

# The New Criterion

## Features

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### The great collectors

by [Marco Grassi](#)

On some of the great collectors of the twentieth century.

One way to understand the history of art is through a history of collecting. We can divide the last century into four periods, each exemplifying certain attitudes towards art collecting. The first might be called the *imperial* phase; it encompasses the period from about 1880 to 1920. This era saw the headlong rush of an emerging industrial and merchant grandee class to acquire status, legitimacy, and social distinction. Collecting art was an obvious strategy; the example had already been well established for at least two centuries by the English aristocracy. By now, we have gotten to know the characters that animated this world of excess and display. Excellent biographies, occasionally more than one, have been written about the *über*-dealer Joseph Duveen, about Bernard Berenson and Wilhelm von Bode, the age's art oracles, and, of course, about the great accumulators Morgan, Frick, Altman, and even about lesser ligh ...

**Marco Grassi** is a private paintings conservator and dealer in New York.

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