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## An American Taste: The Rohman Collection

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# AN AMERICAN TASTE

## THE ROHMAN COLLECTION

SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART • JANUARY 21–MAY 1, 2011

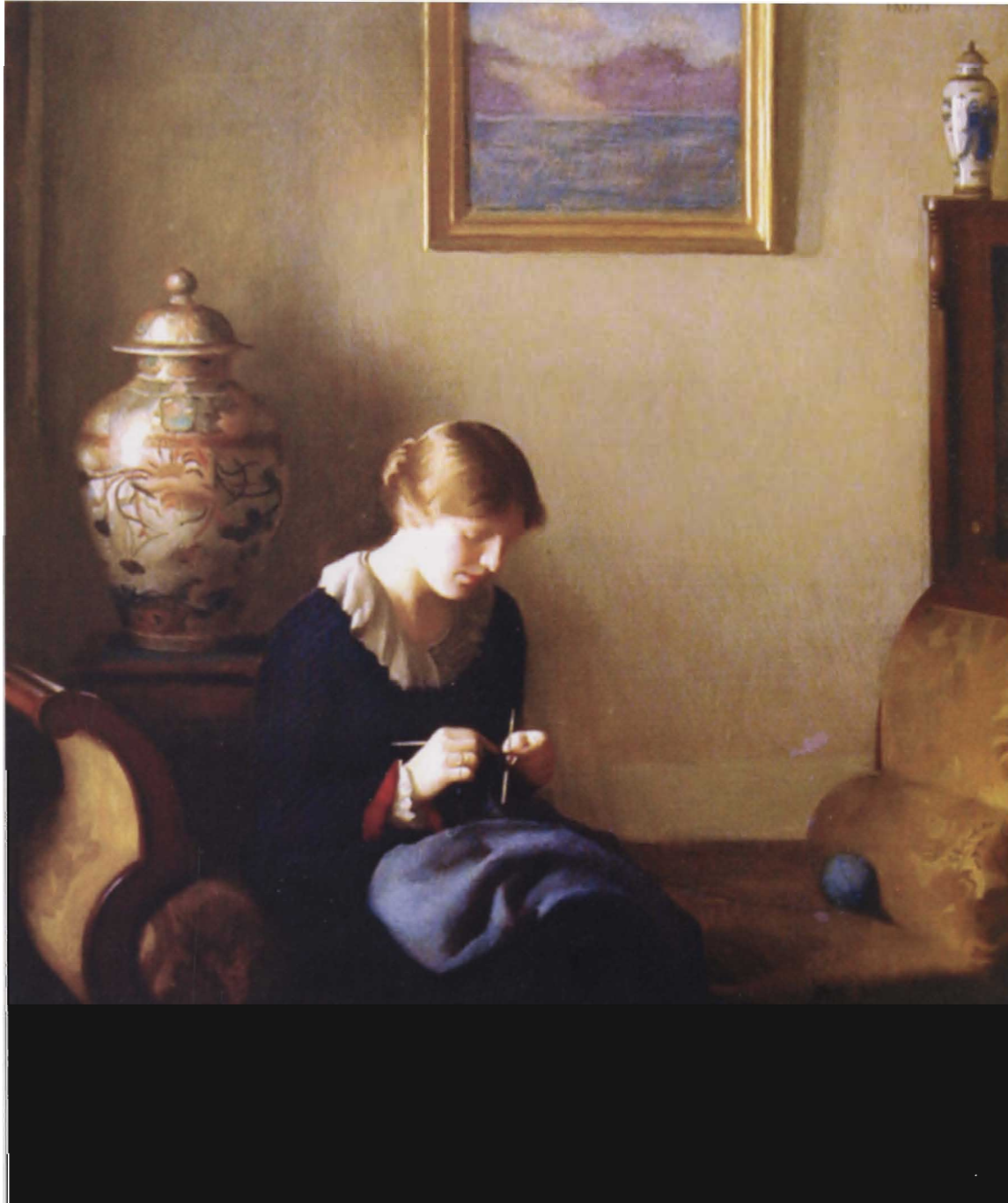


FIGURE 1. WILLIAM MCGREGOR PAXTON, *GIRL KNITTING*, 1919. OIL ON CANVAS, SAA—GIFT OF BEATRICE D. ROHMAN.



The Rohman name has been synonymous with the artistic and cultural life of Lincoln and greater Nebraska for decades. It can be seen on buildings and projects throughout the city and state, from Opera Omaha and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln opera program to the Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney and Lincoln’s own Meadowlark Music Festival. In summer 2005, the Rohmans were the first family to be honored with a named gallery at the Sheldon Museum of Art. But the Rohmans have also enriched the region’s cultural heritage in less visible ways too numerous to count. *An American Taste: The Rohman Collection* pays tribute to their generosity to, and legacy at, the Sheldon, which has taken the form of a special, unparalleled contribution: their art collection.

Inspired by the generous gift of thirty-eight artworks in 2009, this exhibition celebrates the connoisseurship and passion of Jane and Carl (Ky) Rohman in particular, but also honors their family’s decades-long attachment to the museum. Arranged thematically, the gallery showcases the range of artists, genres, and media that have intrigued the Rohmans and enriched Sheldon, nineteenth-century portraiture and landscape, figurative and abstract sculpture, and twentieth-century modernism among them. As a group, these works have contributed significantly to the museum’s standing, making possible substantial special exhibitions such as *Poetical Fire: Three Centuries of Still Lives*.



FIGURE 2. CARL ROHMAN, *STILL LIFE*, 1942. BROMIDE PRINT. UNL—GIFT OF THE LINCOLN CAMERA CLUB.

That installation, on view in the upstairs galleries, features sixteen objects donated by the Rohmans over the years.

While Jane and Ky Rohman share a mutual love for American art, they developed that passion in different ways. Jane studied art history at the University of Nebraska–Kearney and the University of Kansas. Ky—trained in business and law at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln—inherited his interest from his mother, Beatrice D. Rohman, herself a supporter of the museum. Her collection includes such work as William McGregor Paxton’s masterful genre scene of a young girl knitting (fig. 1) and Theodore Wendel’s *Girl with Turkeys*, painted at the epicenter of Impressionism, Giverny, France. The family has honored Mrs. Rohman’s legacy by donating Martin Johnson Heade’s exquisite still-life painting *Orange and Orange Blossoms*, on view in *Poetical Fire*.

Ky Rohman’s artistic experience and attachment to Sheldon stretches back decades. The first official work in the museum’s collection that bears his name is a photograph of a vase of flowers and a charger (fig. 2) that he took while a member of the Lincoln Camera Club in the 1940s. It is a remarkable study in contrasts of light and shadow, surfaces and textures, and perhaps bears the seed of his ongoing attraction to the still life.

Aside from numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century still lifes, another of the couple’s favorite subjects is landscape. Featured here are highlights of their collection that include William Trost Richards’s subtle, expressive sketches of ocean tides at morning, noon, and night, and Joachim Ferdinand Richardt’s rare painting of Niagara Falls. Between 1855 and 1859, the artist visited the United States at the expense and request of the Danish crown, traveling during the summers to the falls, where he executed scenic paintings such as this one (fig. 3), retaining some versions



FIGURE 3. JOACHIM FERDINAND RICHARDT, *NIAGARA FALLS*, 1855–56, UNL—GIFT OF JANE AND CARL ROHMAN THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA FOUNDATION.

and giving others to the Danish government. While Richardt’s canvas is both topographically accurate and picturesque, the Rohman Collection is especially strong in Tonalist landscapes, chief among them George Inness’s *Farmhouse* and John Francis Murphy’s *Across the Meadow* (fig. 5). These two canvases, painted in loose, muted colors that shroud the subjects in a mysterious mist, are informed by the Barbizon and Impressionist traditions of painting out-of-doors, directly from nature, a practice beautifully employed in Jane Peterson’s view of Paris’s Tuileries Gardens. Landscapes were among the early notable gifts that Ky and his first wife, Lorraine LeMar Rohman, made to the Sheldon back in 1972 in the form of a painting by Ralph Albert Blakelock. The Rohmans acknowledged Lorraine’s guiding spirit by dedicating many of the collection’s most important works to her memory, including the Inness.

The family’s tastes, while obviously American focused, are not limited to nineteenth-century figurative works but cross the divide into twentieth-century modernism and abstraction. Their first foray into this area, as well as their first purchase for the museum, occurred in 1970, when Ky and Lorraine Rohman—along with a group of fellow museum patrons—secured Alexander Calder’s important *Red Disk, Black Lace* (see fig. 4), the first kinetic sculpture by this modernist master to enter the collection. While not on view here, it is currently part of a major loan exhibition of the artist’s work. No less important is another first for the museum, Theodore Roszak’s wood-and-metal sculpture *Transverse Polar*, an experiment in biomorphic abstraction whose bulbous, tapering form literally and metaphorically explores the magnetism of polar opposites. The Rohmans acquired their first abstract canvas, Augustus Vincent Tack’s *Untitled (Abstraction)*, at auction in 1989, donating it to the museum eight years later. Tack created his colorful, dynamic composition in response to the natural landscape of Colorado’s

Rocky Mountains, just as another modern artist in the collection, William Baziotis, visually obscured the circular forms of fruit with washes of color to achieve abstraction. In each their own way, then, these modernist pieces can be traced back to the Rohmans’ foremost collecting passions: landscape and still life.

Sculpture has played a significant role in the tenor and thrust of the family’s collecting and subsequent gifts to Sheldon. The first two artworks they purchased for the museum, in fact, were three-dimensional: the already mentioned Calder was followed in 1972 by Thomas Crawford’s touching neoclassical genre scene of two youths examining a bird’s nest (fig. 6). Jane and Ky Rohman have continued to make sculpture a collecting priority, one that has greatly benefited the museum by addressing gaps in its collection. In the 1980s the couple acquired a bronze version of Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s iconic *Diana of the Tower*, which has broadened and strengthened Sheldon’s collection of works by



FIGURE 4. ALEXANDER CALDER, *RED DISK, BLACK LACE*, 1948. PAINTED STEEL, SAA—GIFT OF MRS. CARL ROHMAN, MR. AND MRS. CARL H. ROHMAN, MRS. OLGA N. SHELDON, MR. AND MRS. PAUL SCHORR, JR., MR. AND MRS. ART WEAVER, MR. AND MRS. THOMAS C. WOODS, JR., MR. AND MRS. THOMAS C. WOODS, SR., AND FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF LINCOLN.



FIGURE 5. JOHN FRANCIS MURPHY, *ACROSS THE MEADOW*, 1893, OIL ON BOARD, UNL—GIFT OF JANE AND CARL ROHMAN THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA FOUNDATION.





FIGURE 6. THOMAS CRAWFORD, *TRUANTS (THE BIRD'S NEST)*, 1856, MARBLE, SAA-GIFT OF MRS. CARL P. ROHMAN.

that artist. The Rohmans have continued to build this institution's holdings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculpture by donating pieces by Malvina Hoffman and Edward Thaxter, but perhaps their most visible contribution was to the acquisition of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's monumental outdoor sculpture *Torn Notebook* (fig. 7), a work that has become synonymous with the University of Nebraska since its unveiling and, appropriately, greets all visitors to the campus and the city.

The artworks on display here and in *Poetical Fire* are but a small fraction of the more than one hundred objects that the Rohmans have contributed over the last forty years. The collection that bears their name is a testament to their astute eye and discriminating tastes, as well as to their generous philanthropy.



FIGURE 7. CLAES OLDENBURG AND COOSJE VAN BRUGGEN, *TORN NOTEBOOK*, 1992, FABRICATED 1996, UNL-OLGA N. SHELDON ACQUISITION TRUST AND FRIENDS OF THE SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY (ALIAN T COMMUNICATIONS; BAHR, VERMEER AND HAECKER ARCHITECTS; KAREN AND ROBERT DUNCAN, DUNCAN FOUNDATION; M. E. AND HAROLD GIFFORD; CAROLE ANNE AND ROGER D. SACK; ANN AND FRANK SIDLES IN MEMORY OF PHIL L. SIDLES AND HAROLD P. STEBBINS; PAULA AND DURWARD VARNER; SALLY AND JACK CAMPBELL; PAT AND BILL LUNDAK; CHARLENE AND BILL MILLER, ANHEUSER-BUSCH FOUNDATION; JANE AND CARL ROHMAN; JUNE AND PAUL SCHORR, III; SECURITY FEDERAL; MARGARET AND J. S. BERRY; MARIA R. AND DONALD M. COX; MR. AND MRS. J. TAYLOR GREER; MARY AND CLIFF HILLEGASS; KAREN AND JOHN JANOVY; RUTH A. AND MARTIN A. MASSENGALE; NEBRASKA BOOKSTORE; ANNETTE AND PAUL SMITH; KATHERINE C. AND ELWOOD N. THOMSON, THE MILL, DALE NORDYKE).