OBJECTS OF AFFECTION

Ralph T. Coe’s art collection

Ralph T. Coe was a curator, a museum director, and an art historian, but perhaps more than anything else, he was a collector. Over the course of his life (he died in Santa Fe at 81 in 2010) Coe, who was known as Ted, collected about 2,000 pieces of Native American and tribal art from around the world. The Ralph T. Coe Legacy: Instruments of Passion, an exhibit opening Friday, Aug. 9, at El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe, is presented by the newly established Ralph T. Coe Foundation for the Arts; 36 pieces of Coe’s collection will be shown for the first time in Santa Fe. The foundation is headed by Rachel Wixom, Coe’s niece. Instruments of Passion was curated by foundation board member Taylor Dale, owner of Tad Tribal Art, and advisory committee member Bruce Bernstein, former director of the Southwestern Association of Indian Arts — both of whom knew Coe — as well as Lisa Hsu Barrera, the foundation’s first fellow.

Coe was raised in Ohio, the son of an Impressionist art dealer. He studied art history at Oberlin College and Yale University and served as the director of the Nelson-Akins Museum of Art in Kansas City from 1977 until 1982. In 1976, Coe curated a show called Sacred Circles: 2,000 Years of North American Art, which opened at the

Clockwise, from upper left, Papuan Gulf gope board, circa 1900; Moan feather box, circa 1830-1840; New Ireland funerary figure, late 19th century; Teri Greeves: beaded tennis shoes, 2001; Yoruba (West Africa) galede mask, late 20th century; images courtesy the Ralph T. Coe Foundation for the Arts
Hayward Gallery in London and later traveled to the Nelson-Atkins Museum. Sacred Circles aimed to present Native American work as art in its own right and not as ethnographic objects suitable only for academic study.

"At the time, many people considered Native art to be of the past, and not of the present," Bernstein said. "Ted brought Native artists to the show in London to make sure people understood that these artists were living, that the art had evolved."

Coe curated other notable exhibitions including 1986's Lost and Found: Native American Art 1965-1985, which was sponsored by the American Federation of Arts and toured the country. The Responsive Eye: Ralph T. Coe and the Collecting of American Indian Art was shown at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2003.

While Coe focused increasingly on Native American art as he got older, his tastes were broad, a sensibility Instruments of Passion reflects. The objects in the show vary widely in period (19th-century pieces are displayed alongside contemporary works), media (woven baskets, wooden masks, beaded clothing, pottery, carved statues, and a pair of canvas sneakers), and origin (the Americas, Africa, and Oceania). "We tried to find a few objects that showed the quality of the things Coe liked, and that give an inkling of what got him started collecting, how passionate he was," Dale said. "Collectors often focus on a narrower range of materials (but Coe had a diversity of knowledge of tribal cultures worldwide)."

Wixom described her uncle as lively, inquisitive, and always in motion, often pacing as he spoke. He traveled widely, enjoying long, rambling trips and cultural pleasures beyond visual art, like food. He developed relationships with many of the contemporary artists whose work he collected, including Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty, whose beaded moccasins and horse mask appear in Instruments of Passion, and often commissioned pieces from the artists he grew to know. Wixom recalled her uncle's zeal for collecting; he enjoyed tracking down pieces in antique shops on his road trips across the U.S. and on jaunts to other countries, and finding an unexpected good deal.

Wixom told an old family story about Coe's early forays into collecting tribal art. "The New Ireland chalk figure [from Papua New Guinea] was one of the first pieces he bought. He was in Amsterdam in the '50s, and walking around, he passed an ethnographic gallery I think he bought [the figure] for $150. He put it in his backpack and carried it around Europe for six months."

The funerary figure dates from the 19th century or earlier and is at once eerie and cheerful. Standing about 20 inches high, the light gray statue is painted with alternating blue and yellow dashes. The figure's eyes peer out from under a deeply carved brow, his grim is wide and close-lipped, and his hands are folded.

The primary goal of the Ralph T. Coe Foundation is education. Wixom sees this as being accomplished through sharing the collection with Santa Fe and other parts of the country — 27 ash splint baskets from the collection will be part of an exhibition called Plain & Fancy: Native American Splint Baskets at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York, opening this month.

Though the foundation's endowment is relatively small, Wixom decided it was essential to fund a fellow someone to help catalog the collection while contributing to their own research. Barnett is completing a master's degree in museum studies at California State University in Chico. "I'm learning about areas of art I don't have much background in. It's a glimpse inside a collector's mind," she said. "[Coe] collected a lot of pieces that weren't exceptionally expensive, that maybe others wouldn't have chosen. I think he chose little treasures, things that he thought were beautiful and well made."

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