



## **Kindred Collecting: Exploring the Artworks of The Prairie School and RAM**

February 15 – June 7, 2015

### **Introduction**

This one-of-a-kind exhibition represents an atypical parallel in the contemporary art collections of an internationally-known museum and a preparatory school. Racine Art Museum and The Prairie School—also in Racine—have been the beneficiaries of donors who believe that art is a powerful tool and important to a well-rounded education. The two collections are at the core of both organizations' missions. Each site consistently has art from their holdings on view—year-round in the halls at Prairie and on a rotating basis in a variety of exhibitions at RAM.

Both institutions have works from artists with significant reputations, including many from the region and many who have been featured in exhibitions at RAM and as artists-in-residence at Prairie. In addition, pieces from the groundbreaking collection and exhibition, **Objects: USA**, which toured the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, have found homes with each organization.

**Kindred Collecting** is a dialogue between the work from Prairie's collection and pieces from RAM by the same artist or an artist working in a similar manner. While some names will be familiar to RAM's returning guests—such as **Wendell Castle**, **David Gilhooly**, and **Harvey Littleton**—this is the first presentation of these artists in this combination. The three-dimensional, such as sculpture, art jewelry, fibers, and furniture, are shown with two-dimensional paintings, prints, and drawings.

### **The Prairie School Overview**

The Prairie School was founded in 1965 by two women with a vision. Imogene Powers Johnson and Willie Hilpert believed that the Racine community needed and would benefit greatly from an independent day school that would provide love of learning, attention to the individual student, a diverse student body, high academic standards to promote achievement, a good physical education department, and a creative environment.

Prairie's website describes the campus as such: "The school is part of a beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright architecturally-styled campus whose unique prairie design and curved hallways inspire learning."

The Prairie School integrates artistic and creative thinking into its core values. Works of art are prominently displayed throughout the buildings and grounds. Indeed, in the school's own words, "The Prairie School campus was built to inspire. In this environment, we offer strong Fine and Performing Arts programs to ignite the creativity of our students."



The Prairie School is one of the only preparatory schools in the country with an on-site glass blowing facility. Its presence corresponds with the school's learning goals and is fitting in light of the major innovations in studio glass-blowing that took place in Wisconsin in the mid-twentieth century.

### **Racine Art Museum Collection Overview**

Racine Art Museum has the largest craft collection in the United States. Over the last 10 years, RAM's holdings have almost quadrupled, from 2,200 to nearly 9,000 pieces. Over half of these works represent the museum's focus on contemporary crafts from internationally recognized artists in art jewelry, ceramics, fibers, glass, metals, polymer, and wood. These include works by **Dale Chihuly, Joel Philip Myers, Wendell Castle, Gertrud and Otto Natzler, Lia Cook, Peter Voukos, Albert Paley, Toshiko Takaezu, Arline Fisch**, and several hundred more.

RAM's growing collection of contemporary craft includes work that was originally included in **Objects: USA** as well as other examples from the many artists showcased in that critical event.

The remaining items in the collection are a combination of 1930s art from the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project—which represent the museum's first acquisitions—along with works on paper, paintings, and sculpture.

### **Objects: USA**

The term **Objects: USA** is used to represent both a collection of contemporary craft assembled by SC Johnson Foundation (then Johnson Wax) and an exhibition of that work which toured the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Described as a “watershed” moment in the history of craft, the exhibition was highly influential for those in the field and the general public. With hundreds of objects included, it was hosted at 17 venues and reportedly had tens of thousands of visitors. Host organizations included museums and university galleries.

Many contemporary artists recognize the impact it had on themselves and their work.

### **Exhibition**

The scope of the show includes pieces that were included in **Objects: USA**, other examples by artists who were featured in that collection, pieces from area artists, and works by artists who were connected to Prairie School and RAM in other ways. Both RAM and Prairie School reflect a commitment to the larger art communities in the region by including local artists in their collections (as well as in exhibition programs). There have been moments of direct interaction with Prairie faculty

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who function in the community. For example, **Kevin Pearson**—head of Prairie’s art department for several years—was also a featured artist at RAM as well as a Board Member. Current head of the art department, **Hilary Rinke**, was once a teacher at RAM’s Wustum Museum. In addition to having artists in their respective collections in common, RAM and Prairie have cross-over in other ways. For example, represented in RAM’s collection with several works and featured in **Objects: USA**, **Kent Ipsen** established the glass component of the art program at Prairie. Also, glass artist **Kait Rhoads**, featured in **Cutting Edge: RAM Explores Contemporary Glass Jewelry** in 2012, was a visiting artist at Prairie during the exhibition’s timeframe.

## **Selected Artists Featured in *Kindred Collecting***

**Jerry Belland** (both collections)

Insightful narratives and a strong graphic sense characterize the work of **Jerry Belland** (1947 – ). With work shown and collected internationally, Belland blends personal interest and inquiry with humor and a keen eye for topical social and cultural issues.

**Fred Berman** (both collections)

**Fred Berman** (1926 – 2011) would become a figure of some distinction in the ranks of American modernist painters. In 1956, along with such lions as **Jackson Pollock** and **Willem de Kooning**, he was one of 36 artists chosen to represent the United States in the American pavilion of the **Venice Biennale**, the most important international survey of contemporary art.

Source: [www.deanjensgallery.com](http://www.deanjensgallery.com)

Fred Berman’s paintings, many of them abstract, reveal an interest in urban infrastructure, life, and effects of time and nature upon city life. He is also known for his work in collage, wooden assemblages, and photography. Berman worked in a variety of media, including oils, pastels, collages, and photography.

Source: [www.wisconsinart.org](http://www.wisconsinart.org)

**J.B. Blunk** (Prairie) paired with **Wendell Castle** (RAM)

**J.B. Blunk’s** (1926 – 2002) *Seating Sculpture* is installed outside at The Prairie School and is featured here at RAM via a photograph. Represented in **Objects: USA** with this piece, Blunk took advantage of the redwood forests near his home in California to create work. His aesthetic is described in the **Objects: USA** book as such: “Since 1961 Blunk has been creating wood sculpture in which functional elements are only broadly implied. The monumental scale of these ‘seating sculptures’ and their wandering, organic forms combine to produce vigorous presences.”

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Arguably one of the most well-known furniture sculptors still living, **Wendell Castle** (1932 – ), who was schooled in sculpture and industrial design but self-taught in woodworking, has been recognized as the person largely responsible for “the renaissance of wood as a creative medium.” RAM’s mahogany and silver desk is one of Castle’s best-known works and was featured in **Objects: USA**. For that show, he said of his work, “Furniture should not be derived from furniture. This only leads to variations on existing themes. To me the organic form offers the most exciting possibilities – it can never be completely understood in one glance. I make no attempt to reconstruct or stylize natural form, but try to produce a synthesis or metamorphosis or natural forms. My pieces are not ‘free form’; they are designed and constructed within strict boundaries.”

**David Gilhooly** (both collections)

**David Gilhooly** (1943 – 2013) was represented in **Objects: USA** with the over six-foot-tall earthenware *Map of Africa*—which he, with his seemingly ever present sense of humor, suggested would be “best displayed as an island floating in a big pool of water, maybe with lots of lily pads all around.” This piece was given to The Prairie School and hangs in their large art room. It is represented in this exhibition via a photograph that shows it in context of its long-term location. RAM’s Gilhooly sculptures reflect his longstanding interests in animals, the fantastical, the mundane, and the humorous.

**Balcomb Greene** (both collections)

**Balcomb Greene** (1904 –1990) was a major advocate for the mainstream acceptance of abstract art at a time when that kind of work had not been widely embraced. He was an important voice for advocating new approaches in contemporary art, including the removal of the “artist’s hand” by emphasizing the use of stencils and an air gun over painterly brushstrokes. The two examples here reflect his interests in subject matter, including his abstraction of both the environment and the human figure.

**Virginia Harvey** (Prairie) paired with **Helen Bitar** and **Dominic DiMare** (RAM)

A teacher of both weaving and macramé, **Virginia Harvey** was given credit for rescuing the macramé technique “from the obscurity of Victorian trimmings and end finishes of Mexican shawls.” Her piece for **Objects: USA**, made of upholsterer’s linen, is paired with the fiber work of two other artists that were featured in that exhibition, **Helen Bitar** (1940 – ) and **Dominic DiMare** (1932 – ). Bitar’s quilt owned by RAM, and the work of hers that was in **Objects: USA**, are characterized by vibrant color and pattern, “generally conceived in a painterly manner and with a particular emphasis on texture.” Now known for layered paper fiber projects, self-taught weaver **Dominic DiMare** once created three-dimensional forms from a variety of yarns and natural fibers, such as the pieces included here.

**John Houston** (Prairie) paired with **Elizabeth Blackadder** (RAM)

**John Houston** (1930 – 2008) was a Scottish painter who taught at Edinburgh College of Art between 1955 and 1989. He is known for “expressionist” landscapes and is documented as the first artist-in-residence at Prairie. He was a member of the Royal Scottish Academy, as was his wife, **Elizabeth Blackadder** (1931 – ). Blackadder is the first woman to be elected to both the Royal Scottish Academy and the Royal Academy. A painter and printmaker, she also taught at the Edinburgh College of Art.

**Kent Ipsen** (both collections)

“As one of studio glass founder **Harvey Littleton's** first students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, **Kent Ipsen** (1933 – 2012) may be considered as one of the pioneers of the American Studio Glass movement...Ipsen's work in blown glass debuted in the important 1970 exhibition, 'Objects USA,' [sic] with the work of other studio glass pioneers such as **Marvin Lipofsky, Dale Chihuly, Fritz Dreisbach** and **Richard Marquis.**”

Source: **Tina Oldknow**, [www.richmond.com/entertainment](http://www.richmond.com/entertainment)

**Ed Kalke** (both collections)

Recognized as an accomplished printer and papermaker, **Ed Kalke** (1944 – ) has been a staple in the southeastern Wisconsin art world for decades—as a professor at Carthage College and as an exhibiting artist. With degrees in printmaking, he has long been concerned with exploring collage, painting, printmaking, and handmade paper.

**Harvey Littleton** (both collections)

Text from the **Objects: USA** catalog succinctly describes **Harvey Littleton** (1922 – 2013) this way: “The world of Harvey Littleton is many-faceted: he is artist, teacher, master technician and virtual leader of the renaissance of creative free-form glass in the U.S. today...His own prodigious output of glass sculpture has explored wide ranges of form and expression to exploit different qualities of the medium...”

**R.C. Radakovich** (Prairie) paired with **Svetozar Radakovich** (RAM)

Working together but also independently, **R.C.** (1920 – 1975) and **Svetozar** (1918 – 1998) **Radakovich** experimented with numerous media including glass, plastic, and metal. Their working process was described as an exchange of ideas “about design and technology...and a remarkable aesthetic dialogue.” The plastic door—shown in **Objects: USA**—was praised for its reflection of Ruth’s “creative use of new materials.” The necklace owned by RAM, while attributed to Svetozar, represents the couple’s “radical approach to forged and cast jewelry... [that] marked a trend toward more sculptural concepts.”

**Bill Reid** (both collections)

A celebrated artist who is also a longtime area resident and former RAM Board member, **Bill Reid** (1958 – ) creates serious yet playful work using a variety of media including metal, steel rods, and paint. He is also a standard feature at The Prairie School as an artist-in-residence.

**Richard Barrett Talbot Kelly** (Prairie) paired with **Joanna Poehlmann** (RAM)

Descending from generations of artists, **Richard Barrett Talbot Kelly** (1896 – 1971) was a British artist who was drawn to depicting birds as well as historical subjects. On the front lines in the First World War, he studied the birds that were often in the soldiers' presence.

Source: [www.lissfineart.com](http://www.lissfineart.com)

RAM's counterpoint to Talbot Kelly's sensitive portrayal of birds is the work of **Joanna Poehlmann** (1932 – ). An esteemed artist from Milwaukee, Poehlmann emphasizes the natural world and humor in her watercolors, collages, prints, and sculpture. She is a keen observer of the world and prefers to draw from nature directly.

**Viktor Vasarely** (Prairie) paired with **Marko Spalatin** (RAM)

Internationally recognized, **Viktor Vasarely** (1906 – 1997) gained prominence in the mid-twentieth century for his experiments with light, color, and optical illusion. Associated with "Op Art," (non-objective images that incorporate optical illusions), he was a highly influential figure.

**Marko Spalatin** (1945 – ) also plays with pattern, color, space, and light. With degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Spalatin has been exhibiting his work internationally for over 40 years.

**Lena Vigna**  
**Curator of Exhibitions**