




# GILCREASE

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## M U S E U M

**MEMBERS NEWSLETTER**

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***Rendezvous Reunion***

***Featuring the works of 35 Rendezvous Artists***

# Pepper's Ghost and the Collecting Philosophy of Thomas Gilcrease

Pepper's Ghost, an exhibition technique widely demonstrated by John Henry Pepper in the 1860s, is still used today in museums and theme parks to create illusionary displays. It is based on the principle that a pane of glass can be both reflective and transparent. As a reflective device, the pane of glass serves as a mirror. The same glass, with light coming from a different angle, is transparent, thereby functioning as a window allowing the viewer to see the display on the other side.

The largest example of this illusion can be found at Walt Disney theme parks in the Haunted Mansion and Phantom Manor. Here, visitors pass along an elevated mezzanine looking through a 30-foot high pane of glass into an empty ballroom where translucent ghosts appear to be dancing around - though they are actually animatronic figures moving on tracks in hidden black rooms.

The principle of Pepper's Ghost is perhaps a good analogy to Thomas Gilcrease's collecting philosophy. He collected art and artifacts that reflected his own identity and heritage. He also collected to create a public window for the American experience. Many visitors to the Gilcrease Museum relate to the collections in the same manner as Mr. Gilcrease. They can see themselves in some works of art and observe familiar stories and popular themes in others. Depending on their background, experience and perception, visitors will have their own interpretation of which works of art serve as a mirror and which serve as a window.

Gilcrease Museum has been described as the 'most American' of American art museums with unparalleled collections of Western American art and Native American material. The first work of art acquired by Gilcrease in 1912,

however, did not fit the mold. It was a painting entitled *Rural Courtship* by Daniel Ridgway Knight (1839-1924). Gilcrease was attracted to the painting because he thought it was "wholesome." Although not stated, it is also obvious that Gilcrease saw himself and his wife, Belle Harlow, in the painting. They would have been about the same ages as the subjects in the painting when Gilcrease acquired it in 1912. A half-century later, on May 6, 1962 when Gilcrease passed away at his home, *Rural Courtship* was still hanging over the fireplace - with the courtship scene and the memories of first love frozen in time.

Although Gilcrease dabbled in collecting early in his career, it was not until after the divorce from his second wife, Norma Smallwood in 1934, that he devoted himself totally to this passion. Much of his collecting was during the period immediately before, during and after World War II. It was a period of heightened nationalism united to defeat the Axis powers. *The Freedom Train*, an exhibit of early American documents transported by rail across the country to support war bond drives, attracted his attention. Gilcrease sought them out and acquired many documents related to the founding of democracy in America, and collected the art to go with it, including portraits and sculptures of many of the founding fathers.

For his children, whose bloodlines spanned the Muscogee Creek, Osage and Cherokee nations, he collected a massive amount of American Indian art and artifacts even supporting contemporary Native artists and sponsoring archaeological investigations in which he personally participated.

In 1947, Gilcrease acquired the entire collection of the late Dr. Phillip Gillette Cole, an avid art collector in



Dr. Duane H. King

New York. Soon, 63 boxes and 11 crates were delivered to Tulsa which contained 27 bronzes and 46 paintings by Charles Russell, 17 bronzes and 12 paintings by Frederic Remington, many works by other Western artists, and numerous documents and correspondence of well-known historical figures. This acquisition completed his *Window on the West*. No other collection in existence provided such an in-depth view of America's westward expansion.

Virtually every work of art, every artifact, every manuscript and every rare book served to reinforce Gilcrease's image of the heritage he shared with millions of other Americans. With Pepper's Ghost, our perceptions are determined by the angle and source of light. Similarly, the Gilcrease Museum collection can serve as both a mirror and a window for the varied historical experiences that define our individual and collective identities as part of the American experience.

Duane H. King

*Duane H. King*  
Executive Director of Gilcrease Museum and TU Vice President for Museum Affairs



# GILCREASE MUSEUM

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## In this Issue



Woody Guthrie performing for CBS Radio, New York City, New York, November 19, 1940, (detail) Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Archives.



King George III Medal, silver, 1860, 1814.6576.15



Rendezvous artist Joseph Bohler, Beartooth Pass - Montana, Watercolor, 25" x 36", (detail)

### ON THE COVER

*Rendezvous Reunion* artist Soyna Terpening, *Last Ones In*, oil, 40" x 30". This piece along with many others will be featured in the 2012 *Rendezvous Reunion* Exhibition and Art Sale. For additional information, see pages 8 and 9.



### FEATURES

#### 4 Conservator's Bench

Read tips on how to care for outdoor sculpture in this column.

#### 6-7 Zarrow Center to open in May

Zarrow Center for Art and Education to open in May and feature programming and an exhibition organized by Gilcrease Museum.

### DEPARTMENTS

#### 10 Education

#### 5 Bluestem Honorees

Longtime museum supporters, the Harold Stuart family, were honored with the 2012 Bluestem Awards.

#### 8-9 Rendezvous Reunion 2012

More than 35 artists will be featured at this year's *Rendezvous Reunion*.

#### 13 Calendar