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Donor Stories

Devoted Volunteer Bequeaths Highly-Valuable Paintings to IMA

By Nicole Cunningham

Susan Mallinson had a volunteer's heart. And even though she has died, that heart continues to beat at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, through paintings Susan bequeathed to the IMA in her will.

Susan, a former teacher at Speedway High School west of Indianapolis, left the classroom to begin her family. With her husband Harry, a former president of Eli Lilly International Corporation, she had three children. Susan's interest in art and volunteerism brought her to the IMA, where she became a docent.



"Girl Sweeping," by artist William McGregor Paxton.

Ellen Lee, Wood-Pulliam senior curator at the museum, knew Susan as dedicated, detail-oriented, and ready to tackle any job, no matter the size.

"When I say 'volunteer,' I mean she was the 'ultimate' volunteer. She was completely devoted to the museum," said Lee.

"Susan would be up at two in the morning working on projects for us. She had a genuine love of art and the mission of the IMA." Susan's volunteerism at the museum extended into three decades, and she was also a trustee of the IMA.



Susan Mallinson

In the 1970s, Susan began to seek art to decorate her own home. Her son Richard Mallinson said she approached her art purchases with a great deal of care and advice.

"She had some ideas in mind for an American painting, so some of the museum staff helped guide her in finding one she wanted. It turned out that it was a reasonably valuable piece."

Mallinson is speaking of a 1912 painting by American artist William McGregor Paxton. The painting is called "Girl Sweeping," and is characteristic of Paxton, who was famous for painting women in elegant settings.

Harriet Warkel, associate curator of American painting and sculpture at the IMA, said Paxton's paintings are sought after for a number of reasons.

"Paxton is considered a superb draftsman and colorist. This piece also shows the various ways he painted textures, and it is an important example of his style and technique."

Susan also left to the IMA a painting by another famous American artist, Edward August Bell. "The Statuette," a work from 1912, shows Susan's own taste for beautiful surroundings.

"It shows an elegant woman holding a sculpture. These are things Susan liked living with in her home," said Lee. "Through these two paintings, Susan has enabled the museum to enrich its American holdings."

Susan also helped expand the European collection.

After Susan moved to Vero Beach, Florida, she gave the IMA a sum of money and asked the curator to acquire a painting. The museum purchased a piece called “Monsieur Pool” by French Neo-Impressionist artist Albert Dubois-Pillet. The work features as its subject a handsome uniformed soldier.

Lee said, “The museum has the nation’s best collection of Neo-Impressionist paintings, but this was one of the few painters we were missing.”

Susan’s gifts have, in a sense, filled some previously-empty canvas at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. With that in mind, Lee said it’s beneficial when someone considering a bequest to a museum contacts the curators in advance.

“We all love surprises, but in the case of a donor considering bequeathing a piece of art, it’s wonderful to let the museum know in advance so we can make sure it’s an appropriate fit with the museum’s collection.”

Lee added, “Prior contact with the museum puts us in a better position to act upon the donor’s wishes.”

Susan did not live to see the museum’s \$74 million expansion project complete. She died of complications from a stroke at age 84 in August 2004. But when the museum’s doors reopened to the public in May 2005, Susan’s spirit was felt everywhere—on the lush grounds, in the busy halls, but most potently—on the walls, where her three gifts hang today.

Lee, who gave the eulogy at Susan’s funeral, said, “It is enormously satisfying to me to see the galleries with the art she loved hanging on the wall, symbolizing her generosity.”

“The positive way to look at it is that I know she wanted a piece of her heart at the museum, and it’s here.”

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