

Nevada Museum of Art: Institutional Archive Museum Archive

Introduction/Abstract

The Nevada Museum of Art, founded in 1931 and located in Reno, Nevada, is the oldest and largest nonprofit arts organization in the state. Historical documents, administrative materials, education materials, exhibition ephemera, special event ephemera, and accreditation documents are among the materials.

Biographical Note: Nevada Museum of Art

The Nevada Museum of Art, located in Reno, Nevada, is the oldest and largest nonprofit arts organization in the state, and the only art museum accredited by the American Alliance of Museums in Nevada. It was founded in 1931 as the Nevada Art Gallery and occupied three previous buildings before moving in 2003 into its current purpose-built facility. The mission of the Nevada Museum of Art was promulgated in 2009: “We are a museum of ideas. While building upon our founding collections and values, we cultivate meaningful art and societal experiences, and foster new knowledge in the visual arts by encouraging interdisciplinary investigation. The Nevada Museum of Art serves as a cultural and educational resource for everyone.” This institutional archive encompasses the organizational and programmatic history of the Museum prior to its official founding up to current day operations.

Scope and Content

The Nevada Art Gallery was founded in 1931 by Dr. James Church, a classics professor at the University of Nevada Reno, and his friend the collector Charles Cutts, a businessman who had a dry goods store in Carson City before retiring to Reno. Cutts’ very eclectic collection included everything from European and American paintings and original prints (mostly landscapes) to notable first editions published in the United States and Europe, Native American baskets, Persian rugs, art glass, china, curios, and other cultural objects. Church, in addition to teaching Latin, German, and Fine Arts at the University, was also an aspiring polar explorer and the founder of the first snow laboratory in the world, a data collection station placed atop Mt. Rose, the highest mountain outside Reno at 10,775 feet. He invented the method by which the water content of snow could be measured (which is the basis for the method still used), and helped start snow labs around the world, initiating an early and significant climate data set.

Church and the Latimer Art Club, a local arts club started by painter Lorenzo Latimer’s students in 1921, that had joined his effort to establish the gallery, acquired land at the end of Arlington Avenue not far from the University. Plans were drawn up to erect a modest building that would house a collection based initially on the art, books and objects owned by Cutts. The two men hoped that the University would acquire and administer the proposed gallery and collection, but the University rejected the gift. The Depression and World War II interrupted progress and the planned building was never built, some of the land was eventually sold and used for the construction of Interstate 80. Cutts died in 1949 and in his will bequeathed his collection, library, and residence in Reno on Ralston Street to the Nevada Art Gallery. The Gallery began to occupy the house in 1954.

The Gallery was managed at first by a board of trustees that included members of the Latimer Art Club, prominent citizens interested in the arts, and many local artists. Together many of the board members, with help of the Latimer Art Club members and other volunteers, organized mostly local exhibitions, gave tours, and sponsored lectures. They added an exhibition space to the Cutts house in 1959. In 1967 the Latimer Art Club stepped back and the Board moved toward professionalizing the Gallery, part of a movement started by the

founding of the National Endowment for the Arts, which made matching grants available to qualified tax-exempt nonprofit 501(c)3 organizations. The Gallery hired its first professional director, Anthony Radich, in 1975. After Radich's departure in 1977, the Board hired its second professional director, Suzanne Loomis.

The concurrent growth of both Reno and the University created more demand for the arts, and the Board of Directors purchased the Hawkins House from the Hawkins Foundation, a Georgian Revival home on Court St. in Reno. The board changed the name of the Gallery to the Sierra Nevada Museum of Art to reflect the emphasis on regional art. Loomis then hired Dr. Marcia Growdon, an art historian who had taught at Illinois State University, Normal, as the first professional curator in 1978. The first exhibition in the Hawkins House opened in December 1978, and a museum school was started.

Upon Loomis's departure, Dr. Growdon took over as director in 1981, established the first arts endowment in the State of Nevada with the help of Board President John Deane, and curated exhibitions that included such prominent artists as Jackson Pollack, Hans Hofmann, Willem de Koonig, Helen Frankenthaler, Agnes Martin, Richard Diebenkorn, Lita Albuquerque, and Nancy Holt, among many others.

In 1989, to once again meet the needs of a growing community, the Museum accepted the gift of a commercial title company building from the E.L. Wiegand Foundation, both of which are located downtown on West Liberty Street a few blocks from the Hawkins House. The Museum's director from 1991-1995, Richard Esparza, oversaw remodeling of the new space into a museum facility, expanded the museum school, established both the E. L. Wiegand collection of Work Ethic in American Art and The Altered Landscape photography collections, and oversaw the museum's accreditation from American Association of Museums (AAM, currently the American Alliance of Museums) in 1993.

Steven High became the Museum's director in 1996 and led the campaign to design, fund, and build the current facility. Designed by renowned architect Will Bruder, the new building of 60,000 square feet on four floors quadrupled the exhibition space and included an education facility with two classrooms. It opened on Memorial Day weekend in 2003. High left the Museum in 2007 and the institution has been under the direction of David B. Walker since 2008. Under Walker's leadership, the Museum established the Center for Art + Environment, an international research center with its roots in the work of both Church and Cutts. In addition to Carol Franc Buck Altered Landscape Photography Collection and the E. L. Wiegand Work Ethic in American Art Collection, the permanent collections also include the Robert S. and Dorothy J. Keyser Art of the Greater West Collection and the Contemporary Art Collection. The Center for Art + Environment's archive collections are comprised of more than a million items in approximately 150 separate archives representing the materials from more than 1,000 artists working on all seven continents.

Materials in the archive include historical information about and materials by James Church and Charles Cutts, the Latimer Art Club, and all exhibitions shown while the organization was the Nevada Art Gallery, the Sierra Nevada Museum of Art, and the Nevada Museum of Art. Board minutes and reports, staff correspondence, annual budget reports, exhibition ephemera, special event materials, education materials, and accreditation documents are among the materials.

This archive is currently in process.