

Western art finds a home in far East Texas museum The surprises keep coming at the Stark Museum in Orange

By Harold Harbaugh, Special Contributor

It's a bit of a shock to drive down sleepy, residential Green Avenue and see a huge, modern museum looming ahead.

A veteran museum patron, I hadn't even heard of the Stark Museum of Art when I visited the well-known Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and learned about their partnership.

Orange, the easternmost city in Texas, is a subdued industrial town on the Louisiana border.

H.J. Lutch Stark, son of prominent and wealthy Texas family and good at turning forests into lumber, was from the town. After graduating from the University of Texas, he returned to work in the family's lumber business.

Mr. Stark had already started collecting works of Western art, a lifetime passion. Trips to the family ranch near Estes Park, Colo., always included scouring the Southwest, especially Taos, N.M. Paintings by prominent Western artists showed up in Orange by the crateful, as did American Indian beadwork, pottery, and anything Mr. Stark thought was beautiful.

In 1961, Mr. Stark and his third wife, Nelda, established a charitable foundation, and the Stark Museum of Art came along in 1978, 13 years after Mr. Stark died. Ms. Stark ran the foundation until she died in 1999.

The museum's quality and breadth is surprising. Equally startling, if my experience is typical, you probably will see its treasures by yourself. On the February day that we visited, my wife and I were the only patrons.

According to docent Judy Taylor, only about 10 percent of the collection is on display at any time. The grand entrance atrium's centerpiece was a Frederic Remington sculpture named *The Broncho Buster* displayed with three other bronze works.

Along the walls were glass cases containing some of Mr. Stark's collecting triumphs: Kachina dolls, Maria Martinez bowls, a Zuni squash blossom necklace and a Shoshone child's vest.

Observing our interest, Ms. Taylor led us to "The United States in Crystal," part of Mr. Stark's Steuben collection. Between 1950 and 1959, designer Sidney Waugh created a crystal panorama of the United States by engraving 50 bowls, one for each state. He depicted Ohio's canal traffic, Oregon's salmon, Utah's locust-devouring gulls and so on.

Mr. Stark purchased the set of bowls, the only one that exists, which had been scheduled for introduction in an exhibition at Steuben Glass. The centerpiece is The Great Seal, an interpretation of the national seal. Another Great Seal bowl was presented to former President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1963.

Adjacent rooms contained paintings by well-known artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and N.C. Wyeth as well as lesser-known ones such as William Herbert Dunton, reportedly Mr. Stark's favorite painter.

The surprises weren't over. The next room contained John James Audubon engravings and an 1838 copy of *Birds of America*. The Stark owns a five-volume set that belonged to Audubon.

Also in the room was a comprehensive display of Dorothy Doughty porcelains. Her porcelain birds were displayed somewhat chronologically, so the viewer could see her growing skill and artistry between 1935 and 1962, the year she died. Surprised that one was dated 1968, I learned that she left behind so many designs that her work continued to be issued until the late 60's.

The last room was called "Exploring America's Frontiers," with works by artists such as George Caleb Bingham, George Catlin and Albert Bierstadt.

Admiring an Indian painting by Charles Bird King, I learned that he was a 19th century Washington, D.C., artist who never visited the West. Many of his paintings were lost in a fire at the Smithsonian in 1865. Also destroyed were most of John Mix Stanley's paintings. Seven Stanley paintings that had not been at the Smithsonian are displayed at the Stark.

As I exited the museum, I noticed a number of Indian rugs, mostly Navajo.

I left with a deep respect for Mr. Stark's discriminating eyes.

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