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Traveling Collections

Presaging what might become a trend, a West Coast museum is paying to show part of the permanent collection of an overcrowded East Coast one

by [Carol Kino](#)

At some stage every major museum of twentieth-century art has had to reconcile its duty to the past with its need to be of the moment. New York's Whitney Museum of American Art has always seemed more troubled by this task than most. It was originally founded by the heiress Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, in 1914, as a studio club with an admirably populist mandate: to promote American art and provide a gathering place for American artists, at a time when both were pretty much regarded as Europe's embarrassingly tatty country cousins--that is, when anyone bothered to look. The museum proper opened in 1931, to house Whitney's own collection of American art after the Metropolitan Museum summarily rejected it. Today the Whitney's holdings make up the world's pre-eminent collection of twentieth-century American art. The museum also remains actively caught up in New York's downtown gallery world--by now a fashion-conscious, moneyed, internationally influential scene that helps keep the museum controversial.



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In the 1980s the Whitney raised critical eyebrows by leaving off regular displays of the permanent collection for large mid-career retrospectives of such art stars as Cindy Sherman and David Salle, whose work its trustees were also acquiring--arguably the art-world equivalent of insider trading. Under a new director, David Ross, in the 1990s, the museum has often seemed bedeviled by a current bugaboo--the ceaseless search for a relevant spin. Who can forget the museum's politically correct 1993 biennial, whose artists alerted gallery-goers to the evils of sexism, racism, capitalism, traditional aesthetics, and child abuse? Who wants to remember the mind-numbing wall texts and hipper-than-thou video displays that have so often attended historical work, the better to recontextualize it? The museum's latest tack has been a kind of sexy globality: parts of the permanent collection will soon travel to Prague, where Eastern bloc creative types can commune with them; and [the museum's site on the World Wide Web](#) allows anyone anywhere with a jazzy enough computer to access Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe.

Unfortunately, this relentless trend-mongering undercuts the fact that many of the Whitney's ideas are good ones--precisely the sort that the behemoth it has become must try if it is to remain anywhere near the cutting edge. Yet the museum's mission is also to talk about America to America, a task that is increasingly fraught with danger for anyone who tries it. And it's doubly

tough to sound convincing about Peoria when one speaks with the forked tongue of today's academe--in other words, when one's vocabulary is restricted to artspeak.

Strangely enough, learning to communicate with Peoria--or a West Coast facsimile--is precisely what the Whitney has done. In 1992 it entered into an agreement with the San Jose Museum of Art, in California's Silicon Valley, to provide enough work--about four percent of its collection, all told--to fill four eighteen-month-long shows in exchange for about \$4.4 million.

The idea of collection-sharing, as the art world calls it, on a long-term basis between two independent museums is new, and therefore controversial. Those who are against it say that collections shouldn't be farmed out at all, and certainly not for profit; those who are in favor point out that museums make short-term exchanges of art and exact touring fees all the time--and usually keep nearly all of their holdings in storage. As Stephen Weil, the deputy director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, D.C., has pointed out, much of the country's art is held east of the Mississippi whereas population centers are moving west, and thus collection-sharing seems like an idea whose time has come. For New Yorkers, that may not ease the pain of seeing works so closely associated with the city shipped off to what might as well be Podunk. (It must have rubbed salt in the wound when Josi Callan, the director of the San Jose museum, ballyhooed the deal as a "world-class collection" coming to a "world-class building.")

None of this had much to do with why I wanted to see the Whitney art in its temporary home, however. I grew up twenty minutes from San Jose. From the perspective of the Stanford campus, where I was raised, San Jose is an area looming at the other end of Silicon Valley--an endless cheesy vista of shopping malls, multiplexes, housing developments, and mirror-eyed convention centers. San Jose's local reputation is so glum, in fact, that for years I prided myself on never having been there. But I knew the area to be pragmatic, progressive, and creative--high tech flourished there--and I was curious to see how those characteristics might be applied to presenting American art. The experiment I found seems oddly in keeping with the Whitney's populist roots.



The first show, which opened in May of last year, was surprisingly straightforward. "A History Reconsidered," it was called: a few more than a hundred works, mostly on canvas and paper, marshaled in a survey of [artistic movements from 1900 to 1940](#). In terms of the Whitney's collection, that meant works by artists who were striving to define a visual vernacular--a look that would cry "America" loud and clear at a time when it appeared that there was only Europe to react to. The artists included coteries like the Ashcan School, painters devoted to realism and the depiction of urban life; the Regionalists, who settled on the beau ideal of the midwestern rural

scene; and the Precisionists, whose geometric aesthetic was inspired by American architecture and machinery. The show was chockablock with paintings that, however outré they may have looked in their time, are today familiar, and in some places worn, icons: Georgia O'Keeffe's *The White Calico Flower*, Charles Sheeler's *River Rouge Plant*, [Edward Hopper's *Railroad Sunset*](#). Yet the viewers seemed to be regarding everything with equal attention, from lithographs to pencil sketches, holding companions back to look at things they might have missed, and commenting on wall texts to strangers. Even the guards seemed excited to have the art there. One of them planted himself in front of George Bellows's *Dempsey and Firpo* and held forth, at some length, about the original fight.

What made this show work so well? Thinking back, and revisiting the show, as I have done often, I came up with several answers. First, it was simply a joy to see the Whitney art itself, which has not appeared so representatively in years. (The Whitney plans to return a similarly extensive portion of the collection to permanent display.) Second, because San Jose's galleries are relatively small, it was easy to grasp the back and forth between realism and abstraction, regionalism and urbanism, and to observe the ceaseless tussle between Europe and whatever other influences presented themselves. Third, it was enlightening to see work so closely associated with the East and the Midwest somewhere else. As I looked at Charles Demuth's *My Egypt*, which makes of a geometrically rendered set of grain elevators a looming cultural icon, my mind leaped naturally to Silicon Valley's own recent transformation from orchard to office park. Regarding a pencil sketch of a New York scene complete with crowds and straphangers, I realized that the valley's main industry--high tech--is on its way to rendering such familiar sights obsolete. A work like Max Weber's *Chinese Restaurant*--a Cubist rendition of a New York eatery painted by a Russian Jew who had studied painting in Paris--looked different in a museum where a stand by the exhibition entrance offers brochures in English, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

Finally, there were the wall texts. This being [the Whitney collection](#), I expected them to be something I'd have to ignore: long-winded recitations about my need to revise my notions of the aspects of America I was being shown, or else dispiriting reminders that the collection itself is suspect, founded as it was in part upon the grossly capitalistic excrescence of Cornelius Vanderbilt's nineteenth-century shipping fortune--Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's inheritance. Instead the curators simply posed the following questions at the show's start: What is a masterpiece? What is American about American art? Why have some media (namely, oil paintings and sculpture) been more highly valued than others--and why did that hierarchy have to change in order for art to develop in this country? The usual revisionist stance had somehow been refined to its most intelligent essence, so that it was actually useful. How had this happened?

The answer was something I didn't begin to figure out until, on my first visit, I left the museum and started wandering around the huge park beside it. It was Christmastime. The grass of the plaza was thick with plastic snow. On it sat a garish display of decorated trees and animated dioramas of the Santa-in-his-teddy-bear-factory variety. Each tree bore the name of a sponsoring community group --everything from a Buddhist Scout troop and a university frat house to the DAR, a gay and lesbian center, a Vietnam veterans' society, and a Filipino community club. Anglo and Latino couples strolled among the trees. There were plenty of toddlers and babies. There were even a couple of leather-clad bikers, cruising their hogs slowly around the edge. At one end, right by the museum, a huge mechanical Christmas tree creaked up and down, out of and into a gargantuan gift box. It was a glorious and awful sight. It was also the postmodern, "post-colonial" world

that the Whitney, in its wall texts and catalogues, often seems to be maundering on about. Except here it just looked like real life.

San Jose is that wonder in these times--an American city that sees its civic future as bound to the growth of its arts and cultural institutions. Over the past thirteen years its redevelopment agency has devotedly funneled more than a billion property-tax dollars into the museum, the symphony, and the city's repertory theater, along with such other quality-of-life and infrastructure projects as a hockey-and-performance arena and a streetcar system. The aim is to rejuvenate the downtown and boost the city's national profile, so that San Jose will look more like what it is: the eleventh largest city in the United States (far ahead of Boston and Seattle) and the third largest in California (behind Los Angeles and San Diego).

The fledgling art scene is considered so important, in fact, that Susan Hammer, the mayor, attends benefits and press conferences for the museum, and she readily cleared time to talk to me. "My dream is to have this be the cultural center of northern California," Hammer told me, and because she entered public life in 1969 by helping to found the community art museum about which I was interviewing her now, I was tempted to believe her. (Another reason was her straight-shooting, no-nonsense, tennis-tanned manner, which put me in mind of the terrifyingly efficient moms who used to shove us kids into the back of a wood-paneled Country Squire and haul us around to improving activities.) "When you look at history down through the ages, the societies that have survived have been the ones that have had a real commitment to arts and culture. And on less philosophical terms, the arts are an economic power."

One more thing. Hammer said, "We understand each other better through the arts if we learn about each other's culture and holidays and celebrations and paintings. And I like to think that through that understanding we're better able to live in harmony with each other." San Jose, with its dwindling Anglo population and rapidly growing Hispanic and Asian segments, is fast becoming a smaller-scale version of the minority-ruled California that has for so long been predicted. It also remains, like the rest of the Bay Area, staunchly liberal. Local arts organizations see the words "Engage thy community" writ large.

So when Josi Callan, the director of the museum, hears visitors say, "I don't get it," or "My kid could do that," or even "I don't like it," she can't shrug off these people as philistines. (Nor can she, in this predominantly Democratic part of the world, dismiss them as "neoconservatives"--as so many people are wont to do, now that the arts have become a political football.) She has what amounts to a civic mandate to pay attention.

Her genius for paying attention is the reason that Callan, who has no curatorial background, ended up as the museum's director. A previous head had decamped precipitately, leaving the museum with a beautiful new wing but a reputation for being a hangout for art groupies. When Callan, then the museum's associate director, was drafted for the job, she refocused the museum's mission toward serving a broader arts community. Concert and lecture series were organized. In collaboration with The Mexican Museum, in San Francisco, she commissioned the Los Angeles artist Gronk to create a temporary installation, and waived admission so that any passerby could come in and watch him paint on the gallery walls. The curatorial staff began testing wall texts and brochures on schoolchildren, journalists, and many other people, and then had the results printed in different languages. Callan set up a committee to brainstorm on how to attract members of different ethnic groups and also, the committee head told me, teachers, bankers, and all those engineers and entrepreneurs in their far-flung R&D

buildings. (The museum provides most of the area's public school art education, but some of the engineers are still proving tough nuts to crack.)

Important as this work was, none of it solved what Callan saw as the basic problem: much of the prospective audience had never set foot in a museum. And contemporary art--all that the museum is ever likely to be able to show or collect--has a reputation for being intimidating, even to regular museumgoers. Callan's response was to say, "We haven't done a good job of educating our community." How to do it? The museum's own collection, like that of many community museums, was relatively negligible at the time. In the end there seemed to be only one solution: go out and bring in someone else's, and use it to teach the history of modern art.

Naturally, the Whitney-San Jose agreement didn't fall together quite as simply as that. The deal was hammered out with the help of the San Jose Redevelopment Agency, which wanted a large impact and was willing to contribute \$3 million of the fee to make one, and David Resnicow, a New York museum consultant who had conducted a brief test run of a similar project in Miami. Resnicow had originally spoken on behalf of the redevelopment agency to four major U.S. museums, including the Whitney. It was David Ross, at the Whitney, who got the idea right away and was flexible enough to see the deal through, working with Callan. Of the roughly 11,000 pieces in the Whitney collection, more than 98 percent were in storage, and Ross was disturbed at being unable to show more. What made the experiment work so well is that Callan and Ross both felt that it made sense for the two museums to collaborate on presentation, rather than having the San Jose show be run as a Whitney franchise.

Although both Ross and Callan assured me that they had forged "a real partnership," Callan was quick to acknowledge that, as in any close collaboration, there had been plenty of bumps along the way. What these might have been is perhaps best imagined by looking at the two directors. In one corner sits Ross, with his brushed-back gray hair, his chic little clear-framed glasses, and a Laurie Anderson CD-ROM on his desk; in the other is Callan, with a perky blonde bob and a needlepoint sign above her office door: "UNTIL MORALE IMPROVES / FLOGGING WILL CONTINUE." They're both charming, intense, and voluble, but where Ross tends toward futuristic riffs (Silicon Valley is "the new economic engine for this nation!" "By the year 2025 you've got one city that essentially goes from Los Angeles to San Francisco!" "Do you have access to the World Wide Web?"), Callan is likely to wave a fist in the air and proclaim, "The kind of product we were delivering was not addressing changing museum demographics!"

Each of them represents one side of a coin that is often regarded as counterfeit in the larger art world: Callan is fund-raiser and administrator become museum head; Ross is museum head turned hypemeister. It seems astonishing that their two institutions should have finally settled on a relatively traditional art exhibit that nonetheless manages to explain its subject to the public from the creators' points of view, rather than the curators'.

"One of our basic philosophies is to do art history on the wall," says Peter Gordon, San Jose's chief curator. "It's kind of like a freshman course in American art but using the real stuff instead of slides. If people take advantage of it and come and look at the work and read the labels, they start to know the basic building blocks of looking at art in this century. At least in this country."

The second collaborative show, opening next month, will cover 1940 to

1965, the period during which American abstraction took off, culminating in such works as the all-black canvases that have left so many feeling they've admired the Emperor's new clothes. "Typically what you hear is that people generally don't like abstract shows, or they just don't feel comfortable with them," says Dianne Hoover, the San Jose museum's assistant curator. "So we've been keeping that in mind as we think about how to organize this next show and really try to make the work accessible." Together with Beth Venn, the associate curator for the Whitney's permanent collection, Hoover is working on a display that will, like the first show, move chronologically through its period, suggesting how three traditions--the landscape, the portrait, and the still life--were being continued, adapted, or overthrown. "It's really a new way of approaching the work," she told me with enthusiasm.

Since the Whitney art arrived, the San Jose museum's attendance has increased by about a third. The museum has received a substantial boost on the funding front--with major grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Knight Foundation, and an upsurge of interest from local companies--and also several strong donations of art to its own permanent collection. Interestingly, the museum's adjunct shows are now pulling almost as strongly. Many of these have a local angle. "The View From Within" displayed art made during the Second World War in Japanese-American internment camps, many survivors of which still live in the area. A stunning retrospective of Andy Goldsworthy, a British artist, revealed the use of Bay Area manzanita wood, clay, and slate in the artist's "nature collaborations." Upcoming shows will present work from the high-tech visionary Nam June Paik, and from Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American artists. And "La Frontera/The Border," which presented several aspects of the U.S.-Mexico "border experience," went up at around the same time that the referendum on Proposition 187, California's 1994 anti-illegal-alien initiative, took place, allowing the museum to combine the exhibition with a bilingual writing contest and a highly charged political debate.

I hated this last show; I thought that much of it should have been packed straight off to whatever dumping bin holds that ghastly 1993 Whitney biennial. But that's also why I liked it. By gearing its own shows so patently to local passions, the museum can speak directly to visitors about the response to a political situation, a painting, a face, a rock, an electron, or an idea which may lead someone to create art. And then these visitors, by walking through the Whitney show, can experience a range of creative, aesthetic, and technical decisions that others used to resolve such impulses. When the present moment is considered in the context of the past, rather than vice versa, it starts to look like what it truly is: another blip on the ever-flickering screen of artistic exploration.

The Whitney, meanwhile, seems to have been refreshed by the need to rethink its past for a new audience--an audience that has been encouraged to view the collection appreciatively rather than revisionistically. One of its own shows this past summer was drawn from the permanent collection, and two others in particular managed to sidestep the sort of critical issues that often obsess the professional art world and tap straight into the lust for creativity that still draws artists and art lovers to New York. A delectable retrospective of the work of Florine Stettheimer, who was active when the Whitney was a club, put her fey, idiosyncratic depictions of turn-of-the-century personalities on public view together for the first time in fifty years. A Hopper show presented a small selection of the painter's work rather than an exhaustive array, and the paintings were accompanied, somewhat astonishingly, by lines of poetry on the walls rather than by reams of Marxist critique. Though many critics caviled at the show's video display and the lack of scholarly apparatus, some appreciated its modest scale--and

none could really argue with the crowds that ceaselessly thronged it. The Whitney, whose instinct for the moment is helping to make the San Jose experiment work so well, may also be bringing some of that younger museum's grassroots savvy home as it reintroduces its past to New York.

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