



A Love Story

For Roxanne
and Bill,
collecting art
became
as natural as
breathing,
a vital part of
their long,
joyful life
together.



BY LYNETTE LOBBAN
PHOTOS BY KONRAD EEK

They started out innocently enough. In the time-honored tradition of college students everywhere, newlyweds Roxanne and Bill Thams brightened the walls of their first, tiny apartment with prints—inexpensive reproductions of paintings made affordable through mail order. The year was 1939, and Roxanne Thams was putting her husband, Bill, through geology school at the University of Oklahoma with a newly acquired journalism degree and an advertising position at the fashionable John A. Brown Department Store in Oklahoma City. Roxanne would come home from work with a *New York Times* tucked under her arm, anxious to share with Bill the ads from Bloomingdale's, which often pitted the couple's keen sense of aesthetics against the limits of their disposable income.

When Bill graduated from OU in 1940, the Thamses also graduated from reproductions to original works of art. As good fortune allowed, and often when it did not, the couple would “fall in love” with a particular painting and find a way to bring it home. “When something talked to us,” says Thams, “we couldn't walk off and leave it.”

More than 60 years after purchasing that first print, William H. Thams has donated a multi-million-dollar collection of 31 Southwestern masterpieces to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in memory of Roxanne. After reading about the University's 1996 acquisition of the Fleischaker Collection in *Sooner*

continued

Magazine, the Midland, Texas, couple wondered if OU might be interested in their “modest collection.” When Roxanne died earlier this year, her husband decided the time had come to find a permanent home for the works they had so lovingly assembled during their life together.

“I think they were a little skeptical at first,” says a good-natured Thams, recalling his first conversation with Eric M. Lee, director of the Fred Jones. “But when I mentioned the Fechins and the Gaspards, I could almost see his eyes getting bigger on the phone.”

Lee remembers not only that phone call but also the first time he saw the art. “I was speechless. The paintings in the Thams Collection are extraordinary and represent some of the finest work of the Taos Society of Artists—Blumenschein, Couse, Hennings, Phillips, Sharp and others are represented by some of their best paintings.”

Neither of the Thamses set out to be collectors, although Lee once quipped that Bill Thams was “genetically predisposed” toward that avocation. Paintings always had played an important part in his household. His grandfather, a surgeon who immigrated to America from Norway, was an avid collector and supported Thams’ Aunt Ingebor through art school in Paris. The first original oil painting to hang in Bill and Roxanne’s home was a portrait by his aunt. Roxanne, too, had a passion for art and became a painter in her own right.

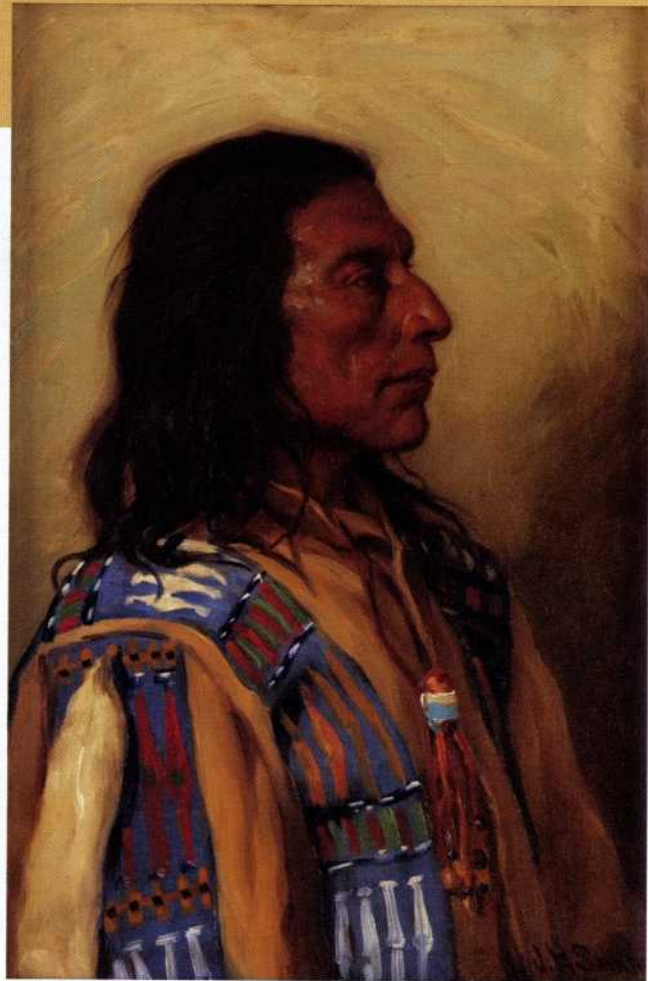
As for collecting, what began as a flirtation quickly escalated into a full-blown love affair. The Thamses bought their first “real painting” in 1966, *The Girl in the Boat* by Ridgway Knight. Thams says Roxanne had a special fondness for “the pretty paintings,” lush romantics of women, children and flowers. “One time I came home, and there was this great big crate sitting in our kitchen. I said, ‘What’s that?’ and Roxanne said, ‘Why don’t you open it and find out?’

“It was around Christmastime, and I opened it up, and there was this beautiful painting, *Mother and Child* by Martha Walter. I said, ‘Roxanne, we don’t have that much money. How in the world did you get this?’” With a sly smile Roxanne explained that she had pinched pennies from the household account, paying the dealer a little at a time until she could bring the painting home.

“That’s just the way we were,” says Thams. “We had no business doing foolishness like that. But I think art was just something that we felt was as necessary [to a home] as a sofa or chair. It was part of our life.”

Thams made a career in the oil business, working first for Phillips in Indiana and Texas, then Anderson Pritchard in Oklahoma City. He went into business for himself in 1951 and says, “That’s the last time I drew a paycheck.” Work as an independent had its ups and downs. “My son Nic said he can always remember when times were bad,” says Thams, “because we had creamed tuna for supper, and when I’d just made a deal, we had steak.”

As Thams’ business grew, so did his art collection. In 1974 on a visit to Scottsdale, Arizona, he came face to face with *Fine*



Joseph Henry Sharp *Fine Bull*



Kenneth Miller Adams *French Landscape*

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6
in Bizzell Memorial Library.



ABOVE: With the addition of the Thams Collection to the previously acquired Fleischaker Collection, OU's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art now possesses at least one major work from each member of the famed Taos Society of Artists pictured here in 1932. Back row, left to right—Walter Ufer, W. Herbert Dunton, Victor Higgins, Kenneth Adams; middle row, left to right—E. Martin Hennings, Bert G. Phillips, E. Irving Couse, Oscar E. Berninghaus; front row, left to right—Joseph H. Sharp, Ernest L. Blumenschein. *Photograph by C. E. Lord, courtesy of Museum of New Mexico, Neg. No. 28817*

Ernest L. Blumenschein
Haystack, Taos

THE THAMS COLLECTION

Bull, a portrait by Joseph Henry Sharp. He could not tear himself away. "I said to myself, 'I've got to have that painting,'" says Thams, "and I guess that's what got me started on the Southwestern art." Lee says it is fitting that *Fine Bull* became Thams' initial Taos painting, since Sharp is widely recognized as the father of the Taos Society of Artists.

By and large, the Taos painters were academic realists, many of whom had been trained in Paris. They migrated to New Mexico from the East Coast and Europe at the turn of the century, seeking to escape the narrowly defined tastes of New York gallery owners. After years in salons, the artists were invigorated by the intense sunlight and natural beauty of the New Mexican landscape, as well as the symbolism and abstraction they found in the Native American culture.

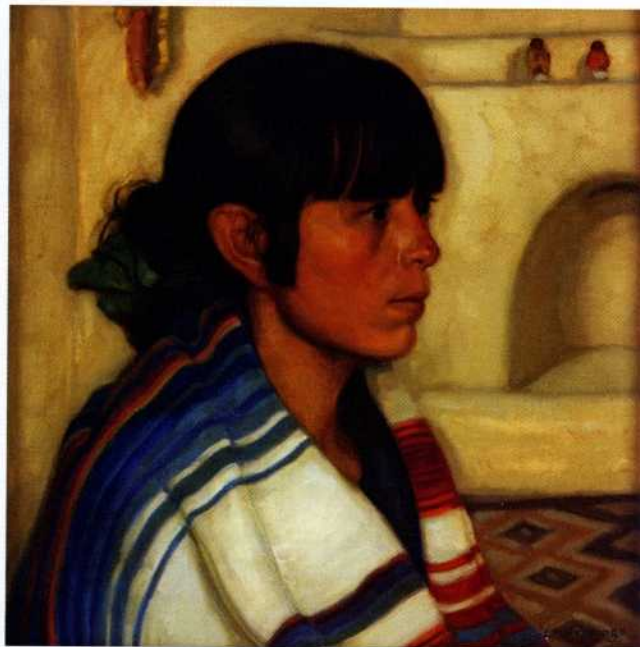
With the purchase of *Fine Bull*, Thams became fascinated with the Taos artists and began extensive research on the painters of the Taos Society. Over the years, he became not only a great admirer of Southwestern art, but a knowledgeable and prudent collector as well. He was seldom at a disadvantage when negotiating with art dealers for the works he wished to acquire.

Once a dealer visiting Midland invited Thams to meet him at a hotel to look at a painting by E. Irving Couse. When Thams got to the hotel, the dealer had the painting propped up against the wall with an empty frame beside it. He told Thams he would sell him the painting, *Lovesong* (a.k.a. *Moonlight*), but not the frame. Thams knew that Couse often made custom frames for his paintings and believed it would have been a "sacrilege" to separate the two. "I told the dealer, 'Nice try, but I'm not buying the painting without the frame,'" says Thams. His instincts proved sound. Later research proved that the frame was designed by Couse himself.

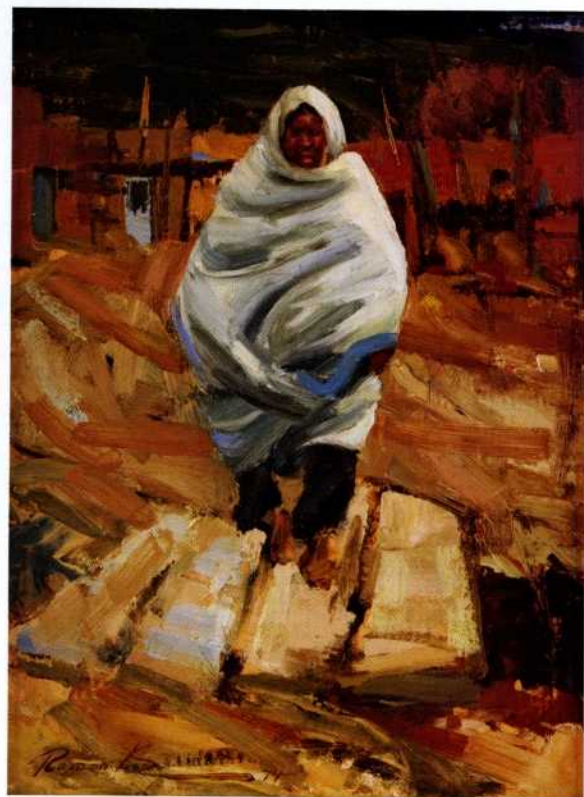
During their married life, the Thamses logged many miles on the highways and back roads between Midland and Santa Fe. Thams says he and Roxanne loved the Santa Fe of the 1960s and '70s, a time when they could walk the streets at night, the air heavy with pinõn smoke and not a tourist in sight. The couple earned respect in galleries from the Forrest Fenn to the Gerald Peters. Over the years, the Thamses developed a close friendship with Zeb and Betty Conley of the Jamison Gallery, whom they credit as being their best and most knowledgeable suppliers. Conley knew the Thamses' taste so well that when a certain painting came on the market, he would make sure the couple was the first to know.

A combination of luck and intuition played an important role in Thams' acquisition of his "pride and joy," Ernest L. Blumenschein's *Haystack, Taos*. "I was recovering from surgery," Thams recalls, "and I promised myself that 'when I get out of this bed, I'm going to buy a 280ZX and take my grandson on a road trip.' That's exactly what I did. Robby flew in to Midland, and we hopped in the car and drove up to Santa Fe."

When they walked into the Jamison Gallery, a surprised Conley



E. Martin Hennings *Juanita*



Ramon Kelley *Taos Pueblo Sketch*



Fremont Ellis
Old Santa Fe Trail at Telocote

Captivated by this work of Fremont Ellis from the moment they saw it, the Thamses later found themselves near the town of Telocote and set out to find the little church in the painting. Topping a hill, they were startled to see below not only the buildings they sought but also the exact sky Ellis had put on canvas.



Leon Gaspard *Vitebsk on the Dvina*

came over at once, saying, "You got here in a hurry!" Thams says he must have looked puzzled because Conley explained that he had left a message on Thams' answering machine saying that he had a stunning Blumenschein for sale, but that it would not last long. Fortunately for Thams, he had not been home when the message came or he never would have made it to the gallery in time.

On another trip, he and Roxanne stopped at the Gerald Peters Gallery. From a wall covered with more than 30 paintings, the Thamses honed in on the same small landscape. "The painting just jumped out at us," says Thams. "I looked at Roxanne, and she looked at me, and we just bought it." The painting was *Old Santa Fe Trail at Telocote* by Fremont Ellis, which featured a mission church under a dramatic sky.

The next year on their way out to Santa Fe, the Thamses were caught in a violent spring storm. They had deviated from their usual route, and by the time they left the rain and hail behind, they found themselves outside the town of Telocote. They decided to drive through the little town to see if they could find the church in their Ellis painting. After wandering the side streets, they had turned around and were coming back over a hill when the scene took their breath away. There before them was not only the little church and houses, but also the same rolling, white thunderheads, hanging in the eastern sky, giving them the same view that Fremont Ellis had captured on canvas years before.

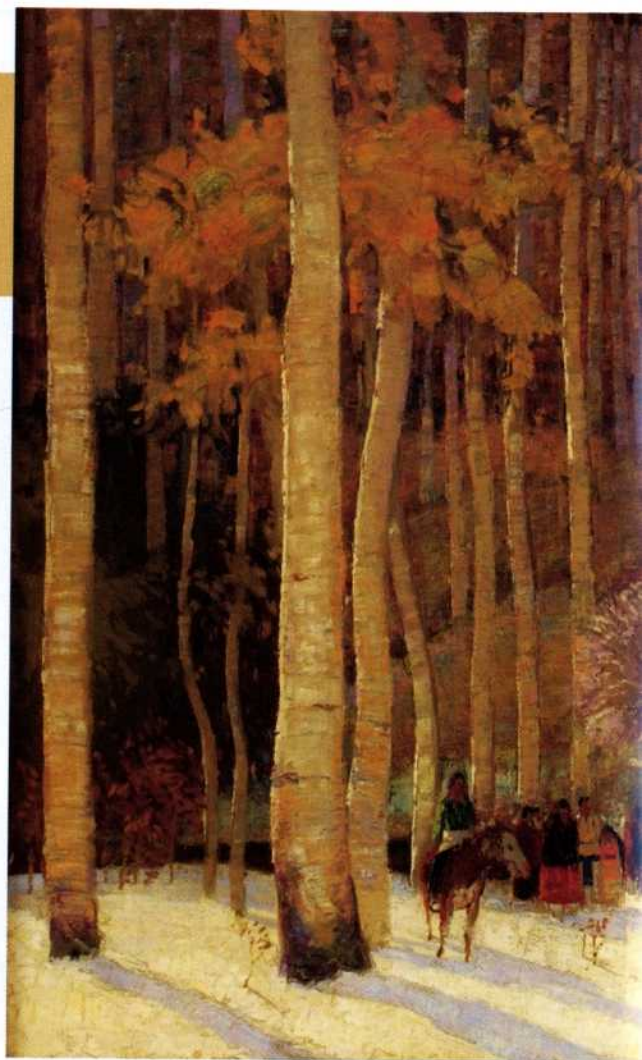
"The road was so muddy, I didn't think we'd ever make it up that hill," Thams says. "We slid around a bit, but we made it."

Thams says there is an emotional attachment to each painting in the collection. "Every painting recalls a certain event or time I like to remember," he says. The couple purchased *Juanita*, a portrait by E. Martin Hennings, in no small part because she was the wife of Frank Samora, Hennings' model for *Drummer Boy*, a painting they had purchased four years earlier. With the acquisition of *Juanita*, the Thamses were delighted to reunite the couple on the walls of their home.

One of the Thamses' favorite Taos painters was Leon Gaspard. The son of a Russian officer, Gaspard became a world traveler in his teens. His clear, bright colors are reminiscent of the Impressionists, while his subject matter reflects street scenes from Moscow to Canton. Almost 30 years later, Thams easily can recall the acquisition of his first Gaspard.

"Roxanne and I got a notice in the mail that there was a Gaspard showing in the Schriver home, where Gaspard once lived in Taos," says Thams. "So we went up there, armed with a small amount of cash, just hoping to be able to buy something." Thams remembers walking into the two-story adobe home and finding it filled with brightly colored paintings, antique Oriental rugs and wonderful early American furniture.

"You talk about a mix of cultures," says Thams. "But it worked. It was really quite a tour de force. Anyhow, we bought



Irving K. Manoir *Aspens and Snow*



E. Irving Couse *Love Song*

Bill Thams was knowledgeable enough about E. Irving Couse to know that the artist often created frames for his paintings that were works of art in themselves. When a dealer attempted to sell him *Lovesong* (a.k.a. *Moonlight*) with another frame, Thams insisted that the original frame be part of the sale. Later research verified that the frame indeed was designed by Couse himself.

THE THAMS COLLECTION



Vitebsk on the Dvina, the one we could afford, and that is how we got our first Gaspard." Ten more paintings by the Russian painter would follow. "Some people refer to these as 'my little Gaspards,'" Thams says, "but I call them my little gems."

Once in awhile, Thams would stumble across a painting from an artist who was virtually unknown, yet he knew that the work belonged in his collection. Such is the case with *Aspens and Snow*, by Irving K. Manoir. Thams was so taken by the painting that he bought it on the spot and took it home to a less than enthusiastic Roxanne. "I said, 'All right, Roxanne, you can't see it properly here in the house. Let's take it outside,'" recalls Thams. There in the natural light, Roxanne, too, was taken by the subtle hues of violet light coming through the aspens after an early autumn snowfall. The painting is clearly a masterpiece.

"We weren't afraid to buy something that we thought was good, that we knew we liked," says Thams. "There was no peer pressure. We never bought a painting because someone else had something, and we had to have something like it. Sometimes we did without to buy paintings, but we always bought what we liked."

Susan Baley, education curator at the Fred Jones, says Thams is unique as a collector. "People collect for many reasons," says Baley. "Investment, prestige. Mr. Thams collected for the pure joy of it. Every painting meant something to him personally." Not only can Thams recall the details of each acquisition, but he also kept such impeccable records Roxanne often referred to him as a frustrated curator.

Byron Price, director of the Charles M. Russell Center, says the Thams Collection is a great asset to the University and to art scholars at large. "It gives us so many resources to work with," says Price. "It will help us to develop an appreciation for Western art."

The Thams Collection will have a starring role at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art when it reopens in fall 2004 after a \$14 million renovation and expansion. Lee says he is "absolutely thrilled" with the gift and believes that the Thams Collection is the perfect complement to works already in the permanent collection.

"The Thams Collection depicts different aspects of the art from the Taos Society than the paintings in the Fleischaker Collection," Lee explains, "so viewers experience the full range of these artists' careers."

At the end of the exhibit's debut last May, Thams visited the gallery at the Fred Jones to have a private moment to say goodbye to the familiar paintings that had been part of his home and his life for decades. "I loved seeing them there," he says. "Some of them looked better with the museum lighting than they did in my house. It was like seeing them for the first time. I can't think of a better place for them, and if Roxanne is flitting around, I'm sure she's happy, too." 