

A Decade of Collecting, 1970 - 1980



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The Letha Churchill Walker

Memorial Collection

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Catalogue prepared by Pamela J. Stiles

Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art

The University of Kansas, Lawrence

P R E F A C E

A MUSEUM DOES MANY THINGS: it exhibits; it preserves; it studies; it teaches. All of these important activities, however, are based upon the foundation of its collections, and the acquisition of prime original works of art becomes thereby the museum's single most important function.

In 1968 Letha Churchill Walker remembered her alma mater with a generous bequest for purchases of works of art. A member of the Class of 1914, Mrs. Walker retained an interest in the University throughout her life. She also maintained an interest in the arts, continuing her work as an artist over many years. These dual affections influenced her decision to bequeath to The University of Kansas a generous fund for the benefit of the Spencer Museum of Art's acquisition program. Her interest in the graphic media — prints, drawings, and watercolors — was especially strong, and by terms of her will the Letha Churchill Walker Memorial Art Fund is to be used "to purchase works of art such as dry point, etchings, mezzotints, wood engravings, conte pencil or charcoal drawings, [and] original landscape water colors . . ." The selections for the Walker Collection are made by the Museum's curatorial staff and approved by a committee consisting of the Chancellor of the University, the Dean of the School of Fine Arts, and the Director of the Museum.

The first purchase from the Letha Churchill Walker Memorial Art Fund was made in 1970. Appropriately a print by an American woman initiated the Walker Collection — Mary Cassatt's *The Barefooted Child*. Subsequently the Fund has enriched the Museum's collections with works ranging from fifteenth-century Flanders to contemporary America. The present exhibition marks the tenth anniversary of the first purchase through the Walker Fund and provides an opportunity to present some of the more exceptional from among the seventy-six acquisitions made to date through the endowment. The show also provides a chance to acknowledge the great generosity of an alumna whose love for the arts and for her alma mater will always be remembered through the continuing purchases made possible by the Letha Churchill Walker Memorial Art Fund.

Over the years The University of Kansas and its art museum have benefitted from the generous donations of many friends and alumni. The Spencer Museum's very building is one obvious example of such inspired benefactions, as are many of its varied programs. The Spencer Museum has also been the beneficiary of individual donors' generosity for additions to the collections to benefit students and public, both now and for generations to come. Although a publicly supported institution, the Museum depends upon private benefactors for the strength of its permanent collections, and has always done so. The institution's premier position among American public university museums is due to that great tradition of private giving. The maintenance of that position depends upon the continuation of acquisitions of distinction. Endowed funds for the purchase of such outstanding works provide one guarantee of the Museum's continuing vitality for the years to come.

Charles C. Eldredge,
Director

INTRODUCTION

THE SCOPE OF MOST ARTISTS' WORK is richer and more varied than any museum collection can convey. The exhibits in museum galleries tend to represent artists at their most formal, with full scale, finished oil paintings and sculptures, often made for important patrons. Prints and drawings, however, often show another mood of the artist — more intimate or private, more experimental, humorous, daring, or simply more casual.

It is particularly pleasing to see a famous oil painter who has consummate mastery in another medium. The American colonial artist John Singleton Copley, for example, created pastel portraits which can be compared to the best of Nicolas Largillière or Maurice Quentin de la Tour (see no. 11). Or consider Georgia O'Keeffe, whose earliest abstractions were watercolors, and who continues to try new ideas in this medium. Though usually discussed as a twentieth-century modernist, her watercolors such as *Pink and Green Mountain, No. 1* (no. 35) show her also to be heir to the tradition of romantic English landscape watercolorists. Simply because of the spontaneity of the medium, her work comes closer than an oil could to showing the direct visual notation of an idea.

If drawings are especially prized for their immediacy, prints are conversely valued for their particular technical qualities. Great artists are able to turn the idiosyncratic properties of each print process to their advantage. The power of Emil Nolde's *Family* (no. 34) comes only partly from the bold design; the expressionist meaning of the work resides as much in the jagged carving of the block, the coarse wood-grain striations, and the unintentional embossing of the image in the paper when it was printed with unwarranted pressure. Nolde's handling of the medium was highly personal, and expressive of his fierce artistic intensity.

Working with a different technique and a different temperament, Mary Cassatt adopted the aesthetic of the Japanese color woodblock print in *The Barefooted Child* (no. 9) — elegant lines, flat color areas, decorative patterning. Yet in an interesting transmutation she used the purely western intaglio techniques of drypoint and aquatint, revealing much about the character of late nineteenth-century eclecticism.

By aligning works according to technique rather than style, period, or subject, unusual comparisons are discovered. One sees, for example, that Robert Cottingham's concerns in *F. W.* (no. 12) run closely parallel to Delacroix's in *A Blacksmith* (no. 14); both artists are composing in carefully calculated gradations of a single color (black) — a virtuosic display of technical control, rather like well-executed terrace dynamics on a harpsichord.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of a collection of prints and drawings, however, is to catch an artist in a mood too fleeting, subtle, or fragile to survive in his more ambitious projects. The ethereality of the *Head of Christ in Profile* by Carlo Dolci (no. 15) is one such example; John Flannagan's barely suggested *Nude Profile* (no. 18) is another; Daniel Huntington's sensual *Study of a Male Torso* (no. 25) is a third. Such glimpses into an artist's mind are rare enough in any medium.

Since works on paper so often have this peculiar intimacy and immediacy, it may be appropriate that they are displayed only sporadically and subjected to special environmental and lighting conditions. When exhibited on an occasion such as this one, there is a fine pleasure in rediscovering their beauty; they speak with the fresh clarity of a new voice.

Elizabeth Broun,
Curator of Prints and Drawings