Celebration of the Creative Spirit

Acquisition of the magnificent Fleischaker Collection moves the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art into a new position among its peers.

By Kathryn Jenson White
The Collectors

"They were both collectors," says David Fleischaker, one of the three Fleischaker children who became responsible for the collection when their parents died—Adeline in 1994 and Richard in 1996. "When we were on family vacations to New England in the '50s, mother would hunt through antique stores. My father had a nice collection of German beer steins. They both liked to acquire things, and they developed an interest in local arts in the early '60s. That was when my father became very involved in the Oklahoma City Festival of the Arts held each spring. He really liked several of the local artists as people and enjoyed talking to them and buying their work.

"This was just Richard meandering around and talking. That was the beginning."

Richard's artful meandering was really the logical end of a journey that began with his family and that of Adeline Singer, who was to become his wife. In the second decade of the 20th century, the Fleischaker family, David recounts, came to America from Germany to settle in Joplin, Missouri, where Richard was born in 1916. At about the same time, the Singer clan came from Russia to Enid, Oklahoma, where Adeline was born in 1919.

His father's father was successful and civic minded, David says. The family opened Fleischaker's, a clothing store in Joplin. As the store grew into a chain of 11 or 12 outlets in Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas, the family flourished. In this quintessential story of the American Dream, Richard's father fell in love with the Great American Pastime and invested substantially from the fruits of his American success: In 1926, he bought the Joplin Miners, a St. Louis Cardinals farm team.

"Unfortunately, this was the wrong time to be investing in a baseball team," David notes. "The country was just heading into the Depression, and that part of the country was particularly hard hit because of the farmers. My grandfather sank a lot of money into..."
that team at the same time that his stores were experiencing reduced revenue because no one had any money. The family's net worth was reduced substantially, and my father had to work to put himself through college."

The college Richard worked his way through was the University of Missouri, where he earned a bachelor's degree and a law degree and met Adeline, a biochemistry major.

The Russian immigrants in Adeline's family had a more scholarly side, David says, and their focus was slightly different from that of the Fleischakers.

"My father's eventual desire to create this collection was reflective of the lessons he learned about being a good citizen from his father, who was a prominent, very civic-minded man," he says. "My father felt very strongly about civic duty. My mother's is a different story. Her family was not so active in civic life. They had a strong intellectual bent and kept themselves very busy making money. They created an oil and gas business called Singer-Fleischaker, which today is Jolen Operating Company."

In 1946, Richard and Adeline moved to Oklahoma City to become part of the Singer family business. There they lived their lives, raised their children and combined their civic and intellectual urges in creating the collection that now belongs to the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

In the early '60s, Richard and Adeline began to travel and spend some of the money their successful business was earning. They visited Europe and became interested in Israeli art. David thinks they were interested not only in the acquisition of finer things, but also in the connection these pieces gave them to their Jewish heritage. They developed a relationship with an Israeli gallery owner in Boston, who sold them some paintings by Marc Chagall and Salvador Dali. Their discovery of the art galleries of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the early '70s coincided with an economic reality that allowed them to pursue collecting the Southwestern art they loved.

"In 1973, the price of oil went from $3 to $40 a barrel, so my parents had a significant cash flow," David says. "They were in Santa Fe before it became what it is today, and my father would just walk into galleries and seek out artists for conversations. He was very gentle, so people talked to him easily. He found—and was found by—those who became the most prominent gallery owners in the city. My parents began making trips to the pueblos, too, where they bought ceramics and baskets and other work from now-renowned Native American artists."

As Richard grew older, he spent increasingly more time on his avocation. He expanded his interest from the Southwestern artists represented in Santa Fe galleries to the Native American artists of Oklahoma. He was on the board of directors of the Red Earth Festival in Oklahoma City and was named the organization's Ambassador of the Year in 1994.

All of the Fleischakers' children are proud of their parents' contributions.
William Robinson Leigh,  
***Lullaby, 1918,*** 
oil on canvas, 28 x22"
They did talk, then and again. While the Borens were visiting the Fleischakers` condo-cum-museum in Oklahoma City, Toperzer was inspecting the collection in Santa Fe, with much the same reaction. While all the pieces he saw were of high quality, the works of the men who made up the Taos Society of Artists were the ones that generated the most excitement.

In 1898, artists Blumenschein and Phillips had landed in Taos after the covered wagon they were traveling in and painting from suffered a broken wheel. By 1912, a group of American artists of European descent formally anointed itself the Taos Society and went to work promoting its exhibitions outside the region. The fame of the Taos Society artists began, justly, to spread.

"The Taos artists are not really my area of expertise, but I knew enough to know immediately how significant those pieces in the Fleischakers` home were," Toperzer says. "There`s something about quality you can`t put into words. A good painting is good whether it`s abstract, photorealistic or expressionistic. This is my 28th year of directing museums. Seeing art is like tasting wine; you develop a gourmet eye, the ability to distinguish the good from the great. I knew this was the finest Fechin I had seen in my life, the finest Gaspard. Blumenschein`s `Taos Valley` could hang on the wall of any museum in the world."

And it almost did, as the Fleischaker heirs worked to find a home for their parents` collection.

The Acquisition

Sotheby`s and Christie`s both expressed strong interest in selling the collection a piece at a time. Both of the national auction houses put together impressive proposal packages after sending teams of appraisers to catalog the collection in Oklahoma City and Santa Fe. The proposals arrived at David`s home in specially designed cloth-covered boxes looking like works of art themselves. These multivolume productions outlined a marketing blitz guaranteed to generate serious interest in the pieces from serious collectors around the world. The Fleischakers were tempted.

"I`m not an art collector," David says. "I knew the art was fine, but I had made no effort to understand the significance of the collection. When
my mother died, it was my responsibility to understand it, so I went to New York. When I saw the expressions on the faces of the art historians as they flipped through my photographs, I knew. They said, ‘Can you believe this?’ and ‘No one has seen this for 20 years’ and ‘This one has never been on the market.’ I was trained as a criminal trial lawyer, so I know the significance of unguarded reactions. At both Sotheby’s and Christie’s those reactions were very strong.

"Still, the entire time we were talking, I was feeling very sad about breaking up this collection."

To avoid such a dismantling, the Fleischaker heirs decided to try to place the collection as a whole with a museum. In Santa Fe, they considered the Santa Fe Museum of Fine Art and the Wheelright Museum. In Oklahoma, they were interested in the Cowboy Hall of Fame, the Gilcrease Collection and the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

David says that despite the family’s desire to see the collection hanging in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, he and his brother and sister did not hold out much hope for the University’s chances of raising the amount of money necessary to buy the collection. To cover the Fleischakers’ estate taxes, he says, the family either had to sell the collection or part of Jolen Operating Company. By selling the collection, Fleischaker family members could meet the estate’s financial needs and satisfy what they felt would have been Richard’s and Adeline’s wishes.

“The University setting means a lot to us,” David says. “There’s great art in this collection, and we wanted students and aspiring artists to see it and take inspiration from it. I think my parents would be thrilled, too. Their roots were in Oklahoma, and they certainly recognized the significance of education.

“Boren deserves great credit for this. Not another person in this state is capable of doing what he did, and we, the Fleischaker family, are very lucky that he was president. I don’t know of anyone else who could have known the collection’s significance, acted that quickly and had the credibility and clout to get the money. He did all that.”

Toperzer agrees. “I’ve seen seven different presidents sit in that chair since my arrival at the University,” he says. “I’m not sure any one of them but this one could have made this wonderful thing happen. Richard and Adeline didn’t collect these pieces for prestige or financial gain. Not many people in the state even knew about it. In fact, no one had any idea of the magnitude of this collection until after the Fleischakers’ deaths. The children knew they had to keep the collection together, and so this developed as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the museum and the family.”

The Museum

Toperzer and his staff already are hard at work capitalizing on their opportunity to move the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art into a new position in the ranks of university museums. Although approximately half of the collection is still under wraps as the staff works to catalog the contents, a 150-piece exhibition opened in No-
Richard and Adeline Fleischaker quietly assembled a magnificent art collection based on their love for the individual pieces with no thought for prestige or financial gain.

Eanger Irving Couse, The Bird Jar, ND, oil on masonite, 12 x 16"