



Journal photo by Gary Porter

**RICHARD AND ERNA FLAGG** stand in the new gallery named after them at the Milwaukee Art Center.

# Flagg galleries opened to public

## Medieval, Renaissance, Haitian art are among highlights

By **JAMES AUER**  
Journal art critic

**W**ITH A SNIP of the scissors Tuesday, Erna Flagg opened to public use two art-filled galleries that have been formally named in her honor and that of her husband, Milwaukee-based collector/philanthropist Richard Flagg, at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

The ribbon cutting, in the lake-level European area, marked the culmination of a lifetime of study and connoisseurship for the Flaggs, who have given their substantial collections of Medieval and Renaissance art objects and Haitian paintings and sculpture to the museum.

Susie Jennings, president of the art museum's board of trustees, said the ceremony celebrated "the richness and fullness of lives of two utterly extraordinary people, who are committed to excellence and have searched out the very best that the human spirit produces."

Russell Bowman, the art museum's director, called the dedication of the Flagg galleries and the legal transfer of the couple's collections to museum ownership "really a historic occasion — one that changes the museum and what it offers to its audience."

### THEY'RE 'RENAISSANCE PEOPLE'

The Flaggs are truly "Renaissance people," Bowman declared, adding that without their "incredible generosity" visitors would be unable to see such key works as "the great St. George and the Dragon, the Renaissance Madonna, the 16th-century German Augsburg clock and the Italian Renaissance bust of a man."

The section known as the Treasury, "which is close to the idea of great German royal collections," would not have been possible in its present form without the Flaggs, Bowman said.

Similarly, the Flagg collection of Haitian art, separately on display on the mezzanine level, represents the artistic flowering of this tiny, poverty-stricken Caribbean nation better than any other known body of work in a US museum.

"The Flaggs are among the generation who collected, not for value or craftsmanship but as a means of gaining an insight into a culture that can only be known

through its objects — objects as culture, not as objects themselves," Bowman said.

"Collectors like the Flaggs, who collect art as a way of learning, are rare indeed today," he went on. "As members of a generation that matured before World War II, they came out of this moral crisis with a commitment to values that we don't always see in the more cynical postwar age."

Sheldon B. Lubar, a longtime trustee and former president of the art museum's board, called the Flaggs "true patrons of the arts, who have been very wonderful to this museum and also to Milwaukee. 'Let us get the best' is the principle that has always guided them."

Donald Turek, executive director of the War Memorial Center, said he had been impressed by Richard Flagg's love of country, and his eloquent way of stating what it meant to be an American and live in America.

### AN EMOTIONAL REACTION

For his part, Richard Flagg, born in Germany but now a US citizen, reacted emotionally to the well-attended ceremony, with its many expressions of appreciation and affection.

"Fifty years ago," he said, "we fell in love at first sight with Milwaukee. Since that time we have seen the city grow immensely in all directions — but especially culture. I think no other city is even close to ours."

Flagg confirmed, by indirection, reports that the art museum had been in contention with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., for several major items owned by the family, but that Milwaukee had won out.

"To make somebody happy is wonderful," he said, "but to make many people happy is an even greater joy. . . . How many people could even dream of culminating an unusual lifetime in such an exciting way?"

In addition to naming its first two European galleries in honor of the Flaggs, the museum is committed to publishing full catalogs of their Medieval and Renaissance and Haitian collections.

The Flagg gift — illustrating both the roots of Western art and the roots of the African experience in America — is considered the most significant the institution has received since the late Peg Bradley contributed a major group of modern paintings and sculpture in 1975.