

A Private Passion

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Milwaukee. During World War II, when resources were scarce and the electrical equipment Allen-Bradley produced was much needed, he and Peg moved into a small apartment at the plant to be more available. If Harry had tile in his bathroom, he saw to it there was the same kind of tile in his employees' bathrooms. He was that kind of man. At first, Harry didn't know what to make of the modern art Peg started bringing home, but he stood behind her, and even came to like the modern stuff before he died in 1965.

A flood of collecting followed Peg's purchase of "In Drydock." Soon thereafter, she also began donating many of her purchases to the Milwaukee Art Center. In 1975, when the Bradley Collection had grown so large that the museum could display only a small portion of it, Peg decided to give even more artworks and to donate a million dollars toward building a new wing to house them. She said it wasn't the first million of the \$7.7 million needed she was giving, but the last—the one needed to finish the fund-raising, not to start it. The distinction mirrors her relationship with Milwaukee, one that said, "I have the money, but we're all in this together."

Today, the wing hovers like a giant spaceship overlooking Lake Michigan. Floor-length picture windows form the east wall, bathing the large galleries with strong natural light and creating an equally strong sense of shadow in the rooms. It's an eerie effect that parallels the impression left by many of the paintings, especially the large sample of German Expressionist works where bright colors, like strong natural light, are often bounded by an outline of black shadow. The room and the pictures reflect Peg's personal sensibility, but happily, as might be expected from such an energetic woman, her tastes were as broad as they were sharp.

She knew color and she knew what she liked. When a museum in Munich was selling a few paintings by German Expressionist Gabriele Muntz, Peg flew over and bought them. Though Muntz's name isn't well known to non-specialists, few visitors to the Bradley wing fail to recognize Muntz's "Portrait of a Young Woman" (1909) and "Girl with Doll" (1908-1909) as two of the finest paintings on view. They show the vigor of light and shadow, of color and darkness, the hallmarks of the collection.

But strolling the spacious galleries,

galleries which quadrupled the museum's exhibition space, visitors find themselves led inevitably to the windows looking out over Lake Michigan. There they find a group of impressive sculptures purchased in the 1960's, such as Amaldo Pomodoro's "Sphere No. 5" (1965), a three-foot diameter, polished brass ball cut away to reveal animal-like ribs within. Only Bertolotti's "Tonal" (1967) seems forlorn by the windows, waiting for a breeze to make it ring like a wind chime as it was designed to. It is as though one is being led out of the museum, out of the limitations of two dimensions, out of light and shadow, toward the sculpture garden and a different sort of aesthetic adventure.

Irene Braeger, who served as Harry Bradley's secretary for thirty years and who now administers the Bradley Family Foundation, says Peg switched to buying sculpture in the 1960's because the price of paintings was too high. There may have been an economic excuse for the switch, but probably the deeper reason lies in the fullness of the woman herself. Two dimensions weren't enough; a huge gallery was too restrictive. In the garden, voids and solids, wind and sky complement color and shadow and design, and the only ceiling is the sky.

In the garden, Peg Bradley hit her peak as a collector. It was her backyard, after all, landscaped forty years before she even thought of putting sculpture there. Bob Retko, who's maintained the garden since 1966, tells how she used to sit on the end of her sun porch and plan where the sculptures would go. "Sometimes she'd have us make mock-ups out of plywood before the sculpture got here," he says. "She'd have these silhouettes set up in one spot for a few days and then perhaps have them moved a few feet to the right or left for a few more days before making a final decision. Then she'd tell Retko, 'Pour the footing; that's where it's going to go.'"

The sculptures fan out from the sun porch across the lawn and around the lake; they seem not only comfortable there, but rooted, as though they'd always belonged where they are. All of the pieces seem to graciously occupy their setting. Henry Moore's "Large Torso: Arch" (1962), for example, one of Peg's favorites, stands between the porch and the lake, where guests often went swimming, offering a primal embrace to all who cast their eyes that way. To the west, Mark di Suvero's "Lover" (1971-73), a construction of steel beams painted bright red, commands but doesn't overpower the large expanse of lawn it occupies.

The garden occupied Peg Bradley's at-

tention for the last ten years of her life, and she enjoyed it. A special lighting system, controllable from a light board on the porch, allowed her to play with the aesthetics of her collection at night. James Auer recalls: "That was part of her fun. She'd sit on the porch and adjust the lights for a while and call up her friend Georgia O'Keefe in New Mexico and talk late into the night."

During her life, Peg Bradley's garden was not generally open to the public. It was opened once as a fundraiser for the new museum wing, and Peg was surprised that so many people wanted to see it. Such is the innocence of a private passion. Intended as a memorial to her late husband, in the end the garden stands as a graceful monument to a gifted collector, a woman who understood the balance of things and who could add to it without spoiling it. ✎

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"What viewers see is the vigor of the collector, the bold, brash, colorful, crusty, much-loved Peg Bradley, the no-nonsense dynamo who was up and going before seven a.m."