

A Work of Art

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Viewed in their magnificent new setting,
the collections of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum
take on new meaning for the visitors
streaming through its galleries.

Robert C. Lautman

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With less than 24 hours till show time, the staff at the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art was working its way through a lengthy to-do list before opening the doors to company. While volunteers hung the last of more than 800 gallery labels, staff members fine-tuned lighting, straightened rugs and arranged fresh flowers for the public's first glimpse of the museum since May 2003. Preparators literally were walking out the back door when the first of 1,500 special guests arrived for ribbon-cutting ceremonies at the museum's dramatic new entrance on Elm Avenue.



The buzz surrounding opening night had a familiar feel to OU regent and renowned musical theater producer Max Weitzenhoffer. "It was the same rush as opening a Broadway show," said the long-time museum supporter, "only without the fear of failure."

With several new collections making their public debuts and old favorites taking center stage in a breathtaking new facility, the January 21 opening was one of the most highly anticipated and well-attended events in OU's history. The 34,000 square-foot wing, named for OU benefactors Mary and Howard Lester of San Francisco, transformed the museum into a shining star that attracted media attention coast to coast.

A minimalist masterpiece designed by Washington, D. C., architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, the Lester Wing itself is a work of art—a matrix of nine pavilions interconnected by hallways of glass. At the apex of each roofline, a pyramid of bronze and glass allows an abundance of filtered, natural light into the galleries below. "The magic of this building is the light," Jacobsen explains. "It will surprise people when they come in."

Jacobsen accepted the challenge of the museum expansion after working with

■ The new Mary and Howard Lester Wing, which was designed by Washington, D. C., architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen as a suite of 10 identically sized pavilions, gives the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art a dramatic new entrance on Elm Avenue and an additional 34,000 square feet of space.

OU President David and First Lady Molly Shi Boren on the 1994 renovation of Boyd House. "I knew the Borens' [art] collection. It's very eclectic," he notes. "If I went into Boyd House and did my minimalist thing, it wouldn't work. I had to take their collection and make a home for it."

Now Jacobsen has taken the rich and diverse collections of the Fred Jones and made a home for them. The new wing more than doubles the size of the previous facility, adding galleries, an auditorium, an orientation room, classroom space, a multipurpose room for dinners and receptions, and an expanded museum store. The award-winning architect, who has built landmark buildings around the world, from the U.S. Embassy in Paris to the Fabergé Gallery for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, has declared the Lester Wing "the best thing I will ever do in my life."

For the museum building, he drew on his voluminous mental file of colors and textures when considering materials that would be compatible with a wide range of artistic styles. The permanent collection includes more than 8,000 works ranging from the detailed mosaics of Persian manuscripts to a stunning suite of Robert Rauschenberg screen prints.

"The paintings will change, but the walls remain the same, so it was important to use something that would complement, but not overpower the art," says Jacobsen. "The limestone walls are the color of French unsalted butter and the rooftops, a wonderful green slate. It's a happy combination."

Another happy combination is the relationship between the works of art and the new and reconfigured galleries of the Fred Jones. During his remarks to an overflow crowd on opening night Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, pronounced the new building "a gem."

"In many museums, you've got aggressive and dominating architecture and the art recedes and is almost like an afterthought," says de Montebello. "Or you have terribly bland buildings where the art certainly holds its own, but it's got to fight against the monotony of the surroundings. Here you have a perfect and

■ Max Weitzenhoffer sits in his mother's 18th century needlepoint armchair in a gallery reminiscent of the library in his parents' Oklahoma City home. Through her bequest, Mrs. Weitzenhoffer left the museum more than \$50 million worth of French Impressionist art, along with furniture, antiques and family heirlooms.



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Portrait of Alexander Reid, c. 1887
Aaron M. and Clara Weitzenhoffer Bequest, 2000

elegant...harmony between wonderful architecture and the collection."

The Barbara Hepworth sculpture, *Two Figures*, which had braved the extremes of Oklahoma weather for more than 30 years outside the museum's north entrance on Boyd Street, got a refurbishing and new life as the centerpiece of the museum's grand lobby. "It's never looked better," says Eric M. Lee, the Wylodean and Bill Saxon Director of the Fred Jones. "It's as if Jacobsen created the space specifically for this sculpture."

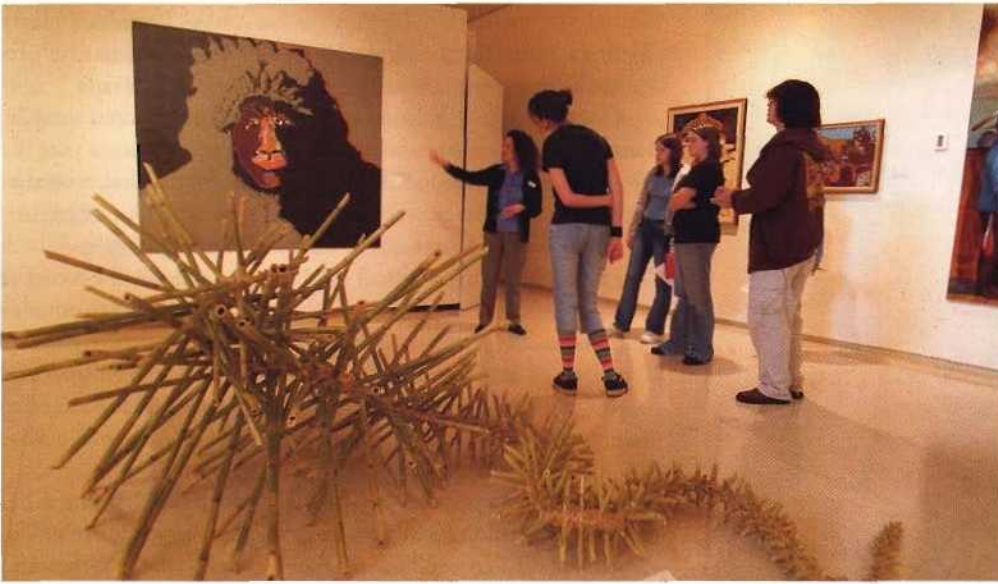
It is evident throughout the building that Jacobsen, who received his bachelor's degree in fine art before getting his master's in architecture at Yale, retains his artistic sensibilities. "The conceptual origin of this

building was influenced by artists," he says. "Much of their work is designed to hang in houses, so the scale of the new wing is domestic. I looked at this project as a gathering of houses, to keep the scale in line with what the painter had in mind."

Nowhere is this more evident than in the galleries that showcase the Weitzenhoffer Collection of French Impressionism. The extraordinary collection of 33 French Impressionist masterworks was donated to the museum in 2000 through the bequest of Oklahoma City philanthropist Clara Weitzenhoffer. Valued at more than \$50 million, the Aaron and Clara Weitzenhoffer Collection includes works by Degas, Gauguin,



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Susan Baley, curator of education, offers a group of visiting students insights into the Fritz Scholder painting *Indian with Tear*. The museum boasts significant holdings of American Indian art from works by the Kiowa Five to contemporary artists, such as Maria Martinez and Allan Houser. In the foreground is a cane and seed sculpture, titled *Seed*, by OU art student Brooke Madden.

Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Vuillard and others. It is the largest single gift in OU history and the most important donation of French Impressionism ever made to a public university.



■ Chris Carlson, a mechanical engineering senior from Plano, Texas, found a romantic spot to propose to Brook Breitenkamp, an elementary education sophomore from Enid: the entry way to the Weitzenhoffer rooms, which hold the museum's collection of French Impressionism. He must have chosen wisely; Brook said "yes." Looking on from her gilt frame, Clara Weitzenhoffer seems pleased.

Jacobsen says the gift and the family behind it inspired him to design galleries that would evoke the Weitzenhoffer home in Nichols Hills, complete with Clara's 18th-century British antiques and Chinese export porcelain. "I wanted to emphasize that these paintings did not appear by magic," says Jacobsen. "They came from a real Oklahoma family, and these are their rooms."

Included in the suite of Weitzenhoffer rooms are the entry way, from which Clara would view *Les Roses*, her favorite Renoir; the library, which boasts a Monet, Pissarro, Degas and others; the living room with the famous *Portrait of Alexander Reid* by Vincent van Gogh; and the

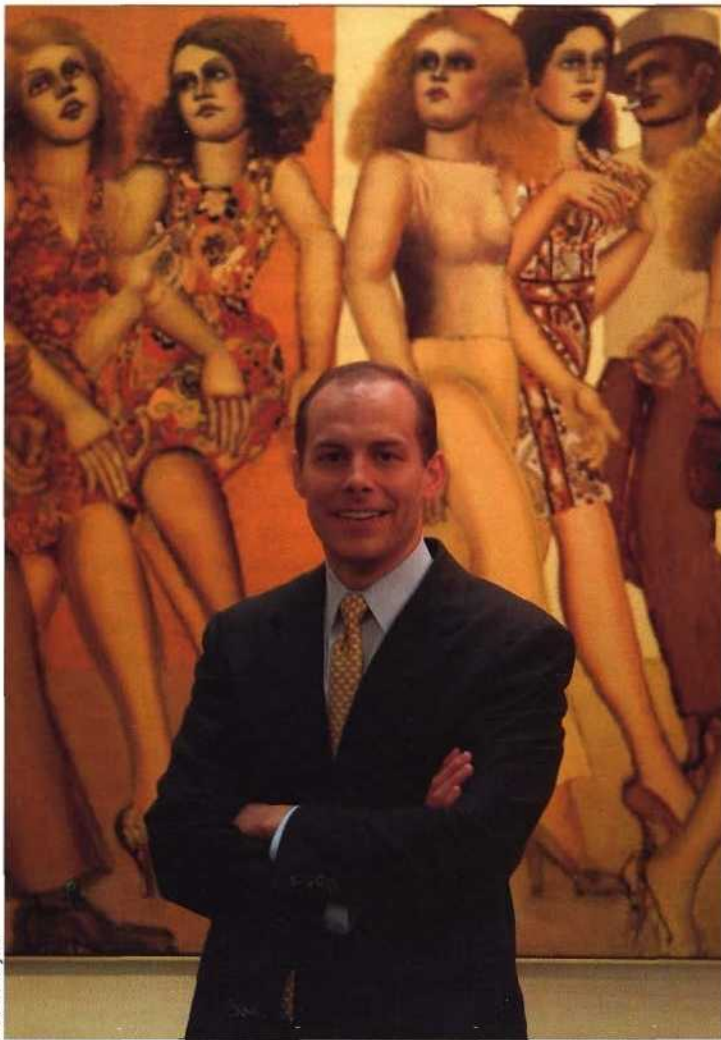
dining room, complete with Clara's blue and white porcelain. So convincing is the replication that Max Weitzenhoffer, who grew up in the house, says entering the rooms is like going back in time. "I can't go in those rooms without feeling something," he says. "I walk in, and they (his parents) are still there."

President Boren says the Weitzenhoffer rooms remind him of a visit he made as an undergraduate to the president's house at Yale University. He describes walking into the beautiful rooms and coming face to face with the magnificent collection of art as "life-changing." He is delighted that the same thing could happen to OU students on their first visit to the Fred Jones.

"The arts are not optional at a great university—they are necessary," Boren says. "Art allows us to see through the eyes of others and the world around us. This museum is a celebration of not only the artwork, but also of everyone who contributed to it."

The museum has had a permanent home on the OU campus since 1971, when Mr. and Mrs. Fred Jones of Oklahoma City donated funds for the construction of an art complex in memory of their son, Fred Jones Jr., who died in a plane crash during his senior year at OU. However, the origins of the art museum date to the 1920s, when Oscar B. Jacobson (1882-1966), director of the School of Art, began collecting works for the University long before an actual art museum ever existed. Like Boren, Jacobson strongly believed that firsthand encounters with original works of art were an important component of any well-rounded education.

A gift of more than 700 works of Asian art from Ponca City oilman Lew Wentz and British photographer R. Gordon Matzene in the mid-1930s helped convince University officials that an art museum would indeed make a nice addition to their growing campus. In 1936, the University officially founded the OU Museum of Art and named Jacobson director. The first galleries were housed in the former OU library, what is now Jacobson Hall.



Robert Taylor

■ Eric M. Lee joins the crowd in Lester Johnson's *Street Scene—People Walking #5*, which welcomes visitors into the museum's contemporary art gallery. Lee has served as director of the Fred Jones since 1997, during which time the museum has experienced exceptional growth, both in terms of its permanent collection and the facility itself.

Until his retirement in 1950, Jacobson continued to acquire fine art for the museum and to promote the work of American Indian artists, especially the group known as the Kiowa Five, who studied at OU.

Jacobson proved to be a visionary when it came to building the museum's permanent collections. In 1937, he acquired the first of the museum's five Edward Weston prints directly from the photographer himself. Since its auspicious beginning, the photography collection has grown to nearly 1,300 prints including works by Ansel Adams, Elliott Erwitt, Mary Ellen Mark, Irving Penn and Alfred Stieglitz.

Another of Jacobson's contributions was arranging for the 1948 purchase of nearly one-third of the 117 American paintings and watercolors comprising the controversial exhibition, "Advancing American Art," sponsored by the U.S. State Department. The government purchased the works from well-known American artists of the day in order to showcase American culture abroad. But when Secretary of State George C. Marshall

visited the exhibition in Prague, he cabled President Harry Truman immediately saying he was shocked by what he perceived as inappropriate ideologies of some of the artists.

Congress, with help from the Hearst newspaper empire, fanned the flames of public indignation, and within a year the program was suspended. The paintings were recalled, stored in a warehouse, declared war surplus and sold at auction. On June 24, 1948, *The Oklahoma Daily* reported that 36 paintings, which "have shocked congressional sensibilities" and are "a bit on the modern side," were purchased by the University. From this exhibition, the museum gained remarkable works by Romare Bearden, Stuart Davies, William Gropper, Edward Hopper and others. Receipts show that the University paid \$50 for one of its most valuable works, Georgia O'Keeffe's *Cos Cob*, and a mere \$1,061 for the entire package.

Over the years, the museum's permanent collection has experienced exceptional growth through the generosity of donors such as Ellen and Richard Sandor, the Weitzenhoffers and the Jerome Westheimer family. More than half of the art now seen in the galleries has been given to the museum in the past eight years.

"Ten years ago, the museum had no holdings of Southwestern art," says Lee. "Now we have three large galleries dedicated to the Taos Society of Artists." In 1996, President and Mrs. Boren spearheaded a successful fundraising campaign to acquire for the museum the Richard H. and Adeline J. Fleischaker Collection, composed primarily of Native American and Southwestern art. In 2003, William H. Thams, of Midland, Texas, in memory of his wife and fellow collector, Roxanne, gave the museum 30 major works by Taos artists. Following the Thams Collection came the 2004 gift of 12 additional Taos paintings

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art *Named Spaces*

- Sandy Bell Gallery
- Molly Shi Boren Gallery
- Natalie and Paul Buckthal Gallery
- Marly LeFlore and Richard H. Clements Family Gallery
- ConocoPhillips Gallery
- Elaine and Gene Edwards Gallery
- Janell and Rik Helmerich Galleries
- Hobson Family Gallery
- Mary Eddy and Fred Jones Auditorium
- McCasland Foundation Lobby
- Nancy Johnston Records Gallery
- Ann and Hugh Roff Gallery
- Ellen and Richard L. Sandor Gallery
- Dee Dee and Jon R. Stuart Classroom
- Priscilla C. and Joseph N. Tate Gallery
- Roxanne P. and William H. Thams Gallery
- University of Oklahoma Foundation Inc. Orientation Room
- Lissa and Cy Wagner Gallery
- Anne and Henry Zarrow Galleries

from Priscilla C. and Joseph Tate of Tulsa.

"It is unbelievable how well the collections fit together," says Lee. "The Tate paintings don't duplicate the works in either the Thams or the Fleischaker but add strength and extraordinary depth overall. To be able to see how the artists changed during their careers is a terrific asset for students and visitors to the museum."

The Native American collection also expanded dramatically with the 2003 acquisition of the R. E. Mansfield Collection—nearly 1,000 works of art—divided equally between the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D. C. Mansfield says he chose the Fred Jones because so many of the artists in his collection were from Oklahoma, and he wanted to see their paintings "come home."

Even since the January opening, Lee has had to reconfigure galleries to accommodate several new additions to the museum's collection of contemporary art, including a painting by Roger Sprague, the 2001 Westheimer Distinguished Visiting Artist in the School of Art. The painting, *Balcony with Windows*, was a gift from the Borens.

"We are so grateful for President and Mrs. Boren's support for the arts, both administratively and personally," says Lee. "Every time I walk into the building, I get the sense that something magical has been created in Oklahoma."

Jacobsen agrees. "I think it's marvelous to have this collection right here on the plains. This museum has one of the finest collections in the United States. Not everyone knows that yet, but they will."

■ Local and area public school students are regular visitors to the Fred Jones as part of the pARTner Project, sponsored by the museum's education department and the Oklahoma State Arts Council. Here, students from Westmoore High School explore a series of works by Robert Rauschenberg.

Museum Offers New Catalogue

In celebration of recent acquisitions and a stunning new facility, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is offering for the first time a catalogue featuring works from its rich and diverse permanent collection. Combining more than 270 full-color reproductions with explanatory text, the catalogue highlights 101 of the museum's most important holdings, as well as related works by the artists and their peers. The work is being published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

"This book celebrates one of the nation's finest university art collections," says Eric M. Lee, museum director and co-author, with Rima Canaan, of *Selected Works: The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma*. "More than half of the featured works in the catalogue have been acquired by the museum in the past decade. We are extremely grateful to the Jones family for making this publication possible."

The catalogue is dedicated to Mary Eddy and Fred Jones, who funded the museum's original facility in 1971 as a memorial to their son, Fred Jones Jr. The family's tradition of support continues through the Jones' daughter, Marilyn Jones Upsher, and grandsons Fred Jones Hall, Brooks Hall and Kirkland Hall, who provided funding for the catalogue.

Arranged in chronological and thematic order from ancient Asian to contemporary American art, the book offers a sampling of the paintings, sculptures, works on paper and photographs from more than 8,000 works in the museum's permanent collection. Artists represented include Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, Edward Weston, Allan Houser and members of the Taos Society of Artists.

Catalogues are available at the museum store or on-line at Amazon.com.



Robert Taylor