

Paintings

Tacoma Art Museum currently owns over 900 paintings (19% of the total collection) ranging in date from the late 1700s to today. Most are in oil, acrylic, or watercolor. Many artists also used tempera, sumi (ink), and gouache (opaque watercolor). Less common is casein, a water-soluble medium in which the paint pigments are mixed with a protein derived from milk. One unusual choice is a painting in Rust-Oleum, a commercial paint used most often as a protective coating over outdoor surfaces.

The majority of the paintings in TAM's collection are by Northwest artists or are Northwest subjects. Two exceptions are a group of 45 paintings from the estate of Mr. and Mrs. W. Hilding Lindberg, comprised primarily of French and German paintings from the second half of the 19th century; and a group of 36 paintings by American artists who were important figures in the modernist art movement in the early 20th century. The modernist works were acquired primarily through donations from Eulalie Wagner and Helen Murray in the 1970s and early 1980s.

TAM continues to add paintings across a variety of time periods and styles both to capture the diversity of the Northwest and to offer context for the art of this region.

Photographs

Tacoma Art Museum's photography collection currently numbers 354 works (7.5% of the total collection). These artworks date from 1905 to the present and are almost exclusively by Northwest photographers. A range of photographic processes are represented from early chloride prints and photogravures to recent digital technologies.

Strong thematic threads include portraiture (particularly of Northwest artists and art leaders), contemporary photography, and urban realist works. In the last five years, the museum also has worked to add historical photographs, notably the artists of the Seattle Camera Club, active during the 1920s, who were key in establishing a cohesive art photography community in the region.

The museum continues to acquire works that tell the story of the Northwest's early and thriving photography community as well as recent developments in contemporary Northwest photography. The museum also seeks new opportunities to add photography to the western art collection.

Prints

Print holdings make up the largest segment of the museum's collection numbering 1,951 images (41%). They range in date from the 1500s to today and include a host of print techniques.

Three significant gifts form the core of TAM's print acquisitions. In 1970, the museum was given the Schneider Collection of prints and drawings by American artists dating from the 1930s to 1960s. The Constance R. Lyon collection, donated in 1971, includes over 200 Japanese woodblock prints, ranging in date from the 17th to the mid 20th century; in 2006, Dr. and Mrs. Al and Betsy Buck donated 52 additional woodblock prints adding works from the early 19th century to the early 20th century. And in 2002, TAM became the repository for over 400 works from the Beta Press, a Seattle fine art press in operation from 1992 through 2002, that worked primarily with Northwest artists.

The museum has made a concerted effort to collect works on paper by important Northwest printmakers from all periods to ensure the collection is fully representative of the arts of this region. Works by Northwest artists currently comprise about one third of the print collection and continue to be a collecting priority. TAM also owns a small group of prints by artists of international reputation that have ties to the Northwest region.

Drawings

The 250 drawings in the museum's collection are almost exclusively by Northwest artists, though a few recent additions came as part of the Haub Family Collection of Western American Art. Though drawings comprise only 5% of the collection, they span several hundred years, from the 1700s to 2014.

Works in sparkle pen, carbon dust, and stove soot can be found among the more traditional media of pastel, graphite, and charcoal.

Drawings have been acquired primarily as individual gifts over the lifetime of the museum. Though there are some quick conceptual sketches that relate to artworks in other media, most are fully realized works.

Drawing is one of the earliest and most fundamental skills an artist acquires. The museum collects drawings because they can offer a unique window into an artist's creative process. They can reveal the artist's thought processes, method of composition, influences, or show a completely different side of their work.

Studio Art Jewelry

Tacoma Art Museum holds an important collection of 219 pieces of studio art jewelry (4.5% of the total collection) spanning from the mid 1940s to the present. The collection is focused on Northwest jewelry artists, and includes selected national and international artists to provide context for the work of the region.

The revival of studio art jewelry as an artform in the 1950s and 1960s had its roots in the Northwest. TAM began building a collection after three successful jewelry exhibitions in the late 1990s. The 1998 donation of 44 works from the estate of key Northwest jeweler Ken Cory formed the foundation of the museum's jewelry holdings.

The collection includes a number of works in traditional materials including gold, silver, and semi-precious stones. Many works also reflect the strong found object and funk traditions in Northwest jewelry incorporating materials as diverse as leather, paper, plastics, and foil, among many others.

In 2009, TAM built jewelry cases that allow most of the collection to be on extended public view in the George and Mary Davis Gallery. TAM continues to selectively acquire jewelry works to build a comprehensive picture of the studio art jewelry movement in the Northwest.

Sculptures

Tacoma Art Museum's varied group of 965 sculptural works makes up 20% of the total collection. Most are by Northwest artists with a small subset by European and western American artists. The sculpture collection includes three-dimensional works in traditional materials such as bronze and steel, blown and sandblasted glass, ceramic, and wood. Some of the more unusual choices include tire rubber, pony hair, Kombucha, and pharmaceuticals. A number date from the late 1880s and early 1900s though most were created during or after the 1980s.

A particular strength of the sculpture collection is in studio art glass. Over 700 objects record the story of the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, and preserve the history of how the Northwest came to be a world-renowned center for studio art glass. They were acquired primarily through the gift of the Anne Gould Hauberg and the Paul Marioni collections of Northwest glass. In addition, TAM owns a retrospective collection of the work of internationally-celebrated glass artist Dale Chihuly who was born and raised in Tacoma.

A group of 30 bronze sculptures were recently added as part of the Haub Family Collection of Western American Art extending the sculpture collection to include artists of the broader western region.

Videos

Tacoma Art Museum began acquiring art videos for the collection in 2003 and has since added 18 works. All are by Northwest artists and date between 1997 and 2012. Formats include VHS, optical formats (DVD / Blu-ray) and digital media files.

Videos offer a particular collecting challenge for museums. Rapidly changing technology means older formats become harder to access over time. Since the look and feel of the work's original format is inherent to the viewing experience, converting older files to new formats can permanently alter the artist's creation. Digital files also degrade more easily than paintings, sculptures, and other physical materials. Museums are still learning how to best care for and preserve this relatively new and variable artistic medium.

Over the past three decades, video has become an increasingly common form of artistic expression in the Northwest. The museum continues to acquire video works in varied formats to fully reflect the interests of the contemporary art community in this region.