American Paintings from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery An Institutional History in Pictures

Daniel A. Siedell
Curator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

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An Institutional History in Pictures

Introduction

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is pleased to present American Paintings from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery: An Institutional History in Pictures, an exhibition of more than forty-nine paintings that celebrates an important part of the Gallery’s considerable permanent collection, which, for over one-hundred years, has come to define its identity and mission as an art museum. Boasting a permanent collection of nearly 13,000 objects, the Sheldon Art Gallery has sought to present the historical development and aesthetic diversity of 19th and 20th-century American art in various media.

But the Sheldon’s permanent collection does not only document the history of American art, it reveals the history of the Sheldon Art Gallery as a collecting institution. Since the 1970s, historians, critics, and theorists have directed a considerable amount of attention toward the function of art museums in U.S. culture. Despite the diversity of these views, a common observation has emerged. Far from being a neutral space where works of art are allowed to “speak,” art museums actively shape how art communicates to the viewer. Far from being a passive space, the art museum is a proactive space, aggressively shaping our experience of the art it presents, from what art is on view and how works of art are exhibited in relation to others, to the didactic text on the walls.

Art museums with active permanent collections, then, participate in several histories. They participate in documenting and constructing histories of art. But they also are documenting and constructing their own histories as institutions. Works of art in permanent collections not only participate in histories of art, but also in histories of the institution that acquired them. They tell not only of an artist who made them, but of a collector or curator who purchased them or a patron who donated them. As important as the permanent collection is, an art museum is not merely the sum total of the art it cares for and exhibits. It includes the people who acquire it, exhibit it, interpret it; in short, invest their passion in the institution.

This exhibition is not an art historical survey of American painting from the Sheldon Art Gallery. Rather, it is intended to tell us something about the Sheldon Art Gallery as an institution, an institution that for more than one-hundred years has attracted and relied on the energy and passion of artists, collectors, donors, directors, curators, university administrators, board members, and support group participants. All of the paintings on exhibit tell us something about the development of the Museum. We should ask them, “Why are you here?”

As Janice Driesbach became the sixth director in the history of the collection and with facilities renovations and additions looming on the horizon, the Sheldon Art Gallery is entering an important moment in its distinguished history. In telling us what the Sheldon Art Gallery was as a community of staff, supporters, and other participants, American Paintings from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery: An Institutional History in Pictures will participate in telling us who we can become. What will the pictures acquired during the next few decades tell us about the Sheldon Art Gallery and those individuals involved in it? Why will they be there? The only thing we can be sure of is that they will have stories to tell (fig. 1).

fig. 1, Installation view of The Quest for the Absolute: Geometric Abstract to Minimalism from the Permanent Collection, April 18-June 22, 1997
collections. Not only did Frances and her brother Bromley provide funding for the building, which became the Sheldon Art Gallery, Bromley’s wife Olga, who died in 1990, acquired a substantial art collection that has been donated to the art collection, including *Princess X* by Constantin Brancusi.

After nearly thirty years of leadership, accompanied by the able curatorial assistance of Jon Nelson and Donald Doe, Geske retired in 1983 and George W. Neubert succeeded him. A sculptor who had devoted most of his professional life to museums in the San Francisco Bay Area, Neubert continued the legacy of developing close working relationships with artists and private collectors as well as commercial galleries, through which many important gifts have entered the collection and through which some of the more important contemporary artists have been introduced to the art collections.

In the late eighties, with curator Daphne Deeds, Neubert developed a Collector’s Forum group, consisting of many of the NAA’s more active art collectors, which facilitated the acquisition of numerous works of art for the collections. Such works as Joe Andoe’s *Untitled*, 1995 were purchased through the efforts of this collector’s group. Moreover, in 1989, Neubert initiated a collaborative fund-raising effort among the *University*, Nebraska Art Association, and private benefactors to acquire a major painting by Andy Warhol from the artist’s estate, a project that mobilized all of the Sheldon’s supporters.

Neubert’s major contributions in developing the art collections at the Sheldon Art Gallery have focused on the contemporary American sculpture, and particularly, with expanding the outdoor sculpture collection. However, Neubert continued to enhance the major strengths of the collection, including the American Impressionist and early 20th-century modernist areas, as well as strengthening the minimalist and geometric abstraction areas that Geske had begun to build.

Under the assumption that a growing and developing art collection needs occasionally to be pruned to facilitate further growth and the commitment that the collection’s focus on American art needed to be reasserted, a deaccessioning process was initiated in 1996. Over sixty European paintings were deaccessioned, including six from the NAA collection. The funds generated from the University collection were invested in 1999 for two of the more important acquisitions by Neubert, Richard Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park Series, #89.5* (fig. 5) and Morgan Russell’s *Synchrony*. Both acquisitions continued and extended areas of strength already present in the Sheldon’s collection. The Diebenkorn painting not only complemented a number of Diebenkorn works on paper already in the collection, it supplemented an important Bay-Area painting collection, a collection that already boasted such artists as David Park and Wayne Thiebaud, and a large-scale painting of a Bison by Mel Ramos donated by the artist after Neubert’s studio visit in 1999. The acquisition of Russell’s *Synchrony* strengthened an already stellar early 20th-century modern collection, consisting of major works by Joseph Stella, Georgia O’Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, Max Weber, Alfred Maurer, and John Marin, among others.

The funds derived from the NAA’s European paintings provided a unique opportunity to acquire a painting by an important American artist who was not represented: Jackson Pollock, often represented by work in the NAA Annual Exhibitions but never purchased. *Untitled (Ritual Scene)* (fig. 6) provided an opportunity for the NAA to recover its legacy of major acquisitions for the art collection. Through the difficult process of deaccessioning a number of paintings donated by the Woods family, NAA reinvested those funds for the purchase of the Pollock painting, further continuing the legacy of the Woods family for acquiring many of the most important works in the art collections.

The most recent major acquisition manifests the uniqueness of the Sheldon’s permanent collection and those whose efforts have created it. In memory of Thomas C. Woods, III an important member of the Nebraska Art Association and active participant at the Sheldon Art Gallery, Carl Rohman, himself associated with the Nebraska Association and a major patron of the Sheldon, donated *Seascape* by 19th-century painter Francis A. Silva.
Develop an art collection, even during the development of the art collections. In the 20th century, however, Hall established a bequest for the acquisition of American art. But more importantly, Hall established a collection in 1928 with the establishment of the School of Fine Arts, which provided an opportunity for original art to be viewed in the context of studio and art history training. Due to his own status as a respected artist and his subsequent contacts with New York art galleries, Kirsch turned the Annual Exhibition into a major showcase of contemporary American art. Like Robert Henri, Kirsch's own relatively conservative aesthetic did not hinder his ability and willingness to champion contemporary art in all its manifestations. It has been this enthusiasm for art that has become the legacy of those involved in the Sheldon Art Gallery.

The Annual Exhibition consisted of loans from commercial art galleries and all works were considered for purchase, not only for the collection, but also by private collectors and NAA supporters, whose acquisitions might find their way into the art collection and on display. Consisting of a blend of conservative and radical artwork, work that was greeted by patrons with both enthusiasm and outrage, these exhibitions served to educate and challenge the Lincoln arts community annually, building a critical mass of support not only for the developing art collection, but for contemporary American art in general. A cursory glance through the exhibition checklists reveals not only important works of art that entered the collection, but also important works that did not, such as Jackson Pollock paintings, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns’s Neo-Dada paintings, and many others. No director or patron can escape the historical moment, and therefore the art collection reflects not only remarkable foresight, but also demonstrates that it has been very much of its time and subject to contemporary whims and tastes.

Gradually, participants in this emerging critical mass of support that the Annuals created, were not content simply to wait for the next exhibition to see the newest and best contemporary art, and they often traveled to Chicago, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, frequently accompanied by the collection’s director to visit museums and commercial galleries. But it was the connection to the New York art world, with its commercial galleries and important museums such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, that provided models for subsequent activities and decisions for the art collection. Many of the most important works in the Sheldon’s collection entered it under Kirsch’s leadership, including Edward Hopper’s Room in New York and Stuart Davis’s Arch Hotel (fig. 3) both of which were purchased through the Hall bequest after their inclusion in one of the Annual Exhibitions. (Room in New York was purchased in 1936 and Arch Hotel in 1947.) Although discontinued in 1965, shortly after the completion of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, the legacy of the seventy-five Annual Exhibitions is tangibly felt—and observed—to this day. In fact, you can see it on the walls of the Sheldon Art Gallery. In addition to the Hopper and the Davis, the Sheldon’s painting by Willem de Kooning, entitled Woman (fig. 4) was acquired through the 1955 Annual Exhibition with funds from the Hall bequest. What is significant about this acquisition is that it was purchased only one year after it was created. Although it is easy to forget, de Kooning’s reputation in the mid-fifties was far from secure, particularly after his return to the figure in 1950 with his famous “woman” series, of which the Sheldon’s is a part. Certainly, the

Origins of the Collection

This distinguished art collection has its origins in the Haydon Art Club (named after the British artist Benjamin Robert Haydon), which was established in 1888 as a creative community for practicing artists and as a means to facilitate the teaching of art. In fact, the Haydon Art Club is responsible for developing the art collections at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and the Art Department at the University of Nebraska. The founders of the Haydon Art Club, which in 1900 became the Nebraska Art Association (and is one of the oldest independent art support groups in the country), believed strongly that an art collection was necessary for all aspects of art education.

Due in part to economic considerations, the growing art collection developed an American focus, a focus that allowed the Nebraska Art Association and later, the University, to develop a comprehensive collection of, among other areas, American Impressionism and early 20th-century American modernism, both of which still serve as cornerstones of the collection. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln established a collection in 1928 with the death of Frank M. Hall, an important member of the Nebraska Art Association, whose private collection inaugurated the University collection. But more importantly, however, Hall established a bequest for the acquisition of American art that has played an indispensable role in the development of the art collections at the Sheldon Art Gallery and maintaining the focus on American art. And perhaps more importantly, the bequest maintains a commitment to continuing to develop an art collection, even during those times when it has appeared “impractical.”

Moreover, the Hall bequest mandated that two “outside” art experts be brought into Lincoln to view works under consideration. Not only did this provide an opportunity for extraordinarily fine artworks to enter the collection with the imprimatur of influential art critics, it also provided an opportunity for those experts, located usually on the East Coast, to become familiar with the growing collection in Lincoln, Nebraska.

A key component and contributor to the development of the art collection was the so-called “Annual Exhibition,” an exhibition instituted by the Haydon Art Club in 1890. As the University developed an art department in conjunction with the Haydon-NAA, the stewardship of the art collection came under the leadership of the Director of the School of Fine Arts, first with Paul Grumman in 1912, Dwight Kirsch in 1931, Duard Laging in 1951, and Norman Geske in 1953. Both the Art Department and the art collections were located in Morrill Hall, which provided an opportunity for original art to be viewed in the context of studio and art history training. Due to his own status as a respected artist and his subsequent contacts with New York art galleries, Kirsch turned the Annual Exhibition into a major showcase of contemporary American art. Like Robert Henri, Kirsch’s own relatively conservative aesthetic did not hinder his ability and willingness to champion contemporary art in all its manifestations. It has been this enthusiasm for art that has become the legacy of those involved in the Sheldon Art Gallery.

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fig. 3, Stuart Davis, Arch Hotel, 1929
decision to acquire the de Kooning painting was not the “easy” or “comfortable” one, but it has turned out to be a very prescient acquisition, giving the Sheldon an irreplaceable masterpiece, made all the more unique and significant given that it was acquired shortly after it was painted. De Kooning’s Woman ultimately provided the cornerstone for a significant collection of works by Abstract Expressionist artists, including Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Franz Kline, Hans Hofmann, and Robert Motherwell.

After Dwight Kirsch moved from the University of Nebraska to the Des Moines Art Center in 1951, putting his stamp on another midwestern art collection, Duard Laging took over leadership of the University and NAA art collections. In 1953 Norman Geske assumed responsibility for the growing University Galleries collection and continued the legacy that Kirsch and Laging had established. Unlike Kirsch who was a practicing artist, Geske was an art historian, trained at the famous Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Geske codified and expanded the close relationship between the art collections and the NAA and many of its key participants, such as Carl and Lorraine Rohman, Olga Sheldon, and Mrs. Thomas C. Woods, Jr., among many others who served on acquisitions committees for the NAA. In addition, these and other key patrons of the art collection were actively involved in other components of art education. For example, in 1959 the Woods family funded the Nelle Cochrane Woods Building, which was the new home of the Art Department at the University. And Lorraine LeMar Rohman had been instrumental in establishing the docent program at the Sheldon in 1964.

Geske’s own collecting interests consisted of strengthening already important areas, such as the American Impressionist and Early 20th-century American modernists, and developing the Abstract Expressionist collection and, significantly, building a collection of mid-century figurative paintings and sculptures. It was the commitment to the figure that was on display in 1968 when Geske was invited to serve as the American Commissioner to the Venice Biennale. In addition, Geske’s scholarly interest in the enigmatic artist Ralph Blakelock resulted in the development of a strong collection of the artist’s work.

The success of the Annual Exhibitions provided the formula for making other key acquisitions: generate general support for the artist and demonstrate the importance of the work of art to the collection. Mark Rothko’s Yellow Band, 1956 (cover) was lent by the Sidney Janis Gallery to the 71st Annual Exhibition in 1961, and was purchased by Mrs. Thomas C. Woods and given to the art collection in honor of her late husband. The importance of Thomas Woods’s patronage and support for the NAA and the art collection is matched only by the aesthetic and historical importance of Yellow Band itself, which has become one of the most significant works in the Sheldon’s permanent collection, not only because of its aesthetic and historical importance, but because it has come to symbolize the importance of patrons who have been passionately involved in building the art collection.

The acquisition of Leon Polk Smith’s Black-Blue-White Squares in 1982 through funds provided by Olga Sheldon, the Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection, and the Peter Kiewit Foundation, came on the heels of Geske arranging a personal visit by the artist himself to meet the Gallery’s supporters and to discuss his work. The positive experience at the Sheldon led Smith to donate a number of works on paper to the collection a year later. This too has been a legacy of the art collections. Artists, critics, historians, museum directors and curators who have viewed the art collections and interacted with the professional staff and supporters have themselves become advocates and supporters.

fig. 4, Willem de Kooning, Woman, 1954

fig. 5, Richard Diebenkorn, Ocean Park, 1975

Unlike many university art collections, which have sought to provide as broad a survey of art as possible, the Sheldon Art Gallery reflects the directors’ philosophy that aesthetic depth is as important as breadth, that an artwork can’t function in isolation, that it requires an aesthetic context. The collection consists of over sixty Ralph Blakelock paintings, fifteen paintings by Robert Henri, eight Marsden Hartley paintings, and twenty-nine works by Alfred Maurer. In addition, many other artists are represented by more than one work and often in different media, reflecting the institutional view that it is necessary to understand an artist through an analysis of and comparison to her other work, as well as a comparison to the work of her contemporaries.

The University Art Galleries, as the art collections were called, were not immune to the tremendous growth of art museums in the U.S. during the fifties and sixties, and in particular, on university and college campuses. In 1950 Mary Francis Sheldon of Lincoln, Nebraska passed away and her entire estate was set aside for a new building for the art collections. Her brother A. Bromley Sheldon passed away in 1957 and a significant portion of his estate was also set aside for a new building. By the late fifties, it was determined that a separate facility was needed to more adequately store and exhibit the art collections. After numerous trips to New York, Geske approached the internationally respected modernist architect Philip Johnson about the project. Built between 1961-1963, Johnson’s building, based on a smaller model on his property in New Canaan, Connecticut, became the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery. The Sheldons have played a very important role in the history and development of the art
Conclusion

The history and development of the art collections at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden are not merely the sum of the art objects that make up the collections. They also include efforts of a legion of community supporters, university administrators, professional staff, and patrons and collectors who believed that the institution was somehow unique, an institution that tangibly manifested an "idea," an idea that experience and study of American art could be and should be a part of this community. And this institution is unique. Its origins in the art educational activities of the Haydon Art Club in 1888 and its relationship to the University of Nebraska have kept, and will continue to keep, the educational mission of the Sheldon Art Gallery in the forefront. Its focus on 19th and 20th-century American art and, due to the prescience of several important benefactors, including Frank M. Hall and Olga N. Sheldon, the collection will continue to grow. That a University art museum boasts such an in-depth American collection emphasizes the importance of an in-depth study of American art to a liberal arts education.

The depth and breadth of the collection and the important role it plays in education has and will continue to focus the Sheldon’s exhibition programming around its permanent collection. That a modest town on the Plains with a public land-grant university could support the development of an art collection that has become nationally and internationally known is a testimony to the tireless efforts of the many participants who believed that it was important to be involved with the art collections at the Sheldon Art Gallery. The paintings on exhibit do not merely speak of aesthetic and formal issues, they also testify to the efforts of countless supporters who have supported the development of the permanent collections.

Daniel A. Siedell
Curator

fig. 6. Jackson Pollock, Untitled (Ritual Scene)


Cover Illustration: Mark Rothko, Yellow Band, 1956
American Paintings from the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery:
An Institutional History of Pictures

July 14 - October 28, 2001

Exhibition Checklist

1933-1952

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<td>1927</td>
<td>tempera on masonite</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Roadmenders’ Camp</td>
<td>John Steuart Curry</td>
<td>1929</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Charles Demuth</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Homer Dodge Martin</td>
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27. Barnett Newman  
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28. Mark Rothko  
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32. Henry Fitch Taylor  
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33. Max Weber  
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34. Joe Andoe  
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35. Richard Diebenkorn  
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36. Philip Guston  
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37. Martin Johnson Heade  
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Seascape  
n.d., oil on canvas  
NAA-Gift of Carl and Jane Rohman in memory of Thomas Cochrane Woods, III, through the University of Nebraska Foundation  
2000.N-772

48. Clyfford Still  
Untitled  
1946, oil on canvas  
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust  
1997.U-4959

49. Andy Warhol  
Myths: Mickey Mouse  
1981, synthetic polymer paint and silk-screen ink on canvas  
UNL-Donated by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., with additional funding provided by the Nebraska Art Association, Mickey Mouse Committee, John and Catherine Angle; Mercedes A. Augustine Acquisition Trust; Jean Rathburn Faulkner estate; the Collectors’ Forum of the Nebraska Art Association; and the Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust  
1993.U-4526