The Dr. Robert H. Derden Collection: 
A Black Collector's Odyssey in Contemporary Art. 
Community Gallery of Art 
College of Lake County 
January 12 - February 25, 1990
Robert H. Derden, Jr., Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist and Art Collector

Born:
September 21, 1944
Canton, Mississippi

Reared:
Nashville, Tennessee

Education:
Morehouse College, Atlanta, Ga.
B.S. 1968
Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.
M.S. 1972
University of Pittsburgh, Penn.
Ph.D. 1977

Far from being a mechanical recording of sensory elements, vision (for the early Gestalt theorists) proved to be a truly creative apprehension of reality—imaginative, inventive, shrewd, and beautiful. It became apparent that the qualities that dignify the thinker and the artist distinguish all performances of the mind. Psychologists also began to see that this fact was no coincidence: the same principles apply to all the various mental capacities because the mind always functions as a whole. All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention.

Rudolf Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye

In the process of becoming a clinical psychologist, Robert H. Derden, Jr., Ph. D., acquired the sensory acuity and intellectual formation that would also enable him to develop into a discerning, risk-taking collector of contemporary art. When I, as an art dealer in Chicago, became reunited with the psychologist, my former school fellow, in the summer of 1977, he had just completed his graduate studies at the University of Pittsburgh. He came to Chicago that summer to begin his career, and he immediately evinced a keen interest in the artists that I was exhibiting and representing at the time. Thus began a long, venturesome relationship between us on an artistic plane. It has been my pleasure to observe, encourage and assist the continually refined taste and evolving connoisseurship of my friend, the psychologist. All—man, his taste, and his connoisseurship—are praiseworthy.

It was clear from the beginning of our reunion that Derden was well prepared to see art. His studies in psychology had included immersion in Gestalt with its emphasis on the importance of wholeness—the notion that a unified object or composition is much more than the sum of its constituent parts and that the appearance of any element depends on its place in an overall pattern. We agreed that seeing art is an expression of the creative will of the mind, that it is the inventive and complex orchestration of perceptions into a vision of reality. It then indicated that taste is the force that guides this manipulation of perceptions and that taste in the visual arts depended in part on first-hand experience of the historical development of art, exemplified in the best works of art, and on knowledge and understanding of art history, including criticism and connoisseurship.

Robert Derden’s academic and experiential background had familiarized him with the formal concerns and properties of art, along with the perceptual problems that formalism can present. He had a fine sense of the importance of balance and unity in a work of art. He understood foreshortening, perspectival systems, and other aspects of illusionistic space. Without a doubt, his grasp of light and color, in a purely objective, physical sense and in the relativistic, Gestalt sense, was firm. So he was immediately attracted to the toughest works that I offered at the time: the minimal watercolors and prints of John Dowell and the punched-paper canvases and drawings of Howardena Pindell.

Over the years, the psychologist’s participation in the artistic life of Chicago has been extensive and intense. I think he sometimes manages to see every exhibition in the city at a particular time. He reads diligently, looks incessantly, and attends lectures and presentations on art where he is a rapt listener.

Possessed of a comprehensive and well-informed view of the contemporary art scene, Derden has made some indisputably meritorious selections for his collection, showing daring and prescience in several instances. His varied collection, results from the creative and expressive exercise of mind over artistic matter. This mental application is manifestly felicitous, and has been enriched by the psychologist’s peculiar insights into how we perceive the complex world.

— Clarence D. White

27. Alex McMath, 1966, "Madonna and Child", ink and watercolor; 18 1/2" x 14 1/2"
When viewing collections of contemporary art, it's nearly impossible to resist the tendency to categorize - to search for a leitmotif that somehow links a collector's choices. What kinds of artists are represented? Is there a focus on abstraction or figuration? Is there a conceptual bent or is the work more concrete? The answers to such questions not only delineate the collection, but shed light on the collector as well.

Sometimes, as in the case of Dr. Robert Derden's purchases of the past ten years, a collection will simply defy all attempts at pigeonholing. The nearly one-hundred works by fifty artists that comprise his ever-burgeoning compendium run the gamut of styles and media, embracing painting, sculpture, prints, and works on paper. Pieces by emerging Chicago artists share space with those by internationally-recognized ones; African woodcarvings are displayed next to work by untrained Outsider artists. In fact, if any pattern emerges within the Derden collection, it's perhaps a discerning versatility that allows disparate works of art to meet on common turf.

"I'm not looking for artwork that's all in one catagory," Dr. Derden has stated. "This collection is largely formed by whatever stimulated my eye at a particular moment. But there has to be something electrifying about a piece that keeps drawing me to it like a magnet."

This guttural response on the collector's part has resulted in many unexpected visual juxtapositions. Derden's art-filled home, in which virtually every surface boasts an artwork, reflects the adaptability of his eye. Visitors may contemplate a large, abstract, shaped canvas by renowned black artist Sam Gilliam, admiring it for such formal qualities as texture, geometry, and vivid color. But just steps away, a tiny, monochromatic, panel-painting by emerging Scottish-born Donald McFadyen asserts itself no less intensely, with an imagination-teasing narrative reminiscent of gangster films from the 1940's.

Conceptual work, too, has not been ignored, but actively sought by Derden with the intention of maintaining a broad scope at all times. In Greg Green's kinetic sculpture titled "Detroit, July 23, 1967, 3:45 pm", a series of rotating steel saw-blades create a dangerous ambience for the viewer, undermining the assumption that art - and the art-world itself - is a safe haven.

Within the framework of this eclectic collection, Derden has managed to address the fact of his own black experience. Half of the artists represented are black, although "I'm interested in artistic expression first, not race," he explains. "When I initially respond to an art work, I have no way of knowing if the creator is black or white. But at the same time, I'm conscious of wanting to collect and support black artists."

Yet even within this defined category, Derden has been captivated by a wide range of work. A lavishly-decorated, glittery construction by Outsider artist Simon Sparrow was created in the grip of spiritual fervor using found materials like old jewelry, beads, and sea-shells. Nearby, two ceramic sculptures by Munee Bahaudeen were inspired by beliefs of the Yoruba tribe in Africa, paying homage to the god Ogun and his goddess-mistress Erzulie Dan-Tor. Where Sparrow has employed ornamental materials, Bahaudeen includes cigars, vodka, perfume, and Chanel make-up to evoke the presence of his deities. But despite the differences inherent in each artist's background, training, and outlook, their works manage to "speak" to one another - and the viewer - forming a creative bridge that transcends each piece's origins.

Finally, seen as a whole, the collection so lovingly put together by Dr. Robert Derden offers many surprises, thanks to the spontaneous spirit in which it has developed. In the end, it is a chronicle of sorts - a personal record of one man's excursion into the realm of art.

—Victoria Lautman
1. Muneer Bahauddeen, 1984
"Homage to Erzulie"
ceramic
32" x 18" x 18"

"Homage to Ogun"
ceramic installation
28" x 25" x 25 1/4"
Representative of the Yoruba inspired deity, Ogun and his agents including one female doll, a dog and a bowl of offerings atop a ringlet on a ceramic base.

untitled (baseball)
oil stick on paper
20" x 16"

"A + B Single Burner System"
mixed media/fabricated metal and ceramic sculpture
ceramic unit (top) 25" x 19 1/2"
metal unit (top) 44" x 28"
metal unit (base) 53 1/2"
Award winner, Black Creativity 1987
Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL.
5. John Bintliff, 1983
"Dancin Fool"
oil on canvas
65" x 79 1/2"

"Goose Neck" (red throat)
ceramic with low fire glaze and pedestal
33 1/2" x 15" x 8" (irregular)

7. Beverly Buchanan, 1987
"Shingle Shack"
mixed media construction
17 1/2" x 16" x 9 1/2"

8. Margaret Burroughs, 1968
"Green Girl" Ghana
pen and ink
11" x 8"

"Saskia's Dream"
lithograph, artist proof
13" x 24"

10. Edward Dwurnik, 1984
"Beautiful Heads"
oil on canvas
55" x 63"
Exhibited in "Portrait Chicago", Chicago, IL., 1988

11. El Loko, 1973,
"Bal Masque"
woodcut
15 1/2" x 72/8"
12. Michel Gamundi, 1988
   "I" (Mommy's Weakness)
   wood/mixed media
   86" x 38" x 16"

13. Sam Gilliam, 1982
   "Composition for a Brown Bag"
   mixed media on canvas with sculpture
   62" x 42"
   DC-483-1
   (pictured on cover)

    "606"
    relief paper collage
    14" x 8"

15. Gregory Green, 1987
    "Assault"
    six blade floor piece
    stainless and wood
    mixed media
    15" x 15" x 15"

16. Gregory Green, 1989
    "Detroit, July 23, 1967 3:45 p.m."
    mixed media (stainless, wood, canvas)
    79" x 36" x 19", photo credit: Michael Tropea

17. Chris Gustin, 1983
    "Covered Jar - Red"
    ceramic stoneware
    lid cover: 8 & 1/2 x 18 & 1/2 diameter
    base: 11 & 1/2" x 15 & 1/4" diameter

18. Chris Gustin, 1986
    untitled
    ceramic stoneware sculpture
    22 & 3/4" x 11"
19. Daniel Hendricksen, 1982
untitled
ink drawing
453/4" x 413/4"

20. George Horner, 1988
"Cans of Worms"
newsprint ink on silly putty
81/4" x 101/4"

21. Herbert House, 1988
"Black Athena"
metal
50" x 15" x 15"

22. Richard Hunt, 1965
untitled
lithograph; 19/20 tamarind #1244
22" x 30"

23. Marva Lee Jolly, 1986
untitled (story pot)
ceramic sculpture
16 3/4" x 16 1/4"

24. Hughie Lee-Smith, 1984
"Nature of Fascination"
oil on linen
16" x 12"

"House and Garden"
ink drawing
8" x 10"

26. Donald McFadyen, 1985
"American Politics #2"
oil on masonite
2" x 41/2"
DC-12-85-38

27. Alex McMath, 1966
"Madonna and Child"
in ink and watercolor
181/2" x 141/2"

28. Ivan Mischo, 1986
"Boosters" #5
oil on canvas
59" x 66"

29. Ivan Mischo, 1962
"Still Life"
oil on canvas
59" x 66"
Award winner, Chicago Arts Festival, Chicago, IL, 1963
30. Tony Padilla, 1988
untitled #4
mosaic tile (chair, sculpture)
31" x 27" x 26"

31. Howardena Pindell, 1980-81
"Oval Memory"
tempera punched paper, gouache, postcards
on board
13" x 32"

32. Howardena Pindell, 1977
untitled, (#84)
punched paper, sequins, gouache, watercolor, powered pigment
181/2" x 121/2"

33. Robert Pollack, 1983
"Lady and Man"
ceramic
(4-tiles), 6" x 6" each

34. Robert Pollack, 1983
"Torsos"
ceramic
(2-tiles), 6" x 6" each

35. Madeline Rabb, 1976
"Cos Basket"
oil on canvas
37" x 303/4"

36. Alison Saar, 1988
"Dreamer"
relief: ceiling tin, linoleum, plastic & wood
27" x 17"
37. Gunther Selichar, 1978-88
from the series "Love Makes You Blind"
screen print on canvas
8" x 12" (left panel)
color photography on canvas
12" x 15" (middle panel)
oil on canvas, 8" x 12" (right panel)

38. Simon Sparrow, 1985
untitled
mixed media on wood
25" x 25"

"Incognito Lorenzo Lotto"
acrylic/collage/paper
61/2" x 51/2"

40. Michelle Stone, 1987
untitled
mixed media construction
17" x 18" x 14"

41. Freddie Styles, 1977
untitled: C series #4
acrylic on canvas
23" x 29"

42. Michael Tang S.J., 1982
"The Green Chair"
oil on canvas
30" x 40"

43. Anna Tyler, 1988
"Blue Monday"
oil on masonite
4 1/3" x 7 1/2"
44. Al Tyler, 1953
“The Crap Shooters”
lithograph Ed. 1/5
14 1/2" x 11 1/4"

45. Maurice Wilson, 1986
“Rose Series” #4
oil on canvas
8" x 8"
From The Pink Room Suite.

46. Maurice Wilson, 1986
untitled #18
oil on canvas
60" x 48"
From The Pink Room Suite.

47. Sally Young, 1980
untitled #1
mixed media (paint/metal/collage on wood board)
65 3/4" x 71 1/2" x 5 1/4"
ARTISTS IN THE DR. ROBERT H. DERDEN COLLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Suzanne Adan  Hughie Lee-Smith
Muneer Bahauddeen Jim Lutes
Jean Michel Basquiat Donald McFadyen
Garry Bibbs Alex McMath
John Bintliff Ivan Mischo
Jennifer Blair Katie O'Neil
Ellen Brooks Tony Padilla
Beverly Buchanan Howardena Pindell
Margaret Burroughs Robert Pollack
Roger Carlson Madeline Rabb
Robert Colescott Alison Saar
John Dowell Gunther Selichar
Edward Dwurnik Simon Sparrow
El Loko Buzz Spector
John Emerson Erin Stack
Michel Gamundi Michelle Stone
Sam Gilliam Freddie Styles
Robert Glover Michael Tang, S.J.
Gregory Green Anna Tyler
Chris Gustin Al Tyler
Daniel Hendrickson Clarence White
Ann Hoeffel Wesley Willis
George Horner Maurice Willis
Herbert House Sally Young
Richard Hunt Allan Zion
Marva Jolly Paul Zubrzycki
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