

# NEW TREASURES AT THE MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

By Kathleen Winkler

Imagine 946 works of art—paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, decorative objects, carvings—all in one place. It would be an impressive sight. That's exactly what the Milwaukee Art Museum gathered in 1991—946 new works of art.

That total represents the most new acquisitions the museum has ever had in a single year with the exception of when Peg Bradley donated her magnificent collection to the museum in 1975.

Why so many new works of art in just one year? Because, explained Director Russell Bowman, a quirk in the tax laws created a "tax window" in 1991 when it was to a donor's advantage to give either money or art objects to a museum. A lot of artists, collectors and donors took advantage of the opportunity and the Milwaukee Art Museum's collection was significantly enriched because of it.

"Our museum is fortunate to have eight or ten endowed funds in which donors have given money specifically to purchase new works of art," said Bowman. "Those funds are invested and we use the interest for purchases. We also have money raised by organizations such as the Friends of Art and the Contemporary Art Society. So in any given year we have about \$500,000 to \$600,000 to spend. In this art market of fifty-million-dollar Van Goghs, that's not a huge amount, but it does allow us to acquire a range of museum-quality materials. We rank 40th in size of the art museums in the country, but 30th in amount of acquisition funds; I know of many other major art museums that don't have that much to work with. It's really the volunteers and their fund raising efforts that makes the difference for us."

Purchased works are chosen by an

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Director Russell Bowman, with a few of the new acquisitions. Photo by John Kimpel.

acquisitions committee composed of museum curators and knowledgeable collectors, and are bought at auction from collectors or from dealers who represent artists. The committee purchases works from dealers around the world, but tries, as often as possible, to work with Wisconsin dealers. In addition, many works of art are

donated directly to the museum.

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Six of the most significant of these new acquisitions include:

***Transfiguration by Odd Nerdrum.***

This large, somber oil, showing a half reclining figure gazing at the horizon, a gift of Karen Johnson Boyd, is by a Norwegian artist who has resurrected the techniques used by the Old Masters, even to grinding his own pigments from natural materials. "His paintings seem to show primitive people after some type of holocaust," said Bowman, "so they are both modern and primitive in a sense. This is one of the most optimistic of his works."

***St. George and the Dragon, German or Austrian wood carving.***

This exquisite carving, donated by Richard and Erna Flagg, once adorned a niche in a Medieval church. St. George slaying a dragon (representing the Christian church slaying the infidel) was a popular theme in Medieval art. Dating from about 1450, this carving is in excellent condition, still bearing much of the original paint and missing only the spear. "It's a very precise, detailed carving and has a very human visage," said Bowman.

***Gathering Wild Flowers by William Merritt Chase.*** This softly-detailed oil landscape from the late 1800s is part of a group of paintings the artist did at his summer home in Shinnecock, Long Island, where he ran a summer art school. This painting

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shows the artist's daughters at play. "It's a very valuable painting that we could not have afforded to buy," Bowman said. "We are fortunate to have received it as a partial gift from the Chester family."

***The Reverend J. Julius Wood, a photograph by David Hill and Robert Adamson.*** Hill and Adamson were among the first photographers working in the medium, not long after photography was invented. This portrait, called a salt type, is dated 1843 and is a preliminary study for a painting of a group of Scottish ministers who established the Free Church of Scotland. The painting was completed 23 years later. "The photos have actually become much more important artistically and historically than the painting itself," Bowman said. The photo was purchased through the Herzfeld fund which is specifically set up to acquire photographs for the museum.

***Maroon, steel, wire mesh, wood and tar sculpture by Martin Puryear.***

Puryear, a black artist, was inspired by the handmade objects of West Africa he saw while a Peace Corps volunteer. This sculpture, a gift of the Contemporary Art Society, is a skin of wire mesh covered with black tar; it exhibits a high degree of craftsmanship. Puryear's works, including this one, are presently in a touring show which will be exhibited in Chicago, Washington D.C., Los Angeles and Philadelphia, so you won't be able to see the actual sculpture until it returns to Milwaukee in early 1993.

***Magique Noir (Black Magic), by Hector Hyppolite.*** Part of the Haitian collection donated by the Flaggs, this oil-on-board painting is by one of the most important Haitian artists working about the time of World War II. Hyppolite was a Vodun priest and the colorful, primitive painting represents some of the aspects of Vodun that we would call black magic (although magic is only a small part of the Vodun religion). "We see the symbols of a black magic ceremony: food offerings,



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lighted candles, spirit bottles," said Bowman. "Some of the symbols in the painting are lost to us and we are still trying to understand them."

These are only six of the works from the museum shopping list which were acquired during 1991. There are many more. The works may be seen at the Milwaukee Art Museum Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursdays from noon to 9 p.m. and Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$2 for students, seniors and the handicapped. The museum is free to children under 12 with an adult and to Milwaukee County residents (identification required) from 10 a.m. to noon on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Parking in the south lot is \$2. EY