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For Lunder Collection: A New Home

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FOR LUNDER COLLECTION:

A NEW HOME

EXTRAORDINARY WORKS OF AMERICAN ART TO BE CENTERPIECE FOR COLBY AND STATE OF MAINE

Peter Lunder ’56 was giving a tour of the paintings and sculpture that filled the apartment high above the Intracoastal Waterway in West Palm Beach, Fla., when a visitor interrupted with a question: “Do you have a favorite?”

“No,” Lunder said. “We like them all.”

“No even two or three that stand out?”

Lunder paused, looked away from the paintings, and fixed the visitor with a hard gaze.

“How many children do you have?” he asked.

“Three,” the visitor said.

“Do you like them all?”

“Of course.”

“That’s no different here,” Lunder said, “once they join the family.”

STORY BY GERRY BOYLE ’78 | PHOTOS BY CHRIS URSO
Josh Phillips, left, and Tyler Townsend, of DAX Fine Art Services, prepare to pack Buffalo Hunt With Lances by Alfred Jacob Miller for shipment to Colby.
The “family” in this case is more than 500 objects—paintings and sculpture, 19th century to contemporary—all of which Peter and his wife Paula have donated to the Colby Museum of Art. The wide-ranging collection includes works by Winslow Homer, James McNeill Whistler, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Alexander Calder. It will be displayed in the Lunder Wing of the museum and in the Alfond-Lunder Family Pavilion, the dramatic crystalline wing of the museum that will open July 13.

“They’ve put together a truly amazing, extraordinary collection,” said Elizabeth Broun, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, “and it makes Colby, in a stroke, one of the great American-art centers of America.”

That stroke is actually the result of more than six years of painstaking planning that saw the collection carefully acquired, organized, and finally shipped to Waterville.

That day in West Palm Beach was the final packing and departure. Forty-three objects from the Lunders’ Southwestern art collection—including paintings and sculpture by the renowned Taos Society of Artists—were being readied for shipping to Maine. Staff from the Colby museum had inspected paintings and frames, art packers had rolled in wooden crates, and one by one the paintings were coming down from the walls.

“This isn’t sad for us,” Paula Lunder said, as the sound of the unrolling of packing tape filled the rooms. “We’re happy with our decision.”

The decision, which will make the Colby Museum of Art the largest art museum in Maine and one of the premier college art museums in the country, is the culmination of more than a half century of collecting, a process that began with Sunday afternoon stops at Maine antique shops.

It was 1959. Peter Lunder had come to Maine from Massachusetts to join the shoe-manufacturing business owned by his uncle, Harold Alfond. The newly married couple lived in Waterville, and Peter Lunder worked six-day weeks, but that left Sundays. “What you can do on the weekends to have some fun is drive around and go to antique shops,” Paula Lunder recalled. “You’ll learn about Maine, and you might see some things you like. Invariably we purchased a painting.”

And another. And another.

“It was our entertainment,” Paula Lunder said.

For years the couple bought things to display in their home (they still have the first painting they purchased, a pastel still life of a delft vase with daisies). It wasn’t until the late 1970s that the Lunders, who met collectors who were involved in major national museums, considered that their art was a collection at all.

“We still had our doubts that it was museum quality,” Peter Lunder said.

Added Paula Lunder, “We were just buying art.”

Assured by then-Colby Museum Director Hugh Gourley and Broun, among others, that, yes, this was a museum-worthy art collection, the Lunders broadened their vision, they said.

“We started to think on another level,” Paula Lunder said. “We’ve always bought what we love, what we admire, what we want to live with. But then there was another element. How will this be used in the future? How will this be enjoyed going forward?”

And where would it be displayed?

Those who are aware of the Lunders’ long association with Waterville and Colby (he is a life overseer; she is a life trustee) might assume that Colby was always the planned destination for the collection. But Peter Lunder said the seed of the plan was planted in the mid-1990s, when he and Paula were touring the de Young Museum in San Francisco and were told that John
Rockefeller chose to place some of his art collection there because it would be seen—not stored.

“The bells went off in our heads,” Peter Lunder said. “That’s when we thought of doing something for a regional museum, and Colby fit the bill.”

At Colby, the Lunders concluded, their collection would be seen and enjoyed. Paula Lunder emphasized the couple’s confidence in what she calls “a very talented museum staff,” the direction of President William D. Adams and Museum Director Sharon Corwin, and the Colby museum’s emphasis on education. She also pointed to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., founded by Walmart’s Alice Walton.

“She has built an extraordinary museum, and she has done it for the people of Arkansas,” Paula Lunder said. “People say to Alice Walton, inappropriately, ‘Who’s going to see this?’ She says, ‘The people of Arkansas.’ … And that is our core belief. We’ve done it for Maine. We think all people deserve to see beautiful things. It’s not about the major art centers. We want this to be for our people, the people we love.”

And who are their people?

The Lunders talk about Colby students and faculty, people from Waterville and Maine, tourists who visit the state. They talk about introducing children to the wonder of art, and they feel children should realize that their reaction to art is as important as that of a grownup, they say. “If the children of Maine, from down south all the way to the border, if they can benefit by viewing art, we’ll be happy,” Paula Lunder said.

Peter Lunder turned to a baseball (another of his loves) analogy.

“It’s like Little League baseball. They start off young and...

“For them to be able to give it to a place like Colby, where it will have such an impact on the teaching that happens here but also be a resource for the rest of the state—they win on both fronts.”

— Sharon Corwin, the Carolyn Muzzy Director of the Colby College Museum of Art

Elizabeth Broun, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, recalls a time when Peter and Paula Lunder began to wonder about the ultimate purpose of their growing collection of American art. Prices were skyrocketing, and the Lunders were questioning whether this was where they should be devoting their resources.

“When they settled on the idea of donating everything to the Colby museum, at that point it was suddenly okay,” Broun said. “They went from collecting good but not great works, when they thought it was just for their own purpose, to collecting the best of the best when they knew it was all going to Colby.”

The destination for the Lunders’ collection was made official in 2007, but the couple had settled on Colby years before. And that decision led the Lunders to change their purpose from acquiring art that would hang in their homes to art that would benefit Colby students, faculty, and the state of Maine.

The result? One of the largest and most important collections of the works of James McNeill Whistler in the world. Addition of contemporary sculpture to a collection that already included some of the most renowned works of the 19th century. The most important works of specific artists, including Winslow Homer, John LaFarge, Georgia O’Keeffe, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Joseph Mozier, among many others, curators say.

> Bold Stroke continued on page 35
In order to embrace Colby President William D. Adams’s call for the museum of art to be integrated fully into the College curriculum, the couple collected many works—a Dürer print dating to 1501, several Rembrandt etchings, and one of the largest private collections of Whistler prints in the country—for their educational value.

The Lunders’ belief in the importance of art in our lives extends from schoolchildren to Colby students and faculty. In order to embrace Colby President William D. Adams’s call for the museum of art to be integrated fully into the College curriculum, the couple collected many works—a Dürer print dating to 1501, several Rembrandt etchings, and one of the largest private collections of Whistler prints in the country—for their educational value.

“We love [the Rembrandts],” Peter Lunder said. “It wasn’t what we were collecting, but we were trying to develop in areas that might be related to the College curriculum.”

The Lunders have established permanent fellowships for Colby students to work at the Smithsonian, the Portland Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. They also founded the Lunder Consortium for Whistler Studies, which links the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C., the University of Glasgow, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Colby College Museum of Art for the purpose of studying James McNeill Whistler’s work. In 2011 at the Freer, a symposium on Whistler’s art attracted 400-plus Whistler scholars from around the world.

But at the heart of the Lunders’ commitment to art and to Colby is the art itself.

In 2007 Colby announced the Lunders’ intention to give their collection to Colby. In 2009 design got underway for the Alfond-Lunder Family Pavilion. Ground was broken for the addition in 2011, and in recent months the gallery spaces have been completed. In February the last of the collection was shipped to Colby.

At one time the Southwestern pieces, collected over many years, had been displayed in the Lunders’ homes in Maine, Boston, and Florida, but recently they were consolidated in the apartment in West Palm Beach.

Their subject is American Indians of the Southwest, mainly from Taos Pueblo in New Mexico. Artists—mostly Americans trained in Europe—congregated in the nearby town of Taos in the early 20th century. The lives of the indigenous people of the region provided a respite from modern life of the time. The colors and light of the Southwest inspired the artists. Seen today, the works capture a period of American life that quickly disappeared.

The Southwestern paintings are one of Peter Lunder’s special interests, and though he’d given the same tour to friends the previous night, he didn’t hesitate to do it again.

“Here’s a Russell. A Couse. A Sharp. That’s a bronze relief of Chief Sitting Bull by Kemeys. … Here’s Red Jacket, the famous Iroquois diplomat. Here’s another Moran. … That little one over there was in Eleanor Roosevelt’s collection. It’s a Leigh painting.”

Lunder explained that many of the paintings were commissioned by the railroad
companies, that one of the painters whose work is included in the collection, Nicolai Fechin, was Russian and came to Taos to visit the artist colony there. Some of the artists stayed for a year or two and moved back east. Others settled in the area, captivated by the scene. The Pueblo models reportedly were paid 25 cents an hour to pose for the painters. In one painting the children are the daughters of one of the artists. The buffalo-skin teepee in one of the paintings is now on display in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

“They all have a story to them,” Peter Lunder said. Soon these stories will be told at Colby. After the tour was finished, the transport staff began taking the paintings from the walls, laying them on tables, and carefully wrapping them. The iconic sculptures—Frederic Remington’s *The Bronco Buster*, James Fraser’s *End of the Trail*—were meticulously wrapped in foam and carefully secured in custom-made crates. Soon the apartment was filled with bins and boxes. When a visitor observed that the walls were bare, Peter Lunder said, “We have a lot of work that’s not included in the gift that we can hang and enjoy.”

And the Lunders aren’t through collecting for Colby, they said. When they see something that they like, and feel would be good for the public to see and for students and scholars to study, they will add it to the Lunder Collection. “It will be our pleasure,” Peter Lunder said.

“We’re very patriotic,” Paula Lunder added. “We feel we’ve been very fortunate to live in this country and in the great state of Maine. … And Waterville was the perfect place to live and enhance our lifestyle with our four children, and our family has supported this effort and is one hundred percent behind us.”

So one part of the family was seeing off another. Later Paula Lunder was on the phone, telling a friend that the Colby visitors and the art transporters were there and the paintings were being packed up.

“Our treasures,” she said, smiling. “We’re sending them to college.”