FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WITH IMAGE

_Art Interrupted_ Explores 1940s Art and Politics at FJJMA
March 2

NORMAN, OKLA. — A controversial exhibition of modern American art, once shut down by the U.S. government in the late 1940s, has been reassembled for a new, two-year national tour. _Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy_ opens to the public Saturday, March 2 at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma.

In 1946, the U.S. State Department assembled an exhibition of modernist paintings created by contemporary American artists. The intent was to show the world America’s artistic coming of age, highlighting the freedom of expression enjoyed by artists in the United States. The result was _Advancing American Art_, an exhibition designed to combat Communism but, ultimately, deemed un-American by members of the U.S. Congress and President Harry S. Truman.

The newly reassembled version of this exhibition, _Art Interrupted_, draws from the permanent collections of 10 museums, private collectors and other public institutions and includes many of the original works from _Advancing American Art._

“We are afforded an incredible opportunity to collaborate with other U.S. museums and organizations to reunite this powerful exhibition of American works,” said Ghislain d’Humieres, the Wylodean and Bill Saxon Director of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. “Visitors will recognize works from the Fred
Jones’ State Department Collection, as well as many other significant paintings from other collections that have made this important exhibition possible.”

*Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy* is organized by the Jule Collins Smith Museum at Auburn University, the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia and the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma and was made possible by grants from the Henry Luce Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts as part of American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius. This program also made possible, in part, by the Norman Arts Council Grant Program.

The exhibition’s organizers are members of the Association of Art Museum Directors.

The exhibition’s opening will be preceded by a symposium 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., March 1. Speakers will address both the domestic controversy and the international implications of *Advancing American Art*. Although the exhibition will be the lynchpin for the symposium, it provides a platform for discussing a variety of related issues of political, social and cultural significance. *Advancing American Art* will be the subject of the morning session, and the importance of international cultural diplomacy will be addressed in the afternoon. The symposium is co-sponsored by FJJMA and the OU College of International and Area Studies.

Guest presenters include Dennis Harper, Curator of Collections and Exhibitions, Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University; Landon Storrs, Associate Professor of History, University of Iowa; Mark A. White, Eugene B. Adkins and Chief Curator, FJJMA; Ambassador Cynthia Schneider, Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service; and Richard T. Arndt, Co-Chair Advisory Council, Americans for UNESCO and Chair, U.S. Steering Committee, Fulbright Association.

Due to limited seating, reservations are required to attend the symposium and lunch by emailing the FJJMA at tdenton@ou.edu by February 15 to register for the symposium and/or lunch. A full symposium program will be available on the museum’s website at www.ou.edu/fjjma.

Following a private opening reception, Association members with Metro Arts Circle benefits are invited to bring their guest (age 21 and above) to an after party at LOCAL restaurant, 2262 West Main St., Norman, OK at 9 p.m. Friday, March 1.

“In its time, *Advancing American Art* attempted to use art as a tool for cultural
diplomacy, one that could build bridges between people of various nations,” said Mark White, the Eugene B. Adkins and Chief Curator at the FJJMA. “Culture, it was believed, could heal some of the divisions created by World War II. The exhibition also attempted to demonstrate the freedom of expression possible in American democracy and the diversity of class and ethnicity that composes American society.

“Ironically, the exhibition fell prey to partisan politics and intellectual posturing as to what an appropriate image of the United States should be. For most of Congress and President Truman, modern art presented a negative view of this country. Our new exhibition, Art Interrupted, seems timely in a period of intense partisan politics and extreme disagreement as to what role the United States should play in the world.”

In 1946, J. LeRoy Davidson, who served the State Department as a visual arts specialist, was responsible for developing a set of touring exhibitions to demonstrate not only the diversity of American modern art, but also the power of democracy to nourish freedom of expression. Advancing American Art originally consisted of 79 oil paintings, and the State Department paired it with smaller collections of watercolor, tempera, gouache and other media, with intentions to travel works to Europe, Asia and South America.

Advancing American Art initially met with positive press, such as its premiere at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in October 1946 and its brief appearances in Paris and Prague. But criticism followed soon after.

William Randolph Hearst’s New York-Journal American ran images of the work with sarcastic captions. Conservative artists’ groups, unhappy with the exclusion of more traditionally-rendered material, mounted letter-writing campaigns. Congressmen investigated the backgrounds of the artists, many of whom were immigrants or had left-wing leanings, and even President Harry Truman expressed his disdain for modern art in public. The ensuing debacle led Congress to eliminate funding for the project, leaving the art to be auctioned off by the War Assets Administration and Davidson without a job.

The OU Museum of Art was quick to purchase 36 paintings from the State Department and bolster its growing permanent collection.

Representing works by artists from Romare Bearden to Ben Shahn, Stuart Davis, Georgia O’Keeffe, Edward Hopper, Loren Maclver, Jacob Lawrence, Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove, Art Interrupted includes many important figures in the development of American modernism. It also serves, in the end, as a testament to Davidson’s goals.
Although his plan to promote the vitality of American art abroad failed, Davidson’s project had a second life as the works were dispersed across the nation. In the collections of, primarily, university museums and galleries, including the three organizing institutions, they exemplified the principles for which he had intended them and reached countless Americans in their formative years.


The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus. Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to a generous gift from the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting www.ou.edu/fjjma.

###

**IMAGE CREDIT**

A new exhibition of 1940s American art, including this 1945 painting by Anton Refregier, goes on display to the public March 2 at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in Norman. *Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy* originally was organized in 1946 by the U.S. State Department for international exhibition, but the exhibit was deemed un-American and shut down before it could fulfill its full exhibition tour.

Anton Refregier (U.S., b. Russia, 1905-1979)
*End of the Conference*, 1945
Oil on canvas, 32 x 15 in.
Purchase, U.S. State Department Collection, 1948
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman