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Theater & art

Museum of Fine Arts receives massive gift from trustee

A transformative trove of works from a devoted benefactor

By **Sebastian Smee** | GLOBE STAFF MAY 20, 2012



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Saundra Lane posed with donated artwork at the MFA.

Saundra Baker was 25 when she met her husband to be, William Lane. He was 50. She was standing in line for last-minute “rush” tickets at Boston’s Metropolitan Theater, and ready to give up.

“I was just starting to go when a gentleman came up and offered me a spare ticket,” said Mrs. Lane, 73, sitting at a table at the Museum of Fine Arts.

“ ‘My compliments,’ he said when I asked him the price. ‘I wasn’t straight off the turnip truck, so I knew that I would have to sit with him.’”

The opera, incredibly, was Verdi’s “La forza del destino” - “the force of destiny.” The two married a year later, and Sandra quickly became involved in William’s passion: collecting art.

Saturday, the Museum of Fine Arts announced it had received an extraordinary, long-hoped-for gift of 6,000 photographs, 100 works on paper, and 25 paintings from Lane, a museum trustee and longtime friend of the MFA. The gift is worth potentially hundreds of millions of dollars - the MFA will only say that the dollar value probably runs into “nine figures.”

The collection’s sheer quality makes Lane, in the words of MFA director Malcolm Rogers, “one of only a few collectors who have changed the face of the museum.”

The donation includes the entire photographic estate of Charles Sheeler - 2,500 photographs - and the same number of photographs by Edward Weston. Complementing these are 500 photographs by Ansel Adams, and 100 each by Imogen Cunningham and Brett Weston, Edward’s son.

Five hundred more photographs, extending the range of the collection beyond its early modernist focus, were acquired by Lane after her husband’s death in 1995, and these have also been given.

Among the 100 works on paper are 20 drawings and watercolors by Arthur Dove, 20 by Sheeler, and seven by Stuart Davis.

The 25 paintings include major works by Hyman Bloom, John Marin, Davis, Franz Kline, and Sheeler.

Rogers and his team of curators were euphoric as they shared the news of the donation.

“I’m bowled over,” he said over the phone. “It’s the most wonderful shock. I feel a great sense of responsibility toward these works. I want to make them as accessible as possible.”

The MFA's collection of 9,000 photographs is now two-thirds bigger.

But it's not just a matter of quantity.

"We have overnight transformed the photography collection from good to great," said Karen Haas, the MFA's Curator of the Lane Collection.

In accordance with Lane's wishes, the MFA has promised to be generous in lending them to other museums.

"Most of the pictures are happy," said Lane, who was trained as a schoolteacher, and taught third grade for several years. "I just want to encourage people to come!" she said of her desire to get people into museums. "Art is not strange, it's nothing to be afraid of. It's just wonderful to see people have a chance at something."

This gift comes more than two decades after the Lanes together gave 90 American modernist paintings and works on paper to the MFA, including paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, and Jacob Lawrence. (Many of these hang in three galleries named for the Lanes in the MFA's Art of the Americas Wing.)

The Lanes were pioneering collectors in the fields of early American modernist painting and photography at a time when neither field had much prestige.

The owner of a plastics manufacturing company based in Leominster, William Lane was zealous about art.

"I remember Bill always saying, 'Look. Look. Look. Preferably with your mouth closed,' " said MFA paintings curator Karen Quinn.

Few of the works the Lanes bought are large, because William needed to be able to fit them into his station wagon.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Curators looked at donated artwork at a gallery in the Museum of Fine Arts. The MFA will say only that the dollar value of Sandra Lane's gift probably runs into "nine figures."

Having set up the William H. Lane Foundation in 1953 to promote the artists whose work he collected, he spent much of his time in the wagon transporting works to and from school, college, and smaller museums in New England and the mid-Atlantic states for temporary exhibitions.

According to Haas, who, like several other MFA colleagues, counts Lane as a close friend and collaborator, “Saundra used to joke that she knew all the museum loading docks in the area but rarely entered through their front doors.”

“I felt like we were educators,” said Lane. “That helped me feel right at home.”

Rather than keep at a safe distance, like many collectors, the Lanes liked to get involved with the artists they supported. They forged close friendships with many.

Saundra Lane, for instance, spent a morning in the darkroom with Ansel Adams, with whom the Lanes were particularly close. She describes watching him work as “like watching ballet.”

“He was a big man, but he was so light on his feet!”

When, as a guest at Ghost Ranch, Georgia O’Keeffe’s New Mexico home, she asked the artist how she handled having an older husband, O’Keeffe responded, “Well, how are you finding it?” According to Haas, writing in the introduction to “An Enduring Vision: Photographs from the Lane Collection,” Lane replied, “I seem to listen a lot.” And O’Keeffe said, “So do I.”

An amateur pilot, William Lane used to fly to Ghost Ranch in a decommissioned AT-6 two-seater with his wife, who is short of stature, sitting on cushions in the seat behind. “I remember you, Bill Lane,” O’Keeffe would say. “You came in like a silver bird.”

Both Lanes became close not only to the four sons of Edward Weston (who died before they could meet him), but to his grandchildren and even to his model, muse, and wife, Charis Wilson.

They became close to curators, too. Saundra Lane, who grew up in Chelsea, first visited the MFA when she was at Simmons College training to become a schoolteacher.

She has maintained a relationship with the museum ever since.

“The MFA staff has come to feel like family and the museum like an extension of my own home,” she said.

The Lanes have always been fastidious about documenting their collection. In notebooks and on the backs of the works of art they kept careful records of when and how each work was acquired, where it has traveled, and which exhibitions it has been lent to.

Lane has included this material in her gift to the MFA, along with the couple’s correspondence with artists.

“It’s every curator’s dream,” said Haas.

Most of the photographs that are part of the new gift have been on long-term loan to the museum for years.

But most of the 500 acquired by Lane since her husband’s death, along with paintings and works on paper, were transported to the museum in a truck last week.

Given the generous gift in 1990, and Lane’s deepening involvement with the MFA over the years, was her collection always bound to end up at the museum?

According to Rogers: “We always lived in hope. But how confident can you ever be? We were certainly surprised about the timing. She just stepped forward.”

“She always made it clear that the collection would be coming here without ever spelling it out,” said Haas. “I think once we started doing exhibitions together, there was a growing confidence with each project.”

Asked to describe Lane, Rogers said, “She’s a very effective communicator without being at all ‘school-marmy.’ She has a girlish charm, a vivacity, which is very attractive. And she combines strong opinions with strong taste.”

“She’s savvy, she has a good eye, and she’s so down to earth,” said Quinn. “She really wants to share this material with the world.” Lane also has “a romantic side,” according to Haas, prompting her colleague Quinn to observe: “The whole collection has a romantic streak running through it.”

One photograph purchased by Lane is by the Swiss-born American Robert Frank.

It shows two chairs in the Tuileries Garden in Paris. One chair has a circular seat and a rounded back and arms. It seems more feminine and present. The second, all straight lines, is folded up and leans against a wall behind.

Present, absent; feminine, masculine. . . . It could be seen a quiet but poignant commentary on Mr. and Mrs. Lane.

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