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Saturday, April 9, 2005 6:01 AM CDT

Buried Treasure: Gallery in Charles City Public Library has art world's biggest names

By DENNIS MAGEE, Courier Regional Editor



CHARLES CITY --- The drawers aroused curiosity. Or maybe suspicion. Interested, the custodian opened one, perhaps a few.

He discovered sheets of paper of various sizes. They were protected, sort of, by white wrappers. A few were matted, and some of the corners were knicked.

Most of the sheets were imprinted with shades of black or brown ink, but some had spots of color. The pages ranged from yellow to antique white. With that, the man may have guessed they were old.

"They had not really been stored in an archival correct manner," library director Virginia Ruzicka says.

The boiler room at the former Charles City Public Library likely wasn't the cheeriest of spaces. A nice poster or photo or print would provide a needed lift. Eventually, the custodian found a pleasing image. So he taped it to ductwork connected to the furnace.

"Self-Portrait in Plumed Hat" was a good choice. The print --- pulled for private basement display --- was created by van Rijn. The artist is better known by his first name.

"When you say Rembrandt, most people can conjure up an image," Ruzicka says.

Whether the man settled on the master's piece after careful consideration or just luck of the draw isn't clear.

"Why the janitor liked that picture, I don't know," says Tracy Sweet, director of the Charles City Art Center.

Odds of picking a winner were good: The Mooney Collection is loaded with formidable names from the world of fine art.

Goya ... Cezanne ... Picasso ...

The prints were a gift to the community from an adopted son. Arthur Mooney moved to Charles City in 1859. Later in life his

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interests and career with Eastman-Kodak took him to New York and around the world. He apparently never forgot his Iowa connection.

Mooney, in a letter to the library in 1934, talked about "the distant days and the people who were so kind in so many ways." The affection may be due to the fact his parents and a sister died when Mooney was young. He was taken in by a Charles City photographer, and townspeople loaned the bright young man books.

The kindness was repaid and then some. In 1930, Mooney gave some of his artwork to Charles City. When he died in 1941 at the age of 82, he donated the rest --- books, manuscripts, photographs and more than 70 prints.

"Mr. Mooney was quite a good connoisseur of art," Ruzicka says.

The prints span the 15th to 20th centuries. The oldest is by Michael Wolgemuth, titled "Solomon and his Wives." It was created in 1491.

"If Columbus had known, he could have brought it with him," Ruzicka says.

That precious 7-by-10-inch sheet and others in the generous gift languished in storage until 1996. Save for the occasional janitor, few got to enjoy the images.

"They knew it was here," Ruzicka says. "But there was just no money to frame them or display them."

Ruzicka was hired in 1994. She and others recognized the need for an appropriate setting. A call went out to donors and to Arthur Frick, now professor emeritus of art at Wartburg College, for a professional assessment.

Whistler ... Manet ... Grant Wood ...

Frick admits harboring a bit of skepticism: Many people think they have a hidden treasure. The art professor's doubt passed quickly.

"I'm telling you, I was so surprised. There were drawers of things. Just by chance, in the first drawer I opened there were two, a Whistler and a Helleu."

The discovery expanded.

"I just couldn't believe what I saw. Here were Rembrandts and Durer and Cezanne ... ," Frick adds.

He signed on as curator and spent two years researching and documenting the Mooney Collection. He also laid out specifications for framing and permanent archival techniques.

"It was a job I thoroughly enjoyed, to put my hands on the works of the masters daily," Frick says.

Two Charles City residents, Sweet and John Goodheart, framed the works. They used white gloves and 100 percent cotton mat boards.

"It was really inspiring to hold an etching in your hands and realize, goodness, Picasso held this in his hands, too," Sweet said.

The names might be enough to impress, but Frick says the cross section of quality is particularly fascinating.

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"There's not one in there that is even average. They are all above average, every single one of them," he says.

The collection includes four images by Rembrandt, five by Whistler, and two each by Picasso, Grant Wood and Manet.

"Cezanne, there are only five of this (print) known to exist. And one of them is in the Mooney Collection," he adds.

Utagama Hiroshige ... Matisse ... Gauguin ...

The assembly apparently was even larger at one time. Ruzicka believes about five pieces are missing, possibly because the library at one time may have allowed patrons to borrow Mooney's prints like a book off the shelves.

"Apparently, they just didn't bring them back," Ruzicka says.

Those days are over, though the library director wouldn't mind hanging her favorite at home.

"If Rembrandt's 'Descent from the Cross' ever comes up missing, don't look in my living room," Ruzicka says.

The possibility is remote. Ruzicka declines comment on what security measures are in place. But they are in place.

"The gallery is secure," she says.

Frick won't put an estimate on the collection's value. Ruzicka isn't certain but knows professional appraisals cost about \$100 per item.

"Well, we have 76 pieces and we do not have \$7,600," she says.

The monetary value likely exceeds \$250,000.

"That sounds like a conservative estimate," Frick says.

The dollar value could theoretically be calculated, "but for the city, and certainly the library, it is priceless," Ruzicka says.

It is also, by design, accessible. At the main entrance, library patrons can veer right to inspect books or veer left into the gallery to admire "Ecce Homo." Even after hours, glass doors seal the gallery, preserving at least a view of some of the collection.

And it's all free.

Durer ... Chagall ... Salvador Dali ...

"If you know anything about art --- and even if you don't --- you've got to be knocked over by the names," Sweet says.

And Rembrandt .

"There was this janitor," Frick says, "and he liked it ... "

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