

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Gwendolyn Collaço, Anne S.K. Brown Curator for Military and Society at Brown University Library, to talk about both the namesake of her role, military historian Anne S.K. Brown, as well as art collector Adrienne Minassian. So why don't we start with this military collection at Brown, which you're responsible for?

GC: To describe this collection can be done simply but it has a very complex history. So thus far the Anne S.K. Brown military collection has become known as the foremost American collection of material devoted to history and iconography of soldiers, soldiering, and really it's one of the world's largest collections that is devoted to the topic of military history and uniform. However, I want to emphasize that this collection is actually much, much more than that, and that's why my position is billed as curator of military and society, because this collection covers materials that relates to histories of the book, technologies of print, graphic arts, fashion, costume and textiles across sectors of society. And there are even materials that relate to fields like music and the study of royal ceremony in addition to travel and exploration. So when we talk about a military collection, I think it is much more than what our immediate kind of image is.

And as for Anne S.K. Brown herself, yes, she was a military historian and she is the one who built this collection over roughly 40 years. And it started actually at the Nightingale-Brown House, which is now a part of Brown University, but when she was living there, it was a recently purchased home that she and her family lived in. And so this collection started off in that home with her toy soldiers and grew to the point that there were so many toy soldiers and books that basically the building started collapsing in on itself and she had to install an elevator to get them out. And then upon her death, it ended up coming to Brown University and their special collections here at the John Hay Library, part of Brown University Libraries. And so even though it had grown so much over Anne's lifetime, it's continued to grow under subsequent curators like my predecessor, Peter Harrington. And as for my own part, as the newest curator in this role, I'm really aiming to show new approaches to these historical materials and also bring in works from, for instance, contemporary artists who responded to some of the very imperial histories that are well represented in this core collection, and also highlight some underrepresented perspectives, both within the materials that exist and also hopefully add to it. And also bring this collection up to date, because when Anne S.K. Brown stopped collecting, which was in 1985, the time of her death, the collection went up to roughly World War II, with some exceptions. But now, of course, today, I'm trying to expand that to cover Vietnam, Iraq, Ukraine, Israel, Hamas. And so all of these are part of my charge about how we continue to build this collection and also bring in new perspectives, not just on military history, but how we can connect other disciplines to this collection, which I think is very broadly an approach to military history. But really, it's just a global collection of a wide array of media.

There's also a degree of care that goes into, I think, a collector's purpose and also their own study of these objects. I know that, for instance, when Anne S.K. Brown started collecting, and these began with toy soldiers, she actually had cases that were custom built for these, that lined the corridors of her home and shelves in her bedroom and all of that. And there are photos of them still. And so there is a very strict, I think, organizational method to this collection. And I think the fact that she hired curators, even when this collection was still in her home, shows that there is, I think, a devotion to the study of these objects, and also their care and preservation for future study.

AT: So when you say that, like, her house started collapsing under the weight of the collection, this wasn't just piles and piles of things.

GC: So because this collection started with her toy soldiers, and then grew to cover so much more than that, now it's primarily works on paper. But still, the woman collected over 5,000 lead toy soldiers. And so you can imagine that on an individual level, lead, a lead soldier might not be terribly heavy. But once you get around five or 6,000 of them, it starts to have an impact. And so when that house was eventually absorbed into Brown's campus, they had to do a full renovation of it. Not only because of the structural integrity issues that in

part were brought about by these soldiers, but also, yeah, the home itself was an older kind of colonial home as well. So I think that there are many factors at play. So I don't want to attribute all of it to her collection.

AT: So tell us a bit more about Anne herself and her life. And like, do we know what led to this particular fascination with this particular topic and whatever other bits of society she collected?

GC: Yeah, so, Anne Seddon Kinsolving Brown, as her full name is, was originally from Baltimore. And she was a daughter of a minister. And so she's the one who actually marries into the Brown family. She wasn't raised up within it. And she was someone who also was growing up during the 1920s. And during this period, after she finished at the Bryn Mawr School, she ended up actually becoming a journalist for the Baltimore News. And we actually have numerous clippings in the archive about her writing and also many of the investigative pieces that she did. And also, apparently, she lived a very rich social life. This was a woman who purportedly knew Rudolph Valentino, among others. And in the newspapers of the time, they really celebrated the fact that she had made such an amazing match with her husband, marrying into the Brown family. Although she's someone who truly found her own identity, even though she married into one of the most elite families in Rhode Island. And it's funny, because when she gets married in 1930, that's when she really starts collecting first toy soldiers, then much more. And there are numerous hypotheses as to why she gets into this topic. Apparently, she had a thing for men in uniforms. And this was not only because they look quite dashing, but also too, she saw many military holiday parades that passed in front of her home before that. And there are also stories about how at one point in time, like she faints at a baseball game and is revived by three young men from West Point, the Cadet Academy in upstate New York. And so there are all these potential reasons of why she was interested in this topic.

Regardless, though, she really begins to dig into it, and fleshes out these works, these toy soldiers with also works on paper that first were used to verify what is the accuracy of these works, but then she really becomes a historian in her own right. She writes numerous articles on the uniforms of soldiers in Maryland and elsewhere, and she becomes a huge human reference in many ways for historians writing in numerous fields, be it history, or military history, art history, etc. And a lot of them, their letters are saved in the archive. And so we can kind of see, she becomes this networker as well, to the point where she is not only sending, for instance, images of her work for publication to these academics so they can use them in their articles. Also, too, we see letters to friends where she's sending other collectors, and she's sending them works that might be of interest. And we can see her really taking an active role in her dealer relations as well, and I think very carefully and judiciously choosing where she goes next to create this expansive core collection. One of the reasons why Anne herself, I think, really ramps up her collecting is from this cultural heritage standpoint as well, because as we know, so much art and also cultural heritage was destroyed due to bombings or intentional destruction. And so for her, by preserving these sources, she was doing her own small part in making sure that this material could be passed on to future generations. But there's also another connection to that. So her husband, John Nicholas Brown, was also a Monuments Man. For those who might be listening who do not know, the Monuments Men were a group formed in World War II who were tasked with recovering looted art objects, objects looted by the Nazis. And so her husband was involved in that process. And I do wonder, too, if this was her kind of method to contribute to that cause by making sure materials were off the market. That is speculation on my own part. But regardless, there is a familial connection to these war efforts.

AT: You've drawn a connection between Anne and another collector named Adrienne Minassian. And they were both unusual for their time and created really unique collections in areas that really weren't associated with women during their lives. So can you tell us about Adrienne?

GC: Yeah, so Adrienne Minassian is the daughter of one of the most renowned Armenian art dealers who sold Islamic art to European and American institutions, and that is Kirkor Manassian. What's interesting, especially

in relation to Anne S.K. Brown, is that Adrienne takes over her father's business, roughly around 1945. And so they're operating nearly across the same decades. And in fact, they're working a lot of times with the same dealers and collectors. You see similar names across all their receipts. But what's interesting is that we don't know as much about Adrienne Minassian as a collector in her own right. We know that she collected, we know that she continued her father's business. And so what I've been doing is actually digging more into her own archive and really seeing, how did she function? Like how did she fit herself into this world? How did she train for this business? Which I think it's actually fairly unusual to have a female art dealer working, especially in Islamic or Near Eastern art. And so what I noticed, though, is that she didn't merely come into this business in 1945. She had been prepping for basically her whole life, because we have, for instance, her whole line, her whole archive of auction catalogs with her notes in them that date back to 1930. And in them, she's scribbling all of these notes about details about the works, how much they sold for, and most importantly, who they went to, which is something really unusual today, usually for privacy reasons, auction houses don't publish that information anymore. And so the collection in and of itself is actually really important to track those networks of buying and collecting.

AT: Well, that's one of your particular areas of interest as well, isn't it? The movement and how art travels through different people and methods and places.

GC: Absolutely, yeah. And so for me, this was a really interesting collection from that standpoint, especially because the family at large was part of a very important group of Armenian art dealers that really established bases in Europe and the US following the Armenian genocide. And so there's a wider history to really talk about there, in terms of how various conflicts and also military events can contribute to the movement of artwork. And in this case, it's all natural art market. But of course, the family itself sets up its offices in Paris in like 1916. And this was all coincidentally very well-timed with the Armenian genocide.

AT: I'm just also thinking if they were operating in Europe, during and after either of the world wars, there's probably a lot of other connections that we could draw there between the movement of art and what's going on in the military side of things.

GC: Oh, yeah, yeah. So there's so much to be said about this history. And especially for the 20th century, I think the majority of research that's been done on the movement of art and looting has been from the perspective of, for instance, Jewish artwork that was looted by the Nazis. However, it extends far beyond that. And I think these collectors actually give you an insight into this lesser-known area. And so, it's interesting too to see Adrienne's own record keeping in this regard, because I think she too wanted to have a longstanding record of where's her artwork going. And this is where I have to say there isn't just one Minassian collection, there are multiple, not only of other works that were gifted to say the Library of Congress by her father, Kirkor Minassian, but also another collection that came from Adrienne Minassian, which is her photo collection. And that is now at MIT, where I used to work. And so together, you have a much bigger picture of how a family business operated, and their own record-keeping, and also their own interest in preserving provenance history.

AT: So when you say photographs, are these photographs that she would have taken of the works for documenting purposes?

GC: Yeah, I think these were documented for stock purposes. So for instance, if there was something in the inventory that was going to be put in a catalog, it had to be photographed first. And the interesting thing about this photo collection, though, is that she puts the prices down that they sold these works for. So it was just also really unique, because so many of these sources regarding private sales of artwork, so those sold outside of auction, we have like no receipts for that, unless it ends up in a public institution. So that's why these

collections are so important. And so we have the prices, we have the individuals they were sold to, which actually fill in a lot of gaps in the provenance histories that are listed on major institutional websites, like the British Museum. I can think of one painting in particular, where an extra link can be added to the history of the work from the past 150 years, which is actually significant, because it shows how many hands a work has to go through in order to make it into an institution. And how quickly sometimes that happens, because some of these sales occur within like 10 years of each other.

AT: It's also interesting, because from a larger art history standpoint, there are some works where the works themselves have been lost, and the only documents we have are say, promotional materials, or an exhibition brochure. So we only have this type of image to show us, this is what the artwork was or looked like.

GC: Oh, absolutely. And I would say, too, in addition to loss and destruction, private collections in general are some of the most difficult to work with, because not all of them publish catalogs, not all of them have a website. And in fact, some collectors would prefer to stay out of the public eye. Understandable, but that also makes it harder for researchers like myself to really follow up on where this material is. And that's why the meticulous notes that Adrienne Manasian takes are so important, because she's the one who really allows us to follow the trail. And I think that any studies that will be done on say 20th century art collecting, for Islamic art at least, will have to contend with her notes, and also many of the silences in that archive as well.

AT: So the photos aside, because we love MIT, but we're here to talk about what's happening at Brown. And like Anne, much of Adrienne's collection is now held primarily at Brown. What's in the collection?

GC: So, I would say over 1700 manuscripts, largely folios that are covering a range of topics from illuminated Quranic manuscripts, to fully painted Persian manuscripts, also manuscripts from Iran, a few from the Ottoman Empire, and also a few other works too that are not Islamic at all. And so this is a much more focused collection in contrast to Anne S.K. Brown, who wanted to create a global collection from the perspective of military history. This one is much more rooted in particular regions, and also especially strong in the early modern period. So the period that we think of for the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires.

AT: Something that we see with a lot of women is that in Adrienne's case, her legacy is sometimes overshadowed by her father's, who as you mentioned, she inherited the business from him, and she's kind of presented as just carrying on his legacy. But can you tell us how her work stands out in its own right separate from him?

GC: Yeah, it's funny because her work stands out because we can also check the collections of numerous institutions like the Met, like the Smithsonian. And we can see not only Kirkor's name, her father, but also Adrienne's name. And I think once you start really digging into this collection, you can see how she too had her dealings in all the biggest institutions that we know of today in the US and in Europe. And I believe too that she, in some ways, went a different route by saying, "okay, we're going to bequeath this entire personal collection to an institution, and also allow some of that money to go to furthering a field, like Islamic art." For example, one of the things that her gift paid for was a full professorship here at Brown. And I think that's one other way to really establish a legacy. And I think it's great because she did it not only through the avenue of collectors, she found

a way to really further the field. Because when you have another professor in the field, and it is not common at all to have a fully endowed professor of Islamic art. And what's great is that also gives a colleague to work with on projects regarding these collections. And so there are many interesting conversations that we've been having about how we can make this collection more accessible, and also how we can further research through it. And there's quite a bit to be done.

AT: You've mentioned that the Minassians were Armenian-American. So how do you think that that impacted, I guess, how they did their work, like how they moved through the art world?

GC: Oh, that is such a good question. We already touched on the Armenian genocide and how that propels movement. But even before that, there were substantial Armenian networks that ran through the Near East, South Asia and Europe. And so you can imagine if you have familial networks like that, it makes it much easier to move goods. And Armenian families were deeply involved in trade businesses within the Ottoman Empire, especially luxury trade. And the movement of artwork fits perfectly into that. And so I think that they fit to this particular moment in that wider history of Armenian networks and how they were used and really propelled through times of crisis. But also even afterwards, even after the genocide, I think that the fact that Kirkor Manassian was able to travel so freely through the Near East and also Adrienne, following him, we can see how having ties to the region allows a certain degree of mobility and access that say, a white dealer from London might not have. And so to make use of that background as well is a part of the story. It's not just a story about loss and destruction. It's also one of having strong familial networks and also being unafraid to use them and also your connections to all the homes that you really pick up along the way, whether that's Paris, Istanbul, New York, etc.

AT: And so both of these women were obviously working in fields that have traditionally been male-dominated. And my guess is that they still are to some degree, but I'm particularly curious from a military history standpoint, as a woman, did Anne do much collecting that highlighted women's contribution in military history? Because that feels like an area that often goes completely ignored.

GC: You are absolutely right. I wish I could say that Anne did that. However, based off of what I've seen in the collection so far, she did not necessarily highlight women creators in various periods of military conflict. There are depictions of women, certainly. And for certain periods, we do have more than others. But I think some of the depictions of, for instance, women serving in war actually occurred a little bit later. And I'm wondering if that had to do with changing historical discourses in the field. And also, I'm wondering, too, if perhaps a woman in Anne's position might have felt the need to play the same game as many of the male collectors around her. She was collecting what was the vision of history and military history at the time. And I think that changes over time as well. And so funny enough, one of the things that I'm trying to do with the collection is to purchase more works that were created by women and also think a little bit more broadly about what it means for women to participate in the military, not just in the context that we might think of women serving in World War Two or nurses during the Civil War in the US. But I'm actually far more interested about thinking through societies where women were actually trained in weaponry and warfare, for instance, nomadic cultures in Central Asia. And also looking too at traditions of sword masters in East Asia who are women. So it's interesting because we have materials concerning, for instance, samurai in Japan. But I think it's something quite different to think of how are women playing a role in this larger social culture of martial engagement.

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AT: I would also imagine a lot of the scholarly work that was done on women in the military came later. Like, I would estimate more like '70s when you had that sort of feminist reclaiming of history.

GC: Oh yes, you are totally right. And so, putting it in the broader timeline of this collector's life, she dies in 1985. And so right as that's happening, you're in the final era of her collecting. And at that point, she's already hired a full curator to manage the collection, who, by the way, was a man. So, I think it's quite interesting that, yeah, the collection does not necessarily shift at that point. And I do wonder if it's because it's being looked at through the eyes of a male curator, not to say that there's anything like particularly wrong with their view, it just,

they did a very good job of crafting one vision of what military history was. And as someone else who's stepping into that role, it's one of my own tasks to figure out what does this mean today? And at least from my own perspective, how can other disciplines really see themselves in this collection? And also audiences that may not have necessarily thought that military history was an interesting thing. And so, I know that I've been surprised looking through this collection. And so broadening the idea of what collecting for it can be is a part of this next stage. Because we're past the stage of the initial collector and past the stage of the stewards that she herself hired. And so, this is the first time that someone has come in that's unassociated with the family and unassociated with the original house museum. And so, it's an interesting place to be because now we get to figure out, how can you make a collection reflect the academic trends and directions of today?

AT: I think what we're really getting into here is that even if both of these women, because I would guess that Adrienne Minassian also didn't necessarily have a lot of opportunity to collect and sell women's art in that field, we're really getting into these larger societal factors that even if you have a personal preference, the industry at large doesn't necessarily allow for you to pursue those.

GC: Yeah. And I would say there's an additional layer to what you've just pointed out. If you are seeking to collect works that are specifically by women, it's harder to do that in Adrienne Minassian's case in the field of Islamic art where you don't have necessarily signatures of artists on all these works of art, except for some cases, especially later painting and later crafts, you do get some signatures. But the earlier periods, which is what her family became known for as well, you're looking at primarily workshop creations where very seldom you see the name of a single artist on them. So how can you say that it is really the work of, now we have historical documents that tell us most of the people working in these workshops are men, but other than that, you can only look to say art forms that were more traditionally associated with women like embroidery, for instance. And even in that case, you cannot be entirely sure.

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AT: Go check out our episode on Ottoman wedding trousseaus. (GC: Exactly.)

So you also mentioned that Anne may have been structuring her collection in part to be sort of in keeping with what was expected at the time. So she's trying to be taken seriously in this military history field that women do not participate in as a general rule at the time. And so she's very much following what the guys are doing so that she can be taken seriously. And what are some of the other difficulties that you think that both women or either woman would have faced as women in their time?

GC: In the case of Anne, she has this additional layer of being a woman who married into high society in America in the Northeast. And so I think that comes with a certain set of social expectations that, I do wonder what the rest of her community might've thought of this woman who suddenly has filled her entire house with toy soldiers. So I do wonder as well, is the act of collecting also another way to perhaps react against society's expectations? And even though we can say, yes, she may have been, in what she collected, she was fitting very much the trends of the time. I think the fact that she was a woman at this moment engaging in this act was enormous. And it's also interesting too that she ends up founding The Company of Military Historians. So I do wonder why does she have to found this particular company? Is it because she did not feel welcome in other scholarly associations? Is it because she wanted to make her own mark on the field? I don't have concrete answers to this, but I think the fact that she's doing that and being very entrepreneurial in those pursuits says something about how she's trying to make her mark on a field and also in her life.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.