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**CULTURE IN COWTOWN: THE AMON CARTER MUSEUM**

by *Bart C. Pointer*

Fort Worth readily embraces a rich, western heritage. Its history as frontier outpost, cavalry fort, Chisholm Trail rest stop, “watering hole” for Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and site of the first indoor rodeo reflects this enduring legacy. Residents affectionately refer to their home as “Cowtown,” and visitors can enjoy a variety of cowboy traditions, including the colorful historic stockyards and nationally famous annual Southwest Exposition and Stock Show, the Chisholm Trail and Pioneer Days celebrations, and weekly rodeos. And recently, Saturday afternoon cattle drives – complete with authentic Texas longhorns – have enlarged this unique appeal. No small wonder, then, that favorite son Amon G. Carter dreamed of donating a western art museum to this city “where the West begins.”<sup>1</sup>

Amon G. Carter, publisher and philanthropist, enjoyed a passion for two North Texas cities – he loved Fort Worth and hated Dallas. Carter dedicated himself to promoting Fort Worth, especially if the enterprise involved denigrating Dallas. While stoking this rivalry, Carter approached zealous extremes, accounts of which grew more grandiose with each telling. Two instances, in particular, attested to his disdain for anything associated with “Big D.” Once, while attending a society ball at the Adolphus Hotel, he refused to eat the local fare and instead dined from a picnic basket filled with fried chicken from Shady Oaks Country Club in Fort Worth. Carter also carried a full can of “Fort Worth gasoline” in his trunk, just to avoid patronizing a Dallas service station. To steal the spotlight from Dallas, he allowed, even encouraged, such stories to circulate.<sup>2</sup>

The Amon Carter Museum, an art collection that began humbly and grew in proportion to his wealth, is a good example of his love for Fort Worth. On a New York street corner in 1928, Carter viewed six water colors by Charles Russell, a renowned painter of Western themes, exhibited by art dealer Bertram M. Newhouse. Pleasantly reminded of his West Texas origins, Carter borrowed \$7,500 (which took him two years to repay), purchased the works, and began a hobby that would span decades and cost millions. Over the next twenty years he experienced considerable success with newspaper and radio investments, at the same time garnering substantial income from ownership in the Wasson and Ellenburger oil pools in Texas. By 1950 Carter had amassed a significant collection of works by Russell and Frederic Remington. *Time* magazine described that period in his life in 1952, reporting that his “appetite for art, and bank account, grew.” Gradually, Carter displayed the collection in various public venues – the Fort Worth Public Library, Southwest Regional Airport, and the Petroleum Club – for the enjoyment of his fellow citizens.<sup>3</sup>

Over the next two decades a series of events led to the establishment of the Amon Carter Foundation and the creation of the museum. In 1945 Carter and wife, Nenetta Burton Carter, incorporated the Carter Foundation with

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more than \$8 million after selling their Wasson Oil Field interests. After Carter's death in 1955, his will added a majority of his estate to the already sizable endowment and provided for a Western art museum in Fort Worth. "I am endeavoring" he explained in the document, "to give those who have not [had] such advantages but who aspire to the higher and finer attributes of life, those opportunities that were denied me." He concluded, "a man cannot live off his community, he must live with it." Carter directed that the museum operate as a nonprofit enterprise for the public benefit, promote the cultural spirit of the city, and especially "stimulate the artistic imagination among young people residing there."<sup>4</sup>

In January 1961, the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art became a reality. Carter would have delighted in the attention that "Opening Day" brought to Fort Worth. Attendees included representatives from institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and such well-known publications as *Time*, *Architectural Forum*, and *Newsweek*. Carter's daughter, Mrs. J. Lee Johnson, officially opened the museum, proclaiming that the spirit and ideals of Amon Carter were present and that the Museum of Western Art would educate, interest, and please the citizens of Fort Worth. She also stated that such a museum in "this great area 'Where the West Begins' would forever enlighten us, and be our companion to remind us of the great heritage we must nourish to keep alive."<sup>5</sup>

With tongue firmly in cheek, *Time* magazine headlined its coverage of the opening with "Museum of Yippee-Yi-Yo." Naysayers called it a house of "cowboy pictures," but a series of early successes and accolades quieted the skeptics. The popularity of the largest and most important private collection of Russell and Remington works quickly became evident just a few weeks after the opening when the first annual Southwest Exposition and Stock Show commenced. This annual event attracted thousands of visitors, including a large number from rural areas. The museum arranged special exhibits to coincide with the Stock Show. As a result, many farm and ranch families enjoyed cultural opportunities previously unavailable to them. Within three months of its debut, over 27,000 locals and tourists visited the museum, including people from twenty-one foreign countries and forty-six states. By the end of summer, visitor totals eclipsed 80,000 and necessitated the hiring of a professional director, Mitchell Wilder. In 1961, the U.S. Postal Service created a stamp with an image of "The Smoke Signal," one of the paintings in the collection, and in December CBS highlighted the museum in a nationwide broadcast. In May 1962, the museum loaned a Remington piece, *Coming Through the Rye*, to Jacqueline Kennedy, who had made an appeal for works of art that would add "interest and historical significance to the White House." These early achievements helped fulfill the dream of Amon Carter of providing an opportunity for many to view his collection and bring prestige and recognition to "his city." The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* proclaimed that the museum was "originally conceived as a home for the art collection of the late Amon G. Carter," but has "expanded its role to become one of the leading creative cultural forces in the city."<sup>6</sup>

Momentum created by the initial success of the museum provided a solid foundation for continued growth both structurally and philosophically. In 1964, only three years after opening, the construction of an annex created space for additional displays. In 1967 the exhibit *American Art, 10<sup>th</sup> Century: Image to Abstraction* heralded a change in philosophy as the showcase expanded its initial focus from Western art. "We feel our obligation to do a better educational job with American art," Wilder explained. The hiring of a curator in 1969 provided expertise to catalog the growing collection. Additional building expansion in 1977 more than doubled the space of the museum. Trustees eventually removed the "Western Art" designation on the museum nameplate in 1986 to reflect the evolutionary shift in focus to include all aspects of American art. Western-themed exhibits, however, continued to be popular, especially during the Stock Show. These changes demonstrated remarkable growth. Since the purchase of the first watercolors on a New York street corner, the collection had expanded to a wide range of holdings that numbered more than 300,000. The museum sponsored more than a hundred special exhibitions and at least seventy individual publications dedicated to some aspect of art. Such success prompted a visiting curator to confirm that "I know of no other institution in the country that is working in this field of combining art and history ... the museum is gaining a reputation far beyond its size."

The diverse, impressive nature of the permanent collection demonstrated the desire of the Carter Foundation to present a quality venue and pay tribute to a dedicated community whose own philanthropic spirit supported the museum. The purchase of one painting in particular illustrated this symbiotic relationship. In 1991 the Fort Worth Art Association offered for sale a Thomas Eakins work, *The Swimming Hole*. Sotheby's Auction House in New York received the painting, causing considerable concern in the Fort Worth art community. The Carter Museum originally declined to buy the work because it was in the process of purchasing another masterpiece, *The Garden of Eden*, by Thomas Cole. Museum officials, who believed that the Cole painting had been lost for 160 years, valued the treasure at between \$5 million and \$7 million. The owners offered the painting to no other museum. Carter board members determined that they could ill-afford to pass up the opportunity to acquire such a gem. Consequently, when available funds failed to cover the expected price of the Eakins canvas, the Fort Worth-based Sid Richardson and Charles Tandy foundations agreed to provide half the purchase price for *The Swimming Hole* if the museum would pay \$4 million and the public the final \$1 million. Approximately 5,000 individuals, businesses, and foundations contributed the necessary \$10 million. More than 1,600 personal donations of less than \$100 each prompted a local news report to remark that "children have sent in their allowances, and an Englishman [even] searched his London house for American money and found five dollars to contribute." Not only did Fort Worth retain the painting, but money from the sale provided needed revenue for its previous owner, the Fort Worth Art Association, to purchase modern art works. That transaction highlighted the convivial relationship between the

Carter Foundation and community.<sup>8</sup>

Other permanent acquisitions demonstrated the opportunities available to museum patrons. In 1971 the Carter secured a number of Currier and Ives prints. Dating to the nineteenth century, a time when neither motion pictures nor quality cameras existed for journalistic purposes, these colorful illustrations depicted historical events of a new nation and unique perspectives of the Old South. Again in 1972 the museum purchased one of the earliest landscapes painted in America – a piece believed to be a depiction of pre-Revolutionary Exeter, New Hampshire, completed between 1775 and 1780. This overmantel representation exemplified the earliest type of landscape painting from colonial America. Subsequent acquisitions have represented such masters as Ben Shahn, John Marin, Arthur Dove, Morris Graves, Marsen Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe.<sup>9</sup>

The museum bounty also included photographs that offer a visual window to the past. An exhibit of 1930s photographs, assembled from the files of the Farm Security Administration historical section – the small agency that provided the most valuable pictures of life in the United States from 1935 to 1941 – became the first of many exhibits in the 1960s. Works on display included those by Dorothea Lange, well-known for her Depression-era depictions of women. Additional exhibits provided images ranging from the early railroads to the first NASA space photos. A number of donors have blessed the museum with photographic collections. In 1978, Southwestern photographer Laura Gilpin of Santa Fe, New Mexico, announced that she planned to give her massive collection to the museum, including works by such noted photographers as Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange. Dedication to this art form has continued to the present, as evidenced by a series of workshops presented in 1999 titled “Focus on Photography.”<sup>10</sup>

While the permanent collection was quite diverse, the Board of Directors also promoted an ongoing series of traveling exhibitions. Former Director Wilder explained, “we like to bring other collections – both public and private – to the museum, not only to let people in the area see things they wouldn't normally have access to” but to “give us a chance to reassess our own collection.” The museum has produced a vast array of curiosities, including Spanish colonial silver, presidential campaign posters, Navajo photos, U.S. flags, Eskimo art, Pennsylvania quilts, and Mexican masks. It also has showcased rare historical documents: the Louisiana Purchase proclamation; the first Bible printed in the Western world; the initial Latin edition of the “Columbus Letter;” a printed first-hand account of the new world; letters and texts by Cortes and DeSoto; and the first printing of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>11</sup>

In 1974 officials of three local museums, including the Carter, planned exhibitions behind the Iron Curtain in Warsaw, Poland. They organized the extravaganza, which eventually represented sixteen museums, under a grant from the U.S. Information Agency. Officials in Turkey, England, and France also requested an opportunity to view the combined works. The occasion

prompted the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* to comment that “apparently oblivious to any barriers America’s historical western art is proving to be a top-rate diplomat for international cultural exchange.”<sup>12</sup>

This dedication to the promotion and preservation of the arts was only one facet of museum focus. The foundation sought other avenues through which the Carter could contribute to the life of the city. As author Charles Parkhurst explained, “a museum is inherently a combination of repository, theater, classroom, research center, activity center, side show, and home for an art elite,” and that “while it cannot be all things to all men, it can provide something for everybody.”<sup>13</sup>

The museum has become a literary entity as well. It is a research repository of 30,000 volumes on American history and art. Additional holdings include over 7,000 microfilm rolls of nineteenth-century newspapers and rare publications – none of which duplicate the holdings of the nearby Fort Worth Public or Texas Christian University libraries. Other literary achievements include a publishing operation that boasts more than 100 titles and seventy-five works relating to its collection, assuring that museum treasures are available to those lacking the opportunity to experience them first-hand.<sup>14</sup>

The educational scope of the museum has extended beyond these research and publication capabilities. Mark Thistlewaite, one-time chairman of the Texas Christian University art department, and Arthur Woodward, a museum staff historical anthropologist who taught a class for the TCU history department, have provided lectures available to the community. An impressive variety of programs have involved school-age children in the Fort Worth vicinity. In 1966 the museum received a grant from the National Foundation for the Arts to support teachers in elementary and secondary schools and to increase public knowledge of the visual arts through expanded services. Later that year, a prime example of this interaction occurred in Antelope, Texas, located eighty miles from Fort Worth. A teacher in Antelope asked her students to name their favorite artist and found that most of the students selected “Peanuts” cartoonist Charles Schultz. As a consequence, Carter Museum Education Director John Diffily developed a plan to teach rural children art appreciation, explaining that museums offered more than just pictures. Schools in ten surrounding counties participated in these experimental programs. Artist Joseph Tischler, formerly on the staff of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, conducted painting demonstrations. The Carter Museum also pioneered local artistic involvement in the Vital Link Summer Internship Program – sponsored by the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce – to forge connections between middle-school students and the job market. Only three school districts in the nation participated in such projects.<sup>15</sup>

Amon Carter Foundation grants have not been limited to the museum. A full fifty percent of its budget has provided community outreach in other areas. In 1996, contributions benefited multiple arts councils, animal-rights groups, community-improvement projects, crime commissions, environmentalists,

agriculture, health, human services, recreation, religion, science, and youth development. The foundation issued 155 grants totaling over \$10 million from an endowment with a market value of approximately \$227 million. By the end of 1998, total charitable contributions had surpassed \$250 million.<sup>16</sup>

The Foundation-sponsored Museum, while already enjoying impressive credentials, embarked upon a major building expansion in 1999. Ruth Carter Stevenson, daughter of Amon Carter, indicated that the museum collection had outgrown its available space. Only about one percent of the holdings could be viewed at any one time, so museum officials announced that the museum would close in August for a renovation to increase floor space from 65,000 to more than 107,000 square feet. The actual display area increased more than three-fold, from 9,000 to over 27,000 square feet. The new addition also provided other amenities: a 170-seat auditorium; a laboratory for the study of paper conservation; expanded library and research facilities; larger retail space; and easier public access. The museum dedicated an additional 5,000 square feet to traveling exhibitions as well as a mezzanine to house a rotating display of works in all media. In the meantime, to continue to exhibit its collection the Carter Museum loaned artworks to the Sid Richardson Collection (another Fort Worth Western art venue), the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, although uninterrupted access to its collection would continue at a temporary location in downtown Fort Worth. To put museum progress in perspective, director Rick Stewart aptly observed that “the Amon Carter Museum has grown from one man’s vision into a vital national institution” and that the expansion program “will enable it to continue to realize that vision and fulfill its mission to collect, preserve, and interpret the finest examples of American Art.”<sup>17</sup>

The Carter Foundation story and its community support is truly remarkable. A review of the museum budget reveals that foundation contributions account for 76.8 percent of its expenses, while community and individuals supply 15.5 percent. Together, they provide 93.9 percent of the total revenue necessary for museum operations – the remaining 6.1 percent comes from investments, sales, fees, and royalties.

Museum accomplishments and contributions to Fort Worth are a wonderful tribute to one man’s dream, the dedication of a family, and an appreciative community. American humorist Will Rogers, a Carter family friend, aptly described the relationship between Carter and Fort Worth: “No other city in America has anything approaching such a public citizen as Amon Carter.”<sup>18</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jerry Flemmons, *Amon: the Life of Amon Carter, Sr. of Texas* (Austin, 1978), p. 355. For a good book on Fort Worth history, see Oliver Knight, *Fort Worth: Outpost on the Trinity* (Fort Worth, 1953).

<sup>2</sup>Knight, *Fort Worth: Outpost on the Trinity*, p. 245; Ruby Schmidt, ed., *Fort Worth and Tarrant County: A Historical Guide* (Fort Worth, 1984), p. 35; Flemmons, *Amon*, pp. 353-355;

Katie Sherrod, Chris Tucker, Christine O'Donnel, *My Town's Better Than Yours* (Dallas, KERA Television Production video, 1997), available at the Fort Worth Public Library.

<sup>3</sup>Rick Stewart, *A Century of Western Art: Selections from the Amon Carter Museum* (Fort Worth, 1998), p. 3; Janet L. Schmelzer, *Where the West Begins: Fort Worth and Tarrant County* (Northridge, California, 1985), pp. 67-76; Flemmons, *Amon*, pp. 490-491.

<sup>4</sup>Flemmons, *Amon*, p. 499; Schmelzer, *Where the West Begins*, p. 68; *Carter Foundation Annual Report*, 1994, Carter Foundation File at The Foundation Center, Fort Worth, pp. 1-3 (hereinafter cited as Carter FF); *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, January 22, 1961, Carter Museum clippings file, Fort Worth Public Library, Fort Worth, Texas (hereinafter cited as Carter CF); Stewart, *A Century of Western Art*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Stewart, *A Century of Western Art*, pp. 3-5; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, January 22, 1961, Carter CF.

<sup>6</sup>*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 19, August 4, 27, October 6, December 12, 1961; May 27, 1962; November 26, 1967; January 24, 1971, Carter CF; *Fort Worth Magazine*, December, 1961.

<sup>7</sup>Knight, *Outpost on the Trinity*, pp. 241-242; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 18, 1963; January 26, 1964; September 3, 1967; July 6, 1969; January 24, 1971, Carter CF; Stewart, *A Century of Western Art*, p.3.

<sup>8</sup>"Carter Museum Buys Artist's 'Swimming Hole,'" *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 16, 1990; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 15, 1990, May 27, September 5, 1991, Carter CF; Knight, *Outpost on the Trinity*, p. 242.

<sup>9</sup>*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 20, 1970; June 4, 1972; January 10, 1971, Carter CF; Jan Muhlert, ed., *American Paintings: Selections from the Amon Carter Museum* (Birmingham, Alabama, 1986), pp. v-xvi.

<sup>10</sup>*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, November 26, 1967; May 4, 1969; September 13, 1970; May 12, 1978; October 22, 1999, Carter CF.

<sup>11</sup>Schmidt, ed., *Fort Worth and Tarrant County*, pp. 35-36; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 23, December 13, 1964; January 29, 1965; March 20, 1966; January 7, April 21, July 14, September 22, December 12, 1968; April 18, May 9, 1971; July 28, October 6, November 3, 1974, Carter CF.

<sup>12</sup>*Fort Worth Star Telegram*, January 6, March 10, 1974, Carter CF.

<sup>13</sup>Charles Parkhurst, "Art Museums: Kinds, Organization, Procedures, and Financing," *On Understanding Art Museums* (London, 1975), p. 96.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with Sam Duncan, Acting Librarian, Carter Museum, by Bart Pointer, November 5, 1999, Fort Worth, Texas; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 18, 1963; April 10, 1966; January 24, 1971, Carter CF.

<sup>15</sup>*Fort Worth Press*, February 2, 1969; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 7, December 20, 1966; December 9, 1973; July 9, 1993, Carter CF.

<sup>16</sup>*Amon G. Carter Foundaouin Schedule of Contributions, Gifts, and Grants for Year Ending December 31, 1993*, Carter CF; Original letter from Carter Foundation to Funding Center, Carter CF; Rebecca MacLean, ed., *The Foundation Grants Index, 1999* (New York, 1998), pp. 22, 217, 340, 378, 487, 648, 714, 749, 835, 866, 1004, 1087, 1129, 1169, 1334-1335, 1472, 1556, 1602, 1661, 1764; Interview with John Robinson, Executive Vice-President, Grant Administration, Amon Carter Foundation, by Bart Pointer, December 28, 1999, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Ruth Ann Rugg, Program Communications Manager, Amon Carter Museum, by Bart Pointer, July 2, 1999, Fort Worth, Texas; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 21, 28, 1999; *Amon Carter Museum Program: Expansion* (Fort Worth, 1999), pp. 1-22 ff.

<sup>18</sup>Flemmons, *Amon*, p. 347; *Amon Carter Museum Program: Expansion* (Fort Worth, 1999), pp. 1-22 ff.