

Charles Parsons

Collection of Paintings

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

St. Louis, Missouri

Cover: Detail of Venetian Interior by Mareschi.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 77-3962

Acknowledgements

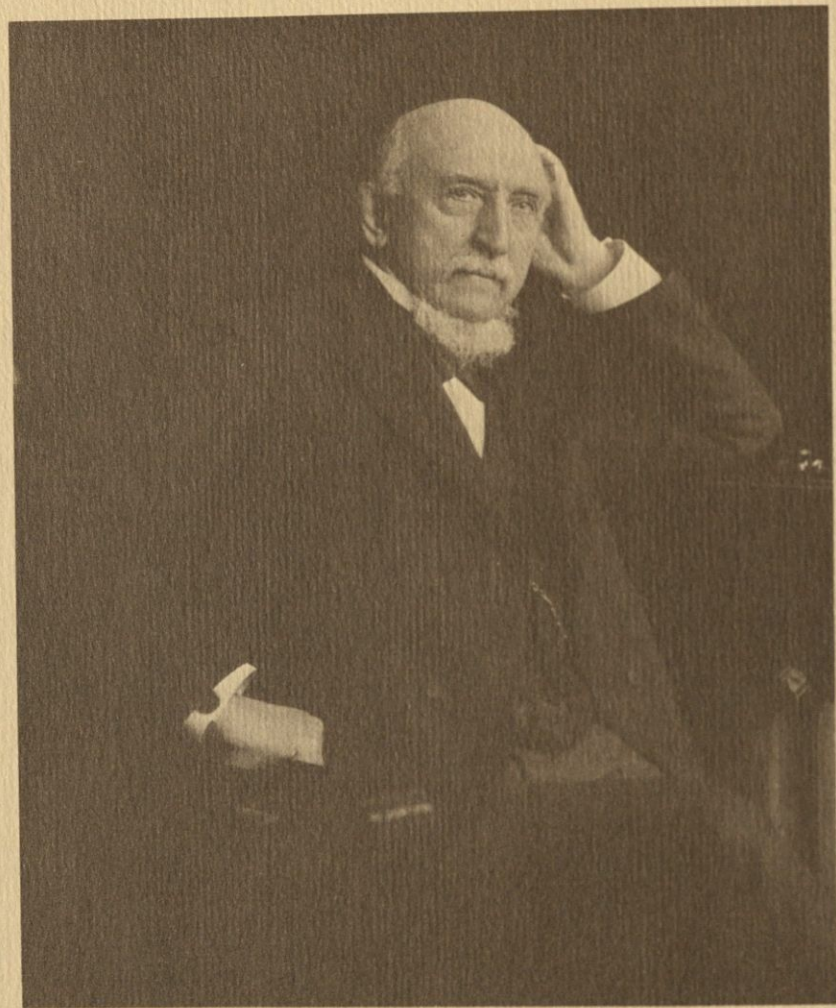
WHEN Charles Parsons died in 1905 he left Washington University his collection of art and artifacts, with the proviso that they be held by his heir and nephew, Charles Parsons Pettus, until the latter's death. When this occurred in 1923 Washington University did not have the facilities for the proper care of the paintings and they were indefinitely loaned to the St. Louis (then City) Art Museum. There they remained until the opening of Steinberg Hall in 1960.

The problems arising from such an arrangement were minimal, but there were inevitable areas of confusion that required clarification before publication could go forward. Initial, valuable legal guidance was forthcoming from Kay Thurman and Peter Ruger. William Eisendrath, Parsons' Committee Chairman and ex-Director of the University Art Gallery, was an invaluable source of information and help throughout. The other committee members (Kenneth Hudson and later James Wood) are to be thanked for enthusiastically voting to support the publication costs with funds from the Parsons Trust. The Missouri Arts Council also provided material assistance, and their support is gratefully acknowledged.

In writing the introduction I was helped by the Missouri Historical Society, in particular by Frances Stadler and her department of archives. I am very grateful to the Director, John Lindenbusch, for giving permission to publish extracts from the Parsons correspondence, most notably from the interesting and little-known letters from Heinrich Schliemann. Many individuals gave advice from time to time, and though they are too numerous to list here, I hope they will recognize themselves and accept my thanks. Arline Leven, assisted by Jill Johnson, carried the burden of the catalogue, and without her thorough work this publication would still be a long way off. Bob Smith liberally gave of his most valuable expertise to design this book, watching carefully over it at all stages. Unstinting thanks are due to my secretary, Mrs. Lucy Ude, who typed and retyped, read and reread every word found here, exhibiting her exemplary patience and initiative, often when my attention was less than undivided.

Mr. Charles Parsons Pettus and Mrs. Thomas (Jane) Pettus provided a real link with their great-uncle, Charles Parsons, and gave me an early insight to this intelligent and generous 19th century St. Louisian. Finally and inevitably, posthumous thanks must go to Charles Parsons himself. Without his foresight this publication could not have come about and, consequently, it is to him that it is dedicated.

*Graham W. J. Beal
St. Louis, 1977*



“With great pleasure I have heard from American travellers of your growing prosperity; but with your iron will and the steadiness of your capacious mind that was of course to be expected.” *Letter to Charles Parsons from Heinrich Schliemann, Discoverer of Troy and Mycenae, dated Athens, February 9th, 1882.*

CHARLES PARSONS was born on January 24th, 1824, in Homer, New York, the third son of Lewis B. Parsons and Lucina Hoar Parsons. Both could trace their lineage directly back to the first years of the settlement of New England: the father to Cornet Joseph Parsons, whose name appears on a deed of 1636 and who became (with one exception) the wealthiest citizen of the entire Connecticut valley¹; the mother to Charles Hoar, the Sheriff of the City of Gloucester whose widow emigrated to Massachusetts about 1640.

Lewis B. Parsons, a serious and diligent man, was a successful merchant with interests all over the northern and eastern Midwest, and with a large part of his wealth he founded Parsons College, Iowa.² The religious convictions of the Puritan settlers were still strong in him and his letters show an overwhelming concern for such matters. A letter to his second son, Levi, then working in St. Louis, to modern eyes read more like a sermon than anything else.

To make a heaven even of earth is one of the highest possible attainments any human being can reach and is only to be had by much, very much, watchfulness and prayer with great activity in the performance of all those duties inculcated in that precious volume which our heavenly Father has given as an *only* standard of faith and practice while here.

I am much more anxious that you should have the peace which comes alone from God; that pearl of great price than that you should possess a large share of that yellow desert of love of which is the root of all evil and has been the ruin of thousands of souls.³

In this same letter, however, we are permitted a glimpse of Charles Parsons. The

impression gained is one of an energetic and enthusiastic young man, already entranced by the intricacies and possibilities of the financial world. The father writes,

Charles and Co. have made a pretty fair business of it . . . better than \$1,000. He is, I think, pretty well cured of the notion of making money by speculation, not so much by his losses (which have been small) as by seeing numerous and heavy failures . . . here. I doubt much whether even the California mania will have much effect on him.

We had hoped that he would spend at least 2 weeks with us at home, but from his calculations for business I see we must make ourselves content with 2 or 3 days . . . I am pleased that our children have energy in business but they should remember that a moral life consists not in the abundance of things.

By the age of 24 Charles Parsons, based in Buffalo,⁴ was travelling extensively over the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and even venturing as far as St. Louis, a city that did not particularly impress him then.

I found Cincinnati had grown beyond my expectations, it is indeed a city of great resources, I think St. Louis can't come up with its 110,000 inhabitants.⁵

The tone and matter of Charles' letters throughout his life indicate a vital, intelligent person, with wide ranging interests, but none perhaps demonstrates this more clearly than one he wrote, quoted above, while attending the 1848 political convention in Cincinnati. It is worth quoting at length for the picture it gives of the young Parsons' mind.

We have just passed through the great Wilmot Proviso Free Soil convention which has just nominated Martin van Buren, the hero of 1840 for the Presidency . . . with Ohio delegates to the number of 2- or 3000 but such a motley gathering as the Buckeyes presented — there was the greatest quantity of homely-green looking-men you ever heard of.

A young man of my acquaintance . . . saw a large number of Ohio badges looking into a bawdy house (and he sung out "hurra for the Ohio delegation," a wag took a number of them to a noted bawdy house to get supper and of course they made the acquaintance of the damsels much to their chagrin . . .

There has been some tall talking from one man, that is Joseph L. White, the Whig orator of 1840 and '44 who in '40 made the houses and hills of Indiana vocal with loud and bitter denunciations of M.v.B. but who now supports him strongly and ardently and going still further speaks of Hy Clay as the best and greatest of men . . . but you must read his speech for it is beautiful and much more so coming from his own lips . . . his enunciation full and distinct and he is full of life and in soul-bathing eloquence — how has he fallen to spend his breath for so great a magician as Martin it is too bad . . .

Yet ranking in my heart is the soul sickening remembrance that in 1844 the same conscience tender abolitionists and revenge seeking Barnburners . . . stood up to malign, to abuse and vilify, to assist in blackening . . . the fair fame of the greatest and the best — Oh how it rankles in my bosom, it festers in my heart and I might sooner lie down with hyenas or become a companion with screech owls than throw myself into the arms of such a party . . .

The tone and the pace of this letter is echoed in others and it marks Charles out as at least the most interesting letter writer in his family. Levi, we learn from Lucy Ann⁶, hardly wrote at all; Lewis, the eldest son, and George, a younger brother to Charles, wrote in a more down to earth way, without the often almost breathless excitement that characterizes so many of Charles Parsons' letters.

Charles' letters home from Buffalo in the years between 1848 and 1850 and those from St.

Louis and Keokuk in ensuing years take in a wide range of subjects, from sweet potatoes (for which he had a passion) to politics, from steamboat food to finance. Already he felt able to advise his father on how to handle the family business affairs.⁸ Rarely was there the extensive well wishing and inquiries after the well-being of members of the family that make up so large a part of his sibling's letters.

By 1849 the brothers Lewis and Levi were established permanently in St. Louis, and in that year the father decided to move to Buffalo, a move which affected the mother and sisters adversely, as a letter from Lucy Ann points out.⁹ The same letter recounts that (brother) Lewis is in a worse state in St. Louis where he has contracted cholera and temporarily lost his business in the great fire that swept the city, but he and his partners were saved by being "perfect insured." Levi, at the same time "has made himself invaluable . . . his salary a year is \$1,200 and what is better still he bids fair to occupy an elated position among the best class of society."¹⁰

Within the year, however, tragedy struck. Charles wrote to his father that Levi was very ill from cholera. He wrote of holding on to hope, but his extensive discussion of how and where Levi should be buried indicates that he, himself, had given up hope.¹¹ And in a letter of four months later, it is clear that his worst fears were well-founded. He tells of a visit to "Greenwoods" (New York City) where "Lewis and myself were in search for a monument for Sarah and perhaps for dear Levi."¹² They found "many fine gorgeous things, but few that suited our taste and pocket both." He was particularly struck by an impressive tomb made for the wife of Byron Sherman and gives a detailed description of it, providing a first glimpse of his interest in the arts. He described the various stones, the quality of the carving and the fancy iron gates. He suggests that the Sherman tomb would make a good model for a Parsons' family tomb, but that "less fancy gates would half the cost of the iron work."¹³

An early paragraph in this letter brings together in a few lines the major concerns that are to be found in all of his later personal correspondence: Nature, business, religion, and art.

A more lovely spot (Greenwoods) I never saw for the last final resting place of mortality, Hill and Dale, (sic) forest and lawn, still lake and running fountains and afar off the hum of the busy city with its heaven towering spires, its forests of masts before us in the most magnificent of harbours, around us the pious memorials raised by the living for the dead.¹⁴

Parsons was about to take a step that would mold the rest of his life, and it is one he takes with a, by now, characteristic self-assurance.

I go into the Attica Bank tomorrow and shall remain as long . . . as I think I am learning anything worthwhile.¹⁵

He remained with them for over a year and they sent him, perhaps because of his family connections, to St. Louis. En route to Alton he met his father at Aurora, Ohio, on Monday, 3rd October, 1850, who was "very well indeed . . . and has burst off all the buttons of his overcoat."¹⁶

Charles' stay in St. Louis was of a short duration for by October, 1851 he writes from St.

Louis to tell of his establishment in Keokuk, Iowa, then a boom town. Business was bad in St. Louis, he told his father, and he felt sure that "some weaker houses must go by the board."¹⁷ He opened his business at the suggestion of Page & Bacon,¹⁸ bankers in St. Louis. He found the life of an owner-banker busy and demanding, and for two pages told his father of his business woes in great detail. Most particularly he lamented the difficulty he found in doing business in the face of competition from the larger houses who could lend at more advantageous rates than he.

Parsons stayed in Keokuk until the outbreak of the Civil War, but the early promise of Keokuk was not to be fulfilled and the impetus passed to other towns. Charles' business, founded at a time of high rents and high hopes, like many others, failed in 1857.¹⁹ But he managed to pay off his debts almost at once, re-open his bank, and still have enough left over to marry Martha, a young lady of the Pettus family and, at that date, one of the oldest names in St. Louis. The "elated position among the best class of society" in St. Louis, that Lucy Ann had hoped for Levi, seemed to be going to Charles when he and Martha were married on June 11th, 1857 in St. Louis. But the ceremony was overshadowed by another family tragedy for the Parsons. Julia, the wife of his brother Levi had died a few days earlier. Charles wanted to postpone the wedding, but the plans were too far forward. Instead, in brother George's words, the "wedding (was) an extremely solemn affair . . . I never saw Charles so much affected."²⁰ The couple were in Boston by June 16th and sailed for England on the next day. The honeymoon was the first of several extensive journeys abroad that Charles was to make and which were to influence his art collection that he built up in the 1880's and 90's.

By the end of the year he was back at work and writing to his new wife from the Astor House, New York. It is clear that the business world fascinated him like nothing else, and after a short but sincere paragraph telling his wife of the comfort he derives from his brother Philo, her, and "our kind heavenly Father," he writes almost exclusively of business. Indeed, to him, even God was actively involved in that arena.

Let us submit, for it is most evident that His hand is in this great disorganization of the business world. . . .

He disclaims

You will think I am selfish to be constantly talking and thinking of my business. I hope to soon give up the subject and let my mind run on more cheerful them (sic). New York looks terribly dull now owing to the entire suspension of business yet there is a more cheerful feeling in the money market . . .²¹

And so on through the greater part of the letter.

But perhaps this letter was not typical, or his wife read it with different eyes. In a letter of May, 1859, she told Charles of the pleasure his letters gave her, "every line fraught with love,"²² and asks him not to chide her for writing of their human passion so freely. For his part, Charles rarely wrote of their mutual love without a reference to the superior love of God, a telling comment on the mores of that time and, more particularly, the influence of the Puritan father. Martha's letters provide a glimpse of St. Louis society at the outbreak of the Civil War. In one she

relates how she had just been to a party where also was Mr. Yeatman. Much respected later in his life, Yeatman was the center of a fund raising drive that resulted in an endowment to provide funds for the care and maintenance of the Washington University Collection of Art and Antiques. Even in 1859 he was trying to raise money. This time for a "lunatic asylum," and at the party he was trying to squeeze a donation out of "Peter Lindell, the old bachelor who glories in the possession of seven millions of dollars."²² Martha did not hold out much hope. She wrote also of the death of Baron Humboldt, a "dear old man"; in terms that are horribly ironic when given the hind-sight that is ours, she wrote

The war does not seem to progress very rapidly why don't somebody do something? The sooner a battle is fought the better. It cannot be a very protracted war, from all accounts they will not be in a condition to endure it long.²⁴

Two years later Martha's sister, Euphrasia Pettus, voices slightly different concerns

we drive out every evening to see the fortifications growing. There are two on the Gravois road, one on Clarks Ave., and another near Morgan. It does not look humane to plant them so near the town, there are pretty houses around them, which will, of course, be destroyed if the guns are used at all. . . we do not feel uneasy . . . but many . . . either wiser or more timid are going away.²⁵

Where Martha was is not clear, but it seems that Charles and his wife were rarely separated during the Civil War. He found a place in the office of his brother Lewis, then a captain and Assistant Quartermaster in St. Louis. These two businessmen must have found their work congenial, and the Union Army was certainly well served by them. Lewis, who rose to be a Brigadier General, was Grant's personal choice as the man best equipped to handle the logistics of moving his army in the western campaign, and was the subject of a two column editorial in the New York Times of July 31st, 1865. Charles seems to have moved up behind his brother. He became a Captain in 1862 and is referred to as Colonel in 1864.²⁶ He was clearly proud of his work and at one stage resigned, at least orally, when allegations of corruption were levied against the Quartermaster's office, a response that some felt to be "oversensitive". However, he was singled out by General Allen as a man who "bore the brunt of hard work and was always ready for duty day and night."²⁷ From the same source we learn that the St. Louis depot was now the largest in the west and there was a magnitude of problems for General Myers, who had replaced "that meritorious officer, General Lewis B. Parsons," when the latter had been promoted to Washington City, as it was then called. It seems that Charles, too, did a tour of duty in Washington, but correspondence is lacking for this crucial period in the life of this man. Though a biographer may lament the lack of revealing letters from the front, at least the Parsons family was spared further loss in a war in which "Casualties . . . were greater, in proportion to the population, than even those of the British and the French in World War I."²⁸ Charles, at any rate, emerged with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel (confirmed June 30th, 1866) and he used the title "Colonel" for the rest of his life.

On leaving the army, Charles became a cashier at the State Savings Association in St.

Louis, which later became the State Bank of St. Louis. He quickly rose through these new ranks and was elected president in 1870. Under his management the bank enjoyed great success. For twenty-three continuous years investments realized over 8% semi-annually, and for other years never less than 5% semi annually, accumulating a surplus of \$1,100,000.²⁹ His standing in the financial community is indicated by his being appointed, amongst other things, special investigator to clear up the criminal mismanagement of St. Louis City finances in 1892 and presiding chairman over the World Congress of Bankers at the Chicago Exposition of 1893. In his last years of life he could read of his success in the *Encyclopaedia of the History of St. Louis*, and it must have seemed to him that it had, in some measure, been a hard and well-earned success. Perhaps he regretted that his wife (she died in 1889) and he never had a child of their own, but he adopted his nephew, Charles Parsons Pettus, as his heir. It was to him that Parsons willed the collection of paintings in 1903, to go to Washington University on the nephew's death.³⁰

II

Travels and Collection

Possessing by nature a refined taste, he has, during his active life gathered a large and valuable collection of paintings and other works of art. *Encyclopaedia of History of St. Louis*, p. 1701

IT HAS NOT been possible to ascertain exactly when Charles Parsons began to collect paintings and other objets d'art, but to a man of his wide interests and social position it was a natural step. The letters from his early days demonstrate an acute awareness of the world around him and a more than passing interest in visual phenomena. Furthermore, his decision to honeymoon in Europe is in line with the Grand Tour tradition with all its implications of educational sight-seeing.

In 1868 Parsons and his wife returned to Europe. Martha's sister, Euphrasia, was to be married in Paris,³² but Parsons took this opportunity to take a breathless tour of Poland, Russia, and the near East. In August he wrote from Warsaw giving an entertaining account of his guide, an eighty-three year old veteran of Napoleon's invasion of Russia who had 'lost all his teeth and spoke indistinctly.'³³ The old fellow took Parsons and his traveling companion round the great palace at Villanow and found the American tourists too tiring for his poor old legs. Parsons was most impressed by the palace; "the Empress offered 30 m. roubles for it so you see it must be a fine palace." The countryside he found very dull, "one vast plain, like the Illinois prairie." On August 24th he took the train to St. Petersburg where he finished his letter to his wife. He tells of a "long uninteresting ride of 30 hours through a vast plain without seeing a hill above 50

feet." After a three day excursion that took in Novgorod and Moscow he traveled back through Germany to attend Euphrasia's wedding in Paris.

The extant correspondence of this time gives only the indication of an intelligent traveler's response to the art and architecture around him, but it was in 1868, on a train crossing the Alps that he struck up the friendship with the great Archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann that was to last for many years.³⁴ Schliemann was two years older than Parsons and his background, though more striking, was somewhat similar.³⁵ Self-educated, successful in business and archaeology, and fluent in seven languages, to the American banker he must have seemed the epitome of the modern humanist. For his part, Schliemann's letters to Parsons are always warm and complimentary, demonstrating genuine regard and respect. In a letter announcing his intention to visit Parsons in St. Louis, Schliemann wrote,

I was much gratified to see from your circular the particulars of your banking establishment which under your wise management, cannot fail to grow rapidly in wealth, inspiration.³⁶

The letter is signed "Your Faithful Friend, Hy Schliemann."

Parsons may have been contemplating living in Europe. A later letter from Schliemann states, "You never can feel tedious if you make Paris your home."³⁷ But neither banking nor archaeology was discussed here; a plan of a more practical nature was under consideration.

If such a scheme fails in France, where 999 out of 1000 have more taste to see "Hamlet" than to know the exact statistic of the Pole, it could not possibly fail in the U.S., where useful knowledge goes beyond every other consideration.³⁸

At this time, although Schliemann had propounded his theory about the location of Troy, he had not yet begun the major excavations that were to bring him vindication.³⁹ This had come by 1874 bringing its own problems which he related to Parsons,

... Your appreciation of my work is the greatest recompense I could wish for and it encourages me to continue the excavations with the utmost vigour as soon as my dispute with Turkey is amicably arranged, which I trust will be the case in the course of a fortnight. The Turkish Minister had taken ill my remarks on page LII-LV of the preface of my book and has brought here in the beginning of April last a suit against me to revindicate one half of my whole Trojan collection. He had engaged the 3 most powerful lawyers and brought it so far that I have been obliged in May last to make the whole collection of 25,000 objects suddenly and mysteriously disappear in order to save it. I have been immensely annoyed by the suit. Seeing now that I am fully a match to him and that he cannot recover anything at all of the collection, he wishes to negotiate and with \$4,000 cash and the continuation of the excavations for the exclusive benefit of the Turks for 3 or 4 months. I shall no doubt settle the matter very shortly. But the suite has already cost \$8,000 ...

... Ever since my discoveries have become known I have been libelled here by the envious scholars and during all the time the suit has lasted the Greek government has brought its crushing influence on the Courts in order to get the decisions against me. Thus I have had to fight all the time with my 6 lawyers against 2 governments. In consequence of that we shall henceforward again live in Paris, or perhaps in Naples; but first we have to finish Troy, where we cannot begin before 1 March. Perhaps you come and see us there.⁴⁰

This kind of problem was to be repeated in relation to Schliemann's second great discovery, that of Mycenae and its fabulous treasure. Martha Parsons' innocent request for a souvenir

from Mycenae evoked the following response,

I am unable to send you any souvenirs at all from Mycenae, because, as you will have seen from the London Times . . . I have presented to the Greek nation one half of the treasures which I could have claimed by law and . . . I have not even kept the slightest particle of gold for myself . . . the Greeks are so jealous of me that the Archaeological Society here refuses to even let me have 100 common Mycenae potsherds out of the million beautiful fragments and thousands of splendid vases which I have gathered for them at the risk of my life and with large expenditure.⁴¹

Soon, however, he wrote to say that he would "have much pleasure in giving to Messrs. Smith, Payne and Smith, some little reminiscences from *Troy* for you."⁴²

In 1882 Schliemann wrote the warm phrases quoted at the beginning of this essay and later in the year he paid Parsons the compliment of casting him in his own role.

You express the wish to be engaged in something that, while giving pleasure to you would confer benefit on the world. I can indeed propose something which would render your name immortal and confer an immense benefit on the world; namely to excavate the artificial mounds in the land of Goshen in Egypt and thus bring light into the dark night of the history of the Jews before their emigration from Egypt. If you will do it I shall probably excavate the mounds of the first Greek settlements in Egypt; but if you will not operate in Goshen I may do it myself; I shall, of course, not do it conjointly with you for if you do the work you must have all the glory of it.⁴³

Regrettably, but perhaps not surprisingly, Parsons did not follow this suggestion. He was now fifty-eight and had been in St. Louis for twenty-five years. Such a move, entailing almost permanent residence in Egypt would have been too much, as he, himself, later wrote.

We finally got to Zigzag . . . I was here in 1876 it is in the land of Goshen of the Bible. There have been some fine discoveries made near here within the last few years. It was to this very place that Dr. Henry Schliemann recommended me to go and make diggings, but I could not do it without giving up all my affairs at home for a long time, and my present business for life. It turned out to be as good a point as he contemplated and might have made one's name famous among archaeologists, and I think I would have liked the work.⁴⁴

The trip referred to above apparently took him round the world and a letter written aboard the S.S. Gaelic bound for Yokohama describes the first stage, from St. Louis to San Francisco. Traveling by rail he found "not so much grand scenery as . . . expected"⁴⁵ until he reached Utah. He was impressed by Salt Lake City but disappointed that "Old Brigham"⁴⁶ was out of town. Though most struck by the Sierra Nevada he found it "surprising how little there is of grand scenery compared with the great distance . . . the Penn^a RR offer(s) almost as much of interest in the ride to Harrisburg as all this ride although the mountains are not so high."

After a delay in San Francisco, caused by bad weather, he sailed for Japan. Perhaps it was at this time that he began to collect oriental pieces, thereby following a recent trend reflected most notably in the art of the American born painter, James McNeill Whistler. He continued to buy Japanese pieces after his return, through an agent, one Peyton Sanders. Even then it would seem that getting what you wanted at a reasonable price was not easy.

I find it difficult to find anything really nice and still less to find anything reasonable in price. Just now the fancy of collectors seems to run upon old pottery and porcelain. There are still some lovely specimens of Satsuma and Imari coming to light.⁴⁷

And in a later letter,

Sword ornaments of the proper kind are becoming dear and scarce, but I am assured that good ones will be procured and put on.⁴⁸

Other correspondence indicates that the Parsons had drapes and screens made in Japan and shipped to them for their house in St. Louis.

Parsons took his last trip abroad with his nephew and heir, Charles Parsons Pettus, in 1894 when he was seventy years old. It lasted over a year and took him completely around the world. On his return he wrote a small book, *Notes of a Trip Around the World*,⁴⁹ which demonstrates that he still retained the perceptive and open mind that characterized his earlier years. Parsons writes with an easy, jogging style that reflects the leisurely pace of their journey, never staying for any great length of time, but only occasionally regretting that their itinerary obliged them to move on. He comments on the people, the landscape, the art and architecture, on manners and fashions, on economics and religion. Occasionally his perspicacity seems almost prophetic. Of Japan, a country for which he had unlimited praise he wrote,

I cannot see why there is not in the future a menace to our home manufacture in Japanese competition, they work so cheaply, are so painstaking and imitative, that . . . we may find our machinery duplicated there to produce all sorts of articles much cheaper . . .⁵⁰

For the prostrate giant China, humiliated by defeat in war and exploitation by foreign nations, he had sympathy.

I believe that if they could get out of their miserable literate rule (which is founded mainly on a knowledge of the stories, myths and teachings of the past), and stop following their tradition, throw off the mandarins and their power too, and have good, progressive men put over them, that the Chinese would come to the front . . .⁵¹

Parsons progressed from Japan to China, via Hong Kong and after visiting Kua Lung and Canton moved on to Singapore and then India. Everywhere, he saw evidence of the vast British Empire in 1895 at its peak, and Parsons comments range from mild irritation at the loss of initiative of Americans⁵² to open admiration in India he found,

The best, and, on the whole, the most just rule the land ever had, and yet, while admitting this to be true, it is said many of the natives would, if it were possible, gladly welcome a native reign.⁵³

A large part of the book is given over to his stay in India, where Parsons and his companions traveled extensively. He went far enough north to see the little Gurka soldiers of Nepal and Mt. Everest, and his narrative takes in a characteristically wide range of subjects: Darjeeling Tea, the Taj Mahal, religious customs and political conditions. His descriptions are brief, to the point, and, a little surprisingly, sparing in value judgments. He talks of an interesting religious discussion with

a genuine Mahomedan in European dress — who argued strongly in favor of his religion, and, as generally is the case when all are amicably disposed, we got on pleasantly.⁵⁴

He gives brief, but adequate, descriptions of the architectural monuments, but to judge from his collection, the opulent and highly decorated art of India was not to his taste. He seems to have purchased nothing.

Parsons left Bombay on March 1st. On March 6th he arrived at Aden, for which he had unmitigated criticism. He was glad to leave and after a dismal voyage he arrived at Cairo, which he declared to be greatly changed since 1868. It was at this time that he saw the Mounds of Goshen and made the comments quoted earlier (see page 10). He visited the ancient monuments and was greatly offended by the desecration that had been perpetrated over the centuries by grave robbers, devout Christians, Muslims and tourists. Though he was obviously as impressed by the things he saw here as anywhere else, including his favoured Japan, he cuts his narrative short on account of the great amount already written by other American tourists.⁵⁵

On April 3rd they set off for Jerusalem. After a short stay he moved on to Lebanon, Rhodes, and arrived at Smyrna on the 13th. Having observed Easter here he took a ship for Greece and soon visited Mycenae, the site of his friend Schliemann's second great excavation. During the rest of April and the whole of May he visited Spain, France and England. They boarded the "fine steamer *Paris*" in Southampton "and in some hours less than seven days were in the Fifth Avenue Hotel."⁵⁶

Parsons ends his account with a somewhat romantic recapitulation of the places he saw. For five pages he evokes scenes of "the friendly people of Nippon . . . almond eyed Chinamen . . . the tramp of ancient kings . . . the valorous Christian soldier Knights of Malta . . . England's green landscape . . . and America, and my dream is over. Once more I am at home, but the pleasant memory still remains and will do so forever."⁵⁷

Unfortunately for this writer, Parsons leaves no similar account of his tastes and aims in collecting. Including, as it does, "paintings, curios, bric-a-brac, bronzes, pottery, porcelain, weapons, carvings, and laquer-ware"⁵⁸ it is clearly an expression of his wide interests.

The greater part of the paintings are either anecdotal, genre scenes, or landscapes. These last stand out as being exceptionally advanced, but were, as will be seen, an essential ingredient in the St. Louis collection of that time.⁵⁹ Though he already possessed a Church landscape by 1880 he decided to buy another, *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*, "sight unseen" and the interesting correspondence throws a revealing light on Parsons.

Church was concerned that Parsons might not like this majestic piece and wrote to explain the evolution of the picture in some detail.

As I developed the picture I introduced a more verdant country than exists in that part of New Granada where I first saw the snowy mountains. But it is reassuring to believe — indeed it is more than probably that the country in the interior is well watered and that all the conditions I have presented may be found there. So we may regard it as a title consistent with the subject.

I hope that the picture will not only please you and Mrs. Parsons at first sight, but what is of more importance that it will grow in favor the more it is studied.⁶⁰

But that was not immediately the case as later correspondence shows,

Although I confess to being much disappointed that it did not impress you with the decided favor I hoped . . . yet I feel confident that as you study and contemplate it more and more you will be impressed with certain features and effects which cost me much study and effort to attain — imperfect though they be.

I certainly should be sorry if all there is in the picture could be comprehended in a glance or two. It was so warmly commended by my artist friends that I was encouraged to expect too much probably.⁶¹

The implied rebuke was effective, or perhaps Parsons genuinely very quickly changed his mind. At any rate, in later correspondence, Church thanked Parsons for what was obviously bountiful praise.⁶²

In fact, Parsons' collection is a perfect example of the informed St. Louis gentleman's of that time. Edward Strahan's three volume, *Art Treasures of America*, subtitled, *The Choicest Works of Art in the Public and Private Collections of North America*⁶³ lists, along with Parsons', the collections of D. Catlin, J.A. Scudder, S.A. Coles, H.L. Dousman, and J.J. O'Fallon.⁶⁴ Though these collections vary in size, a number of artists are represented in most: Corot, Daubigny, Verbockhoven, deNeuville, Coomans, and others are at least duplicated. Further duplications occurred after the publication of Strahan's catalogue. Parsons added a Jules Breton and a George Inness to complement those in the collection of his friend Catlin. As noted above he ventured to buy the *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*, a type of landscape radically different from the generally cow ridden composition of a Troyon or (A.F.) Bellows. It is perhaps possible to discern the first steps in this direction in Strahan's list, for by 1882 Parsons already possessed Church's *Sunset and Mount Desert* and Gifford's *Venetian Sails*. He later also acquired a Venetian "Veduta," by Marieschi, and although he thought it was a Canaletto, it shows Parsons in touch with fashionable developments in taste and collecting.

Nevertheless, a large part of the collection consists of firmly nineteenth century anecdotal pieces which rely for their impact on a narrative (rather than visual) approach to paintings. Invariably the scene shown is one that evokes an easy sentiment and suggests a denouement that the onlookers must imagine for themselves. Thus, to take an example illustrated by Strahan, in front of Palmaroli's *Interrupted Reading* (Cat. #WU 2142) the educated nineteenth century onlooker would delight in the actual and pending interplay between the young lady and the priest. She, half poised, half guilty, hastily conceals a book from the hefty cleric, in whose posture a hint of promiscuity can easily be discerned, highlighted by the ordinary, floppy umbrella that he carries. The implication is quite clear and the picture for all its geniality, is part of a successful genre that took the puerility or hypocrisy of the Catholic clergy as its main theme.⁶⁵ The drama is increased by Palmeroli's involvement in this genre of a young and attractive woman to whom the onlooker is meant to relate.

The then, almost universally, accepted idea of the visual arts as an engaging source for moral elucidation is stated simply in Strahan's summation of St. Louis collections,

To look at these necessary family adornments and educators, domiciled twelve or thirteen hundred miles from the seaboard, one is impelled to the thought that art belongs to no nation, but is universal in its teachings and command of admiration.⁶⁶

Strahan sees Parsons' collection as containing fine examples of the best of modern artists.

In (his) gallery . . . is a collection of well-selected pictures, — gathered slowly and with critical taste . . . growing in American favor. Louis Alvarez is represented by a very recent painting. "The Introduction of the Betrothed" which exhibits all the traits of that artist's *chic*. Mazerolle, the decorator of rooms in municipal buildings in Paris, the artist of the superb frieze which adorns the parlor of the D. O. Mills palace in Fifth Avenue, is here with his masterpiece in serious work . . . "The Love Feast," representing a party of early Christians partaking of that periodical repast, which is continued to the present day in all churches under the name of "Communion." A careful study by Steinheil — called "The Antiquary" — indicates the future of this artist . . . Mr. Parsons in his gathering has a few choice examples of great men of the past generation: — Calame — exhibiting his force — Brion, in one of his best-known works, "The Invasion."⁶⁷

Parsons' collection was then a "solid" one, when judged by the criteria of most collectors of his day in America and Europe. He did not need the advice from Church to stay away from the Impressionists.⁶⁸ It is not likely that a man who praised his favored Japanese for patience and craftsmanship and wrote to Jules Breton requiring details of the characters in his painting, *Wine Shop, Monday*,⁶⁹ would be favorably struck by the hasty brushwork of a Monet or Renoir, whose canvasses lacked even the tonal unity found in those of Corot or Daubigny.

His picture collection, like so much in his life, testifies to a lively and refined mind, capable of discerning judgement within accepted boundaries.⁷⁰ Though he inevitably acquired a large body of narrative pieces he avoided subjects that indulge in extreme morbidity or verge on prurience. Unlike many of his oriental pieces, the paintings that he selected are generally of a high technical quality, carefully composed and finely executed. And occasionally, in purchasing a Corot, or a Church, a Gifford, or an Inness, he acquired paintings that have become central pieces in a vastly expanded university collection owing much to his generosity.

Notes *All letters referred to below are at the Missouri Historical Society*

1. Hyde, W. and Conard, L. *Encyclopaedia of the History of St. Louis*, Southern Historical Co., New York, Louisville and St. Louis, 1899, Vol. III, p1700-1701.
2. Parsons College, Iowa, closed after 98 years in 1973 and reopened in 1974 as the Maharishi International University (unaccredited).
3. Letter from Lewis B. Parsons to Levi, dated Buffalo, October 28, 1848.
4. "Charles insists on my going home with him to Buffalo" Letter from Lucy Ann Parsons (sister) to Levi, dated Perry, N.Y., January 5th, 1848.
5. Letter from Charles Parsons to Levi, dated Cincinnati, August 12th, 1848.
6. Letter from Lucy Ann to Levi op. cit., "I know of no better way to bring you to a sense of your duty and the recollection of your friends than to continue writing."
7. Letters from Charles Parsons to Levi, op. cit.
8. Letter from Charles Parsons to father, dated Buffalo, October 28th, 1848.
9. Letter from Lucy Ann to (unspecified) brother and sister, dated Buffalo, June 12th, 1849 "Mother is in a bad state because of the recent move from Perry."

10. Ibid.
11. Letter from Charles Parsons to father, dated Buffalo, April 2nd, 1850.
12. Letter from Charles Parsons to father, dated Buffalo, August 12th, 1850.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Letter from Charles Parsons to mother and sister, dated Alton, November 8th, 1850.
17. Letter from Charles Parsons to father, dated St. Louis, October 8th, 1851.
18. John W. Noble Address before the Missouri Historical Society on Charles Parsons, a fellow member, May 25th, 1906. p. 3, M.H.S. Archives.
19. "Town lots on back streets sold at \$250 a front foot, great hotels, were building . . . These were halcyon days indeed, full of the hope, anticipation, and enterprise of youth, and the new land. But the panic of 1857 struck us and the prosperity of Keokuk . . . disappeared." John W. Noble Ibid, p. 4-5.
20. Letter from brother George to mother, dated Keokuk, June 28th, 1857.
21. Letter from Charles to wife, Martha, dated New York, November 16th, 1857.
22. Letter from Martha to Charles, dated St. Louis, May 15th, 1859.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Letter from Euphrasia Mackay (née Pettus) to sister Martha, dated Wed. 4th (probably September 1861).
26. Letter from M. C. Meigs to Brigadier General Robert Allen, March 31, 1864.
27. Report for Fiscal Year ending 30th June, 1865, from Louisville, Kentucky by Brevet Major General Robert Allen, Chief Quartermaster, Union Army.
28. Morison, S.E., *The Oxford History of the American People*, Vol. II, 1789 Through Reconstruction, Mentor Edition, New York, 1972, p. 399-400.
29. Hyde, W., and Conard, L., *Encyclopaedia of History of St. Louis*, op. cit., p. 1700-1701.
30. Charles Parsons Pettus died unexpectedly in 1923.
31. Hyde, W. and Conard, L., *Encyclopaedia of History of St. Louis*, op. cit., p. 1700-1701.
32. Euphrasia Pettus married Mr. Robert B. Mackay of Calcutta, India, at the American Legation in Paris on October 22nd, 1868. Mackay died less than three years later.
33. Letter from Parsons to his wife, Martha, dated Varsovie (Warsaw), August 20th, and St. Petersburg, August 23rd, 1868.
34. "In recrossing the Alps a fortnight hence I shall remember the great pleasure I enjoyed 10 years ago in your and your ladies' charming company, on our trip from Chambery to Susa." Letter from H. Schliemann to Charles Parsons, dated - Pans, April 26th 1878.
35. Schliemann happened to be in California in 1850 when it entered the Union. Thus he became and remained an American citizen, a source of great pride for him.
36. Letter from H. Schliemann to Charles Parsons, dated Indianapolis, 10th May 1869.
37. Letter from H. Schliemann to Charles Parsons dated Indianapolis, 16th May 1869.
38. Ibid.
39. Letter H. Schliemann to Charles Parsons dated Athens, Feb. 9th, 1882 "I think with a sigh of the happy time when I met you 14 years ago, for I had then but recently retired from commerce and had a great deal of leisure."
40. Letter from H. Schliemann, dated Athens, 3 December, 1874.
41. Letter from H. Schliemann to Martha Parsons, dated Athens, 18th July 1877.

42. Letter from H. Schliemann to Charles Parsons, dated Paris, April 26th, 1878.
43. Letter from H. Schliemann to Charles Parsons, dated Troy near Dardanelles, 17th June, 1882.
44. The will of Charles Parsons, Item 7, clause 5, July 1905.
45. Letter from Charles Parsons to Mr. Scudder, dated S.S. Gaelic, July 8th, 1876.
46. Parsons here refers to Brigham Young, the founder of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons).
47. Letter from Peyton Sanders to Charles Parsons, dated Tokyo, September 24th, 1877.
48. Letter from Peyton Sanders to Charles Parsons, dated Tokyo, October 8th, 1877.
49. *Notes of a Trip Around the World in 1894 and 1895*, St. Louis, 1896, 177 pages, was published at Parsons' own expense and was, as the title page tells us "For Private Circulation Only." He claims modestly on the page following the dedication, that he only published these notes written "to while away the idle hours on board ship" at the "urgent solicitation of one of my most intimate and valued companions." But perhaps he was also imitating his friend Schliemann, who in the 1860's had written similar sketches describing countries he had visited.
50. Charles Parsons, *Notes of a Trip Around the World*, St. Louis, 1896, p. 18-19.
51. *Ibid*, p. 45-46.
52. "England grows rich on what we thus throw away." *Ibid*, p. 6
53. *Ibid*, p. 105.
54. *Ibid*, p. 58.
55. *Ibid*, p. 150. The comparative length of the India section may reflect a corresponding lack, but Parsons may simply have been tiring of his own narrative by this stage.
56. *Ibid*, p. 172.
57. *Ibid*, p. 172-177.
58. Last will of Charles Parsons, 1905.
59. It has been remarked, with some justification, that "of the 1,000 paintings by Corot, about 5,000 are in the United States of America." Fortunately, Parsons' is of unimpeachable quality.
60. Letter from Frederick E. Church to Martha Parsons, dated 32 Park Ave., New York, April 11th, 1883.
61. Letter from Frederick E. Church to Charles Parsons, dated Hudson, April 23rd, 1883.
62. For example, "I was much gratified to learn by your last letter that the picture, after being well placed in your gallery impresses you all favorably." Letter from Frederick E. Church to Charles Parsons, dated Hudson, April 28th, 1883.
63. Edward Strahan (pseudonym for Earl Shinn) *Art Treasures of America*, Philadelphia, 1879.
64. *Ibid*, p. 65-66. Daniel Catlin was appointed to the committee to regulate the Charles Parsons Trust in Parsons Will of 1905.
65. It is perhaps worth noting that this genre was evolved by French, Italian or German artists and was anti-clerical rather than anti-Catholic, per se.
66. E. Strahan, *op cit*, p. 65.
67. *Ibid*.
68. Letter from Frederick E. Church to Charles Parsons, dated Hudson, April 23rd, 1883, "I hope you have not been favorably impressed by the Impressionists, that sort of art is really but one phase of Decorative Art and so easily acquired."
69. Letter from Jules Breton to Charles Parsons, dated Paris 10-10-04.
70. His taste in music is indicated by a passage in his book where he writes disapprovingly of Japanese music "the music was not equal to Straus or Sousa, and I wouldn't care for many repetitions of it." Charles Parsons, *Notes of a Trip . . . op cit* p. 23.