It is astonishing to learn how many of the most revered modern French paintings in major public museums and many private collections in the United States and worldwide were once in Norwegian hands. Like the proverbial tale of «the record fish that got away,» a recurring phrase in almost every chapter of this outstanding and important book is «purchased by a foreigner» or «sold to a buyer from abroad» (Det ble solgt ut av landet). The American art critic Clement Greenberg’s «umbilical cord of gold» coined to describe the artistic avantgarde’s tenuous dependence on capital, takes on a special poignancy here. Indeed, works of art are major cultural patrimony. Yet, they are also commodities to be bought and sold, whose ownership often fluctuates, and whose value is constantly dictated by the whims of the market.

Messel’s central focus is the brief, exceptional interlude from 1917–1929, when Norway’s alleged inferiority, its peripheral position as a cultural backwater and marginal underdog in artistic, literary and political affairs suddenly was reversed. In fact, Norway experienced a steady economic boom almost from its modern inception in 1905, until the sudden bust around 1920, which thereby anticipated the great financial collapse of 1929. The term «jobbetiden» characterizes the amazing growth and record profits of Norwegian ship owners, in particular, as well as the wealthy industrialists across a range of business sectors, in addition to the bankers, financiers and insurance brokers who helped to fuel their success. Norwegian neutrality during WWI played a vital role in sparking this sudden, and sadly, far-too-brief era of prosperity, since its merchant marine and sizeable shipping fleet were used by both sides to convey much needed shipments.

The most prominent of these Norwegian maecenae (Jørgen Breder Stang and Tryggve Sagen) used their staggering wealth to purchase art, in particular, early modern and modern French paintings. Fortunately, they had a special liaison in Paris, Walther Halvo-
sen (1887–1970), a cosmopolitan Norwegian, fluent in French, with an impressive network of artistic, diplomatic and business connections, as well as the financial savvy, swagger and fortitude to orchestrate such business deals and thereby to satisfy their insatiable appetite for art. Halvorsen had studied with Matisse, and they remained on friendly terms, after he abandoned his artistic career, choosing instead, to work as a journalist/art critic, broker/dealer and exhibition organizer. He also was close to Renoir. Halvorsen plays a central role in almost every chapter, and he seems to have had a hand in almost every major transaction. Jens P. Thiis, the art historian and pioneering museum director, also has a prominent role. In 1908 he became the first director of Norway’s National Gallery, a position held until 1941.1 His relationship with Halvorsen was extremely complex, Messel argues, and it was often strained due to their competing interests and different temperaments.

Thiis’s ambitious vision and bold acquisitions were made possible only by the founding of the Friends of the National Gallery (Nasjonalgalleriets Venner) in 1917. It was modelled after similar private support groups that had been established in Sweden and Denmark. Eventually, they collaborated on a series of thematic exhibitions. This book’s publication coincided with the centennial of the Friends, who also partly supported it. One of this book’s primary aims is to trace their history as well as that of the related splinter group, The Norwegian Society for French Art (Foreningen Fransk Kunst), established in 1918. It was mostly comprised of the same elite members as the Friends, although by the time of its last major exhibition in 1928, it was essentially «dormant,» or «defunct in practice,» according to Messel. It was not formally dissolved until 1949.2

Messel is ideally suited for the task, since a crucial lesson to be learned from his long and very distinguished career—and there are many such lessons—is the importance of France for modern Norwegian art history, in addition to the decidedly long and influential German influence. This was not a simple choice of France over Germany, he claims, since both were important. Messel has argued that the sudden shift towards France was actually much more complex, subtle, and nuanced than a mere rejection or realignment of German influence. Many German artists, critics and art historians themselves had looked to France and embraced French artistic principles. Furthermore, he admits that many Norwegian artists active in Düsseldorf had also studied in Paris. According to Messel, in France art was mobilized in the service of the nation in a way that it had never been in Germany. The major reasons for this shift and the growing Francophilia in Scandinavia, he argues, were the Dano-Prussian (1864) and Franco-Prussian wars of the nineteenth century. It was only after the battle of Sedan in 1870 that allegiances became much less blurred. It marked a decisive cultural turning-point, he contends. Norwegian art historians and critics, artists and collectors, increasingly adopted an ideological position which was decidedly anti-German and pro-French. Messel astutely recognizes that no art exhibition is ever politically neutral. This sentiment extended to many of their Nordic counterparts as well. Messel has previously argued, as a small nation on the European periphery, Norway feared the quickly expanding imperialism of Germany and became infatuated with republican France—the home of Rousseau and modern democracy. When the Norwegians adopted the side of the French this was because the German-French conflict was regarded as something much more serious than a conflict over neighboring borders. From the French/Nordic perspective the conflict was seen as an ideological struggle between a rigid monarchical principle and one that was openly democratic.3

In short, Francophilia became a major critical impulse in modern Norwegian cultural affairs.4 Messel identifies Christopher Bruun and Ernst Sars as two early advocates for this
position. It is also significant to recall that Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Ludvig Karsten died in Paris. Jonas and Thomasine Lie lived there for almost two decades, and the Norwegian poet Olaf Bull tutored James Joyce in Norwegian while he lived there. Christian Krohg lived and taught in Paris for extended periods until returning home in 1909 to assume a professorship at the newly established Academy of Art. Frits Thaulow had settled permanently in France in 1892. Although never discussed by Messel, the young Norwegian artist Alfred Hauge (1876–1901) spent considerable time in France, where he befriended Cézanne, who painted his portrait in 1899.5

A secure provenance means that there is an unbroken, clear and fully documented line of ownership for a work of art. This provides a reasonable degree of certainty regarding its authenticity. Messel’s chapters, which read almost like case studies, demonstrate, however, that ownership often was a very complex issue. Possession or being deposited on long-term loan did not always mean ownership. Messel grants that it was not uncommon for Halvorsen to repurchase a painting, if a former buyer suddenly experienced financial hardship. Joint ownership with other dealers (such as Paul Rosenberg) also was common and further complicates the issue.

This book is a masterful example of art historical provenance and connoisseurship. It also suggests an important new perspective for the recent public debate about the future of Norway’s old Nasjonalgalleri and its collection, the fate of the present building on Universitetsgata, and its relationship to the new combined National Museum currently nearing completion at the old Vestbanen. In other words, the fierce polemic and heated controversies during the 1920s, as well as the role of foreign impulses for a Norwegian national art do not appear to be so unusual. Given the dire economic conditions at that time, it now seems all the more remarkable that the museum’s north wing was even finished in 1924.

Messel’s analysis also extends beyond Norway to Danish and Swedish museums and private collectors. Halvorsen had very close ties to Richard Bergh, the Swedish painter and museum director, as well as the Swedish collectors Conrad Pineus and Klas Fahreus. In other words, Halvorsen actively widened his market whenever his regular Norwegian buyers hesitated or showed little interest in a particular work. Halvorsen also purchased a surprising amount of art for himself, as did Thiis.

It is not surprising that Halvorsen wrote one of the most optimistic and programmatic statements on the importance of France for modern Norwegian art. His essay, «Art and the Young Artists,» published in Kunst og Kultur (1911), boldly claimed,

It appears that there is no other place outside of France which now paints as well as the artists in Norway. And there is nothing we prize more than our art. … The great art centers are steadily shifting northward. Indeed, there is nothing preventing that at some point in the near future, artists from other nations will flock to Norway in order to experience our art and to learn from it.6

Halvorsen remains a fascinating, controversial and enigmatic figure, and he still warrants a definitive monograph. Messel’s discussion, which is the most thorough to date, hopefully, will spark further archival research. Unfortunately, Messel notes that the bulk of Halvorsen’s correspondence was destroyed before his death in 1972.

The book’s graphic design and layout by Beate Syversen is striking. It includes a rich selection of color along with black and white images, as well as an index of names, bibliography, scholarly footnotes, and a list of illustrations. Choice quotations by noted contemporary art critics discussed in the text are also highlighted on separate pages which help to break up
the individual chapters. Different page colors are also used to separate and highlight certain sections. Halvorsen’s important essay, «The Artist’s Association Exhibition of French Art in 1917,» is reprinted as an appendix.

The English edition mostly follows the original Norwegian volume. The translations by Arlyne Moi (of the main text), and Chris Saunders (of the appendix) are largely adequate. The author has made minor changes to the text, footnotes and bibliography, mostly to incorporate new scholarship and historical circumstances or to add brief supplementary details. Some minor errors and occasional typos, however, exist in the English version.7

Furthermore, in the Norwegian edition, Børre Haugstad’s recent publication on this very same topic receives considerable scrutiny.8 Messel painstakingly identifies his many faulty interpretations, groundless speculations, weak arguments, and egregious errors. The omission of Haugstad from the bibliography and footnotes of the English edition therefore, is surprising, as is his absence from the running text.

Such quibbles aside, the scope and depth of Messel’s archival research is impressive. He has consulted board minutes, inventories, letters, sales ledgers, grant applications, contemporary critical reviews, documentary photographs, in addition to the standard oeuvre and exhibition catalogs. Throughout his narrative he strives to state the facts and to set the record straight. He doesn’t shy away from acknowledging where the trail of evidence occasionally has run cold. The present whereabouts of a surprising number of the works discussed here remains uncertain. Messel also corrects numerous omissions and errors in the standard references. His erudition, vast knowledge, scrupulous detective work, engaging tone, and critical intelligence clearly are evident throughout. His argument is cogent, vigorous, and deeply insightful—rich in details and anecdotes, but, never overwhelmed by them. Each chapter almost stands alone as a self-contained, independent essay or case study. Furthermore, his vast knowledge of the history of Norwegian art history, the complex rhetorical strategies and ideological positions of the discipline’s key founders (Lorentz Dietrichson, Andreas Aubert, Jens P. Thiis, Julius Lange) is always apparent. This is an exceedingly complex and fascinating story. It provides a valuable contribution to modern Scandinavian art history, and it should be consulted by anyone interested in modern French art, as well as the intrigues of the modern art market.

Notes
1 Thiis assumed the directorship of the gallery in 1908, although Messel states 1909 in both editions.
2 In the Norwegian edition, footnote 548 states the exact opposite, «Formelt var ikke foreningen oppøist i 1949.»
4 For the broader intellectual context of this see Torleiv Kronen, De Store Årene 1880–1900. Fransk innflytelse på norsk åndsliv (Oslo: Dreyer, 1982). In Messel’s analysis Millet’s position is very minor, but he was also greatly respected in Norway at this time. See Andreas Aubert, Jean-Francois Millet, 1814–1875. Det sidste aarhundredes mest afholdte maler (Kristiania: Gyldendal, 1906).
5 For more details of his work in France and relationship to Cézanne, see the recollections of Hauge’s childhood friend, Harry Fett, «Alfred Hauge-en nittiårenes kunstnerskjebne fortalt i brev til venner,» Kunst og Kultur 41 nr. 2 (1958), 85–104.
Walther Halvorsen, «Kunst og unge kunstnere,» Kunst og Kultur 1 (1910–1911), 265. [De vidner om, at der intet sted utenfor Frankrig nu males saa godt som i Norge. Og dog er det intet, vi underskatter mere end vor kunst. De store kunstcentrer flytter sig nedover eftersom tiden skrider. Det er intet til hinder for, at engang i fremtiden andre landes kunstnere skal komme til Norge for at se vor kunst og lære av den.]

For instance, Anders Zorn was the owner of the Manet, and not Anders Ørvig (p. 212), Julias Elias was an art collector, not a dealer (p. 211). Walther Annenberg should be Walter Annenberg (p. 204), rib should be rob (250), absinth should be absinthe (p. 212), Maruice should be Maurice (p. 294), Edouard Manet should be Édouard Manet, and Cezanne should be Cézanne, etc.