the preliminary years of their engagement and marriage, Florence's mention of 'George's paintings' highlight his early interest in collecting, which soon expanded to the joint purchase of furniture and works of art as a couple. Just a few years later in 1902, the Blumenthals built a four-storey Beaux-Arts style mansion at 23 West 53rd Street.²⁰ It was designed by the New York architectural firm of Hunt & Hunt, renowned for their sprawling Gilded Age estates in Newport and Vanderbilt mansions along Fifth Avenue. The Blumenthal Beaux-Arts mansion was described in the press as 'one of the best midblock mansions ever erected in New York'.²¹ The fact that the Blumenthals selected a renowned architect to some of the newly wealthy families in America suggests that they were perhaps concerned with establishing their position in society during these early years.

Not long after the completion of the house on West 53rd Street, the Blumenthals built a second, larger house on the Upper East Side. As a result of the significant expansion of their collections during the first quarter of the twentieth century, including the purchase of significant architectural elements, notably the sixteenth-century Vélez Blanco Spanish patio in 1913, it is likely that the need for a larger, fully detached residence soon followed. It was not uncommon for collectors during this period to express interest in and gain access to such architectural art, which was often oriented towards export as its large scale made it difficult to place in European museums. Renaissance architecture, in particular, became extremely fashionable in the United States, most likely a direct result of the increased supply of architectural fragments and furnishings from abandoned great European houses that began to appear on the art market.²² Art connoisseurs and collectors, like the Blumenthals, were able to visit the residences of European dealers and decorators abroad, which often exhibited study collections and salvaged elements from demolished chateaux and abbeys that subsequently may have served as models of display back home.²³ The

²⁰ Office for Metropolitan History, 'Manhattan Database 1900–1986' <<http://www.MetroHistory.com>> [accessed 22 October 2020]; 'The Real Estate Field', *New York Times*, 26 February 1916, p. 14.

²¹ Christopher Gray, 'Streetscapes/West 53rd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues; Commerce, and Art, Eclipse a Town House Block', *New York Times*, 14 February 1999, p. 7.

²² Renaissance-style architecture was also promoted by renowned Gilded Age architects Stanford White and Charles F. McKim in New York. See Olga Raggio, 'The Vélez Blanco Patio: An Italian Renaissance Monument from Spain', *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 23 (1964), 141–76 (p. 142). For more on Stanford White, see Wayne Craven, *Stanford White: Decorator in Opulence and Dealer in Antiquities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

²³ The townhouse of architect and decorator Émile Peyre (1828–1904), who

Blumenthals' interest in European architectural salvages was also an interest of New York banker and collector J. P. Morgan, who likely served as a model for George Blumenthal both in business and collecting, and who began buying medieval art around 1902, acquiring large groups of carved wood panelling and decorative objects from the interior designer and decorator, Georges Hoentschel, that Morgan gifted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1906.²⁴ Other notable collectors, such as William K. and Alva Vanderbilt, William Randolph Hearst, and Henry Walters created rooms for their homes to display medieval art.²⁵ The dynamics between wealthy American collectors who saw themselves as the new aristocracy and sought to accumulate objects that reflected the prestige of Old World nobility no doubt helped stimulate the demand for works of art that reflected these tastes, and dealers were in search of works that fed these collecting trends.

In 1911 the Blumenthals acquired a significant plot of land on East 70th Street and Park Avenue, on which the exterior of their limestone mansion was completed in 1914. During World War I, the Blumenthals began spending increasing amounts of time in France due to George's position at Lazard Frères, likely influencing their collecting and facilitating a number of purchases of works of art for their new Manhattan residence (Rougement, p. 343). The three-storey residence was designed in the Italian Renaissance style by the New York architectural firm of Trowbridge and Livingston. The firm's residential buildings of the first decades of the twentieth century had been designed in a variety of styles popular during this period, including neo-Federal, Beaux-Arts, and neo-Italian Renaissance, and they undertook commissions for private residences for a rich and powerful clientele, including Horace Havemeyer, Henry Phipps, and Arthur Sachs, all located on the Upper East Side not far from the Blumenthals.²⁶ The couple's transition to a larger, more permanent residence was consistent with the new millionaire

independently acquired ten friezes previously incorporated into the Vélez Blanco patio, was located near the Blumenthals' residence in Paris and was accessible for public tours. It is possible that George Blumenthal may have seen them on display before Peyre donated them to the Louvre in 1903.

²⁴ Christine E. Brennan, 'Hoentschel's Gothic Importance', in *Salvaging the Past: Georges Hoentschel and French Decorative Arts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. by Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, Deborah L. Krohn, and Ulrich Leben (New York: Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture, 2013), pp. 144–63 (p. 145).

²⁵ Flaminia Gennari-Santori and Charlotte Vignon, 'From Private Homes to Museum Galleries: Medieval Art in America from 1880 to 1940', in *Gothic Art in the Gilded Age: Medieval and Renaissance Treasures in the Gavet-Vanderbilt-Ringling Collection*, ed. by Virginia Brilliant (Sarasota: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2009), pp. 52–63 (pp. 53, 58, 59).

²⁶ Katherine C. Moore, Trowbridge & Livingston Research Files, 1892–2010, New York, Columbia University, Avery Library, Department of Architectural Drawings and Archives.

society who saw their home as the ultimate demonstration of wealth and social status, as well as the principal setting to showcase their collection and allowing them to develop their philanthropic goals.²⁷ A contemporary newspaper described the firm's project for the Blumenthals as 'the largest individual operation lately completed [...] occupying half of the avenue frontage [...]. The house is a model of simplicity and dignified elegance.'²⁸ As a result of wartime delays, the interiors were completed over the following six years and the Blumenthals moved into their new home, prior to completion, by February 1918. The interiors, finally completed between 1919 and 1920, were principally designed by Goodhue Livingston and the Paris-based decorating firm of L. Alavoine et Cie.²⁹

The Metropolitan Museum of Art archives reveal that the design of the interiors was completed in collaboration with Florence (George Blumenthal files, MMA). In his description of the sumptuous interiors of their New York residence, Germain Seligman, one of the Blumenthals' principal art dealers, also credited Florence with creating impressive, yet intimate, interiors in the New York house:

Once inside, the impression of austerity was replaced by a world of imagination, far from the material bustle of New York. It was a dreamlike oasis of beauty, complete with melodious sound of running water from the patio fountain, often the only sound of greeting. At dusk, the light from a table lamp opposite the entrance gave to the high, wide court a quality at once eerie and intimate, as it reduced the proportions and picked up the warmth of the blooming flowers, green plants, and oriental rugs. It is difficult to explain how so sumptuous and impressive a house could be so intimate; this was but one of the achievements of an extraordinary woman [...]. Florence Blumenthal moved about like a fairy-tale princess [...]. In the evening, she often wore Renaissance velvet gowns, in dark jewel-like colors which [...] gave her an air of having been born to this superb environment where every work of art seemed tirelessly at home. (Seligman, pp. 142–43)

First-hand accounts, like those of Seligman, that detail the tranquillity and harmonious interiors, and highlight the talents of Florence Blumenthal, suggest that she likely had more direct contact with the designers and dealers involved in the planning and acquisitions for the Park Avenue home

²⁷ Wayne Craven, *Gilded Mansions: Grand Architecture and High Society* (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 36.

²⁸ 'The Private Home Centre is Advancing up Fifth Avenue', *New York Times*, 7 December 1913, section 9, p. 112.

²⁹ George Blumenthal files, Office of the Secretary Records, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives (MMA).

than her husband. This theatrical description also evokes the photograph of Florence in a Renaissance velvet gown by Baron Adolf de Meyer and described in more detail below. The notion of living in a Renaissance style was perhaps Florence's way of animating the interior and collection, similar to collector Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924), who constructed an Italian Renaissance palace, complete with period courtyard, indoor fountains, and antique architectural elements at her Fenway Court palace in Boston.

Although there is no concrete evidence that the Blumenthals ever visited Fenway Court, it is extremely likely that Gardner's house museum, with its central garden courtyard featuring a mix of Roman, medieval, and Renaissance sculpture and fountains bordered by surrounding galleries, served as a model for the Blumenthal New York home (*Fig. 1*).³⁰ George and Florence Blumenthal also emulated Gardner's predilection for collecting



Fig. 1: The home of George and Florence Blumenthal, 50 East 70th Street, New York, 1920s, print, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 106.1 B622 Folio). © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

³⁰ Histories of the Metropolitan Museum of Art state that Florence was acquainted with Isabella Stewart Gardner (e.g. Tomkins, p. 220).

a broad array of works by using period architectural fragments — such as columns, capitals, reliefs, balconies, fountains, and ceilings, as well as Italian Renaissance furniture and decoration, including cassones and candelabras — in both their New York and Paris residences.³¹

In contrast to the medieval and Gothic interiors of the principal rooms of the first and second floor, the main feature of the Blumenthals' basement level of the Park Avenue house was an indoor swimming pool, the only recorded example on the Upper East Side in the period, decorated with marine wall murals completed around 1920 by the contemporary artist Paul Thévenaz (1891–1921), colourfully described in a record of the artist's work (*Fig. 2*):

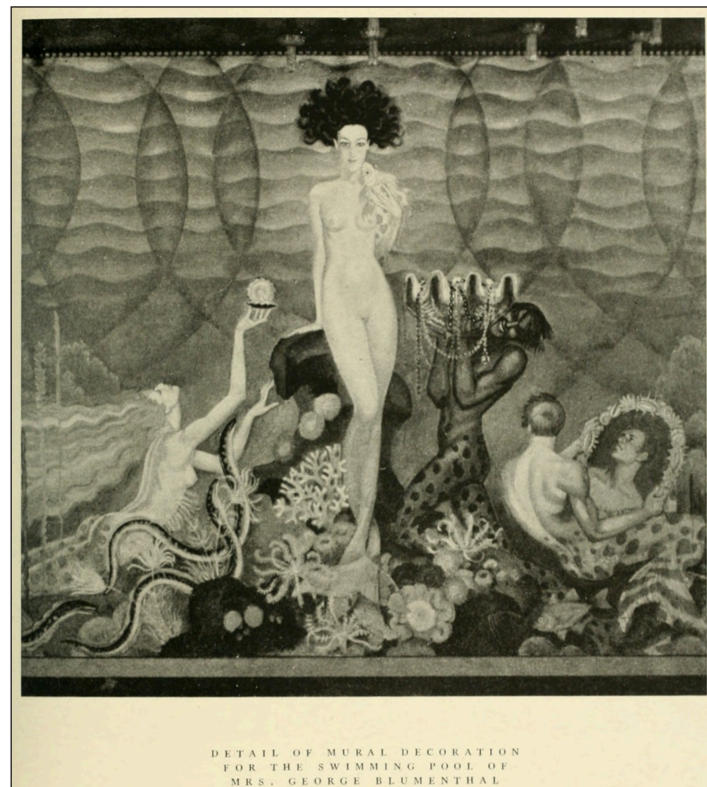


Fig. 2: Paul Thévenaz, Detail of mural decoration for the swimming pool of Mrs George Blumenthal, in *Paul Thévenaz: A Record of His Life and Art* (New York: Privately printed, 1922), unpaginated.

³¹ Archival records confirm that Florence visited Boston for two weeks in March 1917. See René Brimo, *The Evolution of Taste in American Collecting*, trans. and ed. by Kenneth Haltman (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016), p. 190; and Papers regarding scouts, dealers, restorers, and collectors, 1910–1965, Duveen Brothers Records, INHA.

Another masterpiece is the private swimming pool in Mrs. George Blumenthal's New York home. The bare walls surrounding the pool have been transformed into a gorgeous, poetic sea garden. Against an aqua-marine background of undersea tone, float myriad-colored sea anemones, glittering shoals of deep-sea fish, tall iridescent water flowers, great jewelled shells and dreaming mermaids with long tresses of seaweed texture [...]. In this swimming pool [...] Mr. Thévenaz revelled in the exotic, the foreign, the imaginative!³²

The reference to 'Mrs. George Blumenthal's New York home' implies that the commission of the wall murals was likely the idea of Florence, reflecting her interest in contemporary art and her patronage of young artists. In addition to working for Florence, Thévenaz was commissioned to create other whimsical murals for art collectors and patrons, including Mrs Frederick Havemeyer on Long Island and James Deering at Vizcaya in Miami (*Paul Thévenaz*, pp. 15, 17).

During the design and decoration of her Park Avenue residence, Florence Blumenthal also collaborated intimately with the French interior designer, Armand-Albert Rateau (1882–1938). The Blumenthals commissioned Rateau to produce the iron patio furniture and lighting for their indoor pool, the first designs under his own name, which he delivered in 1920 while completing their Venetian-style ballroom on the first floor of the house. The journal of artist Paul Landowski, a close friend of Florence, records that in June 1925 George Blumenthal brought him to see the iron-work furniture that Florence designed in collaboration with Rateau.³³ Once again, Florence was involved in both the design and decoration of the furnishings of the interiors, combining a blend of historical and art deco elements, and reiterating Germain Seligman's earlier reference to her as an 'extraordinary woman' (Seligman, pp. 142–43). Bourgeois Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, regarded household interiors as expressions of the women who inhabited them and American women with money to spend turned to their homes to define themselves.³⁴ The role of female collecting during the early twentieth century also served as a liberating vehicle that enabled women to move away from the narrowly defined spaces of the luxurious interiors of the Gilded Age towards wide-open exterior spaces marked by the fresher possibilities of civic involvement (Macleod, p. 5). Interior design can thus be seen as a key domain of

³² *Paul Thévenaz: A Record of His Life and Art, together with an Essay on Style by the Artist* (New York: privately printed, 1922), pp. 16–17.

³³ *Journal de Paul Landowski: Un Artiste Humaniste* (1902–1959) <<http://journal.paul-landowski.com/node/348>> [accessed 22 October 2020], entry for 5 June 1925.

³⁴ Kristin Hoganson, 'Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865–1920', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), 55–83.

artistic expression and was an extension of Florence's passion for the late Gothic and early Middle Ages, as well as the contemporary art deco style.

Paris interiors

On 16 August 1919 the Blumenthals acquired a late nineteenth-century neo-Grecian style mansion, incorporating an orangerie and extensive gardens measuring approximately three thousand acres, at 11–13 boulevard de Montmorency (situated between the boulevard de Montmorency and the rue du Docteur Blanche) in the neighbourhood of Auteuil in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, an historically picturesque and artistic neighbourhood with many prominent Jewish families.³⁵ By this period, Paris had become the dominant centre of urban Jewish culture and bankers, like George Blumenthal, would not have had as much difficulty integrating into society circles as in New York.³⁶ The Blumenthals' social activities, charitable donations, and travels between France and the United States were frequently publicized in the Parisian newspaper *Le Gaulois*, revealing that they attended the weddings of French aristocrats, the premieres of the Ballets Russes, and concerts at the homes of singers and composers.³⁷ The French property was purchased in Florence's name (perhaps for tax purposes) for two million francs and paid in cash.³⁸ Over the course of eight successive transactions, the Blumenthals eventually acquired several additional parcels of adjacent land, both by exchange or additional purchase, to arrive at the home address known as 15 boulevard de Montmorency, ultimately measuring approximately six thousand acres.³⁹ While there are no known surviving illustrations of the interior of the house, there are,

³⁵ Collection des éphémères, 35 Act Bd de Montmorency, Paris, Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris (BHVP); Archives de Paris, Vol 757; and Commission du vieux Paris, Casier archéologique, 16e–73.

³⁶ Jay R. Berkovitz, *The Shaping of a Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 113.

³⁷ For more on the Blumenthals' social activity, see the following issues of *Le Gaulois*: 16 May 1913, p. 2; 27 June 1921, p. 2; 7 April 1925, p. 2; 3 May 1928, p. 2; 2 June 1928, p. 2; and 3 October 1928, p. 2. For their charitable donations in *Le Gaulois*, see 14 November 1912, p. 2; 6 November 1918; 18 January 1924, p. 2; 25 December 1924, p. 2; and 24 June 1927, p. 1.

³⁸ Notary M. Robert Revel, Paris, Act 10552.

³⁹ Commission du vieux Paris; Loïc Métrope and Edmée Benoist de la Grandière, *La résidence du Parc de Montmorency et avant? Entre les deux guerres: une présence américaine, George et Florence Blumenthal* (Paris: Librairie, 34 rue du Docteur Blanche, 2002), p. 13. Coincidentally, George Blumenthal's colleague, banker Michel Lazard, sold 36 rue du Docteur Blanche to the Blumenthals on 13 July 1922.

however, several photographs of the exterior and gardens conserved in scrapbooks, topography albums of Paris, and architectural records.⁴⁰

As in New York, Florence was deeply involved in the renovation and installation of the Parisian residence. Her brother-in-law, Sigmund Stern, wrote of George and Florence's Paris home in 1921: 'the Blumenthals expect to be in their new Paris home by August — I'll wager it is a gem — leave it to her — and to George to pay for it. Both experts in their respective lines' (Narrell, p. 361). Stern's comment implies (similar to Eugene Meyer Jr's comment cited above) that Florence was the true arbiter of taste in the relationship and George was merely the financier. In 1923 Sigmund Stern visited the Blumenthals' new Parisian home, recalling that 'we lunched with Florie and George in their new home yesterday set in a four acre park, all I can say is that it's a jewel and her individuality is everywhere in evidence' (Narrell, p. 361).

Shortly after the purchase of the house and property, Florence Blumenthal oversaw the construction of a *Salle Gothique* (hereafter referred to as the Gothic room) adjoining the main house, the architectural plans for which were approved for construction in February 1922 (*Fig. 3*).⁴¹ A letter from the architects, Bouwens de Boijen and Bouterin, requesting permission from the prefect to construct a *salle de concert* on the property, as well as architectural blueprints and records, identify Florence as the owner of the property and the originator of the design concept for the Gothic room.⁴² This room, above all, personified Florence and served as a vehicle for her to demonstrate her intention to hold public engagements, social gatherings, musical concerts, and charitable meetings.⁴³ As Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz have fittingly summarized, collecting medieval works in Europe had been associated with private consumption since the *fin de siècle* and public displays of medieval art in newly formed museums and World's Fairs in Paris helped inspire and create the museum home, transforming the viewer into both connoisseur and consumer.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See George and Florence Blumenthal Scrapbook (G. & F. B. Scrapbook), European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Topographie de la France, Paris 16 arr., 6ième quartier, Boulevard Montmorency-Propriété Blumenthal (H83187–H83189), Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), Département des Estampes.

⁴¹ Archives de Paris, VO11, VO13 197.

⁴² The *Salle Gothique* is also referred to as a *salle de spectacle*, *salle de concert*, and *salle de musique*. However, the architectural elevations identify it as the *Salle Gothique*. See Métrope and de la Grandière, p. 15; and *Notice sur les fragments de monuments anciens ayant servi à construire la Salle de Musique de l'hôtel du 15 boulevard de Montmorency à Paris* (Paris: Lévy, 1930).

⁴³ Following Florence's death, elements of the Gothic room were ultimately donated between 1933 and 1934 by George Blumenthal to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for incorporation into the Cloisters.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, 'From the Living Room to the Museum

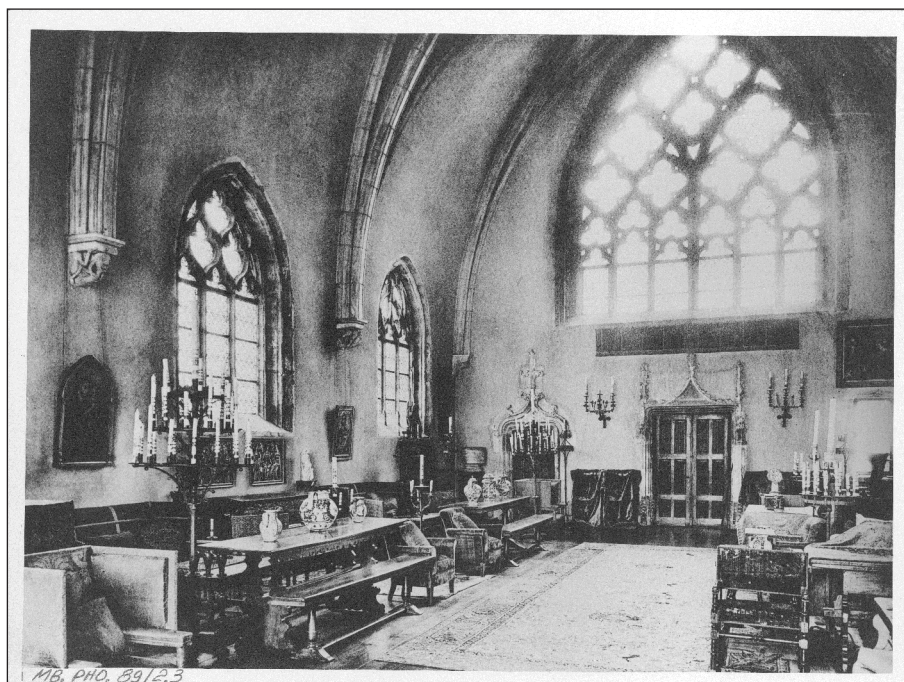


Fig. 3: Interior view of the Blumenthal's Gothic room, 15 boulevard de Montmorency, Paris, c. 1920, Fonds Bouutterin. Académie d'architecture/Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine/Archives d'architecture du XX^e siècle, Paris.

Due to the various complexities involved in the planning and construction of the Gothic room, Florence played an active role in surveying the entire project, requiring that every detail was submitted in advance, unafraid to refuse any of the proposed designs (Métrope and de la Grandière, p. 20). Her direct involvement with the planning of the room is again reminiscent of Isabella Stewart Gardner's daily presence and personal charge of logistics during the purchases of the architectural fragments and construction of Fenway Court in Boston.⁴⁵ In accordance with the notion that Gothic rooms were appropriate places for concerts and meditation, void of religious associations, Florence commissioned a large organ for the reception area of the Gothic room. Her interest in holding public music concerts here is similar to the role of music salons hosted by prominent, wealthy Jewish women in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna from the nineteenth century until the 1920s.⁴⁶ The concerts likely served as a method for Florence to penetrate

and Back Again: The Collection and Display of Medieval Art in the *Fin de Siècle*, *Journal of the History of Collections*, 16 (2004), 285–309 (pp. 287, 303).

⁴⁵ Aline B. Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors: The Lives, Times and Tastes of Some Adventurous American Art Collectors* (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 48–49.

⁴⁶ Leon Botstein, 'Music, Femininity, and Jewish Identity: The Tradition and

French culture and society and speaks to women's gifts as patrons of the arts and cultivators of talent. A close friend and member of Florence's intimate Parisian circle, Jeanne Mühlfeld (née Meyer, 1875–1953), was a famous literary hostess and may have inspired Florence's own salon. Like Florence, Winnaretta Singer (1865–1943), Princess Edmond de Polignac and heiress to the Singer sewing machine fortune, was another American-born expat living in Paris who established a renowned music salon and became an important patron of the arts.⁴⁷ As a member of the elite strata of French society, it is possible that Winnaretta also served as a model for Florence in Paris.

In addition to the Gothic, Florence Blumenthal also had a passion for French eighteenth-century works of art, including drawings, mounted European and Asian porcelains, sculpture, and, above all, royal furniture. Following the completion of their Paris residence, the couple purchased a mechanical table made by the German cabinetmaker, Jean-Henri Riesener (1734–1806), for Queen Marie Antoinette of France, delivered in 1778, prior to the birth of the queen's first child (*Fig. 4*).⁴⁸ The table was most likely sold during the French Revolutionary sales and exported to England, as was the case for many other pieces of French royal furniture during this period, although its whereabouts during most of the nineteenth century are unknown. It was ultimately acquired by the Blumenthals sometime before 1930, perhaps directly from the previous owner, Viscountess Harcourt (née Mary Ethel Burns and niece of J. P. Morgan) in London, as the Blumenthals may have been introduced to Mary by her uncle during his lifetime.⁴⁹ Following Florence's death, the Riesener table was featured in the Blumenthal collection sale and received a great deal of interest from important clients and bidders.⁵⁰ As a result, George Blumenthal asked the auctioneer to raise its estimate from 300,000 to 650,000 francs and even attempted to reacquire the table himself by submitting a maximum bid of

Legacy of the Salon', in *Jewish Women and Their Salons: The Power of Conversation*, ed. by Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 159–70.

⁴⁷ Thomas Stammers, 'Old French and New Money: Jews and the Aesthetics of the Old Regime in Transnational Perspective, c. 1860–1910', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 18 (2019), 489–512 (p. 497).

⁴⁸ Florence Blumenthal's boudoir in New York also contained a suite of furniture made by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené for Marie Antoinette's dressing room at Saint-Cloud in 1788, including an armchair, an upholstered fire screen with an original show cover (believed to have been embroidered by Marie Antoinette herself), and a daybed.

⁴⁹ For more information, see Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, 'French Royal Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art', *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 63.3 (2006), 1–48 (pp. 20–22).

⁵⁰ See sale catalogue, 'Collection de M. George Blumenthal', Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 1–2 December 1932, lot 168 (hereafter 'Collection de M. George Blumenthal').



Fig. 4: Jean-Henri Riesener, Mechanical table, Paris, 1778, oak, veneered with marquetry, gilt bronze, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 33.12).

650,000 francs, perhaps due to its historical significance or its close association with Florence.⁵¹ The importance of this small mechanical table is corroborated by the fact that it was ultimately acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, preceding the Blumenthal bequest that would come to the museum less than a decade later.⁵²

Riesener furniture, in particular, became highly collectable during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, consequent upon the fetishization of furniture associated with Marie Antoinette. There has been much scholarship to date on collectors drawn to pieces with French royal provenance, specifically self-made millionaires buying aristocratic heritage as a symbol of noble status not acquired by birth, and it was common for high society American doyennes to be infatuated with the French queen, even dressing up like her.⁵³ Newly wealthy Jewish aristocrats, like

⁵¹ Archives de Paris, D43E3 125; 'Collection de M. George Blumenthal'.

⁵² Jean Henri Riesener, Mechanical Table (Table mécanique), 1778 <<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/197339>> [accessed 22 October 2020].

⁵³ For more information, see Arnold Lewis, James Turner, and Steven McQuillin,

the Blumenthals, may have also regarded and employed this area of collecting as a means of assimilation and a display of appreciation for French culture. Another twentieth-century female collector who was passionate about French royal furniture, including Riesener's, was the heiress, collector, and philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post (1887–1973). Post acquired two pieces of eighteenth-century French furniture, including a small ladies' writing table, from the collection of George and Florence Blumenthal, conserved today at Hillwood Estate, Museum, and Gardens in Washington DC (*Fig. 5*).⁵⁴



Fig. 5: Ladies' writing table (*Bonheur-du-Jour*), Paris, c. 1785, mahogany, teakwood, gilt bronze, marble, Hillwood Estate, Museum, and Gardens, Washington DC (inv. 31.3).

The Opulent Interiors of the Gilded Age (Mineola: Dover, 1987).

⁵⁴ Hillwood was Post's final residence that she acquired and renovated between 1955 and 1957. She bequeathed the property and collection to the public following her death and it opened as a public institution in 1977.

A likely important female influence on Florence Blumenthal's collecting was Béatrice Ephrussi de Rothschild (1864–1934) who also appreciated a similar combination of antique architectural elements, Catholic art, French eighteenth-century decorative arts, as well as contemporary creations, in her townhouse in Paris and her villa in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat.⁵⁵ Before purchasing the property on the boulevard de Montmorency, the Blumenthals briefly settled at 21 avenue du Bois de Boulogne in the 16th arrondissement (today avenue Foch), a property belonging to Ephrussi, whom the Blumenthals may have been introduced to through Jacques Seligmann upon their arrival in Paris.⁵⁶ The Blumenthals' early connection to Béatrice, whether as close acquaintances or simply tenants, illustrates an association with an influential woman and collector in the upper echelon of Parisian society, as well as an exposure to *Le Goût Rothschild*. The Blumenthals' subsequent acquisition of a third property near Grasse, known as the Château de Malbosc, may also have been a result of Béatrice's inspiration and guidance.⁵⁷

Philanthropy and the patronage of contemporary art

Like many of her siblings, Florence Blumenthal embodied a similar passion for avant-garde art, music, and literature and was immersed in an artistic milieu in post-war Paris. Perhaps her single most important artistic achievement was the creation in 1919 of the American Foundation for French Art and Thought (La Fondation américaine pour la pensée et l'art français), a name proposed by close friend and poet Paul Valéry, which awarded a two-year grant to young French artists and strengthened the cultural connections between the United States and France.⁵⁸ In order to unite art, music, and literature, she assembled seven juries in the fields of literature, painting, sculpture, decorative arts, architecture, engraving, and music to select the recipients of the award and stipends. The various juries comprised the most talented specialists in each discipline, including estab-

⁵⁵ In 1933, a year before her death, Béatrice bequeathed her seaside villa and collection to the Academy of Fine Arts division of the Institut de France and it is still open to the public today.

⁵⁶ Archives de Paris, VOII 353; Pauline Prévost-Marcilhacy, *Les Rothschild: une dynastie de mécènes en France*, 3 vols (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2016), II: 1922–1935, 254.

⁵⁷ Béatrice purchased a pair of eighteenth-century Sèvres porcelain flowerpots from the Blumenthal collection sale in 1932, just two years before her death and conserved at the Villa Ephrussi today, suggesting that the collecting link between these two families may have been meaningful and enduring.

⁵⁸ The foundation has also been referred to as La Fondation franco-américaine Florence Blumenthal, La Fondation américaine Blumenthal, and L'Association Florence Blumenthal. See *Premier Recueil de l'Association Florence Blumenthal* (Paris: Librairie de Paris, 1935).

lished writers and poets, such as André Gide, Paul Valéry, Edmond Jaloux, and Anna de Noailles; composers such as Gabriel Fauré, Vincent d'Indy, and Maurice Ravel; and artists, including Aristide Maillol, Paul Landowski, Édouard Vuillard, and Jean Dunand, further illustrating the circle of artists that Florence surrounded herself with in Paris.⁵⁹ Soon after the creation of the foundation, the press announced the newly created stipends conceived by Florence, praising her generosity, efforts, and initiative, accompanied by a portrait photograph.⁶⁰ In addition to her own financial support, and those of her wealthy friends, the foundation received many donations from French statesmen. Following Florence's death it was remarked that rarely has any act of fundraising reunited such eminent sponsors, a testament to her impressive talents and social network. Between 1920 and 1954, 178 scholarships were awarded in the seven disciplines biannually, held in the Blumenthals' Gothic room until Florence's death in 1930.⁶¹ Artistic patronage and vibrant arts organizations, like Florence's foundation, offered women an entrée into the public sphere and provided them with a venue for shaping transatlantic trends (Macleod, p. 220).

Parallel to their philanthropic support of French artists and art organizations in both America and France, George and Florence Blumenthal also made many large donations, both separately and as a couple, to medical, educational, and cultural institutions in France, including the Sorbonne, the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, the American Hospital of Paris, the Necker Children's Hospital, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Association France-Amériques, and the Louvre Museum. Despite a rise in donations of works of art to the Louvre at the end of the nineteenth century until World War I, very few foreign collectors during this period bequeathed works of art to European museums.⁶² The Blumenthals proved to be an exception. The Blumenthal donation to the Louvre also occurred at a time when larger, personal donations were becoming increasingly rare, perhaps as a result of the formation of the Louvre's Société des amis, an independent association of benefactors created in 1897 by a group of male officials in the political and arts administration sectors to help enrich the museum's collections.⁶³ In recognition of their charitable work in France

⁵⁹ *Premier Recueil*; and Siegel, 'Florence Meyer Blumenthal'.

⁶⁰ Sébastien Voirol, 'Livres et auteurs', *Comoedia illustré*, 20 October 1920, p. 42.

⁶¹ Letter of George Blumenthal de l'Association Florence Blumenthal, 10 June 1931, BHVP; *Premier Recueil*.

⁶² Véronique Long, 'Les collectionneurs d'oeuvres d'art et la donation au musée à la fin du XIX^e siècle: l'exemple du musée du Louvre', *Romantisme*, 112 (2001), 45–54 (pp. 50, 52).

⁶³ Felicity Bodenstein, 'A Show of Generosity: Donations and the Intimacy of Display in the "Cabinet des médailles et antiques" in Paris from 1830 to 1930', in *Museum and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities*, ed. by Kate Hill, Heritage Matters, 9 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), pp. 13–28 (p. 17).

and contributions to French cultural life, both George and Florence Blumenthal were awarded the Légion d'honneur in 1929.⁶⁴

Positioning through portraiture

Continuously described throughout her life as a woman of exquisite taste and passionate about clothes, Florence Blumenthal repeatedly used portraiture and her close relationships with contemporary artists as a means to promote her identity. Two early portraits of Florence by the renowned Italian portraitist active in Paris, Giovanni Boldini (1842–1931), likely commissioned by Florence herself and completed in Boldini's Paris studio, highlight her attractive physique and discernment regarding modern fashion. Leading members of New York, London, and Paris society commissioned portraits from Boldini, including Consuelo Vanderbilt (1877–1964), Gladys Deacon (1881–1977), and Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), as a symbol of rank, position, and celebrity.⁶⁵ By presenting herself as a fashionable, cultured, and modern woman, Florence demonstrates a self-awareness and creative consciousness.

The first portrait by Boldini, completed in 1896, portrays Florence at the age of twenty-three, seated in profile bearing her right shoulder, wearing a long silver dress and a long strand of pearls, arm bracelet, and diamond-studded diadem (*Fig. 6*). Because this early portrait was commissioned just one year after the Meyer family's relocation from San Francisco to New York, and two years before Florence's marriage to George Blumenthal, it most likely represented her coming out as a fashionable and attractive, yet demure, young woman in society. This portrait likely hung in Paris during their marriage and it was subsequently donated by George in 1936 to the Réunion des musées nationaux in Florence's memory, a reversal of the common pattern of women donors commemorating male relatives. The painting was initially received by the Louvre, subsequently transferred to the Jeu de Paume (the contemporary repository for international artists), then finally put on deposit at the French Embassy in Vienna in 1961, where it remains on view in the Music Salon today, a fitting theme given Florence's love of music and the arts.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ 'Mrs. Blumenthal, Art Patron, Dead', *New York Times*, 22 September 1930, p. 15.

⁶⁵ Popular literature of the period remarked on the stylish portraits by Boldini, noting that they sold very well at auction as early as 1917. See Arthur Gold and Robert Fisdale, *Misia: The Life of Misia Sert* (New York: Knopf, 1980), pp. 114, 209.

⁶⁶ The [Boldini portrait of Florence](#) was officially allocated to the Musée d'Orsay (acc. no. JdeP 816) following its founding in 1986. See object file for JdeP 816, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Fig. 6: Giovanni Boldini, *Portrait of Madame G. Blumenthal*, Paris, 1896, oil on canvas, 120 × 85 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris (inv. JdeP 816).

The second, full-size portrait of Florence by Boldini was completed in 1912 and portrays her as a fashionable woman dressed in a black-and-white satin gown, revealing her décolletage and shoulders, with bustling train and black jewel-buckled heels (Fig. 7). As a married woman who suffered the loss of a child four years earlier, the image conveyed in this portrait is one of optimism, energy, and strength. Florence is depicted standing with the half step of her right foot, as if in motion, perhaps just about to perch on the recumbent chaise longue beside her. Boldini's characteristic swirling brushwork, first employed around this time, rendered an abstract pattern of movement.⁶⁷ It has been noted that Boldini completed the portrait of Florence quickly due to the traction cracks around her hair, left

⁶⁷ Gary A. Reynolds, *Giovanni Boldini and Society Portraiture, 1880–1920* (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, 1984), p. 48.



Fig. 7: Giovanni Boldini, *Portrait of a Lady*, Paris, 1912, oil on canvas, 231.1 × 121.3 cm, Brooklyn Museum (inv. 41.876).

arm, feet, and bottom of her gown, where the artist must have made compositional changes while the underlying layers of paint were still wet. The urgency to complete the portrait may have been due to the fact that it was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1912.⁶⁸ The date of this portrait suggests that the Blumenthals were already immersed in sophisticated Parisian society before George's transfer to France by Lazard Frères in 1914 and prior to the purchase of their home on the boulevard de Montmorency. Although these are the only two known Boldini portraits of Florence, there has been reference to a small portrait of the couple's only child, George Blumenthal Jr, the whereabouts of which are unknown, as well as a surviving preparatory

⁶⁸ Object file for Boldini, *Portrait de Madame G. Blumenthal* (acc. no. 41.876), Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.

sketch of Florence by Boldini that she may have given to her sister Aline.⁶⁹ In 1941, just weeks prior to his death, George Blumenthal donated the Boldini portrait of Florence to the Brooklyn Museum of Art as an anonymous gift.⁷⁰ In correspondence with the then Brooklyn Museum director, Lawrence Roberts, Blumenthal requested that the work be titled ‘Portrait of a Lady’ and made no other stipulations except that it be exhibited whenever deemed appropriate.⁷¹

The third portrait of Florence Blumenthal, today in a private collection, was painted by the French artist and interior designer of the art deco period, Jean Dunand (1877–1942), in 1927 (*Fig. 8*). It is decorated with bright coloured lacquers on a gold background and mother-of-pearl and coloured pearl inlay and was exhibited at the Georges Petit Gallery in Paris that same year.⁷² In this final portrait Florence is portrayed as a wealthy and powerful society lady of the day wearing a luxurious red sequined dress decorated with her red ribbon of the Légion d’honneur, fur stole, and a matching emerald and diamond suite of jewellery, most likely purchased from Cartier, including a long necklace, three bracelets, a ring, and drop earrings.⁷³ In contrast to the earlier, more free-spirited portraits by Boldini, Florence is depicted here seated holding a cigarette and gazing directly at the viewer, emphasizing her established position, respected reputation, and her many accomplishments. The perception of herself as perhaps a committed patron of the arts and leader in her community, as well as maintaining her image as a trendsetter in the contemporary art deco style, demonstrates an evolution of her identity through portraiture. Florence Blumenthal and Jean Dunand, better known for his sculpture and furniture, developed a close and long-standing friendship and he was personally selected to serve as a member of Florence’s foundation jury in 1919. As a result of this prestigious opportunity, and through exposure to Florence’s international artistic circle, Dunand was invited to exhibit his work at the Duwin Gallery on Fifth Avenue in New York where he subsequently established a new clientele in America (Marcilhac, pp. 33–34).

⁶⁹ Mrs Ralph K. Robertson (Mary Ann Blumenthal) files, Office of the Secretary Records, MMA Archives; Agnes and Eugene Meyer Estate, Library of Congress, Prints & Drawings, Container 21 Folder 6.

⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, George Blumenthal received a request from members of Florence’s family asking to keep the Boldini portrait. See Eugene Meyer Papers, 1864–1970, ‘Family Papers, Correspondence with George Blumenthal, 1930–41’, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Box 4.

⁷¹ Letter from George Blumenthal to Lawrence Roberts, 12 June 1941, object file for Boldini (acc. no. 41.876), Brooklyn Museum of Art.

⁷² Félix Marcilhac, *Jean Dunand: vie et oeuvre* (Paris: Édition de l’Amateur, 1991), p. 219, cat. 151.

⁷³ Florence was an avid client of Cartier and purchased many pieces of art deco jewellery in Paris during the 1920s. For more information, see Hans Nadelhoffer, *Cartier* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).



Fig. 8: Jean Dunand, *Portrait of Florence Blumenthal*, Paris, 1927, oil on canvas, 78 × 54 cm, private collection.

In addition to portrait paintings, a surviving photographic portrait of Florence Blumenthal taken in the library at 50 East 70th Street in New York by the international photographer, Baron Adolph de Meyer (1868–1946), is conserved in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 9).⁷⁴ Meyer was known for his portraits of the upper echelons of society, including American socialites and aristocratic and society hostesses.⁷⁵ Although undated, this portrait of Florence was likely taken around 1920 when Meyer was living in New York and employed by *Vogue*.⁷⁶ This was also the period immediately following the completion of the Blumenthal

⁷⁴ Object file for 41.71.6, Department of Photographs, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

⁷⁵ See John Szarkowski, Willis Hartshorn, and Anne Ehrenkranz, *A Singular Elegance: The Photographs of Baron Adolph de Meyer* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1994).

⁷⁶ Baron Adolf de Meyer lived in New York between 1913 and 1921 and returned to Paris in 1921 to work as a fashion photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* (Szarkowski, Hartshorn, and Ehrenkranz, p. 40).



Fig. 9: Adolf de Meyer, Florence Blumenthal in the library at 50 East 70th Street, c. 1920, platinum print, 24.1 × 19.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York/Art Resource, NY.

interiors at Park Avenue, prominently showcased in the backdrop of the photograph. In this image Florence is wearing a Renaissance-style velvet gown and headpiece, in harmony with the Renaissance sculpture of a Madonna and Child just behind. While it is not known why this image was commissioned or how it was used, it evokes Germain Seligman's earlier description of Florence entertaining at home: 'she wore Renaissance velvet gowns, in dark jewel-like colors which [...] gave her an air of having been born to this superb environment where every work of art seemed tirelessly at home' (Seligman, pp. 142–43). These four portraits of Florence illustrate her connection to some of the leading contemporary artists of the day, like many of her siblings, and her desire to capture her social ambition during different stages of her life.

Florence Blumenthal also commissioned two portrait busts from the French sculptor and close friend, Paul Landowski (1875–1961). Following the commission of a bronze portrait bust of George Blumenthal in 1919,

Florence visited Landowski's Paris studio to witness the completed piece in October 1919 and their friendship was formed over discussions about art.⁷⁷ Florence even brought the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to Landowski's studio to see his work for potential acquisition, demonstrating her important artistic influence at the museum and her key role of introducing the artist to American patrons.⁷⁸ The first bust of Florence (present whereabouts unknown), produced in bronze and likely commissioned at the same time as the bronze bust of George, was exhibited at the annual Salon des artistes français at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1920.⁷⁹ The second bust, in white marble, conserved today in the collections of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University in New York, was commissioned in 1921 (*Fig. 10*).⁸⁰ This marble bust is perhaps stylistically the most modest and humble depiction of Florence's self-image and character. In contrast to the glamorous earlier depictions by Boldini and the later portrait by Dunand, Florence is portrayed with a short haircut, unadorned with jewellery or clothing, and her head is tilted slightly to the left with a hesitant expression on her face. By capturing Florence as bare shouldered with an intentionally unfinished base contrasted with the smooth worked marble of the upper chest and face, Landowski perhaps sought to represent Florence's 'New Woman' qualities as a patron of the arts.

Originally planning to display the marble bust of Florence at the Salon of 1922, Landowski was not pleased with the final result and delayed its unveiling until late April 1923 when he exhibited it alongside the bronze of Florence.⁸¹ Landowski's work was well received and the marble bust was featured in the *New York Herald's* 'Gallery of Women's Portraits' in October 1925.⁸² Landowski delivered the final marble bust to Florence in Paris on 21 September 1923 and it was ultimately displayed in the Blumenthals' Gothic room, clearly commemorating its principal patron.⁸³

⁷⁷ The bust of George Blumenthal is conserved today at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. See *Journal de Paul Landowski*, entries on 11 October 1919 and 20 September 1921; and Icahn School of Medicine, Mount Sinai archives. A [marble bust](#) of George made by Landowski in 1920 is conserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. no. 43.112).

⁷⁸ Mount Sinai archives.

⁷⁹ The Salon des artistes français was a direct successor of the Royal Academy Salon initiated by Louis XIV and Colbert in the seventeenth century and held at the Louvre. It was renamed in 1881 and held at the Grand Palais every year beginning in 1901. Object file for inv. 91.2.14, Musée des années 30, Boulogne-Billancourt.

⁸⁰ Object records for inv. 68.10, Avery Library.

⁸¹ Object file for inv. 91.2.14, Musée des années 30.

⁸² 'The Herald's Gallery of Women's Portraits', *New York Herald*, 4 October 1925; object file for inv. 91.2.14, Musée des années 30.

⁸³ The marble bust was ultimately inherited by Florence's youngest sister, Ruth Meyer Cook, whose daughter, Janet Cook Loeb, donated it to Columbia University in 1968. Remarkably, Landowski's plaster model of Florence still survives and is



Fig. 10: Paul M. Landowski, *Portrait Bust of Florence Blumenthal (1873–1930)*, 1923, Carrara marble, 45.7 × 48.2 × 24.8 cm, Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University (inv. 1968.10). Photograph by the author, courtesy of Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

These five portraits of Florence Blumenthal convey her established social position, while maintaining her image as a fashionable and affluent trendsetter. Florence's societal evolution is especially evident in her reserved pose and expression in the two early Boldini portraits, as contrasted with the more assertive later depictions by Dunand and Landowski. The representations of Florence through a variety of media, including painting, photography, and sculpture, also underscore her passion and patronage for the arts.

Conclusion

The Blumenthals were part of a generation of collecting couples that focused on their legacy, philanthropy, and the formation of museums rather than simply keeping their artworks for their homes and domestic display, entertainment, and self-promotion. They were part of an important shift from the Gilded Age extravagance to more civic-minded support for American museums.⁸⁴ From the beginning, the Blumenthals envisioned their Park Avenue

conserved at the Musée des années 30. See *Journal de Paul Landowski*, entry on 20 September 1932; G. & F. B. Scrapbook, Paris, BNF; Object records for inv. 68.10, Avery Library; Object file for 1991.2.14, Musée des années 30.

⁸⁴ See George M. Goodwin, 'A New Jewish Elite: Curators, Directors, and Benefac-

house and collection as a future extension of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for public display following their deaths. George's ultimate decision to authorize the museum to tear down the residence and absorb a substantial portion of the collection following his death in 1941 resulted in the George Blumenthal Bequest. In 1933, following Florence's death, George donated several architectural elements from the couple's Gothic room in Paris to the museum for integration in its new Cloisters museum, whose construction was planned during George's presidency.⁸⁵ The Vélez Blanco patio from the New York residence and the Gothic room from Paris were not simply transferred and reassembled as period rooms within these institutions, but serve as architectural foundations integrated into the very structures of the buildings. The Blumenthals' philanthropic strategy was not solely to provide financial support, but to make a long-lasting impact for future generations, whether through the construction of a wing of a hospital in both their names or bequeathing their house and collection for public display.

Within this framework, Florence Blumenthal played a leading role in the formation of the collection and the construction and design of the couple's houses on both sides of the Atlantic. Her example illustrates the need to take interiors seriously as spaces of gendered performance and cultural creativity. Long before the women's suffrage movement, Florence's exertion of power in the civic realm came from her ability to own her own wealth and property. Compared to other female collectors, such as Isabella Stewart Gardner and Arabella Huntington, Florence did not solely rely on the advice and taste of one dealer or decorator and exercised her knowledge of diverse and international influences. Collecting was a natural extension of her privileged family upbringing and familiarity with artistic circles; however, it also served as a catalyst for her philanthropic endeavours and provided an identity and network apart from her husband, including the creation of a new foundation to support contemporary artists. She developed important relationships with painters, writers, and musicians and served as a mediator between international cultures. Finally, she was a connoisseur with an eye for the art of the past, as well as the modern. It is therefore surprising that she is not better known today. Like her siblings, who became Jewish female ambassadors for modernism, Florence, through her homes and patronage, was a crucial tastemaker on both sides of the Atlantic.

tors of American Art Museums', *Modern Judaism*, 18 (1998), 47–79.

⁸⁵ The Met Cloisters is the only American museum dedicated exclusively to the art of the Middle Ages and was formed around a collection of medieval sculpture and architectural fragments collected by sculptor George Grey Barnard (1863–1938). The collection was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924, with the financial assistance of John D. Rockefeller, Jr, and was relocated and reconstructed between 1934 and 1938, set within four cloisters from abbeys and monasteries in France. See Rockefeller Archive Center, Cultural Interests MMA-Cloisters, 1929–1935, Group III 2E, Folder 29; and George Blumenthal files, MMA.