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**JOHN SINGER  
SARGENT**  
(1856-1925)  
*George W.  
Vanderbilt III*  
1890  
Oil on canvas  
42 x 26 1/2 in.

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# PRINTED TREASURES *at the* VANDERBILTS' BILTMORE

*In*

the pantheon of notable American families, the Vanderbilts occupy a special prominence. Alongside other dynasties like the Rockefellers, Astors, Morgans, and Huntingtons, the Vanderbilts' aggressive business practices and generous philanthropy helped propel their young nation into the unprecedented era of economic prosperity between the Civil War and World War I. The family's fortune was built upon shipping and railroads, both of which were essential to America's breakneck industrialization. In particular, it was the early investment of the family's patriarch, Cornelius Vanderbilt ("The Commodore"), in the New York Central Railroad that ultimately led to his tightly controlled monopoly of rail networks throughout the Northeast, Midwest, and eastern Canada.

Upon his death in 1877, the Commodore left an estimated fortune of \$105 million — equivalent

to approximately \$2 billion today. The succeeding generation, led by William Henry Vanderbilt, saw the family fortune double. Their vast wealth not only gave them power and influence wherever they went, but also helped define the era of extravagance dubbed by Mark Twain as the "Gilded Age." With their coffers brimming over, the Vanderbilts' art collections grew, too; not surprisingly, a string of opulent mansions soon dotted the Northeast. The most notable examples include the spectacular "Petit Chateau" at 660 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan (demolished 1926) and the Breakers in Newport, Rhode Island.

After his death in 1885, William Henry's sons Cornelius and William Kissam were appointed to run the family empire, leaving their youngest brother, George Washington Vanderbilt III (1862–1914), to indulge in more gentlemanly pursuits. Considered the clan's most quiet and erudite





(OPPOSITE PAGE) **LUCAS VAN LEYDEN (1494–1533)**, *Baptism of Christ in the Jordan*, c. 1510, engraving on paper, 5 5/8 x 7 1/4 in. ■ (TOP) The Billiard Room, with framed prints visible on far wall ■ (ABOVE) The 780-foot main façade of Biltmore House

member, he spent his inherited millions on constructing what is arguably the most famous Vanderbilt home, Biltmore House.

Located in Asheville, North Carolina, Biltmore — with its 250 rooms — remains the largest private home in America even today. It was designed by the Paris-trained American architect Richard Morris Hunt, and construction commenced in earnest in 1889; although it was not completely finished, George proudly inaugurated the property during the Christmas season of 1895. From its lofty position on a hill, Biltmore House stands at the center of the 8,000-acre Biltmore Estate (formerly 125,000 acres) and commands stunning views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. George nicknamed it his “little mountain escape” because it represented a refuge from the formality of New York City’s dizzying social calendar. Despite its isolated location, he and his wife, Edith Stuyvesant Dresser Vanderbilt, spared no expense in decorating Biltmore, filling it with the finest art and antiques that money could buy.

Biltmore’s enormous 780-foot façade hints at the splendor to be experienced inside. Entering the foyer, first-time visitors are usually awestruck by the grandeur, marveling as they stroll from the indoor conservatory to the cavernous banquet hall, replete with its own organ and 70-foot-high ceilings. As the self-guided tour unfolds, room after room reveals a trove of paintings, tapestries, and sculpture.

#### A TROVE OF PRINTS

Ignored all too often, however, are Biltmore’s more than 1,300 prints, which include woodcuts, engravings, etchings, photogravures, and aquatints. This collection encompasses the major European schools of printmaking from the 15th through 20th centuries and features fascinating rarities by Albrecht Dürer, Lucas van Leyden, and Francisco Goya, to name a few.

This overlooked holding deserves more attention for many reasons. First, a sizeable portion of it (approximately 377 of the 1,310 prints) is regularly hanging on public view at Biltmore. From the rich assortment of sporting scenes after George Stubbs (1724–1806) and Edwin Landseer (1802–1873) in the Billiard Room to the portrait mezzotints after Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) in the guest bedrooms, prints adorn Biltmore’s public and private spaces alike. Second, these works on paper offer a rare glimpse into George’s personal collecting domain. As suggested by his world-class library of 23,000 rare books, he was a deeply passionate connoisseur of printed matter. Then, as now, Old Master prints were often perceived as an intimidating field because the ability to recognize the various stages (“states”) of a print’s evolution, as well as the printing technique employed, requires a highly trained eye. George must have appreciated not only the aesthetic and compositional charms of his prints, but also the rigor and discipline required to collect them, qualities aligned with his own patient, scholarly temperament.

As prints were such a staple of George’s collecting diet, the New York City print dealers Hermann Wunderlich & Co. and Hermann Schaus stood ready to satisfy his appetite. His deep holdings of such individual masters as Dürer, Rembrandt, and the aforementioned Britons demonstrate his intense dedication to them. Now held in the Biltmore archives, a cache of private letters and dated invoices between Wunderlich and George indicate that the latter bought most of his prints from this firm in the 1880s and ’90s. They were acquired only after he had personally inspected them, and so the archived lists contain his annotations, cross-outs, and additions, confirming that his buying was selective and focused.

George’s holding of etchings by Rembrandt included the renowned examples that he acquired, with Wunderlich’s help, from the estate of Walter Francis, the fifth Duke of Buccleuch (1806–1884), at a landmark auction in London in 1887. He considered the Rembrandts the jewels of his collection and displayed them prominently in the Oak Sitting Room. Alas, in 1905, faced with the mounting costs of maintaining his massive estate, George made the difficult decision to sell all 112 of his Rembrandts to his rival in connoisseurship, J.P. Morgan (1837–1913). Vanderbilt’s opening price of \$200,000 was skillfully negotiated downward to \$140,000 by Morgan’s nephew, Junius, despite Vanderbilt’s vigorous assertion of how difficult it had been to amass such a high-caliber collection. In a letter, he wrote tellingly: “...in my collection of Old Masters, Rembrandt and Dürer are the only masters I have attempted to make complete and only succeeded after years of effort and opportunities that are rare.”<sup>1</sup> Vanderbilt’s realization that his Rembrandts were valuable was reconfirmed 35 years later, in 1940, when the collector Richard H. Zinser offered Morgan the then-staggering sum of \$2.5 million for them (a deal that remained unconsummated).<sup>2</sup> Morgan’s purchase instantly enhanced the prestige of his private museum (now the Morgan Library & Museum) as the most important repository of Rembrandt etchings in America.

#### ALBRECHT DÜRER

Undoubtedly, the real strength of Biltmore’s collection today is the extraordinary assortment of woodcuts and engravings by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). His deftly carved woodblocks achieved a level of detail previously thought possible only through engraving, promptly revolutionizing the field of printmaking forevermore.<sup>3</sup> Because Dürer’s equally celebrated paintings and drawings are no longer available commercially, it is only his prints that collectors can still pursue today.

The 67 Dürer prints at Biltmore include the *Passion* series, various portraits, and two exceptionally rare works worthy of mention. Dominating the Music Room is the largest woodcut made in the Renaissance, the striking *Triumphal Arch*, a 11-foot-high installation (before that word became fashionable) comprising 42 large woodcuts and

two etchings pulled from 192 separate woodblocks. A masterpiece of propaganda, this monumental commission from Emperor Maximilian I depicts a seemingly never-ending procession of knights, princesses, and soldiers, the emperor’s family tree, and a reference to Maximilian’s wedding to Mary of Burgundy. Reprinted in 1799, Biltmore’s copy of the *Triumphal Arch* is one of the very few in existence mounted in its entirety; it arrived at Biltmore in 1895, having been shipped in three separate crates.

On a much smaller scale, yet titanic in its impact, is Dürer’s *Rhinoceros*, often cited as history’s most famous animal print. Brought from India as a diplomatic gift to King Manuel of Portugal in 1515, this never-before-seen rhinoceros became a sensation across Europe. Dürer never saw the animal in person, and so based his print on contemporaneous drawings, which gave him much leeway for embellishment. Indeed, his transformation of the folds in the rhino’s leathery skin into something resembling plates of armor brilliantly reflects both his dexterity and his imagination. The rhino story underscores the important historical role of prints: they functioned as powerful tools that could convey a narrative or point a moral to the masses, disseminating ideas in accordance with religious or political ideologies, and ultimately defining their societies’ cultural identity.

Today, as at most museums, the bulk of Biltmore’s print collection rests in storage due to their sensitivity to light. It is tempting to hope that, one day, its riches will be published in book form or online; in the meantime, more than 370 prints can be enjoyed by visiting Biltmore House, which is managed and run by the Cecils, who are direct descendants of the Vanderbilts. True to their family’s tradition of hospitality, they encourage visitors to explore Biltmore House and then extend their stay on the property by enjoying its luxury hotels, restaurants, winery, and impressive roster of concerts and other events. ●

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**Information:** *biltmore.com*. All photos courtesy the Biltmore Company, Asheville, North Carolina

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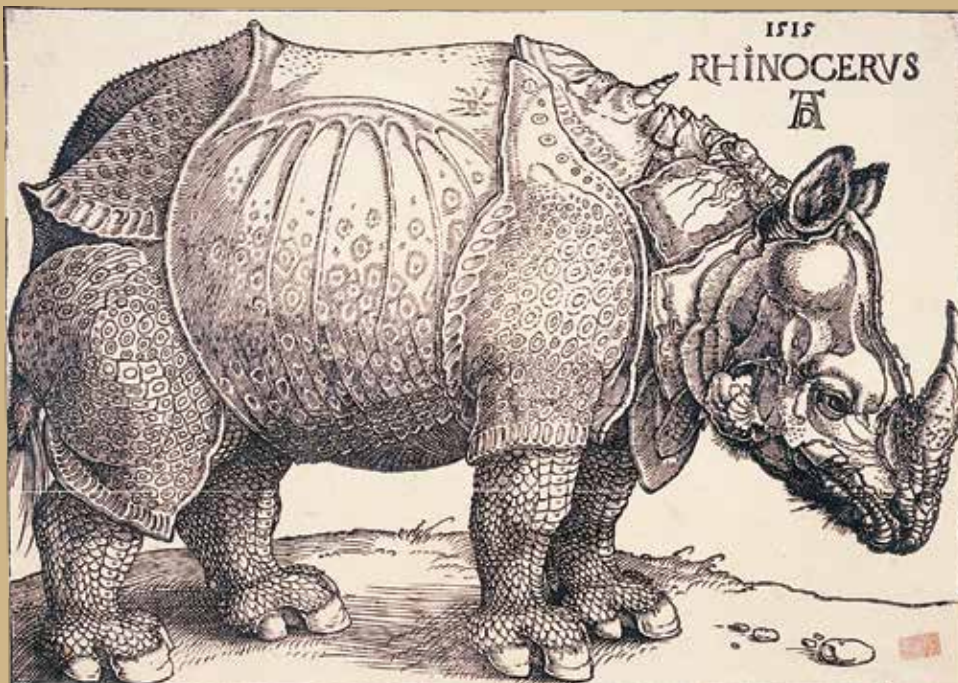
**Betsy Thomas** runs an art advisory firm based in New York City.

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<sup>1</sup> Autograph letter to Junius Spencer Morgan, Nov. 25, 1905. Morgan Collections Correspondence (ARC 1310): Archives of the Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Typed copy of memoranda: Hotel Coolidge, NY and Chesterfield Hotel to the “Curator of the Morgan Library” Jan. 12, 1938 and May 1, 1940. Morgan Collections Correspondence (ARC 1310): Archives of the Morgan Library & Museum, New York

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Boorsch and Nadine M. Orenstein, “The Print in the North: The Age of Albrecht Dürer and Lucas van Leyden,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 54: 4 (Spring 1997), 3.



(ABOVE LEFT) On a wall of the Music Room hangs Albrecht Dürer's complete *Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I*. Comprising 192 sheets, its overall height is 11 feet. ■ (ABOVE RIGHT) A close-up of one section of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), *The Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I*, c. 1515 (reprinted 1799), woodcut on paper ■ (LEFT) **ALBRECHT DÜRER (1471-1528)**, *Rhinoceros*, 1515, woodcut on paper, 9 1/4 x 11 3/4 in.