Johns Hopkins University's Evergreen Museum & Library is counted among Baltimore's rare treasures—a modern interpretation of the great Renaissance cabinet of curiosities, richly assembled and layered by three generations of the philanthropic Garrett family and, today, accessible to any and all for study, research, and exploration.

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Evergreen’s origins as a backdrop for collecting began in the 1850s, soon after the merchant Broadbent family completed construction of the house. A melding of both the historic, Jefferson-espoused Greek revival and the more romantic and then-current Italianate design vocabularies, Evergreen was no doubt intended to impress. But its architecture was never planned to stand alone. From the beginning, the house’s vast interior was envisioned as a type of reliquary for treasures—fine paintings, sculpture, and other objets d’art representative of extensive travel, great knowledge, as well as significant financial and social standing. An American interpretation of the great European country house or villa, Evergreen was, from its beginning, a beacon of taste for Baltimore.

But it was not until 1878 and the estate’s acquisition by one-time Baltimore & Ohio Railroad president John Work Garret (1820–1884) for his son Thomas Harrison (1848–1888) and his own young family that Evergreen became associated with true connoisseurship. Building upon his father’s model of expanding a gentleman’s personal understanding of the world through collecting, Thomas
became an active appreciator of German and Asian porcelains, rare books, and historical coins; for his literary interests, he built the first two of five libraries that still exist within the house. In 1884, following the death of preeminent American print collector James Lawrence Claghorn (1817–1884), whose collection of nearly 20,000 engravings and etchings built over a 35 year period was seen as nothing less than a national treasure then in danger of being lost, Thomas purchased the celebrated collection and brought it to Baltimore. Between 1885 and 1888, he supervised plans for a state of the art print gallery with accompanying storage casework within Evergreen. This became the first of many museum-like spaces devised by the Garrett family for an ever expanding collection of art.

Thomas Garrett’s collecting passions were soon passed to his three sons, and most fervently continued by his eldest, John Work Garrett (1872–1942) who dedicated his life to diplomatic service. Eventually the inheritor of Evergreen, Ambassador Garrett’s acumen as a collector was demonstrated early on. In his early twenties, he bought an edition of John James Audubon’s iconic Double Elephant Folio Birds of America (London, 1827–1838) as the centerpiece for Evergreen’s ornithological collection. His personal interest in reading led him to commission three new libraries for the mansion, the largest and best recognized being an imposing Renaissance court-yard inspired room designed in 1928 by architect Laurence Hall Fowler (1876–1971). John added to his father’s collection of coins—making it one of the very best private assemblages of American, foreign and ancient coinage in the world. And, he skillfully enhanced the family’s collection of Asian lacquer wares that was started in the 1880s at the peak of the Aesthetic Movement and the western world’s frenzy over anything and everything Japanese. During an 1899 tour of Japan, John assembled unrivaled representations of 18th- and 19th-century inrō — small, intricate carrying cases designed to accompany pocket-less kimonos. He also added richly carved miniature masks emulating life-size comedic and tragic examples featured in Japanese theatre, as well as masterfully carved miniature sculptures known as netsuke. Today, these works are displayed within the ivory, pink, and burgundy Far East Room of Evergreen’s North Wing, created during the 1920s Jazz Age.

John’s 1908 marriage to Alice Warder (1877–1952) brought an even more diverse interest in art to Evergreen.

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2 The Garrett print collection, the core of which was the former Claghorn Collection, was placed on loan to The Baltimore Museum of Art in 1930. The loan was subsequently made a gift by Thomas Harrison Garrett’s surviving sons, the Honorable John Work Garrett and Robert Garrett in 1942. Completion of this transfer was secured in 1946.
Alice was a believer that one could not truly understand a painting if one didn’t paint; appreciate an opera if one didn’t sing; or value ballet if one didn’t dance. When she became the mistress of Evergreen, she soon oversaw renovations of numerous spaces, including the conversion of her husband’s boyhood gymnasium and classroom into an intimate theatre. For this unique space, she employed the talents of Russian émigré artist and friend Léon Bakst (1866-1924)—best known for his Constructivist set designs and costumes for the Ballets Russes. Bakst found examples of Russian folk art in the Garrett library and adapted them to repetitive stencil patterns for the walls, ceiling, and even fabric-covered lighting fixtures. The finished theatre became the backdrop for lively musical and dance performances throughout the year—many of which starred Alice Garrett. Its design remains a tour de force example of early 20th century Modernism, complemented by Alice’s seemingly ever growing collection of paintings and drawings by the likes of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), and Raoul Dufy (1877-1953) that still reigns from the formal drawing rooms and halls of the main house.

Following the 1942 death of Ambassador Garrett, Evergreen, its library, and Asian collections became part of the Johns Hopkins University. After Mrs. Garrett’s establishment of the Evergreen House Foundation shortly before her own death a decade later, Evergreen Museum & Library was opened to the public. Today, it exists as a valuable resource for the study and appreciation of fine, decorative, and performing arts. Throughout each year, JHU students serve as both guest curators and artists, using the vast collections of Evergreen as both historical focus and inspirational muse. Musicians and performers provide exciting programs in the famous Bakst theatre. And at the same time, with each tour that passes through its many rooms, taking in century-old treatises, magnificent paintings, and even a somewhat whimsical stage, Evergreen Museum & Library reminds one that collecting is a part of life. As John Work Garrett stated in his will, Evergreen exists today as inspiration for “lovers of music, art, and beautiful things.”

For more information regarding Evergreen Museum & Library, please visit www.museums.jhu.edu, or telephone 410-516-0341.

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James Archer Abbott currently serves as Director-Curator of Johns Hopkins University’s Evergreen Museum & Library. A graduate of Vassar College and the State University of New York-F.I.T. Museum Studies Program, Mr. Abbott has previously worked as an adjunct professor at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, as well as a curator with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Boscobel Restoration, Inc., and Historic Hudson Valley. His publications include: Jansen Furniture (2007) and Jansen (2006), both published by Acanthus Press.