



A.

Collecting Collectors/Constructing a Collection: RAM at Five Years

By Bruce W. Pepich

In our culture almost every artist needs some form of encouragement to continue generating new work. Once an artwork moves from the somewhat solitary environment of the studio and enters the public domain, it requires a support system of collectors, galleries, writers, funders and museums that exists to aid artists and the formation of their new work. Whether the assistance is emotional (reviews and critical acclaim) or financial (exhibition opportunities, sales, grants and fellowships), it is essential for the further development of an artist's career. Few artists can function in a vacuum, and artwork must have opportunities to communicate with viewers.

The Racine Art Museum (RAM) was created in 2003 to house one of the most significant contemporary craft collections in the country. This new museum was born in a community of 80,000 people with a shifting economic base, transitioning from a manufacturing center into a weekend destination for Chicagoans, a cultural tourism site for the region, and a home to artists relocating into abandoned factory buildings. Although this collection was previously assembled at the 60-year-old Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, RAM represented a substantial departure and a glorious adventure into a new century.

The community placed great effort in funding RAM programming and facilities, however this transformation of a museum and a community has taken place in an economic climate that, because of the factory closings and high unemployment of the last two decades, has precluded raising funds for acquisitions. RAM's leadership believed that collecting was an essential function that formed a bridge to the future and aided artists working today through career documentation. RAM came into being by focusing on one important sector of the artists' support system – collectors. For more than 25 years, we have endeavored to collect collectors, as well as their artwork gifts.

Collectors occupy an incredibly important place in the art world ecosystem. They are often the first to purchase new work from an emerging talent and new series by established figures. This provides financial aid, but even more importantly, serious encouragement that sends a motivated artist back into the studio. Through their purchases, collectors also assist galleries which, in turn, provide exhibition opportunities that broaden the audience through further exposure. By sharing information about artists with other enthusiasts and opening their homes to interested groups, collectors advocate on behalf of the artist, creating a larger pool of new collectors. They bring new talent to the attention of museum curatorial staff and provide financial con-

tributions for exhibition and collection programs. Collectors also donate and purchase artwork with the generous goal of gifting their acquisitions to their favored museum. As many institutions are persistently strapped for funds, the gift of acquisitions allows museums to direct funding to public education programming and audience-building efforts.

Once a piece enters the realm of the museum, it becomes public property. The museum makes a commitment to exhibit and care for it and through a host of related programs, most museums conduct ongoing public education about the works they own. Because of the institution's efforts to constantly broaden their audience, these educational programs introduce visitors to new and unique art forms and bring art to audiences that might never visit a gallery or studio. Museum exhibitions help inspire young people to enter the art field and encourage new collectors, creating the next generation for this cultural ecosystem.

Collectors are essential to assisting artists and the production of their works, but they can also make an incredible difference to a museum. When different collectors with a variety of viewpoints and tastes donate to one museum, they amplify the point of view the museum can achieve with one curator and the acquisition dollars it could assemble as one institution. This expands the reach of the collection and the scope of the exhibitions, making the museum's collection more comprehensive and its exhibitions more broadly based.

RAM's collection currently has two foci: craft media and works on paper. Graphics and photographs were its main interest until the second focus in crafts was added in 1989. RAM acquires in-depth – representing artists in early, middle and late life to demonstrate the progress of their aesthetic ideas over time. The museum collaborates with living artists in ways that encourage the production of new pieces and through these efforts, RAM has much in common with the spirits and interests of its donors. Artists are repeatedly presented in changing thematic exhibitions from RAM's collection, which place them in different contexts to encourage the viewing audience to form new interpretations of these works. RAM believes strongly in documentation and publishes gallery guides and catalogues recording the aesthetic growth of these artists.



C.



B.

A.
Lillian Elliott
Wrapped Form, 1988
wood, rattan, waxed string
and thread
43 x 26 diameter
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Lloyd Cotsen

B.
Earl Pardon
Necklace (#151146) and
Earring Set (#1547), 1989
sterling silver, 14k gold,
aquamarine, amethyst, topaz,
enamel, mother of pearl,
abalone shell
necklace: 17.5 diameter x 1
earrings: 1.75 x .75 x 1
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

C.
Richard Notkin
20th Century Solutions Teapot
2003
earthenware
5 x 9 x 7.75
Racine Art Museum
Gift of David and
Jacqueline Charak



D.



F.



H.



E.



G.



I.

When seeking ways to sustain these efforts, RAM has sought ideal people to partner with—divine donors. These collectors are generous in action and spirit, contributing objects and funds to underwrite collections' care and programs. A genuine love of art and respect for artists' roles in society are indispensable, as well as a true desire to share their excitement in encountering a great work of art with the public. They share their ideas and enthusiasm without exerting undue control or influence and understand the delicate balance they must maintain with the museum in advising on activities, without demanding a specific action. Model donors are thoroughly in agreement with the concept of exhibiting the objects they amass alongside those of other collectors to create new points of view that might not be possible if the piece remained privately held. Divine donors are thoroughly enthusiastic about the manner in which the institution will use the artwork they entrust to it and welcome the opportunity for the museum to present these works on behalf of their creators.

RAM has been exceedingly fortunate to have a large number of divine donors who have made gifts of artwork both prior and subsequent to its 2003 opening. At present, there are donors living in 30 states who have presented gifts to RAM's collection. Five of these collectors—three individuals and two couples—stand out in this group and are honored in an exhibition highlighting their gifts to RAM at SOFA CHICAGO 2008. While we are grateful to each donor who has helped assemble RAM's collection, we believe it is important to front and center five heaven-sent donors, who have served as cornerstones in building RAM's collection through large numbers of gifts of great quality. Moreover, through their enthusiasm, volunteer efforts and financial assistance, these perfect patrons have built on their gifted objects by supporting programming based on RAM's permanent collection in ways that have amplified the effects of their original gifts. They have created a life for this museum and an exciting environment in which works from many sectors of the museum's two foci intersect, creating opportunities wherein new interpretations evolve and both the general public and the seasoned viewer may learn new perspectives.

The original collection at Wustum Museum always benefitted from gifts beginning with the arrival of a substantial grouping of WPA Art presented by the Federal Government in 1943, which was quietly augmented by gifted works on paper until the early 1970s. At this time, a Racine native, noted collector and arts advocate, Karen Johnson Boyd, began presenting the museum with gifts of paper pieces and ceramics. When the museum announced its second focus in crafts, she helped build the collection at a major pace.

In 1991, Ms. Boyd presented the museum with a 200-piece gift that immediately created nationally significant representations of contemporary ceramics, jewelry and basketry. This gift included major figures from two generations in the contemporary ceramics field from the mid-1970s through the late-1980s, such as Rudy Autio, Wayne Higby, Toshiko Takaezu and Robert Turner. The fibers gift included Lia Cook, Dominic Di Mare, Norma Minkowitz and Ed Rossbach. Her metals contribution represented Robert Ebendorf, Arline Fisch, Eleanor Moty and Earl Pardon. The national attention her gift brought to the museum attracted many of the donors who have helped RAM earn its reputation as a leader in the field.

Ms. Boyd has continued to present RAM with gifts of multiple objects each year since 1991. Her efforts to build the ceramics collection have attracted a number of other major gifts, as have her continued efforts to expand RAM's representation of contemporary fibers. Her gifts have contributed multiple examples of artists from throughout their careers to establish a serious documentation of the crafts field.

In recent years RAM has increased efforts to acquire graphics and photographs by important artists in order to create equivalent pairings with crafts masterworks in its exhibitions. Ms. Boyd has been very supportive of these efforts, presenting RAM with nearly 100 examples of prints and drawings by major figures in the painting field in the past three years. She has also donated over 50 photographs by respected artists in addition to ceramic and fibers media. Her most recent gift contained artists as varied as Olga de Amaral, Robert Arneson, Dale Chihuly, Diane Itter, Akio Takamori and Peter Voulkos in craft media; and Bill Brandt, Francesco Clemente, Lee Friedlander, Arnold Newman, Robert Rauschenberg and Esteban Vicente in graphics and photographs.

In 1989, New York collectors Dale and Doug Anderson were attracted to the museum's newly stated crafts focus, and visited on a group tour. They began donating objects to the museum that same year. They have continued their efforts each year since, donating literally hundreds of artworks for the collection and pieces traded or sold to raise funds for acquisitions. Their initial gifts were pieces by Jack Earl and Judy Jensen, and each year this couple has continued to build RAM's representation of the glass field with gifts of works by Carol Cohen, Michael Glancy, Jay Musler and Ginny Ruffner. At the same time, their far-ranging eye and broad tastes also resulted in their contributing ceramics, fibers and metals in support of RAM's mission.



J.

D.
Peter Voulkos
NAGA, 1982
wood-fired earthenware
43 x 28.5
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

F.
Diane Itter
Color Point, 1981
dyed linen
15.5 x 10
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

H.
Dante Marioni
Whopper, 1990
glass
26.5 x 10
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Dale and Doug Anderson

J.
Richard Shaw
Walker with Books, 1982
glazed porcelain
50.5 x 28 x 12
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Donna Moog

E.
Dale Chihuly
Wine Vessel, c. 1965
glass
5.5 x 11.25 x 9
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

G.
Ginny Ruffner
Fruit and Flowers, 1995
glass, enamel paint
25 x 14 x 13
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Dale and Doug Anderson

I.
Jack Earl
Raphael Worked Close to Home
1989
white earthenware, oil paint
32.5 x 29 x 20
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Dale and Doug Anderson

Many pieces the Andersons have presented to RAM are by young talents or are examples of more well-known figures at emerging stages in their careers. Some of these examples are now historic and facilitate the recording of the early development of artists who are acclaimed today. By representing different stages in their lives, RAM can demonstrate how these figures became established and matured. The Andersons' enthusiasm for young talent and new statements by recognized individuals has provided many artists with the kind of animated recognition that encourages the creation of new work. Their recent gifts demonstrate this strategy and include examples by Hank Murta Adams, Lola Brooks, Nora Fok, Dante Marioni, Mark Newport, Kiff Slemmons and Carol Westfall. With their gifts, the Andersons enable RAM to present recent works by a wide range of artists and to introduce new talents. Since RAM strives to encourage living artists, the acquisition of emerging individuals and new statements by recognized figures is a great assist toward achieving this goal.

The Andersons have been active, vocal and positive advocates for RAM since the early 1990s. They have served on committees and the museum's Board of Directors, while constantly putting the museum's staff in touch with artists, activists and colleagues in the field. They have been devoted ambassadors on behalf of the museum and its mission, extending the reach of the staff across the country, bringing other enthusiasts and additional gifts to RAM. If RAM is indeed collecting collectors, the Andersons are often in the front line of the acquisition team.

St. Louis collector, Donna Moog, presented her first gift to the museum in 1996, a Leon Niehues basket following her inaugural visit. In 2000, she presented a gift of 286 contemporary ceramic teapots, instantly establishing one of the largest collections of this kind in the United States. This gift included major figures in ceramic sculpture who occasionally made teapots, artists known for solely creating teapots and studio potters. The Moog gift has created a snapshot of the teapot form and its interpretation as practiced by a wide range of American and European ceramic artists from the 1980s and 1990s, and includes Annette Corcoran, Ken Ferguson, John Glick, Karen Karnes, Jeff Oestreich and Beatrice Wood.

Ms. Moog's gift, which debuted in 2003, added teapots by sculptors already at RAM, augmented the holdings of makers of teapots already in the collection, and substantially added to RAM's representation of studio potters. To this original contribution, she has recently added over 50 additional pieces in ceramics and basketry. This builds on the gift of her teapots by adding sculptures by major figures in the ceramics field including Richard DeVore, Ruth Duckworth and Richard Shaw. Her gift of baskets significantly expands RAM's collection of this material by adding both first-time artists and multiple examples by major figures RAM wishes to represent in depth. Her gift includes works by Linda Bills, Lissa Hunter, Gyöngy Laky, and Sylvia Seventy among others.

RAM's strength in contemporary basketry attracted Los Angeles-based collector, Lloyd Cotsen, who recently donated his contemporary American basket collection to the museum. This gift, which is currently having its debut exhibition in Racine, contains 151 works created by 74 artists. Mr. Cotsen was impressed by RAM's serious interest in baskets and by its ongoing inclusion of this material in its exhibitions. The vast majority of these baskets were created by American women artists during the past 20 years and represent what Mr. Cotsen thinks is an example of American artists taking the lead in the fibers field on an inter-national level. He strongly believes these artists expanded the public's view of baskets as a medium for serious expression. He sees these pieces as evidence of the artists' groundbreaking experimentation to investigate ways in which basketry techniques could be explored as vehicles for creating three-dimensional sculptural forms.

K.
Gyöngy Laky
Former Bonheur, c. 1995
found wine bottle corks
and nails
13 x 18.75
Racine Art Museum
Gift of Lloyd Cotsen

L.
Richard Marquis
Teapot, 2001
glass
7.5 x 8
Racine Art Museum
Gift of David and
Jacqueline Charak

M.
Mary Giles
Shadow Profile, 2001
dyed linen, metal
22 x 15.5 x 5.5
Racine Art Museum
Gift of David and
Jacqueline Charak



K.

All photography: Michael Tropea

His gift, the single largest gift of contemporary baskets to arrive at RAM, joins nearly 300 contemporary baskets in RAM's collection from other donors, creating one of the largest concentrations of this material in any art museum in the United States. The Cotsen Collection is broad and includes single examples by 46 artists. At the same time, it is also in-depth as it includes multiple examples by 28 artists including Dorothy Gill Barnes, Lillian Elliott and John McQueen, creating a broad documentation of this field during the last two decades of the 20th century.

David Charak and his late wife Jacqueline, have been donating objects to RAM for over five years after being introduced to RAM by the dealer Leslie Ferrin. Living in St. Louis, the Charaks have assembled a respected contemporary ceramics collection. Their main gifts to RAM have primarily focused on ceramics and they have increased RAM's growing holdings in teapots with the addition of multiple examples by recognized masters like Richard Notkin, George Ohr and Peter Shire, as well as younger talents entering RAM's collection for the first time. The Charaks have also presented pieces of ceramic sculpture by Jack Earl and Paul Dresang, fibers by Mary Giles, glass by Richard Marquis and metal hollowware teapots by Marilyn Da Silva, Kevin O'Dwyer and Christina Y. Smith, broadening RAM's existing representations of these media.



L.

Like other collectors highlighted in this group, David Charak sometimes calls to discuss a potential purchase he is contemplating, with the expectation that it will eventually come to RAM. It is exciting to watch a collector select something based on how it fills his/her collection. It is even more exhilarating when the museum's needs are also considered. Another delight for a curator is when donors' interests overlap and works arrive that were created by the same artists, but at different times in their careers. RAM has received examples by Anne Kraus from Ms. Boyd, the Charaks and Ms. Moog; ceramics by Ralph Bacerra from the Andersons, Ms. Boyd, the Charaks and Ms. Moog; glass by Richard Marquis from the Andersons, Ms. Boyd and the Charaks; and baskets by Lillian Elliott and John McQueen from Ms. Boyd, Mr. Cotsen and Ms. Moog. Each of these single contributions amplifies the other gifts to more clearly survey the artists' complete bodies of work.

There are many other influential donors who actively support RAM by making contributions of objects and we are grateful to them all. We hope to include some of them in a future exhibition of this type. Collecting collectors is about gathering talented and generous souls to your museum, but it is also about ongoing sharing relationships between the donors and the institution. Just as no artist works alone in a vacuum, so too, collectors and museums must establish a collaborative environment that builds on their mutual strengths to advance the field. They also must reach out to the broader public to establish and involve the next generation of creators and appreciators.



M.

It is appropriate to use the forum of SOFA CHICAGO's to focus on RAM's collection and to acknowledge these collector/donors. Many of the objects at RAM were purchased from galleries and artists who have exhibited at SOFA expositions. These artists have been presented to the public and selected by collectors because of the exposure the artists received in the forum of the exhibitions and educational programs at SOFA. By displaying and documenting these artists, RAM continues the efforts of SOFA's organizers and exhibitors to expose a growing segment of the public to contemporary crafts and build an appreciative audience for the artists who create these works.

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For more information visit www.ramart.org.