Part II of IV

James Arthur and His "Temple of Time": A Cautionary Tale for Collector-Donors and Their Beneficiaries

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Maude Arthur Brown Family Archive

Why some of even the most fastidious men and women make no plans for their lifelong collections, who can say? Maybe it's simply because they can't imagine themselves dead. In contrast, there is the other type of collector—the one who fusses endlessly about the disposition of prized possessions, seeming to enjoy the act of imagining the parceling out at auction or in bequests almost as much as collecting them.

Thomas Winthrop Streeter (1883-1965) discussed for decades with friends and fellow collectors the subject of what he wanted done with his collections of American rare books and manuscripts that are considered to be the finest amassed by anyone before or since. For example, he wrote to Henry Raup Wagner on May 6, 1941, "I have just drafted, but not yet executed, a new will…." A lawyer and corporate executive, the 57-year-old Streeter told Wagner it had not been easy to draft the document in such a way that "there won't be any confusion as to what is meant."[1] There wasn't. When his death came 24 years later, his plans worked out as he had envisioned them.

Then there is that third type of collecting soul—literally, may they rest in peace—who, like Streeter, stipulates his or her wishes but, for a variety of reasons, doesn't have those wishes carried out. This is the second in a four-part series about an exemplar of that unenviable scenario.

As recounted in Part I (see *M.A.D.*, November 2018, p. 3-D), James Arthur (1842-1930) donated approximately 1900 horological objects—clocks, watches, sundials, hourglasses—and a related library to New York University in 1925. Five years later, Arthur's estate gave NYU a promised endowment, slightly more than $111,000, to care for the collection and fund an annual lecture on "Time and Its Mysteries." Today only the library, about a dozen clocks, and the endowment remain with the original benefactor.

Despite the financial turmoil of the Great Depression, the collection's first curator, Daniel Webster Hering, managed his job commendably. The emeritus professor of physics acquired more objects, published a catalog, and inaugurated the lectures, inviting a succession of eminent speakers to give it. Each one of them attracted several hundred people to NYU's University Heights campus in the Bronx, where the collection was stored in a space that did not permit its exhibition. Yet Hering was hopeful that a bigger allotment would be forthcoming. NYU had discussed the prospect of building a horology museum on that campus with donor Arthur before his death, and acting on that idea, Hering had an architect make a sketch for a Temple of Time.

Hering worked successfully with NYU's chancellor, Elmer Ellsworth Brown, on that vision—that is, until 1933, when Brown resigned, perhaps because of poor health; he died the following year. Unfortunately, the next chancellor, Harry Woodburn Chase, demonstrated no enthusiasm either for the collection or for a museum to house it. Now we take up the second part of the story, which is, to be sure, a tale of thwarted donor intent. But why it was thwarted and how are the larger themes to be explored, relevant to anyone who is thinking of donating a collection to an institution or, equally, any institution that is thinking of accepting one.

Hering attributed chancellor Chase's disinterest to his failure to recognize "how far the museum of today has departed from the one-time idea that a museum is merely a depository of relics...." He tried to convince him otherwise, and he then made this remark: "The [Temple of Time] project seems ridiculously small when we know that a creditable building could be erected with the gate receipts of a single major game of football."[2] The allusion to football is, undoubtedly, tinged with bitterness. Although NYU was founded downtown in Greenwich Village in 1832, it began to move itself uptown in the 1890s. The idea was to create a more traditional country-type campus with ample room for dormitory living and fields for playing sports. To that end, the university bought up acres of farmland and suburban estates and began a massive construction project. The new campus and environs was christened University Heights, and it was a sports haven, to judge by the dozens and dozens of stories reporting game scores in issues of the *New York Times* of the period.

James Arthur at age 34 in 1876, the year he attained his U.S. citizenship. He was born in Ireland of Scottish parents. He is holding an object from another of his collections, a walking cane.

What's also clear, however, is that NYU's pastoral vision had wrought an unanticipated and ironic consequence. The environs had gotten developed right along with the campus and become urbanized, especially after the opening of the IRT Jerome Avenue subway line in 1917. Paradise lost. Students who wanted a countrified campus would not find it on University Heights.

There was another problem, too, having to do with the type of student that the university was attracting. The scores of immigrants who had arrived in New York and settled there in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were now determined to get their children a college degree. NYU was a logical choice, but most of those parents came from cultures that required their children to live at home until they were married. Dorm life made no sense to them. Besides, it was an added expense. In retrospect, then, Chase's shunning of Hering may have had more to do with the fact that he had bigger concerns on his mind than what to do with the Arthur collection.

In 1938 Hering, age 88, died suddenly, and his associate curator, Carlos de Zafra (1882-1967), a marine engineer, naval architect, NYU alumnus (class of 1904), and NYU engineering professor, was appointed to take his place. Alas, however, de Zafra inherited the same problems that had stymied his predecessor.

"The present quarters [for the collection] are not only ridiculously inadequate..., but are dingy and dark...," he complained in a memo, undated but probably 1940. "Damage to valuable specimens is resulting from lack of air-conditioning.... In the fourteen years past the University has neither provided suitable space to properly display this collection and make it available to the public...."[3] That schoolchildren couldn't see it particularly irked de Zafra. He recollected that "Mr. Arthur at the age of ten" had become fascinated with horology; he extrapolated that NYU was missing an opportunity to instill more children with an early love of horology.

De Zafra not only lobbied for the Temple of Time to be built, but he also was bold enough to suggest that the architect's sketched plan be enlarged. Where did he expect the money to come from? Knowing that the chances of NYU providing it were slim, he proposed solicitations "from well-to-do collectors or from the horological industry."[4] He also made more acquisitions, using the interest on the endowment, just as Hering had done for the purchases he had made.

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From right to left, James Arthur (1842-1930), his son John Forbes Arthur (1870-1933), and his grandson, James Martin Arthur (1899-1987). When Maude Arthur Brown took her two children to see the collection at NYU in 1955, her brother James Martin Arthur was the one they stayed with in Plainfield, New Jersey.

Indisputably, there were gaps to be filled if this were to be a comprehensive "study" collection befitting a university. To its credit, NYU had sought the collection in the first place because of expectations that students would learn both science and art through it. But it did lean heavily toward the science side, reflecting Arthur's love of clocks and watches as mechanisms first and works of decorative art second, if at all. Seeing them as "industrial" artworks was also the way that museums had traditionally viewed them. Arthur had not presumed to be collecting antiques per se. What is more, he had almost entirely neglected Americana.

Undeterred by his lack of knowledge either of clocks, antiques, or dealers, de Zafra was content to learn through trial and error as he made his purchases or took into the collection purchases made by other members of the collection's advisory committee. Offered what was described as a Simon Willard "chronometer" by a Boston dealer for $6000, only to be later offered what was believed to be a similar clock by a New York dealer for $1000, NYU eventually bought the latter, actually a Simon Willard astronomical timepiece, for $800.[5] The Boston dealer's name is lost to history, but the New York dealer was Israel Sack. Correspondence in the NYU archives shows that de Zafra bought several items from the Sack firm. On August 28, 1939, he wrote to the collection's advisory committee that Sack had offered him a tall clock by David Rittenhouse (1732-1796), the renowned Pennsylvania clock maker and scientific instrument maker. De Zafra said he thought the clock was "genuine" and in "reasonably good condition, although we will have some restoration to do."[6]

Later, de Zafra wrote the committee again to say that the Rittenhouse was in "original condition" even though, contradicting himself, he noted that some of the case had been restored. In any event, he conveyed that there was some urgency about making the purchase. "Young Mr. Sack"—de Zafra didn't say which one, but, judging by the time frame, it was probably Harold—had told him "Mr. [Henry] Ford" was interested in it. Sack was asking $2500. The committee told de Zafra to bargain, which he did, getting the price down to the $1800 limit that it had set.[7]

De Zafra also bought a "banjo clock" (properly called an improved patent timepiece) by Simon Willard (1753-1848); one of the same type, with an alarm, by Aaron Willard (1757-1844); and a tall clock by Connecticut's Daniel Burnap (1759-1838). ☞

Sarah Brown Caudell, age nine, and her brother, Stephen Douglas Brown, age 13, visiting the James Arthur Collection at NYU in 1955. They had traveled to see it with their mother, Maude Arthur Brown, James Arthur's granddaughter, from their home in Clearwater, Florida.

But when the committee was told that de Zafra was contemplating the purchase of a clock on which an eagle finial had been replaced by one with a rooster, its members balked, despite de Zafra's explanation that he had been attracted by the clock's "possible mechanical features, the rooster being merely incidental."[8]

Given the collection's cramped housing—a single room in the basement of University Heights' Gould Library—the shopping by both Hering and de Zafra seems imprudent. Maybe both men acquired objects in the spirit of optimism, imagining that eventually push would come to shove. It would never happen, but nobody knew that then. On the contrary, there were signs that their optimism was justified. Like the collection, NYU itself was continuing to grow. In 1938-39 enrollment reached an all-time high of 47,525 students.[9]

To cope with the horological overload, clocks were now being sent regularly to NYU's Greenwich Village campus to decorate deans' offices. Aware of that practice, chancellor Chase requested a clock for his office—he who had not previously given the collection the time of day (to make a bad pun). Chase did not claim for himself personal interest in the clock; his decorator "Mr. Lenygon"—i.e., Francis Henry Lenygon (1877-1943)—was "keen on it." Whether being vindictive or not, de Zafra said no, saying that he didn't feel he had the authority to grant the request.[10]

Besides his acquisitions, de Zafra successfully continued filling the annual lecture spot with eminent thinkers. John Dewey, philosopher, psychologist, and educator, gave a lecture in 1938 titled "Time and Individuality." Arthur H. Compton, a Nobel laureate, coiner of the new term photon, and someone who played a key role in planning and supervising early nuclear power generators, chose time and the growth of physics as his subject in 1939. Henry Norris Russell, an astronomer who spent six decades at Princeton—as student, professor, observatory director, and active professor emeritus—presented a talk titled "The Time Scale of the Universe" in 1940. Adolph Knopf, a petrologist and mineralogist from the University of California at Berkeley, enlightened his audience on the geologic records of time in 1941. These talks were published in book form, as batches of previous lectures had been.

Wartime was not a good time for the series, however. No lecture took place between 1942 and 1945. Even before that, NYU claimed to be having trouble finding suitable lecturers on an annual basis and asked for a change in the will to address that difficulty. An assistant trust officer at Chase National Bank told the collection's advisory committee that it wasn't possible. Edwin L. Garvin, justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, concurred in a February 6, 1941, letter to vice chancellor Harold O. Voorhis. Yet the university asked and received a new legal interpretation of the lecture provision in the will. Only a few signatures, including that of Arthur's daughter Bessie Berg and her husband, NYU chaplain Irving Husted Berg, were required to make the lecture a sometime occurrence instead of a yearly event.[11]

The new arrangement seemed sensible if qualified lecturers truly were in short supply. The whole country was preoccupied with the war, and professional people of all sorts and ages were answering the call. In 1945 de Zafra himself went on leave for that reason. Even though he was in his 60s, his marine engineering and naval architecture skills were needed for the war effort. Arthur Lindig, the mechanic who had been put in charge of maintaining the collection during Hering's curatorship, had also been called up. But knowing now that the will would later be completely dismantled, it's tempting to see this first small change as a foreshadowing.

When de Zafra returned to NYU to reclaim his curatorship after the war, he discovered that he had been dismissed. Surrendering the keys, he vouched for the abilities of Lindig while taking the opportunity to make a cutting remark. "Mr. Lindig is thoroughly and fully familiar with every aspect of the collection and its development to date," he wrote, "as well as the many plans that were contemplated for making it something much more useful than a horological morgue."[12]

Thanks in part to returning veterans taking advantage of the GI Bill, NYU's enrollment numbers were rising, but the immediate postwar period was not a good time for the collection. On May 12, 1947, Joseph H. Park, a member of the Arthur collection's advisory committee, wrote to chancellor Chase to say there were now insufficient funds even for the lecture series.

"I am sorry to learn from your letter of [three days earlier] that the cost of tinkering with the Arthur Collection of timepieces, with the purchase of a few additional specimens now and then, has so eaten into the income from the endowment as to leave insufficient funds to do justice to the lectureship," Chase replied to Park in a belittling vein. Together Chase and Park looked into the finances. Lindig was being paid $3000 annually, but the endowment income was $3375.[13]

"Frankly, it was always understood that the Collection would 'pull its own weight' without calling on the University College or the College of Engineering for a budget appropriation," NYU vice chancellor and controller LeRoy E. Kimball wrote in his own deprecating memo on March 3, 1948. "From the amount spent on Mr. Lindig, it would appear the Collection is pretty well lubricated; or should I say that he has well lubricated the University?"[14] It's interesting that Lindig was still a topic of conversation and still the scapegoat, because a few months earlier, the collection's new curator, John Madison Labberton (1893-1953) of NYU's mechanical engineering department, had been directed to fire him, which he did. More significantly, he was told to do so by saying "that the Collection must be closed because of financial stringency and the necessity of moving the Collection...."[15] As early as the postwar years, then, there was talk of the collection leaving University Heights.

What is perhaps the first documented inkling that the collection would be not only moved but jettisoned by NYU is dated May 10, 1949. Ironically, it is in a memo paraphrasing Labberton, the collection's ostensible guardian, who told its advisory committee that, considering the situation with the finances and the lack of space, "it might be wise for the University to lend, or otherwise dispose of the collection to some institution which can provide a more accessible place of exhibition."[16] Was Labberton trying to talk himself out of a job? Whether he was or not, by the end of 1950, he, like de Zafra before him, had been dismissed.

Edward Conrad Smith, shown in 1953, in a newspaper photo, with three Japanese clocks from the collection. Members of the public could see a small part of the collection on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:15 to 5:15 p.m. in the 1950s. For the rest of its time at NYU, it was viewed only by experts and other friends of the collection by appointment or invitation.

The tenure of the next curator, NYU political science professor Edward Conrad Smith (1891-1982), represents a brief renewal of interest by NYU in the collection. The reasons why are not apparent in archived materials at the university. In any case, if the collection were ever to find its rightful home there, Smith, who finally managed to put a portion on public exhibit 25 years after its acquisition, would be the one to find it.

Although the display was small—only 66 objects—and temporary, it provided Smith with the opportunity to cultivate the press. "Show Ticks Off U.S. Clock History: Old Grandfather Pieces Displayed," the *New York Times* headlined its February 10, 1951, story on the exhibit. *The New Yorker*, which sent a "The Talk of the Town" reporter to take a walk-through with Smith, titled its piece merely "Tick," commenting that the new curator had secured his position "because of an interest in antiques rather than a knowledge of clocks," although he had "been diligently reading up on horology ever since."[17]

Smith also attempted to cultivate influential friends, or, as he put it, "public-spirited people" outside the university community—in the

Maude Arthur Brown with James Arthur's "Round Head" clock in the 1950s. It is now owned by her daughter, Sarah Brown Caudell.

service of the collection.[18] Robert A. Franks (1893-1975) of Philadelphia, a cofounder of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors (NAWCC) and its first president, was among those that Smith sought out. Asked his advice, Franks was, well, frank about how he felt about the collection and the exhibit he had seen.

"Naturally, I have no blue-print for rehabilitating the Arthur Collection," he wrote Smith on February 26, 1951. "Let's take our steps one at a time. Our [NAWCC] Committee in New York is well qualified to give sensible and useful advice, and has your best interests at heart." He broached the subject of location. He felt that University Heights being "away up-town" was "a serious obstacle" to a potential museum's success. "Is there any chance of having the Arthur Collection more centrally located?" He also wanted Smith to address the collection's unevenness. "The main step to be taken, as I see it, is that of 'housecleaning,'" Franks's letter continued. "Should 'questionable' pieces be exhibited?" he asked rhetorically. "You'll probably have several pointed out. I'd say take them off the floor."[19]

Another of Smith's accomplishments was the successful solicitation of some significant

donations. Henry V. B. Darlington gave several important early European watches in memory of his father, James Henry Darlington (NYU class of 1877), one of which was attributed to George Graham (1637-1751), an eminent British maker of watches and scientific instruments. Harold Wintjen gave one of Aaron Dodd Crane's covetable 400-day (year-duration) torsion pendulum clocks, patented by Crane (1804-1860) of New Jersey in 1841. Sampson R. Field gave the collection a Patek Philippe minute-repeater chronograph pocket watch in an 18k gold case—worth approximately $200,000 on today's market.

Then, one day in 1955, quite out of the blue, Smith received something he had not solicited: a letter from James Arthur's granddaughter Maude Arthur Brown (1916-2014). It informed him that during the coming summer she and her two children, 13-year-old Stephen and nine-year-old Sarah, were going to be traveling from their home in Clearwater, Florida, on an extended vacation, and would like to see the collection of their ancestor. Smith wrote back to say they would be most welcome.

Sarah Brown, now Sarah Brown Caudell, who still lives in Clearwater, recalled recently that the family made their way up the coast by car that summer, visiting Tennessee, Kentucky, South Carolina, and North Carolina, and finally arrived in Plainfield, New Jersey, where they stayed at the home of her Uncle Jim, i.e., James Martin Arthur. Like Maude, he was James Arthur's grandchild. Recalling that visit to NYU's University Heights campus, Caudell said in an e-mail, "I remember several large rooms packed solid with clocks and trays of pocket watches. We spent at least two hours or more there…. I had always loved and grew up with all the clocks that Mother had"—the family had retained some—"but seeing these was special."[20]

They returned home to Clearwater, imagining that the collection was in good hands. Yet, within the year, Smith had retired and a name change for the James Arthur Collection had been OK'd by university administrators despite the will, whose first stipulation said that the Arthur name should prevail. It was now officially to be the New York University Museum of Clocks and Watches.

A memo by Thomas Ritchie Adam, chairman of the collection's advisory committee, recommended that letters be sent to Arthur family members. According to Caudell, no letter was ever sent to her mother, who saved everything having to do with the collection in an archive that has been passed down to her. A letter was, however, sent a year later to Arthur R. Berg, another grandson of James Arthur. His parents, Bessie and Irving Berg, were by then both deceased.

"You will be interested to hear of the establishment of the New York Museum of Clocks and Watches," a new chancellor, Carroll Vincent Newsom (1904-1990), wrote of the *fait accompli*. "The Collection previously entrusted to the University, the James Arthur Collection, the Abbott Collection [a gift received by curator Hering], and the Darlington Collection [the gift, received by Smith, mentioned above] together constitute a major nucleus for the study and display of timepieces in this country," he declared. "Under [these] auspices…the separate Collections will now have greater opportunity for suitable display in traveling exhibitions and in association with other Museums in the New York area."[21]

Did that last sentence mean the collections were going out on loan, as Labberton had advised them to be? Chancellor Newsom didn't elaborate, promising only that "Each Collection will retain its separate identity…. It is considered that the enhanced status and activities of a University Museum will enable these valuable Collections to play a greater part in the spread of scientific and cultural knowledge concerning timepieces."

Meanwhile, that visit in summer 1955 marked the last time Brown or any other Arthur family members saw the collection at NYU. The next time Brown inquired after it, she was told that a significant portion had been moved to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Parts III and IV will appear in subsequent issues of *M.A.D.*

Among the highlights of the 66-piece exhibit that curator Edward Smith put on display in 1951 were American clocks, including one by William Claggett of Newport, Rhode Island. When a reporter for *The New Yorker* came to see the exhibit, Smith said of the circa 1740 Claggett: "This is one of our prizes." Here it is in February 2018 in a storage room in NYU's Bobst Library. It was destined for even deeper storage, said archivist Janet Bunde, whose arm is visible, securing the door, so that no one would open it too abruptly and knock into us as we examined the clock and took the photo. Schinto photo.

Notes

1. Thomas W. Streeter Papers, 1920-65, Mss boxes S, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.
2. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, Papers of Chancellor Harry Woodburn Chase, RG 3.0.5, Box 46, Folder 9, Daniel Webster Hering in a memo, December 31, 1936.
3. Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., James Arthur Clock and Watch Collection (hereafter Smithsonian Archives), AC0130, Series 1, Correspondence, Carlos de Zafra memo, undated.
4. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, Papers of the James Arthur Collection of Clocks and Watches (hereafter Arthur Papers), RG 42.1, Box 1, Folder 15.
5. Arthur Papers, Box 1, Folder 14, Irving Berg to Marshall S. Brown, April 18, 1939.
6. Arthur Papers, Box 1, Folder 14, Carlos de Zafra to Irving H. Berg, August 28, 1939.
7. Arthur Papers, Box 1, Folder 14, Irving H. Berg to Marshall S. Brown, October 10, 1939.
8. Arthur Papers, Box 1, Folder 15, Carlos de Zafra to Irving H. Berg, April 5, 1940.
9. Themis Chronopoulos, "Urban Decline and the Withdrawal of New York University from University Heights, The Bronx," the *Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XLVI, Nos. 1 & 2, Spring/Fall 2009, p. 7.
10. Smithsonian Archives, Series 1, Correspondence, Harry Woodburn Chase to Carlos de Zafra, February 24, 1942.
11. This "liberalization" of the will was granted again by the Attorney General of the State of New York on September 15, 1964. Arthur Papers, Box 2, Folder 29, Office of Legal Counsel, NYU, to Maude Arthur Brown, February 8, 1978.
12. Arthur Papers, Box 2, Folder 2, Carlos de Zafra to Harold O. Voorhis, April 20, 1946.
13. Harry W. Chase Papers, Box 48, Folder 10, Harry W. Chase to Joseph H. Park, May 15, 1947.
14. Arthur Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, LeRoy E. Kimball memo, March 3, 1948.
15. Arthur Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, Committee Report, January 20, 1948.
16. Arthur Papers, Box 2, Folder 5, memo by T. F. Jones, May 10, 1949.
17. "Tick," The Talk of the Town, *The New Yorker,* May 19, 1951, pp. 29-30.
18. Arthur Papers, Box 2, Folder 10, Edward C. Smith to Henry Darlington, April 29, 1954.
19. Smithsonian Archives, Series 1, Robert Franks to Edward C. Smith, February 26, 1951.
20. E-mail to author from Sarah Brown Caudell, March 27, 2018.
21. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, Records of the Office of the President/Office of the Chancellor, RG 3.0.6, NYU Museum of Clocks and Watches, Box 3, Folder 8, Carroll Vincent Newsom to Arthur R. Berg, September 25, 1956.