This is the story of an art exhibition that never should have seen the light of day. A brand-new American museum would organize its first international exhibition. It would do so an ocean away, in Paris, on the eve of World War II. As if that were not risky enough, this museum decided to present the most comprehensive survey of American art ever assembled to date, and to do so for a European audience traditionally skeptical of the artistic worth of American art. It would also include in its exhibition new kinds of artworks, such as film and folk art, that until then were rarely deemed to belong in a museum. To do this, the organizers would need to convince more established museums and private collectors to lend them the United States’ most precious artworks to be sent near a war zone, for free. Against all odds, however, Three Centuries of American Art opened its doors on May 24, 1938, in Paris (fig. 1).

Before visiting the exhibition, let us consider why a museum at this time would transport hundreds of artworks as far as five thousand miles away. Three Centuries was a massive exhibition spread...
over the entire famed Musée du Jeu de Paume in the Tuileries Gardens, near the Musée du Louvre. While conceived by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), *Three Centuries* was a collaborative effort: American and European curators, artists, private collectors, gallery owners, heads of state and ambassadors, government agencies, publicity staff, publishers, printers, and journalists all contributed to the exhibition’s success and its resonance nearly a century later. Founded just a few years earlier, in 1929, MoMA was actively seeking legitimacy in Europe and trying to generate a history of American art that would focus on a broader range of American production than was recognized in publications and museums at the time. Collectively, American and French staff promoted MoMA’s first international exhibition as an unparalleled opportunity for European art critics to discover and evaluate American art. These artworks and their
champions represented a groundbreaking interpretation of American art—one devoted to institutionalization rather than to individual artists, artworks, or artistic groups as a method for discerning art history. Fundamentally, *Three Centuries* aimed to be a cornerstone of American modernism and remains key to understanding a leading American museum’s attempt to influence the American art canon. *Three Centuries* and exhibitions like it are worthy of study because they are highly visible manifestations of canon formation and the institutionalization of art history within the public sphere of the museum. They can tell us, for example, what interpretation of American art the museum sought to legitimize and how the selected artworks reflected American culture and sought to represent it. Museums and exhibitions are particularly useful tools for exploring the institutionalization of art history because they are so approachable to readers, both in the 1930s and today. My approach repositions museum studies, for so long sidelined in the field, at the center of American art history.

With *Three Centuries*, MoMA laid out an authoritative vision of American art that was unprecedented in its breadth of artworks and chronology, with over 750 objects dating from 1609 to 1938, as well as in the variety of media it included: architectural models, films, paintings, photographs, prints, sculptures, folk and popular artworks, and interpretive documents, such as film scripts, maps, and graphs. The 329 years of art encapsulated within this international exhibition expressed a vision of American art and culture that built on prior surveys to articulate a new formulation, one that sought to turn American art into a diplomatic agent in the politically turbulent world of the 1930s. First discussed in 1930, with formal negotiations beginning in 1932, the exhibition was initially supposed to go on view in 1934. When that failed, MoMA tried again as part of the 1937 Exposition Universelle in Paris. This plan too was scrapped, and it took until 1938 for the show to open its doors, this time with markedly more pronounced political undertones than when it was originally conceived.

By 1938, politicians, including the American and French ambassadors, used the exhibition as a form of soft power for their own diplomatic objectives. After the chaos of World War I and the Great Depression, the French blamed the Americans for the 1929 stock market crash, and the Americans blamed the French for defaulting on World War I loans. With instability brewing in Europe and another possible war on the horizon, politicians needed both populations to align culturally once more. *Three Centuries* was an attempt to do just that. In a voyage to Paris, approximately one hundred art-filled crates transformed into the cultural and political weight of the United States. *Three Centuries*, in its multifarious display, nuances dominant art historical scholarship on art and diplomacy, particularly scholarship on Cold War exhibitions. *Three Centuries’* ontological boundaries and its mechanics of temporary display permit consideration of the internationalization of American art, modernism, politicized art, and the invention of art historical and cultural categories as part of the periodization of history.

This book is the first dedicated to *Three Centuries of American Art*. It follows the show’s *exhibitionary life cycle*—a term to which I will return—from conception and
negotiations, through loans, travel, and display, all the way to dissemination in the press and imprint on American artworks decades after the exhibition closed. To form their vision of American art, curators at the newly founded MoMA recognized that they had to draw from the collections of others. These loans complicate the institutional ownership of *Three Centuries*. By displaying in their exhibition objects that belonged to other museums, private patrons, galleries, civic organizations, and the American and French governments, MoMA curators also strengthened their institutional authority. These institutional relationships elevated MoMA’s standing on the national and international stage alongside older, better-known museums. With these loans also came assessments by appraisers and insurance companies before objects were crated and ferried to France by couriers. As we will see, this bureaucracy was neither common nor trivial; it was a pioneering practice in the museum world at the time that inflated the stature and value of MoMA, the individual artworks on display, and *Three Centuries* as a whole. Through these networks of exchange, *Three Centuries* glorified MoMA and reinforced a diplomatic relationship between two nations.

Other scholars have written about the applicability of general systems theory, and its associated cybernetics, within art history. Systems theory is an interdisciplinary theory that posits that complex systems can be quantified mathematically. And cybernetics explores how systems are regulated in society. First defined in the 1930s, at the same time that *Three Centuries* was under development, systems theory initially examined biological phenomena but has since branched out to the social sciences, among other disciplines. Within the art history field, scholars tend to employ the theory to examine the post–World War II period and specifically the post-1960s performative installation artworks that art historian Jack Burnham termed “system esthetics.” In short, these scholars argue that some contemporary artists make visible for viewers the complex cultural systems that impact their lives. Critically, many of these dynamics can be seen at work in *Three Centuries*. I would encourage contemporary art historians to consider *Three Centuries* as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism by focusing on the role of technology, as a form of industrialization, in exhibition production.

Most significantly, I add to the art historical framework on systems the notion of time through what I have termed the “exhibitionary life cycle.” An exhibition’s life does not start or end with its display. Neither should an exhibition’s scope be reduced to the selected artworks. I define the exhibitionary life cycle as the extended timeline and inclusive process by which exhibitions continue to permeate culture long after the show closes through the systems they foster and the canon they alter. The exhibitionary life cycle is composed of the concepts and negotiations that undergird an exhibition’s design, the vast documentation that surrounds the negotiations, the artworks on view and those they stand for, the sister installations before and after the main event, the curatorial distillation of the exhibition’s narrative and import in catalogues, the dissemination of the exhibition through publicity, and the intellectual trail it
leaves decades later in textbooks, scholarly articles, popular culture, collecting practices, and future exhibitions. The theory allows the art history scholar to consider the long-term impacts of exhibitions on the formation of bureaucratic systems necessary within canon formation. I also argue that the exhibitionary life cycle is a method for gauging soft power and its convoluted and dispersive qualities. The book contributes to current scholarship by shedding light on the fact that exhibitions are relevant not just to museum studies and art history, but also to the broader study of cultural history, by embodying cultural events within art-historical choices, such as display and analytical categories that correspond to social and economic events of the time. For example, Three Centuries was unmistakably by and about the 1930s, with an emphasis on the Great Depression, the New Deal, and a defense of democratic ideals.

Three Centuries’ exhibitionary life cycle started in 1930 and continues today, nearly a century later, with this book. An exhibition will often take different forms and be more or less visible during its life cycle—as it is formed, as it is displayed, as observers interpret it, as the press translates it, as the public digests it, as competitors spin it, and as other museums appropriate it for their own ends. For example, during the negotiations, the concept of Three Centuries gradually solidified but remained sufficiently liquid to adapt to evolving French and American expectations, MoMA’s own institutional changes, and worsening global conditions. As we will see, MoMA curators faced tense negotiations with the French and struggled to receive loans from American museums and collectors. Once on view in Paris, the exhibition needed to solidify into a sufficiently stable and potent tool for diplomats. With a wide array of artworks on view throughout the Jeu de Paume, Three Centuries greeted visitors as a clearly defined artistic endeavor and coherent representation of the United States. MoMA’s press releases then helped disperse Three Centuries in articles around the globe, where local communities metabolized the exhibition as particulates. This diffusion through the press proved particularly important, together with later displays of artworks featured in Three Centuries, in compounding the exhibition’s potential influence over years and geographies.

The edges of the exhibition remain frayed and difficult to assess, despite Three Centuries’ voluminous archival holdings. One research challenge was that curators and the press had five different titles for it: Art des États-Unis: 1609–1938; Exposition d’Art Américain; Three Centuries of American Art; Three Centuries of Art from the United States; and Trois Siècles d’Art aux États-Unis. To ease future research, I selected the title currently used by the MoMA Archives. Three Centuries also has varying origin dates. In his book on MoMA’s first ten years, MoMA director A. Conger Goodyear dates the idea of the exhibition within MoMA and the start of negotiations to 1932. However, French correspondence from 1930 suggests that the idea germinated earlier and in France. More perplexing, the exact number of artworks is unknown. Goodyear proclaimed to the press that Three Centuries featured one thousand artworks. The catalogue, meanwhile, listed many but not all the artworks on view. Having reviewed all the loan forms
and installation photographs, I estimate that the total was closer to 750, the number I use in this book. Of that number, however, I was only able to identify titles for a little over five hundred objects; although installation photographs and other references confirm that 250 film stills were on view in Paris, scant records of them remain in the archives. The very materiality of an exhibition full of objects documenting culture further complicates the task of settling on a precise number. For example, is a wooden model documenting timber construction in the architecture section an artwork? I believe so, but other scholars would take the opposite view. The precise number of artworks is not that important in the end, both because the general scale of the endeavor is known and because *Three Centuries* exemplifies an open system that only grew larger during its exhibitionary life cycle. Further, I rely on a wide variety of archival sources—nearly twenty-two thousand document pages—to explore the display, categorization, and reception of American art, including curators’ and government officials’ correspondence, speeches, press releases, newspapers, catalogues, object descriptions, embassy records, and exhibition files. The very frayed edges that made *Three Centuries* “untidy” also made it compatible with competing agendas and secured its influence as it morphed to meet the changing needs of lenders, MoMA staff, and politicians.

My quantitative work—by gathering collection, loan, and display statistics and charting artworks’ movements—extends systems theory to canon formation in an attempt to discover trends through deep dives into the data. I quantify artworks and their impacts through a wide range of data sources, including insurance assessments and references in syndicated newspapers. Data-driven approaches serve as a powerful alternative to the traditional reliance of art historians on the reception by a handful of influential art critics. My work builds, in part, on MoMA director Alfred H. Barr Jr.’s attempts at quantification, particularly his remarkable table distilling American culture (discussed in depth in chapter 3). This approach entails an unavoidable amount of imprecision because *Three Centuries* is an open system with permeable boundaries that thicken or thin. In a hallmark of the canonization process, *Three Centuries* is not necessarily explicitly cited as a source of inspiration by later exhibitions and scholars. This omission may be due to the fact that MoMA’s curatorial innovations in 1938 became codified and integrated in the category of “American art” in a way that rendered MoMA’s practice or interpretation self-evident and widespread. Conclusively tracing these shifts and the extent of MoMA’s influence is a difficult task and beyond the scope of my project, but this book shows that MoMA, a modernist museum, undoubtedly attempted to shift American art history in the 1930s, and that its investment in international exhibitions, first achieved with *Three Centuries*, later became commonplace at MoMA and other museums, as seen for example in MoMA’s International Program and International Council, which worked with the US Department of State, the US Information Agency, UNESCO, and the United Nations.
EXHIBITIONS AS ART HISTORY

Exhibitions are sites of experimental art history, where curators act as arbiters of taste, selecting artists, both new and old, for art critics and general visitors. *Three Centuries*, in its ambitious scale, functions as an example of how MoMA curators asserted an emerging role for museums in canon formation. While the history of American art may seem linear and self-evident, it is anything but. American art history was and remains fluid, uncertain, and contested. Which artists, subjects, and media merit a place in the museum, which artworks and time periods coalesce into “movements,” and who gets to determine what is American art are all hotly disputed questions that get resolved through internal museum politics and practical considerations as much as by coherent, artistic deliberations. In the 1930s, scholars were actively debating the history and status of American art in art surveys, exhibitions, newspapers, and magazines. With an ambitious selection of artworks, MoMA curated *Three Centuries* as a canonical intervention to stake a claim in this contested art historical terrain by positioning American art on a continuum of historical and contemporary culture that spanned 329 years. With artworks dating as early as 1609, *Three Centuries* established a national art before the United States even existed. In pairing the new with the old, MoMA curators buttressed contemporary art by positioning it as the progeny of centuries of meaningful artistic endeavors.

With *Three Centuries*, MoMA presented a complex portrait of a country both modern and rooted in centuries-old traditions that forced the French to reassess their image of the United States as nascent, industrialized, and unmoored from history, and instead find American origins in a shared political past. American and French politicians hoped to strengthen their transatlantic partnership through MoMA’s display, in an early instance of MoMA exhibitions deployed for diplomatic purposes. French government officials across departments at the Musées Nationaux within the Ministère de la Culture promoted *Three Centuries* for political gain; in it they saw the potential to represent, on European soil, American democratic values amid the recent advances of totalitarianism. But the same mounting geopolitical instabilities that boosted *Three Centuries*’ appeal also hindered MoMA curators’ efforts to complete the project. The exhibition was almost canceled at the last minute, and MoMA was unable to secure certain art loans. These rejected loan requests affected which American art history would be displayed in Paris and, in turn, solidified in the American art canon.

Fundamentally, *Three Centuries* exposes the tensions that existed in American art when MoMA curators attempted to shape a canonical view at a moment when the nation struggled to find its place within a deepening global political crisis. When first discussing the exhibition in 1930, MoMA and Musée du Luxembourg curators did not intend for *Three Centuries* to serve as a representation of the United States in France. Instead, MoMA curators had hoped that through this display, American art—and by extension their museum—would be praised by the art critics working in Paris, a city MoMA president A. Conger Goodyear and others still deemed the world’s artistic
center. Nevertheless, as the 1930s progressed and a possible conflict loomed, government officials saw the potential of the exhibition to serve as a diplomatic agent as well. Thus, as the United States and France changed, so did *Three Centuries*.

Chapter 1, “What Was *Three Centuries of American Art,*?” presents the exhibition and explains how its organization and display offered visitors a complex vision of the United States and its equally complicated history of art. It looks to the global politics that directly influenced *Three Centuries* to ask how the events in France and the United States shaped the exhibition. The chapter treats *Three Centuries* as an intricate intellectual artwork in and of itself, in order to understand how curators and politicians attempted to deploy American art for diplomatic ends. Not only did the exhibition’s purpose turn more political, but its content was also directly altered by the rising tensions when wary lenders were loath to send valuable artworks into a potential war zone.

Chapter 2, “Loaning across Oceans: Symbolism, Risk, and Value,” as a part of my effort to trace the exhibition from its inception in 1930 to its first display in 1938, documents the impact of loans on the politicization of American art and considers the importance of physical distance for evaluating American art as a cultural commodity. In the 1930s, a decade that saw significant technological advances, the physical movement of artworks affected the materiality of American art. The artworks in *Three Centuries* were wrapped in this contraction of time and distance between Europe and the United States. Little scholarly work has been produced on the use of loans as a form of cultural and monetary currency. Yet art is loaned with expectations of reciprocity by actors who cultivate relationships among each other to advance their respective agendas. As the first systematic study of art loans, this chapter analyzes over four thousand loan letters, forms, and appraisals from the exhibition to explore MoMA’s innovative registrarial practice with Dorothy Dudley at its head. This vast archive reveals that the artworks were objects of cultural and monetary value that served as diplomatic and institutional currency in elaborate networks of exchange among artists, patrons, dealers, and museums.

I consider *Three Centuries* as an intellectual artwork and bureaucratic system created by curators through the selection and arrangement of American art into visual narratives that expressed American culture. In twenty rooms at the Jeu de Paume, a group of artworks arranged together on a wall or in a room became a series—and a linear movement to the passerby—through the intellectual categories conceived by MoMA’s curators. This process demonstrates how artworks serve as palimpsests for visual narratives. For example, *Three Centuries* departed from the artist’s original intent when it interpreted William Edmondson’s biblical sculpture *Mary and Martha* (1930–38) (fig. 2), taken from the Gospel of Luke story of two sisters before Jesus. To Edmondson, the limestone *Mary and Martha*, with prominent chisel marks of two sisters holding prayer books, displayed his artistic process and reaffirmed a revelation from God. Edmonson referred to the artwork as “the preacher. . . . God give me this
thing.” But on view in the folk and popular art section of Three Centuries, the sculpture transformed into a representation of rural America. Instead of a biblical reference, when placed beside the paintings Child with Dog (ca. 1800), The Quilting Party (1840–50), and Coryell’s Ferry, 1776 (1914–18), Mary and Martha morphed (fig. 3). Within MoMA’s hands, the sculpture became the embodiment of a local scene: two young sisters attending a quilting party with another child and her dog in New Hope, Pennsylvania.

Just as Barr had hoped when he arranged the folk and popular art installation without any labels, the 1930s viewer took a “visual splice” of the artworks. Now, the two sisters, Mary and Martha, joined a young Child with Dog. The three figures attended a festive Quilting Party to dance after walking among Coryell’s houses and listening to the heavy water drawn up by the waterwheels on which the community relies (fig. 4). The Quilting Party retained the artist’s likely interpretation as a genre painting, while the “visual slice” by Barr converted both Child with Dog and Coryell’s Ferry, 1776. Child with Dog was transmuted from a family portrait into a partygoer. Within the context of Barr’s installation, Coryell’s Ferry, 1776 was transformed into the rural setting for The Quilting Party. By turning Coryell’s Ferry, 1776 into a location, the exhibition minimized its depiction of George Washington surveying from the hillside and the region’s significance during the Revolutionary War. Together, these four artworks presented a
version of rural American culture that was inviting, in stark contrast to the perceived brutal frontier environment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To perform for the French visitor the cultural experience of a quilting party during the New Republic, MoMA curators manufactured a seemingly cohesive tableau vivant out of four unrelated artworks from different centuries and parts of the Mid-Atlantic.

As the quilting scene illustrates to today’s skeptical reader, *Three Centuries* challenged the American art canon by positioning contemporary art as an extension of American art history. Chapter 3, “Creating a Contemporary American Art History across Centuries,” explores how MoMA curators crafted an American art history that included contemporary art. Many of the works they selected for *Three Centuries* had not previously been displayed by the museum. Indeed, 59 of the 130 painters and sculptors shown in Paris had never previously been featured by MoMA. With these new works, the exhibition introduced not only new artists but also new narratives. To a degree, the tension between historical and contemporary art impacted how diplomats employed the exhibition for their own hegemonic pursuits and how art critics interpreted the relevance of American art. For example, to American diplomats, the
Introduction

Early artworks likely legitimized the traditions and, consequently, the power of the relatively young democratic nation and, with the display of a painting of General Lafayette in particular, its long relationship with France.

My example of the visual splice of rural America also demonstrates the relationship between, on the one hand, artworks’ interpretive flexibility as palimpsests to foreground a curator’s perspective and, on the other hand, the artworks’ formalism, discussed by MoMA curators as an aspect of modernism. In a feat of flexibility, American artworks in *Three Centuries* held dual positions as objects documenting their artists’ intentions and interpretive tools fulfilling the needs of curators. Generally, there is a tendency to assume that the multiplicity of modernisms slowly solidified into formalism with abstract expressionism and the much-cited art criticism of Clement Greenberg. Scholars have considered this question of formalism and the interpretive multiplicity of exhibitions at early MoMA. Serge Guilbaut’s *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1985) made an important contribution to understanding abstract expressionism by framing within shifting Cold War politics an artistic group previously understood principally in terms of its formal qualities. Guilbaut established that
the paintings extolled by Greenberg in formalist vocabularies were also flexible tools for soft power.\(^8\) Mary Anne Staniszewski’s *The Power of Display* (1998) outlined the importance of exhibitions for spreading the international avant-garde at MoMA. Her foundational discussion on display practices informed subsequent scholars writing on MoMA, including myself. In *The Modern Eye* (2009), Kristina Wilson explored how curators embraced a broad definition of modernism during MoMA’s early years that slowly changed with Barr’s demotion.\(^9\) More recently, Jennifer Marshall’s *Machine Art, 1934* (2012) reminded scholars that formalism and the interpretive mutability of objects—transformed from utilitarian to design categories—had been part of MoMA’s exhibition history from its early years. As Marshall argues, in 1934 “formalist modernism’s claims to unchanging timeless stability came as a timely defense against the encroaching indeterminacy of modernity’s material conditions.”\(^10\) Richard Meyer’s *What Was Contemporary Art?* (2013) articulates the challenges faced in accepting contemporary art within art history and the ability of the contemporary art category to accept, among other materials, copies of prehistoric artworks and Persian wall frescoes.\(^11\) These scholars sequentially showed how display was part of a larger art history project (Guilbaut), how exhibition history took center stage in American and European art history (Staniszewski and Wilson), and how art history then welcomed a focused analysis of single exhibitions (Marshall and Meyer). Two monographs, Sybil Kantor’s analysis of Alfred Barr and Mardges Bacon’s analysis of John McAndrews, exemplify the biographical work necessary to understand individual curators’ work on modernism, including its formalism.\(^12\) These projects’ collective display of modernism’s multiplicities led me to Julia Bryan-Wilson’s *Art Workers* (2009) on the postwar display of artist labor at MoMA.\(^13\) Her work on artists’ labors was a reminder to think critically about all labor in the museum as interpretively meaningful. I expand these conversations on MoMA’s evolving display of modernism to write on an art exhibition’s intersection with canonization.

*Three Centuries’* exhibitionary life cycle was extended by a two-hundred-page bilingual catalogue of the Paris exhibition, which would serve as a persuasive tool in promoting MoMA’s version of American art history. Chapter 4, “Art on Paper,” employs MoMA’s six press releases and the approximately five hundred articles written about *Three Centuries* by American and international journalists around the world to trace how people learned about MoMA’s American art history. The chapter is the first study of MoMA’s press department (an early manifestation of a division now ubiquitous across museums), its head Sarah Newmeyer, and the blurring that occurs when an artwork turns into an idea on the printed page. Of particular significance is the chapter’s exploration of how quickly ideas traveled across the United States through the written word, and which artists or artworks particular communities favored. Through this focus on press accounts, the chapter questions how the idea of American art history traveled, how long it survived on the pages of publications, the spread of certain interpretations because of syndication, and the relatively arbitrary canonization proc-
ess derived from what journalists and publishers believed their readers knew or ought to know. Through this part of the exhibitionary life cycle, too, *Three Centuries* illustrates how exhibitions can alter or stabilize art history.

**TRAVELING WITH MARGARET GIBBS THROUGH TRANSMEDIATION**

The transmediation of art is startling to most modern readers, who assume that canonization stabilizes an artwork’s meaning. Yet exhibitions and transnationalism only make the complex coatings on the artwork harder to discern. As Garrett Stewart aptly summarized, “transmediation preserves in some sense the medial energies it supplements or supplants. Operating neither in ‘no medium’ nor in an immediately familiarized new one, it hovers between, recalibrates, analyzes. The conceptualism of the transmedial object begins in such analysis rather than in an absolute negation.” Considering the transmediation of art by tracing one artwork makes the reader confront the complex questions inherent in creating a large-scale display on the history of American art.

Take, for example, *Margaret Gibbs* (fig. 5), the 1670 painting by an unknown artist later designated the Freake-Gibbs Limner (or Painter) by art historians. This painting heralded *Three Centuries* by being prominently displayed on the walls of the Jeu de Paume, in the exhibition catalogue, and on publicity posters throughout Paris. By following the itinerary of the painting as people loaned, assessed, packed, installed, described, and illustrated it in 1938, my approach demonstrates how an artwork, 268 years after its creation, changes through its inclusion in an exhibition. When Barr decided to display the seventeenth-century portrait as part of the Paris 1938 exhibition, how was this painting—and, similarly, all the artworks on view—transmuted through inclusion in an exhibition produced by a museum devoted to modern art? Beyond what is in plain view at the installation, what can we learn about artworks, the exhibition, the organizers’ motivations, and the canon by looking at the exhibition’s life cycle as a whole? And what does it mean for the study of museums that curators’ choices continue to influence our understanding of complex ideas, such as canon formation?

Tracking the evolution and travel of the object *Margaret Gibbs* from painted form to printed identity, and from Charleston, West Virginia, to Paris, brings to light the accretive layers of transmutation. This process allows the reader to appreciate the vastness of the exhibitionary life cycle and how an artwork’s interpretation must change in order to become a part of American art history. In early May 1938, in preparation for the exhibition, movers hired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, removed *Margaret Gibbs* from the dining room of the Charleston, West Virginia, home of Ethelind Smith, the painting’s owner and Gibbs’s descendant. Goodyear requested the painting after he was unable to borrow *Mrs. Elizabeth Freake and Baby Mary* (1671–74) from the Worcester Art Museum. To MoMA curators and their French collaborators at the Musée du Louvre and Musée du Luxembourg, *Margaret Gibbs*, the portrait of a wealthy seven-year-old white girl, represented an origin story for American painting. But
Smith, as a Gibbs descendant, saw the portrait as a member of her family. Here, the painting pivots into personhood—capturing an invented memory—before pivoting back into its material form, a cumbersome and heavy object to be crated.

To travel abroad, the painting had to be insured. Smith’s personal evaluation of $5,000 for the painting turned the artwork into a monetary asset. After being crated and labeled “M.O.M.A. PARIS,” the portrait slowly transformed to represent less
“Ethelind Smith” and “Margaret Gibbs” and more “MoMA” as it traveled in the hands of couriers and curators on its way to France. At Three Centuries, Barr chose to isolate Margaret Gibbs from its pendent Robert Gibbs at 4½ Years on the first floor of the Jeu de Paume (figs. 6 and 7), placing John Singleton Copley’s Mrs. Richard Skinner (1772) in between the siblings. Separated from its pendent, Margaret Gibbs became less a sibling of Robert, with her biography in Boston minimized, and more the embodiment of

FIGURE 6
colonial America by hanging beside other wealthy white colonists. When the exhibition closed on July 31, 1938, the painting was repacked and slowly returned by truck, steamer ship, and another truck first to New York City and finally back to Smith’s dining room after its four-month sojourn.

The transmutation of Margaret Gibbs continued when curators transformed the painting into publicity posters for the exhibition and into a catalogue illustration. The lithographic poster (fig. 8) for Three Centuries was slightly smaller than the full-size painting. Henri Verne, director of the Musées Nationaux and the Musée du Louvre, who was charged with publicity, arranged for five hundred Margaret Gibbs posters to be spread across the French capital—dotting roads, metros, and trains. But that was not enough. MoMA curators and American visitors decried the lack of publicity for the exhibition, suggesting that—despite these plans—there was too small a cavalcade of Margaret Gibbs posters streaming through the city. No matter the number, it is clear that an ocean away from Smith’s dining room and immersed in French culture, images of the young 1670s girl now walked the boulevards, waited for trains, and traveled beside commuters around the city and outlying neighborhoods. The choice of a child, consciously or not, would have reaffirmed in many viewers’ minds the inchoate status...
of the United States, both as a nation and as a people, with its own art and art history. Remarkably, the other publicity poster for *Three Centuries* was of the Daily News skyscraper in New York City, which was erected in 1930 (fig. 9). How did MoMA staff and politicians come to select these two designs to advertise *Three Centuries?* And which image—centuries-old child or young skyscraper—would be a better choice to plaster across the city and otherwise promote the exhibition? We return to these questions in the book’s conclusion. In short, MoMA and its US government partners were keen to use the 1670 portrait because its age legitimizes American art and the United States. Meanwhile, the French liked the skyscraper because it represented the power and