

# Three Pennsylvania Museums

REGIONAL STRATEGIES

by Gail Leggio

The museums discussed in this series could be classified as “small museums,” a category defined not just by the scale of a building or the number of objects in a collection but also by distinct missions and market strategies. Yet even among the admittedly limited sampling of small American art museums in this serial survey, there is remarkable variety. While only large museums try to be encyclopedic, small museums can be generalist or specialist. Some are memorials to donors, like the Frick Collection; others are devoted to single artists, like the Warhol Museum. The Pennsylvania museums considered in this article all emphasize regional art. They have something else in common: all were established well into the twentieth century, past the first blush of the turn-of-the-century museum building boom. These Pennsylvania museums have different institutional histories, however, and employ varying strategies in establishing their identities.

What is the situation of a small museum in a big city with an impressive roster of larger institutions? The Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia presents an interesting case study. In some configurations, smaller museums are clustered with major ones in a cultural district such as New York City’s Museum Mile. Philadelphia is not as concentrated, although the area dominated by the vast Philadelphia Museum of Art also features the Rodin Museum, and one proposed scenario for salvaging the masterpiece-rich but perennially struggling Barnes Foundation is to move it to this part of town. In another central location, Frank Furness’s stunning Romanesque Revival Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts rises straight out of the concrete, a short stroll away from major hotels. The Woodmere Art Museum is removed from the urban center. Housed in a nineteenth-century stone mansion on six landscaped acres in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia, the Woodmere seems comparatively bucolic.

The Woodmere has carved out a niche for itself by focusing on local artists, which might seem provincial, were it not for the depth of talent in the neighborhood, beginning with Thomas Eakins (1844–1917). The house and studio of another excellent turn-of-the-century painter, Thomas Anshutz (1851–1912), are in nearby Fort Washington. Eakins’s assistant at the Pennsylvania Academy, Anshutz was himself an influential instructor who helped shape two important groups: The Eight, which included Robert Henri, William Glackens and John Sloan, and the Pennsylvania Impressionists. One of the highlights of the Woodmere’s collection is *Late Afternoon* (Delaware River)

(c. 1925), a raw, light-filled winter panorama by Pennsylvania Impressionist Edward Redfield (1869–1965).

As a painter, Anshutz was one of America's great portraitists, neither as harshly realistic as Eakins nor as flamboyantly flattering as John Singer Sargent. The Woodmere's *Summertime* (c. 1910)—a full-length portrait of Ethel Hannis, a student model at the Pennsylvania Academy—combines breezy style (the freshness of the white dress emerging from a simple dark background) with psychological insight, capturing the obvious intelligence of a strikingly attractive woman.

The Woodmere, like many other American museums, began with the vision of an individual, Philadelphia businessman Charles Knox Smith (1845–1916), who despite an eighth-grade education formed a solid collection of European and American art and decorative objects. Smith had his portrait painted with a favorite work in the background, Sir Thomas Lawrence's *Portrait of Mrs. John Julius Angerstein*, but he also had an eye for American art, acquiring Jasper Cropsey's *The Spirit of Peace* (1851), Frederic Church's *Sunset in the Berkshire Hills* (1857) and Philadelphia-born Benjamin West's grand history painting *The Fatal Wounding of Sir Philip Sidney* (1805). After purchasing the mansion in 1898, Smith made two additions, a rectangular painting gallery and a two-story rotunda with a balcony that remains a distinctive exhibition space. Smith intended for his collection to form the nucleus of a museum, but his plans were delayed for two decades after his death; the terms of his will gave his wife and son use of the house and collection in their lifetimes. When the bequest became available in 1936, both the Philadelphia Museum and the Pennsylvania Academy sought custodianship. Ultimately, however, the Art League of Germantown and the Chestnut Hill Art Center succeeded with their proposal for an independent institution, and the Woodmere Art Museum opened in 1940.

Since then, an ambitious acquisitions policy has evolved, emphasizing local artists. A typical acquisition is N. C. Wyeth's *Anthony and Mr. Bonnyfeather*, an illustration for the 1934 historical novel *Anthony Adverse*, featuring a young Andrew Wyeth as the model for the boy; the museum purchased the work in 1987. Now the Woodmere is planning a major addition, a wing designed by Venturi Scott Brown and Associates. Although the architecture firm has an international reputation, it is locally based; Robert Venturi's mother's house, one of his signature works, is in Chestnut Hill. "I love the regional emphasis," Venturi remarked in an interview published in the *Woodmere Muse* (Spring/Summer 2001). "I learn so much there about where we live."

There were two revelations lurking behind the overly modest title of the Woodmere's show "Central High School Alumni Exhibition." The first was the roster of marquee names—including painters such as Eakins, Glackens and Sloan, and architect Louis I. Kahn—who graduated from the Philadelphia school. The second was the extraordinary quality of art education available in an American public school in the nineteenth century. The tradition continues, as



works by contemporary alumni in this exhibition demonstrated. Founded in 1836, Central High School had a mission distinct from that of the private academies, with their focus on classics. As Amy Werbel writes in “‘For Our Age and Country’: Nineteenth-Century Art Education at Central High School,” the principal essay in the exhibition catalogue, the purpose was to prepare students with the skills they needed to succeed in Philadelphia’s “useful industries.” Painter Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860) formulated the art curriculum, continuing his family’s work in shaping the cultural history of the nation. The patriarch of the dynasty, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827), established the first museum in the United States in the early 1800s as well as rearing a clan of accomplished painters. At Central High School, drawing instruction was seen as beneficial not only for the fledgling artist but also for the general populace, raising the aesthetic standards of the nation and training skilled draftsmen for a host of industries. In 1855 Peale defended this philosophy in *The Crayon*, citing examples such as Robert Fulton, the steamboat pioneer who was also a portrait painter, and Samuel F.B. Morse, artist, founder of the National Academy and inventor of the telegraph. For all its utilitarian rhetoric, Central High School regularly turned out graduates who made their mark as artists. In addition to works by Eakins, Glackens, Sloan and Kahn, the 141-work Woodmere exhibition featured one of William Trost Richards’s (1833–1905) luminous shorescapes, *On the Cornish Coast* (n.d.), along with a superb photograph, *Miles Davis at Newport* (1990), by recent alumnus Herb Snitzer. The show underlined the penny-wise cultural myopia of today’s budget cuts of arts programs in schools.

The Woodmere continues to foster the living tradition of Philadelphia artists through astute acquisition of contemporary works. This is especially true of realist-style work in various disciplines. Walter Erlebacher (1933–91) was a proponent of the figure as expressive vehicle and the ultimate subject in sculpture. The 1982 *S’Elever (To Arise)* is an original life-size plaster cast for the Dream Garden installation in the ARA Tower, a center city Philadelphia building next to Reading Terminal. Erlebacher’s figure demonstrates the vitality of modern figurative sculpture. Historically, the placement of such a work at a fountainhead looks back to William Rush’s Fairmount Water Works Project. Erlebacher’s young woman moves naturalistically, and while her features are not particularized, she has none of the remote perfection of classical models. This is an American nymph. Daniel Dallmann (b. 1942) is one of Philadelphia’s most gifted figurative painters. His *Medallion* (c. 1990), a striking profile portrait in oil and gold leaf on panel, comments eloquently on early Renaissance painting. While the strict profile pays homage to quattrocento passion for antique coins, the tousled dark hair, bare shoulders and challenging expression of the young woman give the work a vivid contemporary edge. Dallmann, who has taught at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art and in Rome, is articulate on the dynamic between past and present: “For the modern artist, interested in the visual qualities of form upon the picture plane as much

as the identity of the subject, this tradition offers an aesthetic advantage; it flattens the image, wedding it to the surrounding ground like a bas-relief, while at the same time clearly differentiating the figure ground relationship” (*Celebrating Philadelphia’s Artistic Legacy: Selections from the Woodmere Art Museum Permanent Collection*, 2000). Woodmere Art Museum, 9201 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19118. Telephone: (215) 247-0476.

The James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, grew out of an individual’s vision, like Woodmere, but it did not begin with the nucleus of a private collection. The Michener, a newcomer, opened in 1988 with a \$1,000,000 endowment from the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer. Housed in a renovated 1884 building, a massive stone structure that once served as the Bucks County prison, the Michener soon expanded, adding modern gallery spaces, state-of-the-art storage facilities and an outdoor sculpture garden. In the venerable American tradition of personal patronage, Michener continued his support. In 1992 he offered the museum a further \$500,000 contingent on the acquisition of forty high quality works by local artists within a year; the museum met its goal. In a competitive climate where even long-established institutions have trouble meeting market prices for good art, the Michener has done well.

The museum’s collecting strategy is geared towards regional artists, many not as well known as they deserve to be. The premier local art movement is the Pennsylvania Impressionists or New Hope group, including Garber, Redfield, Schofield and Sotter. They have a distinctive palette, avoiding the candy-colored sunshine of some other American Impressionists in favor of earthier tones and scruffier subjects. Like his friend Robert Henri, Redfield was comfortable with urban settings and created some panoramic cityscapes, such as the 1909 *Between Daylight and Darkness* (private collection), that rival John Sloan’s. In 1998, at an exhibition celebrating its first decade, the Michener unveiled an important acquisition, Redfield’s *The Burning of Center Bridge* (1923), a nightscape lit by the smoky fire engulfing a covered bridge. The tiny onlookers might be spectators at a pyrotechnic extravaganza.

Another, more Arcadian acquisition is a 22-foot-wide lunette mural by Daniel Garber (1880–1958). Painted for the Sesquicentennial Exposition of 1926 in Philadelphia, the mural had languished for decades in an auditorium at the State Forestry School at Mont Alto (now a branch of Pennsylvania State University). *A Wooded Watershed* depicts a stand of trees and a few deer, with a luminous stream and hazy hills in the distance; it achieves a fine balance between autonomous landscape and decorative scheme. Another standout in the Michener collection is Garber’s *The Studio Wall* (1914), a graceful exercise in white-on-white aestheticism that deploys a kimono-clad woman contemplating a vase against a simple wall transfigured by light patterns from an intricately framed window.

The museum reached a new level when Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest donated fifty-nine Pennsylvania Impressionist paintings, making the Michener





Daniel Dallmann, *Medallion*, c. 1990, WOODMERE ART MUSEUM

the principal repository for that school. Permanently installed in the Putman/Smith Gallery, the display is notable for the attention to local topography under changing weather conditions, from sharp-aired winter through prismatic spring, lush summer and colorful autumn. Other notable acquisitions from the Bucks County region include the only three existing portraits of Quaker artist Edward Hicks, known for his Peaceable Kingdom series, by his cousin Thomas Hicks, and an installation of Japanese-style furniture from the studio of legendary craftsman George Nakashima, who established his wood-working shop in New Hope in 1946.

Bucks County has attracted a stellar list of part- or full-time residents, lured by the area's rural beauty and proximity to Philadelphia and New York City. A multimedia interactive exhibition, "Creative Bucks County: A Celebration of Art and Artists," incorporates individual displays on a dozen artists, a video theater and a computerized database on hundreds of famous residents, past and present, including Pearl Buck, Oscar Hammerstein II, Moss Hart, George Kaufman and Dorothy Parker. Kaufman's farm became an offshoot of the Algonquin Round Table and a getaway for Edna Ferber and Harpo





Daniel Garber, *The Studio Wall*, 1914, JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

Marx. These country homes were working environments as well as vacation spots. Hammerstein wrote “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’!” from *Oklahoma* while sitting on his front porch gazing out at the Pennsylvania hills. The 1939 smash play *The Man Who Came to Dinner* sprang from a miserable weekend with a guest, the cantankerous Alexander Woollcott, who was visiting Moss Hart at Kaufman’s former house, dubbed *Cherchez la Farm*.

The local history of this region gives the Michener a sophisticated panache. At the heart of the whole enterprise, however, is the vitality of the art. “Earth, River and Light: Masterworks of Pennsylvania Impressionism,” an exhibition drawn from the museum and regional private collectors, began its nationwide tour at the Michener. The show is accompanied by *Pennsylvania Impressionism* (co-published with the University of Pennsylvania Press), edited and principally authored by Michener curator Brian H. Peterson. The



368-page volume, with over 350 color reproductions, is the first comprehensive study of the school (\$49.95). Upcoming venues for “Earth, River and Light” include the Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut (June 27–September 28, 2003), and Lehigh Yawkey Woodson Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin (February 7–April 11, 2004).

The museum’s collection has grown from 100 objects in 1988 to more than 2,200, and a branch of the Michener recently opened in the Union Square development in New Hope, Pennsylvania. The James A. Michener Art Museum is located at 138 South Pine Street, Doylestown, Pennsylvania 18901. Telephone: (215) 340-9800.

The Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, is a solid, community-based institution. While the Woodmere evolved from the connoisseurship of Charles Smith and the fast-track Michener was built on the prestige and generosity of a celebrity donor, the Westmoreland has its roots in mid-century public-spiritedness. A local resident, Mary Marchland Woods, left no collection but wanted to found a public art museum with a cultural and educational mission. She stipulated that her family home, on a hill in the center of Greensburg, be razed and the museum building constructed on the site.

The Westmoreland Museum of American Art opened to the public in 1959. Focused on the acquisition and exhibition of American art, the first trustees made some pragmatic choices in further narrowing their territory; art historically and geographically. The Westmoreland would emphasize Pennsylvania artists, especially from the southwestern part of the state. The



Patricia D. Pfundt Sculpture Garden, James A. Michener Art Museum

target audience of museumgoers would come from the same region, partly rural but also encompassing the city of Pittsburgh. The strategy was to avoid competing with the international collections of Pittsburgh's premier institutions, the Carnegie Museum of Art and the Frick Museum.

Initiating original research in its chosen field, the Westmoreland has won praise for its accomplishments, including the authoritative *Southwestern Pennsylvania Artists, 1800–1945*. Installations offer complementary views of the region. Picturesque landscape paintings by George Hetzel, Charles Linford and Joseph Woodwell present an idyllic image of the countryside, while a Scenes of Industry gallery records the region's later heritage of blast furnaces and steel mills. Both the edenic wilderness and the Industrial Revolution now belong to the past. The museum has assembled an art historical palimpsest recreating the temporal dimension of the environment. Arranged alongside paintings and sculpture are decorative objects—redware and salt-glazed stoneware, blanket chests—made by Westmoreland County artisans.

The museum has amassed a collection of over 3,400 objects, including 700 prints by noted Americans from Mary Cassatt, Winslow Homer and George Bellows to Franz Kline, Stuart Davis and Andrew Wyeth. The sculpture collection features works by Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, Paulanship and William Zorach. An intriguing example of an object combining local interest with aesthetic power is the Lynch Tiffany window (c. 1905). Commissioned by Greensburg resident Thomas Lynch, the window was based on a period photograph of his grandfather's thatched-roof farmhouse in Ireland. Tiffany Studios created a richly colored version of the cottage, surrounded by flowers, in copper-foiled and plated glass. The window, removed in 1945, came up at auction at Christie's in June 2001 and was purchased by the Westmoreland. The Westmoreland is also a venue for touring shows of American art. Upcoming shows include "Points of View: A Shared Vision, Photographs of Berenice Abbott and Hank O'Neal, Paintings of Mark Perrott and Robert Qualters" (through June 8, 2003) and a retrospective on Samuel Rosenberg (1896–1972), the Pittsburgh-born American Scene artist who taught Phillip Pearlstein, among others (June 29–October 19, 2003). Westmoreland Museum of American Art, 221 North Main Street, Greensburg, Pennsylvania 15601. Telephone: (724) 837-1500.

Museum-founding and museum-building are exercises in citizenship, manifestations not only of aesthetics but also of community pride. All the institutions discussed here entered the field comparatively late: the Woodmere, although its germ was a turn-of-the-century collection, in 1940; the Westmoreland in 1959; the Michener not until 1988. They faced formidable tasks both in acquiring works of art and in positioning themselves in relationship to the major metropolitan museums nearby. In the populous, culturally competitive Northeast, these small museums have established strong identities for themselves with regionalism as a theme.