

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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A COLLECTOR'S CHOICE DRAWINGS

EXHIBITED AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

FROM MARCH 7 TO AUGUST 15, 1993

Washington, D.C. -- An exhibition of fifty-eight old master and modern drawings from the collection of William B. O'Neal will be on view at the National Gallery of Art from March 7 through August 15, 1993. Drawings from the O'Neal Collection celebrates the gift and promised gift to the Gallery of 322 works collected over a period of thirty-five years by O'Neal, professor emeritus of architectural history at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Reflecting the breadth of this distinctive collection, the show includes drawings from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, focusing on the work of Continental and British artists. Architectural and stage designs, among O'Neal's strongest collecting interests, are featured along with fine British Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite drawings from the second half of the nineteenth century. These include works by John Ruskin, Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon, and Lord Frederic Leighton.

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"We are deeply grateful to Professor O'Neal for his supreme generosity in donating his entire collection to the National Gallery," said Earl A. Powell III, the Gallery's director. "The richness and variety of his contributions broaden and deepen our drawings collections in many ways. More than half of the artists, such as Francisco Ribalta, Charles-Antoine Coypel, Gustave Doré, and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, are new to the Gallery. Professor O'Neal's discriminating taste and love for drawings are apparent throughout this wonderfully diverse, personal collection."

Works in the exhibition span nations and centuries, ranging from a drawing after an antique sculpture by Baldassare Peruzzi (1481-1536)--one of the greatest Sieneese painters and architects of the Renaissance--to a formal garden scene by Dutch artist Cornelis Pronk (1691-1759) and a Turkish stage design by Karl Ferdinand Langhans (1781-1869), a leading neoclassical German architect.

Many of the works demonstrate themes that are typical of an individual artist's oeuvre. Portrait painter George Romney is represented by John Henderson as Falstaff (c. 1778/1780), a witty study of an actor in one of his most celebrated roles. Sir Edwin Landseer's A Bellowing Stag (1840/1850) is a lively example of the animal studies the artist made throughout his life. Thomas Malton's St. George's, Bloomsbury (1799) presents a characteristically precise view of Georgian architecture in London.

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The show also provides glimpses of less familiar aspects of artists' work. American expatriate Benjamin West (1738-1820) is represented by an early Alpine scene rather than his more typical historical subjects. Another unusual work is the double-sided study of Prudence (1596/1601), drawn in red chalk on two sides of the same sheet, by the brothers Cherubino and Giovanni Alberti of Italy. Several fine drawings are by little-known artists, while others are unattributed.

"In collecting, Professor O'Neal was not so concerned with seeking out specific artists as in choosing works that pleased him," said Margaret Morgan Grasselli, National Gallery curator of old master drawings and co-curator of the exhibition. "His collection covers an extraordinarily broad range of artists, styles, subjects, and media, all of which for a variety of reasons attracted O'Neal and engaged his heart."

Born in Zanesville, Ohio, in 1907, O'Neal trained as an architect at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and graduated in 1930. He then studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for two years, intending to become a mural painter.

The Depression and the Second World War intervened. After working as an architectural draftsman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, O'Neal joined the army in 1942. He served for three years in London and Paris drawing maps, and, in his free time, frequented theaters, museums, and art dealers. He also managed to buy a few prints on his enlisted man's salary.

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Following the war in 1946, O'Neal started teaching in the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia. In addition, he became assistant curator at the university's Museum of Fine Arts in 1947 and served as curator from 1950-1958. In 1964, he established and chaired the division of architectural history at the university. He retired from teaching in 1972.

O'Neal began collecting seriously in the 1950s. His interests were always eclectic, covering a range of European schools and artists, plus some Americans. The collection grew slowly as funds and opportunities permitted. Annual trips to England each Christmas accelerated his purchases of British artists, which represent nearly two-thirds of the drawings in his collection. He ceased collecting in 1988.

O'Neal first gave his drawings to the National Gallery in 1980 and continued each year through 1990. In honor of the Gallery's fiftieth anniversary in 1991, he donated eighty-eight of his Continental drawings and placed the rest of his collection on deposit at the Gallery as a promised future gift.

Grasselli and Judith Brodie, associate curator of drawings at the National Gallery, are co-curators of the exhibition. They also wrote the fully illustrated exhibition catalogue with the assistance of the Gallery's Ann M. MacNary, assistant curator, and Julia K. Dabbs, graduate intern, old master drawings department; and Elmer Eusman, Mellon Fellow, conservation department.

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