“For Paintings of Fine Quality”
The Origins of the Sumner Fund at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

On August 16, 1927, Frank B. Gay, Director of the Wadsworth Atheneum, wrote to Edward W. Forbes, Director of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, that

by the death last week of Mrs. Frank Sumner the Frank Sumner estate now comes to us. I learn from the Trust Company, his trustees and executor that the amount will be upwards of $2,000,000 ‘the income to be used in buying choice paintings.’ Of course we are quite excited here over the prospect for our future.¹

The actual amount of the gift was closer to $1.1 million, making the Sumner bequest quite possibly the largest paintings purchase fund ever given to an American museum. Yet few know the curious details of its origins.

Today, when visitors to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art read a label alongside a work of art, they will often see “The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.” These visitors may well visualize two women—perhaps sisters, perhaps mother and daughter—strolling arm in arm through the galleries of the museum in times past, admiring the art and wondering what they might do for the benefit of such a worthy institution. They would be incorrect. The two women were, in fact, sisters-in-law who died fifty-two years apart and never knew each other.

Since 1927 the Sumner Fund has provided the Atheneum with the means to acquire an extraordinary number of “choice paintings.” As of July 2012, approximately 1,300 works of art have been purchased using this fund that binds the names of Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner together forever.

The story of the fund begins with George Gleason Sumner, the second son of John Wesley Sumner and Mary (Gleason). He was born in 1841—the same year that Daniel Wadsworth conceived of a gallery of fine art for Hartford. Raised in Bolton, George worked on the family farm and taught school. In 1866, after two years of study, he became a lawyer in Hartford, where he moved the following year and served variously as city attorney, judge, and police commissioner. He also entered politics as a Democrat, and over the years was elected to progressively higher offices.
George married Julia Ella Gallup, known as Ella, in October 1870. They had two children. Their son, William, died before he reached two, and their daughter, Ella, died at birth. Ella Gallup Sumner, age twenty-eight, died at the same time, on March 2, 1875, at the United States Hotel in Hartford, where she and George were living. Her obituary said, “She was an estimable lady, of gentle and most attractive manners, intelligent and lovely in every relation of life.” She was buried in her silk wedding dress and her casket was covered in white camellias. George would never remarry.

He continued on in the law and government. When he was elected mayor of Hartford in 1878, he was acknowledged as one of the youngest mayors the city had ever had. In 1883, he was elected Lieutenant Governor of the state, and he was so popular it was said that his name had carried the ticket to victory.

That same year, Ella’s father, Judge David Gallup (who was as staunchly Republican as George was Democratic) died, and when his widow, Julia Ann (Woodward), died the following year with no surviving children, George was bequeathed $75,000 and the residue of the Gallups’ estate, making him a very wealthy man. After that, he would serve in the state senate, but in 1888 he declined to run as the Democratic candidate for governor because of his health. He remained an attorney and elder statesman, enjoying his colleagues, friends, and family.

The family member he was closest to was his younger brother Frank Chester Sumner. Frank was born in 1850 and educated in Bolton and Hartford. He took a job as a clerk at the Hartford Trust Company in 1871, initially serving as a “runner,” or messenger. He rose steadily through the ranks and in 1886 was made treasurer of the bank. He followed his brother into Democratic politics, but never ran for office. He was also appointed a state prison director, and a Hartford health commissioner.

Just after he turned forty-six, in 1896, Frank married Mary Louise Catlin. She was the thirty-nine-year-old daughter of George Smith Catlin and Adelaide Louisa (Catlin), both of Harwinton. Adelaide Louisa was the daughter of a different George Smith Catlin, a Democratic lawyer and politician who served one term as a United States Congressman for Connecticut. Mary’s father and maternal grandfather shared the exact same name because the former was named for the latter, who was his uncle. In fact, Mary’s parents
were first cousins. She was also distantly related to the artist George Catlin (her parents and he shared a common great-great grandfather). Mary was born in 1857 in Marion, Alabama, where her father was in business. The family moved back to Connecticut in 1866, returned to Alabama in the early 1870s, and came back again to Connecticut for good in 1875, when they settled in Hartford.

By 1883 Mary was taking art lessons from Charles Russell Loomis. At that time he was teaching at the Decorative Art Society of Hartford (the precursor of the Art Society of Hartford, which eventually became the Hartford Art School—now a part of the University of Hartford), and Steele’s School for Young Ladies. On May 15, 1883, the Hartford Courant reported that Miss Mary L. Catlin had a painting on exhibition in the spring show of the National Academy of Design in New York City. "It was simply sent there and it was accepted," the paper noted. The Academy chose 746 works from the over 1,400 that were submitted. Other artists represented were Jasper Cropsey, George Innes, Eastman Johnson, Constant Mayer, George H. Story, Louis C. Tiffany, and Frederick Church. [Mary’s painting, On the Line, is in the Atheneum’s collection.]

If Mary had taken lessons through the Decorative Art Society, it would have led her to the Atheneum. The trustees there had been forced to close the art gallery in October 1884 because of insufficient funds to keep it open. In late 1885, the art society presented the Atheneum with a proposition: the society would pay for a custodian and heating for the gallery so that it could be open free to the public, and in return they would be allowed to hold their classes there. The Atheneum trustees agreed to the arrangement and the galleries were reopened in February 1886. A month later the Decorative Art Society incorporated as the Art Society of Hartford. Among the incorporators were Elizabeth H. Colt, art patron and widow of Samuel Colt; the Reverend Francis Goodwin, scion of one of Hartford’s founding families and an Atheneum trustee; James G. Batterson, founder of Travelers Insurance Company and New England Granite Works, and also an Atheneum trustee; Charles Dudley Warner, popular writer and editor; and the Reverend Edwin Pond Parker (who also supported Steele’s School for Young Ladies).

Parker had been pastor of the South Congregational Church since 1860. In 1875 he had presided at the funeral of Ella Gallup Sumner. And in 1892, he conducted services at the funeral of George Smith Catlin, Mary’s father. The Sumners and Catlins most probably belonged to Parker’s church, and quite possibly Frank and Mary met through that
connection. Yet when they married in 1896, the ceremony took place at her mother’s home in Hartford, and was performed by a Litchfield minister who was a cousin of the bride.

After their marriage, Frank and Mary moved into a new home on Farmington Avenue, near Prospect Avenue, along with her mother, Adelaide Catlin. George, who had been residing in the same Hartford boarding house as Frank since 1886, soon began living most of the year with them, along with his and Frank’s mother, Mary Sumner. In the summer months, George and the elder Mary Sumner lived at their family farm in Bolton.

George G. Sumner died on September 20, 1906. An editorial in the *Hartford Courant* the next day said, “In name he was a democrat, in fact he was an American. Nobody will ever take the unique place that he has filled in this community, where for so many years he has been one of its wholesome, choice and individual characters.” Edwin Parker officiated at the funeral, and wrote of his “dear good friend,” “There was sunshine in his presence, warmth and cheer in his greetings, pleasure in his kindly humor, quickening and comfort in his charming conversation, and hopefulness in all his outlooks.” He was remembered not only for his political achievements, but also for his quiet generosity.

George’s estate was valued at just under $200,000. In his will, written in 1904, he left the residue of that estate, after bequests, to his brother Frank. But if Frank were to predecease him, then the money was to go to the Wadsworth Atheneum for a specific purpose.

In case this legacy shall equal or exceed the sum of fifty thousand dollars as evidenced by the settlement of my estate duly made as the law requires, I direct the Trustees of said Wadsworth Atheneum to lawfully invest the said legacy and to use the income thereof for the purchase from time to time of paintings of fine quality which I request may be hung in some section of the Public Art Gallery of said Atheneum Building which section may be called the “Ella Gallup Sumner Collection,” in memory of my deceased wife.

Frank inherited the money, but would remember his brother’s wishes.

By 1906 Frank was involved with so many civic institutions, besides his valued work at the bank, that a local paper included him in a series of “Representative Men of Hartford in Cartoon” with an accompanying ditty.
There's scarcely a thing Frank Sumner doesn't run
From the earth and its people on up to the sun:
Looks after the prison; takes care of the bridge;
Attends to our juries; marks out the state hedge;
He gives us our water; provides us a bank;
For the air that we breathe we have Sumner to thank,
And when we are climbing the heavenly stair
We'll not be surprised if he's in charge there.⁷

Like her husband, Mary engaged in a variety of activities. She was an officer of the Connecticut Alliance of Democratic Women, on the board of the Connecticut Federation of Women's Democratic Clubs, and a leading member of the Connecticut Suffrage Association. Her views on suffrage were not shared by some other Hartford ladies with ties to the Atheneum who signed a petition in 1911 opposing the vote for women.

Mary's involvement in Hartford's art community increased through the years. She joined the Arts and Crafts Club and the Hartford Art Society, whose meetings she would often host. In 1909 she was named to a committee that was working to form a fine arts federation for the city (an organization that did not come into being). In 1912 she attended a meeting of the Arts and Crafts Club where Frank B. Gay lectured on European Impressionism, noting that the propensities of the cubists and futurists were “pernicious to society and morality, and bred much that was vulgar.”⁸ Mary made her first gift to the Atheneum in 1914—the suit her ancestor, Metcalf Bowler, wore in 1774 when he brought the news to Congress in Philadelphia that Rhode Island would join the union of colonies. It was a significant enough gift to make the pages of American Art News. [It was deaccessioned in 2002.] She followed that in 1920 with a collection of Chinese porcelains that she donated in memory of her mother. And in 1921 she and Frank bequeathed to the Atheneum various items from their home, including furniture, paintings and rugs. By 1922 Frank was a patron of the museum and Mary was a life member in her own right.

During this same period, Frank's success at the bank and contributions to his community continued. He was made president of the Hartford Trust Company in 1917, and he retained the office two years later when a merger led to the bank being renamed the Hartford-Connecticut Trust Company. He was also president of the Gray Telephone Pay Station Company, vice president of Cedar Hill Cemetery, the Connecticut State Prison, and the Mechanics Savings Bank, and sat as a director or trustee on more than a dozen
boards, including those of the Connecticut River Bridge & Highway Commission, Hartford Hospital, the Connecticut Children’s Aid Society, and Trinity College.

The public mourning was widespread after Frank C. Sumner died on December 9, 1924. One of the many worthies whose encomiums were published in the newspaper said, “he was keenly interested in the welfare of Hartford, generous in his response to the demands which it made upon him, and loyal and patriotic in his support of the things which were of importance to it and its citizens.”

On December 23, six days after the terms of Frank’s will appeared in the paper, the probate court officially informed the Wadsworth Atheneum that “there are bequests in your favor.” The will, drawn up in February 1916, gave the museum $150,000 and charged the trustees to

lawfully invest said legacy and to use the income thereof from time to time in the purchase of choice paintings to establish and develop a collection to be known as “The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection” in memory of the deceased wife of my brother George and of my wife Mary Catlin Sumner.

The trustees further learned that the museum was left the residue of the estate, estimated at $1.2 million, to use for the same purpose. But not immediately. Both bequests went into a trust fund for the “comfortable maintenance and support” of Mary “throughout the term of her life.” After her death the Atheneum would receive the munificent gift, along with the Sumner home.

When Frank B. Gay addressed the Trustees at the Annual Meeting in January 1925, he talked about Frank Sumner who “had never been actively interested in the work here, so far as we know, although he had been approached as a possible trustee, he preferred not to be, remarking with a laugh that he might not feel comfortable among those highbrows.” Gay also spoke of the various museum funds, highlighting what he called the “Frank C. Sumner fund of $150,000, plus – no one yet knows what – the income for the purchase of choice paintings and their care. This is an impressive list for a gallery of our size and bids fair to make the Atheneum of importance in the picture world.”

After Frank’s death, Mary’s health deteriorated, but she still maintained her relationship with the Art Society and the Atheneum, where she developed a cordial friendship with
Florence Paull Berger, the general curator at the museum. In February 1927 Mary
donated a bust, entitled Frances, by Evelyn Batchelder, and only a few days before her
final illness she spent some hours in the galleries of the Morgan Memorial.

Mary Catlin Sumner died on August 11, 1927. Director Gay wrote in the October
"Bulletin of the Wadsworth Atheneum,"

By her death the great sum from her husband's residuary estate, will now
become available. It is impossible to state the exact amount in addition to the
$150,000 (a direct legacy), but a careful estimate makes the total gift nearly
$2,000,000. The magnificent possibilities which open out from this princely
bequest are startling and alluring.\textsuperscript{14}

Altogether it was a propitious time for the Atheneum. Since 1918 the trustees had
watched their investment of a $250,000 gift from Samuel P. Avery, Jr., double and they
were now ready to consider spending it on its designated purpose—an additional
building. That summer of 1927 they had hired A. Everett Austin, Jr., to replace the
retiring Frank Gay in October. This new and very young director had the training,
connoisseurship, and flair to use the income from the Sumner Fund to purchase superior
paintings. He would use that money and the Avery bequest to transform the Wadsworth
Atheneum. Within a few short years, Austin turned a respectable provincial institution,
known for its American landscape paintings, European decorative arts and early
American furniture, into a cosmopolitan museum, filled with masterpieces of the Baroque
and Modern in an International Style building, that was recognized and lauded on both
sides of the Atlantic.

The first painting acquired using Sumner money was Hercules and Anteus, by Jacopo
Tintoretto, and the label read, as directed by Frank Sumner's will, "The Ella Gallup
Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection." This rather misleading identification led
many to believe that the Sumners themselves collected an amazing array of paintings. In
the early 1990s the museum leadership decided to end the confusion and voted to add
the word "Fund" to the credit line.

At the end of this tale, the question remains: why did the Wadsworth Atheneum receive
the Sumner wealth? Certainly Mary was an amateur artist, engaged in the promotion of
fine arts in Hartford, and she would have influenced Frank, who already had an intense
interest in anything that would improve his community. But the idea for a Sumner
painting fund at the Atheneum did not originate with them. The impetus came from George Sumner, who wished to establish a collection at the Atheneum in memory of Ella. Because George lived with Frank and Mary for ten years, it is possible that Mary guided him toward the bequest. A stronger possibility, though, is that George wanted to memorialize his wife because of her, or their shared, love of art. There are some secondary sources that state this as a given. The first of these short essays describing the fund was written after 1946, and if it was penned by Florence Paull Berger, then it is likely to have been based not only on Atheneum history, but also on her conversations with Mary. It states that George was, “with his wife, a keen student of art, and much interested in the affairs of the Atheneum.” The other essay, written in 1977, simply asserts that George and Ella were “quite interested in art.” No primary material has yet been found to explain George’s motivation definitively, but surely the gift speaks for itself.

The generosity of the Sumner family has had a towering impact on the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. As Frank Gay wrote in 1927, “the Sumner Foundation will not only memorialize the dearly cherished wives, but should carry to a distant future a memory and appreciation of these broad-minded citizens, who wished to make Hartford a finer, sweeter place in which to live.”

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1 Frank B. Gay to Edward W. Forbes, 16 August 1927, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.
2 The Hartford Courant, “Death of Mrs. J. Ella Gallup Sumner,” 3 March 1875.
3 Ibid., “City Personals,” 15 May 1883.
5 Ibid., “George Sumner, A Wreath from Dr. Parker for His Coffin,” 22 September 1906.
6 George G. Sumner, will dated October 5, 1904, excerpt, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.
7 The Evening Post, “Representative Men of Hartford in Cartoon,” 23 March 1906.
9 Ibid., “Frank C. Sumner, Banker, Dies at 74,” 10 December 1924.
10 Mary E. F. Cunningham, Assistant Clerk, Court of Probate for the District of Hartford, Connecticut, to the Wadsworth Atheneum of Hartford, 23 December 1924.
Information for this essay, not cited above, was found in the Wadsworth Atheneum Archives and Registrar’s Office, and in online sources. Copies of these research materials reside in the Archives.