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New Britain Museum of American Art: Collection Overview

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The collections now number approximately 11,791 paintings, works on paper, sculptures, photographs and illustrations by American artists. The last, a unique component of the holdings, is the Sanford B.D. Low Illustration Collection, named in memory of the first director. It represents an enormous range of media and subject matter and includes important works by such noted illustrators as Norman Rockwell.

Among the highlights of the entire collection, the museum houses a fine selection of colonial and federal portraits, with excellent examples by John Smibert, John Trumbull, Mather Brown, John Singleton Copley, Charles Willson Peale, Sarah Peale, Gilbert Stuart and Ralph Earl. Another strength is in the Hudson River School, both early and late, with landscapes by Thomas Cole, Thomas Doughty, Asher B. Durand, Fitz Hugh Lane, Martin Johnson Heade, John Kensett, Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church.

Nineteenth-century still lifes include important examples by Raphaelle Peale, Severin Roesen, William Harnett, John Peto, John Haberle and John La Farge. American genre painting and sculpture are well represented by John Quidor, William Sidney Mount, Lilly Martin Spencer, J.G. Brown, and John Rogers. There is also a significant concentration of post-Civil War figural painting and sculpture, including works by Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, J. Alden Weir, George de Forest Brush, Joseph DeCamp, Frank Benson, William Paxton, Elizabeth Nourse and nineteen plasters and bronzes by Solon Borglum.

Of particular note within this rich and vast range of artwork is the museum's Impressionist collection, which begins chronologically with a prized pastel by Mary Cassatt and continues with sparkling works by Theodore Robinson, John Henry Twachtman, J. Alden Weir, Willard Metcalf and Childe Hassam, the last represented by eleven oils alone. Later Impressionist paintings include those by William Glackens, Ernest Lawson, Frederck Frieseke, Louis Ritman, Robert Miller and Maurice Prendergast.

Other strengths of the twentieth-century collection include: sixty works by members of the Ash Can School; significant representation by early modernists such as Alfred Maurer, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Max Weber; important examples by the Precisionists Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, Preston Dickinson and Ralston Crawford; a good showing by the American Scene painters Charles Burchfield and Edward Hopper; a broad spectrum of work by the Social Realists Ben Shahn, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Jack Levine; and ambitious examples of Regionalist painting by Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, notably the latter's celebrated five-panel mural, The Arts of Life in America (1932).

Works by the American Abstract Artist group (Stuart Davis, Ilya Bolotowsky, Esphyr Slobodkina, Balcomb Greene, Milton Avery) give twentieth-century abstraction its place in the collection, as do later examples of Surrealism (Kay Sage, George Tooker), Abstract Expressionism (Lee Krasner, Giorgio Cavallon, Morris Graves, Robert Motherwell, Sam Francis, Cleve Gray), Pop and Op art (Andy Warhol, Larry Rivers, Robert Indiana, Tom Wesselman, Jim Dine), Conceptual (Christo, Sol LeWitt), and Photo-Realism (Robert Cottingham). Good examples of twentieth-century sculpture include Harriet Frishmuth, Paul Manship, Isamu Noguchi, George Segal and Stephen DeStaebler.

{mospagebreak title=Sanford B.D. Low}Sanford B.D. Low Illustration Collection is named in memory of the first director, and represents an enormous range of media and subject matter and includes important works by such noted illustrators as Norman Rockwell.

A History of the LIC Collection by Howard Munce, Illustrator and LIC Committee Memeber
For the first long part of my life the place called New Britain was where screwdrivers were made. And that was it. I now know better, much better! For in 1949 I was fortunately introduced to New Britain's gem of a museum and to the first of a long line of dedicated people behind its gallery walls.
This is how it began. Stevan Dohanos, the noted Saturday Evening Post cover artist for whom I had worked for a few months before enlisting in WWII and who subsequently became a life long friend was already an intimate of the Museum. Not only were he and Sandy Low, the Director, companions and fellow painters but Steve had three of his easel paintings in the permanent collection. It was in that year, 1949, that Steve's butcher asked him to advise on redecorating his shop in Westport.
A part of his design called for an eye level railing on which cutout barnyard animals stood in real straw. This was a large project and too time consuming for the busy Dohanos to render by himself. So he arranged with Sandy to enlist a few New Britain members of a sketch group from the Museum's barn to be the animal artists. I came along to help. We painted our critters on Homeasote under Steve's supervision. We also had a great Low-catered lunch and wonderful fun. We returned happily to Westport with a station wagon loaded with our jig-sawed menagerie. That day remains memorable to me for beyond the fun it was the day that I met Sandy Low, and although I was subsequently in his company all too few times, he became a unique man to me as he was to all who were lucky enough to encounter him.
I was present at one of his famous lobster cookouts and after a feast fit for Henry the Eighth we got on the subject of illustration (I had become an advertising agency art director and had also been President of the Society of Illustrators, so I was knowledgeable on the subject). Sandy, who had as much interest in illustration as he did in gallery art, happened to say that it was a fond hope of his to one day have an illustration collection in the New Britain Museum, but he didn't know how to go about it. The idea excited me and for the reasons cited above, I did know how to go about it. I immediately donated a small Groeger which had been given to me by Arthur William Brown. His reply said in part: "Thanks for the encouragement about my long cherished idea of having a modest comprehensive collection of good American illustration as I sincerely feel this is a great but neglected phase of Americana. As I told you, we have no funds for a collection of this type and I'm just not the type that can happily try to get something for nothing. We have the means to exhibit, store, frame and maintain in first class condition any picture accepted by us, but must rely entirely on the generosity of the donor. . ."And that is how the Sanford Low Collection of American Illustration came into being. It's a source of great pride to me to see what it has become and now thirty years later to still be connected with it and at this writing, its Chairman.
After Sandy's thank-you letter I called Steve and explained that we would need a committee of big name illustrators to lend their knowledge and prestige to it. Arthur William Brown, Henry Pitz, Steve Dohanos, Wait Reed and I made up the original committee and Steve designed the letterhead for our stationery. The letter of invitation was written by Robert Fawcett and sent to those illustrators voted in. The pictures were to be donated with no money changing hands. The artists were free to take a tax write-off on their own. The Museum took no part in it. Years later the Federal tax laws changed and artists could no longer profit from the donation of their own work. It had to be given by another. It remains so at this writing in early 1995. The response from those invited was immediate. The artists were delighted to become a part of such a collection in such a prestigious place. It was not, and is still not common for illustrators to land in museums. Also, in those days old illustrations had not become the commodity they now are. They were more apt to be a storage problem to their owners. In the main, they were carelessly handled after their use, given away or discarded by their purchasers or mistreated by their creators or by those who inherited them. Walt Reed, who deals in used illustrations can tell you stories that will make your eyes water and moisten his own as he relates them.And while on the subject of Walt Reed, his expertise, diligence and generosity in giving from his own collection has enhanced the Low Collection immeasurable. He never comes to the Museum empty-handed. He is responsible for the acquisition of a portfolio of WWI art by Harry Townsend of Norwalk, CT... a smashing find for the Museum. Many were done or inspired by action at the front so they have historical significance that brought on the thought that since we had a few other works dealing with the Great War, notably Henning's and Kerr Eby's illustrations and etchings and the fact that endless works were done during WWII by G.I. correspondents, it was decided that we start a collection of military art to be an adjunct to the Low oneI suggested Art Weithas to head it. He had been the art director of Yank magazine and designer of the definitive war art book by James Jones, titled "WWII". He still serves in that post. In 1995 the Museum mounted its first show of these works in an exhibit titled "Reporting the Wars". It hung in the E, F, and J Galleries. After Sandy's death, we continued to have smooth uninterrupted dealing with Charley Ferguson, his successor. Charley also brought an understanding and appreciation of illustration to his job.
Our original committee has been almost completely replaced by attrition at this date thirty odd years later. Walt and I remain from the first lot. Meantime, Murray Tinkleman, Fritz Henning, John Witt and Vince deFate still are on it. Steve

Dohanos who headed the committee until his death in '94 will always be remembered for his avuncular role and many contributions. It is hard to think of more likeable men to have once been a part of something than he and Sandy.
And so here we are in 1995 with a remarkable collection of American illustrations, one of the best in existence. We begin this year with an excellent show, the first prompted by the Collection Committee, and a new Museum director who shows a lively and sincere interest in our possible contributions in the future. We know by the Museum's cordiality in the past that we were appreciated. So I speak for all of us when I say thank you to Vic Darnell, Doctor John White, the late Ginny Low and to everyone in the wings. It's been a continuing pleasure. top
Low Illustration Collection Committee Members as of 11/2/09

Lindsley Wellman, Chairman

Scott Bakal

Richard Boyle

Christopher Childs

Robert M. Cunningham

Vincent Di Fate

Charles B. Ferguson

Leonard Everett Fisher

Martha Hoppin

Billie Levy

Wendell Minor

Donald Moss

Howard Munce

Walt Reed

Murray Tinkelman

Walter Wick

John Witt

Douglas Hyland, Director

John Urgo, Collections Manager NBMAA