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NATIONAL COLLECTION OF FINE ARTS

by

Joshua C. Taylor, Director

The primary mission of the National Collection of Fine Arts is to preserve, to study and make known the art of the United States in its varied manifestations, both past and present.

To preserve art is not to maintain a static situation; a museum is too often misunderstood as a mausoleum, the antithesis of creative activity. Although the physical objects must indeed be protected with care, they cease to be of value (in fact, to be works of art) if the spirit that marked their creation does not persist. Creativity is an action and can be apprehended only by an active mind, a mind set free to explore, discover, savor and judge. It is this creative spirit, with its many shades and directions, weaving through our changing culture over the past three hundred years, that we wish to keep alive, to make accessible to the broadest scope of our public.

In carrying out this mission, we are concerned with three groups of people: the general public, looked at in as wide a prospect as possible; the children and youth in the schools; and the specialized scholar. These three groups correspond to our three basic and closely interrelated kinds of activity: our program of exhibitions both permanent and temporary, with catalogues that are planned to be both scholarly and generally understandable; our expanding educational activities carried on both in the galleries and in programs for schools; and our continuing program in the conservation and study of American art which we strive to maintain on the highest and most exacting scholarly level.

This is a national museum, and although we recognize a responsibility to the Washington public, we are concerned with carrying our activity throughout the country through traveling exhibitions and useful publications. In the permanent galleries in Washington we present for those who visit the nation's capital -- and shall present more fully -- a range of many aspects of American art, some of which tend to be

forgotten in the fashions of the moment. In education we are embarking on new programs to discover ways in which schools and museums can best work together to make real to children and adolescents the creative freedom and expressive satisfaction afforded by the works of artists, both past and present. We plan that our gallery activities in this regard be exportable through visual materials for the classroom and through texts.

But if these programs are to be fresh and revealing they must be supported by sound and creative scholarship. There is still much fundamental work to be done in the study of American art which has often seemed a neglected stepchild in the family of art historical studies. We are providing through our collections, archives and staff, both for young scholars and senior colleagues, the opportunity to restudy the art of America and to engage in a continuing reexamination of the historical and aesthetic premises peculiar to its structure. This opportunity afforded visiting scholars is a complement to, not a substitute for, university study, although it should be recognized that few universities have specialized faculties or adequate research facilities in this field.

In conjunction with this last is another pressing matter that figures large in our operation: the physical preservation of our art from the remote or recent past. Our program of research in this area, already widely used for consultation, we are now expanding to include an active campaign to aid in the inventory and care of works throughout the country.

This, then, is a center for the enjoyment and, hence, understanding of American art in its humble as well as its exalted aspects, accessible in their own terms to the general public, the developing child and the dedicated scholar.

Our program is ambitious but we regard our goals as worthy and, at the present, of increasing importance.

30 July 1970