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Three Generations of World-Renowned Art: Greenville Gallery Celebrates the Masters

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That's a Matisse drawing right there on the wall, hanging next to watercolors by Raoul Dufy and Marguerite Zorach and then an Andrew Wyeth landscape.

Glance around the room and you'll find works by William Merritt Chase, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alfred Stieglitz, N.C., Andrew and Jamie Wyeth, John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt and more.

Each is another twinkling facet in a gem of a show, "American and European Masters: Art of the 19th and 20th Centuries," at Somerville Manning Gallery in Greenville, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

While the show ultimately is designed to sell paintings- every one of them is for sale- it's also designed to let regional art lovers get a look at works and artists we can't normally see without a car, bus or rail trip to a bigger city.

"It's really about the realist tradition and how it's being taken further into the abstract and linear. That's kind of the art history aspect of it," says Victoria Manning, who runs the gallery with Sadie Somerville.

This is the second year the gallery has focused on American masters. The shop may be best known for its shows involving the Wyeths, including N.C., Andrew and the Wyeth women in 2008. But Manning also attends New York auctions and keeps up with the American art market.

A couple of years ago, the partners came up with the idea of combining their interest in the Wyeths with what was happening in the American art world while N.C., Andrew and Jamie painted, and last year's "American Masters" show was born. It began in the late 19th century and ran through today.

"It turned out to be like 100 years of American painting that showed the three generations we deal with and the environment they were painting in," Manning says.

The show was so popular, they decided to do it again, but expand the time frame and add Europeans, to show how artists influence one another.

"Some Americans were lucky enough to go to Europe in the late 19th century and they were learning about impressionism," she says. "William Merritt Chase came back and kind of began a school of American impressionism."

His painting, "Landscape: A Shinnecock Vale," across from the Matisse is one of Somerville's favorites in the show.

For those who couldn't go to Europe, the 1913 Armory Show in New York brought the European artists to the states, including Matisse, Dufy, Picasso, Degas, Renoir and Cezanne.

Manning tries to show why art lovers were so excited by that show.

“I can’t go to a complete art survey because we are a commercial gallery and things are for sale,” she says. “I have to deal with what’s on the marketplace and what’s available. I can’t curate from archives all over the country.”

Somerville and Manning grouped paintings into their own little storyline.



“All four of these works have this kind of linear quality going on,” Manning said about the Matisse (“Femme)-Dufy (“La Corrida”)-Zorach (“Figures in a Landscape”)-Wyeth (“Field Flowers”) arrangement, which is the first wall visitors see. “It takes you from Matisse in France up to the 1980s Andrew Wyeth.”

On the opposite wall is Chase’s landscape, which she calls one of his most important Impressionist works.

Around the corner, Manning put an O’Keeffe (“Sunflower”) and photos by her husband, Stieglitz (“Paul Haviland at ‘291”) and Man Ray (“Landscape – Ramapo ill”).

The show ends with works by the Wyeths.

She picked an N.C. Wyeth still life to include in the show.

“He’s most well-known for illustration, but at the same time, he was an incredible artist who was always trying to be recognized as a fine artist,” she says. “I put that in there as a tribute to him.”

In the same manner, she picked landscapes by artists known for other styles- one from John Singer Sargent (“Olive Tree, Corfu, Greece”), who is usually linked with portraits of society women; and John Sloan (“Tree With Yellow Chaoma”), who is more popularly connected with urban scenes.

She picked two Jamie Wyeth pieces that seem to have a connection to pop art, particularly that by his friend, Andy Warhol. One is a chicken sitting in a brilliantly colored lime juice box (“Lime Juice”) and the other is a painting of a huge rusty circular saw (“Buzz Saw”).

“It’s not a typical realist composition,” she says. “It’s pretty confrontational in the way it takes up the picture frame. That’s pretty pop art and that kind of thing was going on in the 1960s and ‘70s as opposed to his illustration background.”

In between the Matisse and Wyeths is a landscape, “Spring Brook,” by Milton Avery, who was called the American Matisse; Robert Henri’s portrait of a young Irish girl, “Mary Patton in Rose Smock,” which is a

real crowd favorite; Ernest Lawson's landscape "Blue Night, High Bridge – Moonlight"; Mary Cassatt's "Woman and Child in Front of a Fruit Tree"; and two works by Maurice Prendergast, "Children in a Landscape" and "Farmhouse in New England."

Somerville Manning Gallery did not use any abstract expressionism, which was certainly the way modern painting began to go at mid-century, partly because Manning couldn't decide how to integrate the look with the realist tradition she focuses on.

"Somebody came in yesterday who said, 'This is one of the best shows I've seen in a year,'" Manning says. "People come in and thank us for having brought this show to Wilmington because it's so unusual. You can't just go out and see these paintings."

Some have even called to ask if there's an admission fee. There's not.

Visitors will not find prices on the works. Manning says they used to post them, and then one day, she heard a man call to his wife, "Mildred, come back here. You want to see what a half million dollars looks like?"

That made her uncomfortable.

"I don't want people to focus on that. If they're not here to buy it, they may as well enjoy it without that," she says.

She does have a printed price list she'll gladly give to anyone who asks.

The duo haven't decided whether to do a similar show next year.

"If I do, it will be a different variation," Manning says.