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Contemporary Art as an Educational Resource: The Cockerline Collection

From an eager college printmaking student in Michigan to a major collector of prints, Neil Cockerline has embraced his educational mission by providing students with direct exposure to great art. The adventure started during Cockerline's early formative years at Alma College in Michigan (1977–1981), in an exchange of academic work with his mentor, printmaker Kent Kirby. After graduation, he became Curator of Collections at the Anderson Fine Arts Center in Indiana. During frequent visits to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, he purchased the serigraph *Miles* by James Rosenquist after being forced to rent it for three months. In the following years, Cockerline has been practicing all the tips that Keren Blankfeld (2011), suggests to create a good collection: such as buying what he loved, rather than relying on the ever-changing art world; extensively reading about art; keeping an eye on auctions; familiarizing himself with the art market; being advised by galleries and museums (p.23).

With a few exceptions (such as a Man Ray and De Chirico), the collection's timeline spans from the Sixties (correspondent to the collector's youth) to the early Eighties, when Cockerline graduated and methodically started this collecting adventure. In 1981 Alma College initiated a competition of printmakers living in Michigan; with a keen eye on both the regional artistic community and the larger national and

international scene, Cockerline originally envisioned a collection that would educate future Michigan art students by providing a multi-faceted context as inspiration for their own work. By including the offshoot of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Hard-Edge Abstraction, Pop Art, New Realism, Photorealism, Conceptual Art, plus several artists whose work does not easily fall into specific categories, the collection acquired a truly encyclopedic width in presenting the variety of styles, experiments, and outcomes that characterized those decades.

The blurring of distinctions between fine arts and crafts and the emerging pluralism in the Seventies allowed women artists a more equal access to the art world through emerging galleries and alternative exhibiting spaces. Lynda Benglis was a student at Yale when the art department head tried to discourage her pursuit of an art career: "Lynda Benglis remembers Tworokov's telling them that his wife was an artist and his sister was an artist, and that it was just too difficult – there were too many obstacles." (Tomkins, 1989, p.46). Besides Benglis, the Cockerline collection has holdings of well-known and established women artists, such as Niki de Saint Phalle, Lee Krasner, Alice Neel, Louise Nevelson and Beverly Pepper. With a keen eye and the skills of a talent-scout, Neil Cockerline has also included Greek-American artist

Chryssa Vardea, activist Sister Mary Corita, and performance and multimedia artist Colette Maison Lumiere.

The collection includes works by Fritz Scholder, a well-renowned Native American artist as well as lithographs of illustrious personalities among the Sioux and Cheyenne by Leonard Baskin, an artist committed to memory and history in figurative terms. By denying the contemporary artists' bowing to irrationality, Baskin embraced "the courage and intelligence to use the past without being used or used up by it, the endless desire to know man again and again in all its avatars of flesh and art" (Kaplan, 1999–2000, p.459).

A few collectors born outside the art world and having relatively modest means have collected with a non-discriminatory eye the art they truly loved, without the preoccupation of following institutional trends or aligning to exclusions dictated by mainstream art politics. Neil Cockerline, a curator and conservator, has been preceded by Dorothy and Herb Vogel, described by Ruth Fine (2008), as respectively a well-educated librarian and a post office clerk (p.3). Having embraced public service all their lives, these collectors have carried a genuine mission of 'visual democracy' into their vision.

Cockerline has been assisted in the fulfillment of this mission by the choice of printmaking. The massive appropriation of subjects and techniques from the mass

media by Pop art has been paralleled by the extensive introduction of prints into the art market since the early Sixties, sharing the same "essentially democratic strategy, having largely to do with accessibility and affordability, as artists explored alternatives to conventional painting and sculpture" (Genocchio, 2006, p.5). In an era in which other artistic forms, such as Earthworks and Performance Art, were challenging the art market mechanism by going outdoors or by eliminating the material and expensive fine art object, Pop artists were producing cheaper prints to be distributed "independently of the museum and gallery system" (Genocchio, 2006, p.5). In particular, Christo turned photos of his projects into signed posters to be distributed to sponsor his work. Cockerline loves what he defines the "educational process" involved in Christo's work, as he tries to lobby constituents towards approving his projects and to involve the audience in sponsoring the projects by purchasing drawings, lithographs, and photos. *Running Fence*, whose photo is present in the collection, summarizes Christo's artistic philosophy by presenting the fence "not as a barrier, but as a means to foment collaboration" (King, 2010, pp.28–29).

Through the years, both the size and scope of this collection increased beyond Cockerline's initial expectations; in 2011, he made his final decision to donate the entire collection to the South Dakota Art Museum. In 1972, art collector

Ben Goldstein co-curated an exhibition of political posters from the 1930s–1940s at the New York Cultural Center, with an “internal logic” reflecting a heartfelt didactical role (Buhle & Smulyan, 2001, p.671). Likewise, Neil Cockerline was involved in selecting the works for this first exhibition of highlights from his collection. When a collector renounces to exclusive consumption and donates his/her collection to a museum for public display and for meeting students didactical needs, “possession” evolves into “access”, thus resulting in an even more satisfactory and refreshing relationship with art objects enriched of ever-changing meanings (Chen, 2009, pp.925–926).

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