The Morgan Library & Frick Collection were given to the nation by men who didn’t do anything by half measures.
No city on earth is more richly supplied with museums, libraries, concert halls, and other cultural amenities than New York. And unlike other global cities, most of New York’s treasures come not from government sponsorship, but out of deep private generosity.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, an encyclopedic range of offerings that only the Louvre in Paris can compete with, has been built up over a century and a half by a Who’s Who of donors giving time, money, art, artifacts, and architecture. The New York Public Library, one of the greatest and largest book lenders in the world, is not owned by a government. The Astor, Lennox, and Tilden Foundations joined to create it in 1895 as a charitable contribution to their city, and continue to own its 53 million items. Most of the branch libraries were built by Andrew Carnegie.

Not all of New York City’s donated cultural wonders are as vast as the Met and the NYPL. Indeed, two of the best—the Morgan Library and the Frick Collection—are moderate in size. Yet both of these institutions house magnificent collections inside striking buildings, reflecting the personal passions of their founders. The Morgan Library and the Frick Collection were each opened wide to the public as bequests of their creators, and given endowments of sufficient generosity to make certain they will remain cultural jewels for the world always.

A Sistine chapel for books
Unlike most of the financial and industrial titans of the Gilded Age, J. P. Morgan was born rich, in 1837. His grandfather was one of the founders of the Aetna Insurance Company, and his father became an international banker and partner of George Peabody, one of the seminal donors who helped form the tradition of giving by America’s business class. After high school in Boston, Morgan studied in Switzerland, then earned a degree in art history at the University of Göttingen in Germany. He was fluent in both German and French.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Morgan had become the most powerful banker in the United States. After he created the first billion-dollar corporation, U.S. Steel, out of many smaller steel companies, a joke made the rounds that while God had created the world in 4004 B.C.; J. P. Morgan reorganized it in 1901.

As a respite from his commercial labors, Morgan collected art, omnivorously. Not only paintings and sculpture but also rare books and manuscripts, bronzes, gold work, tapestries, snuff boxes, Chinese porcelain, medieval armor, and furniture. Art historian Bernard Berenson wrote to museum founder Isabella Stewart Gardner that he had visited Morgan’s London house and “it looks like a pawnbroker’s shop for Croesuses.”

Because the Revenue Act of 1897 charged a duty of 20 percent on imported works of art, Morgan kept much of his collection in England. But the act contained an exception for rare books and manuscripts, provided that they were to be used for educational, philosophical, religious, or literary purposes and were not sold. Therefore much of his book collection ended up in his house on the corner of Madison Avenue and 36th Street.

But while the house was a large one, there soon was not enough room for his burgeoning collection. Some of it was stored in the basement under less than ideal conditions. So in 1902 he decided to build a separate library, slated to hold 20,000 books, on lots he bought next to his home. To design it he called on architect Charles McKim,

John Steele Gordon is a contributing editor of Philanthropy.
best known today for the campus of Columbia University and the University Club in midtown New York City, masterpieces inspired by the Italian Renaissance. Morgan, who was very active in determining the details of his new building, always wanted the best quality. After McKim told him parts of the Athens Acropolis were built without mortar, he approved the extra expense of precisely grinding blocks of Tennessee marble so his library could also be erected mortarlessly. Because of such upgrades, the final cost of construction, originally budgeted at $850,000, reached $1.2 million (roughly $36 million today).

Completed in 1906, the library was a masterpiece of quiet opulence, with lapis lazuli columns, Roman marble floors, a coffered vault in one section, and an elaborate painted ceiling in another. There is a grand entrance hall, Morgan’s imposing study, and the soaring main library with three tiers of walnut bookshelves accessed by bronze walkways.

Within a year, the Morgan library played a significant part in American financial history. In 1907 a rash of bank failures set off a financial panic. Without a central bank to act as a lender of last resort, the hysteria threatened to engulf the entire U.S. banking system. It was Morgan who rescued the situation. For a few days, J. P. Morgan & Company effectively served as the country’s central bank. After raising $25 million to keep the stock exchange open, Morgan asked all the major bankers in New York to meet that evening at his library, where they were asked to hash out a response to the crisis. Morgan, who had a bad cold, played solitary in his office while they dickered. Every so often someone would play solitaire in his office while they assessed the situation. He reported back:

Morgan asked back that the land and the coke ovens were just as Frick had described them. Yet he had his doubts about Frick’s seriousness. The curious young businessman lived and worked right on the property in a “half-office and half-living room in a clapboard shack.” Even odder, he was devoting snips of free time to decorating the shack with “prints and sketches,” some drawn by himself. It was the first reference to Frick’s passion for art, and caused the staid banker to recommended that the loan be rejected.

Mellon sent out another man to assess the situation. He reported back:

Mellon did so. The loans were soon repaid.

With the onset of the deep depression that began in 1873, the price of coke declined to levels that were sometimes below cost. Frick’s prospects were touch-and-go for a while. He ran a very tight ship, however, and survived. Many of his competitors did not. In 1878 Frick...
acquired one of these bankrupt competitors, and soon commanded 80 percent of the local market.

In 1881 Frick began what turned out to be a very happy marriage. While on his honeymoon he met Andrew Carnegie in New York City, and eventually became his partner. That relationship was not nearly so loving.

Since Carnegie's steel mills were Frick's biggest customer, the advantages of joining forces were many. But Frick, a born leader, chafed at being second in command. Two decades down the road, the two had a spectacular feud that resulted in a business separation. Soon after Frick helped J. P. Morgan engineer the formation of U.S. Steel. When Carnegie sent a message to Frick a few years later, hoping to renew their friendship, Frick instructed the messenger, “Tell Mr. Carnegie that I'll meet him in hell.”

When he became wealthy, Frick began collecting art seriously. As his knowledge deepened and taste became more refined, he sold paintings nearly as frequently as he bought new ones. It is no great trick for a very rich man to acquire a valuable collection of paintings; only a checkbook and an art dealer are required for that. But a collection of the sort that Henry Frick assembled requires judgment. Art dealers are happy to sell second-rate works by first-rate artists. Only a collector with good instincts can achieve Frick's goal—which was to assemble a modest-sized collection of the finest paintings by the old masters.

When Frick moved to New York City he began planning construction of a house on New York's Fifth Avenue where he could display his art in a proper setting. He hired Carrère and Hastings, architects of the New York Public Library. The result was a mansion of subdued elegance. It is at once grand and intimate, making it a good setting for paintings. The main rooms remain much as they were when the Frick family lived there.

At the end of his life, the masterpieces that surrounded Frick were much more than symbols of success to him. They were what his biographer called “the mirrors of his heart.” Late at night, when the family and servants had gone to bed, he would often pad about, turn on the lights, and sit by the hour in front of one painting or another.

When he died in 1919, Frick left his house, his collection, and an endowment of $15 million to the city of New York. As a memorial to her father, his daughter Helen established one of the country's premier art libraries in 1920. It now has its own adjacent building. Conversion of the Frick property into a museum began after Mrs. Frick died in 1931. Thanks to the generous endowment (now worth more than $400 million) artwork continued to be acquired, and more than half of today's collection arrived after Henry Frick's death.

Like the Morgan Library, the Frick Collection is moderate in size but unmatched in quality. Each institution is a kind of temple in a city that is today's cultural Jerusalem. And it was the decision of their patrons to share them with the widest public.