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105 rare art pieces are given to museum

*The gift is from collectors
Richard B. and Erna Flagg*

By JAMES AUER
Journal art critic

More than 100 rare and costly artworks have been given to the Milwaukee Art Museum by Milwaukee collectors Richard B. and Erna Flagg.

Russell Bowman, the art museum's director, said the Flaggs' gift was second in importance only to the Bradley Collection in the history of the institution, and a "critical" step in the continued development of the permanent collection.

The objects — almost equally divided between Renaissance and Medieval art ob-

jects and Haitian paintings and sculpture — were assembled by the Flaggs over a lifetime of study and collecting here and in their native Germany.

The pending ownership transfer of the 55 European and 50 Haitian items to the museum was announced Wednesday night at a dinner meeting of the Milwaukee Art Museum Council, an honorary society made up of major benefactors.

The art objects, which have been on loan to the art museum for the past decade, will take their place in the permanent collection in January 1991, Bowman said.

Flagg was chairman and chief executive officer of the Flagg Tanning Corp. until his retirement several years ago.

Because of the specialized nature of the items involved, no estimate could be made of

the gift's total value.

In recognition of the gift, the first two galleries of the European section on the museum's Lake Level will be dedicated as the Richard and Erna Flagg Galleries next spring. Members of the Art Museum Council previewed the reinstalled galleries Wednesday night.

'AN EXTRAORDINARY GESTURE'

Both the Haitian and European collections — largely assembled since the Flaggs' arrival in the US from war-torn Europe in November 1941 — are necessary to the continued development of the art museum, Bowman said.

"It's an extraordinary gesture. The Medieval and Renaissance material is not represented in the collection in any other way, nor

is there similar material in the community. As for the Haitian art, it is unparalleled and, again, essential to our collection of naive and outsider art."

Richard Flagg, prevented by illness from attending the dinner Wednesday, said in a prepared statement that the gift represented the culmination of a love affair with the city of Milwaukee that began with the couple's arrival here in 1942.

"I fell in love with Milwaukee in the first half hour of my very first visit here," he said. "Erna and I have never swayed in our love for this wonderful city and are very pleased to be able to share our collection with the people who live here."

Please see Art page 7

Art/Collectors donate more than 100 rare works

From page 1

The Flagg collection of Haitian art is considered the most extensive of its kind on permanent view at any US museum.

Perhaps the best-known painting in the collection is Hector Hypolite's "St. Francis and the Christ Child," executed in oil on cardboard and dated 1946-1948.

The Renaissance and Medieval items encompass game boards and timepieces as well as religious statues and paintings.

Among the highlights of this portion of the gift are "St. George and the Dragon," a late 15th-century sculpture of polychromed wood that epitomizes the skill of the German carvers of the period, and a 17th-century, gilt-bronze clock from Augsburg, Germany.

The Flaggs, now 84, were born in the same year in Frankfurt, met at 17 and were married nine years later. Almost from the start, they cultivated their collecting taste together.

Flagg had begun his collecting activities at 12 when, as a student of classical languages, he became interested in Greek and Roman coins. He bought his first Renaissance clock, known in Germany as "the kingly gift," when he was 17.

"The key for both of us," he reflected, "is our love of beauty. We never bought anything for any other reason than that we loved it. I

think my love for art also came to me naturally, because I had a talent for drawing and sculpting."

At 21, Flagg, then an aspiring artist, was sent by his father to study sculpture in Vienna.

"That experience had a profound effect on me as a collector," he said, "because I found out firsthand what it takes to be a sculptor."

Similarly, Flagg's enthusiasm for Haitian art developed because "it was a matter of love — this time for an art form that I found to be genuine, honest and powerful in its directness and simplicity."

"I feel very fortunate not to have had any tunnel vision which could have prevented me from being able to see beauty in all kinds of unexpected corners of human creativity."



"ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON," a late 15th-century German sculpture of polychromed wood, is among the pieces donated by the Flaggs.



Photo by Ephraim Lever

RICHARD B. AND ERNA FLAGG have donated more than 100 Medieval, Renaissance and Haitian artworks to the Milwaukee Art Museum.