



## THE LAUREN ROGERS MUSEUM OF ART

Mississippi's oldest art museum serves as the cultural heart of Laurel and as a beacon for art lovers throughout the South.

Text by Mary Ann DeSantis

Photography by permission of The Lauren Rogers Museum of Art

Every hometown has a special place that native sons and daughters never forget. For me, that place is the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, built in 1923 and an anchor in Laurel's Central Historic District. Returning to Laurel nearly 40 years after moving away, I rediscovered the gem that is Mississippi's oldest art museum.

With its five permanent collections, popular traveling exhibitions, and community outreach programs, the museum attracts about 30,000 visitors per year who are often surprised to see original masterpieces by noteworthy artists such as Winslow

Homer, Albert Bierstadt, and Jean-Francois Millet.

The story about how the Lauren Rogers Museum began in a small Piney Woods town is just as remarkable as the art it contains.

In the 1890s, the pine forests attracted the Eastman, Gardiner, and Rogers timber families to Laurel from Iowa. The industrious Midwesterners adopted Laurel wholeheartedly when they established the Eastman-Gardiner Lumber Company. By the turn of the century, Laurel was thriving, with four active sawmills, strong schools, public parks, and broad avenues lined with classical mansions – all credited to the founding families.

(Below) The American Gallery, photo by Owen Murphy.



(Below) George III Coffeepot, 1773, Gift of Thomas M. and Harriet S. Gibbons.



(Left) Early photo taken of the Lauren Rogers Museum during construction. (Opposite page) Portrait of Lauren Eastman Rogers by Nicholas Haritonoff, 1940.

accomplishments we’ve had over the last 88 years,” said George Bassi, LRMA’s executive director. “Despite their heartbreaking loss, Lauren’s family wanted something good to come from the tragedy.”

The museum is the sole beneficiary of the Eastman Memorial Foundation, which was established in May 1922 to endow and maintain a public library, museum, art gallery, and educational institution in Mississippi. A year later, the Georgian Revival structure opened with one art gallery and space for a public library. Almost before the doors opened, though, the families realized they would need more space to house the art collections that they themselves were developing. So in 1925, a new wing added five galleries and space for the Laurel Library Association, which occupied the lower level until 1979.

Today, when first-time visitors arrive they are amazed by the grandeur of the 22,000-square-foot facility designed by renowned New Orleans architect Rathbone deBuys. And they are even more astonished to learn the museum does not charge admission.

“Thanks to the endowment, anyone can visit for free,” said Bassi. “That is what the founders wanted.”

Forty percent of the museum’s \$1 million annual operating budget comes from the endowment, which ensures free admission in perpetuity. The other

Located at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Seventh Street, the museum is a memorial to Lauren Rogers, the only child of Nina Eastman and Wallace Brown Rogers and the only grandchild of Elizabeth Gardiner and Lauren Chase Eastman. The young man had been destined to take over the family’s lumber business, but he died in 1921 at age 23 after an appendectomy. Lauren and his new bride, Lelia, had just begun building their dream home on the site that eventually would become the museum.

“Without the vision of Mr. and Mrs. Rogers and Mr. and Mrs. Eastman, the museum would not have existed nor achieved the artistic excellence and



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\$600,000 for acquisitions, traveling exhibitions, and special programs is raised through a variety of activities, including memberships, special events, grants, and donations.

### Strolling the Galleries

The light in the long, rectangular American Art gallery is always different because of the opaque sky lights, and every visit exposes some new detail in a painting. Always apparent, however, is the beauty of the individual pieces.

“The paintings in the museum, particularly the ones by American artists, are things the founding families liked,” explained Bassi. “They collected for their homes, not a museum, and they wanted pretty things in their houses.”

The focal point at the far end of the main gallery is the oil painting “A Glimpse of Long Island Sound from Montauk” by landscape artist Thomas Moran. The vivid colors of the sunset can be seen not only from the museum’s grand entrance but also from the Rogers-Green house across the street, which now serves as the museum’s administrative offices.

“Lauren’s parents may have been able to catch a glimpse of the painting from their home,” said Bassi. “It’s a straight 450-foot line from the home’s front doors

*Fisherman’s Wife*, by Winslow Homer, 1873, oil on wood panel, gift of Lauren Chase Eastman.



to the back of the main gallery.”

Perhaps no other LRMA collection has more cultural significance than the Catherine Marshall Gardiner Native American basket collection, which was the museum’s first official gift in 1923. Mrs. Gardiner was Lauren’s great-aunt, and her husband George Gardiner was also one of Lauren’s founders.

“Mrs. Gardiner began collecting baskets in 1875 and continued well beyond the turn of the century,” said Bassi. “She traveled throughout the West and around the world, developing great relationships with tribal weavers, trading posts, and other collectors. Her life and her journeys make quite a story.”

The adventuresome Mrs. Gardiner was already a world traveler when an article about collecting Native American baskets stirred her interest. She amassed one of the most representative collections of North American Native basketry in the country and donated almost 500 items to the museum.

“It’s rare to mention the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art in conversation and not have someone mention the baskets,” said Bassi. “This remarkable collection has become a hallmark of this institution.”

Over the years, museum curators added baskets from Southeastern tribes, including Mississippi Choctaws and Florida Seminoles, bringing the number of tribes represented in the collection to 82.

Although the European collection is the museum’s smallest, with 65 paintings and works on paper, the gallery contains several significant pieces that influenced many of Europe’s masters. Jean-Francois Millet’s *First Steps*, an 1856 pastel, inspired Vincent Van Gogh, and Eugène Boudin’s en plein air style was seen in Claude Monet’s work.

The museum’s eclectic flavor is most reflected in two collections that represent cultures far from Lauren. The Japanese Gallery began with 142 Ukiyo-e woodblock prints donated by Lauren’s father. An exquisite collection of British Georgian silver sparkles in another gallery at the building’s far end. Former local

newspaper owners Thomas M. Gibbons and his wife, Harriet, donated the 65 sterling silver objects from the 18th and 19th centuries related to high tea.

### Looking to the Future

It's hard to believe the museum has more items in storage due to a lack of gallery space. To make room for some of those items, a new 5,400-square-foot wing will be completed in 2013 in time for the museum's 90th anniversary. The addition also will feature contemporary art and works by Mississippi artists.

Located on Interstate 59, Laurel is en route for folks traveling to New Orleans or Atlanta, but getting people off the interstates to stop at the museum can be tough. A redesigned web site with online access to the entire collection and a variety of social networking options are guiding a new generation of art lovers to Laurel's most historic landmark.

"Most of our out-of-town visitors still come because of word of mouth. We have Mississippians who stop in and say they've wanted to see the museum for years and are just getting around to it," said director Bassi. "One advantage we have is that we've been here 88 years and people have heard about us."

For more info, visit [www.lrma.org](http://www.lrma.org). ■

### TRAVELING EXHIBITIONS

The lower-level gallery of the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art hosts temporary and traveling exhibitions that change throughout the year. Future shows include the following:

**Lois Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color,**  
August 27–November 6, 2011

**Views from the Vault,**  
December 2011–January 2012

**Southern Journeys:**  
**African American Artists of the South,**  
January 28–March 16, 2012

**Langdon Clay Photography:**  
**The Welty Gardens, February–March 2012**



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