

COOPER
HEWITT

SARAH & ELEANOR

THE HEWITT SISTERS

FOUNDERS OF THE NATION'S DESIGN MUSEUM



BY MARGERY F. MASINTER

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(Front cover) Drawing, *Two Chairs and a Table*, ca. 1790; Jean Démosthène Dugourc (French, 1749–1825); Brush and watercolor, pen and black ink, graphite on white laid paper; 21.4 x 34 cm (8 7/16 x 13 3/8 in.); Purchased for the Museum by the Advisory Council, 1921-6-137-2; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

THE HEWITT SISTERS: FOUNDERS OF THE NATION'S DESIGN MUSEUM



01 Sarah in day suit (*tailleur*) and boater hat, ca. 1890–92. Collection of Anna Engesser Parmee.



02 Eleanor in evening gown, ca. 1888. Collection of Anna Engesser Parmee.

Picture the stylishly clad Hewitt sisters meandering through today's Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum galleries. They look closely at the warp and weft of textiles and delight in the experience of projecting a wallpaper on the Immersion Room walls. Gazing at various pieces of etched glass and marveling at the technology of 3D-printed objects and the museum's new Pen, they would be thrilled that their vision lives on.

Sarah (1859–1930) and Eleanor (1864–1924) Hewitt established the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration in 1897. Pioneers in the field of design education, these amazing sisters were committed to inspiring good design for American industry. Privileged, confident, and quirky, young Sarah and Eleanor were the first women to found an American museum—but it wasn't easy.

"We've had to give up cabs and such luxuries to accomplish it all. Each time it was a question of a cab or some other indulgence of the sort, or a new cast for the collection, we found our love for the museum conquered."

—Eleanor Hewitt, *New York Herald*, May 1897

FAMILY & CHILDHOOD

“Love of beautiful and exquisite workmanship was an inheritance from two practical and artistic grandfathers who were master workmen and master mechanics and craftsmen.”

—Eleanor G. Hewitt, *The Making of a Modern Museum*, 1919

Sarah and Eleanor were part of an enterprising family. Their visionary grandfather Peter Cooper (1791–1883) was a successful inventor, manufacturer, and philanthropist. With little formal education, he dedicated himself to the belief that education was a right of mankind. In 1859, he opened the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art—a free school for young men and women. He introduced a Women’s Art School on the fourth floor of Cooper Union and envisioned a museum nearby.

Peter Cooper and his wife, Sarah Bedell Cooper (1795–1865), had a daughter named Sarah Amelia (1830–1912), known as Amelia. In 1855, Amelia married Abram Steven Hewitt (1822–1903)—a son of fine cabinet-maker John Hewitt (1777–1857) and his wife, Ann Gurnee Hewitt (d. 1873).

Abram and Amelia Hewitt had six children: Amelia Bowman (Amy), Sarah Cooper (Sally), Peter Cooper, Eleanor Garnier (Nelly), Edward Ringwood, and Erskine. Abram became a distinguished businessman and public figure, and was elected mayor of New York City in 1887. With her interest in arts and education, Amelia was a devoted volunteer at Cooper Union’s Women’s Art School and Candace Wheeler’s Society of Decorative Art.

The growing Hewitt family shared two spacious homes with Peter Cooper at 9 Lexington Avenue, New York City, and in Ringwood, New Jersey. Successful businessmen, inventors, foreign dignitaries, and artists were frequent visitors to both homes. The Hewitt children were included in this vibrant social scene from an early age. In his memoir *Those Were the Days* (1943), Edward Hewitt described childhood escapades and much family mischief.



Eleanor, ca. 1869. Gift of Norvin H. Green. Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.



9 Lexington Avenue, before 1883, from *Abram S. Hewitt*, Allan Nevins, 1935.



Ringwood Manor, 1936. Courtesy of Ringwood Manor.

No one was immune to the ingenious pranks—not even Peter Cooper! However, formal photographs show angelic sisters beautifully dressed for the camera—with perhaps just a little mischievous twinkle in their eyes.



Sarah, ca. 1865. Gift of Norvin H. Green. Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.

The large, thirty-five-room house on Lexington Avenue included an extensive library and gymnasium. Nearby Gramercy Park offered outside space for sports and games with cousins and friends. No wonder the children grew up to be well-read athletes with an enormous sense of fun. Their education was intense and well-rounded. They were tutored in drawing, languages, and music in addition to their formal classes. Edward bemoaned the fact that “our mother had an obsession about education. She felt that we should waste no time during the whole year but must have lessons during the summer.”

Summers and idyllic weekends were spent at Ringwood Manor, the 1,200-acre country estate located in the heart of the Ramapo Mountains in Ringwood, New Jersey. The Victorian great house, often redecorated by Amelia, was surrounded by stables, flower and vegetable gardens, greenhouses, ponds, and a farm. Sarah and Eleanor became competitive athletes and equestrians, and were considered “pioneers as women sports.” The Hewitts loved to entertain, and many of the twenty-six bedrooms were occupied by an array of houseguests. Ringwood guest books are filled with testimonials, poems, lively anecdotes, and amusing artwork.



Illustrations of guest arrival and departure in guest book, by Caroline King Duer, November 7, 1892. Courtesy of Ringwood Manor.



Illustration in guest book, summer 1900. Courtesy of Ringwood Manor.

Eleanor inherited her mother’s love of landscape and garden design, and the two women laid out formal gardens around the home. Amelia once said that she could not paint a picture but she could create one. Sarah’s interest was in managing the Ringwood farm, known for producing vegetables and dairy of outstanding quality. With her enterprising spirit, she established the Ringwood Restaurant and Grocery, located at Cooper Union.

AN EDUCATION IN DESIGN

Growing up, Eleanor and Sarah were immersed in a world of art, books, and travel. They became educated in the arts of decoration, and shared their mother's passion for beautiful objects and needlework and their father's broad intellectual interests. The sisters filled scrapbooks with theater and opera bills, poetry, artwork, ship notices, and artistic ephemera.

“Two little girls with pigtails tightly braided . . . were taken regularly by their father to all places where objects of art were being exhibited before their sale at auction. . . . To give his children pleasure and occupation, he placed within their reach in his personal library delightful histories to fill their minds with the manners and customs of olden times and countries.” —Eleanor G. Hewitt, *The Making of a Modern Museum*, 1919

Every year, the Hewitt family traveled through Europe. Abram combined business with pleasure, while Amelia and her daughters shopped for art, bibelots, and the latest in Paris fashion. These annual excursions were considered part of their education, and they learned to be curious and discriminating shoppers as well as students of the decorative arts. The sisters pasted sketches of their destinations into scrapbooks,

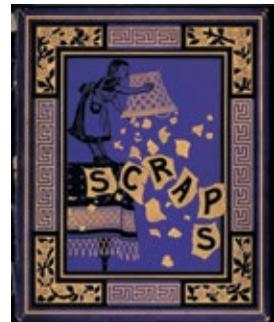


Design sketch, watercolor.
Courtesy of Cooper Union Library.

evidence of their artistic talent and interest in architecture and design. Introduced to knowledgeable dealers and museums, Sarah and Eleanor began to buy books, drawings, and textiles that would later appear in their museum.



Sketch, graphite on paper, Venice, Italy, 1886. Courtesy of Cooper Union Library.



Cover of one of Sarah and Eleanor's scrapbooks. Courtesy of Cooper Union Library.



Sarah, Amy, and Eleanor in gondola,
Venice, ca. 1890. Cooper Hewitt,
Smithsonian Design Museum.

01 Eleanor, 1888; Antonia de Bañuelos; Brush and oil on canvas; Bequest of Erskine Hewitt, 1938-57-737; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

02 Sarah in walking suit designed by House of Worth, ca. 1890. Courtesy of Ringwood Manor.

03 A poem for Sallie, from *Town Topics*, ca. 1888. Courtesy of Cooper Union Library.

04 Sarah, costumed for the Vanderbilt Ball of 1883 as a Persian princess in a blue brocade robe trimmed with white fur and large pearls, a girdle of crimson satin, a gold belt with two daggers, and a feathered turban. Collection of Anna Engesser Parmee.



01



02

TO MISS SALLIE H—W—T
(*First Violin in the Ladies Orchestra*)
I'd like to know what Sallie knows,
(And what she doesn't 's not worth knowing)
From Bronchos to Arpeggios;
From fiddle heads to fiddle-bowing.
The ribbons she handles; she drives and she rides;
She skates and she swims and she waltzes besides;
She judges a horse or a Mayor; and, what's more
She can keep down expenses, and run up a score.
A score of Mozart, I would say;
Of Wagner, Hayden, or Rameau;—
When she her violin would play
I'd like to be Miss Sallie's bow.

03



04

GILDED AGE ENTERTAINMENT & FASHION

THE SISTERS' MUSEUM FASHIONS

Upon Sarah's death (1930), the sisters' extensive wardrobes were bequeathed to Amy's daughter, Eleanor, the Princess Viggo of Denmark, who distributed the large collection of day dresses, gowns, costumes, and accessories to New York museums. In 2009, the Brooklyn Museum transferred its Hewitt collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute.



An evening dress designed by House of Worth, ca. 1882, probably worn by Eleanor as a debutante. Gift of the Princess Viggo. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute.



Evening cloak, designed by House of Worth, probably worn by Sarah. This magnificent textile, called "Tulipes Hollandaises," won a prize at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. Gift of the Princess Viggo. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute.

"When the season is getting on and things are growing a little dull, look out for the Hewitts!" —C. Lorenzo Perkins, April 1899

With the growth of wealth during the late nineteenth century came an abundance of balls, operas, concerts, theatrical performances, and dinners. Invitations to soirees and theater and opera programs are preserved in the sisters' scrapbooks.

In 1883, Amelia hired the young architect Stanford White to renovate 9 Lexington Avenue in the Beaux-Arts style. White designed a new ground-floor entrance, a grand Italian-marble foyer and wide staircase, a music room, and a ballroom that featured one of the only private theaters in New York City. The Hewitts were applauded in the press for creating novel and amusing home musicales, one-act plays, and imaginative costume parties. Dubbed "Swelldom's Belles" by the press, Sarah and Eleanor organized the Ladies' Amateur Orchestra in 1885, performing for at-home and charity events—Sarah was first violinist and Eleanor played the viola.

The wide range of social events called for a variety of fashions. The Hewitt sisters' wardrobes included morning or day dresses, afternoon or visiting dresses, dresses for dinner parties, costumes, and ball gowns. A highlight of the Hewitts' annual trips to Paris was shopping at the exclusive House of Worth at 7 Rue de la Paix. Sarah and Eleanor were lifelong clients of the couturier. The clothing designed for them would be cherished and altered over the years as the fashion of the day—and their own proportions—changed. After 1897, the sisters' fittings at Worth included climbing a ladder in order to ensure that no one would be able to look under their skirts while they worked in the museum's library.

THE SISTERS FORM A PLAN— 1890s PARIS

Since childhood, Sarah and Eleanor had dreamed of fulfilling their grandfather’s wish to have a museum in the Cooper Union. As they entered their twenties, the sisters were accomplished linguists, writers, musicians, artists, and athletes. They were witty and social, with a broad circle of friends. They championed education and employment opportunities for women, and methodically studied the history and best works of European decoration in pursuit of opening a teaching museum in the Cooper Union that would be similar to museums they had visited in Paris and London. Their commitment to this objective was full-time. They treasured their independence and did not marry.

THE MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS

In 1889, Abram Hewitt established a relationship with the directors of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (UCAD, or Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, as it was then known) with an order of plaster casts produced from their collections, probably for use by Cooper Union art students. Sarah and Eleanor presumably applauded this purchase, with an eye toward their own goals.

In May 1891, *The American Illustrated*, a weekly magazine, noted that “the clever daughters of Abram Hewitt” were on a mission: “The Misses Hewitt propose to inaugurate in New York a work as yet unknown in this country.” Sarah and Eleanor were observed “taking keen and intelligent interest” in galleries, museums, and bric-a-brac shops in Paris, spending more time than usual in that city. “No new thing deserving of attention escaped their comprehensive vision.”

The sisters filled their scrapbooks with news clippings about happenings in Paris, London, Vienna, and Russia. Articles concerning major collectors, exhibitions, auction prices, and more reveal their focus on learning about and purchasing objects in Europe. Sarah and Eleanor also engaged with the directors of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, who offered advice about the organization

AMY HEWITT GREEN

Sarah and Eleanor’s older sister, Amy, was thirty when she married Dr. James O. Green in 1886. They had two children, Norvin (1893–1955) and Eleanor (1895–1966). After marrying a prince of Denmark, Eleanor Green became known as the Princess Viggo. While Amy was initially involved in planning the museum, her responsibilities as wife and mother took precedence. She was listed as a director of the museum and was a lifelong generous donor.

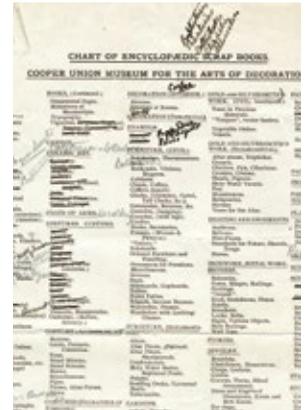


Chart of Encyclopedic Scrap Books, with Eleanor’s edits, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Page one of the 1895 Hewitt order from the Atelier de Moulages. Courtesy of UCAD Archives, Les Arts Décoratifs. Photo by Elizabeth Keslacy.

ATELIER DE MOULAGES— THE PLASTER CASTS

The Atelier de Moulages was created by the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1883 to make plaster-model reproductions of artwork for use in professional education. Catalogs of these models were available for schools, museums, and expositions. The Hewitt casts were displayed in the Cooper Union Museum for years, but by 1910, gifts and acquisitions of original works rendered them superfluous. Many were given away to local educational institutions, and the balance found a home in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where a new museum and school were being constructed.

NOS du Catalogue	Paris le 21 Octobre 1895	Prix total
2	Sabatette de pleurant	12 ..
33	Cadre ovale, rubans & lauriers. Prix N°1	25 ..
143	Couronnement de lambris - Chambre Henri IV Encre	30 ..
242	Chapiteau flestre galère du Sauro (bord de l'eau)	50 ..
249	Tête de Pilote	25 ..
260	Frise à tête de Femme buclée	25 ..
265	Chapiteau flestre Ionique inf	50 ..
295	Abondance haut bon Creston. Couronné	40 ..

and collection of objects for their future museum and an accompanying library. Tucked into the 1895 UCAD Meeting Record Book was a handwritten letter on Hewitt family stationery in which “the sisters beg to tender their sincere thanks to the Directors of the Arts Décoratifs for having kindly allowed [them] to model the New York Museum after it and also for having given them the necessary information and documents. . . .”

“The Directors of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, singularly broad-minded and perhaps secretly amused at the youth and inexperience of their collaborators, were generous of thought and time. They personally selected a series of decorative casts of the best French periods and styles by the greatest Masters of Ornament. . . . This magnificent and initial gift was presented to start the Museum by Mr. and Mrs. Hewitt.”

—Eleanor G. Hewitt, *The Making of a Modern Museum*, 1919

In July 1895, Abram submitted what was probably the largest order ever received by the Atelier de Moulages—336 objects costing over 11,000 francs. The Hewitt order was for exclusively French objects from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, and included furniture and interior ornaments, decorative metal objects, sculpture, and exterior ornaments. These objects would be used as teaching tools, foreshadowing the tremendous breadth of the future museum’s collection.

THE COOPER UNION MUSEUM FOR THE ARTS OF DECORATION

In 1896, Elizabeth Bisland, a respected journalist and good friend of the Hewitt sisters, wrote the *Proposed Plan of the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration*. After acknowledging the assistance of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Bisland outlined the organization and detailed the content of the proposed museum. Its mission was to become “an educator of public taste.” The pamphlet emphasized the need for “collecting beautiful specimens of art applied to industry” in order to encourage and inspire American manufacturers to “elevate the character of their products.”

On Friday, May 21, 1897, the museum was officially inaugurated. Located on the fourth floor of Cooper Union, its collection consisted of textiles, decorative engravings, etchings, furniture, and books, as well as the plaster casts from France. Encyclopedic scrapbooks of design and a reference library were available to assist in research. Dozens of May 1897 press clippings celebrating the sisters’ achievements are preserved in the Cooper Union Library archive.

The *New York Herald* declared: “None but the most unselfish and enterprising of young women would have gone to work as these two daughters of Abram Hewitt, to found and furnish a museum with practically no help. . . .”

The *Washington Post* wrote: “This is a princely gift to the city from the hands of two young women, who thus prove that they wish to spend their fortune in such a way that many may be benefited from it.”

The Cooper Union Museum, staffed with volunteers from among the sisters’ wealthy friends and members of the Cooper Union Art School faculty, was free and accessible to all. Visitors—particularly students—were encouraged to handle objects in a way that was unimaginable then and in museums today.

A COOPER UNION MUSEUM

Founded by Granddaughters of Peter Cooper and Soon to be Opened to the Public,

TO PROMOTE INDUSTRIAL ART

Formed on the Model of the Famous Paris Musée Des Arts Décoratifs—
To be Free to All, and No Restrictions—The Collection Cost Years of Effort.

The Granddaughters of Peter Cooper have founded, after years of patient effort, a Museum for the Arts of Decoration. The museum is established “in memory of the great and constant interest he always evinced in the education and welfare of artists”, and their collections for it are appropriately placed in Cooper Union.

More than three years ago the granddaughters began the work of forming a collection with which to start the museum. Slowly they gathered together, by their own means and sometimes through the aid of others, engravings, pictures, copies of famous works, designs, photographs, and specimens for the future collection. At last they have succeeded in securing on the fourth floor of the Union a considerable treasure, which they modestly call “the nucleus of the museum.”

The rooms will be opened to the public the first week of June, for, probably, three days in each week until the arrangements are complete.

Excerpt from the *New York Times*,
May 23, 1897.

Following the example of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Eleanor created encyclopedic reference charts that painstakingly detailed the architecture and decorative arts of each century, country, and period. By 1902, volunteers had compiled from these charts 450 scrapbooks with pictures encompassing every aspect of design and decorative arts. According to Eleanor in 1919, this number grew to 1,000 volumes.

BUILDING THE COLLECTIONS

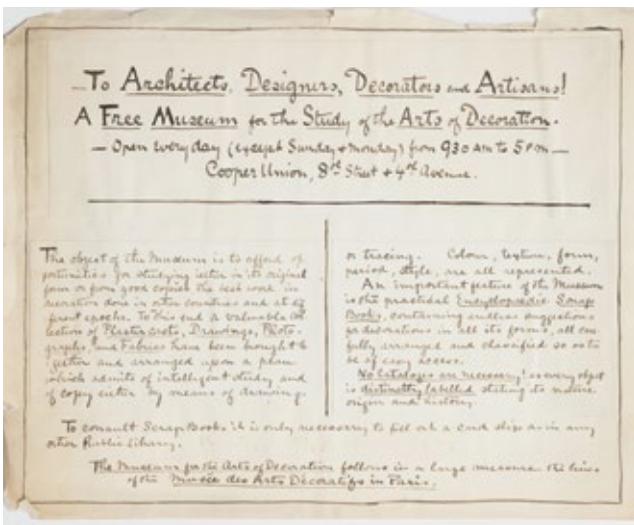
“Then came a wonderful series of happenings. Manufacturers and dealers came forward with unsolicited help . . . and gave objects suitable to make small exhibits covering the various branches of the textile and ornamental trades. . . .”

—Eleanor G. Hewitt, *The Making of a Modern Museum*, 1919

In the early days of the museum, friends of the family followed the example of the Hewitts and industry leaders, making generous contributions of money and objects. In 1896, George Campbell Cooper, Peter Cooper’s nephew, gave hundreds of engravings and woodcuts by Dürer, Rembrandt, and many others. This gift formed the foundation of the museum’s collection of drawings and prints.

In 1901, the sisters were ecstatic to learn that the curator of the Borghese Gallery in Rome—Signor Piancastelli—was selling his collection of 4,000 drawings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, artists’ sketchbooks, and original designs for ornamental decoration. “Some Fairy Godmother must have been working overtime waving her wand,” wrote Eleanor in 1919. “The purchase price of four thousand dollars was contributed, as if by magic, by friends of the Museum.”

Another early major gift came from J. P. Morgan. At a 1902 dinner with Abram, as Eleanor later recalled, Morgan asked “in his usual abrupt, impulsive way, what Mr. Hewitt’s daughters were interested in.” Upon learning about the sale of a unique textile collection in Europe, Morgan followed up and promptly cabled Abram, “Have purchased the Badia Collection of Barcelona, also the Vives Collection of Madrid and the Stanislas Baron Collection of Paris. I do this to give your daughters pleasure.”



A handwritten 8 x 10 announcement of “A Free Museum for the Study of the Arts of Decoration,” proudly penned by either Sarah or Eleanor and posted at the Cooper Union. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Library.



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05

01 Drawing from the Decloux Collection, Design for a Saltcellar, 1524–45; Giulio Romano; Pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on white laid paper; Purchased for the Museum by the Advisory Council, 1911-28-35-b; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

02 Textile fragment from the J. P. Morgan Collection; Egypt, 4th–5th century; Linen and wool slit tapestry with weft wrapping; Gift of John Pierpont Morgan, 1902-1-34; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

03 Drawing, Two Young Girls, 1878–79; Winslow Homer; Charcoal, brush, and white gouache on brown-gray laid paper; Gift of Charles Savage Homer Jr., 1912-12-276; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

04 Drawing from the Piancastelli Collection, Window Cases with Alternative Suggestions, 1750–70; Filippo Marchionni; Graphite, red crayon, brush, and gray watercolor on laid paper; Museum purchase through gift of various donors, 1901-39-664; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

05 Rialto Bridge birdcage, late 19th–early 20th century; Painted wood, bent-metal wire, metal; Gift of Eleanor and Sarah Hewitt, 1916-19-14; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

“Gifts of wonderfully suited objects, and generous gifts of money were brought each year by Santa Claus,” Eleanor wrote in *The Making of a Modern Museum*. The “Santa” was George A. Hearn, a wealthy retailer and art collector. In 1907, Hearn formed the Council for the Cooper Union Museum, composed of prominent philanthropists, industrialists, and artists whose purpose was to finance and advise on collections for the museum. The council grew to fifty members—including J. P. Morgan, Jacob Schiff, and Louis C. Tiffany—before it disbanded in 1927.

At Eleanor’s urging, the council arranged for the purchase of the important Jean Léon Decloux collection of drawings and furniture mounts in 1908. Philanthropist and art collector Eleanor Blodgett gave \$10,000 toward the purchase in honor of her mother. In 1911, the acquisition of a collection of Decloux prints and books was financed by Jacob Schiff, Charles Gould, and Thomas Snell. In 1920, the council acquired the Decloux library, consisting of 413 bound volumes.

In 1912, Charles Savage Homer Jr. and his wife gave more than 300 drawings and twenty-two small paintings by his brother, Winslow Homer, who had died in 1910. This gift was followed in 1917 by more Homer paintings, 100 Western landscape drawings and watercolors by Thomas Moran (a gift of the artist), and 2,000 oil and pencil sketches by Frederic Edwin Church given by his son, Louis P. Church.

When the famous Alexander Drake birdcage collection was offered for sale in 1914, “it was secured by those discriminating collectors, the Misses Hewitts” (as described in the July 1916 issue of *House Beautiful*) for \$1,300. With their unique architectural details, the eighty-six birdcages collected from all over the world were wonderful objects for aspiring designers to study.

“The objects are there for use, to be worked from, and, if so desired, to be removed from their position and placed in any light. They can be photographed or measured. . . . People come to this museum to learn . . . and the arrangement of the Museum in small sections and with a mass of objects in each . . . does invite comparison and discussion as to material, workmanship, and design.” —Eleanor Hewitt, *The Making of a Modern Museum*, 1919

AU PANIER FLEURI— COOPER UNION MUSEUM SHOP

In 1905, Sarah, Eleanor, and Constance Parsons Hare, an active volunteer at the museum, invested in a shop called Au Panier Fleuri, where decorative home accessories inspired by the Cooper Union Museum collections and designed by students at the Cooper Union Women's Art School were sold. The shop was stocked with painted furniture of all kinds, trays, jardinières, door and furniture knobs, lamp and candle shades of silk and paper, writing sets, books, screens, decorative wall panels, cotillion favors, and more. This was America's first museum shop.



Students looking at textiles, ca. 1925. Textiles, which could not be handled, necessitated the invention of display cases with interior sliding panels. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

“As the Christmas gift season approached . . . Elsie de Wolfe gave us orders for papier prints and for screens; then came orders for painted furniture and lampshades. Other women became decorators and used our products—then came a big department store as a customer.”

—Constance Hare, in a 1937 letter. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

The shop was a huge success. After it was sold in 1922, a \$20,000 fund (the equivalent of \$228,000 today) was created to purchase objects for the museum's collections. Named the Au Panier Fleuri Fund, it was used to acquire hundreds of objects, primarily textiles.

“The oldest textiles in our collection—a bonnet and pair of mitts from the Han Dynasty—were bought with funds from Au Panier Fleuri. These funds also helped to make other very important purchases of embroidery and lace that would not have been possible without it.”

—Matilda McQuaid, current Deputy Director of Curatorial and Head of Textiles, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum



Students in the Decloux Room, Cooper Union Museum, 1920. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

THE SISTERS' TRAVELS: 1910–1930



1905 Renault Town Car, owned by Sarah Cooper Hewitt. A plaque on the dashboard reads: “Miss Sarah Cooper Hewitt, 9 Lexington Avenue, New York”; on the reverse side: “Miss Sarah Cooper Hewitt, Hotel du Rhin, Place Vendome, Paris.” Courtesy of Ringwood Manor.



Trade cards and notes inserted within the pages of the sisters' French travel diary. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Library.

Twenty-five small travel diaries, filled over many years with Eleanor's unmistakable handwriting, reveal that the sisters traveled extensively through Europe by car. They were likely driven by a chauffeur and accompanied by a butler and perhaps a maid. Their Vuitton luggage was secured in a rack on top, with space reserved for purchases they made along the way. The diaries precisely describe the cities, important country homes, and gardens they visited or hoped to visit during a given sojourn—typically three months in duration, beginning in summer and continuing into the fall.

Journeys through Italy, France, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, Poland, Germany, and the United States were methodically documented and organized in a manner similar to the museum's encyclopedic scrapbooks—geographically, by country, city, and village. When they revisited a city or site over the years, Eleanor updated her entries, adding notes between 1906 and 1924.

Each time the sisters went to Europe, members of the Council for the Cooper Union Museum gave them “large checks to buy the best that could be found in the way of fine things to enhance the beauty and working qualities of the Museum,” according to Eleanor in 1919. “With munificence past belief, the Council has facilitated the purchase of hundreds of unique objects . . . which have been fruitful sources of inspiration and in constant use by artist artisans.”

Eleanor and Sarah also searched for and purchased rare books, using the Reference Library Fund designated for the purpose of acquiring illustrated volumes of ancient and modern art that would prove invaluable for study.

The annual visits to Europe ended with the outbreak of World War I. But Sarah and Eleanor didn't stop their travels. Inveterate explorers, their diaries from 1914 to 1919 contain itineraries in the United States, with alphabetical lists of destinations in each state. They covered as much territory as possible, meeting with historians and collectors and staying with friends when possible. Every day was another destination, another hotel, and another discovery of American design.

DYNAMIC SISTERS

Colorful stories—true or not—tell how “eccentric” Sarah and Eleanor became as they aged, growing plump and more set in their ways. It was written that they were resistant to all “new-fangled” gadgets, including the automobile, even though they had one, and the telephone, swore like truck drivers, and collected pornography. While this is not completely accurate, their commitment to preserving their lifestyle was clearly paramount—and they were used to having their own way. The Ringwood gardener’s son, Louis West, wrote that it was once said that “Nelly always made the cannonballs and Sally fired them.” Here are some snippets from their mature years.

SARAH MAKING HEADLINES

“Miss Hewitt Takes a Whole Traffic Squad” was the *Evening World* headline on April 22, 1911. Sarah attempted to cross a street to get to the Cooper Union in “her carriage, drawn by two very stiff men in the box.” An altercation occurred with the traffic policemen, and strong words were exchanged. “It would take an expert stenographer to take down half of what Miss Hewitt said.” The result is that Sarah crossed the street as intended.

“There are a few old-fashioned ladies. . . and two maiden ladies in particular, where on a certain afternoon of the week, if you come in for tea, you are sure to meet not alone those prominent in the world of fashion, but a fair admixture of artists, scientists, authors, inventors, distinguished strangers—in a word Best Society in the truest sense.”—Emily Post, *Etiquette in Society*, 1922

In *Merchants of Art: 1880–1960* (1960), art dealer and historian Germain Seligman recalled that the sisters were the “last bastion of an older American aristocracy,” for whom “clocks had stopped before the turn of the century. . . and [who,] while thoroughly aware of the social changes around them, chose to ignore them.”



Sarah and Eleanor’s at-home card.
Courtesy of Ringwood Manor.



Sarah and Eleanor seated on the porch of Ringwood Manor, 1918. Courtesy of Ringwood Manor.

A Ringwood guest book photograph dated 1918 shows Sarah dressed in her favorite Louis XVI-style riding jacket from the House of Worth and a fedora. Next to her, Eleanor works on an intricate needlework project, her beloved pastime. Their close friend, poet Caroline King Duer, is seated with them. The sisters wore their treasured clothing for years and had them altered to larger proportions when needed.

Sarah was a skilled musician who used a coaching horn instead of the telephone at Ringwood.

Her bedroom windows faced the stables, and she enjoyed performing an array of melodies on her horn to inform her coachmen which of the many coaches should be brought to her door, as each carriage had its own tune. In her later years, she used the horn to summon her maid.

When the sisters traveled, they mailed typed postcards to their personal maid, Anna Engesser, who came to care for them in 1923. The postcards reflect their regimented attitudes and are filled with precise instructions regarding housekeeping, caring for Sarah's chow chows (Kao and Nanky), mailing clean laundry—even writing a postcard!



Portrait of Sarah in a wig and French-style riding costume and holding her coaching horn, 1899. James Carroll Beckwith; Pastel on paper mounted on linen; Bequest of Erskine Hewitt, 1938-57-890; Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

**“You must write all yr postals my way, WHICH IS THE RIGHT WAY. . . .
Write yr lines closer together so you can tell me more things.”**

— Sarah Hewitt, postcard to Anna Engesser. Courtesy Anna Engesser Parmee.

LAST YEARS

Eleanor died suddenly of bronchitis in November 1924 at age sixty. Sarah was devastated by this loss but continued her travels and dedication to the museum. She became increasingly infirm. Before the Hewitt home at 9 Lexington Avenue was demolished in 1939, journalist Geoffrey T. Hellman wrote an article about his visit to the house. After he inquired about an oddly shaped trunk labeled “S. C. Hewitt, New York,” it was explained to him that it was for “Miss Sally’s” wheelchair, which she took with her (after Eleanor died) when traveling abroad.

“Miss Hewitt always traveled with a manservant, registering at hotels as ‘Miss Sarah Cooper Hewitt and Manservant.’ The servant hoisted her wheelchair to the top of a taxi whenever they went to a museum, which was practically every day. On arriving he would take it down and wheel Miss Sally through the galleries.”—Geoffrey T. Hellman, the *New Yorker*, October 29, 1938

Sarah died in October 1930 at age seventy. Her will granted generous gifts to many of the people in her employ who had served her well. The headline of her obituary in the *New York Times* was “A Lady of the Old School.” It noted that “she belonged to the ‘400’ but she was not under the restraint of its social precedents. She and her sister made their own.”



08

WHY A MODERN MUSEUM?

In 1919, Eleanor wrote a paper titled *The Making of a Modern Museum*, which was so popular it was issued over three printings. The term “modern” in her title referred to Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration’s being freely accessible to all and open in the evenings so that working visitors and artisans could enjoy. This museum collected and encouraged the study of objects primarily made before 1825 but was “modern” because it placed few restrictions on the use of objects. Objects were to be used—measured, handled, photographed, sketched. Eleanor also emphasized that objects were to be massed together to create “a happy, busy atmosphere” that would encourage comparison, discussion, and “original ideas in unexpected directions.”

A WORKING MUSEUM

Eleanor called the museum an “Industrial Art Laboratory.” It was “a working museum with collections of beautiful specimens of art applied to industry.” Collections were arranged chronologically, with labels providing contextual information—including material, date, designer, and geography—anticipating today’s practices. Encyclopedic picture scrapbooks and an extensive library were readily available to broaden the museum visitor’s education and visual experience.

After Sarah died, an Advisory Council composed of the sisters' dedicated friends continued to guide the museum along with longtime curator Mary S. M. Gibson. In 1933, Calvin S. Hathaway, curator, was hired. He improved the museum's administration, inaugurated publications, and organized exhibitions. In 1963, the Cooper Union Museum was confronted with a funding crisis. Fortunately, the museum's collection was preserved intact by the Smithsonian Institution, which acquired it and established the Cooper-Hewitt National Museum for Design. Located in the Carnegie Mansion, the nation's new design museum opened its doors in 1976. In 2011, the museum closed for an extensive renovation, restoration, and modernization.

Since reopening in 2014, Cooper Hewitt has augmented and expanded the sisters' pioneering vision of a working design museum. The second-floor galleries are dedicated to exhibitions of objects from the permanent collection. Various and changing exhibitions intermingle, integrating the historic with the contemporary, juxtaposing cultures, and presenting centuries-old craft traditions alongside current manufacturing techniques and new ways of making things. While modern conservation practices preclude visitors from handling objects, the museum's curatorial and digital initiatives strive to make the collection as accessible as possible. Museum visitors are invited

to click or "collect" from the collection online and use the innovative interactive Pen in the galleries.

Cooper Hewitt's collection contains more than 210,000 objects, ranging from an Egyptian faience cup dating to ca. 1100 BCE (a gift of Eleanor and Sarah) to contemporary 3D-printed objects and digital code. After a major digitization effort, all Cooper Hewitt objects are now available for the world to see.



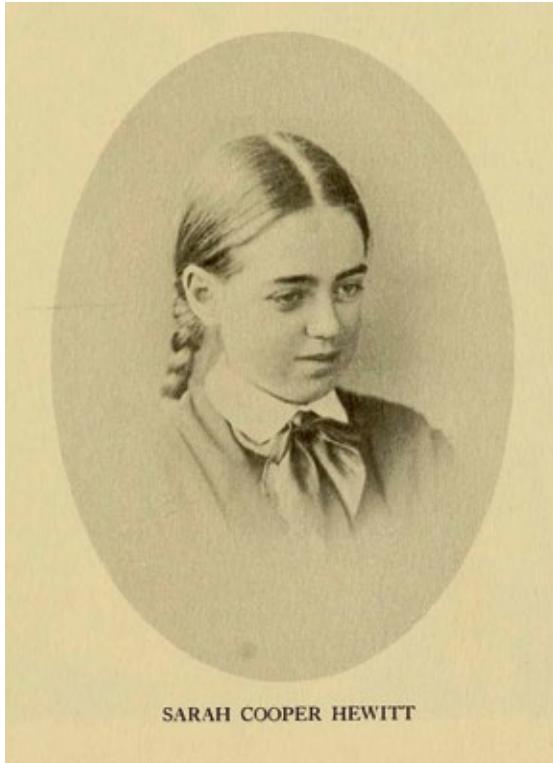
Students at Cooper Union consulting Eleanor Hewitt's encyclopedic reference scrapbooks, from *Chronicle of the Cooper Union Museum* (vol. 1, no. 3), 1937. The scrapbooks were dismantled around 1970, and the images were used to form a picture library, stored at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Library until the 1990s.

“When everything is a miracle, no one step appears unusual, and each unhopd for and unexpected happening seemed absolutely natural.”

—Eleanor G. Hewitt, *The Making of a Modern Museum*, 1919

01 Sarah, ca. 1869, from *Chronicle of the Cooper Union Museum* (vol. 1, no. 3), 1937.

02 Eleanor, ca. 1874. Gift of Norvin H. Green. Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.



SARAH COOPER HEWITT

01



02



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Ringwood Manor guest books. 4 vols.: 1876–84, 1884–90, 1891–1902, 1902–32. ringwoodmanor.org/ringwood-manor-guest-books. A record of guests and house parties at Ringwood, with colorful sketches, poems, stories, cartoons, and autographs.

ARCHIVAL RESOURCES

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Library
2 East 91st Street New York, NY
cooperhewitt.org/collections/library
cooperhewitt.org/collections

The Cooper Union Library
7 East 7th Street, New York, NY 10003
library.cooper.edu

The Costume Institute at
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY
metmuseum.org/collections
Sarah Hewitt Collection, Gift of Princess Viggo
Costume Institute.Collection@metmuseum.org

Ringwood Manor
1304 Sloatsburg Road
Ringwood, New Jersey 07456
ringwoodmanor.org
Sue Shutte, Historian at Ringwood
RSPRIS@verizon.net

Smithsonian Institution Archives
600 Maryland Avenue SW
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(Back cover) Textile fragment, Spain, 15th–16th century;
Silk and metallic satin brocade; 35.2 x 22.9 cm (13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 in.);
Gift of John Pierpont Morgan, 1902-1-299-b; Cooper Hewitt,
Smithsonian Design Museum

COOPER HEWITT

**“WHEN THE SEASON
IS GETTING ON AND
THINGS ARE GROWING
A LITTLE DULL, LOOK
OUT FOR THE HEWITTS!”**

—C. LORENZO PERKINS, APRIL 1899

Meet Sarah and Eleanor Hewitt. Clever, independent women and pioneers in the field of design education, Sarah and Eleanor achieved their dream of opening a museum at Cooper Union in New York City in 1897. Hoping to raise the standard of American design, the sisters amassed a collection at the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration—their teaching museum—that became a cornerstone of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum collection.