For the love of art

Don Walp was many things during his lifetime. Soldier, artist, author, landscape architect. But perhaps the title for which he is best known is friend. When Walp died in Dallas in April 2010, he left behind a legion of friends he had collected like precious works of art during his 100 years. One to which he was especially loyal was the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

During his life, he donated nearly 300 works to the OU art museum, from post-Impressionism to Inuit sculpture. His collection filled three separate exhibitions, including one featuring his own sketches, “World War II: A Different View.”

“He had an intriguing collection. It was a true labor of love,” said Kirk Hall, nephew of Fred Jones Jr., for whom the museum is named. Hall’s grandparents Fred and Mary Eddy Jones funded construction of the University’s art museum, named for their son, who died in a plane crash while a student at OU. The Joneses met Walp through his profession as a landscape architect.

“It was my grandmother’s connection to the museum that nurtured his,” said Hall, current president of the museum’s board of visitors. “He had his opinions in the world of art as did my grandmother. Neither was afraid to speak their minds, but they got along famously.”

Walp became so knowledgeable about “the Fred” that he became the museum’s unofficial ambassador, spreading the word to clients and friends from New York to Dallas.

Walp earned a degree in landscape architecture from the University of Michigan and was beginning his career in Texas when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. While serving in World War II, he toured English gardens and museums and sought out the famous and not-so-famous artists of the day. In England he met Lucien Pissarro, son of post-Impressionist Camille Pissarro. Lucien was so moved by Walp’s wartime visit, he later sent him a
color lithograph by his father. The lithograph, along with paintings by Lucien and his brothers, are now part of the OU art museum collection.

After the war, Walp returned to Texas, married Johnette Atkins and established his own landscape business. He was soon working for the Dallas elite, and his designs frequently appeared in House Beautiful and House and Garden.

“He had an eye for art his entire life,” said his niece Mary Stripling. “He would visit us every summer on Cape Cod, and he would take us to galleries. Art was a focal point of his life and something he wanted to share.”

His artistic talents were never more evident than in his landscape designs. “I can see him sitting in my garden, telling me exactly how to plant,” recalled Stripling. “Those plants are still alive today.”

A passionate and intelligent collector, Walp visited galleries until the last two weeks of his life. Once his hearing failed, he brought along a dry erase board so he could continue having conversations with friends.

“He loved modernism,” said Cheryl Vogel, co-owner with husband Kevin of Valley House Gallery of Dallas. “With his background in landscape design, he was drawn to Asian art. He liked strong patterns and rhythm.”

Vogel said Walp was a dapper dresser and loved to entertain. “He would always create a wonderful centerpiece and party favors for every woman there.” One of Vogel’s favorites was a balancing lobster in day-glo pink, a souvenir from his summers in Maine.

He had a wicked sense of humor and excelled at captivating an audience with his stories. “His stories were not about his past. They were always fresh, contemporary,” Vogel said. “He very much lived in the moment.”

Former OU art museum director Eric Lee, now director of the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, said Walp had a gentle, playful spirit that was evident in his life and his art.

“He was the museum’s uncle.”

###