



Ohio Arts Council's  
**RIFFE GALLERY**

## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Melissa Wolfe, Curator of American Art  
Columbus Museum of Art

Columbus has a great legacy of art still visible to those who look for it, in nearly every corner of the city, left by past artists who engaged and responded to its often deceptively sedate Midwestern demeanor. It seems most appropriate, in this year of the city's Bicentennial, to pause and give due celebration to the work of these artists. This exhibition covers more than 100 years of artistic endeavor, including a wide variety of media and artistic styles, in order to present a sense of the city's art community as it looked, changing over the years in response to both local and national artistic developments. The works of many artists who found their starts in Columbus, such as Roy Lichtenstein and Stanley Twardowicz—who formed a friendship while both teaching at The Ohio State University—are represented in the styles they worked in in this city, rather than the Pop Art and Abstract Expressionist styles for which they later became known for this reason.

Columbus jumped on the local art scene bandwagon with enthusiasm, matching the trend at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century among urban artists to form their own clubs that offered professional support—when that was at times lacking from the broader community—but that also provided an important social outlet for the members' often rather marginalized creative (or “bohemian”) lifestyles. In 1897, Columbus artists formed a Pen and Pencil Club that had a studio for sketching and exhibitions as well as reception rooms for relaxing and throwing a party or two. Like Pen and Pencil Clubs in other cities, the one located downtown on High Street offered a place for artists working in commercial areas, such as illustrators and cartoonists for newspapers, photographers, and architects, and those working in more traditional fine art areas to exchange ideas and shared concerns. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city also had a Kit-Kat Club, which were often formed by portrait painters, and a Paint and Clay Club, reflecting the city's location in the heart of pottery manufacturing as well as the recent formation of a ceramics engineering program at The Ohio State University.

In 1909, 40 graduates of the Columbus Art School (now the Columbus College of Art & Design, or CCAD) came together to form what is now the Columbus Art League, which from its inception was the most active and robust artists' organization in the city. The League held annual exhibitions with multiple awards and purchase prizes sponsored by local commercial and private patrons. Many of the artists in this show found their primary patronage through these exhibitions. There were also a number of early private galleries that supported local artists, such as the Walter L. Lillie Gallery

at the turn of the century, the Little Art Gallery, Studios F.G. and Attowald Company, and the Z.L. White Gallery in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1921, Harriet Kirkpatrick, head of the art department at the Columbus School for Girls, founded the Ohio State Fair art show, which also became an important annual showing for local artists.

The city also enjoys a rich academic and institutional community that has given underlying support to the dynamic local art scene. Many of the most active local artists were employed at The Ohio State University, CCAD, Columbus School for Girls, Columbus Museum of Art, or Capital University, to name only a few. Such institutions provided continuity in the art community, as teachers mentored students to become professional artists in their own right. Hoyt Sherman, Alice Schille, Arthur Baggs, and James Roy Hopkins all shared their nationally acclaimed expertise with students who developed a visual language related to their training, but all their own.

The city also has enjoyed a dynamic folk art community, including nationally recognized artists such as Elijah Pierce and William Hawkins. These artists have received notable support not only from the communities within which and for which they produced their artwork, but also by the broader city community. When a sculptor and OSU graduate student came across Elijah Pierce's work in a Columbus YMCA exhibition, he sought the carver out and organized several exhibitions that were important in establishing Pierce's importance in the national folk art world. Grandpa Smoky Brown never sought recognition beyond his immediate community, but his artistic contributions to his community were supported and openly appreciated.

Though well ensconced in the heartland, Columbus' artists have enjoyed consistent and direct connections to the broader national art world. Often nationally recognized artists, such as Alice Schille or Charles Rosen, helped to place local artists in the national art scene, sending them to summer colonies or connecting them to national networks. Or, conversely, artists such as George Bellows or Roy Lichtenstein brought nationally and internationally recognized artists to Columbus, directly impacting the styles found in the local art scene. This was not always without tension. When George Bellows organized a show with Robert Henri for the library, local patrons nearly closed it down before its opening day over the risqué images of boxing, nudity and dissolute urban scenes. Or, often local artists such as Elijah Pierce brought national attention to the local folk art scene, increasing awareness of other folk artists working in the city and offering proof of the legitimacy of their work. Such exchanges characterize the nature of the city's artistic history. The local has had a healthy and consistent infusion from the national, and has equally contributed significantly to the national scene.

The city's art world perhaps is best characterized by a remarkably easy and dynamic exchange among its diverse artistic communities, from folk art to fine art to commercial art, from local artistic personalities to national artistic movements. This is a rare enough combination to suggest that Columbus, a "typical Midwestern city," has in its rather unassuming Midwestern way, managed to offer that rare engaged and engaging environment within which artistic creativity takes hold.