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Newly acquired Bloch painting offers warmth with hint of mystery

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January 4, 2015

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A newly acquired painting by one of Lawrence's more famous past residents — at least in the art world — is warming up the contemporary gallery at the Spencer Museum of Art.

"Summer" by Albert Bloch is now on display in the 20/21 Gallery. Kansas University alumni Eric and Michelle Voth donated "Summer" to the museum this fall, adding to the Spencer's Bloch holdings and representing a unique period in the artist's work.

Bloch, a St. Louis native, spent his early years exhibiting in Germany with the Blue Rider group, according to information from the Spencer. Bloch

was the only American in the circle founded by Vassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc.

Bloch returned to the Midwest and, in 1923, became chairman and professor in the KU art department, where he taught painting until 1947.

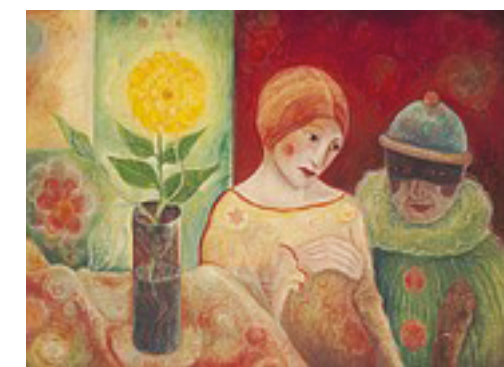
"Summer," painted in 1929, is currently on view with two other Bloch paintings from the Spencer's holdings, "Winter" of 1918 and "Frieze for a Music Room" of 1915.

"Summer" depicts a vivid yellow flower in a vase next to a woman and a masked clown, painted primarily in yellow, green and deep red tones. The painting has a soft, pastel-like quality.

"Summer" demonstrates a transition from Bloch's style while working in Germany to the style he developed after returning to America, Scott

Heffley, president of the Albert Bloch Foundation and Senior Conservator of Paintings at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, said in a news release.

"The color harkens back to the German period where colors were really strong and pure and the two figures relate especially to works that came late in his American period," Heffley said. He added that Bloch used glaze to create "images that glowed from their own light."



Courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas

"Summer," by Albert Bloch, 1929, oil on Masonite™, Gift of Dr. Eric and Michelle Voth. Image courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas.

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Heffley said the addition of Summer to the Spencer's collection is significant both because a painting from this period is rare, and because it adds to the Museum's representation of work created by Bloch while at KU.

The Voth family had a long-standing relationship with Bloch and gave the Spencer another Bloch painting in 2004, according to the museum. Eric Voth's father, Harold Voth, began collecting Bloch's work more than 50 years ago.

Viewers of "Summer" will enjoy its hint of mystery, said David Cateforis, KU professor of American art and modern and contemporary art.

"I am particularly intrigued by the enigmatic pair of figures in this Bloch painting — the rouge-cheeked young woman with a gloved hand, 1920s-style head scarf, and star-decorated yellow dress, and her companion, a masked male clown wearing a cap, a ruff collar and a smirking expression," he said.

Bloch painted clowns throughout his career, and this one is based on the Pierrot type, Cateforis said.

But why is there what appears to be a wooden club in front of them? Is the clown holding it, or the woman? And what does it mean?

Said Cateforis, "These are mysteries that the painting invites us to try and solve."

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