

French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor



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Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *General Séré de Rivières*, 1881–1882

Artist	Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864–1901)
Title	<i>General Séré de Rivières</i>
Object Date	1881–1882
Alternate and Variant Titles	<i>Le Général Séré de Rivières</i>
Medium	Watercolor over pencil on paper
Dimensions (Unframed)	10 x 7 in. (25.4 x 17.78 cm)
Inscription	Inscribed lower right: FROM A PHOTO
Credit Line	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Gift of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch, 2015.13.26

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When Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec painted this modest watercolor portrait, he was still a teenager living with his mother and had only just announced his intention to become a professional artist.¹ It would be another few months before he passed his *baccalauréat*, exhibited his work publicly, and asserted some independence by renting a studio in Paris.² The subject matter is typical of his early period. Before entering Léon Bonnat's (1833–1922) atelier in April 1882, Toulouse-Lautrec painted equestrian and maritime scenes almost exclusively. As he acknowledged to a friend who had expressed interest in seeing his pictures: "You have a choice between horses and sailors. The former are better."³ These youthful preferences reflected the artist's upbringing among the provincial aristocracy. From infancy, Toulouse-Lautrec had been surrounded by horses and horse enthusiasts. His father rode and hunted daily, taught his son to ride at age seven,⁴ and enjoyed taking his family to the Grand Prix in Chantilly, France's premier thoroughbred race. It was only natural, therefore, that Toulouse-Lautrec would gravitate toward hippic themes as a burgeoning artist.



Fig. 1. René Princeteau, *Portrait of George Washington*, 1875, oil on canvas, 145 3/4 x 118 in. (370 x 300 cm), Residence of the US Ambassador to France and Monaco, Paris; repro. in Robert and Manuel Schmit, *René Princeteau 1843–1914: "Chevaux et Cavaliers" Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Éditions Galerie Schmit, 1994), 52

To help himself master the horse's form and movement, Toulouse-Lautrec studied the work of several contemporary animal painters, especially his father's friend René Princeteau (ca. 1844–1914), who specialized in sporting pictures and hunting scenes. Toulouse-Lautrec first mentions Princeteau in a letter from December 1875. While he and his mother were in Paris for the holiday season, they saw Princeteau's equestrian portrait of George Washington (Fig. 1). Painted in honor of the American Centennial, it was displayed at a number of Parisian venues, including the Musée de Cluny, before crossing the Atlantic and appearing at the Philadelphia world's fair.⁵ In his letter, Toulouse-Lautrec states that he was impressed by its size and glad to have previewed the work before it traveled to the United States. In another piece of correspondence from April 17, 1878, Toulouse-Lautrec relates how he watched his Uncle Odon pose on horseback for a commissioned portrait by Princeteau.⁶ Soon after, Toulouse-Lautrec began visiting Princeteau's atelier regularly and replicating his equine compositions. As Princeteau later recalled, "At the age of

fourteen, in 1879, he copied my sketches. He copied my mounted sentry so well that it gave me the shivers."⁷ Princeteau's kind tutelage and positive feedback buoyed the young artist's confidence and ultimately emboldened him to pursue art full-time.⁸

This painting builds on the skills and techniques that Toulouse-Lautrec had absorbed from Princeteau. It depicts General Raymond-Adolphe Séré de Rivières (1815–1895), a decorated military engineer and distant relative of the artist. Toulouse-Lautrec's genealogical tree was quite unusual due to repeated instances of intermarriage among his immediate ancestors. Not only were his parents first cousins, but also his mother's brother married his father's sister. As a result, Toulouse-Lautrec was connected to General Séré de Rivières on both sides of his family. Technically speaking, they were second cousins twice removed—that is, two generations apart.⁹ However, Toulouse-Lautrec probably regarded the general as something akin to a great-uncle, for he addressed the general's eldest son, Georges Séré de Rivières (1849–1930), as "Oncle Georges" (Uncle Georges) in both writings and conversation. Georges¹⁰ and Toulouse-Lautrec remained close until the artist's death. They dined together periodically,¹¹ and Toulouse-Lautrec brought Georges to gatherings hosted in the mid-1890s by socialite Misia Godebska, whose husband Thadée Natanson had founded the art and literary magazine *La Revue blanche*.¹² Later in the same decade, when Toulouse-Lautrec was on the brink of a mental breakdown, he impulsively asked Georges for his daughter's hand in marriage. Georges politely refused but continued to show up for the struggling artist, visiting him when he entered a mental health facility and handling his money when he grew paranoid about family members conspiring to seize his assets.¹³ When Toulouse-Lautrec died prematurely, Georges told a journalist: "Poor Lautrec, I did everything I could to cure him of his fatal addiction; alcoholism is a terrible disease."¹⁴ The extent of Toulouse-Lautrec's relationship with Georges's father is uncertain, but clearly the Séré de Rivières clan played an important and lasting role in his life.



Fig. 2. François-Henri-Alexandre Lafond, *Portrait of General Raymond-Adolphe Séré de Rivières*, 1882, oil on canvas, 21 5/16 x 25 13/16 in. (54.2 x 65.5 cm), Musée de l'Armée, Paris, Inv. 9529. © Paris-Musée de l'Armée, Dist. Grand Palais-RMN / Thierry Ollivier

The Nelson-Atkins picture portrays General Séré de Rivières wearing his dress uniform and seated atop a chestnut horse. His proud pose matches that of his steed. Like Toulouse-Lautrec, the general was descended from nobility and born in Albi, in the south of France.¹⁵ After studying at the prestigious École polytechnique in Palaiseau, he joined the military and participated in the 1841 conquest of Algeria. Over the next three decades, he oversaw engineering projects in Metz, Toulon, Perpignan, Castres, Carcassonne, Orléans, Paris, Nice, and Lyon, rising through the military hierarchy in the process. In October 1870, three months into the Franco-Prussian War, Séré de Rivières was promoted to brigadier general and, shortly thereafter, given a leadership position in the Eastern Army. During the Paris Commune, he assumed control of the 2nd Engineer Corps of the Versailles Army and helped retake several strategically important fortifications from the *fédérés*. After the war, General Séré de Rivières led the effort to revamp France's defense system, which their recent defeat had proven to be woefully outdated. He spearheaded the construction of 166 major forts, forty-three smaller ones, and roughly 250 batteries between 1874 and 1885. During this building frenzy the general's

likeness was painted not only by Toulouse-Lautrec but also by the more established portraitist François-Henri-Alexandre Lafond (1815–1901) (Fig. 2).¹⁶ Bespectacled, serious, and awash with medals, Séré de Rivières commands our respect in the portrait by Lafond. His most prominent decorations are those of the Legion of Honor and the Military Order of Savoy, testaments to his years of distinguished service as an army engineer. Toulouse-Lautrec omitted these marks of distinction and depicted his sitter at a further remove, producing a quieter image of the illustrious general.



Fig. 3. Eugène Le Beurriée, *Portrait of General Raymond-Adolphe Séré de Rivières*, 1872, albumin print, 3 3/8 x 2 3/16 in. (8.5 x 5.6 cm), Musée de l'Armée, Paris, Inv. 3639. © Paris-Musée de l'Armée, Dist. Grand Palais-RMN / Pascal Segrette

The portrait by Lafond was probably commissioned by Séré de Rivières, but the one by Toulouse-Lautrec was not. As Richard Brettell observed, someone of the general's stature would not have sat for an untried artist like Toulouse-Lautrec, family connections notwithstanding.¹⁷ Rather, Toulouse-Lautrec based his

watercolor on a photograph of Séré de Rivières, as indicated by the all-caps inscription in the right foreground stating, "FROM A PHOTO." It is not clear who added these words or when. They were present by 1954 because when the Nelson-Atkins portrait was exhibited that year at the Galerie des Ponchettes in Nice, the accompanying catalogue alluded to it.¹⁸ Brettell argued emphatically that the inscription was "most certainly not from the hand of the artist" since it was written in a foreign tongue.¹⁹ Yet Toulouse-Lautrec was actually quite adept at English. His mother was an Anglophile who employed English housekeepers and recruited an Irish tutor named Miss Braine to give her son private English lessons, supplementing those he was already receiving at school. By 1872, the artist was competent enough to translate a chapter from an English book on falconry for his father; two years later he was first in his class in English; and by 1876 he was writing entire letters and essays in English.²⁰ Thus, it is conceivable that a teenage Toulouse-Lautrec could have inscribed his portrait of General Séré de Rivières in English, perhaps simply on a whim.

Toulouse-Lautrec's source photograph has yet to be located.²¹ Only a few photos of General Séré de Rivières are known, and the majority are half-length images of him in uniform or civilian attire. Eugène Le Beurriée's (1815–1895) albumen print of the general at age fifty-seven offers a representative example (Fig. 3).²² It is probable that the elusive source photograph was taken by Louis-Jean Delton (1807–1891) or his son Louis-Jean Delton Jr. (1850–1901), who succeeded him in business. One of the leading equestrian photographers of his age, the elder Delton opened a studio in the Bois de Boulogne in 1861 after retiring from the military. He was a passionate horseman and member of the elite Jockey Club de Paris, and his clients often hailed from the upper echelons of European society.²³ Many of Delton's surviving photographs are similar in format to the Nelson-Atkins picture, such as the J. Paul Getty Museum's photo of an unidentified soldier on horseback (Fig. 4). Delton may have met Séré de Rivières through their overlapping social circles or tenures in the military. He was certainly known to the general's extended family, for he photographed Toulouse-Lautrec's father on horseback. The artist also painted a watercolor based on that black-and-white photo, enlivening its composition and form with muted colors, just as he would later do for his portrait of the general.²⁴ In all likelihood, the Delton photograph that inspired the Kansas City picture

remains in private hands and, with luck, may one day surface.



Fig. 4. Louis-Jean Delton, *Unidentified French Soldier on Horseback*, 1870s, albumen print, 5 3/4 x 3 15/16 in. (14.6 x 10 cm), J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XD.879.356

When Wildenstein acquired and exhibited Toulouse-Lautrec's portrait of General Séré de Rivières at its New York branch in 1956, it caught the attention of art historian Anita Brookner. Though disappointed overall by the "rather haphazard" selection of works on view, she was impressed by the Toulouse-Lautrec watercolor, writing: "The nineteenth-century section was frankly poor, with the exception of a very early Toulouse-Lautrec, a portrait of Général Séré de Rivières on horseback rather mystifyingly inscribed *From a photo*. Taut and delicate, it was full of that sense of character that was to become so brilliant and morbid in the artist's later years."²⁵ Such praise would surely have pleased the teenage artist, who had spent the previous years honing his talents as an equestrian painter and was only just embarking on his professional career.

Notes

1. Toulouse-Lautrec declared his professional ambitions in a letter to his uncle, Charles de Toulouse-Lautrec, in May 1881. See Herbert D. Schimmel, ed., *The Letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 49.
2. Toulouse-Lautrec passed his exams in November 1881, exhibited his work for the first time in Pau from January to March 1883, and rented a Parisian studio in October 1883. See Julia Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 122–23, 151, 157–58.
3. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec to Etienne Devismes, January 1879, in Schimmel, *Letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, 28. The letters in Schimmel's volume were translated "by divers hands."
4. Toulouse-Lautrec's riding days were short lived, however. He had to forgo this hobby during adolescence due to ongoing health problems related to a genetic disorder. See Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec*, 116. The diagnosis of Toulouse-Lautrec's disorder remains controversial. Many scholars think he suffered from a type of dwarfism known as pycnodysostosis, which is an autosomal recessive condition associated with bone fragility, but others disagree. For opposing opinions, see Pierre Maroteaux and Maurice Lamy, "The Malady of Toulouse-Lautrec, 1965," in Gale B. Murray, ed., *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1992), 54–57; and Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec*, 71.
5. The painting was moved from Princeteau's atelier to the Musée de Cluny on January 15, 1876. It subsequently adorned the home of American expatriate Dr. Thomas W. Evans, who hosted a fête on February 24, 1876, to celebrate the 144th anniversary of Washington's birth. See "À travers Paris," *Le Figaro* (January 12, 1876); and "Paris Local," *The American Register* 8, no. 412 (February 26, 1876): 5. At the Philadelphia exhibition, the picture was titled *17th of October, 1781, Washington* in reference to the British surrender at Yorktown, when General Charles Cornwallis capitulated to Washington. See *International Exhibition, 1876: Official Catalogue; Department of Art*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: John R. Nagle, 1876), p. 38, no. 193b.
6. For both letters, see Schimmel, *Letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, 14, 20. Odon de Toulouse-Lautrec (1842–1937) was the younger brother of the artist's father.
7. René Princeteau, "Reminiscence of Lautrec as a Youth, ca. 1910–1913," in Murray, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Retrospective*, 57.
8. Toulouse-Lautrec's correspondence from this period often mentions Princeteau's opinion of his work. A letter from May 1881 states: "I get as inflated as a Gambetta balloon when I think of the compliments I've received on [my palette]. All joking aside, I was flabbergasted. Princeteau was ecstatic." Another dated April 17, 1882 notes: "Princeteau is still at the hotel. He is so charming to me and encouraging." See Schimmel, *Letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, 49, 64.
9. Henri Ortholan, *Le général Séré de Rivières: Le Vauban de la Revanche* (Paris: Bernard Giovanangeli, 2003), 38–39.
10. From this point forward, I refer to Georges Séré de Rivières solely by his first name to avoid confusion with his father.
11. For example, on March 1, 1877, Toulouse-Lautrec informed his grandmother: "Mama and I had dinner at my Uncle de Rivières' house." Georges's sister, Hélène (1858–1942), was also in attendance. In another letter dated July 1892, Toulouse-Lautrec told his mother of plans to lunch with Georges and a woman named Suzanne Gonthier. Schimmel, *Letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, 19, 179.

12. Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec*, 332–35.
13. Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec*, 448, 479. Following weeks of erratic behavior, Toulouse-Lautrec entered a private sanatorium in Neuilly-sur-Seine run by Dr. René Semelaigne.
14. Fernand Hauser, “Le bon juge de Paris: Chez le Président Séré de Rivières,” *La Presse*, no. 4022 (June 4, 1903): unpaginated. “Ce pauvre Lautrec, j’ai fait tout ce que j’ai peu pour le guérir de sa fatale passion; l’alcoolisme est une terrible maladie.” Translation by Brigid M. Boyle.
15. For the following biographical summary, see Henri Ortholan, “La vie et la carrière du général Raymond-Adolphe Séré de Rivières,” in *Actes du colloque Séré de Rivières: Épinal 14–15–16 septembre 1995* (Paris: Association Vauban, 1999), 29–37; Guy Le Hallé, *Le Système Séré de Rivières, ou le témoignage des pierres (la France et Verdun)* (Louviers: Ysec, 2001), 14–16; and Jean-Denis G. G. Lepage, *The Fortifications of Paris: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 211–12.
16. Little known today, Lafond studied under Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) and specialized in portraits, mythological scenes, and religious paintings. He served as director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Limoges from 1868 to 1874. See “Nécrologie,” *Le Monde artiste*, no. 28 (July 14, 1901): 449.
17. Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro, *Manet to Matisse: Impressionist Masters from the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection*, exh. cat. (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007), 132.
18. See *Œuvre Graphique de Toulouse-Lautrec*, exh. cat. (Nice: Galerie des Ponchettes, 1954), unpaginated.
19. Brettell and Pissarro, *Manet to Matisse*, 132.
20. For Toulouse-Lautrec’s English-language skills, see Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec*, 33, 53, 57, 62, 64, 69, and 384.
21. Neither the artist’s namesake museum nor the general’s descendants in Albi possess any photographs of Séré de Rivières sitting astride a horse. My thanks to Bérangère Tachenne, Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, and Gérard Alquier, Association Albi Patrimoine, for this information. Curators at the Musée de l’Armée in Paris checked their extensive photographic holdings for equestrian images of the general but found none. Alain Monferrand, President of the Association Vauban, an organization dedicated to the study of French military fortifications, kindly contacted several scholars who participated in a 1995 colloquium on General Séré de Rivières, but no one knew of an equestrian photograph that Toulouse-Lautrec could have used for reference.
22. For additional photographs of the general, including a full-length studio portrait, see Le Hallé, *Le Système Séré de Rivières*, 14; and Ortholan, *Le général Séré de Rivières*, unpaginated plates.
23. For Delton’s life and career, see Nicolas Chaudin, *Le studio Delton: Miroir du temps des équipages*, exh. cat. (Paris: Actes Sud, 2014), 15–44.
24. For Delton’s photo and the watercolor it inspired, see *Toulouse-Lautrec*, exh. cat. (Bristol: South Bank Centre, 1991), 78–79, cat. 3. The latter is inscribed “d’après photo Delton” (after Delton photo).
25. Anita Brookner, “Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions: Drawings at Messrs Wildenstein,” *Burlington Magazine* 98, no. 640 (July 1956): 249.

Documentation

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Provenance

Possibly General Raymond-Adolphe Séré de Rivières (1815–1895), by 1895 [1];

By descent to his granddaughter, Aline Séré de Rivières (1879–1972), Nice, by May 1955;

Purchased from Séré de Rivières by Wildenstein and Co., New York, May 1955–1960 [2];

Purchased from Wildenstein by James W. Johnson (d. 1970), Cannes, 1960–December 1, 1970 [3];

Purchased at his posthumous sale, *Impressionist and Modern Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture*, Christie, Manson, and Woods, London, December 1, 1970, lot 39, as *Le Général Séré de Rivières à cheval*, by Waterloo Fine Art, London, 1970 [4];

Mrs. M. J. Jacobs, by March 30, 1977 [5];

With an anonymous dealer, Tokyo, by November 14, 1990 [6];

Purchased from this dealer at *Impressionist and Modern Drawings and Watercolors*, Sotheby's, New York, November 14, 1990, lot 101, through Susan L. Brody and Associates, Inc., New York, by Marion (née Helzberg, 1931–2013) and Henry (1922–2019) Bloch, Shawnee Mission, KS, 1990–June 15, 2015;

Their gift to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 2015.

Notes

[1] General Raymond-Adolphe Séré de Rivières (1815–1895) was Toulouse-Lautrec's second cousin twice removed. See Henri Ortholan, *Le général Séré de Rivières: Le Vauban de la Revanche* (Paris: Bernard Giovanangeli, 2003), 38–39.

[2] For these ownership dates, see email from Joseph Baillio, Wildenstein and Co., to MacKenzie Mallon, NAMA, May 21, 2015, NAMA curatorial files.

[3] The buyer was probably James Wood Johnson (1907–1970) of Fort Lauderdale. Johnson married a Frenchwoman, Camille Leboutet (1896–1983), so he often spent time in France.

[4] Waterloo Fine Art operated out of Britannia Hotel (today the Biltmore Mayfair) in Grosvenor Square. It seems to have been active only during the 1970s.

[5] Mrs. M. J. Jacobs offered *General Séré de Rivières* at auction in 1977, but it failed to sell. See *Important Impressionist and Modern Drawings and Watercolours* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, March 30, 1977), unpaginated, lot 103. The auctioneer's book does not record Jacobs's full name or city of residence, nor does it indicate whether *General Séré de Rivières* was returned to Jacobs after the auction or purchased post-sale. See email from Lucy Economakis, Sotheby's, to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, December 12, 2023, NAMA curatorial files.

[6] See email from Lucy Economakis, Sotheby's, to Brigid M. Boyle, NAMA, December 12, 2023, NAMA curatorial files.

Exhibitions

Œuvre Graphique de Toulouse-Lautrec, Galerie des Ponchettes, Nice, January 30–March 15, 1954, no. 299, as *Le Général Raymond Séré de Rivières à cheval*.

The Art of Drawing: XVIth to XIXth Centuries, Wildenstein and Co., London, May 9–June 16, 1956, no. 103, as *General Séré de Rivières on Horseback*.

Manet to Matisse: Impressionist Masters from the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, June 9–September 9, 2007, no. 25, as *General Séré de Rivières (Le Général Séré de Rivières)*.

Painters and Paper: Bloch Works on Paper, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, February 20, 2017–March 11, 2018, no cat.

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The Art of Drawing: XVIth to XIXth Centuries, exh. cat. (London: Wildenstein, 1956), 26, as *General Séré de Rivières on Horseback*.

Anita Brookner, "Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions: Drawings at Messrs Wildenstein," *Burlington Magazine* 98, no. 640 (July 1956): 249, 251, (repro.), as *General Séré de Rivières*.

Impressionist and Modern Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture (London: Christie, Manson, and Woods,

December 1, 1970), 24, (repro.), as *Le Général Séré de Rivières à cheval*.

M. G. Dortu, *Toulouse-Lautrec et son œuvre* (New York: Collectors Editions, 1971), no. A.193, pp. 3:496–97, (repro.), as *Le Général Séré de Rivières*.

Art Prices Current: A Record of Sale Prices at the Principal London, Continental, and American Auction Rooms, vol. 48, *August 1970 to July 1971* (Folkestone, England: Wm. Dawsons and Sons, 1973), A83, as *Le General Sere de Rivieres a [sic] cheval*.

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Henri Ortholan, *Le général Séré de Rivières: Le Vauban de la Revanche* (Paris: Bernard Giovanangeli, 2003), 39, 39n31.

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Museum of Art, 2007), 12, 132–33, 161, (repro.), as *General Séré de Rivières (Le Général Séré de Rivières)*.

Catherine Futter et al., *Bloch Galleries: Highlights from the Collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art* (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2016), 116, (repro.), as *General Séré de Rivières*.

Victoria Stapley-Brown, "Nelson-Atkins Museum's new European art galleries come with a 'love story,'" *Art Newspaper* (March 10, 2017): <http://theartnewspaper.com/news/museums/nelson-atkins-museum-s-new-european-art-galleries-come-with-a-love-story/>

Harry Bellet, "Don du ciel pour le Musée Nelson-Atkins," *Le Monde* (March 13, 2017): http://www.lemonde.fr/arts/article/2017/03/13/don-du-ciel-pour-le-musee-nelson-atkins_5093543_1655012.html.

Menachem Wecker, "Jewish Philanthropist Establishes Kansas City as Cultural Mecca," *The Forward* (March 14, 2017): <http://forward.com/culture/365264/jewish-philanthropist-establishes-kansas-city-as-cultural-mecca/> [repr., in Menachem Wecker, "Kansas City Collection Is A Chip Off the Old Bloch," *Forward* (March 17, 2017): 20–22].

Louise Nicholson, "How Kansas City got its magnificent museum," *Apollo: The International Art Magazine* (April 7, 2017): <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/how-kansas-city-got-its-magnificent-museum/>.
