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Clark Art Institute Receives 'Princely' Collection of European Treasures

The Berkshires museum is getting a transformative gift: 331 artworks from the Renaissance on, worth several hundred million dollars, and money to build a new wing.



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By Ted Loos

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Museums are lucky if they receive either a large collection of valuable artworks or a big check. Getting both at the same time is rare.

The Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., is announcing this week that it has received the rare twofer gift from the Aso O. Tavitian Foundation: a trove of 331 works by revered European artists of the 15th through the 19th centuries — including Hans Memling, Peter Paul Rubens, Parmigianino, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, Jean-Antoine Watteau and Gian Lorenzo Bernini — plus more than \$45 million to build a new wing to house it all and care for it, and to fund a new curator's position.

“It’s an unbelievable thing that’s happening to the Clark,” the museum’s director, Olivier Meslay, said, adding that it was the “most transformational gift” since the founding bequest from the collectors Sterling and Francine Clark, for whom the museum is named.



Aso Tavitian, a software entrepreneur who began collecting art in 2004, developed a deep relationship with the Clark Art Institute.

Blake Gardner/Clark Art Institute

The value of the gift — 132 paintings, 130 sculptures, 39 drawings and 30 decorative arts objects — is likely several hundred million dollars, said Candace Beinecke, president of the Tavitian Foundation.

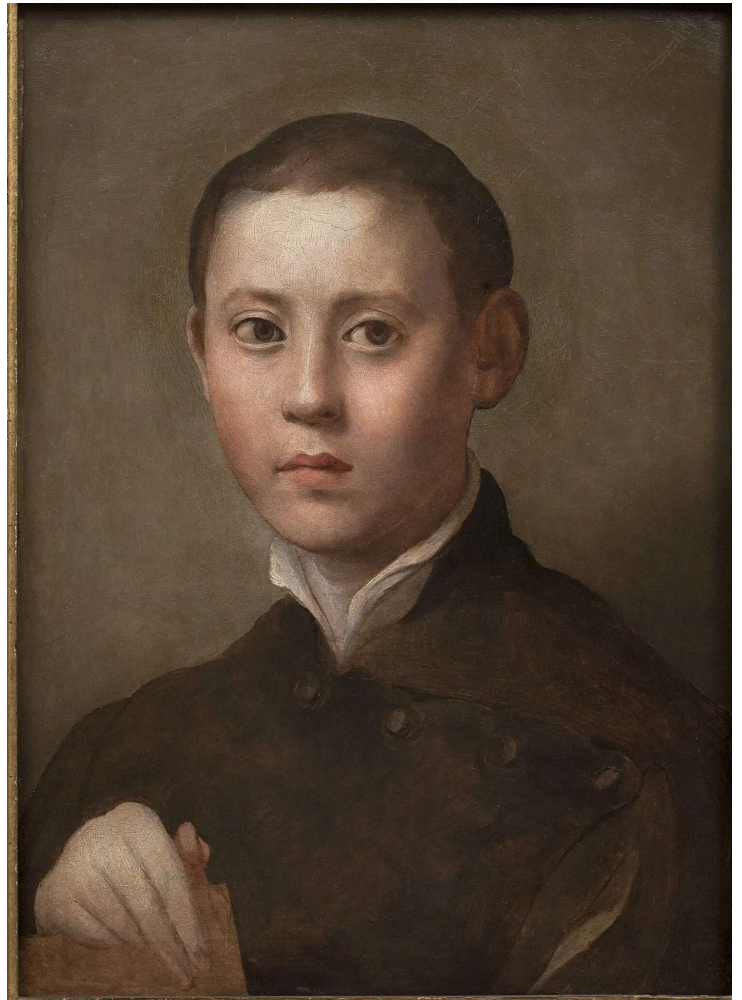
“He had princely taste,” Meslay said of Tavitian. “He was extremely refined.”

Tavitian, a philanthropist who died in 2020 at age 80, was born in Bulgaria of Armenian descent, immigrated to the United States in 1961 and made a fortune in software. He lived in New York City and Stockbridge, Mass., also in the Berkshires, and developed a deep relationship with the Clark. Tavitian, who began collecting in 2004, served on the Clark’s board of trustees and showed some of his personal holdings there in a 2011 exhibition.

The collection he gave to the museum is “portrait-heavy,” Meslay said. Notable examples include Rubens’s “Portrait of a Young Man” (circa 1613-15), Parmigianino’s “Portrait of a Man” (circa 1530) and Vigée Le Brun’s “Self-Portrait in Studio Costume” (circa 1800).



Parmigianino's "Portrait of a Man," circa 1530, oil on canvas. via Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, photo by Bruce M. White



Jacopo da Pontormo's "Portrait of a Boy," circa 1535-40 or later, oil on fired tile. via Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

The donation will give the Clark its first works by more than 100 artists, including the 16th-century Italian painter Jacopo da Pontormo ("Portrait of a Boy," circa 1535-40) and Bernini, who is considered to be one of the greatest Italian sculptors of the 17th century (two works, one of which is the bronze "Countess Matilda of Canossa," circa 1630-39).

The earliest work being donated is "Madonna of the Fountain" (circa 1440), by the 15th-century Flemish painter Jan van Eyck and his workshop.

The gift is notable partly because sculpture — a medium that Meslay said has not previously been "a big strength of the Clark" — accounts for nearly half of it.



Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun's "Self Portrait in Studio Costume," from about 1800, is included in the gift. via Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, photo by Bruce M. White

Sculptural highlights include Andrea della Robbia's glazed terra-cotta "Portrait of a Youth" (circa 1470-80), Jean-Antoine Houdon's marble bust "Little Lise" (1775) and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's "La Candeur" (1873).

"The collection is vast, but he wanted a significant portion of it to stay together," Beinecke said of Tavitian.



“La Candeur,” a marble bust by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux from 1873, was included in the gift. via Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, photo by Bruce M. White



Jean-Antoine Houdon’s marble bust “Little Lise” (1775) will soon reside at the Clark Art Institute. via Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

Beinecke added that the Tavitian Foundation would sell the bulk of its remaining holdings, more than 900 works, in four Sotheby’s sales in February (those sales are not related to the Clark gift). The foundation focuses its grant-making on education and peace, particularly in the Armenian region, and on the arts.

Opened in 1955, the Clark has long been known as a jewel among museums for its strong collection of American and European art. In 2014 it built an addition designed by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando.



“Countess Matilda of Canossa,” a bronze sculpture from around 1630-39, is one of two works by Gian Lorenzo Bernini that were included in the gift. via Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

The New York firm Selldorf Architects, led by Annabelle Selldorf, has been selected to design the Aso O. Tavitian Wing, which is scheduled to be completed in 2027 or 2028. The new building will be located on the Clark's campus between two existing structures, the Manton Research Center and the original museum building, for which Selldorf designed previous renovations.

Discussions about the Tavitian gift began in 2019. Meslay and the Clark curators had a give-and-take with Tavitian and, after his death, with Beinecke and the foundation, about what the museum would receive, making requests for artworks they thought would fill gaps or otherwise dovetail with the Clark's holdings.

"It's a great addition, a great complement to what we have, but we're not changing the Clark experience," Meslay said. "Just making it far, far deeper."