



*Director Tom Toperzer wants the whole Southwest to know that something extraordinary is going on at the OU Museum of Art.*

# *Rebirth of an Art Museum*

The doors of the OU Museum of Art have reopened on sparkling new exhibition space worthy of the excitement being generated by its personnel, programs and future prospects.

By KATHRYN JENSON WHITE  
Photos by Gil Jain

**A** high-quality gem deserves the most beautiful setting possible. The same holds true for a superb work of art and its museum setting. In 1971 the University of Oklahoma provided such a setting for its museum of art in the newly built Fred Jones Jr. Memorial Art Center. The museum was a modern showcase.

By the 1980s, however, the definition of "modern" had changed, and the museum was ready for a new, updated look. In March of 1986, the museum closed its doors to begin a major makeover; when it reopened in September, the museum was once again a place where fine art could find an equally fine setting.

With \$100,000 from state capital improvement money, the museum underwent a major renovation and security upgrade. Now, the works of art which the museum owns and those it rents in touring exhibitions will shine forth in all their glory, truly enhanced by their place of display.

The man most immediately responsible for the sparkling new look of the museum is its director, Tom Toperzer, who came to OU in July of 1984. He came, he says, because "I saw this place as one of the biggest, best challenges I could imagine. At the time, this was a very low-profile operation with little money and a small staff. Everything was low key. The collection was fine, and the staff had a very professional attitude, but they didn't have an aggressive program. I'm aggressive about everything. The bigger the better, and the potential here was big. Everything just said, 'Go.'"

Toperzer's high energy and enthusiasm definitely have the museum on the move. Not long after settling into his new position, he began redesigning the interior of the museum to see what could be done with its space. The most important aspect of his new design was a series of divider walls to be arranged in any number of ways.

"With a scale model, I showed how we could take this rectangular room and make it completely different every month by sliding walls around and repainting whenever we wanted to," Toperzer explains. "I got everyone excited by telling them we could make this the most flexible, up-to-date museum in the Southwest."

With the jump from scale model to reality completed, the museum is well on its way to fulfilling Toperzer's superlative forecast.

In the redesigned museum, all the carpeting has been stripped from the walls and the floor-to-ceiling interior walls are gone. Movable divider panels in a variety of sizes are now available for internal wall display space. None of these partitions reaches the ceiling, so light can flow more readily through the galleries to illuminate the works hanging there.

The bare concrete floor of the lower gallery has been replaced by white terrazzo, and most of the area overlooking that gallery has been closed off for safety and to decrease the natural light that enters through the bank of north windows. In addition to these aesthetic and functional improvements, the museum also is readying a state-of-the-art security system and video monitoring station.

Of what he and his staff have wrought, Toperzer says, "I believe we now have a facility second to none in this part of the country. Actually, we have a better facility—a facility with fewer limitations—than, say, the Dallas Museum of Art. Some might argue with that, but for what we are about to do, we have the best. We have almost total flexibility now; we can do anything we want, and the Dallas museum really can't."

Toperzer's ability to redesign the museum so successfully is the result of his own artistic talent and his 16 years of experience directing art museums. He has a master of fine arts degree from the University of Nebraska, where he concentrated on painting, drawing and printmaking. Before he came to OU, he spent two years at a small church college in St. Paul, Minnesota, as dean of fine arts.

He left the deanship when it became clear that he would be dealing with paper rather than people. "I'm a high-energy person," he admits. "I've got to do something. I just don't sit behind a desk very well unless it ultimately leads to action that I can take part in."

Before taking the position in Minnesota, Toperzer had satisfied his need "to do" by acting as director of a small, community-owned museum in Iowa, the Rochester Art Center in Minnesota and a university museum in

Illinois, which he opened and ran for 10 years.

To help him at OU, Toperzer has what he terms "the best board in the state." Established in 1985 and officially called the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art Board of Visitors, this group is as dedicated as the director to making a name for the museum.

Board members include William B. Cleary, Douglas R. Cummings, Christy Everest, Dannie Bea Hightower, Gusti Huffman, John Kirkpatrick Jr., Ann Linn and Clara Weitzenhoffer, all of Oklahoma City; Jayne Hazleton, Joe Hobbs and Richard L. Reynolds, of Norman; Jeanne Brawner and George R. Kravis II, of Tulsa; Mary Frances Maurer, of Duncan; Harold C. Price, of Laguna Beach, California; LaVona Rushton, of Birmingham, Alabama; and Robert Tuttle, of Washington, D.C.

The chairman of the group is Fred Jones Hall, of Oklahoma City, nephew of the late Fred Jones Jr., for whom the museum is named. Hall thrilled those attending the gala black tie reception marking the facility's September reopening by announcing that the Jones family was presenting the museum with a \$1 million challenge gift to be matched on a two-for-one basis over the next five years.

The resulting \$3 million endowment will be the second largest for a university museum in the midwest-southwest region, topped only by the \$7 million endowment of the University of Texas in Austin. The University of Kansas now has the next largest with an endowment of \$1.5 million.

Also active on the Board of Visitors is Mary Eddy Jones, who, with her late husband Fred Jones Sr., turned the grief of losing a young son into positive action by donating the money for the museum portion of the present building. Fred Jones Jr., an OU senior, was killed in a plane crash in 1950.

In 1936 when it was founded, the art museum occupied just two rooms in the old School of Art building, later to be named Jacobson Hall in honor of Professor Oscar Brousse Jacobson, a director of the school and first director of the museum. When the School of Art moved from Jacobson to Carpenter Hall, the museum took over most of the vacated space and stayed



*Members of the Jones family of Oklahoma City gather in the Fred Jones Jr. Memorial Fine Arts Center for the announcement of the art museum endowment. Seated, from left, are Fred Jones Hall, Mary Eddy Jones and Marilyn Jones Parsons; standing, Carole and Brooks Hall Jr., Karen Hall and John R. Parsons. Not pictured is Kirkland Hall of Hermosa Beach, California.*

for 45 years until moving into the new building in 1971.

At the event he termed the “rebirth of the museum,” Hall remarked that the Board of Visitors intends the museum to be a close third to football and basketball in drawing people to the campus. The board—members of which are a nationwide mixture of OU alumni and art lovers with other ties to Oklahoma—was assembled with what Hall calls a “three-pronged drive for excellence.”

“The first goal was to get the best people we could in place at the museum,” he explains. “Every year the Board of Visitors makes a donation which ties them to the museum. That money enabled us to match funds with the University and hire well-qualified people.

“Goal number two was to get the facility in shape. We didn’t want to be excluded for any physical reason from consideration for the top exhibitions in the country. Goal number three was to set up an endowment to fund exhibitions and acquisitions. Now we’re on our way to accomplishing that, too.”

The \$3 million dollar endowment

that will grow from the Jones family’s generous seed money will turn quickly into \$4 million if a dream of Toperzer’s becomes reality. He has found a government granting agency in the National Endowment for the Arts that can match the museum’s money one for three.

“If we raised \$3 million, which I know we will,” Toperzer says, “and they approve my grant, which I believe they will, we’ll get a fourth million. It will all go in the OU Foundation, and when times are good again, we could be earning three to four hundred thousand dollars a year to buy important works of art for the collection and bring major exhibitions to campus.”

Acquiring new pieces for the collection and presenting top quality exhibitions—both those of his own design and those rented from other art institutions—are top priorities for Toperzer. “The definition of a museum is an institution that collects, preserves and exhibits,” he explains. “At present we have a collection of approximately 5,000 objects, and we need to continue that tradition. That’s one of the reasons I’m here.

“The alumni from this University have been virtually untouched by the museum. I doubt if a very large percentage realize we exist, let alone understand the quality of the facility, the collection or the vision we have for the future.

“We’ve graduated 80,000 to 100,000 people from the University of Oklahoma, and a certain number of them must support and collect art,” Toperzer says. “Eventually they probably will give their collections to their families or they might give to the museum down the street in Dallas or Cincinnati or wherever. But if we can catch their imaginations and get them excited about what we’re excited about, they could just as easily give to the University, their alma mater. The art works they have collected or even the monies to purchase art would help us begin to fill in some of the gaps in our present collection.”

Toperzer describes the museum’s existing collection as being a good foundation upon which to build. “We have examples of fine Oriental, primitive and western art; pottery; painting, prints, drawings and photographs. However, although our collection touches upon many of the various periods of the history of art, we also have major gaps, missing complete and important movements and artists—not unlike many peer museums of our age and size.”

For the time being, Toperzer must focus the museum acquisition program on works done by living artists. His own specialization in art from 1945 to the present is one reason for this decision, but there is an even more important one: when good artists die, the price of their work skyrockets. If a museum can find a major name-to-be, it can buy that artist’s work at a fraction of its eventual value.

“Under our current financial restraints, it is almost impossible to purchase historic works of art,” the director explains. “When the endowment is in place, we can begin to make significant purchases with the earnings and begin to close some of the gaps. We are, of course, continuing to seek important collections from friends and alumni to increase the quality and stature of the collection and the museum.”

One of the museum’s treasures, a



group of 36 modern paintings called "The State Department Collection," will serve as a solid base for the pieces Toperzer hopes to add over the years. This group of post-World War II paintings was exhibited in Washington, D. C., in a 1946 show titled "Advancing American Art."

The exhibition began a tour of Europe to show what the bright young artists of America were producing and received very positive response in the foreign press. However in the postwar atmosphere that preceded the McCarthy era, the Hearst newspapers led an attack on the show for its "suspect" emphasis on abstract painting. The art of such "radical" painters as Georgia O'Keefe and Edward Hopper just did not seem American enough to a few influential people. The tour was canceled and the paintings put in storage in 1947.

Luckily for OU, then museum director Jacobson heard about the intended sale of these works and bought 36 of them in 1948 for 10 cents on the dollar. In 1984, all the paintings were brought together again under their original title for a touring exhibition. Ironically, the OU museum could not bring the exhibition to the campus even though it owned most of the paintings; the museum just could not afford the \$7,000 rental fee.

Since the museum received only \$5,000 a year from the regular University budget to mount or rent exhibitions, such an incongruous situation was understandable. However, given the financial support picture the Board of Visitors is painting for the museum, that sort of dilemma is much less likely in the future. The endowment money also will allow the museum to create its own exhibitions to be sent to other museums.

"In the past, 97 percent of the museum's exhibitions have been rented," Toperzer says. "We're definitely going to start putting together more exhibitions ourselves. It will be difficult because we're so understaffed, but it's necessary for us to make our mark in the museum world. To do that we've got to research, publish, organize, exhibit and circulate. We're going to do it all."

To help him "do it all," Toperzer has a small but fine staff: Edwin J. Deighton, assistant director/curator of



*Guests at the OU Museum of Art's gala reopening tour the spacious lower gallery where a gleaming new white terrazzo floor has replaced the bare concrete, and movable divider panels provide the ultimate in flexible wall display space.*



*New York City art dealer Max Weitzenhoffer, left, a longtime art museum benefactor, visits with Director Tom Toperzer at the September reopening exhibition which featured a retrospective on the works of Sooner artist Eugene Bavinger.*

collections; Jane M. Hallett, museum educator; Judith F. Dearing, administrative secretary; Mary E. Cook, supervisor of security; Abigail L. Bliss, exhibition assistant; Karen Mobley, graduate assistant/education department; Dan Chaffee, graduate assistant/preparator; and Greg Bullard, museum security assistant.

The man who designed the perfect exhibition space is brimming over with ideas about the exhibitions he and his staff will create for it. With no hesitation, he describes the four areas he intends to emphasize in designing exhibitions.

"I'm planning a series of exhibitions called 'Once in Oklahoma' (a series planned to begin during the University's Centennial celebration in 1990), which will show artists who were, as the name suggests, in the state for a time. A significant number of important artists in this country fall into that category.

"Secondly, I want to concentrate on blue-chip, prominent American artists, artists many of us have grown up with. I'm interested in showing what they're doing right now, in getting the work fresh from their studios. The show may be only one big painting or ten drawings or photographs, but it would be new and fresh. Everyone knows the pieces upon which these artists' reputations were built; I'd like our museum to become known as a place that takes a second look.

"The third exhibition area will include artists currently working in the Southwest. They may be up, or on their way up, or down because no one has discovered them yet. I want to do the research and look for people to introduce to the art world.

Finally, I'm interested in new talent on the national level and in showing experimental art. If you can't experiment on a university campus, where can you?"

The museum also will continue to mount biennial faculty and graduate student exhibitions as well as the Annual Art Students Exhibition in the spring to showcase talent in the University community and maintain a strong relationship with the School of Art. Toperzer never forgets that the museum is part of a university.

"We are here," he says, "because the students are here. We have a mission.

We're a graduate research institution, and we need to look in-depth at art, historic as well as current, issues as well as objects. We'll include films, symposia and didactic programming in our schedules. We will invite critics, curators and artists to campus to put into context the art we show in the museum's galleries.

"I'll try to touch upon significant movements in the history of art during each four-year period, because basically the population turns over every four years. I'll put together and rent exhibitions that will give the entire student body a broad spectrum."

Toperzer expects a return on such efforts. "It is important to remember that the students currently on our campus will be the professionals in our communities in the future. If we can expose them to the very best in the visual arts and help them develop an appreciation for art while they prepare for their careers, then we will have an experienced, appreciative generation ready to move onto the boards of directors and trustee seats of our art museums in Oklahoma and across the nation."

As both a functional move and a symbolic gesture signifying the close relationship between the School of Art and the museum, Toperzer recently oversaw the cutting of a door between the two. Before the door, students and faculty had to go outside to get from one area to the other.

In addition to serving the University, the OU Museum of Art wants to reach out to the city of Norman, the state of Oklahoma, and the entire southwestern region of the country. Jane Hallett devotes most of her time as museum educator to establishing ties with all those publics.

"We want an art museum that is for more than just students," she says. To involve the public, Hallett has arranged for the museum schedule to be printed on Safeway shopping bags and to have information about the museum available on the mass transit shuttle that runs between Norman and Oklahoma City. She takes programs and slide presentations into local schools and is supervising the creation of curriculum materials for their use as funding allows.

Hallett is also liaison with the Museum of Art Association, a support

group providing much-needed volunteer work in all areas of museum operations. This year's officers of the association are Jayne Hazleton, president; Anne McCurdy, vice president; Karen Copeland, recording/corresponding secretary; and William Hallett, travel chair. Another important volunteer group is the docents, whose most important responsibility is to provide educational tours for visitors.

Education is an important aspect of an art museum, but Toperzer is well aware that the prospect of self-improvement does not draw droves of people to its doors.

"A recent study told museum directors what we really already knew," he says, "that the number-one reason people go to museums is to be entertained. The second is to be socially involved, which includes everything from just being seen there to giving time. Those two reasons are almost neck-and-neck at the top of the graph. Then *way* down at the bottom is to do something educational. But, of course, people do learn because you slip it in when they're not looking."

Providing the spoonful of entertainment sugar that will help the education medicine go down is high on everyone's list at the museum. When the museum staff was planning the reopening events, someone warned Toperzer that with the number expected, people would be jammed into the gallery and waiting at the door to get in.

His response was typical of the born promoter: "Great! They'll be looking through the windows and seeing all those good-looking men in black tie and those gorgeous women in beautiful dresses, and they'll be saying, 'Gee, this is really exciting. I didn't know there was so much action down here.' Then we'll follow up with some really good exhibitions. We'll get them back again."

No doubt about it. With the help of his stellar advisory board, talented staff and eager art association volunteers, Toperzer will bring the visitors back. As Jane Hallett says, the director's excitement is contagious.

As he himself says, "The potential here is just incredible. I've heard Oklahoma called 'The Frontier Lake State.' I call it 'The Frontier Everything State.' I'd like to do a poster with that on it. I think it's Oklahoma's time." 