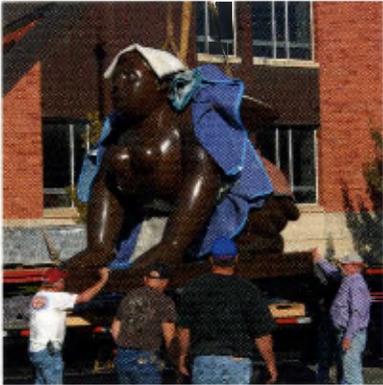


A parting gift from an OU patron brings a benevolent guardian to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.



The Sphinx has landed

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Photos by Robert Taylor

With a crowd watching, the 3,000-pound figure hung breathtakingly, inappropriately in midair, suspended by straps from a giant yellow crane in front of the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. The plight was undignified for a half-woman, half-winged lion of her sizable girth, and onlookers felt for her as one would for a plump cat lifted skyward by a sling around its tummy.

Slowly, smoothly and with great care, museum preparators and OU Physical Plant staff inched the sculpture toward her

waiting platform. Her journey, which had included stops in Florence, Venice, Tokyo and Singapore, was coming to an end. As she was lowered onto the base, cheers and applause erupted from the crowd. The new guardian for the Mary and Howard Lester Wing had arrived.

Sphinx, a monumental sculpture by Colombian artist Fernando Botero, found its way to OU through the generosity of long-time museum benefactor Jerome M. Westheimer Sr. When Westheimer died in September 2004, he left a provision in his will for the OU art museum to purchase a Botero sculpture. The task fell to Eric Lee, then director of the Fred Jones, to decide which one. Working through the Marlborough Gallery in New York, Lee located *Sphinx*, which was touring the globe with an exhibition of several larger-than-life Botero sculptures.



After traversing the globe, *Sphinx*, a monumental sculpture by Fernando Botero, finds a permanent home on the west lawn of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. The work of art was a parting gift from long-time museum patron Jerome M. Westheimer Sr. Other gifts of outdoor sculpture from Westheimer include *Mustang* by Luis Jiménez and *Interlocking Triptych* by Jesús Morales.

“I think of all Botero’s works, this is a perfect fit for the museum,” says Lee, now director of the Taft Museum in Cincinnati. “Thematically, it works well with the pyramids of the building, even though it is a Greek, not Egyptian, sphinx. The curves of the sculpture contrast nicely with the geometry of the building, and the bronze is really beautiful against the limestone.”

Like all Botero sculptures, the piece is playful and witty. Although her powerful torso is that of a beast with imposing claws on the hind feet, the tapered fingernails on her hands are lovingly manicured, and her expression is one of benevolence. The sphinx sits near the museum’s entrance like a post-modern version of the traditional lions that stand guard at the Chicago Art Institute and the New York Public Library.

Westheimer, a leader in the oil and gas industry from Ardmore,

explored his love of art through his own personal art collection and by supporting institutions including OU’s Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. He was honored with the Governor’s Arts Award in 1982 for elevating public awareness about Oklahoma artists through his efforts in establishing and organizing the Oklahoma State Art Collection. Westheimer was a great admirer of Botero, who at 74 continues to be one of the most prolific artists of the 21st century.

“Mr. Westheimer was a huge fan of Botero,” says Lee. “And as a collector, he wanted to see an outdoor, monumental Botero in his home state. I am thrilled that through his vision and generosity to the University, we were able to make that happen.”

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