



Crystal Bridges Museum, Bentonville, Arkansas, architect Moshe Safdie

Well before the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art opened in November 2011, it had generated heated debate about founder Alice Walton's choice of location and acquisition practices, as well as about its philosophical mission. In the past, when wealthy individuals established museums to showcase their collections and burnish their reputations, they tended to select as venues major cities that were already cultural magnets, as Henry Clay Frick and J.P. Morgan did in New York City and Isabella Stewart Gardner did in Boston. The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, for all the charm of its bucolic setting, is surrounded by colleges and premier arts festivals, and draws cosmopolitan visitors from Boston and New York. In contrast, Crystal Bridges is located in Bentonville, Arkansas, population 35,000 and, until now, solely defined as the corporate headquarters of Wal-Mart. Bringing a good collection of American art to an underserved part of the country is a laudable goal. But there are solid existing museums anchoring the cultural life of cities throughout the Midwest and the South, places with an infrastructure of civic amenities, such as hotels and restaurants, and transportation options—all of which Bentonville lacks. The situation may change in time, but for now the logistics are somewhat daunting.

Being a collector—especially on the scale of those that found museums or make significant contributions to established institutions—requires personal passion, financial resources and an understanding of the marketplace. The Neue Galerie in New York City grew out of Ronald Lauder's fascination with

fin-de-siècle Vienna; he began acquiring the relatively undervalued drawings of the period as a young man. The Morgan Library & Museum testifies to J.P. Morgan's appreciation for the subtle, fragile beauty of drawings and manuscripts, a tradition continued by contemporary donors such as Eugene Thaw. Alice Walton has been building up a solid, generalized—rather than focused—collection of American art for some time, but many of the stars of Crystal Bridges are recent acquisitions, purchased specifically with the museum in mind. One acquisition in particular exemplifies the unease many observers have felt about the process. Asher B. Durand's *Kindred Spirits* (1849) actually deserves the overworked accolade “iconic.” Walton has a great deal of money and does not limit her treasure hunt to the commercial art market. Was the \$35 million she offered the New York Public Library too much to turn down, given our current financial difficulties? Over the last few years, a number of cultural institutions have proposed de-accessing works from their permanent collections to meet their cash flow problems, a strategy that has faced legal challenges. There were attempts at the time of the *Kindred Spirits* sale to secure the painting for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and/or the National Gallery of Art. Walton has promised to lend generously to other museums. Still, the debate raises some fundamental questions about the cost and the value of artworks, about the ownership of masterpieces and the stewardship of collectors.

Crystal Bridges opened with an the exhibition titled “Celebrating the American Spirit,” a generous overview of the collection. (Many of the works on display are described in the preceding article.) A secondary show, “Wonder World: Nature and Precision in Contemporary Art,” suggests an avenue for future collecting, with thirty-three works—among them one of Walton Ford's big, beautifully rendered and disturbing natural history watercolors, clever conceptual *jeux d'esprit* by Vik Muniz and John Baldessari, and a “Soundsuit” costume by Nick Cave. These are well-known contemporary artists, welcome in fashionable galleries and museums. An institution ambitious to cover American art from Colonial portraits to the present day would understandably wish to demonstrate cognizance of these trends. But there are other great, largely untapped opportunities for museum collecting today, notably in the superbly crafted, increasingly sophisticated works of the contemporary realists we feature in the pages of *American Arts Quarterly*. Crystal Bridges is a very young museum, with potential for growth. Perhaps, with the right guidance, it will refine its mission and make a distinctive contribution to the American cultural landscape. Why not support the talented artists who are rediscovering the vibrancy of inherited genres such as still life, portraiture, landscape and narrative painting? Or, in more pragmatic terms, why not get in on the ground floor of the future of American art?

—Gail Leggio