

# History of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts

**“Culture,” says Don W. Carlson, theater editor for the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, “is, next to the church, the most important influence on this community.”**

—*Look Magazine*, January 9, 1968

The Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th century was a time of prosperity, social activism, and political reform. Increased personal wealth came with heightened philanthropy. Kalamazoo embraced this spirit of “giving back.” The Kalamazoo Institute of Arts began as a grassroots effort spearheaded by Kathryn Wood, with financial assistance from Anna Louise Raymond.

## The Early Years

The Kalamazoo Institute of Arts’ evolution as an art center was unique for a community of its size. While the three colleges in Kalamazoo stimulated culture in the community, it was the city’s interest in art that brought about the formation of the art center. By the start of the 20th century, local interest in painting led to the formation of informal studio groups such as the Palette and Chisel Club (fig. 1). American watercolorists traveled to Kalamazoo from the East Coast to teach them.

By 1923, a group of artists and instructors formed the Kalamazoo Chapter of the American Federation of Arts. At that time, Kathryn Wood was Kalamazoo’s most prominent artist. In the summer of the same year, she presented to the community the idea of a new arts organization that would offer classes, host lectures, and stage exhibitions. The new organization would be named the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (KIA) and absorb the Kalamazoo Chapter of the American Federation of the Arts. By February 1924, a constitution with bylaws was adopted.

Anna Louise Raymond was a Kalamazoo native and the wife of a wealthy Chicago wholesale hardware dealer. In 1925, she gave the KIA a large portion of her personal art collection and, more importantly, a \$20,000 endowment that became critical to the KIA’s survival.

The KIA’s first location was a rented room in the newly built YWCA on South Rose Street. After four years, the YWCA needed more space, as did the KIA. The Kalamazoo Board of Education, which managed the public schools and had oversight of the public library and city museum, had recently acquired the Peck Mansion at 331 South Rose Street. Since the KIA needed space for exhibitions and classrooms, it became

affiliated with the Board of Education in 1928. Flora Roberts, director of the Kalamazoo Library and Public Museum, persuaded a reluctant KIA Board to merge with the library’s museum department, envisioning that they would become one entity under the auspices of the library. The KIA then moved with the library and museum into the Peck Mansion. This relationship between the library, museum, and Board of Education proved to be problematic for nearly two decades.

In just two years, the Peck Mansion was overcrowded. The Board of Education subsequently purchased the adjacent property, the Kauffer House, at 347 South Rose Street. W.E. Upjohn provided \$40,000 towards its purchase, with the Board of Education supplying the remaining \$20,000. In 1930, the KIA and the museum moved into this facility. The museum was to occupy the first floor and the KIA the second. The exhibition space on the second floor had two large rooms with high ceilings, long windows, and a niche in the stairwell for sculpture. In the back of the second floor was an attic space which became a studio/classroom. However, the public museum’s rapidly expanding collection soon infiltrated the second-floor exhibition space. This encroachment led to what became known as the “War of the Stuffed Animals and Birds” as more of these creatures crept into the KIA’s exhibition space. As the Great Depression deepened in the Midwest during the 1930s, the Board of Education slowly reduced financial support for the facility. Although the KIA was allowed to continue its use of the



FIG. 1  
The Kalamazoo Palette and Chisel Club, n.d.





FIG. 2  
Blanche Hull, n.d.

house for thirteen straight years, the KIA received an annual request to vacate the property.

From 1930 to 1936, Blanche Hull (fig. 2), a Kalamazoo native, served as the first president of the KIA board of directors. She envisioned the art center as a place where art could be experienced in many different formats and by diverse audiences. She believed one way to stimulate interest in art was to showcase local artists and contemporary trends in art. Thus, the first season of exhibitions in the “Art House” began with American contemporary art. The highlight of the year was a January 1931 exhibition of Kalamazoo artists. Despite being held in the middle of winter, it broke all attendance records with over 2,700 visitors. Later that year, Hull traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and hand-picked Sylvester Jerry as the KIA’s new director. Jerry was a young Milwaukee artist who had studied at the Art Students League with Thomas Hart Benton and Max Weber. The curator’s position at the KIA called for planning a schedule of exhibitions, classes, lectures, and films.

Nina Belle Ward had begun teaching art classes for children under the auspices of the KIA at Kalamazoo Central High School in 1925. In 1931, after moving into the Kauffer House and hiring a full-time director/educator, the KIA was able to offer classes in-house for both children and adults. By 1932, the local Palette and Chisel Club, whose members promoted adult classes in the visual arts, joined with the KIA to provide a strong,

unified studio art program. Classes at all levels were very popular.

In 1933, the KIA started showing foreign films at the Civic Theatre. Jerry recalled that they were very popular and admission was only fifty cents. In early 1934, Jerry started a lecture series that brought nationally known artists to Kalamazoo. Diego Rivera was completing a mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts and was the first of many artists to visit under the program. The 1935 lecture was by Thomas Hart Benton, followed by Le Corbusier in 1936.

In early 1936, Jerry became Director of the Michigan branch of the WPA Federal Art Program, resulting in his departure from the KIA. After Jerry’s departure, a succession of directors stayed for only a year or two, until the fall of 1939 when the KIA appointed Ulfert Wilke as its new director. Programs such as the lecture series, exhibitions, and art classes continued. Between 1937 and 1939, the Annual Lecture Series featured Grant Wood, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Tony Sarg.

### A Triumvirate of Artists

The KIA’s story in the early 1940s revolves around three men: George Rickey, Ulfert Wilke, and Philip Evergood. In 1937, Rickey received a Carnegie Foundation artist-in-residence grant to come to Olivet College. During his second year at Olivet, he was asked to teach several classes at Kalamazoo College for instructor Kathryn Hodgman during her maternity leave. The following year, he became a half-time instructor at Kalamazoo College and the KIA.

In 1938, Rickey met German native Ulfert Wilke in New York City. He was quite impressed by Wilke as both a practicing artist and art historian. When the directorship of the art center became vacant in 1939, he proposed Wilke to fill that position. The summer before Wilke was to begin his duties at the KIA (1939), he and Rickey were driving in Mexico when they learned that Germany had invaded Poland and Britain had declared war on Germany. Wilke hurried back to Michigan to apply for immigration to the U.S. and to begin his duties as Director of the KIA. A few months later, he temporarily moved to Cuba so he could formally immigrate to the U.S. and then apply for citizenship. During his six-month absence in 1940, Rickey served as interim director.

Once his immigration status was settled, Wilke used his excellent connections in New York and Europe to bring several outstanding exhibitions of internationally known artists to Kalamazoo. The fall 1940 exhibition was 100 watercolors by Walt Disney. His next major exhibition, titled Six Centuries of Paintings, brought works from Titian, Rubens, Van Dyck, and Delacroix to the KIA. This was the institution’s first



FIG. 3  
Kalamazoo Art Center, 421 West South Street, 1947-58

blockbuster exhibition. In 1942, an exhibition of *Dutch Masters of the 17th Century* included works by Frans Hals, Ruisdael, and Rembrandt. Soon after, Wilke left to enlist in the U.S. Army.

Philip Evergood was the final member of the early 1940s triumvirate. He was the best-known artist of the three, with a national following and reputation. In the fall of 1940, Evergood moved to Kalamazoo as a recipient of a Carnegie Foundation artist-in-residence grant to paint a mural at Kalamazoo College. His completed mural, *The Bridge of Life*, took two years and was painted on the east wall of Welles Hall. In addition to his duties at Kalamazoo College, Evergood presented demonstrations and workshops and taught adult classes at the KIA. He also gave talks to the public as part of his immersion into the Kalamazoo community.

### Eviction

The 1940s were difficult for the KIA. The animosity between the Board of Education, the Library, the Public Museum, and the KIA slowly reached a boiling point. The KIA’s finances limited its independence, as the only asset at its disposal was a \$20,000 endowment from Mrs. Raymond. As noted earlier, the Board of Education sent “eviction notices” annually to the KIA under the justification that they needed more space to accommodate the library and museum. The situation climaxed on June 1, 1945, when the school board issued an official order for the Art Center to vacate the building. The KIA subsequently received a one-year reprieve, but on June 1, 1946, it moved out of the Kauffer House.

Despite all this turmoil and a rapid succession of new directors, including Priscilla Colt, Karl Priebe, and Marion Dickinson, the Institute continued its mission.

While “homeless” for the 1946-47 season, Dickinson ran the institute from her home, scheduling a full slate of exhibitions and classes in multiple locations across the city. For the 16th year, the KIA continued its extremely popular *Kalamazoo Artists Annual Show* in the Civic Auditorium lounge.

### Independence

In the spring of 1946, under the leadership of President Lester F. Rosenbaum, the KIA Board of Directors entered into negotiations with the American Legion Home Association to purchase their property near the corner of South and Park Streets. This was an incredibly bold move for an organization with no assets other than a small endowment.

The purchase price was \$25,000 and consumed all of Mrs. Raymond’s 1925 endowment. However, Rosenbaum noted that substantial contributions were made by the W. E. Upjohn Estate and the Kalamazoo Foundation to complete the \$45,000 project. The remodeled facility was to include three gallery spaces and several large studios. While the building and property were debt-free, there was no money for operations. In March 1947, during the renovations of the old American Legion Building, Rosenbaum announced “Art Needs a PUSH in Kalamazoo.” This was an ambitious fundraising campaign designed to receive commitments for operational expenses for the next three years. At the time, the operating budget was \$12,000 per year. Rosenbaum’s letter explained that two-thirds of the \$36,000 needed had been pledged, contingent upon raising the entire sum. By May, they had raised over \$30,000. After multiple delays and difficulties, the Art Center opened on May 25, 1947, financially secure (fig. 3).

By July of that year, the KIA announced the appointment of Pennsylvania native Phillip S. Merrill as its new director. He was described as being “versatile in painting and art education.” He arrived with his artist wife in mid-August to prepare for the upcoming season.

The new Art Center was fully operational for the 1947 fall class schedule. Merrill reported that 250 students had enrolled in studio classes, and they planned to accommodate an even larger number of students for the winter session. However, Merrill resigned as director in the spring of 1949 after receiving a scholarship from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts to study and travel in Europe for a year.

Following Merrill’s resignation, the Executive Committee, under the leadership of Mrs. Donald Gilmore, established a formal relationship with the extension division of the University of Michigan. This allowed students to receive college credit for KIA





**FIGS. 4, 5**  
The First Annual Clothesline Art Show, 1952; Children painting at the Clothesline Art Show, 1965

classes, paying University tuition fees. The University of Michigan also provided three instructors: Paul Haller Jones, Gerald Mast, and Kirk Newman, who was the resident artist in charge of the Kalamazoo program. Jones, Mast, and Newman were all practicing artists.

Newman was a Dallas, Texas native who had attended the University of Tulsa. As an undergraduate, he obtained a part-time job in the art department and soon became enamored with ceramics and sculpture. After further study at the University of Iowa, he returned to Tulsa to teach.

Paul Haller Jones developed his love for painting while spending summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts. His Michigan connections included a fellowship at Cranbrook Academy of Art and service at Fort Custer during WWII, where he was a member of the Fort Custer Illustrators.

After graduation from the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis, Gerald Mast worked with former KIA Director Sylvester Jerry on WPA projects in Michigan. Following his WPA tenure, he taught mural painting at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Three years later, Gibson Byrd joined the school and taught art history. Like Newman, he had received his undergraduate training at the University of Tulsa and earned an MFA at the University of Iowa. Byrd was of Shawnee ancestry and best known for his landscape and figurative paintings.

Exhibition scheduling was a collaborative effort between the University of Michigan instructors and the Executive Committee of the KIA. Since photography was very popular in Kalamazoo, with

several camera clubs meeting at the KIA, the first *Kalamazoo International Salon of Photography* was held in March 1949. Nearly 300 photographers representing 16 countries and 30 states submitted their work, and over 3,000 people visited the show. Other exhibitions generally featured local artists. In April 1955 the KIA and the Friends of Art of Grand Rapids joined as co-sponsors for an annual competition titled *The Western Michigan Artists Exhibition*.

### Clothesline Art Show

Clarence Lininger was elected board president of the KIA in 1951, a position he held until 1954. He felt that the key to the KIA's future success was to engage the "ordinary person" in the world of art. Lininger met with the art critic for the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, Philip Wight, over coffee one day and came up with an idea to hold a community-wide art event in a public space. Bronson Park was selected, and on Saturday, June 7, 1952, artists strung their artwork on clotheslines between trees while a troubadour accordion player strolled through the park (fig. 4). Wight described the park as being transformed into an American version of a bohemian setting on the Left Bank of the Seine in Paris. KIA instructor Nora Drapce offered a painting demonstration while Kirk Newman and William Fox spun ceramics from clay using a potter's wheel (see fig. 5 for arts activities at a later Clothesline Art Show). An enthusiastic crowd of between 15,000 to 20,000 people attended this inaugural event.

Over the years, the fair transformed the park into Montmartre, Venice, Amsterdam, and Greenwich



**FIG. 6**  
Kalamazoo Art Center, 314 South Park Street, October 1961

Village. In 1966, the park was transformed into a Japanese village to acknowledge Kalamazoo's affiliation with its sister city, Numazu, Japan.

In 1969, the Clothesline Art Show was officially named the Kalamazoo Art Fair, and a few years later, it became the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts Fair. It is not only the largest fair in Southwest Michigan but the second-oldest continuously held art fair in the United States. Each year, it is estimated that 50,000 visitors come downtown for the Fair, the Do-Dah Parade, a book sale at the Public Library, and Art on the Mall.

By 1957, it was evident that the KIA had outgrown the Art Center at 421 West South Street. On March 3, 1957, *Kalamazoo Gazette* writer Philip Wight reported a million-dollar plan to "make Kalamazoo one of the major art centers in the Midwest with facilities surpassing those of most cities this size in the nation." The idea originated with the Kalamazoo Foundation and was enthusiastically supported by the Foundation's Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Donald S. Gilmore. Kalamazoo College and the KIA were also reported to be enthusiastic about the plan. A new art center would be constructed on the triangle formed by West Main Street and Grand Avenue, facing downtown. Eero Saarinen was retained to design the building.

The program visualized the development of the six-acre hilltop into a cultural area. Art Center programs would be managed by a cooperative effort between Kalamazoo College and the KIA, and would also be open to students from Western Michigan University and Nazareth College. There was to be space for studios, classrooms, and both traveling

and permanent exhibitions. The following year, the plans were abandoned following a preliminary study and investigation. In June 1958, the Kalamazoo Foundation established a \$500,000 endowment from a gift of Upjohn stock, with the income to be used to underwrite the activities of the KIA. It was felt that this would ensure the "permanency and stability" of an art program in Kalamazoo. Additional support from The William E. Upjohn estate, which owned the property at South and Park Streets, combined with funds from the Kalamazoo Foundation for the purchase of additional property, made the KIA's current site available for future development.

### A New Beginning

"CITY TO HAVE NEW ART CENTER" headlined the front page of the *Kalamazoo Gazette* on February 15, 1959. The new Art Center, including its property, was estimated to cost nearly \$1 million. Mr. and Mrs. Donald S. Gilmore would pay for the entire cost of constructing the building on the donated property. The Chicago architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill was chosen to design the new building. The same firm had designed the \$14.5 million office building that had been built for the Upjohn Company on Portage Road. The lead architect for the project was Bruce Graham, who later designed Chicago's Hancock Building and Sears Tower. Graham's design, which incorporated input from Donald and Genevieve Gilmore, featured glass walls, a courtyard, and an interior that was functional, comfortable, and inviting. Classroom space was ample, and all rooms were fully stocked with state-of-the-art supplies.



Two new KIA directors, Richard Gregg and Ned Cornish, each held the position only briefly, and in July 1959, the board of directors appointed Alfred Maurice. A native of New Hampshire but a graduate of Michigan State University with degrees in Italian and art, Maurice had a range of experiences as an artist, college professor, and administrator. Prior to arriving in Kalamazoo, he was the executive director of the Maryland Institute, the second-oldest art school in the nation.

In September 1959, the Art Center moved to the vacant Free Methodist Church at the corner of Jasper and Jane Streets. This property was owned by the Upjohn Co. and was reconfigured into galleries, studios, and classrooms. According to Maurice, there would be no interruptions to any programs. The first exhibition in the temporary facility featured the KIA's permanent collection. Classes started in early October. The temporary facility was a significant improvement over 421 West South Street.

Ground was broken for the new building on June



**FIG 7**  
Donald and Genevieve Gilmore, ca. 1966

28, 1960. On Tuesday, September 26, 1961, Mrs. Donald Gilmore cut the white satin ribbon and the new Kalamazoo Art Center opened its doors to over 3,000 of its members for their first look at the 45,000-square-foot facility (fig. 6). The inaugural show in the new facility was an exhibition of 20th-century Artists including Grant Wood, Arshile Gorky, Milton Avery, Philip Evergood, Robert Henri, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alexander Calder, Jackson Pollock, and Max Weber. With the understanding that the success of an organization is largely due to its members, a major membership drive was launched in the spring of 1961. With the help of materials designed by cartoonist Al Capp, membership doubled from the previous year to nearly 5,000 by June 1961. More importantly, the operating fund phase of the campaign exceeded its goal of \$45,000.

It wasn't until the fifth anniversary of the Kalamazoo Art Center's opening that its two greatest benefactors, Genevieve Upjohn Gilmore and Donald S. Gilmore (fig. 7), were honored by having the building officially named the Genevieve and Donald Gilmore Art Center of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore spent many years on the Board of Directors of the KIA. During their respective tenures, each served as the organization's president. They enjoyed all things related to art and were excellent artists in their own right. In addition to their leadership, they assembled an impressive personal collection which they graciously shared with the KIA and other museums.

### Stability at Last

By September 1961, the school had a staff of four full-time and eleven part-time instructors. All were artists, and many of the part-time instructors were faculty members at Kalamazoo College, Western Michigan University, or Kalamazoo Public Schools. The school's enrollment grew from 125 students to over 500. In 1962, Maurice initiated a noon art history lecture series on the first and third Thursdays of the month that often attracted an audience of over one hundred enthusiastic attendees.

The exhibitions Maurice chose to present at the KIA represented a wide range of subject matter, from bucolic Currier and Ives prints to the hectic action of Abstract Expressionism. One of the most successful one-man exhibits during his six-year tenure was by Kirk Newman, who debuted his distinctive *American Salesman* bronze sculptures. Maurice resigned in August of 1965 to become the chair of the art department at the Chicago branch of the University of Illinois. The board of directors decided to split the top administrative duties to allow the new director to focus on collections and exhibitions while an associate



**FIGS. 8, 9**  
Kirk Newman (center) with ceramic students, 1965; A KIA drawing class, ca. 1960s



director of education ran the school. Kirk Newman was appointed to the latter position. He had been with the school since 1949. The board also reaffirmed that the collection should concentrate on 20th-century American painting and sculpture, small sculptures from throughout the world, and works on paper from all periods in honor of Kalamazoo's long history in the paper industry.

A University of Maine associate professor of art, Harry Greaver, became the new director in June 1966. As an artist, Greaver's watercolors, drawings, and prints were widely exhibited in the United States and Canada. His wife, Hanne Nielsen of Copenhagen, Denmark, was equally talented as an artist. One of the major attractions of the job was the opportunity to build the permanent collection. Greaver was extremely knowledgeable about fine art prints and envisioned the collection being used as an educational tool for students.

Greaver was very successful in building the collection in his decade at the KIA through both gifts and purchases. Notable artists whose works were added to the collection included Albrecht Dürer, Ernst Barlach, Edvard Munch, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood. On March 10, 1968, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* announced the acquisition of *The D and the Delta*, a mobile sculpture by Alexander Calder. One year later, two other important works were added to the collection: *Sleeping Woman* by Richard Diebenkorn and *Woman with Coffee Pot* by David Park. Between 1961 and 1970, the permanent collection increased from 217

works of art to 1,291.

The Fifth Anniversary of the Genevieve and Donald Gilmore Art Center's opening was celebrated with the September 1966 exhibition *American Masters*. This show included 39 paintings by 35 American masters from the 18th century on. Artists such as Winslow Homer, Gilbert Stuart, John Trumbull, John Singleton Copley, and Benjamin West graced the walls of the KIA. An anonymous donor was so impressed with *American Masters* that they gave the KIA \$50,000 to be used to bring future exhibitions like it to Kalamazoo. Later exhibitions included *The American West*, *17th Century Dutch and Flemish Artists*, *Surrealism*, and Yousuf Karsh's *Men Who Make Our World*. The popularity of the exhibitions exceeded expectations. For example, the *American Masters* show drew 10,566 visitors in 31 days.

In 1974 the KIA celebrated its 50th Anniversary. The highlight of the June celebration was the unveiling of Kirk Newman's large bronze sculpture, *People*, which was commissioned by Dorothy U. Dalton to commemorate the occasion.

As the director of the art school, Kirk Newman tripled the enrollment from 484 students in 1961 to 1,309 by 1970 (figs. 8-10). He added enthusiastic young artists who could teach and inspire students of all ages, expanded the variety of classes available, offered varied course times to accommodate students' schedules, added weekend and evening courses, and started summer art camps for younger students. He also strengthened the core classes of ceramics, drawing/painting, and photography. The board of directors





FIG. 10  
A KIA drawing class, 1968

announced Harry Greaver's resignation on December 9, 1977. They also announced that the position of director of education, held by Kirk Newman, had been eliminated, emphasizing that the termination of Newman was to "streamline" administrative responsibility.

On June 18, 1978, Thomas A. Kayser became the new executive director of the KIA. He was expected to split his time between the museum's school and exhibitions. The board aimed to integrate the two positions into a single cohesive unit via a single leader. Kayser was a Milwaukee native and had been the assistant director of the Flint Institute of Arts for 13 years. He was very well respected as a leader and had numerous ties in the museum industry. His goal was to develop the facility into a well-known and -respected institution. His first act as the new leader was to remove the turnstiles at the building's entrance and drop the 50-cent admission charge.

Harry Greaver had had the foresight to have the KIA accredited by the American Alliance of Museums in 1972. Kayser leveraged this badge of excellence to the KIA's advantage. Within one year, he received a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and two grants from the State of Michigan totaling over \$31,000. He also received a grant from the Upjohn Foundation to support an outreach program called ARTIST Tours, which allowed fifth-grade students to spend a half day at the art center for a "hands-on" experience. ARTIST Tours received a Michigan Educational Association award in 1987 for excellence and innovation.

Kayser recognized talent and found a gem in KIA librarian Helen Sheridan (fig. 11), whom he named project director for an exhibition on German Expressionism. All 66 prints, paintings, and sculptures in the show came from public and private collections

in Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and Muskegon. The exhibition was a huge success with the public and museum directors. The Detroit Institute of Arts' "Show on the Road" program sponsored a year-long tour of the exhibition.

Kayser's administrative skills combined with Sheridan's creativity, work ethic, and communication skills to form a dynamic team. To add to the viewers' understanding of the artwork displayed in the galleries, Kayser and Sheridan initiated the KIA Docent program. The first class began a formal 18-month curriculum of art history, art media, and tour techniques in 1982.

Sheridan's vision for acquiring new artwork for the permanent collection was outstanding. In her more than two decades at the KIA, she was involved in the acquisition of hundreds of works of art. Her husband, David Isaacson, recalled that one of the more important works of art she added to the collection was Helen Frankenthaler's painting *Code Blue*. Works like this helped broaden the vision of the KIA to include collecting more works by women and artists of color.

Sheridan was a master at creating themes for exhibitions to showcase the KIA's permanent collection. One example was *The Confrontational Image - Aspects of Realism in Contemporary Art*. This show was intended to stimulate an intellectual or emotional response from the viewer. Sheridan also relished promoting and exhibiting local artists such as Harold Landes and Victoria and Francis Littna.

Kayser instituted a program called ARTREACH that toured works from the permanent collection to outlying areas. Sheridan was put in charge of this project. Exhibits would be fashioned for a wide range of ages, from elementary school children to nursing home residents. In three years, she grew the program from 10 exhibits at 13 sites to 20 exhibits at more than 50 sites. Sheridan often chose Michigan artists who would



FIG. 11  
Helen Sheridan and Tom Kayser, 1979

accompany the show and interact with the audience. It was extremely popular and subsequently funded by the Michigan Council for the Arts.

With a steady growth in enrollment, Tom Kendall of the ceramics department was named assistant director of the school. In 1983, the school announced "more faculty members and course offerings than ever in its history." Innovative courses included "The Figure: Three Artists, Three Media." This class was designed for adults to explore the creation of figurative work in ceramics, drawing, and printmaking. Another new offering was "Comic Book Illustration" for ages nine and up. By 1990, school enrollment was an impressive 1,987 students.

Thomas Kayser resigned in April 1989. In his eleven years at the helm, the KIA received more than \$1 million in grants from multiple organizations. The operating budget grew from \$360,000 in 1978 to \$1.2 million in 1989. The number of corporate benefactors quintupled, membership nearly doubled, and school enrollment also doubled. Under his leadership, the KIA became recognized as a Midwest art center known for excellence in its public programs, exhibitions, and educational offerings.

Ward Nay, retired vice president of engineering for the Upjohn Co., was hired as interim director following Kayser's resignation. He knew the KIA as a board member, a member of the building and grounds committee, and as vice chairman of a committee exploring building expansion. At the time of his death in October 1992, he was actively involved in remodeling the lower-level galleries so that they could be used exclusively for the display of works from the KIA's permanent collection.

## Expansion

James A. Bridenstine was hired as the new director of the KIA on April 16, 1990. He was the first director who was an art museum professional with an art history background and extensive museum experience. At the time of his appointment, he was the director of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House in Grosse Pointe Shores. Prior to that, he was at the DIA managing their state-wide outreach programs. He was quite familiar with the KIA through exhibitions he had organized, such as *Michigan Masterpieces* (1986).

A month before Bridenstine arrived in Kalamazoo, the KIA lost its beloved benefactor, Genevieve Gilmore. In her will, she donated most of her personal art collection to the KIA. Works by Cassatt, Barlach, Matisse, Gauguin, Degas, Picasso, Whistler, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Andrew Wyeth were among those included in this gift. The following year, many of these paintings and drawings were in an exhibition at the KIA titled *A Gift to Kalamazoo: Selections from the Genevieve U. Gilmore*

*Collection*. Curator Helen Sheridan noted in an interview with the Kalamazoo Gazette that "these works were a final investment by Mrs. Gilmore in the cultural heritage of the city she loved."

The acquisition of Mrs. Gilmore's personal collection and its subsequent exhibition highlighted the need to expand the 1961 structure. A critical deficiency was storage space for the permanent collection. This area had to be climate-controlled and secure. When the 1961 building opened, the KIA owned 217 pieces of art. Thirty years later, the collection had increased to over 2,800 works, many from renowned artists. Dedicated gallery space was needed to display this art from the permanent collection without sacrificing space for temporary exhibitions. Gallery attendance certainly justified this expansion, as the number of visitors had increased from 4,900 per year in 1961 to nearly 68,000 thirty years later.

Sunday, May 7, 1995, was the KIA's "Family Art Extravaganza." During the program, William U. Parfet, grandson of Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore, announced the public portion of the \$12,000,000 campaign to fund renovations and expansion of the current structure. Additional money was sought for a permanent collection fund for future art purchases and endowment funds for future programs and maintenance of the renovated structure. Parfet announced that the board had been working on fundraising for the past year and was already at two-thirds of its goal. After architectural planning and further consideration over the next two years, the final campaign goal was \$14,500,000. Despite this increase, under Parfet's leadership, the campaign was very successful. Many local foundations and businesses contributed to the campaign, and the State of Michigan also awarded a grant of \$500,000 for the renovation.

Ann Beha was hired as an architect who specialized in the design, preservation, and revitalization of cultural institutions. She felt that the strengths of the building were the visibility of the galleries, the use of glass, and the very natural traffic flow through the building. Weaknesses of the structure included a lack of public gathering space and poor street presence. Final plans expanded the building from 44,500 square feet to 72,000 square feet and included additional space for galleries, offices, storage, a museum store, an interactive gallery for families, and a community auditorium. Renovation and expansion of the 1961 building began on April 17, 1997.

The KIA was fortunate to be able to temporarily move into the vacant office building directly across South Street from the existing structure during the renovation. The "KIAnnex" housed two galleries, administration offices, and some storage for the





**FIG. 12**  
The Car as Art exhibition promotional image

permanent collection, although much of the museum's art was loaned to other museums. It was difficult to schedule exhibitions, but Sheridan was able to showcase local artists with national reputations like Kirk Newman, Norman Carver, Bernard Palchick, Nora Drapce, Lona Walsh, and Denise Lisiecki. Other exhibitions scheduled in the KIA Annex included *Kalamazoo Artists Paint the Town*, where twenty local artists were invited to offer their unique perspective of the city, and *Kalamazoo Area Fiber Artists*.

An overriding mission of the KIA has always been education. Denise Lisiecki took over for Tom Kendall in 1996, becoming the art school's first female director. Her initial task was to schedule classes and workshops in multiple locations around Kalamazoo, Portage, Parchment, and Comstock. Classes were held in libraries, schools, senior centers, and even the Red Cross building. Liesicki was a huge proponent of integrating school activities with the museum. Even during renovation, she scheduled a five-day workshop on egg tempera painting by the nationally known artist Michael Bergt. A few months later, an exhibition of Bergt's egg tempera paintings, supplemented by a few student pieces from the workshop, was held in the KIA Annex.

The architectural plans changed the main entrance from a relatively obscure location facing Park Street to a 34-foot-tall atrium of glass and metal facing South Street. Jim Bridenstine envisioned a large, brightly colored glass chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling of the atrium to serve as a beacon directing visitors to the KIA. He contacted the Chihuly Studio in Seattle, Washington, and explained what he wanted. However, the price for such a chandelier was well beyond the KIA's means. He lamented the KIA's inability to afford a Chihuly chandelier to a friend in Seattle, but unbeknownst to Bridenstine, his friend was also a friend of Chihuly's. Soon, Bridenstine received a call from Chihuly's studio asking what the KIA could afford and what size it would like. Bridenstine explained the situation, and Dale Chihuly approved the deal. The KIA's *Kalamazoo Ruby Light Chandelier* is 8 by 7 by 7 feet, made of 464 individually blown pieces of glass attached to a stainless steel armature, weighing nearly 1,000 pounds. This is one of the signature pieces in the KIA collection.

The grand opening of the renovated and expanded Genevieve and Donald Gilmore Art Center was on Sunday, September 13, 1998. Visitors were greeted at the South Street entrance by Kirk Newman's *People*, Marcia Wood's *Procession*, and *Four Lines Oblique* by George Rickey before passing beneath Chihuly's dramatic chandelier. The two-story lobby was home to Helen Frankenthaler's *Code Blue*, the Calder mobile, *The D and the Delta*, and Roger Brown's *Americana*. Interior glass walls allowed the visitors to view the galleries from the lobby.

### Exhibitions and Acquisitions

The following year was the KIA's 75th Anniversary and featured the inaugural issue of *Sightlines Magazine*. A special anniversary exhibition, *A Taste for Splendor: Russian Imperial and European Treasures from Hillwood*, ran from February 28 to May 9, 1999. Hillwood was the Washington, D.C. residence of cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post, daughter and only child of W.C. Post. Ms. Post's collection included the largest collection of Russian art outside of Russia.

Kalamazoo was the fifth of eight cities on the collection's nationwide tour, and the exhibition became the KIA's first ticketed event. The show featured 185 of the finest pieces from Post's collection, including *Catherine the Great Easter Egg* by Carl Fabergé and Empress Alexandra's nuptial crown featuring silver and diamonds. Although the attendance was short of projections, *Splendor* broke previous KIA visitor records.

After 24 years of sharing her enthusiasm, passion, and expertise in art with the community, Helen Sheridan retired in 2000. One artist commented, "She's the heart of that place. She's invaluable."

The next blockbuster exhibition was *Millet to Matisse: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century French Paintings from Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Glasgow*, which opened for 12 weeks on May 21, 2004. Bridenstine and Don Desmett, director of collections and exhibitions, described this as the biggest exhibition in the history of the KIA. Kalamazoo was the smallest venue to host the exhibition during its seven-city North American tour. The exhibition included 64 paintings, 50 of which had never been on display in the United States. *Millet to Matisse* included works from the Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Modern periods by artists who worked in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including works by Vincent van Gogh, Camille Pissarro, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley. More than forty-six thousand visitors from all over the world viewed the exhibition.

*Chihuly in Kalamazoo* opened on September 25, 2005. The exhibition was specifically designed by Dale Chihuly for the KIA. It was the only major exhibition of the artist's work in North America during that time. Visitors were greeted in the lobby by a gleaming tower of glass, and hundreds of his brightly colored organic forms were spread throughout the museum. In addition to this exhibition, the KIA hosted ten days of the Hot Glass Roadshow sponsored by the Corning Museum of Glass and a personal visit from Chihuly.

This exhibition exceeded all expectations, setting a record of 58,673 visitors. Docents led 173 tours that included more than 6,000 school children and adults. The total economic impact of the exhibition on the local economy was estimated at \$5,200,000.

Bridenstine used the talents of his leadership team to support his claim that the KIA was the "Best Art Institute Between Detroit and Chicago." He was fortunate to have a series of excellent Directors of Exhibitions and Collections, starting with Helen Sheridan, followed by Don Desmett, then Susan VanArendonk, and finally Vicki Wright. These individuals were responsible for procuring and displaying twelve to sixteen temporary exhibitions each year, as well as maintaining the permanent collection galleries on the lower level. While none of the ticketed shows after *Chihuly* were as successful, they were nevertheless superb exhibitions. Included in this group were *Georgia O'Keeffe and Her Times: American Modernism from the Lane Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, and *Spared from the Storm: Masterworks from the New Orleans Museum of Art*. The latter show was a result of Hurricane Katrina's direct hit on New Orleans on August 29, 2005. This traveling exhibition featured some of the museum's most prized works from the 17th through the 20th centuries.

Susan VanArendonk brought 14 cars from the



**FIG. 13**  
Kirk and Georgia Newman, 2006

Gilmore Car Museum for a show titled *The Car as Art* in 2007 (fig. 12). Among the automobiles were a 1905 Packard, a 1929 Rolls-Royce, a 1929 Bentley, a 1933 Auburn Boattail Speedster, a 1957 Ford Thunderbird, and a 1968 Shelby Cobra. According to VanArendonk, getting the vehicles into the facility was a major challenge. Exhibitions were also curated by other KIA staff members. Denise Lisiecki, Director of the Art School, curated *The Figure Revealed: Contemporary American Figurative Paintings and Drawings* in 2008. The show contained 50 works by 25 of the leading American figurative artists of the past 25 years. Greg Waskowsky, KIA ARTREACH curator, put together *A Curator's Legacy: Helen Sheridan and the KIA Collection* in 2009. During Sheridan's tenure, nearly 600 works of art, or approximately one-sixth of the total collection at that time, were added to the permanent collection. Sheridan favored works by local artists but also recognized the significance of the KIA's collection of German Expressionist art, which she was able to expand during her tenure. She also had an affinity for Regionalist artists such as Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, who are also included in the collection. Vicki Wright worked for nearly two years to put together *The Wyeths: America's Artists*. The exhibition featured 90 paintings and drawings from three generations of Wyeths.

In 2006, the KIA renamed its art school The Kirk Newman Art School at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (KNAS). During his tenure as instructor and director,





**FIG. 14**  
KIA member Zandra Cole examines a Robert Rauschenberg lithograph for sale at the Art & Antique Auction, 1999

Newman created programs in multiple disciplines that encouraged the average student to experience the joy of making art (fig. 13). A rededication ceremony was held in March 2015 following a major financial gift to the school by Rosemary and John Brown.

Newman was able to attract outstanding artists to Kalamazoo from throughout the United States to lead stimulating workshops for students and faculty. Newer skills and techniques were quickly incorporated into courses designed by the KIA faculty. Subsequent school directors, Tom Kendall and Denise Lisiecki, also viewed these hands-on opportunities as extremely valuable for the KIA. As a ceramicist, Kendall invited potters of such fame that glazes or techniques were often named after them. Lisiecki's list of visiting painters was likewise impressive. A sample of visiting artists included Gregory Gillespie, Jack Beal, Sondra Freckelton, Martha Mayer Erlebacher, Steven Assael, Fred Wessel, and Jane Lund, all of whom have works in the KIA's permanent collection.

While Newman initiated the popular Children's Art Camps, Lisiecki expanded these camps and added new course offerings. For example, classes were offered in digital media, glassmaking, interior design, foreign languages, creative writing, Yoga, Pilates, knitting, and holiday-themed workshops. Art appreciation classes were popular, as was the opportunity to join KIA faculty on a biennial trip to Italy. Partnerships were formed with the Nature Center, Fetzer Institute,

Kalamazoo Valley Community College, and Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency (KRESA). The latter is for high school students to take classes for credit at the KIA in a program called Education for the Arts (EFA). KNAS's audience also expanded to include developmentally and physically disabled persons. Team building sessions were offered to corporations or businesses. Art therapy was offered for grieving families through Heartland Hospice and "Painting with Parkinson's" through the Parkinson's Foundation. Lisiecki also expanded the Holiday Art Sale to three days, and its annual sales approached 100,000 dollars. The school's success was detailed in the 2014-15 KIA Annual Report, which listed 70 professional artists as faculty, 282 classes offered in ten mediums, 2,694 children and adults who took an art class, 232 scholarships awarded to students, and 120 high schoolers participating in KRESA's EFA program.

Jim Bridenstine was an art collector, personally and professionally. He was an expert in 18th- and 19th-century American art, and his additions to the KIA's permanent collection representing this era were very impressive. He joked that instead of reading novels, he read art auction catalogs, always plotting and planning ways to improve the KIA's collection. He successfully increased the KIA's permanent collection by more than 1,700 works of art during his twenty-four-year tenure. The KIA, like most museums, owes most of its permanent collection to gifts by private collectors or donors. Such gifts led to permanent displays of Pre-Columbian gold, Oceanic art, and Tiffany glass. Meanwhile, in addition to funds from the capital campaign of 1995, many donors established funds for the purchase of art or assisted in the purchase of selected pieces. A highly successful fundraiser for art purchases was the biennial "Arts and Antique Auction" (fig. 14).

The spring 2010 issue of *Sightlines Magazine* marked Bridenstine's twentieth anniversary at the KIA. Acquisition highlights he pointed to at that time included *Egyptian Blue Jazz Bowl with Flared Rim* by Viktor Schreckengost, *Autumn Sunset at Greenwood Lake, New York* by Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Gerald Ford* by Andy Warhol, and *Yellow Stone Saga* by Peter Voulkos. Significant works added later to the collection included *Mars, Venus and Vulcan: The Forge of Vulcan* by John Singleton Copley, *The Marriage of Hiawatha* by Edmonia Lewis, and *Untitled (Couple)* by Charles Henry Alston.

One of Vicki Wright's areas of expertise was 20th-century American Modernism. She identified Manierre Dawson as an important artist to collect, and she was able to purchase *Mother and Child* (1912) in 2012, just before the art world realized Dawson's brilliance. Wright was also proud to facilitate acquiring *Fancy Hat*

by Milton Avery for the collection.

Bridenstine recognized early in his tenure at the KIA that it needed to diversify its collection. He added works by many well-known artists of African descent, including Henry Ossawa Tanner, James Van Der Zee, Ulysses Marshall, Hughie Lee-Smith, Faith Ringgold, Lorna Simpson, Charles Wilbert White, Jacob Lawrence, Frank Bowling, and Elizabeth Catlett.

On September 17, 2010, the KIA officially opened the Joy Light Gallery of Asian Art, a gift from longtime KIA supporter Timothy Light in honor of his wife. The Lights also established an acquisitions fund that allows for purchases for the permanent collection and pays for loan exhibitions. The design of the gallery was a collaboration between Wright and the Lights. The opening exhibition was *Strong Women, Beautiful Men: Japanese Portrait Prints from the Toledo Museum of Art*, which explored two recurring themes in Japanese printmaking: beauty and celebrity. A wide range of Asian art has been displayed in the gallery, ranging from contemporary Japanese ceramics to traditional landscapes such as the exhibition *Mountains and Waters: Landscape Paintings from China*. The Light Gallery also featured non-traditional shows like *Reaching into Infinity: Chul Hyun Ahn*, which situated Ahn's lightboxes in a darkened gallery, creating illusions of glowing geometric forms appearing to recede into infinity.

Fourteen years after its opening, the Joy Light Gallery hosted an exhibition titled *The Anniversary Show: Promised Gifts from the Joy and Timothy Light Collection*. This impressive display of Chinese and Japanese works on paper ranged from contemporary paintings to classical landscapes while demonstrating the rich artistic heritage of Chinese and Japanese art. In total, the Light family has given or committed 144 works of art to the KIA.

Before his retirement, Bridenstine wanted his final exhibition to be an elegant one. *Louis Comfort Tiffany* opened on May 31, 2014, and was divided into three components. *Tiffany Jewels* was curated solely by Vickie Wright, with the KIA as its sole venue. Searching coast to coast, she was able to find excellent examples of Tiffany's classic Art Nouveau jewelry. *Louis Comfort Tiffany's Quest of Beauty* displayed works from the KIA's impressive Tiffany collection. *Tiffany Glass: Painting with Color and Light* was curated by The Neustadt Collection of Tiffany Glass, New York, and displayed sixteen lamps, three windows, and seventy-five pieces of opalescent flat glass that illustrated the richness of color and light in Tiffany glasswork.

### A New Direction

Belinda Tate began her tenure as executive director of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts on September 8, 2014. A

graduate of Yale University and Wake Forest University, she became the first woman and first African American to hold the position. Before coming to Kalamazoo, she was the director of the Diggs Gallery on the campus of Winston-Salem State University.

One of Tate's priorities was engaging a younger audience. Among the many changes she instituted were lengthening the hours of the museum to attract people working downtown, ensuring public access to the permanent collection through an upgraded website, and adding QR Codes that allowed visitors to learn more about the art using their cellphones. Virtual tours of exhibitions became available through the KIA website in 2019.

With Denise Lisiecki, Tate began a one-year post-baccalaureate residency program so that students could work closely with selected KNAS instructors to help expand their portfolios and explore an art career. This program took eight to ten students per year and received applications from across the country. Another program co-sponsored with Kalamazoo College was a postdoctoral curatorial fellowship. The position was intended for recent Ph.D. holders who specialized in art history, cultural studies, or ethnic studies to expand the art history curriculum at Kalamazoo College while building research and curatorial capacity for the KIA.

Another of Tate's priorities was to increase diversity in the KIA's exhibitions. *Common Ground: African American Art from the Flint Institute of Arts, the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and the Muskegon Museum of Art* was a collaborative effort that surveyed 60 works featuring some of the most important African American artists from the 19th century to the present. It opened in August 2015. The following summer, *Rene Stout: Tales of the Conjure Woman* explored African cultural traditions in contemporary America. The summer of 2017 had two significant exhibitions. *Women Warriors: Portraits by Hung Liu* showcased the strength of Chinese women in the face of overwhelming persecution. The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and the American Federation of the Arts curated *Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist*. It was the first major retrospective exhibition of her long artistic career. WalkingStick is a member of the Cherokee Nation and one of the most celebrated artists of Native American ancestry. The exhibition opened with a Blessing Ceremony by elders, singers, drummers, and veterans from the Gun Lake Band of the Potawatomi, Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi, and the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi. The Blessing Ceremony was followed by a Blanketing Ceremony, which is a ceremony that denotes great respect for the recipient (WalkingStick). The afternoon continued with storytelling, drumming, and dancing by members of all

three nations.

In 2019, Tate also hired the KIA's first African American chief curator, Rehema Barber, whom she asked to steward *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*. This exhibition filled all four galleries on the main floor of the KIA and the entire Ward H. Nay Gallery on the lower level in the fall of 2019 and featured a diverse range of work created by artists of African descent from the last hundred years. *Black Refractions* looked at class, identity, social justice, and socio-economic power/status as seen through the eyes of these artists. The KIA was the only Midwest stop for this tour. Simultaneously, the lower level displayed *Where We Stand: Black Artists in Southwest Michigan* and *Resilience: African American Artists as Agents of Change*. The latter show featured works from the KIA permanent collection. One of the highlights of *Resilience* was *The Legend of John Brown* by Jacob Lawrence—22 color screen prints depicting the life of the famous abolitionist. *Where We Stand*, which was co-curated by Denise Lisecki and Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow Fari Nzinga, featured ten Michigan artists working in various media such as sculpture, photography, painting, ceramics, and printmaking. The KIA was also proud to be the only venue in the Midwest to host *David Park: A Retrospective*, the first major exhibition in more than 30 years of this influential but underrated artist. It opened in December 2019.

However, the most exciting project of 2019 was planning and preparing for the new installation of the permanent collection in the lower level, entitled *Unveiling American Genius*. Tate wished to illuminate the ingenuity and innovation that arise from all corners of society, while also featuring artists that reflect the KIA's commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion. As a result, Tate, Barber, and the curatorial team reimagined the museum's permanent collection installation by displaying works thematically rather than chronologically. This exhibition was curated by Barber and Associate Curator of Collections and Exhibitions Katherine Ransbottom. The exhibition included four sections. *Forming US: Land* examined the importance of cultural, social, and physical landscapes as they portray the story of the United States. In *Forming US: People* artists examined America's promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." *Design and Purpose* acknowledges many of the disciplines being taught in the Kirk Newman Art School and examines how design solves problems, communicates socio-economic or political status, and reflects ideas of beauty. The final section, *Rediscovering Abstraction*, explored artists who used intense color and innovative painting techniques to convey or evoke deep emotions.

*Unveiling American Genius* was scheduled to open early April 2020, but the COVID pandemic scuttled those plans. Despite this adversity, The KIA remained healthy. Tate was able to obtain over one million dollars in grants during the 2020-21 year. Denise Lisecki had KNAS classes available on Zoom by April 2020. The Holiday Art Sale was predominantly virtual, and educational programming continued virtually, too. Docents live-streamed gallery tours. Within a year, exhibitions were back open in the galleries, although the number of visitors was limited.

Tate grew the permanent collection by more than 10% during her nine years at the helm. 46% of the acquisitions during her tenure were by women and 32% by artists of color. Notable works added to the collection included objects by Romare Bearden, Philomena Williamson, Ibrahim Said, Dawoud Bey, Frank Bowling, Olga Albizu, Hung Liu, Chris Ofili, Edward Hopper, Charles Marion Russell, Tylonn Sawyer, Jeff Sonhouse, Barbara Takenaga, and Fred Wessel.

An important accomplishment under Tate's leadership was the KIA's re-accreditation by the American Alliance of Museums. She started the multi-year process with her leadership team early in her tenure, and the submission was successful on the first attempt. Tate departed to become the Melvin and Bren Simon Director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields in Indianapolis in October 2023.

The KIA begins its next century with a new Executive Director, Michelle Hargrave. Hargrave has extensive experience as a museum director, having come from the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa, where she was Executive Director and CEO. A Michigan native and graduate of the University of Michigan and the Bard Graduate Center, Hargrave also has experience at the national level, having worked for the American Federation of Arts in New York City for six years. She embraces the KIA's belief statement that the "visual arts are for everyone and they inspire, fulfill, and transform." The KIA is in excellent hands going forward.

**James W. Carter, MD**

Past President, KIA Board of Directors (2005–2018),  
KIA Docent (2014–present)