

## Art in the Newton Gresham Library

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"Art in the Newton Gresham Library." This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian at Sam Houston State University. If you are in the library now, feel free to stop the recording at any point to view the object being mentioned as you walk around.

The present library was completed just before Christmas 1968. For nearly a decade, the interior walls were completely bare; only the glass window walls provided visual interest as one peered through the large trees surrounding the building. The architect thought that the classical statuary and plaster busts of educators that had adorned the old Estill Library were inappropriate for a contemporary building, so the stark look prevailed. In those early days, his vision worked very well, as the building was so uncrowded that the large expanses of glass were completely open; one had the sensation of being able to step out into the treetops. As the collection grew, however—with considerable rapidity—book stacks obscured the openings and the eyes turned toward the bare walls.

Perhaps the first pictures to grace these walls were inexpensive framed reproductions of European and American masterpieces that were provided by a grant from the federal government. The idea was to provide art that could be checked out for a few months and then returned for another patron to enjoy. In actual practice, however, most of these were soon situated on office walls all over campus, never to come back to the library. I know of two that were even included in employees' estate sales! The very presence of pictures hanging on walls, however, inspired a few librarians to suggest that the Art Department right here on campus was a source of great talent. Beginning in the early 1980s, a steady stream of high-quality works of art came to the library; all were donated, though several had been supported by the university in the form of short-term grants.

Since some of the most impressive of these donations are housed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, which is also the main floor, let us begin an imaginary walking tour there as one comes through the main entrance. Directly across the lobby is a large oil-on-canvas triptych by the late Professor Kenneth ZONKER; it is an abstract entitled "Theme and Recapitulation." Though it was painted when Zonker was very young—in 1965—the library received it from his estate quite recently. A framed pencil cartoon—that's the term used in art to describe a preliminary sketch—of the work hangs alongside it.

Just around the corner, covering the entire wall facing the staircase, is the massive "Mahogany and Metal Wall Sculpture" created by Professor Charles PEBWORTH in 1988. Though it was originally commissioned by Gulf Resources for their headquarters on the 43<sup>rd</sup> floor of a tower in downtown Houston, that corporation was absorbed by a company in the northeast and moved. At that time, Don Rose, a vice president who was a Sam Houston alumnus, facilitated the donation to his alma mater. Nearby is a framed poster of the celebrated Pebworth show, "Metalmorphosis"; he was the Houston Art League's "Artist of the Year" in that year, 1987.

Continuing around the central staircase, one sees display cases containing memorabilia of the distinguished career of SHSU graduate Dan RATHER; a further notable Rather donation is a set of inaugural posters by Peter MAX, which is signed by President Bill Clinton, Vice-President Al Gore, and Max himself. These are hung on the east side of the travertine-covered interior wall that forms the core of this and all the other floors. Still other Rather donations may be seen in the Thomason Room and Archives when one reaches the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, and books donated from his personal library are scattered throughout the library stacks.

Continuing around the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor "core," one sees on the north-facing wall a set of five signed lithographs of historic Huntsville buildings, donated in memory of W.S. Gibbs. From that point, one can look across the floor to see a painting

that was just to one's left side upon entering the library, "Portrait of a Woman with Carafe," by David ADICKES, also an SHSU alumnus. C. Eldredge Salmon donated this fine example of early work before Adickes turned primarily to sculpture—the epitome of which is his gigantic statue of Sam Houston south of Huntsville, or "The Musicians" in the Arts District of downtown Houston.

Crossing the lobby and entering the always-crowded Room 200, full of public-use computer work stations, one notes a large photograph of the General Sam Houston equestrian statue in Hermann Park, Houston; it was donated by Southwestern Bell.

Back in the lobby, on the other side of the Circulation Desk, is one of the earliest donations to come to the Gresham library: a ceramic sculpture entitled "Texas Basket." It was created and donated in 1983 by visiting artist Kay THOMAS in memory of Dr. Patrick Weber, Professor of Psychology.

Continuing in front of the elevators, one sees a GITTINGS photographic portrait of the library's namesake, Newton Gresham, before approaching the Director's suite of offices. To the left of that entrance is hung "Views of Texas," a panel of nine related oil paintings by the late Professor Harry AHYSEN. Ahysen was twice selected as Texas State Artist, and was honored by having one of his paintings reproduced on telephone directories across the state (you can see Huntsville's of 1978/79 in the Thomason Room). Inside the Director's Office is a well-executed watercolor scene of Venice by Otto BLUM, as well as several paintings by SHSU students.

From the Director's office, go down to the first floor before heading in the direction of the crown jewel, the Thomason Room. On the north side of the stairwell is a collagraph, "The Dove of Peace Ascending to the Tree of Life." It was created and donated by Professor Stanley Lea. No other art is displayed on this floor except colorful posters created by the U.S. Government Printing Office and forming a changing exhibit on the glass wall of the Government Documents department. Of course, to map fanciers, of course, the steel cases under the staircase that contain the U.S. topographical maps house art of a high order! With the recent openings of a satellite entrance on the first floor giving access to a large area not previously available for library use, there is an opportunity for display of more art on the long white walls of that area.

The third floor has only a couple of items of note. "Fall," a large oil on Russian linen created and donated by Professor Martin AMOROUS, is a beautiful landscape inspired by Lake Raven in Huntsville State Park. The other work is a Dimitri VAIL portrait of Brigadier General William C. Lindley (class of 1940 and Distinguished Alumnus of SHSU 1993).

One should walk up the central stair to the fourth floor, in order to pass by the tall sculptural “Totem #3” by Charles PEBWORTH (its place on that particular landing is mandated by the fact that it is the only place in the library that can accommodate its great height). Taking the stair landing to the north side of the floor also gives one an interesting perspective of the Breitenbach Mexican Mask Collection. It is one of the largest such collections in the world. Four vertical display cases currently display 50 masks and store many others. There is also a nearby horizontal case which displays many additional masks, and a large Olmec head is hanging on the travertine wall.

While on the fourth floor, there are several points of interest besides the walnut-paneled Thomason Room. One might wish to visit Archives in the extreme northwest corner of the floor; there are kept SHSU presidents’ portraits, historic photographic images of Huntsville and SHSU, and numerous SHSU memorabilia articles. The south side of the central core contains the Adams Room, which is decorated with a couple of oil paintings by the late Dr. Loyce ADAMS, a professor of Business Administration who also wrote poetry and novels and was an amateur artist. The room is reserved for use by Honors Students and approved graduate students, but it is possible to glimpse the paintings through the glass walls.

A huge piece of art not on the fourth floor but easily visible from the window walls on the southeast side, is the stainless steel sculpture, “Rainbow Walker,” alongside Bowers Stadium. It was donated by Ali Baudoin in 1987.

The end of the tour is the Thomason Room, Treasure House of the Library, with a multitude of art objects in many different media. There are far too many to list individually in the podcast, but items are listed in abbreviated form in the handout “Art in the Newton Gresham Library,” which is available both at the Reference Desk and in the Thomason Room.

The Thomason Room has ten oil paintings, most notably “Ben Franklin Before the Court of Louis XVI,” painted in 1892 by Filippo Baratti, an artist listed in the foremost biographical dictionary known by the name of its author, Benezit; we have a set of that work in both Reference and the Thomason Room, but you must brush up your French; it has never been translated). This work was donated by Orville Bullington (Class of 1901) in 1940, and was recently cleaned and repaired so that it could appear as resplendent as it is inherently.

Perhaps the most interesting provenance of any piece of art in the library is that of a small impressionistic painting by George Elmer BROWNE, a fashionable Houston artist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; he is also listed in Benezit. Miss Anna Loring, an early art professor, wanted the pupils in the Demonstration School to be able to see a real painting, not just a reproduction. Therefore, the students conducted fundraisers, such as selling hotdogs at basketball games, until they achieved the sum of \$300 (quite a large sum in 1929) to buy “On the Bridge at Avignon” to display in the building that housed Education. After many years of wandering, following the demolition of that building in the early ‘80s, the painting returned to the campus in the ‘90s, and is now in a prominent location in the reading area of the Thomason Room.

Lithographic images of such diverse individuals as Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Mark Twain, and Horace Greeley are featured in the Thomason Room, as well as photographs of presidents, attorneys general, and Supreme Court justices inscribed by their subject to James V. Bennett, longtime director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons.

Three-dimensional art includes five busts in various materials, objects in porcelain and pottery, bronze medallions, and additional masks from the collection donated by Professor William Breitenbach.

By far the most important art holding, however, is the more than 1,800 drawings (plus a filing case of his sketchbooks and manuscripts) of Colonel John W. Thomason, Jr., namesake of the room. It is these works that are sought out by writers and military historians from around the world. Thomason was born here in Huntsville in 1893, and attended Sam Houston Normal Institute (as SHSU was known in his youth), long enough to be certified as a teacher. His most enjoyable higher education, however, was a year at the Art Institute in New York City, where the vivid sketches he had been doing since childhood were given some discipline and authority. The Thomason Room has many of those appealing early representations of outdoor scenes that feature the birds and other wildlife of East Texas, as well as his later work which employed subjects from Cuba, Nicaragua, China, the trenches of France, or wherever the Marine Corps sent him. Had

World War I not intervened, he might have spent most of his life as a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*, founded by a family friend from Huntsville, M.E. Foster. His immediate action to volunteer, however, was followed by distinguished service in the front lines which earned him several decorations. He was quickly set on a lifetime course with the Marines, but the amazing drawings he did in the trenches of France caught the eye of Scribner's Publishing Company, as well as the general reading public, when they were combined with his stories. All three of his careers were in high gear by 1925. For more on the life of Thomason, listen to another podcast which was devoted to him.

One is not likely to leave the Thomason Room without becoming aware of the fact that numerous fine books have illustrations of superb artistic quality. To take just a single example, the "elephant folio" *Of Birds and Texas*, the most lavish book ever to have been published in this state—and unlikely to be excelled in view of changes in the culture of the book world; this book has dozens of frame-worthy plates just begging to be displayed.

Thus one can see that the surprisingly large collection of paintings, sculptures, and other art objects in the Gresham Library is owed to the generosity of art faculty, alumni, and even a few well-wishing "outsiders" who admired our role in this region. One hopes it will always be appreciated for what it tells us about the history of humanity.