CELEBRATING FIFTY YEARS OF THE SARAH CAMPBELL BLAFFER FOUNDATION

Edited by James Clifton and Melina Kervandjian
With essays by Barbara Baert, Andrea Bayer, Anne Dunlop, Steven F. Ostrow, Lisa Pon, Martin Postle, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
Collection Checklist by Josine Corstens

The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation
Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London
On December 21, 1964, in Austin, the Secretary of State of Texas, Crawford G. Martin, certified the incorporation of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, the articles of which had been drawn up two days before in Houston. A non-profit corporation (now a private operating foundation), it was “organized for strictly educational purposes and for purely public charity . . . exclusively for religious, charitable, and educational purposes,” more specifically, “to make contributions to institutions of higher learning . . . and other [tax-exempt] organizations.” The Articles of Incorporation named three trustees: Sarah C. Blaffer of Houston, the benefactor who financed the foundation through a series of trusts whose proceeds were to “be used exclusively in Texas for religious, educational or charitable purposes”; Charles W. Hall, Mrs. Blaffer’s lawyer at Fulbright, Crooker, Freeman, Bates & Jaworski; and Thomas D. Anderson, a trust officer of Texas Commerce Bank. Hall has been a trustee of the foundation for every moment of its life. He served first as secretary and has been president of the board since 1975, following the death of Mrs. Blaffer. In 1966, Anderson resigned from the board, and three of Mrs. Blaffer’s children were named trustees: John H. Blaffer, Jane Blaffer Owen, and Cecil Blaffer Hudson, all now deceased. With the exception of the late Gilbert M. Denman, Jr., a San Antonio lawyer, antiquities collector, and friend of the Blaffers, all subsequent trustees have been members of the family.

Amended by-laws of the foundation, adopted on January 12, 1966, stipulated that in furtherance of the religious, charitable, and educational purposes set forth in the articles of incorporation, the foundation shall pay particular attention to:

- Art and the development of artistic talent, with emphasis upon assisting or enabling institutions of higher learning (such as colleges and universities) to obtain and display worthwhile objects of art to the benefit of young men and women;
- The prevention of blindness and the care, cure, and rehabilitation of the blind; and
- The training and education of young men in agricultural pursuits such as farming, ranching, and animal husbandry.

Blindness and animal husbandry notwithstanding, the foundation’s turn toward educational art programs had begun.

The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation now owns a collection of early-modern European paintings, prints, and objects—the chronological parameters are roughly 1500 to 1800—and has exhibited its works, individually and in entire exhibitions, throughout Texas, from El Paso to Beaumont, from Lubbock...
to McAllen, with scores of other venues in between, as well as in museums throughout the United States and the world. The collection occupies five dedicated galleries in the Audrey Jones Beck building of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), in a long-term, mutually beneficial arrangement with the museum.

SARAH CAMPBELL BLAFFER (1885–1975)

Born in Waxahachie, Texas, in 1885 and raised in Lampasas, Sarah Campbell attended boarding school in Boston. She was the daughter of William Thomas Campbell, a Scottish immigrant and one of the founders of the Texas Company (Texaco). Sarah married Robert E. Lee Blaffer on April 22, 1909, in Lampasas. A lawyer from a German banking family in New Orleans, he entered the newly booming oil business following the gushing at Spindletop. With Harry Wiess, whose family owned the land on which Spindletop had erupted, and several others, Lee Blaffer formed the Humble Oil and Refining Company, which later became Exxon (now ExxonMobil). Texas Governor James Hogg once referred to Sarah’s marriage to Blaffer as “the conglomerate of the century.” The maid of honor was the governor’s daughter, Ima Hogg, whose home, Bayou Bend, and collection of American decorative arts are now a part of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. There are no known photographs from the wedding because Sarah’s father would not allow it, “in case some of the boys in the bars and barbershops bandy it about.” Mrs. Blaffer maintained this resistance to publicity her entire life.

While at school in Boston, Sarah Campbell visited Fenway Court and was much taken with Isabella Stewart Gardner’s impressive collection of art. It was her experience at the Louvre, however, during her three-month European honeymoon that transformed her into a passionate art lover and, ultimately, a collector. In the early twentieth century, there was little European art to be found anywhere in Texas. Living in a relatively small house, Mrs. Blaffer did not do any serious collecting of European paintings in the first decades of her marriage. In the early 1930s, however, she began to acquire late nineteenth-century paintings—Manet and Gauguin—and works by more recent artists, including Modigliani. Her collecting was impassioned and deeply felt, both when she was collecting for herself and, years later, when she was collecting for public institutions.

The Blaffer family has long supported the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Mr. and Mrs. R. L. Blaffer are listed among the early major donors to the museum building fund in 1925. In 1947, Mrs. Blaffer established the Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection at the museum, in memory of her husband, who had died in 1942. Over the course of seventeen years, she gave some twenty-five works to the museum. Most of the gifts were Old Master paintings, among them two Canaletto vedute (fig. 1) and a portrait of a woman by Frans Hals (fig. 2), but there were important modern works as well, such as Pierre-August Renoir’s Still Life with Bouquet (fig. 3) and Paul Cézanne’s much-exhibited portrait of his wife, Madame Cézanne in Blue (fig. 4). Blaffer family members donated other works to the collection, including Edouard Vuillard’s The Promenade, given by Jane Blaffer Owen, the Blaffers’ eldest daughter, and her husband, Kenneth Dale Owen (fig. 5).

In 1952, Sarah and Lee’s son, John H. Blaffer, and his wife, Camilla Davi Blaffer, made a significant contribution to expand the museum building. The Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Wing, which opened in 1953, was designed by Kenneth Franzheim as
an addition to the Main Street side of the original 1924 building designed by William Ward Watkins (fig. 6).6 Franzheim explained to John Blaffer that he ‘planned [the exterior wall of the new wing] as a background for some fine modern sculpture.’7 Jane Blaffer Owen commissioned Jacques Lipchitz to create a high-relief sculpture in aluminum for the site, comparable to his Prometheus Strangling the Vulture, which he had completed for the Philadelphia Museum of Art a few years earlier. Lipchitz provided a small model in paper for the large (twelve by eighteen feet) proposed sculpture. The subject, which was to include Apollo, Orpheus, a mortal, a fish, and a bird, symbolized inhabitants of earth, water, and air. The museum considered the proposal but, strangely, rejected it. The next year, an impression of a mausoleum. Certainly, it is very dull.”8 He suggested that John or Camilla Blaffer consider other sculptures by Carl Milles, William Zorach, and Sidney Waugh), but the blank façade of the Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Wing was never completed by a sculpture, though its starkness is now mitigated by a row of live oak trees. It proved not to be the only disappointment the Blaffer family would suffer at the museum.

The Blaffer Wing housed new quarters for the museum school as well as the Blaffer Room, which was hung with paintings from the Blaffer Memorial Collection and was also used for trustee meetings. The gallery was around the size of Mrs. Blaffer’s own living room, and a Houston interior designer (Higford Griffiths) was hired to create a domestic look that included eighteenth-century architectural elements (a Robert Adam marble mantel, c. 1770, chair rails, baseboards, bracket cornices, mahogany doors, and carved pine doorways); the walls were sheathed in fabric; the floor is parquet. In 1958 cornices, mahogany doors, and carved pine doorways); the walls were sheathed in fabric; the floor is parquet. In 1958 Mrs. Blaffer continued to add works to the Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection at the museum, but such fulsome praise would ring hollow for her a decade later.

She made her final donation of an artwork to the MFAH in 1964. That year, she offered to the museum a head of an old man attributed to Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The director of the museum at the time, James Johnson Sweeney, had little interest in the Old Masters and little patience for cultivating patrons. Sweeney refused the painting, which was subsequently given to the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University (where it is catalogued as having been executed by an unidentified eighteenth-century French artist).9 The Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Wing, Caroline Wiess Law Building, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1953.

A resolution adopted by the MFAH Board of Trustees (April 15, 1953) praises the building, the collection, and the donor, in extraordinary language:

WHEREAS, this building will house the magnificent paintings, which have been and are being collected by Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer in memory of her distinguished husband, the late Robert Lee Blaffer, one of the great original pioneers in the discovery and development of the Texas oil industry, and

WHEREAS, this group of paintings contains rare examples of the works of Cézanne, Hals, Inness, de Predis, di Paolo, and Renoir, and is bringing to Houston and to Texas art treasures which will place the names of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer and Mr. and Mrs. John Hepburn Blaffer indelibly upon the art annals of America to the end of Time, therefore

BE IT RESOLVED, that the Board of Trustees of The Museum of Fine Arts of Houston extend to Mr. and Mrs. John Hepburn Blaffer and to Mrs. Robert Lee Blaffer this written testimony of their realization of the impact which these contributions will make upon the citizens of this community, of this state and of the United States as well as upon all who pass through these halls and have the opportunity to enjoy the beneficent gifts which their great philanthropy is bringing into focus . . . .

Mrs. Blaffer's personal integrity and aesthetic judgment are evident in a more public controversy surrounding one of her gifts to the MFAH: a French polyptych called the Retable de Puget, donated in 1960–61 (fig. 7), which, after extensive
conservation and restoration treatment, was first exhibited in the Blaffer Room in 1963. She had purchased the work for $300,000 in 1959, but she claimed a tax deduction of $425,000, the median value of three separate appraisals. The Internal Revenue Service allowed a deduction of only the $300,000 purchase price. Mrs. Blaffer paid the additional tax on the $125,000 difference, but, feeling that her aesthetic judgment had been denigrated, she sued the IRS for the return of her payment. As one newspaper account noted, “It must have been an agonizing decision for her. Mrs. Blaffer is known to have been seduced to buy it.”13

In 1967, the eighty-three-year-old Mrs. Blaffer, as full of spunk as ever and undeterred by the inevitable press coverage, brought the suit to trial in federal court in Austin. Testimony as to the painting, spunk as ever and undeterred by the inevitable press coverage, brought the suit to trial in federal court in Austin. Testimony of fine arts at Rice University and director emeritus of the Houston museum, who said that Mrs. Blaffer herself was “almost an expert . . . ; her judgment was impeccable.”15 According to the Texas Tempo Sunday Magazine writer, “The Blaffer attorneys suggested that the French experts were low-rating the relatable to cover up their mistake in permitting such a matterwork to be exported from France.”16

The jury deliberated only thirty-five minutes before finding in Mrs. Blaffer’s favor. They said that she was due a refund of $108,000 in taxes, plus about $17,000 in accrued interest. The government pondered the judgment for nine months and finally decided not to appeal.17

The plaintiff’s case was led by attorney Charles W. Hall, one of the three original trustees of the nascent Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation. The plaintiff’s experts were Dr. Richard Henry Rush, author of Art as an Investment (who said that it was “absolutely excellent—better than excellent . . . so rare as to be almost non-existent,”18 and it could have brought a fair market price of $500,000 in 1960–1961); Eric Larsen, head of the fine arts department at Georgetown University; Jack Flanagan, the Houston conservator who restored the painting; James S. Laurence O’Toole, a New York dealer; Spencer A. Samuel, also a New York dealer, who had been advising Mrs. Blaffer on art purchases and would eventually become art consultant to the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation; and Dr. James Chillman Jr., trustee professor of fine arts at Rice University and director emeritus of the Houston museum, who testified, “perhaps for $20,000 for a museum

without a single School of Avignon painting, I could have been seduced to buy it.”19

Other government experts valued it between $12,000 and $30,000.

The plaintiff’s case was led by attorney Charles W. Hall, one of the three original trustees of the nascent Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation. The plaintiff’s experts were Dr. Richard Henry Rush, author of Art as an Investment (who said that it was “absolutely excellent—better than excellent . . . so rare as to be almost non-existent,”18 and it could have brought a fair market price of $500,000 in 1960–1961); Eric Larsen, head of the fine arts department at Georgetown University; Jack Flanagan, the Houston conservator who restored the painting; James S. Laurence O’Toole, a New York dealer; Spencer A. Samuel, also a New York dealer, who had been advising Mrs. Blaffer on art purchases and would eventually become art consultant to the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation; and Dr. James Chillman Jr., trustee professor of fine arts at Rice University and director emeritus of the Houston museum, who testified, “perhaps for $20,000 for a museum
THE ART PROGRAMS OF THE SARAH CAMPBELL
BLAFFER FOUNDATION

Those two Munchs, along with a third, Female Nude (Anna) of 1920, acquired in 1974 (fig. 10),18 played an important role in the foundation’s developing concept for the creation of a public collection.19 According to a “Plan for the Foundation” proposed by Mrs. Blaffer and adopted by the trustees on December 10, 1968:

The Foundation should devote the balance of its income [after giving up to $25,000 annually to “general charitable programs of the Houston community”] toward a museum and other sponsorship of fine arts, a hospital emphasizing eyesight matters, and, possibly, a vocational school for adults.

The museum would be a museum of fine arts operated for and open to the public. The probable name of the museum would be the Blaffer Museum of Fine Arts. The income could be used for acquiring fine paintings and other objects of art, acquiring or renting land, constructing or renting a museum building, employing a director and other necessary and appropriate employees, maintaining a school relating to the fine arts, and other activities appropriately relating to establishing and maintaining a recognized museum of fine arts. Until such time as the Foundation might have its own museum, it could exhibit its paintings and other objects of art to the public by loan to other museums and other appropriate institutions and by transporting them from place to place on a traveling “museum without walls” basis.20

In the mid-1960s, Mrs. Blaffer, her daughter Cecil Amelia Blaffer Hudson, and subsequently the foundation created The Blaffer Collection at the University of Houston through gifts of paintings, which in Mrs. Blaffer’s case were purchased precisely for this purpose and delivered from the dealers to the university, and funds for the acquisition of additional paintings, the choice of which was left to a committee at the university.21 Mrs. Blaffer often expressed her conviction that the arts were essential for the development of young people, and in a letter to Patrick J. Nicholson, chairman of the Committee for Art Acquisitions at the University of Houston, Mrs. Blaffer wrote: “It pleases me very much to note the increased interest and accumulation of fine paintings in the great Universities in our country; and that the University of Houston is slowly joining this group.”22 However, the foundation trustees also began buying pictures to remain in the foundation collection but to be placed on long-term exhibition until such a time as the foundation would have its own museum; the University of Houston was a primary beneficiary of this plan. Thus, Lyonel Feininger’s Self-Portrait, now in the collection of the MFAH (fig. 11), was acquired in 1967 and lent to the University of Houston.23

In 1978–79, the foundation established by Cecil Amelia Blaffer Furstenberg (formerly Hudson) was merged into the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, of which she was a trustee. Among the assets of the Cecil Amelia Blaffer Foundation were paintings that became part of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation collection, including Max Beckmann’s Woman with Mirror and Orchids (fig. 12), the two-sided panel of Scenes from Christ’s Passion and Resurrection, attributed to Lambert Lombard (fig. 13), and Carle van Loo’s Mars and Venus (fig. 14).25 Also in 1979, the trustees bought from the
University of Houston those artworks that had been given to the university by members of the Blaffer family or entities with which they were associated; this purchase consisted of thirteen paintings and one drawing, about half of which are still in the Blaffer Foundation collection.

In 1976, the year after Mrs. Blaffer’s death, the exhibition Old Master Paintings from the Blaffer Collections was mounted at the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston. The accompanying brochure was written by Spencer Samuels, a New York art dealer who had long known and advised Mrs. Blaffer and who was engaged as consultant in art-related matters for the foundation that year. Samuels worked with the foundation trustees for more than twenty years, until his death in 1999. The exhibition soon began touring, but the trustees’ ambitions were greater: to create several exhibitions of European art based on national “schools.” In the meantime, however, another exhibition was sent on tour: American Abstract Expressionist Paintings from the Collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, which consisted of nearly thirty works, accompanied by a brochure written by Sam Hunter. Samuels described his own part in these initiatives:

The trustees, most of whom are members of the Blaffer family, . . . asked me to draw up the plan of operation. My suggestion to have a “museum without walls” and, I guess, what is called “operation outreach” in educational circles today was adopted. In order to get started quickly, we assembled a collection of Abstract Expressionist paintings which have been touring museums in Texas now for several years, and we have just completed the Dutch and Flemish collection. At present, I am working on an Italian and Spanish collection which will take several years and, after that, a French and English collection.”

No further Abstract Expressionist works were added to the collection after 1976, and, after numerous exhibitions not only in Texas but also elsewhere in the United States, the group was sold in 1987 to Galerie Beyeler of Lugano in order to gather more assets for continuing to expand the Old Masters collection. After the Northern European group was formed, the trustees turned their attention to Italian and Spanish paintings, but soon—following the acquisition of paintings by Francisco de Zubarán and Claudio Coello (fig. 15)—focused this particular effort entirely on Italian works. Subsequent collections comprised British and French works. While one group traveled, the next collection would be formed.

Given Mrs. Blaffer’s interests in education, Samuels envisioned a collection that would be didactic, as fully representative of the painting styles and subjects of a given place and period as possible; each group consequently included biblical, mythological, and classical subjects, portraiture, genre painting, landscape, and still life. Samuels created elaborate visual aids, “model boards,” as he called them, with reproductions of paintings on them, to demonstrate to the trustees the range of types within a given school of painting (fig. 16). Works that came on the market could thus be categorized and accepted or rejected based on the extent to which they were viable representatives of a particular style or subject. The art-historical model they followed was fairly conventional, and emphases within each group were thus placed in accordance with prevailing notions of the history of art. The British collection, for example, is weighted toward the eighteenth century; portraits and landscape paintings dominate (figs. 17, 18); and watercolors were included to acknowledge the particular importance of this medium in British art (fig. 19). Similarly, in the Italian collection, there are significant
Venetian paintings of the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, but none from the seventeenth, which has generally been considered a fallow period in Venetian art (figs. 20, 21).

The trustees and Samuels retained experts for advice in their acquisitions, sending them photographs and transparencies of available works and discussing issues of attribution, condition, value, and appropriateness for the foundation’s collection. In late 1983, for example, Sydney J. Freedberg, longtime Harvard University professor of art history and then chief curator at the National Gallery of Art, whom Samuels visited in Cambridge and subsequently thanked for his ‘delightful frittata Toscana,’ responded to such a solicitation regarding Giovanni Bagiardini’s Madonna and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist (see the essay in this volume by Andrea Bayer, plate 3), writing: “I have seen this picture at Colnaghi’s, and consider it first-rate by a second-rate master. It is exceptionally well known, probably Bagiardini’s best-known piece, and you could do worse than purchase it.” The foundation, not wishing to do worse, purchased it.

The budget was limited, and the ambitions for the collection were originally moderate. Samuels described the situation succinctly in a letter in 1996: “My old friend at Wildenstein’s, David Ellis-Jones, must think that the Foundation has a ton of money to assemble a collection to rival the Kimbell [Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas]. Unfortunately, we don’t.” Yet the foundation was able to create a didactic, historically exemplary survey collection with many fine works while adhering to a tight budget. Samuels explained to Freedberg: “We try to illustrate periods and styles—the main currents of European pictorial art—and are satisfied when, for example, we cannot buy a Rembrandt, to illustrate his influence through his closest pupils. We are not afraid to purchase a fine quality work which is anonymous or a fine quality contemporary replica.” Such a Rembrandtesque work is the Allegory on Peace by Aert de Gelder, “Rembrandt’s Last Pupil,” as he was dubbed in the monographic exhibition on the artist in Dordrecht and Cologne, in which the Blaffer painting appeared (fig. 22).

There are several autograph versions of paintings in the foundation’s collection.
In the process, Samuels and the trustees considered—carefully and thoroughly—a great number of pictures in relatively short periods of time. In advance of a tour of London galleries, he advised the trustees, “You will be viewing some fifty-odd English paintings within the next two days.” They were always (and sometimes painfully) aware of budget and cash-flow restrictions, negotiating both price and payment terms with sometimes uncooperative dealers with their own priorities. Samuels complained to the trustees of one dealer, for example, who had agreed to reserve a Frans Hals portrait for the foundation, but then “blatantly disregarded his firm promise and sold the painting a few days before the Trustees meeting without even informing me.”

Foundation exhibitions found venues in museums, galleries, art centers, and libraries throughout the state. During its tour, the British collection, for example, had some twenty venues, one of which was at the Old Jail Art Center in Albany, Texas, a town of around two thousand, where Henry Fuseli’s Dismission of Adam and Eve from Paradise was admired by former First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson (figs. 24, 25). Frequent traveling of artworks comes with certain risks, which the trustees recognized. But the foundation’s purpose necessitated it, at least initially, as trustee Gilbert Denman pointed out in a letter to the director of the University of Texas art museum:
The Foundation has been criticized repeatedly for sending these objects on their travels to small city museums and University museums which do not have important and encyclopedic permanent collections. However, that circulation for educational and inspirational purposes is the principal reason for our Foundation’s existence. Mrs. Blaffer was a very religious person, and she believed that man’s creativity as expressed in art was a demonstration of the spark of divinity which should be encouraged in all humans, and she was eager to give the opportunity to appreciate this divine gift to as wide an audience as possible in areas remote from the great museums.36

Nonetheless, in the late 1980s, the foundation trustees, in part concerned about the potential conservation problems created by traveling the collection, determined that, once the French collection had been completed, the “museum-without-walls” concept should be phased out, and they once again seriously considered building a museum.37 Land just south of downtown Houston was acquired in late 1990, and museum professionals and architects were consulted; in fact, several plans were submitted as part of an exercise for fourth-year architecture students at the University of Houston, which surely would have pleased Mrs. Blaffer, with her perpetual interest in the development of young people’s artistic talents and sensibilities.

The Blaffer Foundation had long lent paintings to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and in 1992, the museum mounted a special exhibition, Masterpieces of Baroque Painting from the Collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, curated by George Shackelford, the museum’s curator of European art, featuring highlights from the foundation collection, organized according to pictorial genres.38 Perhaps based in part on the success of this collaboration, the foundation abandoned its plans for a stand-alone museum and determined that it would be more economical and more people would see the works if the collection could be shown in conjunction with the MFAH, which was in the process of planning an additional building. A long-term arrangement between the two institutions, recently extended to 2064, affords the foundation a share of the museum’s gallery, office, and storage space. The foundation relies heavily on museum support staff but remains autonomous from the museum.

In the Audrey Jones Beck Building, designed by Rafael Moneo and opened to the public in 2000, the foundation exhibits its works in five dedicated galleries, separate from the museum’s collection, yet integrated into an overall traffic pattern for visitors whose experience of early-modern European art is thereby nearly seamless. Thus, after an only occasionally interrupted hiatus of decades since Mrs. Blaffer ceased expanding the museum’s collection, her vision of sharing works of art with the public was once again realized at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The foundation and the museum also work together on special projects. They have been the co-organizing institutions of several loan exhibitions, two of which were installed in the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Galleries at the museum. The MFAH was the sole venue for The Body of Christ in the Art of Europe and New Spain, 1150–1800, which ran from the 1997 Christmas season through the following Easter.39 In 2012, the two institutions co-organized Elegance and Refinement: The Still-Life Paintings of Willem van Aelst with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and, in 2015, Pleasure and Piety: The Art of Joachim Wtewael (1566–1638) with the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, The Netherlands, and the National Gallery of Art, which featured one painting each from the foundation’s collection (figs. 26, 27).40 The MFAH has also premiered two exhibitions of prints from the foundation’s collection, which subsequently traveled: A Portrait of the Artist, 1525–1825: Prints from the Collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation (2004) and The Plains of Mars: European War Prints, 1500–1825, from the Collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation (2009).41 The foundation frequently lends its works for display elsewhere on the MFAH campus and also borrows from the museum’s collection for the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Galleries (figs. 28 a–b).
THE CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT OF THE SARAH CAMPBELL BLAFFER FOUNDATION COLLECTION

Although the foundation collection now has its own circumscribed exhibition space, it continues to lend works liberally (both individually and in small exhibitions) (fig. 29). It is also by no means static and has been guided for decades by the idea that it is strengthened by sustained self-examination and growth. Spencer Samuels was a constant advocate for developing the collection through deaccessioning works that lay outside the parameters of the collection and works of mediocre quality or condition, while continuing to add better ones, always with an eye to telling the story of early-modern European art. The issue became critical in the mid-1980s as the trustees considered deaccessioning the collection of American Abstract Expressionist painting in order to free up funds to continue to acquire Old Master paintings. Samuels wrote to the board:

The question facing us is whether we should deaccession the American collection to provide enough funds to complete the Old Master series as contemplated. In other words, is it more important to complete the survey as planned or to retain the collection of American paintings? It is not a question of value of individual paintings themselves, but as the principle purpose of the Foundation is educational, which would better further the study of Art History? In the long run, which would be more important both for laymen and for graduate and undergraduate students of Art History?

In a memorandum to the trustees in 1997, he adduced, negatively, the example of Isabella Stewart Gardner’s magnificent collection, which had sparked Mrs. Blaffer’s interest in collecting when she was in boarding school in Boston:

I am also of the opinion that a collection should never remain static, but should continue to improve and to grow. Mrs. Gardner, who acquired so many beautiful paintings and works of art now in the museum at Boston, mentioned in her will that art should be “for the education and enjoyment of the public forever.” I am sure that Mrs. Blaffer had the same wish. However, the museum as beautiful as it is and containing so many wonderful masterpieces, is, according to the New York Times, slowly losing its audience.

After several years with no acquisitions, in anticipation of the opening of the MFAH’s Audrey Jones Beck building and the foundation’s own galleries, a large landscape, striking in both its vertical, oval format and its enigmatic subject—Worshippers at a Shrine by Alessandro Magnasco and Antonio Francesco Peruzzi—was added to the collection (fig. 30). Subsequently, the foundation has acquired paintings at a rate of approximately one per year. There is no longer the incentive to create the well-rounded groups of paintings according to national “schools” envisioned by Samuels, but the collection remains didactic and broadly representative of European painting around 1500–1800. Acquisitions are made less to fill lacunae in the collection and more to improve it by adding works of ever greater historical significance and quality of execution and condition. Thus, in addition to the Van Aelst, Wtewael, and Magnasco already mentioned, the foundation has recently acquired, among others, Orazio Gentileschi’s Stigmatization of Saint Francis (fig. 31), Dirck van Baburen’s Apollo Flaying Marsyas (fig. 32), and a vanitas still-life by an unknown Dutch painter from the Leiden school (fig. 33). Most paintings have been acquired through dealers, but Paolo de Matteis’s important, monumental Allegory of Knowledge and the Arts in Naples, his earliest dated work, which was probably meant as a tour de force to announce the young artist’s emergence on the scene, was purchased directly from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (fig. 34), in part to complement the artist’s later allegorical self-portrait already in the foundation collection (fig. 35). After spending a year undergoing conservation treatment, the Allegory of Knowledge and the Arts in Naples now anchors an enfilade of galleries at the museum, striking even from over two hundred feet away.

---

Fig. 29. Venetian Paintings from the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, 2015.

Fig. 30. Alessandro Magnasco and Antonio Francesco Peruzzi, Worshippers at a Shrine in a Mountainous Landscape, c. 1716–17, oil on canvas, 73 x 41 1/4 in. (185.4 x 105.1 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1999.41.
In 1979–80, in order to be able to offer visitors something to tour while the Italian collection was being assembled, the foundation acquired approximately one hundred prints by Francisco Goya, mostly consisting of a complete set of The Disasters of War. Likewise, in 1983–84, the foundation acquired close to one hundred prints by William Hogarth and toured them as a group. The foundation has collected prints more consistently since the mid-1990s, but still usually with an eye toward the creation of exhibitions that can travel. Building on prints by Hogarth and Goya already in the collection, the foundation has thus far presented the previously mentioned A Portrait of the Artist, 1525–1825 and The Plains of Mars: European War Prints, 1500–1825.

The foundation has also been collecting prints and illustrated books related to nature, science, and technology toward a future traveling exhibition. In the meantime, these works are exhibited in conjunction with a developing Kunst- und Wunderkammer, that is, a cabinet of curiosity (or curiosities) installed in the foundation’s smallest gallery at the MFAH (fig. 36), for which objects have been acquired since 2008, beginning with an ebonized walnut cabinet (Schreibtisch or Hausaltar) made in Augsburg in 1601 (fig. 37), now complemented by a writing casket and a tower clock, both also of ebonized wood with brass elements and produced in early-
seventeenth-century Augsburg. The three-dimensional objects in the cabinet of curiosity include examples of both manmade things (artificiata) and natural things (naturalia), the former made in a variety of material and media: ivory, bronze, brass, wax, ceramic, enamel, and so on (fig. 38).44 They are installed with related prints, illustrated books, and densely hung paintings. While the paintings in this room reflect that of the collection as a whole in the chronological range and diversity of subject matter, some resonate more specifically with the objects and prints. Thus, for example, flowers, insects, and animals in paintings by Osias Beert, Balthasar van der Ast,45 Jan Brueghel the Elder, and Jan van Kessel are echoed in engravings from the Archetypa studiaque by Jacob Hoefnagel after his father, Georg; a suite of etchings of butterflies, moths, and other insects by Wenceslaus Hollar; and herbals and florilegia like those by Fabio Colonna and Johann Theodor de Bry (figs. 39–46), as well as by fossils, shells, and a spiny puffer fish (the naturalia mostly acquired through eBay). An illustrated book, The Microscope Made Easy, stands next to a portable microscope, both of which might have been readily found in the collection of an eighteenth-century amateur (figs. 47, 48). A pocket globe (fig. 49), an equinoctial sundial with the latitudes of major cities worldwide engraved on its case, a Japanese exportware porcelain bowl on which European ships are depicted (fig. 50), and an illustrated book in French, New Memoirs on the Present State of China, all from the long eighteenth century, attest to the global interests and reach of European collectors and the market for knowledge as well as for works of art, as does Pietro Longhi’s painting in this gallery, The Display of the Elephant (see the essay by Steven Ostrow in this volume, plate 4). The objects are displayed in the gallery in ostensibly casual arrangements, with potentially distracting labels removed and information provided in a gallery guide, rather than presented on walls or in cases. The goal is to evoke the cabinets of European collectors from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries without, obviously, replicating them.

Left: Fig. 37. Paintings attributed to Anton Mozart, Cabinet for Private Devotions, 1601; cabinet: pear wood, ebonized walnut, oak, and conifer with brass mounts and fittings; paintings: oil on copper, overall (closed): 18 1/2 x 13 3/8 x 10 7/16 in. (47.9 x 34 x 26.5 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2008.1.

Below: Fig. 38. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century objects in the cabinet of curiosity, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery 217, Audrey Jones Beck Building, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Fig. 39. Osias Beert the Elder, Still Life with Flowers in a Basket, c. 1620, oil on panel, 21 1/8 x 29 1/2 in. (53.7 x 74.9 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2012.6.

Fig. 40. Balthasar van der Ast, Still Life of Flowers in a Glass Vase, 1624, oil on copper, 12 3/8 x 9 5/16 in. (31.4 x 23.7 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2007.4.

Fig. 41. Jan Brueghel the Elder (with figures by an unknown painter), Diana and Actaeon, c. 1600, oil on copper, 10 1/2 x 14 1/4 in. (26.6 x 36.2 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2010.2.

Fig. 42. Jan van Kessel, A Study of Butterflies, Moths, Spiders, and Insects, c. 1655–60, oil on panel, 7 1/4 x 12 in. (18.4 x 30.5 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1978.10.

Fig. 43. Jacob Hoefnagel, after Joris Hoefnagel, Archetypa an rhaphis patris Georgii Hoefnagelii, 1592, engravings, each sheet approx. 1 1/4 x 2 3/4 in. (36 x 71.1 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2007.2-3.

Fig. 44. Wenceslaus Hollar, Muscarum Scarabeorum, 1646, twelve etchings, each sheet approx. 3 1/4 x 4 5/8 inches (9.52 x 11.75 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1997.4.1-.6 and 1997.4.7-.12.

Above left: Fabio Colonna (1567–1640). Phytobasanos sive Plantarum aliquot Historia (Plant Touchstone, or the History of Some Plants) (Naples: Giovanni Giacomo Carlino and Antonio Pace, 1592), 2 parts in one volume; 37 full-page engravings (26 botanical etchings in part I; 11 botanical and aquatic engravings in part II), 7 13/16 x 5 13/16 in. (19.9 x 14.7 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2013.4.

Above right: Johann Theodor de Bry, Florilegium novum (New Book of Flowers), 1612–14, vellum-bound book in half leather clamshell box, 12 3/8 x 8 1/4 in. (31.5 x 21 x 2.5 cm), Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2008.7.
In 1976, the foundation supported an ambitious exhibition of over one hundred paintings, drawings, and prints by Edvard Munch at the University of Houston’s Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery; six of the paintings had been acquired by Mrs. Blaffer, including three in the foundation’s collection. In her foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Mrs. Blaffer’s daughter, Jane Blaffer Owen, drew a surprising parallel between artist and patron, not only in their need for privacy, but also in their deeply felt faith in the powers of art: “While alive, their sensitivities were too near the surface for frequent visitors or public encounters. Their awareness of this tragic century caused them a pain which could not be healed with quick or purely social panaceas. Art alone for them offered the diagnosis, the purification, and, in the last analysis, the resurrection.” As practical as Mrs. Blaffer was about the art market, collecting, and art museums, her view of art was fundamentally transcendental. A few years before her death in 1975, she told Gilbert Denman, a longtime friend, foundation trustee, and serious collector of antiquities: “I believe that love of art is closely associated with love of God. It has been true all through Christian history. Man’s art is God’s gift to him. It is His signature across the Face of Creation. Every experience of man’s art is an experience of God . . . in the creation of art we are fellow workers of God, whether we recognize it or not.” Mrs. Blaffer was always concerned with the viewer’s personal experience of art, of art’s transformative powers. As she often told her family and friends: “art is what it creates in you.”

Since the inception of its traveling art program, the foundation has arranged hundreds of exhibitions of its works throughout Texas and beyond, bringing fine art to people who otherwise might never see such works in person. It has always been the foundation’s policy to lend the works and provide logistical support, including shipping, insurance, didactic materials, and even security, to institutions in Texas free of charge. One museum director wrote to express his gratitude to the foundation for sending the Old Masters exhibition to his institution: “It is so good that your Foundation shares with others the experiences that give pleasure and satisfaction. This is reminiscent of the story of the bodhisattva in the Buddhist tradition. Three monks had wandered for many years searching for heaven. One day in a remote district they saw a well and went to it for a drink of water. Lo and behold, what should they see at the bottom of the well but the heavenly paradise below. Two of the monks immediately jumped into the well, eager to enjoy the bliss for which they had sought so long. The other monk refrained. Rather than keep the secret to himself, he left to tell others about it and show them the way. This loving concern for the well-being of others is what makes life worthwhile, both for those who give and for those who receive. You could have kept your treasure all to yourselves. Instead you chose to share it with us. We’re so glad you did!”

Although most of the works in the foundation’s collection were acquired after Sarah Campbell Blaffer’s death in 1975, it was her commitment to sharing her love of art that has made the foundation and its work possible and that continues to provide its guiding principle.

NOTES
1. In 1971, an amendment to the articles of incorporation confirmed the plan to acquire works of art for museums the corporation “is organized and shall be operated . . . [t]o own, operate, or make contributions to and to acquire fine paintings and other objects of art for one or more museums and shall be operated . . . [t]o own, operate, or make contributions to and to acquire fine paintings and other objects of art for one or more museums and other organizations described in section 501 (c) (3) and exempt from taxation under section 501 (c) (3) of the Code.” (Minutes of 1971 Annual Meeting of Board of Trustees, May 5, 1971); this language was maintained through at least 1986. The language in the by-laws regarding the purposes of the foundation, quoted above, was retained at least through April 4, 1976. The foundation has contributed substantially to non-art institutions; in 1976, for example, the foundation established the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Endowed Chair in Ophthalmology at Baylor College of Medicine. Unless otherwise indicated, all cited documents are housed, unnumbered, in the archives of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.
Attorney at the U.S. Courthouse in Houston on August 5, 1965, “to testify...”


Charles Sterling, with one of the founders of Humble Oil, Ross Sterling in 1937, gave an opinion regarding it.

Perhaps as part of her bid to gain a lower price from the Swiss dealer Dr. J. A. Ribert, Mrs. Blaffer, in a letter of July 5, 1972, to him, complained of being unable to come in to answer the questions by the Henri Matisse, and the last Pissarro painting, of which a few were in the works of the Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection that did not buy back the property for the museum. She continued: “I have an appraisal value on this item from an art dealer in Houston by Monet...”

Ibid. There is no indication that they are a copy. The original work was in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

a. Harry Wiens’s daughter, Caroline Wiens Lee, eventually became a major benefactor of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.


c. Beut, Debrov’s Texas Portrait, 93.


Perhaps as part of her bid to gain a lower price from the Swiss dealer Dr. J. A. Ribert, Mrs. Blaffer, in a letter of July 5, 1972, to him, complained of being unable to come in to answer the questions by the Henri Matisse, and the last Pissarro painting, of which a few were in the works of the Robert Lee Blaffer Memorial Collection that did not buy back the property for the museum. She continued: “I have an appraisal value on this item from an art dealer in Houston by Monet...”

Ibid. There is no indication that they are a copy. The original work was in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”

A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

The Kiss by François Boucher. The attempts were unsuccessful, but some consolation could be taken in John Constable’s remark that “...When pictures painted as copywork are acquired, the purchaser of one, without being aware of it, is sometimes buying only half a picture. Companion pictures should never be parted, unless they are by different hands and then, in general the sooner they are directed the better.”