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Hidden Treasures on Display at Michener Art Museum



by Anthony DiMattia

It was more than 100 years ago when impressionist painters flocked to Bucks County to capture the area's scenic beauty.

For years the historically significant pieces created by these artists hung in schools and offices of local districts as part of an effort to enrich the lives of students.

But for the first time these long-hidden works of art will be available to the public at Michener Art Museum in Doylestown.

The exhibit – Dedicated, Displayed, Discovered: Celebrating the Region’s School Art Collections – highlights 39 paintings and archival objects dating back to 1890 that were amassed by Bucks, Montgomery and Philadelphia county school districts.

“There was this idea during the turn of the 20th century that by utilizing artworks and having artworks in the classroom it would create a surrounding of beauty – using beautiful objects to create good behavior in children and happiness in children,” said Adrienne Neszmelyi-Romano, Michener director of interpretation and innovation who curated the exhibit with assistant curator Louise Feder. “It was a holistic approach to utilizing artwork.”

The migration of the artists during this period coincided with Schoolroom Decoration and Picture Study, two movements designed to help bring art to public schools.

“You had these movements in schoolroom decoration and early development of art appreciation happening at the same time, so you had this burst of activity,” Adrienne said.

The movement flourished in Bucks due to the influx of impressionists like Daniel Garber, Joseph Meierhans and George Sotter, who with other artists helped form the New Hope Art Colony with founder William Lathrop.

New Hope-Solebury School District and the Bucks County Intermediate Unite #22 were two of the local districts that bought or were gifted work from these artists.

“All the artists lived in the backyards of these districts,” Adrienne said. “It really gave the (motivation) for teachers to work with artists of the region.”

Another key artist involved in the movement was Walter Baum, one of the few Pennsylvania impressionists of the time born and raised in Bucks County.

“He was sort of the heart of how all of these collections developed,” Adrienne said. “He had a huge network of artists. He was a very prolific artist himself, but he also was a teacher and he developed relationships within each of the schools systems.

“In Philadelphia, he was very close to the director of arts education, he was very close with certain principals and very close to several artists. He was the hub of pushing access to art and his philosophy was all about rural and urban students should have access to art – it wasn’t just for the elite.”

In the 1940’s, Bucks County Schools Superintendent Charles Boehm helped bring artwork to students through the development of a traveling art gallery and exhibits featuring regional artists at his offices in Doylestown.

“The ’30s through the ’50s you have the Great Depression and World War II so the visual was still really important in exposing kids to create mental happiness,” Adrienne said. “The Great Depression was happening and needing of solace, peace and reassurance, so the art object stood for so much more.”

But the movement began to stall by the 1960s due to “shifting educational priorities” throughout the country and the death of Baum in Bucks.

Since then portions of the IU collection have traveled to Bucks schools as part of the “Art of the Move” program that runs each fall and spring.

For the public, these pieces will only be on display until Friday, January 7th before returning to districts or the Michener vault.

“We are delighted to be able to present for the first time how these connections evolved over the decades and benefited everyone involved,” Adrienne said.

Upcoming events associated with the program include:

- The “Seeing Eakins Every Day: Mindful Looking at Art in Schools and Museums” lecture on Wednesday, November 15th at 7:00pm.
- The “Walter E. Baum, An Amazing Leader for Collecting Art in Bucks Count Public Schools lecture on Thursday, November 16th at 1:00pm.
- Conversations/Reflections on the Exhibition on Wednesday, December 6th at 3:00pm.

Admission is \$18 for adults, \$15 for seniors, \$10 for college students, \$8 for children 6-18 and free to children under six and Michener members.

The museum at 138 S. Pine St. is open from 10:00am-4:30pm Tuesday-Friday, 10:00am-5:00pm Saturday, and 12:00pm-5:00pm Sunday.

For more info visit MichenerArtMuseum.org.

PHOTO CAP: “*The Brook, (The Brook, Winter)*,” by Bucks artist Walter Baum, c.1930 , oil on canvas.