

## **OBSERVATIONS**

**by Jane Gudmundson**

*What has been shall be; change will follow change.*  
— Lily Long, Poet

### **The Exhibit**

In this exhibit, the viewer is given the opportunity to go on a journey to explore works of art from the permanent collection of the Rourke Art Museum. Only the work of artists connected to Minnesota by birth or work life were considered for this exhibit and many of the included works have not been shown before. Some artists like Charlie Beck were academically trained and have made art their entire lives. Others, such as William Perl, were self-taught, and dealt with a specific subject matter and time frame. The artwork spans almost 100 years and includes early works by Annie Stein and Alfred Dehn, as well as the work of more contemporary artists such as Kerri Pickett and Zhimin Guan.

### **The Curators**

Rourke staff worked closely with curatorial advisor Maria-Christina Villaseñor to guide viewers on this journey. Coming from New York and California, Villaseñor can definitely be described as an “outsider Minnesotan,” bringing with her a fresh pair of eyes and an interest in Midwestern art practice. In reviewing the collection, she identified certain categories of work and highlighted intriguing commonalities or incongruences. The Rourke staff and Villaseñor together crafted a selection of work that gives the viewer pause for thought.

### **The Writer**

Technically speaking, I too would be considered an “outsider Minnesotan,” although I have lived in Moorhead since 1975 and my relationship with the Rourke Art Museum dates from the same year. I grew up in England, a small confined island with a long history but close proximity to European influences. Soon I came to realize that living in the middle of North America in the land-locked state of Minnesota was fundamentally different. A synthesis of ideas is easier to achieve when distance is not an issue. Influences from the East or West coast, let alone from Europe or Asia, South America or Africa, were slow to gravitate to the heartland.

### **The History**

Living in Minnesota a century ago must have been an incredibly insular experience, especially for artists. Attention was focused mainly on human survival. Distances between towns were considerable, travel opportunities poor, education limited, weather conditions harsh.

Fortunately the founders of the Fargo-Moorhead community were interested in establishing higher education institutions. Each one in turn developed an art department. The university professors at these institutions –Cyrus Running at Concordia,

Jack Youngquist at Minnesota State University Moorhead and Wayne Tollefson at North Dakota State University, among others – were responsible for nurturing student artists. Some of the students they tutored began in turn to contribute to the growth of the arts in the area.

Brothers James O'Rourke and Orland Rourke are two examples. They opened the first Fargo/Moorhead Gallery in 1960. In 1965, a group of dedicated people, including Phyllis Thysell, Maren Larson and Susan Hunke, helped establish the Red River Arts Center in the historic post office building on Main Avenue in Moorhead. Eventually James O'Rourke took over as the director of the institution.

As each of the university art departments became more established, a tradition of national and international artist-residencies allowed students to be introduced to a wider range of artistic concepts, genres and materials. Simultaneously the opportunity for artists to study outside of Minnesota grew. Technology now adds to the list of influences that progressively have changed the way art was/is produced and presented in Minnesota today.

### **The Collector**

James O'Rourke was an avid collector of objects. He amassed a considerable amount of artwork during his time in the Moorhead/Fargo community. His collection includes African masks, reproductions of Civil War prints, and the work of nationally known pop artists and local emerging artists. Jim was also well-connected to art collectors such as Meredith and Aldrich Bloomquist, who deserve acknowledgement for the support and encouragement they gave local artists by purchasing their work. Later, collectors such as David Hasbergen and Wayne Zimmerman, Naomi Nakamoto and Terry Adams, and Richard Callender continued the trend and extended the appreciation of original works of art. Last but not least, the artists themselves are worthy of recognition, for many have donated their work to the museum over the years.

Given the foundation of the Rourke Art Museum's permanent collection, it is understandable that it had no one particular focus. It was, and still is, a hybrid of Jim's personal interests and the work gifted to the museum. If there is a common thread between the artists represented in this exhibition, it would be personal responses to their surroundings, the people they met and the experiences they had. It is refreshing to see that the work itself is so varied that it defies being categorized.

Hopefully this exhibit will be the first in a series of exhibits that will mine the museum's collection to explore and analyze the nuances and meanings of individual objects within the larger context of the whole collection.

*Jane Gudmundson is an independent writer, curator and teacher. Born in England, she received her masters degree in the United States, She worked for the Moorhead and Fargo public school systems, the Rourke Art Gallery, the Plains Art Museum and the Department of Art & Design at Minnesota State University Moorhead. She has collaborated with photographers and writers to create exhibits and books; most recently she has produced several thematically-based photographic books stemming from recent travels.*