The Art of Brenau
University collection includes pieces by modern masters
Amazing acquisition

Brenau University’s art collection is a cultural wellspring in North Georgia

A Brenau University gallery worker carefully unpacks artwork to hang in one of the campus galleries. Opposite page: An oil painting of a figure by Giuseppe Napoli donated by avid art collectors Dorothy and the late Hubert Vogel.

Story by Savannah King
Photos courtesy Brenau University
The sounds of rush-hour traffic can be heard from inside The Manhattan Gallery. The constant swoosh of passing cars creates an appropriate ambiance for the metropolitan-inspired art exhibit. The mood is occasionally punctuated by the honk of a passing chicken truck.

Through the Big Apple and Brevard University in Gainesville may be more than 800 miles apart, the two are linked by a network of personal connections to the art world. Works by world-renowned artists Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg hung on the gallery’s walls, representing the New York City art scene in the small private university in Northeast Georgia.

When John S. Burd arrived on campus as Brevard’s president nearly 30 years ago, he felt the students needed more fine art displayed around the school. At the time, the college had only a few pieces on campus.

"When I came here we had no art at all," said Burd, now president emeritus. "So I put an ad in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal saying that an elite women’s college in the South wished to develop an art collection, and if people were interested to please call."

The ads led to a few donations from art collectors and artists. Burd continued reaching out to the art community at-large.

Not long after he began his search, Burd learned the school had a connection to Johns, one of America’s most valuable artists. Johns was born in Augusta in 1930 and raised alongside his aunts, who were Brevard alumni, by his grandmother in South Carolina.

So Burd called Johns, a well-known pop and abstract expressionist in New York with a reputation for being aloof. Burd attempted to reach Johns several times to see if he would be interested in donating a piece to the university’s budding collection in honor of his aunts.

"I knew he knew about this place and so I called him and finally after three calls he told his secretary that "He didn’t do that kind of thing," Burd said, smiling.

Instead, his secretary told Burd to contact Johns’ agent.

"His agent was Leo Castelli, who was the father of pop art," Burd said. "He was the one who gave Johns notoriety and Rauschenberg and (Roy) Lichtenstein and Warhol and several others.

So he agreed to see me and I went up to New York to see him about helping us do this."

When Burd told the school’s art depart-
The new gallery is anchored by a donation of art by another connection to the New York art scene of the last century. More than 100 works donated by well-known New York art collectors Dorothy Vogel and her late husband Herbert were donated to the university. More than 80 of the pieces are on permanent display in the Manhattan Gallery.

The Vogels began collecting art soon after they were married in 1962 and, over the years, collected more than 5,000 pieces. “They were basically civil servants,” said Melissa Morgan, former gallery director. “He was a postman and she was a librarian. They lived in rent-controlled housing and basically took his salary and bought art and she supported him. She’s very open about saying that. … They amassed a tremendous amount of art.”

The couple provided artwork for a featured exhibition of female artists at the school in 1990 and continued the relationship with the university over the years. Earlier this year, the university received an additional 26 pieces from the collection through the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., custodian of the entire Vogel collection. The additional pieces included a piece by Giuseppe Napoli, an abstract expressionist, and several others by Herbert Vogel himself.

As Morgan walked down the gallery corridor that holds the Vogel collection, she remarked on what it must have been like for the couple to fill such an active role in preserving art of the last several decades.

“What makes them so incredible is they lived the life of New York in the ‘60s and ‘70s,” Morgan said.

Imagining the art scene during that time isn’t difficult to do inside the Manhattan Gallery. An adjacent hallway in the gallery also provides visitors with a glimpse into the iconic era of art history with a series of photos taken by Warhol, a prolific pop artist.

The photos are a part of the Photographic Legacy program begun in 1997 by the Andy Warhol Foundation. Brenau received 155 photographs from the foundation through the program featuring iconic personalities like Truman Capote, Lillian Carter and Valentino. The photos were often used by Warhol as references for his many silkscreen portraits. In 2013, the foundation provided Brenau with an additional seven screen prints to go along with the collection of photographs.

More contemporary works created by artists like Margaret Evan-geline, Hunt Slonem, Kiki Smith and Sarah Lamb, a graduate of the university, also are featured. In keeping with the school’s history, many pieces were created by female artists.

“It’s always wonderful to add women artists to the collection because of the school being a women’s college,” Burd said. “We’ve had some very good contemporary artists, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Nevelson and Kiki Smith. Those are just some … They’re all big names in the art world.”

The idea behind the gallery is to represent the modern periods of American art history through the gallery. “New York basically became the center of the art scene after World War II, mostly because Paris was dealing with issues like getting bombed,” Morgan said. “So New York, after the war, became the center of the art scene and a lot of the artists flew Europe and came here.

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Above: An undated photo of Hubert and Dorothy Vogel with some of the many pieces of modern art collected by the New York couple over many years. Right: A 1965 oil painting, “Still Life with Black Bottle,” by Giuseppe Napoli is part of Brenau’s permanent collection. Opposite page: Watercolors by Hank Virgona are part of the permanent collection at Brenau University.
So what we set up here was having those artists from the decades after World War II, so each of the decades of art history is represented."

Morgan said the campus and its galleries are set up to be a "living museum." Many pieces are displayed along halls where classes are held, giving students daily exposure to fine art.

"That's what a museum art gallery really does," Morgan said. "It gives you that relationship. That one-on-one to a work that you can't get on a computer screen. You can look at the Mona Lisa all you want to but unless you're standing in front of her it's a whole other concept. ... Educationally, I hope our students are walking by and saying 'Wow, that's different.'"

The collection continues to grow. In addition to showcasing student and local artists at exhibitions throughout the year, the college is adding to its collection through donations and providing both students and the public with opportunities to learn about art through the ages.

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Dorothy Vogel, sitting, gets a look at some of the donated artwork on display during the Brenau University 135th anniversary gala.
Several large glass collages by Los Angeles-based artist Maurice Weber lean against the walls inside of the Bureau Trustee Library waiting to be hung. A box of 2,000-year-old Egyptian and Roman oil lamps and coins are waiting to be unpacked inside the rare books collection in the library.

“When (people) find out what’s in the collection, they have a much greater respect for this institution,” Hurst said. “When things are credible, it does then to build on itself. Especially when people are donating, knowing they’re doing it for people learn more about art. It will be generations after generations that will have this opportunity. I think that makes a big impact on a lot of donors.

“I think it would be great if it was an institution in this area that could not only talk about the periods of art, but also have examples of it, that would be unusual. A lot of people would have to do it with digital photos or books or whatever, but these students are able to see it firsthand and I think that makes an impact on them when they want to do something for themselves.”

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