

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Hi res images available upon request

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***Friends and Fashion: An American Diplomat in 1820s Russia***

Special exhibition presents an intimate perspective of an American's diplomatic life in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century St. Petersburg

February 18-June 11, 2017

WASHINGTON, D.C., January 26, 2017—Focusing on 45 portraits from an album assembled by the family of politician and statesman Henry Middleton, the special exhibition *Friends and Fashion: An American Diplomat in 1820s Russia*, on view from February 18 through June 11, 2017, paints a captivating picture of diplomatic life in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century St. Petersburg.

The intimate portraits, along with objects, images, and publications selected to complement them, offer an exploration into a number of themes, including Henry Middleton's posting in St. Petersburg and the historical events surrounding his time there, the family's social life in Russia, the artistic traditions of the period, and the elaborate fashions and hairstyles of the day.

"Hillwood acquired the Middleton album in 2004 and had it conserved in 2015, disassembling it to treat each watercolor," explains Kate Markert, Hillwood's executive director. "*Friends and Fashion* marks the first time this fascinating set of portraits will be presented to the public in its entirety."



From South Carolina to St. Petersburg

On September 20, 1820, Henry Middleton—along with his wife, Mary Helen, the six youngest of their ten children, and at least two servants—embarked on a nearly two-month-long journey to Russia, where Henry would become Minister to Russia. A planter and political leader from Charleston, South Carolina, Middleton was well-suited for Foreign Service. His grandfather had served as the president of the First Continental Congress and his father and an uncle both signed the Declaration of Independence. Middleton himself was a member of South Carolina's House of Representatives, governor of South Carolina, and a member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

As a diplomatic family, the Middletons found life in St. Petersburg to be extremely engaging. Much of what is known of the family's time in Russia comes from daughter Eleanor's detailed social diary and from letters Mary Helen wrote to her younger Middleton children left in the care of family in England. Eleanor's diary and her mother's letters include detailed descriptions of an array of activities.

## The Album

The watercolor and gouache portraits on view for the exhibition were originally assembled in an album that documents the family's time in St. Petersburg and the people they met through their diplomatic and social engagements.

Watercolor portraits were popular as a way to preserve meaningful images of family and friends. Prominent figures commissioned well-known artists to paint their portraits and often requested copies as gifts for the sitter's family and friends. Sometimes, lesser-known and amateur artists copied professional works for themselves and others. The portraits in the Middleton album combine both, with two portraits by the well-known portraitist Petr Sokolov (1791-1848). The Middleton family has long believed that Henry's oldest daughter, Maria Henrietta, painted many of the album's portraits. Research conducted for the exhibition confirms this is a reasonable assumption, with letters and other family papers referencing her hobby.

Like our social media platforms today, the collection of watercolor portraits was an opportunity to capture the fashions of the day. The Middleton album captures the trends that were popular from around 1820 to 1850, when romanticism was in style. Romantic fashions—with their dramatic profiles of full sleeves, wide necklines, puffed skirts and tightly corseted waists—evoked history and the poetic, in embracing prettiness. While a few of the women in the Middleton album wear the simple, high-waisted gowns of the waning empire or regency style, the majority of them are dressed in the latest fashions from Paris—the exaggerated, hourglass silhouettes of the emerging romantic era.

Ladies' hair was elaborately styled, with curls covering the temples and large coils or ringlets hanging down the back. Portraits from later in the decade document tresses that were arranged high on the head in extravagant styles, often supplemented with wire and hair pieces and decorated with ribbons, flowers, feathers, combs, or other additions like metallic sheaves of wheat or arrows. Such gravity-defying styles were set with pomades made from animal fats scented with fragrant oils to mask the stench of the lard as it turned.

Men's fashions are also on display, highlighting the pinched waists and broad, padded sloping shoulders and curvy hips—much like the women's styles. Their hair is cut fashionably short and sideburns and occasionally mustaches were worn by those in military service.

## The Story of St. Petersburg

With its many ties to Hillwood, including the celebrated Russian imperial collection and its founder's history of diplomacy, the Middleton album made a perfect addition to the collection. In addition to portraits from the album, some of these celebrated objects from the collection, including prints, porcelain, glasswork, and enamels, are also on view in the exhibition to elaborate on life in 1820s St. Petersburg and the world of international diplomacy.



## Exhibition Programs and Events

Several programs and events will be presented in conjunction with the special exhibition. An opening celebration, *Soirée Diplomatique*, on Tuesday, February 14, will celebrate the magic and sophistication of the court and diplomatic life in 1820s Russia.

## Sponsors

The exhibition is supported by: The Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation, Ms. Susan Bollendorf and Mr. Robert Broeksmit, Ellen MacNeille Charles, Kyra Cheremeteff and Thomas W. Richardson, and Mr. and Mrs. Scott Phares. All exhibitions and programs are funded in part by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts through the National Capital Arts and Cultural Affairs program.

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## About Hillwood

When art collector, businesswoman, social figure, and philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post left to the public her northwest Washington, D.C. estate, she endowed the country with the most comprehensive collection of Russian imperial art outside of Russia, an exquisite 18<sup>th</sup>-century French decorative art collection, and 25 acres of serene landscaped gardens and natural woodlands. Opened as a public institution in 1977, today Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens offers a gracious and immersive experience unlike any other. Highlights of the collection include Fabergé eggs, Russian porcelain, Russian orthodox icons, Beauvais tapestries, and Sèvres porcelain, and Post's personal collection of apparel, accessories, and jewelry. Thirteen acres of enchanting formal gardens include a Japanese-style garden, rose garden, French parterre, and a greenhouse full of orchids.

## General Information

- Location: 4155 Linnean Avenue, NW, Washington, DC  
Metro: VanNess/UDC, Red Line (20 minute walk)
- Information/Tickets: 202.686.5807 for information or [www.HillwoodMuseum.org](http://www.HillwoodMuseum.org)  
[Facebook.com/HillwoodMuseum](https://www.facebook.com/HillwoodMuseum)
- Hours: Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Mondays, most holidays, and for several weeks in January.
- Café: The Hillwood café serves lunch Tuesday through Saturday from 11a.m. to 3:30 p.m.  
Afternoon tea is served on Sundays only from 11a.m. to 3:30 p.m.  
Express dining, featuring a quick selection of sandwiches, salads, snacks, and beverages, is available Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Call 202.686.5807 for café reservations.
- Suggested Donation: \$18, \$15 seniors, \$10 college students, \$5 for visitors age 6 to 18.  
No donation is suggested for children under 6.  
Adults and seniors receive \$3 off the suggested donation for weekday visits and \$1 for weekend visits when reservations are made online.

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