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Remembering Hugh Gourley

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REMEMBERING HUGH GOURLEY, WHO NURTURED THE COLBY MUSEUM

It was our summer to visit colleges, and as we walked around the beautiful Colby campus we arrived at the museum. Standing at the door was Hugh Gourley. He was wearing his characteristic impeccably pressed kakis and a colorful tailored shirt. A slight, very proper man, Hugh appeared large as he stood at the door of his museum.

This was Hugh's kingdom, a place he built with dedication, determination, and creativity. Slowly he guided us through the galleries. Hugh's love of art was not communicated by lengthy monologues, but by a gentle silence interrupted by morsels of profound information. In his quiet way he told us the history of the museum and the aesthetic reasons why he had placed one work next to the other. Art here did not stand in isolation but in a dialogue that spanned the centuries and created a conversation between different aesthetic movements.

By the end of the tour, Bree had decided that this was the place she wanted to go to college.

As he did for so many students, Hugh provided Bree with a very special and profound education, not only in art, but in the ways museums function, exhibitions are formed, collections are created, and collaborations are developed with other museums. Students found sanctuary and stimulation at the museum and Hugh provided a place where they could go, usually unannounced but always welcomed. As he did with us on our first tour of the museum, Hugh offered students the opportunity to see and experience differently. The museum truly was a magical place.

We both watched Hugh as he realized his dreams and turned the museum into the jewel of Colby College and one of the great American cultural institutions. When Hugh first became director of the Colby Museum it was just a small college museum without a particular direction or curatorial vision. He soon began growing the collection in a systematic and careful way. Hugh had ambitious plans, and he lived to see them realized.

The list of Hugh's accomplishments is long and impressive. When he had the opportunity to build the Lunder Wing, Hugh searched for the best architect for the project. He wanted to work with someone who could design a building that would blend into the campus, adapt the vernacular architecture of Maine, but most importantly be sensitive to the art it housed. Fred Fischer, Paula D.F.A. '98 and Peter Lunder '56, D.F.A. '98, and Hugh produced that building.

The same was absolutely true of the Paul J. Schupf Wing for the Works of Alex Katz. Hugh and Alex worked in collaboration with Max Gordon and created a space that not only responded to Alex's work, but provided the perfect showcase.

In addition to building an exciting and appropriate physical space for the museum, Hugh remained focused on the art it housed. He identified a need for contemporary art in the collection and, with a strong and supportive board, he aggressively searched for and added not only sole, extraordinary works of art, but entire archives such as the Terry Winters print archive, a magnificent tool for research. In an unusual move for a college museum, Hugh also identified the importance of acquiring public art. Hugh commissioned two bold and controversial pieces. The Richard Serra piece "4-5-6" is a perfect pre-

lude to the museum. A site-specific piece that stands at the entrance, it alerts the visitor to the depth and range of the collection within the museum walls.

In our opinion, one of Hugh's boldest accomplishments during his tenure was the commissioning of Sol Lewitt's *Seven Walls*. This was a brave move that created a heated but healthy debate about the role of public art. Now, *Seven Walls* stands as a symbol of a college that is open to dialogue, has an open mind, and encourages creative and forward thinking.

Hugh's entire professional career was the Colby museum. When he retired to New York City he spent his days visiting museums and galleries. His love for Colby and art was always informing his life. When visiting a show he would so often say, "This would be great piece for the collection." The "collection" he was referring to was, of course, Colby's.

In New York Hugh became a veritable encyclopedia of ongoing exhibitions and art happenings. He experienced the art community in New York much as his adoring students had experienced the art at Colby—with passion and awe. His favorite place of discovery was the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He visited almost daily, taking in one wing at a time. He slowly, methodically, and with an eager eye studied the collection. His elegant figure was seen at openings and lectures.

Hugh would often call and ask, "Have you seen the new Fred Wilson show (or whoever was recently up and opened)? Would you care to join me?" And off we would go on a wonderful afternoon adventure with Hugh. It was always a delight to experience a new show through Hugh's unique, enthusiastic, and informed viewpoint. Hugh's love of art truly knew no limits.

When his health began to fail, he retired to what he knew best: the comfort of Maine, his museum, and his very many friends. He lived surrounded by his art books and visitors. We talked to Hugh often. He was always eager to hear of New York goings on, and we were always curious to hear what he was learning through books and friends and to share his thoughtfulness. The many of us who had the luck to be

his friend also had the privilege to engage in his conversation and gain his gentle, thoughtful, and informed advice.

We like to think of Hugh as a strong tree that grows in the Maine forest, like one would find in an Alex Katz landscape. Under his shade grew many friendships and mentorships and a very particular and vital museum. He shall be remembered as such.

—*Gabriella De Ferrari, L.H.D. '08, and Bree Jeppson '93*



An Enduring Legacy

In the end a man's life is often measured by the difference he made. About Hugh it is enough to say that Colby College, its museum and Maine cannot be imagined without his life's work, nor could the lives of Hugh's friends who benefited from his unique kindness, generosity, integrity, and intelligence.

Early in 1985 a European couple who summered in Maine suggested to me that a large Alex Katz exhibition be held at both Colby and Bowdoin. They said their friend Hugh Gourley would be the best contact.

We spoke often that summer before the show. I soon discovered that Hugh was remarkably easy to work with at every level. His understanding of art and mounting exhibitions was impeccable, and he was a master of museum management.

This began 15 years of weekly and sometimes daily brief telephone conversations. Hugh rarely called, but he was almost always available. Starting with the first visit that summer we spent hundreds of hours in his quiet office talking about art, current and past.

The director's office was always my first and last stop when I visited Mayflower Hill. In those early years this was a very quiet place with almost no visitors. Hugh's desk was immaculate, with a fine Calder, a phone that never rang, and a PC that was never turned on.

The table near the couch was piled high with books and magazines, which Hugh thought would interest me. The only odd feature were hundreds of unread newspapers stacked along each wall. Finally, Board Chair Ridge Bullock [H. Ridgeley Bullock '55] rushed through the office on the way to see an exhibition and blurted "OMG," which finally convinced Hugh to throw away the papers.

Hugh and I were able to talk uninterrupted for hours about art, artists, and future exhibitions. Hugh was not a traditional scholar. He was the classic 19th-century connoisseur with a perfect eye who understood art of all periods. Despite his conservative nature Hugh was totally open to the most radical new art propositions and trends. This is what separated him from almost anyone else in the art world. Like Bobby Rosenblum and Adam Weinberg, Hugh had an encyclopedic knowledge that permitted rapid assimilation of new and different art. Hugh rarely imposed his views. He preferred to react to those of others. One of my fondest memories was spending an afternoon in New York City with him visiting dozens of galleries. He asked me what would be best for the museum and I suggested a Sol LeWitt monotype, which he immediately acquired.

Hugh was always perfectly dressed. I prefer hoodies and sneakers so I bought him an ace Colby sweatshirt, which he gamely wore once and never again. We did not always agree but we never argued. We often talked about a long-term vision for the Colby museum.

Hugh never asked for anything. He offered generosity, friendship, integrity, and intelligence. His reticence made it difficult at times to get his point of view, but this is a minimal issue compared with his unique qualities.

It has been said that the museum is the jewel in the Colby crown. This is the enduring legacy of Hugh Gourley's life's work.

—*Paul Schupf LL.D. '06*