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Natural Beauties: Exquisite Works of Minerals and Gems
On view February 15 to June 7, 2020

Special exhibition presents over 100 decorative art objects crafted from nature's finest materials, like jade, malachite, onyx, rock crystal, and more

Washington, D.C.—The special exhibition *Natural Beauties: Exquisite Works of Minerals and Gems*, on view at Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens from February 15 through June 7, 2020, will present over 100 objects that illustrate the beauty and history of precious stones and the remarkable artworks into which they were transformed.

For centuries, nature's most enduring materials, like malachite, jade, amethyst, and lapis lazuli, have been carved, polished, and mounted into beautiful works of art. Hillwood founder Marjorie Merriweather Post was known for the incredible gems and jewelry that signaled her unparalleled taste, but the hardstone objects that make up a less well-known area of her connoisseurship are equally impressive and exquisite.

"Marjorie Post was a renowned collector, known for her keen eye and love of beautiful and finely crafted objects," explained Executive Director Kate Markert. "Her passion for hardstone developed at a young age and continued throughout her life, culminating in this unique assembly of treasures from around the world." Established as a serious New York collector in the late 1910s, Marjorie Post discovered Chinese jades, semi-precious stones in Western European decorative arts, and Russian lapidary works, before commissioning such pieces for her homes and personal use. Presenting a selection of intricately detailed pieces from Hillwood and borrowed from other collections, *Natural Beauties* is the first exhibition at Hillwood to trace the use of these gems and minerals, focusing on the remarkable collection of resulting objects.



Background

Hardstone, the English translation of the Italian *pietra dura*, refers to a specific local inlay technique using cut and polished colorful stones. However, the unscientific term covers a large range of "hard" materials that are often qualified as semi-precious stones or gemstones.

Minerals have long been admired for their significance and beauty. Set, cut, carved, and polished by human hands, they become sophisticated marvels with visual and tactile appeal, reflecting the creativity of skillful artisans. These stones often developed into symbols of imperial, royal, and aristocratic status and were collected as such.

“Though lesser-known within Hillwood’s collection, the lapidary works acquired by Marjorie Post embrace a wide range of cultural expressions of stone carving between the Far East and the West,” said Wilfried Zeisler, Hillwood’s chief curator and curator of the exhibition. “This aspect of the collection has been called ‘a mineralogist’s delight’ by my predecessor, Anne Odom, reflecting its depth and diversity. *Natural Beauties* will display hardstone as it has not been seen before, offering an exploration into not only the materials themselves and how they were transformed but also the resulting lapidary marvels that speak to the cultures in which they were made.”

Exhibition Organization and Highlights

The exhibition, on display in Hillwood’s dacha, will feature seminal examples of natural stones that were transformed into works of art. Over 100 objects from Hillwood’s collection, including delightful containers, seals, tables, and frames, will be displayed alongside loans that further explore the beauty and history of the precious stones, from the 1600s through today.

Organized into three sections, it will open with an introduction into the world of gemstones, from their natural beauty to their use in art and as family heirlooms. Richly colored stones were sourced from around the world for works both decorative and useful, from jade figurines and snuff bottles in China to bloodstone boxes and candlesticks in France. Materials and techniques presented in this section include jade, lapis lazuli, bloodstone, agate, and *pietra dura*.

The second section will dive into the fascinating treasures from Russia. In 1927, Marjorie Post purchased her first Fabergé piece, a Yusupov family heirloom made of amethyst quartz and a carved spinel. About ten years later, she discovered Russia’s appreciation for skillfully turning hardstone into works of art. Post gathered precious hardstone seals, malachite artifacts, tables, and rock crystal chandeliers to adorn her various homes, culminating in a chamber of treasures once known as the “Malachite Room” or “Green Room,” recreated for the exhibition.



Post was an important client to many luxury firms in the twentieth century, acquiring not only jewelry but also exquisite *objets d’art*. Here, a highlight is the impressive *pietra dura* tabletop she commissioned from the Società Civile-Arte de Mosaico in Florence, probably the most imposing mosaic ever to be produced by a Florentine workshop. Everyday accessories, such as frames, ashtrays, desk sets, and bell pushes, form a distinctive assortment of art deco objects, typically held largely in storage and explored as a collection exclusively for *Natural Beauties*.

The exhibition will close with an example of the current revival of stone carving, representing the continuation of the hardstone tradition in contemporary art.

Curator

Dr. Wilfried Zeisler is Hillwood's chief curator. He is a graduate of Sorbonne University and the Ecole du Louvre, Paris. Wilfried has written extensively on the decorative arts in France and Russia, including a 2010 book on ceramics and several articles. Wilfried's dissertation, *L'Objet d'art et de luxe français en Russie (1881-1917) [French Objets d'art and Luxury Goods in Russia]*, was published in 2014. He has participated in and curated exhibitions in Paris and Monaco. At Hillwood, he was the curator of *Splendor and Surprise: Elegant Containers, Antique to Modern* (2015), *Konstantin Makovsky: The Tsar's Painter* (2016), and *Fabergé Rediscovered* (2018). Wilfried co-authored and authored, respectively, the latter two exhibition's accompanying books: *Konstantin Makovsky: The Tsar's Painter in America and Paris* (2015) and *Fabergé Rediscovered* (2018). He is also the author of *Vivre la Belle Epoque à Paris: Olga Paley et Paul de Russie*, published in Paris in 2018.

Events and Programs

Natural Beauties: Exquisite Works of Minerals and Gems inspires an array of programs and events throughout the presentation of the exhibition.

In March and April, a three-part lecture series will delve deeper into the world of hardstone. Speakers, dates, and subjects are:

Tuesday, March 24: *Russian Malachite at Hillwood*, with Dr. Wilfried Zeisler, chief curator, Hillwood

Tuesday, March 31: *Nature's Art in Stone*, with Dr. Jeffrey Post, curator, U.S. National Gem and Mineral Collection

Tuesday, April 7: *Rocks as Art—A Chinese Tradition*, with Jan Stuart, Melvin R. Seiden Curator of Chinese Art, Freer|Sackler

Exhibition Sponsors

Natural Beauties: Exquisite Works of Minerals and Gems is supported by The Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation, Ellen MacNeille Charles, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Fouthat tndation, Ms. Nedenia Rumbough and Mr. Jan Roosenburg, Kyra Cheremeteff and Thomas W. Richardson, Martha Johnston and Robert Coonrod, A La Vieille Russie, Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Charitable Trusts, Sara and Peter O'Keefe, Dr. and Mrs. Michael J. Petite, and Susan and David Thoms. 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. This project was supported by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

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 18th-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 an orchid-filled [greenhouse](#).

General Information

Location: 4155 Linnean Avenue, NW, Washington, DC
Metro: Van Ness/UDC, Red Line (20 minute walk)

Information/Tickets: 202-686-5807 for information or 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: Merriweather Café serves lunch Tuesday through Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Merriweather To Go, featuring a quick selection of sandwiches, salads, snacks, and beverages, is available Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 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 off for weekend visits when reservations are made online.
Members receive free admission to visit the estate during regular operating hours. To join visit <http://www.hillwoodmuseum.org/join>
For more information visit <http://www.hillwoodmuseum.org/hours-and-tickets>

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