by the autumn of 1932, the Great Depression was in full swing. It hardly seemed an auspicious moment to launch a nationwide tour of “old master” paintings. But that is exactly what was taking place as a train left New York City pulling a specially outfitted Railway Express car loaded with more than fifty masterpieces of Italian art. The paintings onboard belonged to a foundation created by a highly successful businessman named Samuel H. Kress, and they were headed south to Atlanta and the start of a twenty-four-stop journey across much of United States.\(^1\) Kress’s intent in sponsoring this extraordinary version of “a museum without walls” was both to lift the national spirit and to bring “a more cultured understanding of art” to the American public.\(^2\) Despite the nation’s preoccupation with its financial crisis, the tour was a great success. By the time the exhibition’s three-year railroad odyssey was at an end, thousands of Americans had viewed Kress’s collection of “old masters” in temporary installations set up in civic centers, schoolhouses, libraries, and local museums. At the time, outside the major metropolitan areas, art museums were a rarity in America, and tourist travel was still uncommon. Thus, for most who viewed the Kress paintings, this was their first, and likely their only, opportunity to see actual examples of Renaissance and Baroque art painted by such important artists as Pontormo, Pietro Lorenzetti, Fra Bartolommeo, Francesco Guardi, and Jacopo Tintoretto. Consequently, in each of its venues, Samuel H. Kress’s collection of masterpieces was greeted with great enthusiasm.\(^3\) In underwriting this extraordinary cultural experience, Samuel Kress demonstrated his confidence in America’s future and proclaimed his conviction that an appreciation of the visual arts was not only an aesthetic 

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the name of Samuel H. Kress was more broadly recognizable than it is today. Although Kress’s name has lost its commercial cachet, it ought to retain considerable significance for the museum-going public. In scores of museums and educational institutions across the United States, the Kress name is attached to individual artworks or galleries displaying Renaissance and Baroque art. But how many of those who appreciatively view these works know the story of Samuel H. Kress, his collection, and how a portion of that collection happened to come to their museum? The works of art donated to the Columbia Museum of Art through the Samuel H. Kress Foundation remain the centerpiece of its collection of “old masters,” and it therefore seems appropriate that this catalogue should recount the story of the Kress Collection and how a part of it came to Columbia, South Carolina.
pleasure but a moral imperative. Kress was convinced that the opportunity of seeing significant works of art should not be restricted to those who happened to have the good fortune to live in one of the few urban centers in the country then boasting a major art museum. Even at this early stage in his collecting life, he displayed a commitment to sharing his passion for art with the broadest possible spectrum of American society and most especially with those who, as customers, had made his business venture such a success. He did not regard the paintings and sculptures that his good fortune had allowed him to acquire as being for his private enjoyment but rather as having been entrusted into his care “for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people, to be preserved as part of that spiritual heritage which is our greatest and most treasured possession.” What Kress did in 1932, when his foundation organized this traveling tour of masterpieces, was in itself remarkable, but it also predicted the way in which the collection eventually would be presented to the American public.

The Rise of a Merchant Prince

Samuel Henry Kress’s life was practically an American cliché of the self-made man and public-spirited benefactor. Born on 23 July 1863 in the central Pennsylvania town of Cherryville, Kress began his professional life in 1880 as a twenty-five-dollar-a-month country schoolteacher. Over a period of seven years, he managed to put enough of his earnings aside to purchase a local stationery and notions store. This business venture proved successful, and in 1896, recognizing the potential demand for similar stores in other parts of the country, he selected Memphis, Tennessee, for the first of what in the coming century would expand into a chain of more than 270 retail stores spread across thirty-six states. For many twentieth-century Americans, the S. H. Kress & Co. name would become almost synonymous with the term nickel and dime.

In building his retail empire, Kress shrewdly had rejected the business model of the high-end department stores found in major urban centers. Instead he focused on smaller communities in the heartland of America (mostly in the southern and western parts of the country) that might most eagerly welcome a store offering middle- and lower-income families quality household merchandise and novelty items at bargain prices. Kress’s strategy was successful, and by the end of its first decade of operation, the S. H. Kress & Co. five-and-ten-cent stores had achieved annual sales of three million dollars. A Kress store became a prominent feature
on many an American main street, easily recognizable not only by name but also by its distinctive architecture. Designed by house architects, these buildings visually announced the Kress company’s presence in the community and, at the same time, were intended to elevate the taste of the shoppers who passed beneath the familiar red and gold S. H. Kress & Co. marquee. Samuel Kress merged a keen business acumen with a sincere desire to improve the cultural climate of the communities his stores served.

In 1924, when Samuel Kress stepped away from a direct role in the management of his company, the stores were generating forty million dollars a year and had fifteen thousand persons on the payroll nationwide. The S. H. Kress & Co. had become one of the most successful retail operations of the twentieth century, and its founder had joined the ranks of the wealthiest American entrepreneurs. Samuel Kress, however, clearly saw that the making of money was not a proper end in itself. Kress would have agreed with a character in the play Dinner Pieces by the Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti who says, “Now, wealth in human life is like a game with a ball. For it is not holding the ball in your hand a long time, but throwing it with skill and returning it accurately, that helps you win the victory. Just so I judge that it is not the possession but the use of wealth that contributes to happiness.” Kress was ready to assume a new role as art collector and cultural philanthropist. In doing so he also was returning to his first career as a teacher, but this time he would be teaching not in a one-room schoolhouse but on a national level.
The Business of Collecting

Samuel Kress always had taken a personal hand in purchasing the inventory for his company, and on one of his frequent buying trips to Europe, he was introduced to Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi. It was through the persuasive tutelage of this Florentine art collector and dealer that Kress began to acquire a few examples of medieval and Renaissance Italian art. Such art purchases were certainly in keeping with what a number of other affluent American businessmen had been doing. Among Kress's peers, owning a few old masters was seen as a mark of success, an emblem of financial accomplishment, and a testimony to elevated social standing. But Kress actually stood apart from most of his contemporaries in the enthusiasm with which he entered into the business of collecting art and in the deliberate methodology that he followed in making his acquisitions.

The path chosen by Kress in forming his collection was shaped in part by circumstance. By the time that he had discovered the beauties of Italian painting and sculpture and had begun to purchase works of art in a serious fashion, there already were a number of notable American collectors who, led by the Pittsburgh financier Andrew Mellon, monopolized the great international art dealers of the day: Knoedler, Colnaghi, Wildenstein, Duveen. These major gallery owners commanded the contacts and resources that allowed them to offer their select clientele only the finest works by the greatest of the old masters. Kress, arriving somewhat late on the collecting scene, initially avoided these dealers, not wishing to be offered what was left over after the more favored senior customers had picked through the true masterpieces. Instead he turned his attention in another direction, one that, as it turned out, would give unique distinction to his collection. While quality was always a significant factor for him, Kress decided to cast a wider net than that of his competitors, to look beyond the first echelon of old masters and to concentrate his efforts toward putting together a truly comprehensive assemblage of Italian art. This collecting approach actually was admirably tailored to his experiences as both teacher and businessman.

One can view the way in which Kress collected art as mirroring the entrepreneurial approach he followed in building his five-and-dime empire: just as he had decided to locate his stores in “middle America” rather than in the major metropolitan centers, he now chose a more expansive approach to collecting in which lesser masters would take their places alongside the more illustrious. Kress later said that he had “endeavored to acquire the best examples of the most representative masters [of Italian painting], beginning with the thirteenth-century painters . . . and extending through the great periods of Florence, Siena, Umbria, Venice and Northern Italy, and ending with the Venetians of the eighteenth century.”

The collection that Samuel Kress created abounds in first-rate examples by what might be viewed as artists of the second rank but whose contributions nevertheless are regarded as being fundamental to the history of art. To be sure Kress eventually was able to gather in his fair share of masterpieces by Italian artists of the first echelon. Fine examples by such celebrated artists as Giotto, Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, Tintoretto, Tiepolo, and Guardi certainly had their place, but it was the inclusion of their lesser-known contemporaries that gave to his collection its unusual depth and greater historical texture. In the end the comprehensive collection he created embraced works by 342 identifiable masters, in addition to many for whom no specific artist has yet been determined. The collection that Samuel Kress put together has come closer to presenting a complete survey of the history of Italian art than has that of any other private individual.

What had started out as a cultivated diversion for a traveling businessman rapidly had grown into an all-absorbing passion.
In the course of this pursuit, Kress solicited the expert advice not only of his original mentor, Contini-Bonacossi, but also of some of the great art experts of the day: Raimond Van Marle, William Suida, Giuseppe Fiocco, Federico F. Mason Perkins, Adolfo Venturi, Pietro Toesca, Roberto Longhi, and the legendary American scholar Bernard Berenson. These art historians, Berenson especially, encouraged Kress in forming and then refining his broad-based collection. It was, after all, just the sort of a collection that an art historian might have created. Kress himself became more than a passive dilettante; he developed a keen eye and a thorough knowledge of the history of Italian art. Furthermore, as he would later explain, he deliberately built his collection in order “to provide for the study and enjoyment of the public, as complete a representation as possible of the Italian School of painting and sculpture. . . .” Consistent with the traits of the shopkeeper, Kress had set about systematically assembling a rich inventory of artworks, and like the schoolteacher, he recognized the pedagogical potential that the thoroughness of this approach would give him to narrate visually the course of Italian art history. In deciding to build a truly representative collection of Italian Renaissance art, Kress demonstrated a consciousness of art-historical context unprecedented among the collectors of his generation.

Although in the first years most of the works in his collection were acquired through the agency of Count Contini-Bonacossi, Kress also made purchases from other sources, including American ones. The dissolution of their fortunes during the Great Depression forced several American collectors to put their artworks up for sale, and Kress rescued a number of these from the international market, adding paintings to his collection from those of Clarence Mackay, Henry Goldman, Otto Kahn, Dan Fellows Platt, and Philip Lehman. As Kress established his presence in the art market, his name was placed on the “most favored” lists of the preeminent dealers, including the elite Duveen Brothers. In the end Samuel Kress was to spend upwards to $100 million dollars in the acquisition of art and become the Duveens’ major client.

The management of the expanding collection was entrusted to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, which was set up in 1929 to organize, conserve, and research the artworks, and—most especially—to “promote the moral, physical and mental well-being of the human race.” The foundation, in which Samuel Kress’s brothers Claude W. (1876–1940) and Rush H. (1877–1963) had significant roles, obtained the services of the very best professionals to superintend this virtual museum.

The best of the artworks that Samuel Kress was collecting—the “items,” as he referred to them in the business-like terminology of a retail merchant—were displayed in his two-level, seventeen-room penthouse looking down on New York’s Fifth Avenue, only a block away from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In keeping with the origin of most of his art, he transformed the interior of his residence into a convincing replica of a Tuscan palace, complete with oak-beam ceilings, checkerboard marble flooring, entablature-topped door frames, sculpted fireplaces, and a collection of decorative arts (such as period furniture, textiles, and small bronzes) to complement the wealth of paintings and sculptures. Photographs of the interior do not offer the slightest hint of its New York City location; it is only by reading the accompanying captions that we realize that the setting is a Manhattan apartment and not a Florentine palazzo. Even though the paintings were hung in tiers, the wall space was soon exhausted, and Kress was forced to put into storage much of the art that he was acquiring in ever-increasing quantity.

In any case this residential installation was to be only temporary. From the moment he had started to build his collection, Kress had tended
that it eventually should enter the public domain. The question was how he might best effect this objective. Initially he had thought to follow the example of several of his fellow collectors—such as Henry Clay Frick, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and J. P. Morgan—and establish his own museum in a major metropolitan center to preserve both his name and his collection. Yet this “traditional” way of sharing the artistic profits of financial success was contradicted by Kress’s character and his actions. Kress’s “whistle-stop tour” of 1932–35 had, after all, brought his collection to the American public. His donations throughout the 1930s of works of art to a variety of museums, educational institutions, and other such entities (eighty-six works to some forty different locations) also seemed to run counter to any notion that he might have entertained of keeping the collection intact in a single memorial museum. Kress also seems to have been mindful of the debt he owed his customers. As previously noted, the presence of an S. H. Kress store often determined where his trainload of masterpieces had stopped and later where his gifts of artworks were left. Samuel Kress may not have envisaged the extraordinary steps that his foundation later would take in distributing the collection across America, but they were predicted by Kress’s own activist attitude toward placing the collection before the public.

Kress’s typically American interpretation of the principle of noblesse oblige manifested itself in a number of other ways, including
that of an extraordinary impromptu exhibition described by Lord Joseph Duveen. Duveen tells of taking a walk down New York’s Fifth Avenue in December of 1938 and how he reacted in horror when he saw in the Christmas display window of the flagship Kress store at 39th Street a painting he recently had sold to the collector. The painting in the window was none other than the exceedingly beautiful *Adoration of the Shepherds* (also known as the *Allendale Nativity*), one of but a handful of paintings by the great Venetian master Giorgione. The subject certainly captured the mood of the holiday season, but Duveen was shocked to see the masterpiece in such a mercantile (and potentially vulnerable setting). Duveen conveyed his displeasure to Kress, whose simple explanation was that the spirit of Christmas-time generosity had prompted him to share the beauty of the painting with his customers. As this story indicates, Kress was searching for an appropriate means by which to present his collection to his fellow citizens. Only a few months earlier, as a matter of fact, Kress had made a momentous decision concerning what he would do with his growing collection of old masters.

Despite Kress’s apparent desire to make the collection widely accessible, there is every indication that up until 1938 he still was intending to follow the example of fellow Pennsylvanian Henry Clay Frick, who had established a private museum bearing his name in New York. Before Kress could finalize plans for a “Kress Museum of Art,” however, the director of the yet-to-be-completed National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., intervened."South Carolina native David Edward Finley and Kress actually had met a few years earlier on an Atlantic crossing. Finley recently had learned of the extent of the Kress Collection and had been alerted to the likelihood that its owner would establish a private museum in New York to house it. Finley arrived at Kress’s Fifth Avenue residence on 18 April 1938 in an effort to dissuade him from taking this step and to convince him to join forces with Pittsburgh financier Andrew Mellon in creating a national collection of art in Washington, D.C. Finley argued that the United States lagged behind the nations of Europe in support for the arts and unlike them, had never established a national museum of art. This disgraceful situation, Finley explained, was about to change. Mellon had taken the lead in underwriting the construction costs for the great National Gallery of Art on the Washington Mall. That the building would be built was certain, but it would need worthwhile art to fill it. Mellon had not only committed his finances to the physical structure but intended to endow this new National Galley with his own priceless collection of 152 masterpieces (21 of which had come from Leningrad’s famous Hermitage Gallery, having been sold by the cash-strapped Soviet government). With the building project under way, Mellon had energetically canvased his peers in a search for additional support and donations of art to fill the gallery spaces of America’s enormous new art museum. Finley apparently argued the case well, and when he returned to Washington, he brought along a pledge from Samuel Kress to enroll as a founding benefactor in this ambitious national project. Once won over to the concept of a public art museum in the nation’s capital, Kress abandoned whatever plans he might have had for a personal museum in New York and devoted himself with passionate enthusiasm to assuring the success of the Washington project. His major concern in this endeavor was to have his collection represented as fully as possible in the nation’s new art gallery.

Andrew Mellon had concentrated his collecting activities to acquiring the best paintings available by the very finest artists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Qualitatively Mellon’s collection set a very high standard, and it became the benchmark for determining the suitability of all later gifts to the National Gallery. Kress of course had used different
criteria in putting together his own collection. Clearly many of the works of art that Kress was proposing as his gift to the National Gallery did not meet the qualitative standard set by Mellon. Kress’s encyclopedic approach to collecting meant that artists generally viewed as belonging to the second or third echelon of talent and fame had been included. It was a case of a conflict between high standards of quality versus a better historical definition of the evolution of Italian art. A compromise finally was reached when it was agreed that those works in the Kress Collection deemed as meeting the Mellon standard of excellence would be placed on public view while the remainder would be included in a special “study collection” for specialists.

When the National Gallery opened its doors to the public in March 1941, Andrew Mellon’s own collection of Italian medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque masterpieces had been enhanced by a splendid selection of art from Samuel Kress’s collection—all arranged chronologically by region in thirty-four galleries of the museum’s west wing. In presenting his gift of 451 paintings and 24 sculptures to the nation, Kress stated that his “collection [is] for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people, to be preserved as part of that spiritual heritage which is our greatest and most treasured possession.”

Although the walls of his New York residence had been denuded, he declared that he was “happy in the thought that, during my lifetime, my collection intact is settled in my country, in a permanent home within this magnificent modern structure. . . .” The second phase of the remarkable Kress story was over. Only a short time later, Samuel H. Kress was struck by a crippling paralysis from which he never recovered. Kress died in 1955.

**A Truly National Collection**

With its founder incapacitated, the direction of the Kress Foundation was assumed by Samuel Kress’s surviving brother, Rush. One should not forget the significant role played by Rush Kress in the history of the Kress Foundation and its art collection. In fact it was under Rush Kress’s guidance that his brother’s already substantial collection of some eight hundred works of art was multiplied fourfold and was meaningfully expanded in regional scope to embrace the arts of Germany, Flanders, France, and Spain. In the postwar decade, with Andrew Mellon and Joseph Widener (another National Gallery benefactor) removed from the scene, the Kress Foundation became the dominant force in old master purchases. Taking advantage of the dislocation of artworks in World War II and its aftermath, the Kress Foundation, through its art director, Guy Emerson, expended large sums to acquire outstanding works from some of the most significant collections in England and on the Continent. When this spate of rapid acquisition was concluded, the Kress name could be found in the provenance history of more than 3,200 works of art, including some 1,424 paintings and 150 sculptures, most of which had been purchased between 1937 and 1956. The Kress Foundation now oversaw a private collection of old master paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts unmatched in size and scope.

In 1947, in order to match the administrative structure of the National Gallery, with which the Kress Collection was now closely involved, the Kress Foundation appointed longtime Kress conservator Stephen Pichetto as the collection’s full-time curator. Noted art historian William Suida was given the position of collection librarian and in 1950 assumed the role of research curator. Following the sudden death of Pichetto in 1949—at the suggestion of Count Contini-Bonacossi and Bernard Berenson—the skilled art restorer Mario Modestini was asked to take over the supervision of the foundation’s conservation program and given the added responsibility of acting as collection curator. In the belief that quality art deserved quality care, the foundation maintained a conservation studio located
at first in the cramped Manhattan offices of the Kress Foundation and later transferred to the tower of Carnegie Hall. In 1951 the conservation studio was relocated to the Kress Huckleberry Hill estate in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, where it became a state-of-the-art model for such facilities. It should be pointed out that the Kress Foundation—then as now—pursued an active agenda in the preservation of the artistic patrimony of Europe. Already in 1929 Kress finances were being used to conserve monuments in Italy, and throughout the next decade support from the foundation was instrumental in restoration projects carried out in Italy—at Ravenna, at Spoleto, and especially at Mantua in the Ducal Palace—as well as in Greece and Turkey. Postwar efforts included Kress Foundation support for the restoration of the beautiful Santa Trinità Bridge in Florence, the Malatesta Temple in Rimini, and the churches of St. George and St. Lawrence in Nuremberg. The Kress Foundation’s continuing involvement in such on-site conservation and restoration projects is a story in its own right.

It was obvious that the National Gallery could not display the entirety of the considerably expanded Kress Collection. After a careful review of its needs, the National Gallery accepted 365 paintings, 82 sculptures, and more than 1,300 bronze statuettes, plaquettes, and medals (acquired in one fell swoop by Rush Kress from that field’s preeminent collector, Gustave Dreyfus) for permanent installation in Washington. According to the terms of the original agreement between Samuel Kress and the National Gallery, this meant that there were more than a thousand paintings that might have been relegated to the “study collection” category. Rush Kress and the other officers of the Kress Foundation saw this term as essentially being a euphemism for “in storage.” That fate would have been totally out of keeping with Samuel Kress’s philanthropic objectives and his overall desire to use the entirety of his collection to provide the American public with an accurate survey of the development of Italian art.

At this point, instead of reviving the old notion of opening a separate museum in which to display the rest of the collection, Rush Kress and his associates at the Kress Foundation hit on a novel strategy: there would be a “Kress Museum,” they decided, but instead of consisting of exhibition rooms within the walls of a single building, it would be a truly nationwide museum with its galleries geographically dispersed across the country. In other words Samuel Kress’s vision of bringing art to the American public was to take on concrete and multiple form and be given a further dynamic by serving as an impetus for the creation of a network of separate collections of Renaissance and Baroque art throughout the nation.

By the early 1960s, when the Kress Foundation had completed its task of dispersing the collection, nearly 1,400 artworks had been distributed across the United States, in addition to the primary Kress repository at the National Gallery. Fifty locations had received gifts of art (a process already informally begun by Samuel Kress), each having been given from one to eighteen pieces. Some two hundred paintings were divided into twenty-three “Kress study collections,” most of them affiliated with educational institutions, each receiving from four to twenty-one works. Three special collections had been established in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City and in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. All these donations were in keeping with Samuel H. Kress’s commitment to broaden the aesthetic base of America. The lion’s share of the artworks available for distribution went to eighteen especially selected regional museums, which were the recipients of seven hundred artworks. These regional repositories were the centerpieces of the entire effort. The quantity of art they received varied from eleven to seventy-five pieces. The sites
selected for transformation through these Kress donations were determined, in part by the commitment of local authorities to proper housing and professional maintenance of the bequests. Other than that the demands placed on the recipient community were minimal. According to one local museum-commission chair, “The [Kress] Foundation investigates thoroughly the qualifications of a museum before selecting it. . . Once selected, the museum receives from that moment until the collection is installed all the technical assistance that can by given by the Foundation’s staff of experts. For its part, the museum is only required to provide a fireproof, temperature- and humidity-controlled gallery designed to insure the preservation of the paintings.”17 More often than not, the fortunate city boasted an S. H. Kress & Co. five-and-dime store. This “condition” was in keeping with Samuel Kress’s long-standing desire to reward his faithful customers. There is little doubt that without these donations of artworks from the Kress Collection, many of the recipient institutions would never have come into being or would have languished in mediocrity.18

Kress Comes to Columbia

Columbia, South Carolina, had the good fortune of being designated one of the eighteen regional Kress centers. The Columbia Art Association had been organized in 1915, but it was not until 1950 that it could open the doors of an actual museum to the public. For the first four years of its existence, the new museum (located in the Taylor House on Senate Street) was more building than collection. That situation changed in April 1954, when the Columbia Museum received its first donation from the
Kress Foundation. Until that time the museum’s inventory included only ten pieces of Renaissance and Baroque art, the most prominent of these being Juan de Pareja’s portrait of the Spanish king Phillip IV, the Artus Wolffort Christ in the House of the Pharisees (then attributed to Otto van Veen), Scipione Pulzone’s portrait of Duke Ferdinand I of Florence, and the Bacchante by Sir Joshua Reynolds. The initial Kress gift added twenty-five old master paintings to the Columbia Museum’s collection, ranging in date from the late thirteenth to the late eighteenth century.¹⁹ To celebrate the installation of this donation the museum published a catalogue of its new Kress Collection by William Suida. In the foreword to this volume, Katherine Bayard Heyward (an art historian at the University of South Carolina and at the time chair of the Columbia Museum of Art Commission) wrote: “This valuable collection of Italian Renaissance paintings will be of untold influence on the cultural life of our people. With the opening of such vast new fields in our art resources students and art lovers will flock to this Museum for inspiration throughout the years. For the generosity which has made all this possible we cannot express adequately the gratitude of the Columbia Museum of Art to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.”²⁰

In 1961–62 the Kress Foundation added nineteen more paintings and four sculptures to the collection in Columbia. This event occasioned the publication of a new catalogue, prepared by Count Contini-Bonacossi, of all the paintings and sculptures donated to the museum by the Kress Foundation. Included among the paintings in the two-phase bequest to the Columbia Museum were seven paintings that had been in the Kress Foundation’s traveling exhibition of 1932–35.²¹ The foundation complemented these donations with several pieces of furniture in 1959, and four years later it sent Columbia nine decorative bronze mortars and two elaborate door knockers, as well as examples of textiles dating from the fifteenth century.
through the eighteenth centuries. A late sixteenth-century engraving depicting a scene identical to that of *The Charity of St. Nicholas*, a painting included in the Kress donation of 1954, was the final work of art coming to Columbia (1974) from the foundation. All together the Columbia Museum of Art received a total of seventy-eight works of fine and decorative art from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation—an essential nucleus of quality and historical breadth on which it could further build.  

To house its Kress Collection, the museum added a new wing along the Bull Street side of the Taylor House. It is interesting to note that of the ninety-five nationwide recipients of art from the Kress Foundation, only Washington’s National Gallery and New York’s Metropolitan Museum exceeded the Columbia Museum in the total number of artworks they received. In terms of paintings, only the National Gallery and the museums in Raleigh, Tucson, El Paso, and Allentown were greater beneficiaries. That Columbia was so favored may be owing in part, to the fact that South Carolinian David Edward Finley was serving as the director of the National Gallery at the very time that the decisions were being made on how the Kress Collection was to be dispersed. Finley’s connection with Columbia and its new museum was established and maintained through his sister, who had been president of the Columbia Art Association in 1929–30 and who—once an actual art museum took shape in Columbia—served on the Columbia Museum of Art Commission from 1954 to 1969 and was commission secretary in 1961–62. Her husband, W. Bedford Moore Jr., served as chairman of the commission from its inception in 1950 until 1953. That David Finley took an especial interest in the Columbia Museum is borne out by the central role he played in recruiting the institution’s first director, Dr. John Richard Craft; by his having delivered the address at the opening of the museum in the former Thomas Taylor House in 1950; and—after his retirement from the National Gallery in 1956—by his serving in an honorary capacity on the Columbia Museum of Art Commission from 1960 until 1975. Finley’s personal donation of a portrait by Frans Pourbus the Younger to the museum in 1958 is further evidence of his interest in the museum’s growth. While a link between Finley’s Columbia connections and the quantity and quality of the works coming to the Columbia Museum from the Kress Collection cannot be demonstrated, it certainly may be inferred.

Today the Kress materials at the Columbia Museum of Art have been augmented by some 140 additional works dating from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries. These “late arrivals” included paintings by or attributed to Ambrosius Benson, Parmigianino, Charles Coypel, François Clouet, Jacopo Bassano, Carlo Dolci, Benjamin Wilson, and Sir Peter Lely. Yet even though the preponderance of its period holdings no longer share a Kress provenance, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation donation, made almost a half century ago, remains the heart and soul of the museum’s collection. In fact Samuel Kress’s name is as synonymous with the Renaissance and Baroque art collection at the Columbia Museum as it once was with the five-and-dime stores that made his philanthropy financially possible. Coincidentally, in its new location on Main Street, the Columbia Museum sits across the way from the city’s former S. H. Kress store, an art deco architectural delight, its interior now reconfigured to house a restaurant and apartment units.

*The Kress Legacy*  
The formation of the Kress Art Collection and the way in which it became a significant factor extending an appreciation of old master painting and sculpture all across the nation is one of the most remarkable stories in the history of art patronage and collecting. In many ways
that story echoed the life of the collector. Samuel Kress’s first job had been as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse and, despite the fact that he made his fortune as an astute businessman, he remained true to his pedagogical instincts. The items carried by the S. H. Kress & Co. were intended to improve the living standards of the average American family; the S. H. Kress stores themselves were consciously designed to provide a tasteful shopping environment and to enhance the architectural appearance of the communities in which they were located. Similar purposes directed Kress as he formed his collection of Renaissance and Baroque art and predicted how he would make it available to the public. He stocked his art collection, as he did the shelves in his stores, with a wide range of quality items, and he brought the art to the public throughout the nation just as he had taken his marketing concepts onto main streets all across the country. Kress also believed strongly in the instructional role of fine artworks in ensuring that (in the words of President Franklin Roosevelt when accepting Kress’s donation to the National Gallery on 17 March 1941) “the freedom of the human spirit shall go on.”

The five-and-dime empire that Samuel H. Kress created is gone, sacrificed like many of the main streets where his stores once flourished to the suburban mall and discount center. To those who know, the story of Kress’s success can be read in the handsome art deco features of the former retail stores, many converted (as is the case with the former Kress store in Columbia) to other uses. In the end, as Kress must have known, his lasting legacy was in his having put together a historically comprehensive art collection and then in allowing it to scatter and take root in more than thirty states. At the time Kress began his collecting career, there were few art museums in America outside New York, Philadelphia, and Boston that possessed Italian paintings in any great quantity. That this seems surprising today is largely because of Samuel H. Kress’s collecting interests.
and the decision of his foundation to spread his great collection across the nation. Rush Kress was instrumental in achieving that goal and deserves great credit for the eventual success of this incredible project.

The presence of Kress Collections in communities from Allentown to Coral Gables and from Raleigh to Honolulu has taught thousands to value the arts and to appreciate quality. The foundation Samuel Kress created to superintend his collection has continued its program of conservation and preservation abroad and has gone on to support scholarly research and to nurture the careers of several generations of art historians and conservators through its program of fellowships.25

Samuel Kress was part of a uniquely American phenomenon, a member of an extraordinary group of wealthy individuals who, for whatever initial reasons, competitively collected masterpieces of art and then placed them into the public domain.26 Yet Kress had a different approach from the others in that he built no museum to bear his name and did not even concentrate his collection within the walls of a major metropolitan museum. Although he enthusiastically entered into Andrew Mellon’s campaign to establish a national art museum in Washington, D.C., and deserves appropriate accolades for this philanthropic contribution, Kress’s real distinction lies in his broader vision of bringing art into the lives of people in communities all across the country. Probably more than any other private collection of art in the United States, the one put together by Samuel H. Kress—and what he did with it—characterizes the very nature of a distinctly American approach to the democratization of culture.

Notes
3. The cities visited by the Kress exhibition were confined to the southern and western states, the regions where the Kress firm was most active. The cities visited in the southern region were Atlanta, Birmingham, Charleston, Charlotte, Dallas, Houston, Memphis, Montgomery, Nashville, New Orleans, San Antonio, Savannah, Tampa, Waco, and Winter Park. Those in the western states were Colorado Springs, Denver, Los Angeles, Portland, Sacramento, Salt Lake City, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle. Perry, “The Kress Collection,” 20–21.
4. Ibid., 25.
7. Ibid.
8. Emerson, Seymour, and Walker, Art Treasures for America, viii.
9. The most complete discussion of how Kress was persuaded to join in the National Gallery project is found in Perry, “The Kress Collection,” 23–25.
10. “The Kress Collection: A Meeting of the Directors of Kress Collection Regional Galleries at the National...
The Kress Collection in its entirety embraces 3,210 works of art. There are 1,434 paintings: 692 of Italian origin and 199 from other areas of Europe; 891 of the paintings have been associated with specific artists. The sculptures in the collection number 151. Additional elements in the collection include 1,363 small bronzes (plaquettes, medals, statuettes, mortars, and other utensils), 38 drawings, 4 manuscripts, 82 pieces of period furniture, 2 carpets, and 87 objects of decorative art. Especially noteworthy in this inventory are the celebrated Barberini Tapestries (designed by Pietro da Cortona and Peter Paul Rubens and now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art), the Robert Adam Room from Croome Court in England, complete with Gobelin tapestries (now in New York’s Metropolitan Museum), the Hillingdon Collection of French eighteenth-century furniture and porcelains (also in the Metropolitan Museum), the Anhalt Palace Carpets, a collection of rare books, period furniture that complements the Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and other assorted art objects. In addition to these “primary” artworks, the Kress Foundation also accumulated over the years a collection of more than eight hundred period frames, which were reconditioned and put to use in reframing paintings in styles more suitable to their periods of execution. Many of the earlier Italian paintings (the so-called primitives of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) were set into velvet-lined shadowbox frames designed by Kress’s restorer Stephen Pichetto; these frames are so ubiquitous in the collection that they are known as “Kress Frames.” On the “Kress Frames,” see Ann Hoenigswald, “Stephen Pichetto, Conservator of the Kress Collection, 1927–1949,” and Dianne Dwyer Modestini, with Mario Modestini, “Mario Modestini, Conservator of the Kress Collection, 1949–1961,” both in Studying and Conserving Paintings, by Michele Marincola et al., Occasional Papers on the Samuel H. Kress Collection (New York: Archetype Publications / Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2006).

The career of Stephen Pichetto (1887–1949) is described in Hoenigswald, “Stephen Pichetto,” 31–41. Pichetto occupied a position within the administrative structure of the Kress Collection that far exceeded that usual for an art restorer. Samuel Kress so valued Pichetto’s advice that he appointed him a foundation trustee in 1936, three years later saw to it that he was given the position of consultant restorer at the National Gallery, the same title he had held at the Metropolitan Museum since 1928.

Details concerning the conservation work of Mario Modestini (1907–2006) are given in Modestini, “Mario Modestini,” 43–62. Modestini also played a significant role in the Kress Foundation’s postwar acquisition of art and its dispersal to the regional centers.

By the mid-1980s, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation had funded architectural conservation projects in France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain. Since 1987 the foundation, in conjunction with the World Monuments Fund, has supported more than 250 restoration projects in forty-nine countries. See Marilyn Perry, “The Samuel H. Kress Collection: Conservation and Context,” in Studying and Conserving Paintings, 512.


Following the national distribution of its collection, the Kress Foundation directed its attention to the support of art-historical research. Since 1965 more than three thousand individual students and scholars have been assisted in their studies through a program of fellowships and grants. As indicated in note 15, another significant aspect of the foundation’s assistance has taken the form of direct intervention in the conservation and restoration of significant sites and monuments throughout Europe and the Near East. The foundation’s ties to its former art collection also have remained strong as it has offered continuing conservation assistance to the various museums housing Kress Collections.

Two of the paintings in the original donation to Columbia were removed and relocated; they are Giampietrino’s early sixteenth-century St. Mary Magdalene, now in the Kress Study Collection at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and The Arts: Drawing, by the eighteenth-century Neapolitan painter Gaspare Traversi, now in the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. The works added in the second gift to Columbia included paintings by Allori, Bastiani, Bellotto, Bonifico, Boucher, Cagnacci, Catena, Claesz, Cozzarelli, Crespi, Girolamo da Santa Croce, Maes, Matteo di Giovanni, Ribera, Rosa, and Tintoretto.

Suida, Art of the Italian Renaissance, 5.

These works are Madonna and Child with the Infant St. John the Baptist, St. Francis, and Three Angels, attributed to the circle of Fra Bartolommeo (cat. 23); the small Five Panels with the Virgin and Four Saints, now attributed to the circle of the Venetian painter Michele Giambono (cat. 8); Bartolommeo Bulgarini’s St. Mary Magdalene (cat. 3); St. John the Baptist...
Preaching (cat. 12), now attributed to a follower of Vincenzo Foppa (Niccolò da Varallo); The Charity of St. Nicholas, attributed here to Johannes Stradanus (cat. 47); the Girolamo Genga St. Augustine Giving the Habit of His Order to Three Catechumens (cat. 27), and the Sacra Conversazione with Tobias and the Angel by Bonifacio de’ Pitati (cat. 38).

22. On the Kress donations to the Columbia Museum, see The Legacy of Samuel H. Kress, 14.

23. This is also the implication in Katherine Heyward’s foreword to Suida’s Art of the Italian Renaissance, the museum’s 1954 Kress Collection catalogue. Ms. Heyward said that the members of the Columbia Museum Art Commission “gratefully acknowledge the debt we owe to Mr. David E. Finley, Director of the National Gallery of Art, who acted as our champion with the Foundation. His conviction that Columbia, as capital of the state and seat of several colleges and of the University, is so placed as to serve a large area and thus fulfill the main purpose of the Foundation, will, we feel, be amply justified” (5).

