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Defining Art: Lunder Collection of American Art raises Colby to pinnacle of college art museums

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LUNDER COLLECTION OF AMERICAN ART RAISES COLBY
TO PINNACLE OF COLLEGE ART MUSEUMS

By Bob Keyes

With the announced gift of an exquisite private collection of American art, Colby's claim to having one of the top college museums in the country is airtight.

"The Lunder Collection puts it on a whole new level of distinction," said leading American art scholar John Wilmerding, of Princeton University. "It's a gift that builds on the museum's strengths ... and puts Colby on the map in a competitive way."

In May, Colby President William D. Adams announced the promised gift of more than 500 objects, including 464 works by American masters, from Peter '56, D.F.A. '98, and Paula Crane Lunder, D.F.A. '98, art collectors, Maine residents, and longtime supporters of Colby and its museum. The gift, valued at more than \$100 million, is the largest in the history of the College. The College also announced plans for an expansion of the museum, targeted for opening in 2013, Colby's bicentennial year. That plan is part of the \$370-million Reaching the World capital campaign, the largest fund-raising campaign in Maine history.

The Lunder gift enhances Colby's reputation as a place for art scholarship and increases the College's national profile, Adams said. "This sends us to a whole new level in respect to the quality of the education program in the visual arts and the reputation of the College in the visual arts," he said.

The Lunder Collection includes key paintings and objects by important historical figures and contemporary artists. Represented in the collection are George Inness, John Singer Sargent, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Winslow Homer.

Sharon Corwin, the museum's Carolyn Muzzy Director and chief curator, cited O'Keeffe's oil painting *Birch and Pine Trees—Pink* as an outstanding example of the artist's exploration of abstraction within the natural landscape, and she said a number of Inness paintings are "stunning examples" of his prowess as a landscape pioneer.

The Lunders, who chose to maintain a low profile and declined to be interviewed, also have a keen interest in sculpture, Corwin said. Their collection includes sculptures ranging from 19th-century neoclassical works up through the late-20th century, including pieces by Paulanship, Donald Judd, John Chamberlain, Jenny Holzer, and others. "The collection shows the Lunders' commitment to sculpture and their boldness as collectors, to collect such a range of it," Corwin said.

The collection's distinguishing feature is its concentration of prints by James McNeill Whistler. It is the largest single collection of art by Whistler given to an American academic museum, and it makes Colby vital to Whistler scholars, Corwin said.

Colby already is known for its extensive holdings of art by Alex Katz, Richard Serra, and John Marin. "And now we will have

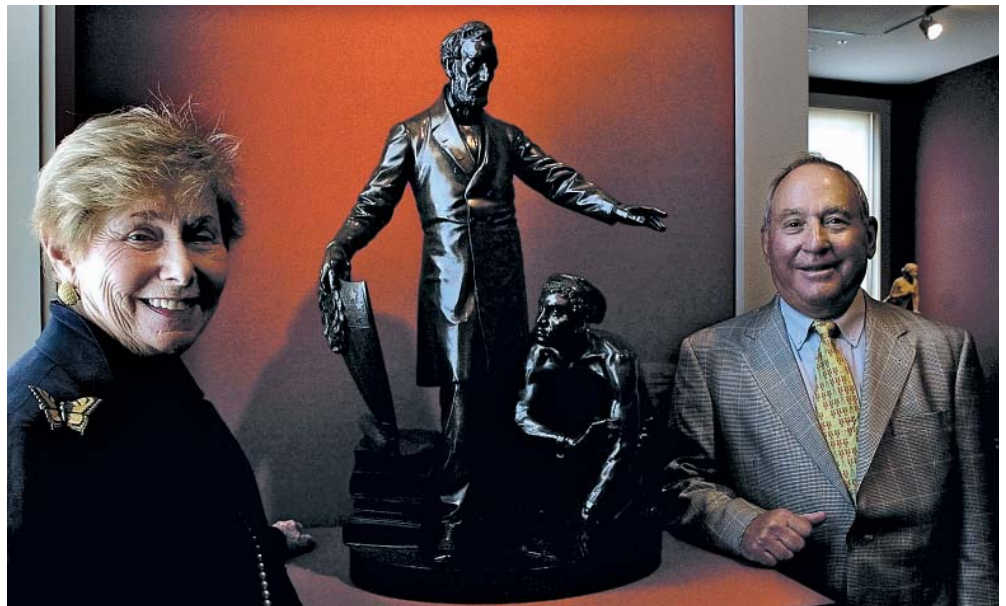


PHOTO BY DAVID LEAMING

Paula Crane Lunder, D.F.A. '98 and Peter Lunder '56, D.F.A. '98, with the sculpture Emancipation Group by Thomas Ball, one of the works the Lunders are donating to the Colby College Museum of Art.

more than two hundred prints by Whistler. It strengthens our deep holdings, which is useful as a teaching museum," Corwin said.

The Whistler print collection includes rare etchings and lithographs and illustrates the artist's mastery of the printmaking technique. "You get a sense of his virtuosity through the collection," she said.

Elizabeth Broun, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., called the Lunder gift "one of the finest gifts for any art museum in the country, ever. It's hands-down one of the top private collections of American art anywhere."

With the gift, the Colby art collection grows from about 5,100 pieces to 5,600. Broun and Wilmerding said the Colby mu-

seum had a solid collection already, built on the strength of longtime director Hugh Gourley's interests and savvy. The Lunders' gift represents years of sophisticated collecting, and it gives Colby a collection that rivals those held by museums with deeper collecting histories, at Smith, Wellesley, Amherst, and elsewhere, Wilmerding said. "Their collection would have been welcome at a number of places, but the magnitude of it will make more of a difference at Colby than at many other places that are either larger or in bigger cities," he said. "Good for them for thinking it out. In that sense, they are smart people who have put their collection in a place where it can make the greatest difference."

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ELIZABETH BROUN, DIRECTOR OF THE SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Paul Schupf, LL.D. '06, a philanthropist and art collector who also has given generously to Colby and the museum—including the Paul J. Schupf Wing for the Works of Alex Katz—said the Lunder gift gives the museum a broad spectrum of specialization. Schupf has focused his collecting, and his giving, on works by contemporary artists, whereas the Lunder Collection focuses primarily on 19th- and early-20th-century artists.

“With their gift, the museum now has an incredible survey. It absolutely catapults the Colby museum to the top three college art museums in the country,” Schupf said.

Many of the paintings in the collection are spectacular, art scholars say, and the O’Keeffe may well be the most exquisite of the bunch.

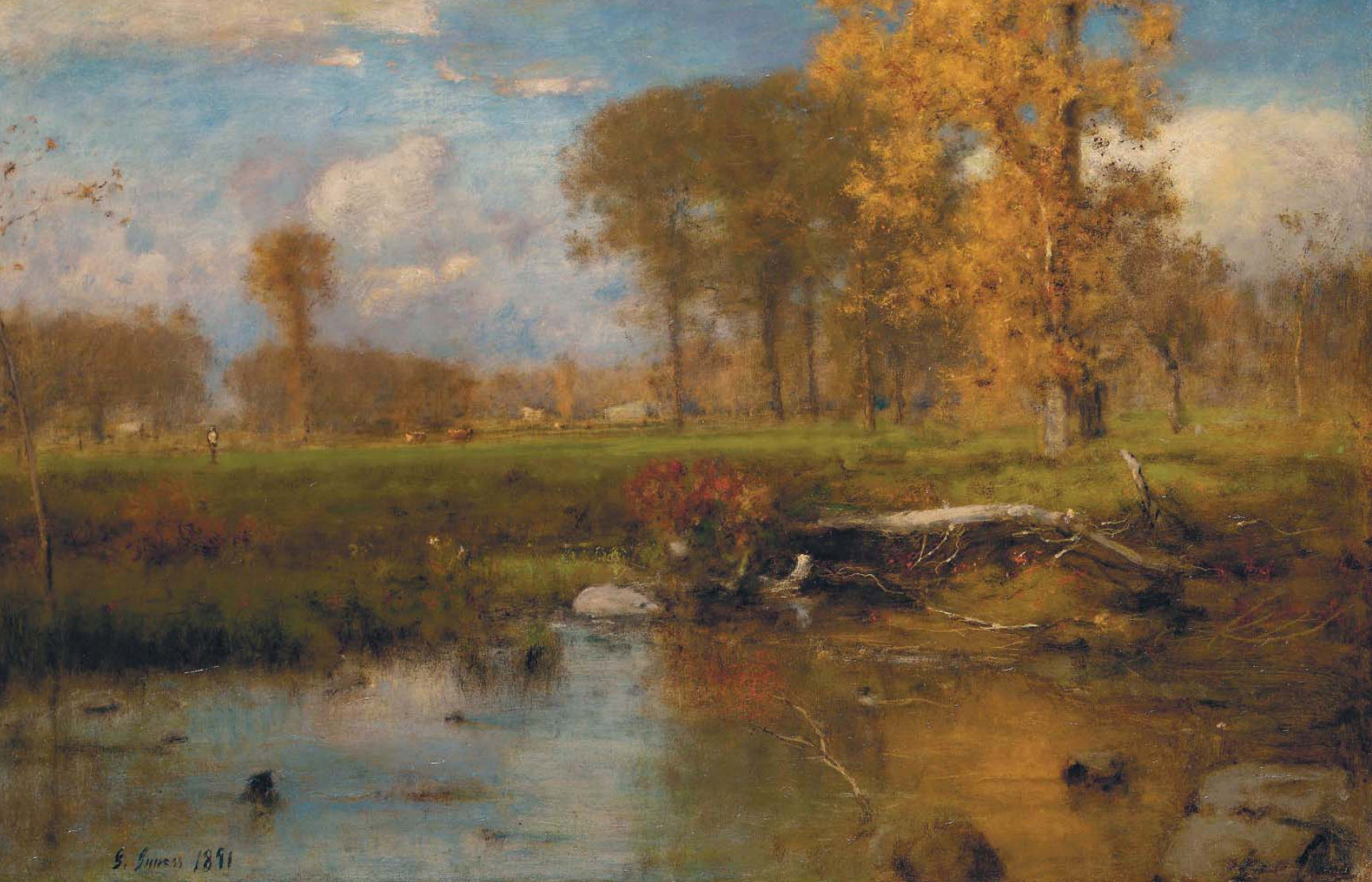
O’Keeffe created the painting in 1925, at a time when she was making some of her most significant work. She fills her canvas with luscious, radiant colors, evoking both a specific image and a sense of the imagination that informed much of her work and guided her hand.

It’s as much a study in color and tone as an image from nature. The 36-by-22-inch canvas suggests a pink- and red-hued birch tree, with its trunk and limbs reaching skyward, their soft colors fading as they grow. At the top, O’Keeffe adds a splash of yellow and fills the background with deep, dark greens.

Schupf said Peter Lunder is especially proud of the O’Keeffe. At a dinner soon after he and Paula Lunder purchased the painting, Lunder asked Schupf what he thought of O’Keeffe, and if he were to purchase an O’Keeffe painting, what year would he buy. “I said 1925, and he beamed, because that is the year he bought,” Schupf said.



Birch and Pine Trees—Pink, Georgia O’Keeffe, 1925, oil on canvas, 36" x 22"
Colby College Museum of Art, The Lunder Collection



Spirit of Autumn, George Inness, 1891, oil on canvas, 30" x 45"
Colby College Museum of Art, The Lunder Collection

At the other end of the spectrum is Inness's *Spirit of Autumn*, painted in 1891. The piece illustrates the artist's palette and his ability to recreate the wonder of nature through his brushwork and vision.

John La Farge's painting *Agathon to Erosanthe*, from 1861, is one of just two the artist made showing flower wreaths.

Wilmerding said one of the values of a gift of the magnitude of the Lunder Collection is its impact on the academic program. "It instantly gives a kind of critical mass for the teaching of a whole field," he said.

Peter Lunder descended from shoemakers, and his family has strong ties to central Maine. His uncle is Harold Alfond of Dexter Shoe Co. Lunder joined the company in 1958, two years after graduating from Colby, and later became its president.

The Lunders have maintained ties to

Colby for many years. He is a life overseer and Paula Lunder serves as a life trustee. The Lunders have supported the museum with the naming gift for the Lunder Wing, which opened in 1999, and by endowing the museum's curator of American art position. The family name also adorns the admissions building, and they have quietly helped in many other areas. They also have shared many pieces from their collection with Colby over the years as long-term loans.

"Their philanthropy at Colby has been extensive already," Adams said. "This takes it to a much higher level."

Their interest in the arts extends beyond Colby. Peter Lunder is vice chair of the Smithsonian Institution's National Board, and the Lunder Foundation has supported several endeavors of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Broun said.

Adams said Colby has been talking with the Lunders "for some time" about the possible gift. Toward the end of 2006, the conversations became serious. Their primary concern was that the work be shown and shared with the public. Their expectation is that the collection will benefit Colby's teaching mission and the undergraduate community at the College, he said.

Adams said he believes the gift will make Colby a destination for art lovers and will enhance Maine's reputation among cultural tourists.

"The ability of the College and its desire to share this collection with the region has always been strong. But now we have much more to share," Adams said.

"A gift such as this provides important buttressing of the relationship the College has with the community, and it represents

the kind of cultural resource we can be for central Maine.”

Many of the pieces in the collection are on exhibit already, and many more will be shown in 2009 when the museum celebrates its 50th anniversary, Corwin said.

Schupf has known the Lunders since the 1980s, when he began getting involved with Colby affairs. They met at an art opening and with time became close friends, Schupf said. “I never would have gotten so involved with the museum if not for the Lunders. You couldn’t find two more charitable and thoughtful people than the Lunders, in every aspect.”

He described the Lunders as passionate collectors who care deeply about Colby and Maine.

“We talk incessantly, constantly. Early on in this process, they said very clearly that they wanted the Colby College Museum of Art to be to Maine what the Sterling and



Agathon to Erosanthe (Votive Wreath), John La Farge, 1861, oil on canvas, 23" x 13" Colby College Museum of Art, The Lunder Collection

Francine Clark Art Institute is to Massachusetts. They said it over and over again.”

The Clark, as it is popularly known, is in Williamstown, Mass., and is home to the art collection of Sterling and Francine Clark. The Clarks collected Impressionist and Old Master works. They considered bequeathing their collection to major museums, but instead decided to build their own in the Berkshires, close to Williams College, in the early 1950s. It has since attracted numerous other gifts and is internationally known.

Schupf has little doubt Colby is on a similar path.

“It’s absolutely clear that Colby is one of the top college museums in the country, and it’s going to get one heck of a lot better over the next five to ten years. This is not the end,” he said. “We have a lot more to do here.”

WHEN ART MEETS MATH

Lauren Lessing was driving north to Maine in June to begin her job as the first Mirken Curator of Education at the Colby College Museum of Art when her cell phone rang. It was her mom.

“She said, ‘Your museum was in the *New York Times*.’ I said, ‘Well, it’s not my museum anymore.’ I thought she was talking about the Nelson-Atkins Museum [where Lessing worked previously in Kansas City]. She said, ‘No, your new museum.’ And then she started reading it to me. I really couldn’t believe it.”

The *Times* story was about the Lunders’ gift of American art. When Lessing arrived at Colby, she saw the full list of more than 500 works coming to her “new museum.”

“I was stunned,” she said. “Page after page of these fantastic artworks. I almost started to cry.”

There was the George Inness painting, *Spirit of Autumn*, which Lessing had as her screensaver on her computer at the Nelson-Atkins Museum. Five examples of 19th-century American “Ideal” sculpture, on which Lessing wrote her doctoral dissertation at Indiana University. She had seen one work, Joseph Mozier’s *Undine*, only in photographs. “It was really wonderful to come here and see the sculpture itself,” she said.

Lessing’s love of art is apparent and, if her first weeks on the job are any indication, it will prove contagious. Drawing on her experience at Nelson-Atkins and at the Art Institute of Chicago, she had



Lauren Lessing

plans for programs for local schools, had connected with a local arts organization, and had already met with several Colby faculty members—from philosophy, environmental studies, and other fields—including some whose disciplines would seem an unlikely match with an art museum.

Since assuming her position, which was endowed by Alan Mirken ’51, a member of the museum board of governors, Lessing had spoken with Whipple-Coddington Professor of Geology Robert Gastaldo, whose research centers on South Africa. The conversation had Lessing mulling a course on African art and, perhaps, exploration of the landscape as re-

flected in art of the 20th century.

“I really feel that the art museum can be worked into any class that’s taught here,” Lessing said.

Any class?

“I’m thinking about math,” she said. “We have a wonderful tapestry hanging in the galleries now, by Chuck Close.” The work, a self-portrait, began as a daguerreotype, was turned into a digital file, and then sent to Belgian weavers who used the electronic image to make the tapestry. “I think that process would be interesting to the Math Department, computer science,” Lessing said.

Her new educational mission, she said, “is big. I want to do a lot of things.” —Gerry Boyle ’78