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# FAR & WIDE /



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DOUGLAS O. ROBSON



# INSIDE & OUT

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# A JOURNEY WITH ART

## REMEMBERING MARGARET ZUEHLKE ROBSON

It is impossible to predict what someone will hold close to their heart—why some things become cherished as others recede from view. Filtered through a kaleidoscope of perspective, experience, emotion, intention, spirituality, and psyche, every object becomes a puzzle piece to a mottled inner existence, with one foot in the world of the maker, another in the world of the person who later valued and saved it, and the nexus of that creative force sometimes offering a more profound understanding when considered together. Therein lies the mystery and surprise of the collector’s vision.

My mother, Margaret Elizabeth Zuehlke, was full of surprises, as a person and eventual collector. Born in 1932, she grew up in rural Minnesota in the 1930s and 1940s, during the lean years of the Great Depression. Her divorced mother taught piano to provide for Margaret and her three older siblings (Fig. 1). They weren’t poor, but they lived close enough to the poverty line to know want. As a young girl, Margaret survived on licorice gum and Shirley Temple movies (Fig. 2).

Catholicism and small-town mores shaped her formative years, providing a potent underpinning of stricture, superstition, and shame. A single-parent household in that era was often viewed with pity and judgment. This hardscrabble upbringing in Faribault—just south of Minneapolis—where she and her siblings shucked corn for extra money and Margaret later worked at a canning company, didn’t expose her to much beyond what she might have learned in school or seen at the local movie theater. As a regular churchgoer and a product of Catholic schools, it seems likely that Margaret’s exposure to arts and culture was limited to the religious art and iconography she encountered. She was hardly primed to become an art collector (Fig. 3).

Margaret did collect people. All stripes. This theme infused her life. Her world would expand dramatically in the decades ahead, but she steadfastly remained as conversant with blue-collar tradesmen as with heads of state. Early on, she harnessed an ability to connect with people at any station in life. She took a genuine interest in everyone. She asked questions. She had real affection and respect for the tradesmen and service providers in her life, often giving them endearing sobriquets such as “Art the Carpenter” or “Polly the Faux Painter.” Their craftsmanship grew important to her. The world she sought to inhabit placed high value on personal creativity, often rooted in frugality but never lacking flair, and on people who were adept at using tools and materials close at hand rather than purchased. Process, as well as product, mattered.

“Margie,” as some called her, majored in business and economics, graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1954. Afterward, she relocated to Chicago, where she began a successful and somewhat trailblazing career in banking. She was one of the early women executives in a prefeminist society, holding what the *Chicago Daily Tribune* called, in a 1958 article about her, “a ‘man’s’ job”; the *Chicago Sun-Times* later featured a piece as well (Fig. 4).<sup>1</sup> These years before

Fig. 1. Margaret with her siblings, Faribault, Minnesota, ca. 1930s; left to right: Mary, Margaret, Jim, and Tom Zuehlke Fig. 2. Margaret (right) and her childhood best friend playing dress-up in Margaret’s grandmother’s wedding gown, late 1930s Fig. 3. Margaret, graduation day, Faribault High School, Minnesota, 1950 Fig. 4. *Chicago Sun-Times* article highlighting Margaret as a woman entering the male-dominated profession of banking, February 7, 1959. Photos by Jack Lenahan



she met my father are little known to me. They were, however, punctuated with secrets, loss, and grief—themes that would shadow-shape Margaret’s outlook on life. I discovered, only after my mother died, that she had put her first child up for adoption before she married my father. Three decades later, she would lose a second to an accidental overdose. A third child would come out as gay, which produced in my mother an attendant loss of expectations. What became a prominent, conventional existence on the surface often shielded complexities that later inspired deeper interpretations.

The presidential nomination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy captivated Margaret, whose enthusiasm and organizational acumen were quickly noticed—certainly by Sargent Shriver, who became a personal friend and tapped her to run a key district in the campaign. My mother left her banking career to join “Operation Kennedy” in 1960, serving as executive director of Citizens for Kennedy-Johnson. She interacted with Kennedy and his family firsthand, including JFK’s sister Eunice, who had married Shriver in 1953. Margaret was with them all in Hyannis Port on election night (Fig. 5).

Less than a month after Kennedy was elected this country’s first Catholic president, Margaret Zuehlke married my father, John Edwin Robson (Fig. 6). They had met two years earlier when residing in the same Chicago apartment building. As the story goes, my father made frequent pretense of bumming household goods like salt and sugar from Margaret and her roommates—until my mother suggested he summon the courage to ask one of them out. Margaret’s connection to Shriver, who kick-started the Peace Corps in 1961 and ran on the Democratic ticket as the vice presidential candidate in 1972, lasted several years into her marriage. Their correspondence reveals her efforts to help him get the Peace Corps off the ground, including recommending personnel and organizing conferences. Their affiliation tailed off over time, but the impact of these formative experiences remained a lasting source of self-confidence for Margaret.



## MARRIAGE

I don't know how my mother felt about giving up her professional identity for marriage and motherhood, not to mention the constraints those roles entailed in the 1960s. I do know she threw herself into these new responsibilities with gusto and excelled in the details of domestic life. My brother, Matthew, was born in 1962; I followed in 1965. My father, a Yale-educated, Harvard-trained lawyer and nonpracticing Jew from the Chicago suburbs, bore the burdens of a young attorney with ambitions. He busted his backside while my mother took the reins at home, raising the children and managing the household. Whatever career aspirations she harbored were set aside. She never returned to full-time employment, and domesticity became her default creative outlet (Fig. 7).

In 1966, my father's decision to leave his law firm and take a post in the Lyndon B. Johnson administration set their lives on a new trajectory. It was the first of several government positions he would hold, the subsequent posts all served under Republican presidents (Fig. 8). Between Washington stints, my father worked variously as a lawyer, business executive, and academic, oscillating between the private and public sectors for decades. Our family moved frequently between Washington, DC, and Chicago, living also in Atlanta, San Francisco, Santa Fe, and finally back in Chicago, where my mother spent the final two years of her life.

How did art fit into this itinerant equation? It had unassuming beginnings. John and Margaret revered the American democratic experiment. Every Fourth of July, my father read the Declaration of Independence aloud at the breakfast table to whoever was present. They had come of age in the 1950s, when the United States emerged from World War II as the preeminent economic and military superpower. The country had a new self-confidence and far-reaching optimism. In the art

**Fig. 5.** Margaret talking with John F. Kennedy on election night, Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, November 8, 1960 **Fig. 6.** Margaret and John Robson on their wedding day, Chicago, 1960 **Fig. 7.** Robson family, late 1960s; from left: Matthew, Margaret, John, and Douglas **Fig. 8.** Surrounded by his family, John Robson (center) is sworn in as chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board by Supreme Court Associate Justice William H. Rehnquist for President Gerald R. Ford (far right), at the White House, April 1975



world, New York asserted its growing prominence with the rise of abstract expressionism, as artists Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and others tilted attention away from Paris.

Those artists were too avant-garde for my parents' taste—and frankly out of their price range. By inclination or circumstance, their early collecting telegraphed patriotism, and veered toward the folksy and accessible (CAT. 1). In those early days, my father played a substantial role in their collaboration. The antiques and Americana they used to furnish their home reflected the almost preordained, white-shoe environment in which they lived. This gradual amalgamation of hand-made objects and antiques mirrored my parents' lives and characters. They were predictable people with midwestern roots that appreciated the enduring form and function of everything from a rusted weathervane to fly-fishing rods and reels (accumulated from another shared endeavor). Reflecting on it now, I wonder if discovering art together served an unspoken and subconscious purpose during their forty-year marriage: it helped transcend their political, religious, and socioeconomic differences, providing an emotional bridge that preserved their independence.

A seminal, early influence on my mother was a DC socialite named Martha Bartlett, wife of Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Charles L. Bartlett.<sup>2</sup> The couple's claim to fame was introducing John F. Kennedy to Jacqueline Bouvier—though it was Martha who had first made Bouvier's acquaintance. Raven-haired and covered in freckles, Martha was the epitome of preppy. The Bartletts lived nearby, and Martha decided to take my mother, a Washington neophyte, under her wing to help her navigate life “inside the Beltway.” This education ranged from dinner party tips to decorating advice to social networking. I believe this association solidified my mother's interest in American antiques, which dovetailed with the burgeoning patriotism in the Robson household.

The 1960s and 1970s likewise coincided with my mother's on-the-job training as a hostess for the insiders with whom my parents began to fraternize. During these and later Washington



iterations, my mother threw elaborate, largely home-cooked dinner parties for top journalists and elected officials, vice presidents, Supreme Court justices, the head of the Federal Reserve, and many others.

In the holiday season, Margaret transformed our kitchen into a makeshift peanut brittle factory. She would order pounds of raw peanuts, large bags of sugar, and other ingredients, followed by a monthlong process from Thanksgiving to Christmas, during which my mother slathered the fragrant, sticky substance across the kitchen counters to cool. The result was a homemade treat that she mailed or delivered to friends and dignitaries around the world, including President Johnson. The whole process was ambitious, industrious, and disruptive, which presaged the same leanings that drove her collecting.

As she melded into the milieu of high society, Margaret never shed the small-town sensibility that grounded her character (Fig. 9). She developed her own kind of sophistication, one that would blend urbanity with commonsense pragmatism. Her well-regarded dinner parties were hands-on: she cracked and roasted the nuts, shopped for the delicacies, set the tables, and picked and arranged the flowers. A true midwesterner, she pulled off corn husks herself, as she had as a child. With increasing skill as the years went on, she could pull off one hell of a dinner party (Fig. 10).<sup>3</sup>

## EARLY COLLECTING

My childhood memories of art collecting were of parent-only excursions to go “antiquing” in the mid-1970s, when we lived in Chicago. Antiquing was becoming more mainstream at this time; my parents took road trips to rural Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Indiana. Dressed in blue jeans and flannel shirts (or something equally comfortable and utilitarian), my parents would gleefully stake out small-town shops or roadside stands. The objects they returned with—

Fig. 9. Margaret Robson (right), early 1970s Fig. 10. Margaret Robson featured in “How to Throw a Party That Works,” *Chicago Magazine*, December 1980 Fig. 11. The Robson home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2011, showing artworks, including Stephan W. Polaha’s carved wooden eagle (CAT. 4) and Elijah Pierce’s *Elephant* (CAT. 42), on the table in the foreground Fig. 12. Margaret with cast-iron eagle sculpture (CATS. 2, 3) in Chicago, 2013



furniture, quilts, weathervanes—slowly populated the living room and common areas of our home, offsetting the staid chintz slipcovers and curtains with character and color.

These missions remained regular events during turns in Washington and elsewhere as well. Happenstance discoveries and an eclectic aesthetic, shaped in large part by those early forays into small-town America, persisted and came to define my mother's collection, from a pair of large cast-iron eagles from the White Eagle Oil Company to Stephan W. Polaha's carved wooden figures, to walking-stick snakes and more (Figs. 11, 12; **CATS. 2–4**).

Yet gradually, their collecting expressed something else, something multidimensional and primal. It reflected a more informed and complex understanding of the society in which they lived. It represented a comfort with their own identity as well as a subtle aversion to the parameters of custom and a willingness to embrace difference. They were a hard-to-categorize couple—on the one hand, extremely conventional, but in art, increasingly beyond definition.

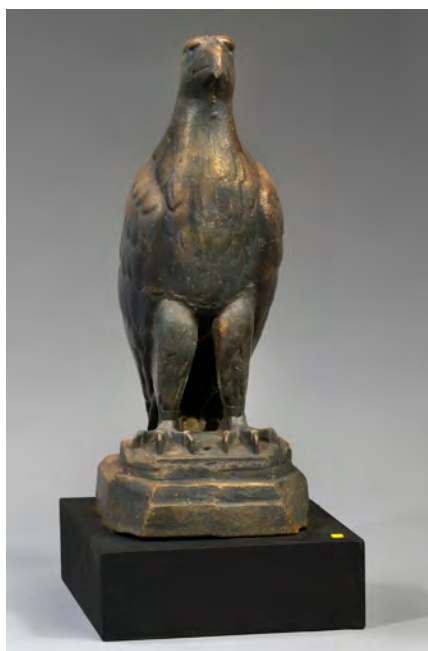
It was in the late 1970s, with our lives back and forth between Chicago and Washington, when my parents became acquainted with Carl Hammer and his then wife, Trish.<sup>4</sup> Hammer was dabbling in antiques and teaching high school in the Chicago suburbs, having not yet committed to running a full-time gallery. “We were exchanging ideas and the folk movement was altering,” recalls Hammer. “We were working from the antiques world and trying to put it into a contemporary art context.”<sup>5</sup>

As their interests expanded beyond antiques and Americana, my parents became increasingly drawn to the stories of artists, as well as the expansive array of reasons they had made what they did. One of the first such artworks my parents acquired was by an artist who would enthrall them for years to come. It was around 1983 when they purchased a pencil drawing by Bill Traylor, which he had made in the late 1930s (**CAT. 5**). Traylor, who had been born enslaved in rural Alabama, took up drawing and painting in his late eighties, devising spare but compelling



narratives to tell his own story. Traylor's intense, abstract configurations on discarded pieces of cardboard revealed both late-life industry and a unique vision that struck a powerful chord for my parents. Was it Traylor who awoke in them a critical understanding of that universal human impulse to transcend the limits of identity through creation?<sup>6</sup>

Gradually, their art collection became a shared means of expression, a way both to inject beauty and pleasure into daily life and to live with thought-provoking and expectation-thwarting objects and images. Across the country, notions about art and artists were expanding, and as curator Leslie Umberger details in this volume, museums and individual collectors were waking up to an untapped wellspring of creativity that extended well beyond the mainstream.<sup>7</sup> For collectors, passions were percolating, many fueled by the 1982 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Black Folk Art*





**CAT. 1.**

Eddie Arning  
*Untitled*  
(*American Flag*)  
ca. 1964

**CAT. 2.**

Unidentified artist  
*Untitled (Cast Iron*  
*Eagle from White*  
*Eagle Oil Company)*  
ca. 1920

**CAT. 3.**

Unidentified artist  
*Untitled (Cast Iron*  
*Eagle from White*  
*Eagle Oil Company)*  
ca. 1920

**CAT. 4.**

Stephan W. Polaha  
*Eagle*  
ca. 1975

**CAT. 5.**

Bill Traylor  
*Untitled (Mule, Dog, and*  
*Scene with Chicken)*  
July 1939



in America, 1930–1980, which most certainly influenced my parents. By the time our family relocated to Atlanta in the late 1980s, my parents—increasingly my mother on her own—were connecting with various “pickers,” such as Georgia-based Jimmy Allen.<sup>8</sup>

Allen turned Margaret on to the work of woodcarver Ulysses Davis. Becoming interested in Davis signaled another early inflection point at which my mother markedly pivoted from decorator to connoisseur—from gravitating toward tradition-based objects to those that, instead, expressed highly unique visions. An African American raised in rural Georgia, Davis, a barber by trade, carved exquisite objects. His creations embody the storytelling atmosphere inherent to the southern barbershop, ranging from quotidian to wild without ever owing anyone an explanation. An artist like Davis, whose subjects ranged from portrait busts to phallic totems and beasts of lore, was a perfect bridge (CATS. 6–8). If social norms had largely scripted much of my mother’s life, the realm of collecting was improvisational theater, free-form and uncontained. “She loved the off-ness of it,” says longtime friend and interior designer Berta Shapiro (Fig. 13).<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent moves from the South back to the mid-Atlantic and then to the West Coast amplified my mother’s interest in the creativity she saw from region to region. She started to attend auctions and work regularly with galleries such as Phyllis Kind, Ricco/Maresca, and Cavin-Morris.<sup>10</sup> She collected works by European artists, including the Swiss painter, writer, and musician Adolf Wölfli and Italian artist Carlo Zinelli, both figures in art brut, whose stories and artworks were compelling in equal measure (CATS. 9, 10). But it was artists from her own country that drew

**CAT. 6.**

Ulysses Davis  
*George Washington*  
ca. 1940s

**CAT. 7.**

Ulysses Davis  
*Lincoln*  
1940

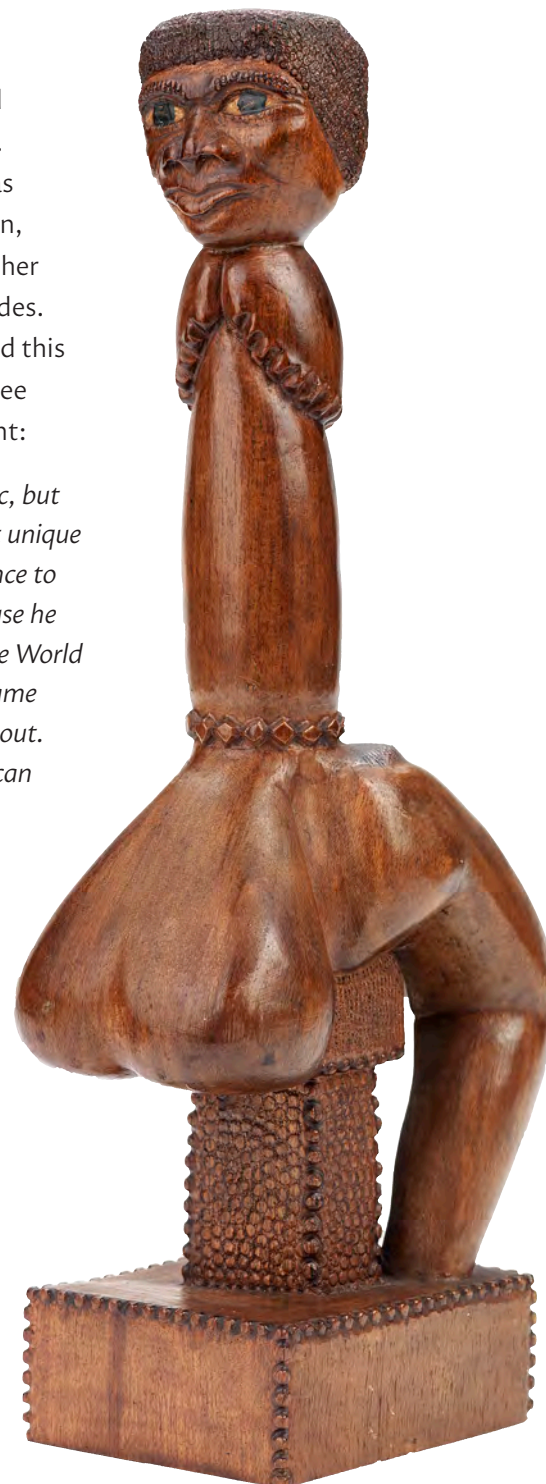
**CAT. 8.**

Ulysses Davis  
*Where Life Comes From*  
ca. 1950–90

her in a more meaningful way. Margaret’s stalwart belief in liberal democracy and individuality served as a through line to her expanding collecting vision. “I think she really believed in the ideal of ‘America’ as an expansive and democratic place,” says Shari Cavin, who has run Cavin-Morris Gallery in New York with her husband, Randall Morris, for more than three decades. Cavin recalls Margaret collecting works that reflected this Stars and Stripes inclination, notably by Jon Serl (see CAT. 100), but with her own take on what that meant:

*Jon Serl was eccentric, and extremely individualistic, but for Margaret, this was part of a bigger idea—that unique and true selves were more important than adherence to norms or ideals. Serl said he started to paint because he was trying to capture a grittier American life before World War II. He felt that the texture of the country became homogenous after World War II; it was flattening out. His paintings were a way of honoring what American individuality meant, before advertising and the desire for possessions turned the country bland. He championed the underbelly of America. I think she picked up on that, the paradox of a postwar national identity that superficially promoted individuality but in reality, rarely embraced anyone that veered too far off the path of “normalcy.”<sup>11</sup>*

While living in the Bay Area in the 1990s, Margaret learned about Creative Growth Art Center, the innovative studio for developmentally disabled artists.<sup>12</sup> She became an instant supporter and early collector of work by artists including Judith Scott, Donald Mitchell, and Kerry Damianakes.<sup>13</sup> Her instincts were bold. “Margaret was one





of the first with Judith Scott's work to say, 'I'm buying this,'" recalls Tom di Maria, the longtime face of Creative Growth who now serves as its director of external relations. "Judith was barely a blip on the map at that time. It's hard to remember how gutsy that was."<sup>14</sup>

Scott was afflicted by the genetic disorder Down syndrome; this, in addition to being deaf, severely limited her means for language or other modes of communication. The environment at Creative Growth allowed Scott to defy these constraints. She spent her days making three-dimensional pieces, layers of wrapped, multicolored fibers that both shrouded and teased objects trapped inside. Scott's mental isolation made her flowing abstractions all the more complex, confounding, and, to many, utterly dismissible. Her sculptures prompted profound questions about the meaning of art, the role of the maker's identity and intentions, and, ultimately, the human need to communicate by any means possible. My mother was instantly riveted by Scott and her creative drive—sensing, decades before many others did, the importance of this artist, who challenged every possible convention for contemporary art.

Di Maria remembers that Margaret also championed his early efforts to position Creative Growth at art fairs—a tack not always met with open arms by established galleries.<sup>15</sup> "She understood that this moment [the late 1990s] was a fundamental shift in how outsider artists could be seen and collected," he says. "She had a contemporary outlook.... [Margaret] wasn't afraid to dive in with artists, either; I remember an interaction with her and Dan Miller where he was spelling out words and she was just fascinated. She wanted to get in there and get her hands dirty."<sup>16</sup> Di Maria's impression of Margaret was that of a woman who wasn't captivated by "white cube" gallery types and felt confident taking risks without second-guessing herself.<sup>17</sup> "It was a fun time, an adventure, and she didn't need someone to tell her what was interesting," he recalls. "She liked to champion the underdog. Maybe she saw herself as an underdog in relation to the art world."<sup>18</sup>

### FULL STEAM AHEAD

It was during this fin de siècle period in San Francisco that my mother demonstrated how much her perspective had broadened, seeing beauty even in the increasingly prevalent and poignant handmade signs of the homeless; it further contextualized her appreciation of the work of self-taught artists and spoke to her growing awareness of creativity as a powerful and ever-present force. These objects also resonated with her curiosity in fringe and ephemera—in this case the most utilitarian of artistic endeavors from people spanning the fiercely independent to those in urgent need of help: one moment to catch the eye, solicit aid, or trigger an ironic smile of a passerby.

Artistic expression entered Margaret's life in unexpected ways, especially when it could illuminate voices that might otherwise go unheard. Social consciousness and detours from expectation became

#### CAT. 9.

Adolf Wölfli

*Blatt Aus Heft #15*

1917

**CAT. 10.**

Carlo Zinelli

*Untitled*

(recto/verso)

September 26, 1968



another connective arc of her collection. Long-standing friend and art lover Richard Sinkoff saw her character as one that ultimately dovetailed perfectly with her collecting endeavor: “She had a great deal of empathy for people who stood outside society.”<sup>19</sup>

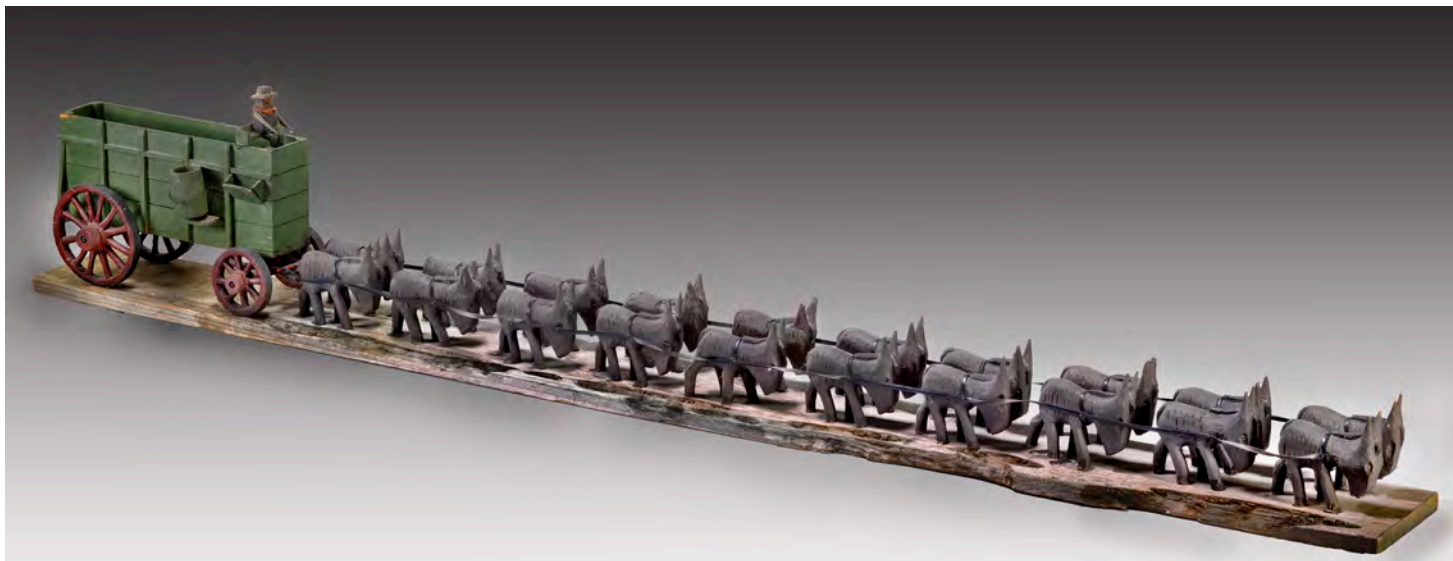
Yet three decades into collecting, my mother and father didn’t think of themselves as art insiders, even as their collection grew. “We are *not* collectors,” my father is quoted as saying in a 1999 book describing how people live with their art. “To be a collector sounds pretentious.... These paintings are part of our life.... I think that it is the humor and earthiness in them that I like more than anything.”<sup>20</sup>

When my father died in 2002, art became my mother’s *raison d’être*. It focused her energies. It crystallized her own personal journey. She still engaged with her established social sphere, but like many of the artists she may have identified with, she resisted pigeonholing forces. She had already left her small-town upbringing for the big city. She married a Jew, despite a habituated sense of Catholicism. Her children challenged mainstream trajectories and her own expectations—from musical tastes to sexual orientation. To her credit, she attended Grateful Dead concerts and accompanied me to gay pride parades. She responded to her life and familial experiences—and grew. Outwardly, my mother developed strong but varied political affiliations at different times in her life, but she could be hard to pinpoint. More than anything, she was independent. Cavin, the gallerist, remembers this spirit in the way Margaret responded to the “extraordinary individuality” of artists, “that spirit that says, ‘I must make this, I am here, this is who I am.’”<sup>21</sup>

To Margaret’s disappointment, she had no grandchildren, but compensated with a tapestry of relationships with younger adults and godchildren. Art became her progeny. At some point after my father’s death, I became aware that my mother didn’t really *collect* art—she cohabitated with it. Art was her paramour, her intimate. It provided an ongoing and vibrant conversation. “She often talked about how to live with the art,” says Brooke Davis Anderson, who worked closely with Margaret during her curatorial tenure at the American Folk Art Museum in New York.<sup>22</sup>

To wit: My mother called a carved figure by Calvin and Ruby Black by name—*Gladys*—and seemed to have a running dialogue with her (see **CATS. 111, 112**). A mummy-like sculpture by Judith Scott hung somewhat ominously in her bedroom—a circadian reminder of the secret value of *objets trouvés* (**CAT. 11**). She placed a weighty, outdoor-scale, limestone birdbath by William Edmondson in the center of her Chicago apartment, where she bestowed upon it two utilitarian functions: to conceal a pipe opening in the floor, and as a delicate staging ground for her unopened mail. An eight-foot-tall self-portrait of Howard Finster towered in the vestibule, like a friendly sentry (see **CATS. 31, 86**). She delighted in stuffing chili peppers into a carved wagon with mules (made by an unknown artist) as the centerpiece for her “chili pepper” dinner parties





in Santa Fe (CAT. 12). There was a joy and gentle irreverence in the way she employed the artworks that surrounded her. They were friends and family.

Ultimately my mother extended her interest in art and artists beyond collecting. She was a staunch advocate for the loosely defined genre encompassing folk, self-taught, and differently abled artists. She supported galleries, sat on museum boards, and was known for attending any and all lectures and symposia.<sup>23</sup> In the last years of her life, my mother supported the self-taught ecosystem with gifts to museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Wisconsin, and Atlanta’s High Museum of Art.<sup>24</sup> “She was relentless as a patron,” remembers Anderson, who further notes that while collectors of self-taught art were not uncommon by the 1990s, it was rare for a patron to also realize the critical need for scholarship in this area—and act on it. “She had a way of community-building that almost no one in the outsider art world was doing.”<sup>25</sup>

By the time my mother died, she had created in her home small tributes to artists who had transformed their own humble, personal surroundings into special places: a cluster of items from Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden; a bold mixed-media construction by Wisconsin artist Simon Sparrow that explodes like a glitter bomb in one’s eye; and the whimsical but irresistible pile of cast-iron railroad spikes—each one hand-painted with dots and tiny faces—from the Michigan art environment of Albert “Kid” Mertz (see CATS. 58, 87–91, 113). Margaret placed equal value on works by little-known artists and those who became, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, “blue-chip” sellers, such as Chicago’s Henry Darger, and Martín Ramírez, who died alone in a state hospital in California. Religion and Americana remained themes that drew her, from Eddie Arning’s drawing *Untitled (American Flag)* to David Butler’s *Untitled (Mary with Baby Jesus)* (see CATS. 1, 37). Anyone opening a closet door to discover her trove would have been mesmerized by its eclectic depth.

**CAT. 11.**

Judith Scott  
*Untitled*  
1994

**CAT. 12.**

Unidentified artist  
*Untitled (Twenty Mule Team)*  
20th century

## FAMILY AFFAIR

In 2014, at age eighty-two, my mother died rather unexpectedly. She hadn't formulated a specific plan for her now more than hundred-object collection.<sup>26</sup> Like a newborn dropped at my doorstep, it was something I didn't think I was prepared to nurture. Over the years, my mother had, of course, baited my interest by declaring (in that provocatively ironic way of hers), "Someday you're going to have to deal with all this." I wondered: Was it a puzzle she'd bequeathed to help me piece together her life? She had offered me little direction, either verbally or conceptually, about how she wanted it carried forward. Perhaps she expected it to speak for itself, to channel something she couldn't fully articulate, a Judith Scott sculpture writ large.

What could I draw upon? Beyond my mother's influence, I trace personal art edification back to my undergraduate days at Yale—notably, Vincent J. Scully Jr.'s dazzling lectures that canvassed prehistoric times to the Renaissance, and Robert Farris Thompson's flailing "guerilla scholarship" orations on New York mambo ("Master T," as we knew him), which included guest appearances from the likes of Keith Haring, best known for his graffiti-inspired drawings, which adorned New York's subway stations in the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> Otherwise, I formed my artistic education mostly by osmosis, absorbing a rudimentary foundation for collecting simply by exposure. Everything my mother surrounded our family with impacted me over time, from Chicago artist Joseph E. Yoakum's luminous landscape drawings to the compelling root figures Bessie Harvey made in her adopted home state of Tennessee. I attended museum exhibitions, both with and without my mother. Before and after her death, I waded into the water and began to acquire artworks, mostly by artists from the Bay Area, where I live. My own association with Creative Growth, during and after the time our family lived in California, provided connective tissue to artists

Fig. 13. Margaret Robson (left) and Berta Shapiro, mid-1980s

Fig. 14. Laura Craig McNellis, 1992; photo by Libba Gillum

Fig. 15. Douglas with his mother, Margaret, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2005; photo by Scott Saraceno

Fig. 16. Douglas in his San Francisco home with Judith Scott's *Untitled (Medicine Bottle)* (CAT. 96), 2021; photo by Scott Saraceno



my mother had exposed me to early on, particularly Judith Scott and Dan Miller, whose intense paper drawings became my first acquisitions from the Oakland-based studio-cum-gallery.

The learning curve accelerated exponentially after my mother died. My profession as a sports-writer hadn't positioned me particularly well for art connoisseurship or caring for and crafting a collection. Thus began a more intense process of delving into the realm of self-taught art and artists, to better understand and manage the array my mother had cared so much about. I read. I reached out. Almost without warning, I realized that I was both responsible for and energized by carrying my mother's torch forward.

Practically speaking, I didn't have the space or the wherewithal to make use of or manage the ongoing stewardship of so many artworks, and I knew that the legacy of the artists who had made them should factor into the fate of these objects. I decided to place most of the collection in the care of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) in Washington, DC, and to promise to the Museum a number of works that were important to me personally, that I still wanted to live with. This made sense, and more importantly, it felt right. My family had connections to Washington; I had spent some of my childhood there, and I knew the Smithsonian's reputation as a world-class art institution. But SAAM was also a pioneer—the first major art institution to embrace self-taught makers, to regularly include their work in the Museum's galleries and position it as an important element of American art, not as the work of “lesser” makers. It seemed the ideal place for buttressing scholarship, the ongoing care the artworks would need, and a far-reaching public embrace of art beyond the mainstream.<sup>28</sup>

In the ensuing years, I suppose I honed my own eye. I tapped into knowledgeable resources—curators such as Brooke Davis Anderson and Leslie Umberger; gallerists including Shari Cavin, Carl Hammer, and Frank Maresca; visionary advocates like Tom di Maria; as well as other art





**CAT. 13.**

Laura Craig McNellis  
*Untitled (Fudgesicles)*  
ca. 1982

**CAT. 14.**

Laura Craig McNellis  
*Untitled (White Plate  
with Sandwich)*  
ca. 1982

**CAT. 15.**

Dan Miller  
*Untitled (DM 847)*  
2016

**CAT. 16.**

Dan Miller  
*Untitled (DM 848)*  
2016



collectors and passionate supporters of self-taught artists I've met along the way. The ongoing input of consultant Caitlin O'Meara, who worked with my mother near the end of her life, has proven invaluable.<sup>29</sup> I continued to collect artists my mother had cared about, such as Judith Scott and Dan Miller, but also discovered artists and works that spoke to me and that she adored, including Tennessee native Laura Craig McNellis (born 1957), who is on the autism spectrum and developed a painting practice when she was very young (Fig. 14; **CATS. 13, 14**).

If family lineage drew me to art beyond the mainstream, my own engagement is personal and entirely voluntary. Whether by the daring eccentricity of William Hawkins, the urgency of Dan Miller (**CATS. 15, 16**), Nellie Mae Rowe's driving need to define herself and live creatively, or the intellect and precision of Achilles G. Rizzoli, I am moved in many facets. I respect the craftsmanship and clever reimagining of discarded materials. I value the singularity of vision

that can arise from blurred circumstances. I love the diversity that encompasses a tapestry of emotions and ideas—from skillful, goofy, and ingenious to joyous, reflective, and defiant. In a word, unabashed.

I need to feel some visceral connection to a piece. It must petition my senses, and not only visually. If known, the artist's life—the lived experience that shaped that object or image into being—ineestimably enhances the experience of encountering that work, as I believe it did for my mother. Grasping the human component of the story adds a critical layer of historical, emotional, and intentional context. When I connect with a piece of art, it usually evolves over time, changing as I do, providing new pleasures or perspectives.

Few in my personal sphere are familiar with the artists that interested my mother. This has created opportunities to educate and share, although, increasingly, it's not uncommon for friends and guests at my home to recognize an artwork by better-known artists like Henry Darger or Bill Traylor. These artists have been encroaching on the mainstream contemporary art scene, particularly during the last two decades, as amply evidenced in media coverage, major museum exhibitions and acquisitions, and blue-chip gallery interest.

As with my mother, it's impossible to predict how this artistic journey will unfold, what objects I will continue to hold dear. I have no precise destination in mind. I hope to complement what she achieved in her collecting and fold my own sensibility into the mix, a generational dovetailing of sorts (Figs. 15, 16). My focus will likely center on artists from the United States, not necessarily those born in this country, but more essentially, those whose lives and works powerfully embody a unique American experience. I realize, as I believe my mother did, that so much of the American story remains untold—and that what happened in this country at earlier moments can help us make sense of where we are today. The compelling visual language that Margaret collected, and that I now collect and care for, remains a whisper but is growing in amplitude. Making these artists heard is increasingly important in political winds that can shift in a moment. In times when difference and artistic expression stand on less firm ground, the artists in the Robson Family Collection are beacons of resistance and potential. Often operating on the margins of convention—economically, socially, neuro-diversely—they defy the constraints that hem so many in. I value these distinct perspectives, these unique intonations. I hope this journey leads me to a greater appreciation of the artists I know, and to a discovery of new voices I have yet to hear.

## NOTES

1. Joanne Knoch, “Women in Business,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 25, 1958. In a similar article, the *Chicago Sun-Times* noted Margaret was the only woman to complete the “College Men’s Training Program” at the Continental Illinois National Bank & Trust Co., where she worked; Bette Scanlon, “How One Woman Carves Bank Career,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 7, 1959.
  2. Richard Goldstein, “Charles L. Bartlett, Journalist and a Kennedy Matchmaker, Dies at 95,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/19/us/charles-l-bartlett-dead-journalist-kennedy.html>. Bartlett won the Pulitzer Prize in 1956 while at the *Chattanooga Times*. As with many women married to important men in that era, less is known of his wife, Martha, who is cited in the article as first “befriending” Jacqueline Bouvier before the couple introduced her to JFK in Washington’s clubby circles.
  3. Jane Salzfass Freiman, “A Strategy for Entertaining: With Organized Planning and Informal Style, Chicago’s Margaret and John Robson Produce a Convivial Dinner for 12 Friends,” *Cuisine*, May 1982, 38–42, 72, 74, 76, 78.
  4. My family first moved from Chicago to Washington, DC, in 1966, when my father went to work for the Johnson administration and eventually took the post of undersecretary at the Transportation Department. We returned to Chicago in 1970, where my father continued to practice law; moved back to Washington in 1975, where he became chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board; returned to Chicago in 1977, where my father was COO at the pharmaceutical firm G. D. Searle & Co.; relocated to Atlanta in 1987, where my father became dean of the Goizueta Business School at Emory University; returned to Washington in 1990, where my father became deputy secretary of the Treasury; moved to San Francisco in 1993, where my father joined the boutique investment banking firm Robertson Stephens; and in 2001, returned to Washington, where my father became chairman of the Export-Import Bank of the United States. After his death in 2002, my mother lived in Washington and then moved to their second home in Santa Fe around 2006. In 2012 she returned to Chicago.
  5. Carl Hammer, interview with the author, August 30, 2018. Carl and Trish Hammer opened Hammer & Hammer Folk Art Gallery in Chicago in 1979. The business became Carl Hammer Gallery around 1984; it is still in operation under that name today.
  6. Traylor’s use of discarded, often soiled pieces of paper and cardboard might have aided my mother in seeing the comprehensiveness of an artist’s personal journey as an inherent part of the artwork. Many years later, Margaret undertook a collection-within-a-collection of signs and depictions made by homeless people on whatever scraps of paperboard they could find. Although these signs are dramatically different than Traylor’s autobiographical imagery, a palpable connection exists between these disenfranchised makers: circumstances impelled them to create. Traylor recorded the brutal truth of life for Blacks in segregated Alabama; others gave voice to another searing reality: the basic human need for food and shelter. For both, the deceptive simplicity of their creations conveys a deeper, lived complexity.
  7. In her essay in this volume, Leslie Umberger discusses the history of American self-taught art as a growing phenomenon in the larger art world.
  8. Jimmy Allen was based in Atlanta and called a “folk-art scout extraordinaire” by the *New York Times* in 1995. For more information on Allen, see Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, “From the Sahara of the Bozart to the Shoe That Rode the Howling Tornado: Collecting Folk Art in the South,” in *Let It Shine: Self-Taught Art from the T. Marshall Hahn Collection* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2001), 58; and Patricia Leigh Brown, “42,000 Miles a Year on the Antiques Track,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1995.
- While workaholicism had always permeated my father’s multifaceted career (see note 4, above), his transition to academia at Emory, in 1987, represented a significant leap. My mother continued to branch out on her own in this period, serving, remarkably, on the Georgia State Boxing Commission. A 1987 article on her appointment describes how my father was too busy to serve, so my mother stepped up: “He was approached to go on the boxing commission, and his commitments are tremendous at this point, and I asked him, if he didn’t have time, would they consider me?” Margaret Robson, quoted in Duane Riner, “Newcomer Appointed to State Boxing Board,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 29, 1987.

9. Berta Shapiro, interview with the author, August 23, 2018.
10. Phyllis Kind (1933–2018) opened Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago in 1967, specializing in old-master prints before finding her niche representing Chicago artists, trained and untrained. In 1975 Kind opened a second branch in New York’s SoHo district; in 1998 she closed the Chicago branch. The New York branch moved in 2006 to Chelsea and remained open until Kind retired in 2009. Ricco-Johnson Gallery, created by Roger Ricco and Elizabeth Johnson, began in SoHo in 1979 and became Ricco/Maresca Gallery when Ricco formed a new partnership with Frank Maresca in 1985. It has moved over the years from Tribeca, back to SoHo, and finally to Chelsea in 1997. Roger Ricco retired in 2017 and the gallery is run today by Frank Maresca. Cavin-Morris Gallery has been run by the married team of Shari Cavin and Randall Morris since 1985, having worked privately for several years before opening their first gallery space in Tribeca. The gallery moved to SoHo in 1992 and to Chelsea in 2006, where it remains today.
11. Shari Cavin, interview with author, January 14, 2019, and emails with author, April 22, 2021.
12. Creative Growth was established in Oakland, California, by Elias Katz and Florence Ludins-Katz in 1974, as a creative work space and commercial gallery outlet for adults with physical and developmental disabilities. The Katzes’ mission was both therapeutic and creative, and also public: the art was meant to be offered for sale. In 1978 the studio moved to a storefront with an adjacent gallery in Oakland after receiving a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts — the first of its kind for people with disabilities. Four years later, Creative Growth relocated to a twelve-thousand-square-foot former automobile repair shop in downtown Oakland, where its studio, gallery, and offices have been since 1982. The Robson family lived in San Francisco from 1993 to 2001 and Margaret encountered Creative Growth around 1997–98. See also Nathaniel Rich, “A Training Ground for Untrained Artists,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 16, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/magazine/a-training-ground-for-untrained-artists.html>.
13. Artists Donald Mitchell and Kerry Damianakes are not featured in this exhibition or catalogue, *We Are Made of Stories*.
14. Tom di Maria, interview with the author, September 5, 2018. Di Maria served as director at Creative Growth from 2000 to 2018; he currently serves as director of external relations.
15. For more on the entry of Creative Growth into the commercial market for self-taught artists, and the sociopolitical implications of di Maria’s work, see Leslie Umberger’s essay in this volume, pp. 189–90.
16. Di Maria, interview.
17. The “white cube” gallery aesthetic, with its white walls and spare, boxy interior museum spaces, grew out of the rise of abstraction in modern art in the early twentieth century. In later decades, the white-cube paradigm came under criticism, notably by Brian O’Doherty in the 1970s. See Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of Gallery Space* (1976; repr., Santa Monica, CA: Lapis Press, 1986).
18. Di Maria, interview.
19. Richard Sinkoff, interview with the author, July 30, 2018.
20. Estelle Ellis, Caroline Seebohm, and Christopher Simon Sykes, *At Home with Art: How Art Lovers Live with and Care for Their Treasures* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1999), 159.
21. Cavin, interview.
22. Brooke Davis Anderson, interview with the author, November 11, 2018. Anderson was founding director and curator of the Contemporary Center at New York’s American Folk Art Museum from 1999 to 2010. She currently serves as the inaugural executive director of the VIA Art Fund in Boston.
23. Margaret participated in many forms of public service, primarily in the fields of health, art, and historic preservation. She was a member of the board of directors of the Northwestern Memorial Foundation in Chicago and a trustee of Northwestern Memorial Hospital (1979–84). From 1987 to 1990, she served on the Georgia State Boxing Commission. She was a member of the board of directors of the American Folk Art Museum in New York (1998–2007), the Santa Fe Art Institute (1995–2002), and the College of Saint Benedict (1996–97), Saint Joseph, Minnesota. She was a board member of the President’s Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (1992–97) and on the Names Project (AIDS Quilt) board of directors (1993–96). From 2002 to 2005, she served on the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), as well as the Vice President’s Residence Foundation (2001–9). She also served on the board of the Foundation for Self-Taught Artists, Philadelphia (2006–9), and was a member of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities (2002–9). She served as a trustee for the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, from 2010 to 2014.

24. Leslie Umberger, curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, first met and worked with Margaret Robson in her capacity as senior curator of exhibitions and collections at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin (1998–2012).
25. Anderson, interview. In 2000 the American Folk Art Museum, New York, acquired a large group of Henry Darger paintings and all his writing from Kiyoko Lerner, the widow of Darger-discoverer Nathan Lerner. In 2001 the museum formed the Henry Darger Study Center at its former home on West Fifty-Third Street. As part of these efforts, my mother funded a Darger Study Center Fellowship (2007–9).
26. In the last years of her life, my mother culled her collection, as a natural evolution of her aesthetic sensibility and because she wanted to downsize her living space. It was important to her to donate to a wide variety of institutions; placing the right piece with the right home mattered. She donated works by Felipe Archuleta, David Butler, Ken Grimes, William Hawkins, Lonnie Holley, Clementine Hunter, Nellie Mae Rowe, Charlie Willeto, and Albert Zahn to museums across the country, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia; New Jersey's Newark Museum of Art; the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, and the Milwaukee Art Museum, both in Wisconsin; the Mingei International Museum in San Diego; and the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe. She sold select artworks via galleries, including works by William Hawkins and Henry Darger.
27. Vincent J. Scully Jr. (1920–2017) was Yale's Sterling Professor of the History of Art and Architecture; Robert Farris Thompson (1932–2021) was the Colonel John Trumbull Professor of the History of Art and Professor of African American Studies, also at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.
28. In 2016, I donated ninety-three works of art—thereafter known as the Margaret Z. Robson Collection—to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and made a promise of many additional works. This project is named in honor of both my mother's collection at SAAM and the works from my own collection that are promised to the Museum: The Robson Family Collection. In 2018, on the occasion of a major exhibition at SAAM, *Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor* (September 28, 2018–April 7, 2019), curated by Leslie Umberger and featuring five artworks by Traylor from the Margaret Z. Robson Collection and one from my collection, I formally endowed a symposium series, also in my mother's name, to be held at SAAM on an ongoing basis and for which the Traylor symposium was the inaugural event.
29. Caitlin O'Meara started working with Margaret in 2012 as her personal assistant after meeting her through Carl Hammer Gallery. She is an independent art consultant and the owner of O'M Consulting, LLC.

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