Painting, Furniture Exhibition Spotlights Norman Artists

NORMAN, OKLA. – A unique exhibition that combines abstract and experimental paintings with modern furniture design debuts this June at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. Oil and Wood: Oklahoma Moderns George Bogart and James Henkle showcases the works of two Norman artists who have helped represent the cultural climate at the University of Oklahoma over the past 60 years. The exhibition opens with a lecture by the exhibition curator at 7 p.m. on Friday, June 6, followed by a reception at 8 p.m. Both events are complimentary and open to the public.

Bogart and Henkle, while artists in their own right, both served as art faculty at the OU School of Art and Art History in the latter half of the 20th century. Bogart, who joined the faculty in 1970, experimented tirelessly with oil paint, and the exhibition offers a retrospective of his career. The furniture designs of Henkle offer a sculptural counterpoint to the paintings of Bogart. Henkle taught design at OU for nearly 40 years and, although he worked in a variety of media, he excelled in the artful design of modernist furniture.

Susan Havens Caldwell, David Ross Boyd professor emerita of art history at the OU School of Art and Art History and guest curator of the exhibition, stressed the importance of the mediums selected for Oil and Wood.

“George Bogart’s paintings and James Henkle’s furniture designs awaken in us a feeling for materials used richly, lovingly,” she said. “It is not that Bogart painted in oils exclusively, but he always returned to his preferred medium, oil, whose
luminosity attracted him. Likewise, while Henkle constructed metal sculptures and product designs in various materials, his most beloved materials were the various woods that he fashioned into functional sculptures of great elegance.”

The exhibition pairs the works of these distinguished professors emeriti and demonstrates that artists in Norman kept pace with the developments of their artistic peers outside of Oklahoma.

“As colleagues at the University of Oklahoma, Bogart and Henkle championed modernist ideals in painting and design, respectively,” said Mark White, the Eugene B. Adkins senior curator and curator of collections at the FJJMA. “Bogart and Henkle alike delighted in experimentation with materials, and this exhibition emphasizes the profound joy each artist found in his chosen media.”

Bogart was born in 1933 and grew up in a suburb of Duluth, Minn. After completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Minnesota at Duluth in 1956, he entered the M.F.A. program at the University of Washington in Seattle the following year. By the time he earned this degree in 1959, Bogart had been attracted to landscape subjects in his oil paintings.

However, by 1961, he abandoned landscape painting for more symbolic images that could stand alone without reference to objects in the natural world. Bogart preferred more abstract compositions that referenced personal themes and allowed him to experiment with color.

“Struggling with the notion of the abstract and his desire to distance himself from realism, Bogart did not see abstraction as an end in itself,” Caldwell said. “Abstraction, he believed, needed to derive from real experiences, real vision.”

Bogart continued painting while teaching at the University of Texas at Austin from 1959 to 1967. He then taught at Penn State University in State College, Pa., for the next three years. In 1970, Bogart joined the faculty at the OU School of Art, where he taught until his retirement in 1997. Bogart continued painting for nearly 10 years and, as an emeritus professor, he was invited back several times to teach painting courses until his death in 2005.

The nearly 90 works of Bogart’s selected for display in Oil and Wood offer a retrospective of his artistic career and reveal that, as Caldwell said, “Bogart’s paintings run the gamut of emotions and expressions.”

As a counterpoint to Bogart’s paintings, Caldwell selected nine works of furniture by Henkle, who worked alongside Bogart for nearly 30 years in the OU School of Art.
Born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1927, Henkle grew up in Lincoln, Neb. Following high school, he served in the U.S. Navy for two years, then enrolled full-time at the University of Nebraska in 1945 on the GI bill. Although his major was in art, he took a number of engineering courses and ended up with minors in both mathematics and architecture.

One of the teachers who most influenced Henkle during his undergraduate years was Kay Nash, a sculptor and product designer. For her class, he designed and constructed his first chair, which was so admired that he ended up selling a number of his chairs to other members of the faculty.

In 1949, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, then attended Pratt Institute in New York for the next two years, where he earned a certificate in industrial design.

Upon the completion of his certification, OU hired Henkle as a general and industrial design instructor in the School of Art in 1951. Due to a financial crisis at the university that resulted in lost positions, Henkle took a position in 1952 with Dave Chapman Industrial Design in Chicago, where he remained for two years.

While in Chicago, Henkle completed design projects for multiple companies, such as Pabst Blue Ribbon and Parker Pens. A particularly beneficial project for him was commissioned by the Brunswick Balke Collender Co. The experience taught him, for example, how to plot the curve of a chair back according to the position of the fourth lumbar vertebra of the spinal column – a practice he still follows.

“For that project, the firm was commissioned to design school furniture for children of different age groups,” Caldwell said. “Adjusting proportions for different sizes sensitized him to designing for comfort – a skill that is apparent to anyone fortunate enough to sit in one or more of the many chairs Jim has designed.”

Henkle was invited back to the OU School of Art in 1953 to teach industrial and graphic design courses by then-Director William Harold Smith. Additionally, Henkle took up welding so he could also teach it in a sculpture course.

Having enjoyed the vibrant cultures of New York and Chicago, Henkle found the atmosphere at OU to be stimulating. The same GI bill that had originally supported his undergraduate work also brought in additional faculty with fresh, new modern ideas about art.
“Henkle particularly enjoyed having total control over his own individual designs and their construction, since he had worked as part of a team in Chicago,” said Caldwell.

Since his retirement in 1990, Henkle has continued honing his craft and has completed more than 50 public and private commissions for his work, consisting mostly of furniture for galleries, museums and private collections. His works have been exhibited throughout the Midwest and featured in multiple design publications.

The wooden furniture pieces selected for the exhibition include tables, chairs and desks from Henkle’s own Norman home.

“Henkle’s designs differ greatly from one piece to the next, but their craft, their careful balance, their often opposing viewpoints and their unusual solutions to construction problems mark them as his designs and no one else’s,” said Caldwell. “In Jim’s pieces we find grace and charm, and sometimes even a playful lyricism.”

Multiple educational programs are scheduled in conjunction with Oil and Wood, including a gallery talk with Bogart’s widow, Elyse Bogart, at 12:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 30; a gallery talk with Henkle at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 9; and College Night, an event for college students, at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 11. The exhibition will be on display at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art through Sept. 14, 2014.

More information about the exhibition and programs is available on the museum’s website at www.ou.edu/fjjma.

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 the generosity of the OU Office of the President and 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.

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IMAGE CREDIT

A new exhibition combines the paintings and wooden furniture of two University of Oklahoma emeritus professors, such as the examples shown here. Oil and Wood: Oklahoma Moderns George Bogart and James Henkle opens with a
public lecture and reception at 7 p.m. Friday, June 6, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art on the OU Norman campus.

Left:
James Henkle (U.S., b. 1927)
Rocking Chair, c. 1995
Cherry, 38 x 22 x 37 in.

Right:
George Bogart (U.S., 1933-2005)
Tacoma, 2002
Oil on canvas, 61 ½ x 71 ½ in.
Loan courtesy of Elyse Bogart, 2014