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LORD OF THE WING

Morrison H. Heckscher

BY LAURA BEACH
NEW YORK CITY — Morrison H. Heckscher was eager to show me his latest acquisition.

A recent tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing with its chairman of ten years included a brief stop in the Charles Engelhard Court, bustling, as it does most days, with students and sightseers.

At the far end of the sun-splashed pavilion, at the foot of the 1820s US Branch Bank façade that marks the entrance to the American Wing, stood a massive marble column with a robustly carved Corinthian capital. Salvaged from La Grange Terrace, a series of 1830s row houses in lower Manhattan and acquired by the museum in late 2010, the column is upright, supportive, elegant in its details and enduringly traditional, much like Heckscher himself.

The pillar of the American Wing arrived at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1966 as a Chester Dale Fellow. Forty-five years later, he presides over the wing's 16,000-object collection from a glass-enclosed corner office with arresting views of Central Park and the jagged skyline beyond.

Few people know Central Park better than Heckscher. He crosses it by foot twice daily on his way to and from the West Side apartment that he shares with his wife, Fenella, a retired pediatric endocrinologist. Drawing on his deep knowledge of the city and its institutions, Heckscher in 2008 published *Creating Central Park*, a history of the public space designed by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted. Along with *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: An Architectural History*, his 1985 book on the park's most prominent tenant, *Creating Central Park*, cemented Heckscher's informal reputation as the museum's institutional historian, an honorific bestowed by the Metropolitan's former director, Philippe de Montebello.

Although his is a name associated with old New York, Heckscher — called Morrie by his friends and colleagues — grew up in the suburbs west of Philadelphia, where his grandfather, Morris Harris, was the first of several mentors.

"My grandfather was a Sunday painter and amateur cabinetmaker, so there was someone in my life from the very beginning who was



Beyond his many publications, Heckscher, a passionate student of architecture, will be remembered for his expansion and renovation of the American Wing, an artifact of collecting and leading national tastemaker since 1924. The entrance to the American Wing is marked by the façade of the 1820s US Branch Bank, which once stood at 15 Wall Street.

interested in the visual world," he says. As Heckscher told Danny Danziger, author of *Museum: Behind the Scenes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, it was Harris who introduced him to Philadelphia before redevelopment. The red brick buildings of Frank H. Furness (1839–1912), many of them later demolished, nurtured Heckscher's lifelong love of architecture.

In his early 20s, Heckscher, who briefly dreamed of decamping to Vermont to become a cabinetmaker, rescued a weathered, old house in Maine, in part because it reminded him of the austere, windswept farmscapes of Andrew Wyeth. Later, he acquired a Gothic Revival house overlooking the Hudson River in upstate New York, near where Andrew Jackson Downing unleashed the American landscape movement in the mid-Nineteenth Century. Both houses, he says, are works in progress.

Heckscher studied American history at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., another city with a stately progression of historic buildings. Attending classes taught by two notable art historians, Heinrich Schwartz (1894–1974), a Czech-born scholar of prints and photographs, and Samuel M. Green (d 1995), an authority on American art who restored Middletown's 1840 Alsop House, stirred his interest in connoisseurship.

"As a senior, I audited a course with Schwartz, one of the world's great experts on graphic arts. We sat on camp stools in the vault of Wesleyan's Davison Art Center looking at Dürers, Goyas and Rembrandts. That experience with original works of art was transformational," he recalls.

Green piled his students into the battered university station wagon for weekend trips to Providence, Boston and New York, where Heckscher was introduced to museums and the people who populate them. As he recalls, "I'd been putting off a decision about what I was going to do with my life. At just the right moment, Green encouraged me to apply to the Winterthur program in early American culture."

At Winterthur Museum in Delaware, Heckscher fell under the spell of the pro-

ADA's 2011 Award Of Merit Winner

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Heckscher's longtime interest in Rhode Island's pre-eminent Eighteenth Century furniture makers culminated in his 2005 book, *John Townsend, Newport Cabinetmaker*, and the companion exhibition of the same name. That year, the museum added to its already outstanding collection of Newport furniture by acquiring this signed and labeled mahogany chest-on-chest by Thomas Townsend. It bears the intriguing inscription, not yet fully researched, "Nicholas Easton 1772." Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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gram's director, Charles Montgomery (1910–1978). "He was every bit as much of the charismatic teacher as people say. He was involved with his great book on Federal furniture but spent a tremendous amount of time with his students. He told me that I had to go on with my studies. I went to Columbia University to work with Rudolf Wittkower, one of the towering, European-trained art historians," says Heckscher, whose doctoral research was on the English architect William Kent.

Heckscher arrived at the Metropolitan Museum in 1966, where for two years he worked with architectural drawings and graphic art in the prints department. His career in the American Wing began in 1968, when its chairman, Berry B. Tracy (d 1984), hired him as assistant curator of American decorative arts.

Heckscher is the eighth individual to lead the American Wing, whose opening in 1924 gave shape and prominence to a national collecting movement already under way for more than a decade. The museum established an administrative department of American decorative arts in 1934. A department of American paintings followed in 1948. The American arts were not joined under one chairman until 1982.

The first professional administrator in Heckscher's role was Charles Over Cornelius (1890–1937), who is remembered for his pioneering studies of the cabinetmakers Duncan Phyfe and John Townsend. Joseph M. Downs (d 1954), who left to become Winterthur's first curator in 1949 after nearly 20 years at the Metropolitan Museum, succeeded Cornelius.



Morrison H. Heckscher, the Lawrence A. Fleischman chairman of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is the 2011 winner of the Award of Merit, presented annually by the Antiques Dealers Association of America. "Washington Crossing the Delaware," rear, by Emmanuel Leutze, is a centerpiece of the American paintings galleries, set to open in January 2012. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Heckscher's most recent acquisition is this massive marble column, base and Corinthian capital salvaged from La Grange Terrace, a series of 1830s row houses in lower Manhattan. For much of the past century, they lay abandoned on the grounds of what is now the Delbarton School in New Jersey.



"We had one of the two types of John Penn chairs. Now we have both, which really strengthens the collection," Heckscher says of this Philadelphia armchair of 1766, acquired by the museum in 2007. Made by Thomas Affleck (1740–1795), the carved mahogany chair is from a set associated with Penn, lieutenant governor of the Province of Pennsylvania from 1763 to 1771. The Diplomatic Reception Rooms of the Department of State, Winterthur, the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art own other chairs from the set. A sofa with identical carving on its legs is at Cliveden, the Chew family seat. Benjamin Chew may have acquired the sofa when he purchased Governor Penn's Third Street house in 1771. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For a brief time, Lydia Bond Powell, a Philadelphian whose family name is attached to the museum's 1760s Powel Room, was the American Wing's "keeper," an unsalaried position. Powell was assisted by Vincent D. Andrus (d 1962), the American Wing's curator of decorative arts between 1949 and 1960.

James Biddle (1929–2005), curator from 1963 to 1967, was the first to promote the idea of expanding the American decorative arts collections to 1900, a dateline that had long applied to American paintings. Biddle, who left to head the National Trust for Historic Preservation, was also influential in forming the Friends of the American Wing in 1961.

"It was the first such group to support an individual department and it has been hugely successful over the years. Many museums have emulated it," says Heckscher, acknowledging the important role that dealers and collectors have played in building the museum's collections and endowing its galleries.

Tracy, curator-in-charge from 1969 to 1981, brought Heckscher into the American Wing. "Berry rose to prominence very quickly at the Newark Museum with his show, 'Classical America.' His landmark 1970 decorative arts exhibition 'Nineteenth Century America,' for the Metropolitan Museum's centennial, was really a dress rehearsal for the expansion of the old 1924 American Wing to bring its collections and display up through the Twentieth Century," says the chairman.

With Tracy in charge of decorative arts and John K. Howat the head of paintings, the American Wing entered what Heckscher describes as "40



Morrison H. Heckscher, the Lawrence A. Fleischman chairman of the American Wing, welcomes Metropolitan Museum honorary trustee, the Honorable William Lee Lyons Brown Jr., former ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Austria, and his wife, Alice Carey, to the ribbon-cutting ceremony in the Charles Engelhard Court in May 2009. In the background are Met trustee Richard L. Chilton Jr and his wife, Maureen; Anthony W. Wang; Richard and Elizabeth Miller; and Met trustee Lulu C. Wang. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



At Kamp Kill Kare, the great camp of Francis P. and Mabel Brady Garvan, in Raquette Lake, N.Y., around 1975. From left, top row, Fenella Heckscher; Anne d'Harnoncourt, the late director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Bea and Tony Garvan; and architect Robert Venturi. Bottom row, art historian Joe Rischel; Sam Prown; Darrel Sewell, former Robert L. McNeil Jr curator of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art; architect Denise Scott Brown and Morrison Heckscher.

Heckscher presides over the American Wing's 16,000-object collection from a glass-enclosed corner office with arresting views of Central Park. His books *Creating Central Park* and *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: An Architectural History* cemented his reputation as the museum's institutional historian.

years of peace and prosperity in the American arts." In 1980, the Metropolitan Museum opened a greatly expanded American Wing based on plans by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates.

Roche, a Modernist with whom Heckscher has worked closely over the years, remains the museum's house architect. His designs for the 1980 renovation joined the American Wing, which was originally freestanding, to the rest of the museum through the addition of the Charles Engelhard Court. American paintings, sculpture, decorative arts and architecture were jointly exhibited for the first time. Not long after the American Wing reopened, Tracy left the museum to become an antiques dealer. Howat was named the first Lawrence A. Fleischman chairman of the American Wing, a role Heckscher assumed in 2001.

Heckscher is admired for the exhibitions and companion catalogs *John Townsend*, *Newport Cabinetmaker* (2005), the culmination of his longstanding interest in Rhode Island's pre-eminent Eighteenth Century

craftsmen, and for *American Rococo: Elegance in Ornament, 1750–1775* (1992), which he wrote with Leslie Greene Bowman. He also authored the collections catalog *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Late Colonial Period: Queen Anne and Chippendale Styles* (1985), among dozens of other publications.

Beyond these achievements, Heckscher and the team that he is eager to credit will be remembered for the expansion and modernization of the American Wing, itself an artifact of collecting and an influential national tastemaker now approaching its centennial.

"I spent much of my first ten years in the American Wing acquiring architectural elements, whole rooms and fragments, all for ultimate installation. It was very easy for me and for the museum to remain committed to historic interiors. We had been collecting them since 1910. We had a story but it needed updating. It only made sense to carry on into the Twentieth Century," he says.

Between 1980 and 2000, in an

era when other institutions were dismantling their period rooms, the Metropolitan Museum added the Shaker Retiring Room, the Greek Revival Parlor, the Rococo Revival Parlor, the Gothic Revival Library, the Renaissance Revival Parlor, the McKim Mead and White Stair Hall, and the Frank Lloyd Wright Room, which was the first architectural interior Heckscher purchased, in 1972.

In 2003, after completing feasibility studies, the American Wing began its most recent round of renovations. The changes, which started as modest upgrades and will be mostly completed by 2012, are meant to rationalize and modernize the existing building, a combination of the 1924 structure and the 1980 expansion around it. Unable to expand further into the park, the designers added space by digging out under the courtyard and raising the roof to enlarge the picture galleries. They also clarified traffic patterns for visitors.

Asked what is next for the American Wing, Heckscher pauses. "We are an encyclopedic, urban art museum. Our

focus is on great works of art of all periods and cultures. If you bear that in mind, our goal is to keep refining the collections and improving the way that they are displayed to continually make them more accessible to the public. There is no rocket science to it. We don't have to think of other missions. If we keep our eye on that goal, we are where we should be."

Following a ribbon cutting presided over by First Lady Michelle Obama, New York's grandees turned out for a glittering evening gala on May 18, 2009, to celebrate the reinstallation and renovation of much of the American Wing. Minus its greenery, the once-frond-filled Charles Engelhard Court was recast as a much-needed sculpture garden and its glass atrium refitted with a mezzanine for additional displays of decorative arts. The Classical galleries were reinstalled and period rooms reordered and updated.

"Now one can get off the elevator at the top of the American Wing and walk downstairs through a chronological sequence of historic interiors.

All of the historic architectural fabric is really the highest degree of authentic and well done," the chairman says with satisfaction.

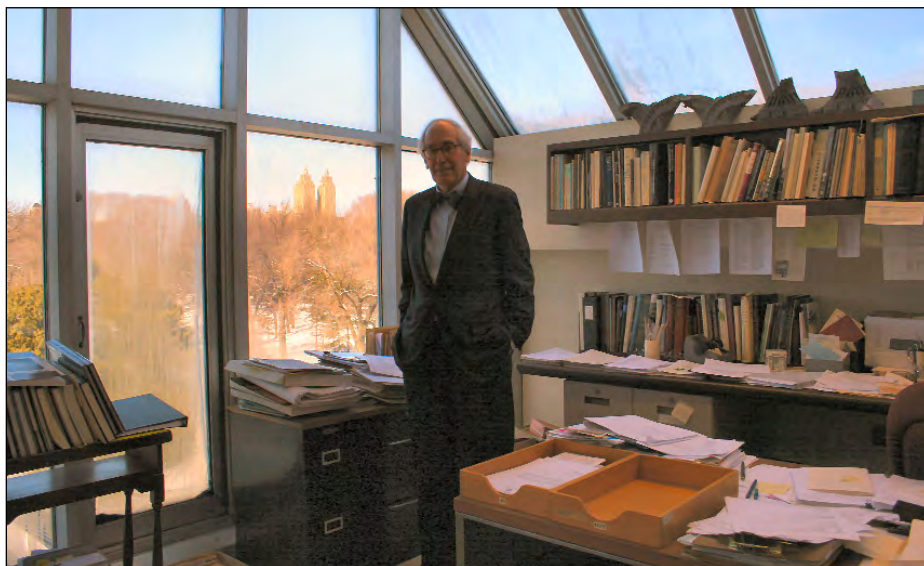
Opened in 2009, the museum's newest period room, the 1751 New York Dutch Room, is state of the art. "We supervised the disassembly of the house, did archaeological studies on the site, completed measured drawings, did reconstructions on how the house originally looked and supervised the reinstallation precisely," says Heckscher. Space has been set aside to install a dressing room from the Rockefeller House on West 54th Street, a recent gift from the Museum of the City of New York.

Heckscher led me past the Temple of Dendur and its shimmering reflecting pool. A ring of keys in hand, he ushered me into what will be the expanded galleries for American painting and sculpture, slated to open in January 2012 during Americana Week in New York. The debut will coincide with the museum's much-anticipated

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Completed in 1980, the Charles Engelhard Court joined the 1924 American Wing, originally freestanding, with the rest of the museum. Conceived as a casual public meeting place and winter garden, the court reopened in 2008 as a much-needed sculpture garden with mezzanine displays of decorative arts. Over the years, Heckscher has worked closely with in-house architect Kevin Roche of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates of Hamden, Conn., on plans for the American Wing. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





First Lady Michelle Obama, center, officially cut the ribbon for the newly renovated and expanded American Wing, which opened on May 18, 2009, a century after the Hudson Fulton exhibition that marked the beginning of the museum's commitment to collecting American decorative arts. Present were New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg; Emily K. Rafferty, president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Kirsten Gillibrand, US Senator of New York, among other dignitaries. Fourth from right is Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



"I was put in charge of a team of very accomplished, quite senior curators and colleagues. My goal was to allow them the freedom to do their best work," says Heckscher, who was named chairman of the American Wing in 2001. From left, Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen and her husband, George, with Fenella Heckscher in Maine around 1990. Frelinghuysen is the Anthony W. and Lulu C. Wang curator of American decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



"I had the privilege of knowing, and learning from, many of the great dealers of a generation ago, among them Ginsberg & Levy, Joe Kindig Jr, Israel Sack, Inc, and John Walton," says Heckscher, here with the late Harold Sack, a dealer in American decorative arts, at Old Sturbridge Village in 1985. Sack and his brothers, Albert and Robert, endowed galleries in the American Wing during its first expansion in 1980.



"Morrie is a great collector," says his friend and colleague Christopher Monkhouse, right, with Morrie and his wife, Fenella, in Maine. As a favor to his friend, Monkhouse, who will give the keynote address at the April 9 ADA Award of Merit dinner, delivered this large iron fire hose wheel to the Heckscher's renovated house on a remote island in Maine, a task that took more than a decade and a great deal of strategic planning to complete. "It says something about Morrie's persistence," says Monkhouse.



Heckscher, at the wheel, shared a passion for vintage Farmall Cub tractors with past Metropolitan Museum of Art director James J. Rorimer (1905–1966). He owns two Cubs, the smallest tractor made by International Harvester.

Morrison H. Heckscher



Morrison Heckscher with Bea Garvan around 1985. Heckscher, who grew up outside Philadelphia and from childhood was drawn to historic architecture, maintained a close friendship with the retired curator of American decorative arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and her late husband, Anthony N.B. Garvan (1917–1992), a professor of American studies and expert in urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania.



Wendell Garrett, left, editor at large of *The Magazine Antiques* and past recipient of the ADA Award of Merit, met Heckscher in 1963 when the Garretts entertained Heckscher and his Winterthur classmates at Historic New England's Cooper-Frost-Austin House in Boston. Both men are members of the Walpole Society, an exclusive fraternity of collectors and scholars of American art.

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exhibition on Duncan Phyfe, the rejoinder to its display of 1922.

Heckscher's team does not take possession of the new paintings galleries, nearly two dozen in all, for another few weeks. Already there were signs of activity. In the final gallery, Emmanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" of 1851 has taken its place on the center wall. Newly refreshed by cleaning, the oil on canvas radiates a swashbuckling energy that is magnified by its great size, more than 12 by 21 feet. A massive gilt frame lay in pieces on the new oak floor, waiting to be assembled.

"To achieve what looks very simple has actually taken from 1924 to 2010," says the chairman of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing.

ADA Award Of Merit Dinner On April 9

PHILADELPHIA, PENN. — The Antiques Dealers Association of America (ADA) will honor Morrison H. Heckscher, the Lawrence A. Fleischman chairman of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, with its annual Award of Merit at a dinner on April 9. The event is planned in conjunction with the April 9–12 Philadelphia Antiques Show.

Christopher Monkhouse, the Eloise W. Martin curator of European decorative arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, will deliver the keynote address in Heckscher's honor. Also scheduled to speak are Peter M. Kenny, the Ruth Bigelow Wriston curator of American decorative arts and administrator of the American Wing, the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Judith Livingston Loto, incoming ADA president. Carrie Rebora Barratt, associate director for collections and administration, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Elle Shushan, an ADA director, will make introductory remarks.

"The ADA is thrilled to have Morrie as its 2011 recipient. We've had a tremendous response from the American arts field and are looking forward to the evening with great anticipation," said Arthur Liverant, the dinner's chairman.

The ADA Award of Merit honors distinguished leaders in the antiques industry. Past recipients are Albert Sack, Elinor Gordon, Wendell Garrett, Betty Ring, R. Scudder Smith, Satenig St Marie, Dean F. Failey, Joe Kindig, Philip Zea, and Jane and Richard Nylander.

The dinner, which begins at 8 pm, will be at the Navy Yard, Philadelphia Cruise Terminal at Pier One, 5100 South Broad Street in Philadelphia. Tickets are \$90.

For reservations, contact ADA executive director Lincoln Sander at 203-364-9913 or 203-364-9913, or email info@adadealers.com.