

Henri Vever (1854–1942)

Collector

Born in northeastern France in the town of Metz, Henri Vever was a third-generation jeweler. In 1881, with his elder brother, Paul (1851–1915), Vever assumed control of the family business and established the Maison Vever, which became one of the preeminent jewelry ateliers in Europe, best known for wares in the art nouveau style. Maison Vever won numerous awards and accolades, including the Grand Prix at the Exposition Universelle in Paris (1889 and 1900), the Brussels International Exhibition (1897), and the Franco-British Exhibition in London (1908). Many scholars credit Maison Vever's success to Henri Vever's keen artistic eye.

A lifelong painter and collector, Vever acquired art of many different genres and origins. Through the 1880s and into the 1890s, Vever amassed a well-regarded collection of modern European paintings, drawings, and sculptures. He sold most works from that collection at the Galerie Georges Petit in 1897. The true reason for this sale remains a mystery, though some scholars suggest that Vever's wife, Jeanne Louise Monthiers (1861–1947), worried about the family's finances and encouraged her husband to sell his collection. Vever continued to collect, however, acquiring modern French paintings in addition to Islamic and Japanese works of art.

Vever's interest in Islamic art began in 1891 when he traveled to Tiflis (Tbilisi), Baku, Samarquand (Samarkand), Bukhara, and Istanbul. Upon returning home to Paris, he began purchasing Persian and Indian paintings and illuminated manuscripts, ultimately amassing a collection of over five hundred items. Vever, who also collected Japanese ukiyo-e prints, found camaraderie and intellectual stimulation from fellow members of the dinner group Les Amis de l'Art Japonais and the social-intellectual group Société Franco-Japonaise de Paris, many of whom also collected Islamic art. He studied Islamic art intensely, expanding his collection,

loaning to exhibitions, and publishing on the subject. He quickly became one of the leading international authorities on Islamic paintings and manuscripts, and he exercised great influence in developing European interest in Islamic arts through his participation on Conseil des Musées Nationaux and Les Amis du Louvre.

Vever acquired works of art in numerous ways, including buying directly from artists, working with dealers, bidding at art auctions, and purchasing works during his own travels. He bought several Japanese works on paper through the dealers Siegfried Bing (1838–1905) and Tadamas Hayashi (1853–1906), who also became Vever's good friends. Vever's Islamic collection greatly expanded under the influence of dealers including Georges Demotte (1877–1923), Fredrik Robert Martin (1868–1933), and Léonce Rosenberg (1879–1947). After World War I (1914–18), Vever once again shifted his collecting practices for unknown reasons. In 1920, he sold a significant part of his collection of Japanese works on paper to the Japanese businessman Matsukata Kojiro (1865–1950). After this sale, Vever directed his attention to acquisitions made through public art auctions and purchases from his fellow collectors.

Because of its extraordinary quality, Vever's collection of Islamic works on paper was widely regarded as one of the most important in the world, becoming a focal point of study as it developed. Vever often welcomed a group of fellow Islamic art enthusiasts for an afternoon of study in his light-flooded atelier. The group included Siegfried Bing, fine art printer Charles Gillot, writer and art critic Louis Gonse, fellow collector Raymond Koechlin (1860–1931), curator Gaston Migeon (1861–1930), artist Paul-Albert Besnard (1849–1934), and poet and art dealer Charles Vignier (1863–1934).

When Nazi forces invaded France during World War II (1939–1945), Vever and his family retreated to their country estate, Château de Noyers, with their collections in tow. Vever

died in 1942, bequeathing everything to his surviving family, including his wife, Louise Monthiers, and his grandchildren, François (1907–2003) and Jacqueline Mautin (1910–2000). In 1943, Nazi troops controlled the château, billeting in one wing while the family lived in the other. The Vever family said nothing of Henri's vast collections. Amazingly, the Nazis, who pillaged art collections for their own profit, never located Vever's. After the war, the world seemingly forgot about these celebrated collections; specialists believed the Islamic works had been destroyed. In the 1980s, however, Vever's collection of Islamic art resurfaced. A chance encounter between a Smithsonian curator's mother and Henri Vever's grandson at a 1984 Parisian dinner led to the National Museum of Asian Art's rediscovery and purchase of the enormously important collection in 1986.

Works of art with Vever provenance can be found across the globe in both private collections and public museums, including the National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC), the Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, Massachusetts), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, New York), the Louvre (Paris), the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Paris), and Tokyo's National Museum of Western Art, among others. While Vever bequeathed his collection of Islamic art to his wife and then to his grandchildren, his family sold his remaining collection of Asian art, consisting of primarily Japanese and Chinese objects, in three auctions at Paris's Hotel Drouot. Vever's heirs auctioned the last of the collector's Japanese works on paper in the 1970s and for the final time in 1997.

Literature:

Aitken, Geneviève, Possémé Évelyne. "Les estampes japonaises données au musée du Louvre par Henri Vever." *La Revue du Louvre et des musées de France*, no. 2 (1988): 138-147.

Aitken, Geneviève (trad. Jonathan et David Michaelson). “VEVER Henri (EN)” in *Collectionneurs, collecteurs et marchands d'art asiatique en France 1700–1939 - INHA*, <http://agorha.inha.fr/detail/824> (consulted 17 August 2023).

Catalogue of the Matsukata Woodblock Print Collection. Osaka: Yamanaka and Co, 1925.

Cinquième exposition d'estampes japonaises, Choki, Yeishi, Yeisho, Hokusai. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs. 6 January–16 February 1913. Exhibition.

Deuxième exposition d'estampes japonaises, Harunobu, Koriusai, Shunso et son groupe. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs. 24 January–20 February 1910. Exhibition.

Exposition d'estampes japonaises primitives 300 pièces. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs. 23 January–28 February 1909. Exhibition.

Hillier, Jack. *Catalogue of Highly Important Japanese Prints, Illustrated Books and Drawings from the Henri Vever Collection*. Parts I–III. London: Sotheby's, 1974–77.

Koehlin, Raymond. *Souvenirs d'un vieil amateur de l'Extrême-Orient*. Chalon-sur-Saône: 1930.

Lowry, Glenn D. with Susan Nemazee. *A Jeweler's Eye: Islamic Arts of the Book from the Vever Collection*. Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1988.

Possémé, Évelyne. *Henri Vever (1854–1942): Collectionneur, bijoutier-joaillier et historien, mémoire de maîtrise*. Paris: Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1984.

Quatrième exposition d'estampes japonaises, Utamaro. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs. 11 January–12 February 1912. Exhibition.

Silverman, Willa Z. *Henri Vever, champion de l'art nouveau*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2018.

Sixième exposition d'estampes japonaises, Toyokuni, Hiroshighé. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 10 January–15 February 1914. Exhibition.

Troisième exposition d'estampes japonaises, Kiyonaga, Sharaku, Buncho. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs. 10 January–12 February 1911. Exhibition.

Vever, Henri. “L'influence de l'art japonais sur l'art décoratif moderne. *Bulletin de la Société franco-japonaise* (June 1911): 109–19.

Vever, Henri. *La Bijouterie française au XIX siècle (1800–1900)*. Vol. 1–3. Paris: H. Foury, 1906–1908.

Archive:

Henri Vever Papers. National Museum of Asian Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC. FSA A1988.042.2.