



News

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Harvey Dunn feminine images show their influence on the artist

BROOKINGS, S.D. —In a dimly lit corner of the South Dakota Art Museum, the current Harvey Dunn exhibition opens beneath a Dunn quotation displayed in large, serif type.

“To be feminine is not to be weak. It’s strong.” - Harvey Dunn.

Harvey Dunn, a successful, prodigious artist with South Dakota roots, said this to a group of his New York art students more than half a century ago.

Dunn’s attitudes toward women show in the collection of his paintings called, “Feminine Images” on display in the Museum from now through Feb. 9, 2009.

Growing up on a prairie homestead, Dunn was heavily influenced by his mother, who encouraged him to draw at night by kerosene lamp.

Aptly displayed below his words hangs the newly acquired portrait of Dunn’s mother, Bersha. Her faded blue eyes reveal the figure of a strong woman looking back.

Dunn’s granddaughter, Deborah Dunn Wessells of Glenmoore, Pa. donated the picture to the South Dakota Art Museum.

“We’re excited because his mother was a critical influence in his life,” said Lynn Verschoor, SDAM director.

“All the paintings in this exhibition exist because of his mother.

“Dunn meant what he said about strong women, and it is evident in each of these paintings. His women are painted as strong, central-grounded figures.” Verschoor concluded.

Dunn’s mother also encouraged him to study at South Dakota Agriculture College, now South Dakota State University, where he met Art Professor Ada B. Caldwell, who left an indelible mark on him as well.

“She opened new vistas for me,” Dunn said of Caldwell in a publication called “An Evening in the Classroom.”

“For the first time I had found a serious, loving, intelligent interest in what I was vaguely searching for. With my eyes on the horizon, she taught me where to put my feet,” said Dunn in tribute to his mentor.

A portrait of Caldwell, like many of the 109 other Dunn paintings owned by the Art Museum, is in the process of being restored.

Once the exhibition concludes, Bersha Dunn’s portrait will be sent away for conservation work at the Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC) in Minneapolis, Minn. The repair work could take as long as a month, depending on the conservators’ assessment, said Lisa Scholten, curator of collections at the South Dakota Art Museum.

Dunn’s painting, which is at least 65 years old, will be cleaned, layers of varnish and additives removed and re-stretched if needed, according to Verschoor.

Conservators David Marquis and Joan Gorman at MACC have worked with Dunn paintings for 24 years.

“Dunn was a thrifty painter, and that fact complicates nearly every one of his paintings,” said Gorman, senior paintings conservator at the MACC, in reference to Dunn’s habit of painting over existing paintings and illustrations.

“Because of the complexity of Dunn's paintings, it is very difficult to provide an average treatment time,” she said.

“We allow the work of art to guide our conservation treatment choices.”

Restoration of the Dunn collection is being funded through private donations.

For more information, contact the South Dakota Art Museum at 605.688.5423 or toll free at 866.805.7590.

Viewing hours are Monday – Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and Sunday noon to 4 p.m.

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Photo: Harvey Dunn’s portrait of his mother Bersha will be sent to Minneapolis for conservation work at the conclusion of the “Feminine Images” exhibition.