

Claude Monet, France 1840-1926
La Berge à Lavacourt
(Riverbank at Lavacourt)
1879
Oil on canvas



All reproductions: Aaron M. and Clara Weitzenhoffer Bequest, 2000

Clara's Gift

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

More than 33 thousand eager viewers flocked to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art as the University briefly exhibited its new French Impressionist collection, a \$50 million bequest from an old friend.

Traffic on Boyd Street, leading straight to the University of Oklahoma's front door, was backed up for blocks. Such an impressive showing of brake lights and turn signals usually was reserved for Saturdays when the rekindled thrill of cheering a national championship team pulled fans into Norman like a gridiron magnet. On this chilly November evening, however, the spotlight was not on the exalted Owen Field, but the sedate Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, where crowds were queuing up to view a treasure trove of French Impressionist art unseen by the public eye for half a century.

The collection represents the lifetime passion of Oklahoma City philanthropist and OU benefactor Clara Rosenthal Weitzenhoffer. At the time of her death last July at the age of 88, she had lovingly assembled a small but impressive gallery of the most celebrated artists of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements, including Renoir, Monet, Degas, and Van Gogh. The incredible odyssey of some 30 paintings, drawings, and sketches from Paris to the Plains began, as long-term relationships often do, with a honeymoon.

The daughter of pioneering oilman Henry Rosenthal, Clara grew up in Olney, Illinois, in a home that valued culture and education. She earned degrees from Wellesley College and the University of Wichita, before becoming engaged to Oklahoma native Aaron Weitzenhoffer. Aaron's father, Berty, an Austrian immigrant, had carved out a successful liquor distillery and retail clothing business in Oklahoma well before statehood.

The younger Weitzenhoffer, born in Oklahoma Territory near Lexington, inherited his father's flair for entrepreneurship. He became one of

the state's first independent oil producers, and, in 1936, a co-founder of Davon Oil Company. Aaron was 43 and Clara, 27, when the pair married in 1938. Befitting a successful businessman, Aaron took his bride to Europe for their wedding trip. For Clara, it was love at first sight.

"She was only 27, and you can tell in her letters from Europe that she was developing a passion for antiques and art," says her son, Max Weitzenhoffer, a renowned Broadway and London theater producer, and

her English-style home in Oklahoma City. She had intended to continue along this English channel, when family friend and art dealer, David Findlay, steered her toward the French Impressionists. Clara then discovered a style that suited her perfectly, a marriage of the restrained 17th and 18th century English decorative arts with the colorful insurgency of the Impressionists.

With the help of John Rewald, an eminent authority on the Impressionists, Clara became a devoted and discerning collector of fine art. Over the years, the individual pieces she selected began to emerge as a whole, representing each phase of the Impressionist movement.

"What is so wonderful about this collection," says OU museum director Eric Lee, "is that it is so comprehensive. It begins with the people who inspired the movement, includes works from the movement itself and concludes with variations of what came after, like Neo-Impressionism. It's excellent for teaching purposes, both for OU students and the community at large. There's nothing like a one-on-one encounter with a Renoir."

Some of the works in the collection that were early influences on the Impressionists include a poetic landscape by Corot and an 1865 still life by Fantin-LaTour, which Lee describes as "staggeringly beautiful" and one of the artist's greatest works.

Highlights from the heart of the Impressionist movement include the lovely "Les Roses" by Renoir, a charcoal-and-pastel sketch of a ballerina by Degas, a portrait of a young girl that exudes spontaneity by American Mary Cassatt, and a moody landscape by Monet, painted in 1879 while his young wife was dying of cancer.

Representing the later Impressionist/Post-Impressionist movement are



Pierre-Auguste Renoir, France 1841-1919
Les Roses, 1878
 Oil on canvas

producing director of OU's musical theater program. "My mother loved beautiful things. After the war, she started buying books and auction catalogs."

Ironically, the first painting in her collection was not French, but English. She purchased the charming "Harvest Dinner," by Francis Wheatley, because she felt it was in keeping with the refined character of

Armand Guillaumin, France
1841-1927
Nature Morte
c.1885
Oil on canvas



Max Weitzenhoffer, right, attends the Weitzenhoffer Collection opening night with his cousin, Elizabeth Weitzenhoffer Blass.

almost too many gems to mention: a landscape of Copenhagen by Gauguin before he left Impressionism for synthetism and Tahiti; and a breathtaking Pissarro, "Shepherdess Bringing in Sheep," which showcases the senior artist's experimentation with the juxtaposition of color contrasts, during a time when he was moving away from the Impressionists; and a fantastic coastal scene by Signac, which Lee calls a "textbook example" of the Neo-Impressionist movement, when artists further separated color into dots or patches of pure hues leaving the blending of color to the

eyes of the viewer.

Certainly one of the main drawing cards of the collection is "Portrait of Alexander Reid" by Vincent Van Gogh, the sentimental favorite of any Impressionist exhibit.

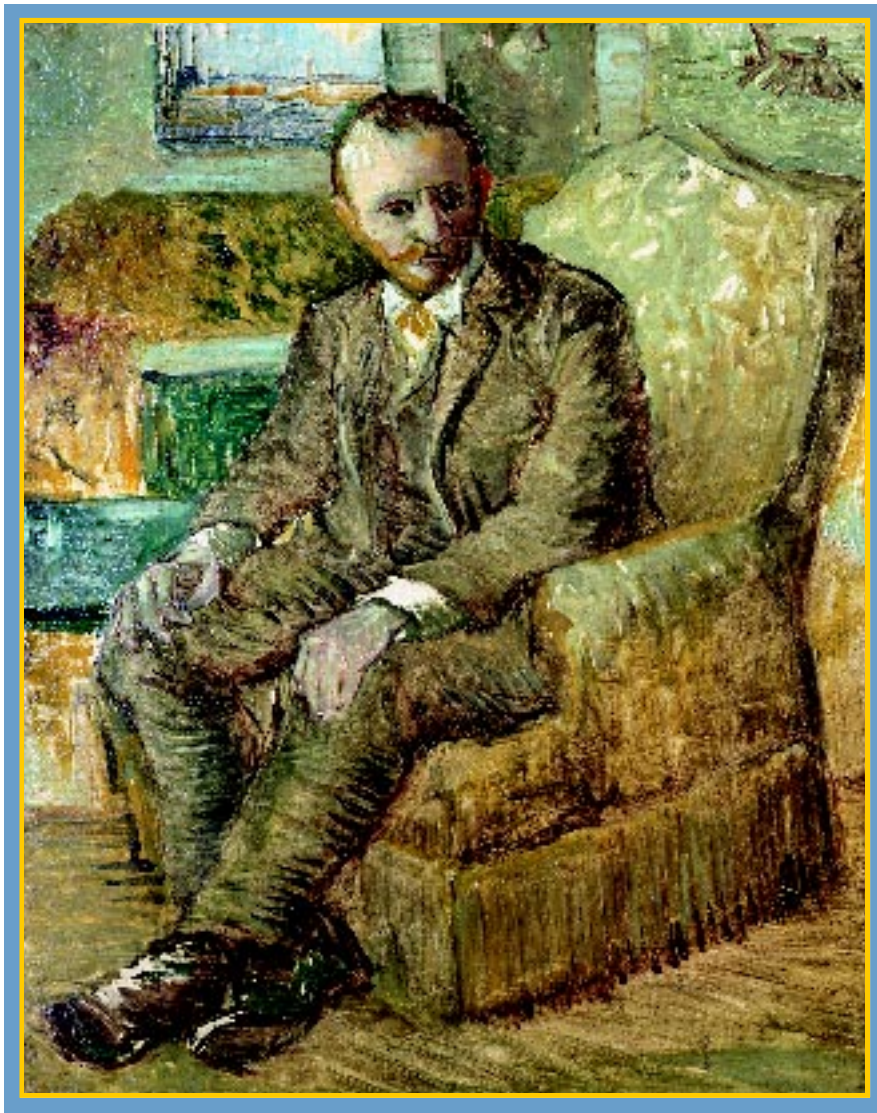
The portrait of Reid, a Scottish art dealer and friend of Vincent and his brother Theo, represents the artist before his palette began to soar with the characteristic cadmium yellow and cobalt blue he favored during his months in Arles. Although the colors here are subdued, the defiant, rapid-



Edgar Degas, France 1834-1917
Danseuse à la Barre
Charcoal with pastel and white chalk on paper

fire brushstrokes and bare patches of canvas are pure Van Gogh.

It is near mind-boggling to consider that at one time all 33 works were part of someone's home furnishings. "When things came to the house, my mother would move them around, seeing if they fit," recalls Weitzenhoffer. "She



Vincent Van Gogh, Netherlands 1853-1890
Portrait of Alexander Reid c. 1887
 Oil on canvas

had very definite tastes. She didn't buy anything as an investment; she decorated the house with things she liked." Her favorite, Renoir's "Les Roses," greeted her coming and going from the entryway. Monet's "Riverbank at Lavacourt," the only piece in the collection selected by her husband, hung above the fireplace in the library.

She once told her son that it was a shame the rooms of her house could not become a museum. During her lifetime, few outside the family were aware of her remarkable holdings. Fear of vandalism and theft were certainly issues, but the need for privacy was stronger still. Allowing

visitors to view her paintings and furniture in their intimate family settings would have been as personal a gesture as offering up pages of her diary. Clara enjoyed her friends at garden clubs and racetracks, but few guests ever were invited into the Weitzenhoffer home.

In the mid-1950s the family built a second home in La Jolla, California, and eventually, some of the collection moved west with Clara. "After some 30 years, the paintings have been reunited," says Max. "I haven't seen them all together in that time, and neither has anyone else."

Very likely, more people saw the collection on its opening night at the



Mary Cassatt, U.S. 1845-1926
Sara in a Dark Bonnet
Tied under her Chin, c. 1901
 Pastel on paper

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art than over the past five decades combined. More than 800 guests were invited to preview the exhibit November 13, and tour buses began making regular stops outside the museum. Public response was so overwhelming that the museum extended the exhibit's original eight-week run to nine.

"We had days when more than 2,000 visitors came through the exhibit," says Joyce Cummins, museum supervisor of security and facilities. "Our usual attendance for a weekday is 200."

Rumors of the Weitzenhoffer bequest had been circulating the University for months, perhaps longer. Sam Olkinetzky, museum director from 1958 to 1983, says he became aware of the collection when Max was one of his students in the 1960s and had hoped privately and fervently that it might find its way to OU. Though the possibility of the gift may not have been one of OU's best-kept secrets, the speed with which the bequest was executed caught even those in the loop by surprise. In a matter of weeks, the collection fell into the lap of a giddy museum staff.

Overnight, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art was catapulted into the upper echelon of public universities with French Impressionist hold-



Docent Chris Tirey, left, plays host to Norman resident Faith Killam and OU students Elizabeth Wille and Kathy Ray during their visit to the FJMA exhibit.

ings. “There is no public university in American with a collection like this,” says Lee. News organizations from *The New York Times* to CNN carried the story worldwide. Security at the museum was beefed up, walls were reconfigured, and a very intricate and complex exhibit was sacrificed three weeks after its installation to make room for *Monsieurs Pissaro, Gauguin, and Vuillard*.

Docents, who were in the middle of their regular eight-week training, suddenly found themselves mobilizing for the front lines of unprecedented museum crowds. OU graphic artists set to work designing no less than 10 commemorative posters for the exhibit’s initial eight-week run. And though everyone from curators to janitors began to feel the effects of the Weitzenhoffer windfall, no one was complaining. The prevailing attitude was, “Isn’t it lovely to be inconvenienced by \$50 million worth of French Impressionist art?”

To prepare for the collection’s first public showing, Lee said his staff approached the exhibit as they would any other, only “a lot more quickly.”

“Usually we might repaint an entire wall and hold up the art to see if it makes a good match. We like to think the colors over, sometimes choosing as many as five for one show,” Lee ex-

plains. “With this exhibit, we had no time for meditation. Instead of walls, we painted boards and held them up. We went through about five shades of blue before we found the perfect one, which we offset with white graphics and label text.” Later Lee discovered that blue and white was one of Clara Weitzenhoffer’s favorite color schemes.

Clara’s personal touches accented the exhibit in other ways. All of the pieces came ready to hang in exquisite frames, some dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries. “The frames alone are spectacular,” says Lee.

Just days before the exhibit was to open, Lee was in Spain fulfilling a previous commitment to the OU Museum Association. “I wrote some of the exhibit labels in longhand between Toledo and Madrid,” he recalls with a laugh. “When I returned, we hung the show more or less chronologically and had very few departures from our original plan. We were very lucky. Everything fell into place.”

As tremendously successful as the collection’s debut was, the best is yet to come. In accordance with Mrs. Weitzenhoffer’s wishes, her rooms, or rather fastidious replications, will become a museum after all. With the help of acclaimed architect Hugh Newell Jacobson, a new west wing of

the museum is being designed to bring Clara’s Nichols Hills home to the people of Oklahoma.

“The new wing will have the feel of a house museum,” says Lee. “To me the museums that one loves are the more intimate ones like the Kimball (in Fort Worth) and the Frick (in New York City). Hugh Jacobson is perfect for the job because he is such a great residential architect. He will be able to blend these rooms and the existing museum into a seamless whole.”

Max Weitzenhoffer met Jacobson while the architect was renovating Boyd House for OU President David and Molly Shi Boren and helped recruit him for the project. “Hugh Jacobson spent a lot of time at my mother’s house,” he says. “He drew plans, he took photographs. When he’s finished, the rooms will look as though my mother and father just stepped out of them.”

In addition to the paintings, the rooms will be furnished with Clara’s extraordinary collection of 17th and 18th century antiques, among them an intricately carved tilt-top tea table, a burl walnut settee with needlepoint cushion, and the blue and white Chinese porcelain she loved. The new wing is tentatively set to open in two years; until that time the collection will remain in secure storage.

“I think the experience of seeing the paintings in the rooms will be something quite different than the experience of seeing them in a gallery,” says Weitzenhoffer. “I hope the setting will attract a lot of students, high school and junior high. That’s what great museums do, like the Frick. They bring kids in.”

In that respect, “The Fred” is proving itself to be one of the greats. More than 33,000 visitors, including hundreds of schoolchildren, passed through its doors during the weeks of the Weitzenhoffer exhibit. For many, it was their first trip to a museum of art. That is a good sign to FJMA officials.

“I think it is important that museums are no longer seen as part of the ivory tower, but as the new public forum,” says Lee. “We want people to feel at home here and to keep coming back. We want these paintings to become like old friends.”