The Thams Collection

The collection just grew. Art was just something I think we felt was as necessary as a sofa or a chair. It was part of our life.

-William H. Thams

Joseph Henry Sharp (U.S., 1859-1953)
Fine Bull, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 18 x 12"

Leon Gaspard (U.S., b. Russia, 1882-1964)
Pearl River at Canton, 1926
Oil on board, 20 x 22 1/4"
The Thams Collection - A Spectacular Gift of Taos Art

Just weeks before the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art closed to the public to begin its $14-million renovation and construction of a new wing, University of Oklahoma President David L. Boren announced that another extraordinary art collection had been given to the museum.

In memory of his wife, Roxanne, William H. "Bill" Thams of Midland, Texas, has given the museum 30 significant paintings by such Taos artists as Ernest Blumenschein, Nicolai Fechin, Bert Phillips, Joseph Henry Sharp, and E. Irving Couse. A bronze bust of honored medicine man Hosteen Klah by artist Allan Clark was given to the museum by the Thamses in 1999. The works were on display through May 18 and will play a starring role in the museum's permanent collection when the museum reopens in fall 2004.

"We are deeply grateful to Bill Thams and the late Roxanne Thams for their generosity in choosing the University of Oklahoma as the ultimate home for their outstanding art collection," Boren said. "They wanted their art to be in a place where it could make a positive impact on the future by being part of the educational experience of students at their alma mater. This collection, along with those given previously to the museum, establishes the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in the top ranks of university art museums in the nation."

Announcement of the university's acquisition of the Fleischaker Collection, highlighted in OU's alumni publication Sooner Magazine, served as the catalyst for the Thams gift, said museum director Eric M. Lee. "We are absolutely thrilled with the gift of this magnificent collection," said Lee, noting that the Thams and Fleischaker collections complement one another. "The Thams Collection depicts different aspects of the art from the Taos Society than the paintings in the Fleischaker Collection," said Lee, "so our audiences will be able to view the breadth and scope of these artists' careers."

Bill and Roxanne Thams shared a love of art from the beginning of their marriage in 1939. Early on, the couple purchased art reproductions through ads in The New York Times for their two-room apartment in Norman. They did not begin collecting Taos paintings until 1974, when they purchased Joseph Henry Sharp's

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Nicolai Fechin (U.S., b. Russia, 1881-1955)
Girl in Purple Dress, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16"  
E. Irving Couse (U.S. 1866-1936)
in Ambush, 1915-16
Oil on canvas, 24 x 29"
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Fine Bull. It is especially appropriate that the pair’s initial Southwestern painting was a portrait by Sharp since he is often referred to as the father of the Taos art colony.

Each work in the Thams collection has a story behind it as unique as the painting itself. The remarkable *Haystack, Taos* by Ernest L. Blumenschein (see detail, front cover) was acquired on a road trip to Santa Fe which Thams took with his teen-aged grandson in celebration of the elder’s release from the hospital after surgery. When they walked into the Jamison Gallery, surprised owner Zeb Conley asked, “How did you get here so fast?” He had left a message on Thams’ answering machine saying he had a stunning Blumenschein for sale, but that it wouldn’t last long. If Thams had been home to receive the message, he never would have made it to the gallery in time.

The Thamses purchased *Juanita* by E. Martin Hennings in no small part because she was the wife of Frank Samora, Hennings’ model for *Drummer Boy*, a painting they had purchased four years earlier. With the acquisition of *Juanita*, the Thamses were delighted to reunite the couple on the walls of their home.

During the years they were building their collection, the Thamses carefully researched each artist and became extremely knowledgeable collectors, constantly fine-tuning their artistic eye. Bill Thams was so thorough in his research and record keeping that Roxanne often referred to him as a “frustrated curator.”

“Art was just something I think we felt was as necessary as a sofa or a chair,” said Thams. “It was part of our life.”

Leon Gaspard (U.S., b. Russia, 1882-1964)
*Les Artistes Incorrigués*, 1928
Oil on silk on board, 12 3/4 x 19 7/8"
(above, left)
Ernest Martin Hennings
(U.S., 1886-1956)
Juanta, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 14 x 14" 

(above, right)
Bert Geer Phillips
(U.S., 1868-1956)
Nor-A-Kig-Gee-Ah-Tzur, c. 1900-1910
Oil on canvas, 19 x 15" 

(left)
Irving K. Manoil (U.S., 1891-1982)
Aspen and Snow, 1923
Oil on canvas, 36 x 41"