

THREE CENTURIES OF AMERICAN PAINTING

NOTE: While I was using about half our acquisitions funds to enrich the French collection at the Legion, I was using the other half to enrich the American collection at the de Young. That side of the story had an added dimension because looking over my shoulder was John D. Rockefeller 3rd. After completing his Asian collection and donating it to the Asia Society, he had assembled the world's finest collection of 18TH & 19TH century American paintings. He had been given first refusal on Church's "Rainy Season in the Tropics" by the dealer, Stuart Feld, but thought it too large for their apartment. When in 1970 he learned that it had been purchased for San Francisco (at my recommendation), he called. I was Acting Director that day, so the call came to me. Mr. Rockefeller started by saying he had heard good things about me from his wife (who was President of New York's Museum of Modern Art when I worked there), then asked three pointed questions.

First question: "I know it is a great painting, but the dealer was asking a world-record price. Why did you buy it?" I said because, in my opinion, there is no finer example of the Hudson River School, which is the supreme achievement of American landscape painting. And landscape painting of this quality is one of the greatest contributions the United State has made to World Art. The closest comparison is the great gift China made to World Art in the form of the profound landscape scrolls that crystallized during the Sung Dynasty. "Rainy Season," I continued, radiates the finest values of the American spirit – solid realism and clarity of vision blended with unlimited hopefulness, and transcendent spirituality. It will inspire visitors for generations.

Second question: "Does this mean you have a major interest in American painting?" "Yes," I replied. "It does." I was able to tell him that I was writing a book that would place the San Francisco collection into the wider context of American painting as a whole. And that the first major project of our new collection program was going to be a special exhibition of American paintings. I was going to put the best of the American paintings from the de Young and Legion collections together. I reported that earlier curators in both museums had done a good job in this area. But by combining the two

collections, the whole will be greater than the parts. It looked to me like we had the best pre-modern American group on the West Coast.

Third question: "Would your museum be interested in having my American collection?" "Yes, Mr. Rockefeller, we would." He ended the conversation by saying he would come out to see that exhibition, and in the meantime I should tell no one of this conversation except the Director, Ian White, - not even the Chairman of the Board. He wanted absolute secrecy! That request surprised me, but Ian and I honored it for years. (I was glad I was raised in a well-disciplined military family and had a degree in diplomacy.) Early in 1971 Mr. Rockefeller and his curator, E. P. Richardson, came to see the show. They were impressed. They also said very nice things about the book I wrote to go with this exhibition, THREE CENTURIES OF AMERICAN PAINTINGS. So our secret negotiation for his American collection was off to a good start.

When considering what other American paintings to buy, I looked in two directions. There was a tradition in both museums of buying minor paintings for small prices. I felt strongly that it is more meaningful to consolidate funds and buy masterpieces. It is visual greatness that lifts the human spirit to the highest levels. So, following the Church masterpiece, my question was: who is the most important artist not yet represented? Answer: Eakins. So I worked hard to locate a fine Eakins, and happily was able to acquire "The Courtship." The price was high but so was the quality. The price would have been higher but the signature had not yet been discovered. I managed to find it (but did not inform the dealer of this fact until after the purchase had been made.)

There was not enough money to buy "great names" very often. I would have liked a haunting Ryder and a sparkling Homer, but that was not possible at this time. I decided the most useful way to use the next round of funding would be to build on existing strength.

We had a good small collection of *Trompe l'Oeil* paintings, centered on Harnett's famous "After the Hunt." With the judicious use of the available funds, I felt it would be possible to make a good collection into a great collection. Not every art style can touch the hearts of a wide public. The Hudson River School can, and so can "Fool the Eye" paintings. So I focused on the best painters of the era working

in this field of visual magic. I eventually decided to acquire a painting of a delicious batch of books by Peto, Pope's majestic "Trumpeter Swan," and a delightful school slate board by Haberle. The result was a very strong gallery with a great deal of popular appeal. With additions made from the Rockefeller Collection, this gallery remains much as I left it, and is still one of the most popular museum experiences in San Francisco. When the new de Young Museum building opened in 2005, the art critic of the SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE called this gallery the strongest in the museum.

Ian and I continued to meet with Rockefeller and Richardson from time to time, either in San Francisco or New York. Both were watching our collection program, and our exhibition program, and our education program very closely. They were impressed by our innovative exhibitions of American Tonalism in 1972 and of Andrew Wyeth in 1974, along with their extremely successful catalogues, and were especially impressed when we were able to persuade the Archives of American Art to locate their West Coast office in our museum.

Mr. Rockefeller was in no hurry to make a decision. He was a deliberate person, and he was considering proposals from museums on the East Coast who wanted his collection. And he was listening very carefully to our arguments for San Francisco. I gave him three arguments that were particularly meaningful to him. 1) The East Coast did not need it. To balance the artistic resources of the nation, California would be a better choice. 2) San Francisco is the Gateway to America from Asia. 3) Our Board was so committed to American Art, long-term, that they were raising funds to build an American Wing, even though they knew nothing of the possibility of the Rockefeller donation.

As the years went by, the talk became more and more friendly. Each conversation moved the possibility of a donation a little closer to a decision. On one occasion, Rockefeller was considering the purpose of a Peto. He asked me if I thought it would go well with the Peto we have recently acquired. That told me THE DREAM was coming even closer. During a lunch at Rockefeller Center, to move things along (with Ian's approval), I proposed that an exhibition of the collection be presented for the first time during the Bicentennial Year (1976) at the de Young Museum. Richardson would write

the catalogue and I would edit it. The table broke out in smiles. We had a plan!

To make a long story short, the bicentennial exhibition took place under the brilliant curatorship of Wanda Corn, and the book appeared on schedule. It was the last book I edited for FAMSF. After that, the show and the book went on to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The Rockefellers were very pleased with everything. The decision to donate the collection to San Francisco was announced in 1978. With the arrival of that collection, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco started to become a world-class museum.

~ FLG