Thrill of the Search Produces a Major Art Collection

Bill Fletcher ’42

On an extraordinary afternoon in March, Menlo College alumnus Wilfred “Bill” Fletcher ’42 carefully retraced his younger years and his passion for contemporary and modern art with Darcy Blake, Director of Communications, Marketing and Public Relations, and Catherine Reeves, Vice President for External Affairs, when they visited his home and two small, private galleries in Southern California.

His dazzling collection of works by such artists as Sam Francis, David Hockney, William Wiley, Christo and treasures including rare books, works on paper, sculptures, glass and ceramic collectibles graced every square inch of space, reflecting his gifted eye for color, design and balance. As the afternoon light was captured through carefully placed objects bringing life to the room and conversation, Bill remembered:

“I was born in 1922 in Boise, Idaho, and spent my childhood there. My father, Daniel Steen Fletcher, had a petroleum distribution business, and in the early days he delivered product by horse and tank wagon. The business expanded and thrived, even during the Depression years of the 1930s, to include service stations and bulk plants in California, Washington, Oregon, and eventually a refining plant in California. I finished high school in Los Angeles in 1940, and then enrolled at Menlo College.”

Bill continued, “The campus was pastoral–almost like being on a farm. It was the early ’40s, and I had come from Los Angeles at a time when Hollywood was really booming. Now I was out in the country, surrounded by big estates, quiet roads and some very beautiful landscapes. It was quite a change. The nation was still suffering deeply from the Depression, but I had an inquiring mind and I was ready to learn, focus and discover. We were taught discipline at Menlo. We were an all men’s school then, and we had to wear a coat and tie to dinner.”

Bill built very close relationships with the faculty at Menlo. The close relationships with his teachers are where he learned to study–yet he still found time to explore San Francisco. On the weekends he would drive his green Mercury convertible coupe to the mountains to ski with friends. In addition to his growing love for skiing and some regional exploring, Bill’s interest in classical music, art and literature developed while at Menlo. “I remember Mrs. Kratt, the president’s wife, taught the Music Appreciation class,” Bill mused, “and I enrolled in the course and participated in Glee Club.”

Bill finished two years at Menlo, followed by a year of academic study at Stanford, then two years in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and another year at Stanford. After Stanford, Bill went to work for the family business where he later became the Purchasing Agent and Secretary-Treasurer at his family’s refinery and company headquarters in Carson, CA. It was during his career at the refinery that Bill developed an interest in and avocation for drawing.

His passion for art, skiing and exploring continued as he spent time between L.A. and Sun Valley, Idaho, but he did not begin his personal art collecting until the late ’70s. “My mother, Marie Davis Fletcher, is really the one who inspired my love for art during my childhood. My mother collected antiques and my grandmother was a painter. I remember when the Boise Art Museum was built. The new Director of the then-fledgling museum was a close friend of my parents. I watched with great interest as the museum was established over the years through its acquisition of unique collections.”

Bill continued, with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes, “I think I might describe the building of my own collections over the past 30 or so years within a process you might call “search and discovery—the opportunity to explore, discover, acquire, own and enjoy. My favorite piece of art is always the last one I purchased.”

Bill’s interest in contemporary art was kindled when he brought one of his antiques to the L.A. County Art Museum to learn more about it. The director of the Museum mentioned that contemporary art was becoming more recognized in art circles and his remark sparked Bill’s interest in the genre which became the focus of his lifetime passion.

During his travels between California and Idaho, Bill began his serious collecting when he acquired a print in 1979 at the Ochi Gallery in his hometown of Boise. Bill’s education
in contemporary art was subsequently chiseled by Denis Ochi, a gifted art teacher at Boise College who studied at UCLA. This was a period when public appreciation of contemporary art blossomed and new artists were discovered. “Denis really stirred my interest, and I learned as I went along. I’m still learning,” Bill reflected. “With no formal art education, I had to rely on instincts and good teachers.” Bill told Denis he didn’t know much about contemporary art but was intrigued. A Ron Davis print titled, “Pinwheel, Diamond & Stripe,” was his first purchase. Bill began to follow and purchase some of the then-new artists who, in time, became many of today’s leaders in modern and contemporary art. His collection today includes such names as Charles Arnoldi, Guy Dill, Sol LeWitt, Wayne Thiebaud, Ed Ruscha, Jasper Johns and Richard Diebenkorn (who attended Stanford at the same as Bill during the early ’40s.)

If you ask Bill to what he attributes his successes, he’ll tell you he was in the right place at the right time. With his inquiring nature and desire to learn, Bill possesses an innate ability to recognize artists who later become famous and, consequently, collectable. As he follows his instincts, he continues to assemble an exquisite collection of great works of art.

To share his love of art in his hometown, Bill has donated an enormous collection of his art to The Boise Art Museum. Starting in 1984 with his first contribution of a graphite drawing by Maynard Dixon titled “Old Apache Woman,” he has given over 120 works of art to the Museum in a collection, Wilfred Davis Fletcher Collection.

Bill is also planning to honor his alma mater and his legacy at Menlo College with a donation of rare books. With this tribute to the education and guidance he received in the beginning of his visionary development while at Menlo, he hopes that other students may follow in his footsteps and gain inspiration from the books and the story of his personal quest for the greatest find.

Karen Wilberding-Diefenbach, “Vento II”, oil on canvas

OPPOSITE: ART DETAILS:
1 Raymond Saunders, “Remembering and Then Forgetting,” painted collage on wood
3. James Gleason, Untitled #2, charcoal and pastel on paper
4. Joel Shapiro, “Boat, Bird, Mother and Child,” pastel on paper
5. William T. Wiley, “Canister Under the Banister,” oil on canvas
6. Unknown Artist, Cambodian stone sculpture, Khmer period, 11th Century, Fragment of Arm and Untitled Glass Vessel
7. Michael Beck, “Naval Maneuvers,” oil on canvas