60-Year-Old Museum of Art Celebrates 25th Anniversary in Fred Jones Jr. Memorial Art Center

By Debra Krittenbrink

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, located on the corner of Boyd Street and University Boulevard on the University of Oklahoma Norman campus, is a union of the effort of many artists and visionaries. In large part, however, it is a combination of the dream of one man, Oscar Brousse Jacobson, and the generosity of another couple, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Jones.

When Jacobson became director of the School of Art in 1915, there was only one art class on campus. Supplies for drawing and painting were scarce, and sculpting materials nonexistent. There were no art museums or collections in the state available to the public, though a few wealthy men had private collections. St. Louis was the nearest art center to Norman. Still, Jacobson envisioned an art school that would nurture its students to develop to their fullest potential. He also dreamed of a fitting space in which to showcase good paintings and sculpture as part of their cultural education, and he set about acquiring a collection that would be available to anyone who was interested in art.

His first acquisitions were gifts from student organizations, friends and alumni. Jacobson’s 1926 sabbatical to North Africa allowed him to add Arab and Berber rugs and Moroccan and Algerian jewelry, pottery and weapons to the collection. He also developed an extensive collection of works by Native American artists, including works by Allan Houser and the “Kiowa Five,” Kiowa students whom he mentored.

In 1948, Jacobson once again brought a significant collection to the university by purchasing the State Department Collection, which included works by such prominent American artists as Georgia O’Keeffe, Edward Hopper and Jack Levine.

Between 1950 and 1958, the Museum of Art was headed by various art professors, who also taught classes at the art school. In 1959, art historian Sam Olkinetzky was hired as director of the museum. Not until 1984, when Tom Toperzer was hired, did the museum have a full-time director.

Olkinetzky used his limited budget to build on the museum’s collection of photography and prints, which is still considered one of the best in the area. With the support of such donors as Max Weitzenhoffer, Jerome Westheimer and Mrs. Fred Jones, he significantly expanded the museum’s holdings.

Jacobson’s vision of a permanent facility to house the art finally came to fruition in 1971. Mr. and Mrs. Fred Jones wanted to present OU with a gift that would memorialize their son, Fred Jones Jr., who had been killed in a plane crash in 1950. The Jones family decided that a non-sectarian chapel would be an appropriate remembrance, and they worked with Bruce Goff, a protegé of world-renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the director of the School of Architecture, to develop a model. Goff developed a contemporary plan which, while well received nationally, stirred local debate about the merits of traditional versus contemporary architecture. The Jones family spent months, then years, working on a compromise for the chapel. In the meantime, several religions established student centers around the campus, and the Jones family decided to refocus their efforts on a fine arts building.