

THE LAST FIVE DECADES

featuring

THE WASHINGTON ART CONSORTIUM COLLECTIONS

Works on Paper: American Art 1945-1975

Gift of Virginia Wright Fund and NEA

Mary Margaret Aiken and Richard Aiken Collection

Gift of Richard and the late Margaret Aiken

and

SELECTIONS FROM WWU CHAIR COLLECTION

Western Gallery, Western Washington University, Bellingham
January 5 - February 10, 1999

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Fitting It All Together

A museum may be seen as a series of large rooms housing a vast array of treasures or as a narrative theater where objects are organized to define intellectual moments. This University art gallery is not a traditional museum fulfilling an encyclopedic destiny but rather an exhibition space where connections between objects on temporary view pinpoint contemporary ideas and evolving attitudes. Eschewing the mode of universal collecting, the Western Gallery has sharpened its focus in three main areas: a public collection of contemporary sculpture outdoors; a collection of international chair designs; and 20th - 21st century works on paper by American artists.

To excel in these areas the Western Gallery has to seek partnerships with other institutions and friendships with the private sector. The best example, so far, is Western's founding membership in the Washington Art Consortium. Aware of the need of institutions to provide cultural resources of American art for its citizens across the state, the Virginia Wright Fund (Seattle) in the early seventies imaginatively proposed that the National Endowment for the Arts match funding for a collection of works by unarguably some of the most important American artists working from the mid century. Still unique in the United States today, the Washington Art Consortium provides a prime example of how seven institutions* share and can enrich their communities with a collection which none could have afforded on their own.

The original intent of the Consortium selection committee was to focus on the best of the immediate past as well as to support art within its own life time. The Works on Paper Collection: American Art 1945-1975 (Virginia Wright Fund and NEA) has also indicated some of our future artists for most of these artists are still prolific today. This is one of the reasons why the Washington Art Consortium celebrates in this exhibition the recent gifts of the late Mary Margaret Aiken and Richard Aiken of Anacortes. While remaining a separate collection - The Mary Margaret Aiken and Richard Aiken Collection - these works selected by the Aikens amplify the earlier Consortium holdings of such artists as Helen Frankenthaler, Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg and Frank Stella. Yet, through their intellectual quest and with discerning eyes, the Aikens selected for their own pleasure not only, for example, the older visions of Robert Motherwell but also the work of the younger Susan Rothenberg who invigorated expressionism in the early eighties; not only the ironically submerged narratives of Jasper Johns but also the overt political stories of Jacob Lawrence. Thus, continuing with the original Consortium Collections** and, now, with these wonderful gifts from

the Aikens, the Western Gallery and other members of the Consortium will be able to draw upon these individual objects of the highest quality and to continue to present illuminating themes to its public.

Thus, intersection is one of the key operations in the Western Gallery's collections*** mentioned above. In the Consortium Collections, drawing emerges as one of the fundamental processes of the contemporary artist. In the case of sculptors, such as Mark Di Suvero, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra, drawing functions as a conduit of some of the prime ideas, intellectual or intimate, from the artist's mind. Realizing its space and budgetary limitations, the Western Gallery can maximize its well known sculpture collection through these Consortium Collections. Also interesting cross fertilization between visual art, architecture and design, prevalent in the last five decades, can occur by looking at some of the examples in Western's Chair Collection: the fluid painterly environments of Matta, a contemporary of Arshile Gorky, translated into a 3-d secretive wall; the lattice work holding universal symbols (circle, bird) of the sculptors Isamu Noguchi and Harry Bertolia; the intimate designs of the public architects Eero Saarinen and Robert Venturi. And, the Western Gallery's wish list could include, for example, the chair ensembles of Richard Artschwager, Donald Judd, Frank Gehry, and Maya Lin.

- * Washington Art Consortium Members
 - Cheney Cowles Museum, Spokane
 - Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle
 - Museum of Art, Washington State University, Pullman
 - Seattle Art Museum
 - Tacoma Art Museum
 - Western Gallery, Western Washington University
 - Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham
- ** Washington Art Consortium Collections
 - Works on Paper: American Art 1945-1975
 - American Photographs: 1970-1980
 - Mary Margaret Aiken and Richard Aiken Collection
- *** Western Washington University Collections
 - Outdoor Sculpture Collection
 - Chair Collection
 - Ownership in Washington Art Consortium Collections

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Exhibition Notations

Just as the editors of Time have tried to pick the most influential artists and entertainers [since mid century], so too did the original Consortium committee, the Aikens, and various University art committees. In their chronology over the past five decades, the editors of Time (June 8, 1998) also have highlighted certain artistic, literary, political, scientific and social events. For one type of Western Gallery viewer, the dialogue here in this exhibition will not have to necessarily intersect with this chronology; this viewer's concerns will consist of examining aesthetic influences and comparing artists. Another type of viewer who comes from a literary or musical background may find analogies in the themes and structures of the visual art. For the most part, the average viewer will question whether there is any relation between this exhibition and Time's chronology, much less with his own life. Aside from the spoken intentions of the artist, here are a few notes to spark a dialogue.

1: In Mark Rothko's Altar of Orpheus (1947-48), a dead bird lies in front of a stringed instrument. Relative to the time of the United States dropping the atom bomb on Japan (1945) and the ensuing Cold War, Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb made their thoughts known in a radio broadcast, letters to The New York Times, and their art. Because of the "brutality of the natural world" and the violence of their day, they insisted on subject matter in their art. To explain the instability of life and the constant presence of terror, they turned to the structure of myths where icons and symbols - "Greek, Aztec, Icelandic or Egyptian" and American Indian - express these psychological states. Rothko's veils, Gottlieb's primitive grid, Franz Kline's fragmented markings (1957-58), and Eero Saarinen's reference to origins in his sofa (1948) are codes for both individual and collective power in society.

During the fifties the war continued on the scientific front with the reexamination of the genetic structure of the double helix (1953) and the announcement of the space race (1957). Are there any connections with Gottlieb's painting (1956) where circular pictographs - earth, sun, moon - hover behind the elemental grid; with Al Held's H Series - 10 (1962) where interlocking spirals, while flat, engulf the white sheet of paper?

#2: In 1963 President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The United States had begun the decade of the sixties with a well established system of values, but by the end of the decade people were

questioning every aspect of their society. Artists began to examine popular icons of American culture and how cultural values are transmitted. In taking rubbings from newsprint, Robert Rauschenberg presented an untitled work (1965) where slices of life (monuments of world capitols, patrolmen, timed devices, fences, a mature buck, and passers-by) collide with and transmute one another. Whether the postcard of the Washington Monument in Jim Dine's collage (1973) has any significance in regard to government's rules is up for debate, but it is clear that the artist intended that the tools of his trade (scissors, drill, glove), all lined up across the page, speak as his portrait rather than the traditional lines of his face. Some might say that this opacity or lack of inner truth matched the multivalence of words on the part of the government at that time. In James Rosenquist's Circles of Confusion (1965), he ironically supplanted the earlier aureoles of the French tradition with the plain reality of GE light bulbs. Finally, Roy Lichtenstein's Mural Drawing (1969) blows out of proportion the personal marks of the artists of the fifties. His mural also comments on the replacement of fine art (for example, wall paintings from ancient civilization or the Italian Renaissance) by the mechanical ben-day dot of newspapers and commercial billboards.

While some artists in the sixties utilized popular media, others created simplified, frontal images on neutral ground. Often this format included industrial materials and mass production to promulgate "classic" values in a technological society. Whether the Dacron webbing of the airline industry in Richard Schultz's chair (1966); the steel tubes in Verner Panton's chair (1961); the streamlined box by Donald Judd (1965); the diagram for a florescent tube sculpture by Dan Flavin (1964); the grids of Agnes Martin (1965) and Larry Poons (1963); or the transparent colored plastic seats in Giancarlo Piretti's chair (1969), these forms give an air of anonymity that has come to stand for the power within a technological complex.

Frank Stella is known to give his works intriguing titles. While his earlier work, York Factory (1971), expands the power of the box with a protractor, his recent work, Feneralia (1995), forgoes the standard casing and allows a more personal approach (ala personal computer); yet, Feneralia also suggests the explosion of multiple mechanisms not unlike the expansion of circuits beyond Ma Bell (1982).

#3: As the viewer moves into the seventies and eighties on Time's chart, events such as the resignation of President Nixon (1974) or the acclimation of Alex Haley's novel Roots (1977) and Judy Chicago's installation, The Dinner Party (1979), stand out. In the exhibition Andy Warhol's icon of Chairman Mao (1973) not only flags political and social ideologies but also tellingly reminds us of Nixon's trip to China in the midst of his impending impeachment.

In a decade where Afro-American and feminist power accelerated, the viewer can find Jacob Lawrence pointing to his roots in The Hanging (Legend of John Brown) (1977) and can reflect with Claes Oldenburg

on the female as object (1967). Other artists as George Segal (1965) and Philip Pearlstein (1976) reevaluate the angle of their gaze to desexualize the female nude. In the eighties and nineties artists have continued to comment on personal politics, the effects of commerce, and world events. The viewer can linger with Robert Rauschenberg's Soviet/American Array II (1988) and try to put the texts, diagrams, and patterns together to decode any message regarding the collapse of the Soviet empire three years later.

#4: Artists have always been interested in aspects of the landscape, but the ecological movement which remains strong today came to the forefront in 1970 according to Time. Whereas the sculptor David Smith gives us the distant view of mountains in his upstate New York (1963), Mark Di Suvero displays one of his own sculptures on the land (1972). Jennifer Bartlett intervenes between nature and the viewer; the land is seen as continually changing under the lens of her style - here, The House, Trees, Beach, Bird (1985) in highly systematized patterns. However, someone like Michael Heizer, as well as Nancy Holt and Robert Morris, epitomizes the artists' movement in the late sixties and early seventies to literally work with the materials of the earth often in remote areas. Dissipate (1968) is one of Heizer's drawings suggesting his mode of sculpting - cutting trenches in the Nevada desert resulting in shifting positive and negative forces of land against the vast sky.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C., has pursued her love for the land. For her first designs in furniture - Longitude Chaise Longue and 0 and 30 West Side Chairs (1998), she stated: "It goes back to a childhood fascination we all have - that moment when you discover that the earth is round... and you walk around trying to see that curve."

#5: As the viewer walks through the Last Five Decades, he will find that the works of art deal with aspects of what societies in which they are created take to be reality. The philosopher Michael Foucault believed that this reality is an intellectual construct and that culture can be likened to constantly shifting geological layers of the earth. What can we say about the next five decades?

Sarah Clark-Langager
Director, Western Gallery
January 1999

1940 *I'll Never Smile Again*, by Frank Sinatra and Tommy Dorsey, ranks No. 1 on Billboard's first hit-singles chart



↑ 1941 Orson Welles directs *Citizen Kane*

→ 1940 Constantin Brancusi completes abstract sculpture *Bird in Space*



1950 Kurosawa's *Rashomon* premieres



↑ 1955 Salvador Dali paints *The Lord's Supper*

1953 Lucy has a baby on *I Love Lucy*



↑ 1955 Marilyn Monroe stars in *The Seven Year Itch*

1960 Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* premieres

1962 Claes Oldenburg creates soft sculpture *Two Cheeseburgers with Everything*

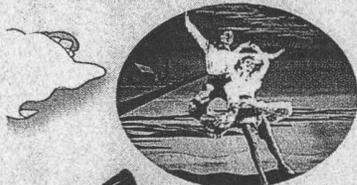


1964 The Beatles perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*



↑ 1942 Edward Hopper paints *Nighthawks*

1955 Allen Ginsberg publishes *Howl and Other Poems*



↑ 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* opens on Broadway



← 1947 Christian Dior introduces the *New Look*

1947 The Actors Studio is founded in New York City to teach Stanislavsky's Method acting

1956 Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's *My Fair Lady* debuts in New York City



↑ 1957 Elvis breaks loose in *Jailhouse Rock*

1959 Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* launches cinema's *New Wave*

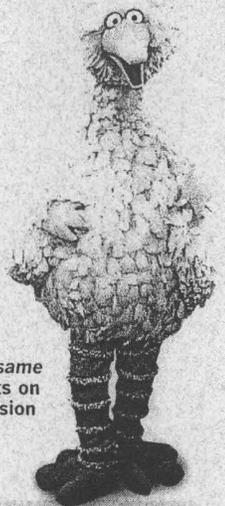


← 1964 Pop art, exemplified by Roy Lichtenstein's *Vicki! I-I Thought I Heard Your Voice!* comes into vogue

1967 The musical *Hair* opens on Broadway

1969 Three-day Woodstock festival draws more than 300,000 people

1969 Portnoy's *Complaint* by Philip Roth is published



→ 1969 *Sesame Street* debuts on public television

1945 U.S. drops atom bombs on Japan

1947 Jackie Robinson joins Brooklyn Dodgers, breaking major league baseball's color barrier

1953 Francis Crick and James Watson discover DNA's double-helix structure

1957 U.S.S.R. launches Sputnik satellite

1963 John F. Kennedy assassinated

1967 Dr. Christiaan Barnard performs first heart transplant, in South Africa

1940: KOHAL COLLECTION; CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI'S 'BIRD IN SPACE': 1940: SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION, NEW YORK; © 1998 ARS/ADAGP; EDWARD HOPPER'S 'NIGHTHAWKS': 1942: EVERETT COLLECTION; 1955: EVERETT COLLECTION; 1957: EVERETT COLLECTION; 1964: ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN; 1969: EVERETT COLLECTION; 1970: MARTHA SWOPE/TIME, INC.; HAMI HON/ABC TV, MA

70

1980

1990

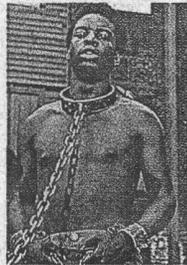


1970 *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* premieres

1971 Archie Bunker and *All in the Family* debut

← 1976 Mikhail Baryshnikov dances Twyla Tharp's *Push Comes to Shove*

→ 1977 Alex Haley's mini-series *Roots* is a worldwide ratings smash

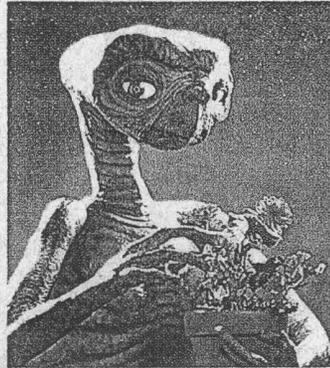


← 1980 John Lennon is murdered in New York City

→ 1981 *Cats* opens in London



1981 The world tunes in to *Dallas* to see who shot J.R.



↑ 1982 *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* invades the planet

→ 1984 Michael Jackson sells 37 million copies of *Thriller*



↑ 1977 *Saturday Night Fever* makes John Travolta, the Bee Gees and white suits cool

1979 Feminist artist Judy Chicago presents *The Dinner Party*



↑ 1987 Vincent Van Gogh's *Irises* fetches \$53.9 million at auction



← 1988 Toni Morrison wins the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*

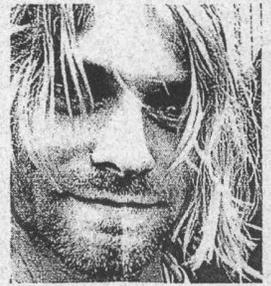
1970 First celebration of Earth Day launches environmentalism as a major political issue

1974 Nixon resigns in wake of Watergate

1982 Courts break up "Ma Bell" telephone monopoly

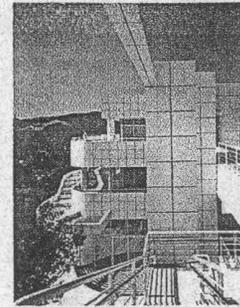
1986 Nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl

1992 Johnny Carson steps down as host of the *Tonight Show*



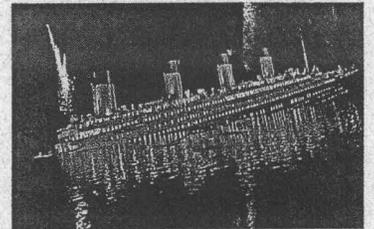
↑ 1994 Grunge-rock singer Kurt Cobain commits suicide

1993 Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* is released



1996 *Rent* debuts on Broadway

← 1997 The Getty Center in Los Angeles is completed



↑ 1998 *Titanic* becomes the top-grossing film of all time



↑ 1998 *Seinfeld* signs off

1990 First gene use of therapy to treat disease

1991 The collapse of the Soviet empire

1997 Britain hands over Hong Kong to China

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Virginia Wright for the unique idea of the Washington Art Consortium and for the extraordinary funding of the Works on Paper: American Art 1945-1975.

National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency, for the recent conservation grant for the two original Consortium Collections.

Richard Aiken and the late Margaret Aiken for the development of the third Consortium Collection of prints and drawings.

Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, for its development of collectors of contemporary art and for its encouragement of gifts from the private sector.

Western Gallery Interns for their hard work with the Preparator, Paul Brower, over the holidays.