
Our History

Ever Heedful of the Future: A History of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

By 1900 Memphis had recovered from a devastating yellow fever epidemic and reestablished itself as a thriving commercial center. The town's burgeoning affluence fostered the establishment of civic institutions such as the Cossitt Library (1893) and the Overton Park Zoo (1906). Spearheaded by Mrs. E.A. Neely, a campaign was begun to found an art museum in Overton Park. Neely challenged the artist Carl Guthertz (1844-1907) to give form to her idea of an art museum in 1906. Guthertz's preliminary sketches detail a series of small pavilions dedicated to the arts, sciences, and humanities, connected by pergolas that enclosed playgrounds and gardens. He also drew a beautiful example of what one of the pavilions might look like. The resemblance of this small building to a mausoleum is not accidental, as Guthertz proposed that all of the pavilion buildings be constructed as memorials to deceased patrons. Both drawings were dashed off on the back of sheets of stationery.

In a letter to Neely of November 21, 1906, Guthertz expressed his desire to locate the museum where it would be most easily accessible and allow ample space for future growth. He thought the architecture should be in perfect accord with the landscape and preservation of artwork should be the structure's primary goal. In his letter, Guthertz wrote "that Memphis is sadly in need of the refining influence of the esthetic is beyond dispute, and that the lack of it must be a canker in every true and intellectual citizen's heart: in fact, we cannot take our place among the intellectual cities of this or any other country without this consideration. Memphis has long outgrown its town swaddling clothes and donned its city affectation."

Under the auspices of the Park Museum Association, whose logo included images of children flanking a drawing of a squirrel holding a nut and the phrase "ever heedful of the future," Neely set out to raise broad support for an art museum. Her original plan involved raising money by the collection of discarded wastepaper by schoolchildren. The program evolved to engage first-grade children in the gathering of wastepaper on Mondays; second-grade children searched for linen and cotton rags on Tuesdays; and on Wednesdays third-grade students collected waste rubber (garden hoses, galoshes, pencil erasers, and buggy tires).

The Park Museum project languished until 1913 when Bessie Vance Brooks donated \$100,000 to the City of Memphis to build a museum in honor of her late husband, Samuel Hamilton Brooks, who died in 1912. Originally from Ohio, Brooks moved to Memphis in 1858 and joined Brooks and McCall, his brother's wholesale grocery business. After fighting in the Confederate army for four years he formed Brooks-Neely wholesale grocers, which prospered until the firm dissolved partnership in 1897 and Brooks retired. Bessie Vance, a member of a prominent Memphis family, became Brooks' second wife when they married in 1902. An artist, Vance traveled to Paris and studied under her lifelong friend Kate Carl, and was painted by Carl around 1890 (see figure below).



Inspired by the plans laid by Neely, the wife of her husband's business partner, and Carl Guthertz, Mrs. Brooks hired the New York architect James Gamble Rogers to design a museum in 1913. Together they selected a grassy knoll in the southwest corner of Overton Park for the building. No stranger to Memphis, Rogers had recently completed the large Shelby County Courthouse (1905-1909) to great acclaim. Constructed of white Georgian marble, and designed in the Beaux Arts style, the museum building features a Serliana, a large central arched opening that is taller than the two flanking flat-topped openings. The Serliana is surrounded on either side by delicate bas-relief panels depicting personifications of painting and sculpture. Carved into a wooden panel over the door, a sign reads, "Put thou thy faith in the Lord and be [sic] doing good."

Taking a large part of its inspiration from the Morgan Library in New York City, which was designed by the firm of McKim, Mead, and White, the museum soon became widely known as "the jewel box in the park."

Constructed at a cost of \$115,000, the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery (Brooks) opened to the public on May 26, 1916. At the dedication, Mrs. Brooks' speech was read by the Episcopal Bishop Thomas F. Gailor: "I hereby give and donate this building to the public use as a repository, conservatory, and museum of art—to be kept and maintained forever, under the care and regulation of the Park Commission and other authorities of the City of Memphis . . . for the free use and service of students of art and for the enjoyment, inspiration, and instruction of our people."

The museum opened without a collection, staff, or exhibition schedule. The Memphis Art Association, founded in 1914 by members of the Nineteenth Century Club, adopted the Brooks. Florence McIntyre, an artist who studied under William Merritt Chase and was the Art Association's corresponding secretary, became the museum's first director. The inaugural exhibition secured by McIntyre and the Memphis Art Association opened on July 10, 1916, and included work by Frederick J. Waugh, Childe Hassam, Kate Carl, and Ben Foster.

Portraits by Cecilia Beaux of Samuel Hamilton Brooks and Bessie Vance Brooks were the first works of art to enter the permanent collection (see figures below) in 1916. Beaux, a successful Philadelphia artist who studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, was commissioned by Mrs. Brooks in 1911 to paint her husband at Green Alley, the artist's summer home in Gloucester, Massachusetts. The companion portrait of Mrs. Brooks was also painted by Beaux in 1911. Until Mrs. Brooks' death in 1943, all acquisitions were approved by a small

acquisitions committee that consisted of established artists. The first committee included Chase, Beaux, and Carl. Proposed acquisitions were sent to New York for the convenience of the committee.



The job of the acquisitions committee was not terribly onerous at this time since the collection grew initially at a slow rate—by 1941 the collection contained only 21 works. One of the museum's earliest acquisitions was Chase's *Self Portrait*, a gift of the Art Association in 1922. This painting was included in the 1917 Chase *Memorial Exhibition of Paintings*, which was on view at the Metropolitan Museum before it was sent to the Brooks.

In 1928 Samuel H. Kress made his first donation to the museum, a tondo depicting the Madonna and Child with Saint John, attributed at the time to Raffaelino de Garbo and currently considered to be the work of a Lorenzo di Credi follower. The gift was made in recognition of the opening of the first Kress store in Memphis in 1896. In December 1932, in the middle of the Great Depression, Kress loaned the Brooks fifty-three of the paintings in his collection for an exhibition that was so successful it drew 2,000 visitors on opening day. In 1933 Edward A. Bell's *Lady in Gray*, painted in 1889, entered the collection, a gift made by Bell at the urging of artist Irvin R. Wiles, a member of the museum's acquisitions committee and a friend of Chase's.

A variety of women's civic clubs and arts organizations supported the museum in its early years with their time and talent by hosting fund-raising events, lectures, concerts, children's programs, and meetings. These organizations included the Memphis Art League, the Memphis Garden Club, the Alpha Book Club, the Memphis Palette and Brush Club, and the American Association of University Women. The Brooks Memorial League was founded in 1934 with the purpose of "stimulating and promoting the interests and the work of the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, with special attention focused on activities for children." Initially, membership was open to just 25 active members, but this number expanded to 100 in 1955 and is unlimited today. From the beginning, the league strove to make art and art classes accessible to children of all ages through a variety of programs. An early project included the Motor Corps—women drivers who brought groups of children from schools to the museum. Known today as the Brooks Museum League, these dedicated women continue to promote art education by hosting the annual *Mid-South Scholastic Art Awards* to honor exemplary art made by students in grades seven through twelve.

An integral part of other museum projects, the league established the docent program in 1965 and initiated and staffed the museum's first gift shop. With a long history of supporting acquisitions on behalf of the museum, in 1938 the league purchased a diorama of Donatello's studio made by Lorado Taft, and later added similar dioramas of Michelangelo's and Praxiteles' studios. Other acquisitions made possible by the league include Leon Koury's *The Compress Worker*, John Rogers' *Coming to the Parson*, and the *Torso of Pan*.

In 1936 an art reference library opened that helped to further the museum's educational mission. The State Art Project of the Works Progress Administration gave the Brooks 12,000 reproductions of famous works of art that could be used by students and art teachers who had no other means of seeing these works.

The early exhibition schedule focused primarily on the work of American artists such as Robert Henri, Childe Hassam, Arthur B. Davies, John Sloan, and Rockwell Kent (all of whom are represented in the Brooks Collection). Most of the exhibitions hosted during this early period in the museum's history were organized by the American Federation of Arts (AFA). Anna Hyatt Huntington loaned the museum 69 of her sculptures for an exhibition seen only in New Orleans and Memphis in 1937 (see figure below). As a result of the exhibition, for which Huntington assumed all costs, she donated the sculpture *Greyhounds Playing* to the museum in 1938.



Between 1933 and 1957 a major annual exhibition was held in conjunction with Memphis Cotton Carnival. Memphis businessman and arts philanthropist I.L. "Ike" Myers, chair of the Cotton Carnival's Fine Arts Committee at the time, was instrumental in bringing major exhibitions to Memphis. He organized an exhibition of 13 paintings by English painters and 24 paintings and 40 etchings by American artists in 1938. One year later, the Cotton Carnival exhibition included

paintings by Mexican artists, as well as European old masters, which drew a record 10,000 people in six days. Upon his death in 1960, Myers bequeathed the museum his collection, including Rembrandt etchings, Honoré Daumier lithographs, and paintings.

In 1942 the City of Memphis purchased 38 paintings and objets d'art for \$30,000 from Warner S. McCall in St. Louis. Several collection highlights emerged from this purchase, including portraits by Sofonisba Anguissola, Sir Anthony van Dyck, and Sir Henry Raeburn. Significant American paintings were also added, such as Winslow Homer's *Reading by the Brook* and *In the Campagna* by George W. Inness. At the time of this purchase, however, the press maligned Mayor Walter Chandler and Park Commission Chairman John B. Vesey for spending public money unwisely. So fervent was the civic debate about the purchase that a story ran in the March 6, 1944, issue of *Time* magazine



declaring that “the City of Memphis has been stung.” In an article in the April 21, 1944, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Helen Warden quoted “connoisseurs” as saying that the McCall Collection was “the most notorious lot of second-hand art ever unloaded on a museum.”

The collection of works on paper was firmly established by Dr. Louis Levy, a notable physician who presented the Brooks with 1,010 prints in 1947. Levy began building his collection in the 1930s and 1940s when he subscribed to the Associated American Artists (AAA) mail subscription for prints. The bulk of his collection consisted of lithographs by AAA artists, such as Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Stuart Curry. His gift also included prints by European artists such as Lucas van Leyden, Rembrandt van Rijn, Adriaen van Ostade, and Honoré Daumier. In the years since Levy’s gift, the print collection has grown to more than 4,000 works, especially through the gifts of the Armand Hammer Foundation, Myers, Milton M. Adams, AutoZone Inc., and the Madonna Circle. An extensive collection of artists’ books was given in 1990 by local collectors Isabel Ehrlich and Charles F. Goodman.

In 1952 the Samuel H. Kress Foundation announced that it would give Memphis a collection of European masterpieces as part of its national initiative to donate more than 700 old master paintings and sculptures to regional American art museums. To receive this significant gift, the foundation stipulated that the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery had to expand in order to accommodate the collection. The new 15,000-square-foot addition, designed by Memphis architect Everett Woods and constructed at the cost of \$250,000, opened to the public in 1955 (see figure below). This utilitarian single-story building clad in rough-cut stone included a basement and nine exhibition galleries, all of which were air-conditioned. The expansion also gave the Brooks a kitchen, offices, a lounge, and an auditorium.



The opening exhibition in the new building included 31 paintings from the 16th to the 20th centuries belonging to Memphis philanthropists Lillian and Morrie Moss. Over the next 30 years, the Mosses frequently loaned part of their collection for temporary exhibitions, such as the 1965 Selected Paintings from the *Mr. and Mrs. Morrie A. Moss Collection: A Loan Exhibition*, which displayed 38 paintings from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Starting in 1954, they also made frequent donations of art, including outstanding Dutch, Flemish, and British paintings, silver, sculpture, and

decorative arts. Highlights from the Moss collection include William-Adolphe Bouguereau’s *Au Pied de la Falaise*, Richard Wilson’s *Tivoli: Temple of the Sibyl and the Campagna*, John Hoppner’s *A Country Girl*, George Romney’s *Portrait of Lady Wright*, and Jan van Goyen’s *River Scene*. A close associate of Armand Hammer’s, Morrie Moss was also instrumental in the exhibition of 82 paintings from Hammer’s collection in 1967, which attracted more than 50,000 visitors. The Mosses’ impact on the collection’s growth continues today due to the Moss acquisition endowment fund established in 1984.

Mildred Hudson, Nancy Glazer, Adele Lemm, Marjorie Liebman, and Dorothy Sturm—a visionary group of women committed to the appreciation and promotion of contemporary art—formed Art Today in 1953. An influential support group of the museum, Art Today sponsored contemporary art lectures and organized contemporary exhibitions such as the 1953 *Betty Parsons Group*, which included artwork by Theodore Stamos, Ad Reinhardt, Richard Pousette-Dart, Marjorie Liebman (whose work is represented in the Brooks Collection), and Alfonso Ossorio. In 1957 Art Today made its first gifts to the collection: six silk screens by Jackson Pollock, Theodore Stamos' *Oriental Beggar*, and *Moon Steps* by Kenzo Okado. Art Today began taking "off the wall" trips to New York City in 1983 to purchase works for the collection. In its 50-year history, Art Today has added many modern works to the permanent collection, such as Georgia O'Keeffe's *Waterfall—No. 1—Iao Valley—Maui*, Josef Albers' *Study for Homage to the Square: Young Voice*, Elizabeth Murray's *The Tempest*, Ansel Adams' *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, and Alan Shields' *Cat Nip Tabs*.

Under the leadership of Louise Bennett Clark, the Brooks maintained a close and beneficial relationship with the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. Clark assumed the director's position from Valerie Farrington in 1933 and held this position until she retired in 1961. She remains the Brooks' longest-serving director. During her tenure, Clark oversaw the acquisition of the McCall, Levy, and Kress collections, as well as the erection of the new building. Although the possibility of the Kress gift was announced in 1952, it was not until 1961 that all of the 32 works given by the foundation were received. Ranging in date from Rinaldo da Siena's *Madonna and Child with Four Saints* in 1265 to Canaletto's *The Grand Canal from Campo di San Vio* in 1785, the Kress Collection offers an excellent survey of artwork from the Sienese, Florentine, and Venetian schools. In the years that have passed since its initial gift, the foundation has generously supported conservation, research, and publications on this significant part of the Brooks Collection.

Like much of Memphis, Overton Park, and all of the institutions located inside of it, was a segregated institution. African Americans were permitted to enter the park only on Thursdays. At ten o'clock in the morning on Tuesday, March 22, 1960, four African American men and three African American women, all students at LeMoyne-Owen College, entered the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery to view the *Mid-South Art Exhibit*. Another six African American students remained outside the building. All of the students were arrested and charged by the city with disorderly conduct and loitering. The seven students who entered the building were also charged by the state with threatened breach of the peace. On December 2, 1960, it was announced by the Park Commission that the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery was desegregated.

In 1950 the city approved the appointment by the Park Commission of nine prominent businessmen as trustees to direct the museum's operations. The first female trustee was elected in 1969 to a 15-member board. Park Commission management was terminated in 1970 and replaced by the Arts and Sciences Commission, reporting to the mayor. Eventually, members of the board were appointed by the mayor and approved by the City Council to manage public funds and establish policy. In 1957 the private Fine Arts Foundation was formed to allow the museum to raise money for collections and programs through the subscription of memberships. Both boards were maintained separately until 1983.

Between 1952 and 1960 Hugo Dixon, a dedicated member of the museum's board who worked diligently with Clark to secure the Kress Foundation gift, gave the museum 13 paintings from his extensive collection. Originally from Southport, England, Dixon and his wife, Margaret Oates Dixon, amassed a fine collection of British portraits and gave the museum Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait *Mrs. Way* in 1954 and Sir Henry Raeburn's *Alexander Home* in 1962. The bulk of the Dixons' gift includes an impressive collection of French 19th-century paintings, including Camille Pissarro's *La Sente de Justice, Pontoise*, Alfred Sisley's *Le Pont d'Argenteuil*, Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *L'Ingenu*, and Édouard Vuillard's *Vue en Suisse*. Other collection highlights given by the Dixons include Vanvitelli's *View of the Piazza del Popolo* and Luca Giordano's *The Slaying of the Medusa*. After Hugo Dixon's death in 1974 the Dixon Gallery and Gardens opened in the Dixons' stately former home and grounds.

In 1959 the Memphis Academy of Arts, known since 1985 as the Memphis College of Art, moved to its dramatic new building, designed by Roy Harrover of Mann and Harrover. Adjacent to the Brooks in Overton Park, the physical proximity of the buildings further cemented the institutions' close relationship. The long history of collaboration began with the same sponsoring organization, the Memphis Art Association, and the same founding director, Florence McIntyre. In 1936 most of the students and faculty deserted the James Lee Memorial Academy of Arts and McIntyre's rigid devotion to the academic tradition and founded the new Memphis Academy of Arts. The museum and art college have collaborated throughout their histories, jointly bringing artists such as Max Beckmann, Will Barnet, Tony Smith, and, more recently, Willie Cole to jury exhibitions, teach classes, and give public lectures. The Brooks Collection includes many works by Memphis College of Art professors, such as Burton Callicott, Veda Reed, Henry Easterwood, Edwin C. Rust, Dolph Smith, Edward Faiers, and Dorothy Sturm.

The Little Garden Club was one of the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery's devoted support groups that worked hard to improve the surrounding landscape. The club developed the intimate Holly Court garden, located on the north side of the 1916 building and maintained today by the Brooks League. In 1962 the club presented the museum with sculptures by Wheeler Williams of three of the seasons: *Spring, Summer, and Fall*. Carved of Carrara marble and standing more than six feet tall, they were originally placed in niches designed for them along the south side of the 1955 building. They were moved to their current location on the south side of the 1916 building in 1998 (see figure below). Along with *Winter*, these three sculptures were first made in fired porcelain as *The Four Seasons of Life or The Life of the Iris* and awarded a gold medal at the Paris *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la vie Moderne* in 1937.



Although there was not enough space outside the building for *Winter*, in 1962 the artist donated the smaller-scale bronze model that was created in 1934. The Little Garden Club funded the addition of a set of marble stairs, designed by Everett Woods, leading up the hillside to the 1916 building entrance in 1968.

Carl Guthertz, who helped conceive the museum's original plans, continued to exert a strong influence on the Brooks. Although born in Switzerland, Guthertz spent his childhood and early adult years in Memphis. He subsequently went back to Europe, where he studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and traveled to Munich and Rome. He returned to the States from his second trip to Paris in 1896, when he was commissioned to paint the murals for the reading room of the Library of Congress. In two gifts made between 1968 and 1986, the artist's son, Marshall Goodheart, donated 155 paintings and 573 drawings by his father to the Brooks. The Guthertz Collection includes work from nearly every phase of the artist's career. The collection also contains Guthertz's letters, two handwritten journals, photographs, medals, and notes made about his works. The paintings include portraits of sitters like Susan B. Anthony and Guthertz's daughter, Godfriede; French and American landscapes; history paintings like *Bering Sea Arbitration*; and elaborate allegories such as *Light of the Incarnation*.

When photographer and concert pianist Eugenia Buxton Whitnel died in 1971, she left the Brooks \$250,000, the largest bequest received to that date. Jack Whitlock, who became director in 1972, used the funds to acquire significant works of art by 20th-century American artists such as Walt Kuhn, Reginald Marsh, Arthur Dove, Arthur B. Davies, Jacques Lipchitz, Thomas Hart Benton, George Ault, and Ben Shahn. During his tenure, Whitlock secured the Brooks' first accreditation from the American Association of Museums and completed the new addition to the museum that had been started by his predecessor, Robert McKnight.

The new building, which opened in 1973, was designed by the Memphis architectural firm Walk Jones + Francis Mah, Inc. and constructed for \$850,000 (see figure below). A Modernist building with Brutalist elements, such as the use of raw concrete and exposed structure, the building echoes Louis Kahn's use of concrete in his museums at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. Also incorporating notions of universal space as espoused by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the building originally called for the display of paintings on cable-hung cubes and planes. While innovative at the time, the system proved impractical and the space was significantly modified in the 1990s.

In 1979, under the leadership of Jay Gates, the museum's support groups—the Brooks Art Gallery League, Art Today, and the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery Foundation—were reorganized and each was incorporated with its own board of directors.

In 1980, a new support group, the Decorative Arts Trust (DAT), was formed. The museum's decorative arts collection, already strong with earlier gifts from the Memphis Glass Collectors Club and the Norcross collection of English Lustreware, has expanded greatly with the DAT's generosity. Additions to the collection secured with the assistance of the DAT are *The Mocking of Christ* stained glass, the Spanish *Processional Cross*, the Mallard *Chest of Drawers*, the Tiffany & Co. *Pair of Ewers*, and the Frank Lloyd Wright



Chair. The DAT also hosts seminars, lectures, and events to expand the appreciation and understanding of decorative arts in Memphis. The trust's promotion of the decorative arts has inspired collectors to make donations to the collection, such as the twenty-nine pieces of Fitzhugh-pattern Chinese export porcelain donated by Nathan Dermon in 1998 and Dr. William Huckaba's 1999 bequest of a fine 18th-century English walnut longcase clock made by John Wait.

The decorative arts collection increased after receipt of the Isenberg bequest in 1987. Julie Isenberg, a graduate of Smith College who was committed to civil rights and social justice, was also keenly interested in books, music, and art. Today part of the Brooks Collection, Childe Hassam's etching *Tree* was Isenberg's first purchase, acquired with money given to her by her parents as a wedding gift. Several important pieces of American furniture Isenberg acquired became part of her bequest to the Brooks, including a Queen Anne High *Chest of Drawers*, the Goddard *Tallcase Clock*, and a New York Federal period dining table. She also donated drawings, prints, and paintings by Maurice de Vlaminck and Maurice Utrillo.

The 1980s brought extensive administrative changes to the museum, a succession directors, and a beautiful new building addition. In 1983 the museum changed its name to Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Inc., and in 1989 the Brooks separated from city government and became a fully private institution. The City of Memphis, however, continues to own the museum's building and the bulk of the collection acquired prior to 1989.

In 1986, following a yearlong master plan study, the firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM) was selected to design the third major expansion of the institution. The project was led by architect Richard Keating of SOM's Houston office, in association with the local firm Askew, Nixon, Ferguson & Wolfe. The Postmodern-influenced design received a prestigious award from *Progressive Architecture* magazine. Taking the form and details of the original 1916 building as its point of departure, the expansion replaced the earlier 1955 addition and created a new entrance and public face for the museum. At a cost of \$6.5 million, this new addition added important amenities: a new entry rotunda, restaurant, gift shop, and lecture theater, as well as desperately needed galleries and collection storage.

The new millennium was marked by the donation of 227 works of art from the corporate collection of AutoZone, Inc. in 2001. The collection, formed under the extraordinary vision of Memphis philanthropist and business leader J.R. "Pitt" Hyde III, includes paintings, photographs, prints, drawings, and sculpture, primarily by artists living and working in the South. The AutoZone Collection expanded the museum's already strong holdings of important photographers working in the South, such as William Eggleston and William Christenberry, as well as adding sculpture by William Edmondson and prints by Elizabeth Catlett.

In 1933 the Brooks Collection contained 19 paintings by mostly American artists housed in a building of 8,200 square feet. Today, that collection has expanded to more than 9,000 works of art, including painting, sculpture, works on paper, decorative arts, and video art from most major world cultures—housed in an 86,000-square-foot facility. Thanks to the generosity of countless donors and collectors, the collection and institution continue to grow, ever heedful of the future.