

The history of the Whitney Museum is a riveting drama that begins with Gertrude, the oldest daughter of the heir to the biggest American family fortune of the day--the Vanderbilts. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, a sculptor and art lover, opened the Whitney Studio in 1914 on Eighth Street in lower New York City. She then funded and ran the institution that evolved into the Whitney Museum of American Art until her death in 1942. When she died, she passed the reins on to her daughter Flora Whitney Miller, who bequeathed it to Flora Miller Biddle, the author of this book. Biddle's own daughter Fiona, currently a museum trustee, represents the fourth generation of Whitney women to influence the direction of what has become one of the world's most prominent art institutions. The Whitney women, through their roles variously as administrators, trustees, collectors, and artists, have shaped the structure and focus of the museum, a function played primarily by men at other museums. This mixture of memoir and history takes readers through the whirlwind of changes that the museum has undergone throughout its history, offering glimpses into a tumultuous arena in which the changing values of the art world and academia are constantly at play. Biddle writes that the Whitney has been, in turn, mother, sister, child, and lover. Its given me a richer life than I could possibly have imagined for myself, and its given me more pain, too--plus a true education. And she imparts some of that knowledge to readers here. --A.C. Smith

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