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Eye on the Past:* Who Was Caroline Wiess Law? | PaperCity Magazine

BY Catherine D. Ansporn // 03.06.15



Warhol's "Caroline," 1976, Collection MFAH, bequest Caroline Wiess Law.

Herein we paint a profile of the lovely lady who left a trove of world-class masterpieces – and one of the largest bequests ever to an American museum – to the very lucky Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. (Originally published in November 2005)

THE PATRONESS

When she died on her 85th birthday, **Caroline Wiess Law** had already left an indelible mark, donating millions to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, Baylor College of Medicine and, most notably, the [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston](#). At the latter, her work as a lifetime trustee and bequests of numerous modern masterpieces had already resulted in the renaming of the original 1920s-era William Ward Watkin structure, with its soaring Mies van der Rohe additions, as

the Caroline Wiess Law Building. At her death, a bequest of 54 additional works of important modern art and \$25 million was announced for the MFAH (as well as \$25 million each to Baylor and M.D. Anderson). But more surprises would not be revealed until her will was probated in Spring 2004. The majority of her estate, valued at a staggering \$450 million, had been left to the MFAH, making Caroline Wiess Law one of the largest donors ever to an American museum and one of the top four U.S. philanthropists for 2004.

PUBLIC PHILANTHROPY, PRIVATE PERSONA

Caroline Weiss Law was a complex, private woman who avoided the spotlight and shunned publicity, yet she left arguably the greatest impact ever on an American museum—an influence that extended beyond dollars. She was born in Beaumont, Texas, in 1918, the second of three daughters of Humble Oil & Refining Co. co-founder Harry Carothers Wiess and his wife, legendary hostess Olga Keith Wiess. The family moved to Houston, and Caroline grew up amid great wealth, privilege and a tradition of philanthropy. (Her parents were major benefactors to Rice University, the MFAH and Houston hospitals.) The sisters lived in a graceful home designed by William Ward Watkin across from Rice University on Sunset Boulevard (now the residence for the president of Rice University). Her upbringing befitted a scion from a great oil dynasty: attendance at elite schools (The Kinkaid School, The Ethel Walker School in Connecticut, Sarah Lawrence College in New York); worship at the old-guard Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church (she walked to Sunday school from her house across the street); and aristocratic activities (she was a championship tennis player, yet never learned to cook or sew). Despite her private nature, she had a larger-than-life personality often compared to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis or Lauren Bacall, as well as a sense of fun that family members likened to Auntie Mame.

She was a consummate lady who looked beyond the sphere of prescribed social privilege to investigate and collect challenging modern art. A bit of an iconoclast, she was an admirer of Andy Warhol and a fan of Tina Turner, Lightnin' Hopkins and Elvis. A perfect hostess, she gave the most elegant dinner parties (down to infinitesimal details). A style-setter, she was always turned out in vividly colored designer names (her favorite: Bill Blass), often with dramatic jeweled cuffs, necklaces and rings by David Webb. Her art matched her taste in clothes and jewels: bold, brave, impeccable and important. Hers was a life of abundant happiness edged with tragedy: the deaths of her beloved husbands, power broker William Francis and businessman Theodore N. Law. Francis died suddenly of a heart attack in 1958 when they were living in Washington, D.C.; he was assistant secretary of defense. Law, whom she married in 1960, was a brilliant businessman, active in Republican politics and the founder of Falcon Seaboard Drilling Co. and Mid-Continent Airlines; he passed away after a long

decline in 1989. She also survived two bouts with cancer and endured the disappointment of never having children. Yet her legacy lives on with Houston's medical and cultural institutions and the MFAH, where her philanthropy joined late director Peter Marzio's vision to forge a world-class art institution.



Left to right, blue-chip canvases by Picasso and Lucio Fontana graced the living room.

CONSUMMATE COLLECTOR

MFAH [then] director Peter Marzio: "She started seriously collecting ... in the late '50s. The first major painting was that Picasso, *Two Women in Front of a Window*. ... But her heavy collecting didn't really begin until the mid-'80s ... That's when she started really getting committed to filling the house with major paintings. She liked really bright color. She liked abstract art. And she liked things that she called 'gutsy' – things that were really strong. She thought Picasso hung the moon. The only regrets that I ever saw her express were when she missed a couple of Picassos at auction. Because, despite her enormous wealth, she didn't throw the money around.

"She worked pretty hard at [collecting] ... She had her own mind. She didn't give a damn what anyone told her. If she liked something, she was going to get it. But she spent a lot of time looking ... She was a good negotiator. People knew she was wealthy, but she'd get the price down. They also knew that she'd be back for more if she liked the experience.

SHOP JEWELRY

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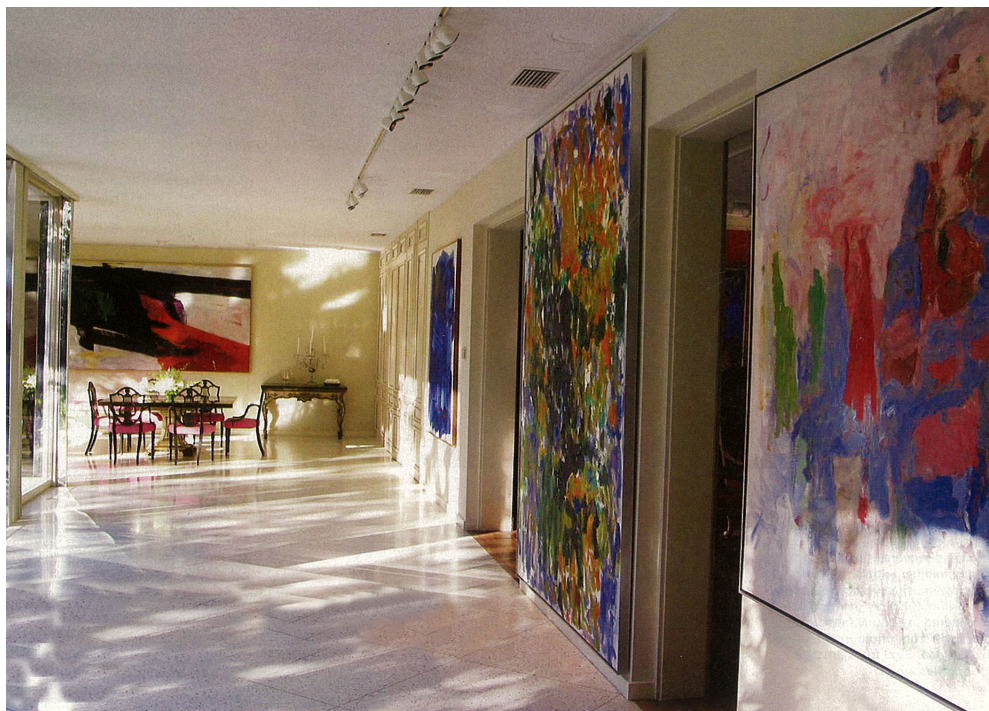
"She told me in the early '90s that she intended to give her collection to the museum ... What was important about her telling us, was that we didn't buy in areas where she was strong. For example, we didn't buy Franz Kline or Hofmann

or various others whom she had great works by. That kind of really thoughtful, forthright philanthropy is far and away the most productive ... The impact [of her gift] will be here for decades.”

Frances Marzio, curator of The Glassell Collections, who knew Caroline for 22 years: “She loved bold brushstrokes and pulsating color in her art. ‘Pretty’ was never enough. She had three criteria for her purchases: ‘Is it first quality? Is it a good value? Can I afford it?’ She never forgot a painting and actually purchased works that she had seen 30 years before ... Caroline saw a great colored Franz Kline in New York when the paint was almost fresh. She admired its boldness but chose to buy the great black-and-white Kline, *Corinthian II*. Three decades later, *Orange and Black Wall* reappeared on the market at C&M [Arts] gallery. This time there was no hesitation; her boldness matched the Kline.”

Art dealer Meredith Long, who had a 40-year friendship with Caroline: “Her eye was marvelous. The Joan Mitchell, I think I helped her on that. But most of the time, I went to look at what her most recent acquisition was ... Caroline was very interested in the museum. Obviously she thought about it a lot. It’s really a very significant collection. It shows you how much the focus of her life was on the museum.”

Caroline’s niece Elise Elkins Joseph: “She loved her art. She didn’t have a favorite. I guess because she didn’t have children, she treated them as children. There wasn’t one she loved more than the other. Her taste did grow. But once she honed her skill, she loved every single piece and was always so proud and couldn’t wait to show you her new one.”



Warhol's "Caroline," 1976, Collection MFAH, bequest Caroline Wiess Law.

THE HOSTESS

The Laws' John Staub–designed home on Inwood Drive in River Oaks was the scene of many a social occasion. Caterer **Jackson Hicks** details those exquisite evenings. “She was among my first clients at Jackson and Company ... She possessed that rarest of all gifts and in great abundance: taste ... [She had] perfect manners, which is to say, she thought of others first. She also had a wicked sense of humor and wonderful laugh. She adored a good joke and could dance the night away well into her 70s. She had a voice that reminded me of Tallulah Bankhead, but with the delivery of a duchess.

“I believe her favorite evenings were seated dinners for 12 to 20 at two ebonized, lacquered square tables (long before square tables became fashionable). I think she liked the intimacy of those evenings, the conversation, the theater of the table ... Mrs. Law had some of the most exquisite table settings in Houston. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Many she had personally collected, and some passed to her from her mother, legendary Houston hostess Olga Wiess. Fine historic Spode, Paul Storr silver, bespoke Baccarat. From the tiniest saltcellar to the most magnificent epergne, she had great toys with which I could play. Mrs. Law also adored color and frequently used tangerine and hot-pink fabrics together. She never, ever used paper napkins, even for drinks —only pure white, hemstitched linen. I used to joke with her I thought paper napkins caused a rash anyway.

“Mrs. Law loved hors d'oeuvres that were tiny and neat; she wanted them to look like miniature paintings. A couple of her favorites were American classics (tiny BLTs on toast); paper-thin gingersnaps; finger sandwiches with bread sliced so thin you could practically see through it; and, perhaps her all-time favorite, our candied lemon zests.

“She noticed and appreciated detail. She preferred haricots verts trimmed in a specific way and cooked to an exact tenderness. It is fun to have clients that are that particular. Nothing escaped her discerning eye ... Ever thoughtful, she never failed to come to the kitchen after an event to thank the culinary staff and waiters ... We shared in our personal collections some identical after-dinner coffee cups that were unusual and no longer produced. She thoughtfully left all of hers to me. I treasure them.”

Frances Marzio: “She was the personification of '60s glamour and grace —the Jackie O. of Houston ... I will always have a vision of round tables down the loggia, laden with beautiful porcelain, silver, candles and bright blossoms. Though always professing to be shy, she toasted honored guests with panache in her best Lauren Bacall voice.”

Jo Marsh, best friend, personal secretary for 42 years and co-executor of Caroline's will: "Her parties were beautiful. She always said, 'This and this wasn't right.' And I said, 'Believe me, you're the only one who knew that it wasn't. Nobody else is as perfect as you.' And that's true. People have gotten away from that formality and that way of doing things ... When she and I had lunch, we had finger bowls. She would say, 'I don't know how people live without finger bowls.'"



In the sunroom, canvases by Franz Kline, Roy Lichtenstein and Willem de Kooning lent drama.

THE STYLE-SETTER

Jo Marsh: "Bill Blass was her favorite. Some Oscar de la Renta and some Akris ... But she absolutely loved Bill Blass' designs, and it worked for her. She could wear those wedges; she had some beautiful ones ... The last gown she wore to the museum ball was a lemon-colored sequined [Bill Blass]. Just straight with straight sleeves. Very, very plain ... It was gorgeous." And, for jewelry? "Definitely, jewelry was David Webb."

Marsh relates how her employer and friend later branched out to other purveyors: "She loved Target. Her favorite pair of pants came from Target. She said, 'Don't you ever tell any of my friends' ... She loved IKEA. Peter and Frances were the first ones who took her to IKEA, but I [also took] her. We had such a good time there. We redid the ranch on Highway 105 between Conroe and Navasota, and most of it came from IKEA." Of her life in the country, Frances Marzio says, "Caroline's attention to color and coordination prevailed at Lawridge, her ranch in Navasota. All the fences were white, the trucks red, the cows black. Herd deviants were quickly dispatched to market."

WORLD TRAVELER

Always a globe-trotter, Law's trips later in her life often included the Marzios.

Frances Marzio: “We traveled nationally and internationally, from New York for the holidays to Las Vegas for its blackjack tables, L.A. for the Getty opening, to London, Paris, Madrid, Tokyo and Osaka in search of an architect for the new museum building. Art and travel formed a love knot.”

Jo Marsh: “The most fun she had was when she went with Peter and Frances to pick the architects of the new building. They went to Japan, they went to Tokyo ... And they went to London and talked to an architect there ... Not just sightseeing, but with a purpose.”

CHARISMA AND CHARM

Elise Elkins Joseph: “She just loved life so much. And loved all of us. I guess everyone adored her because she adored everybody. Or made you feel like she did. She felt such devotion to the city and those institutions, which help make Houston great. She could have lived anywhere she wanted to, but Houston was home. And she was proud of it.”

HER WAY

Jo Marsh: “That was definitely the glamour age. I used to tell her: ‘Look where you were. All the movie stars. The beautiful clubs ... You did all those fabulous things ... You lived at the best time.’ She knew people like Frank Sinatra and Bob Stack. Judy Garland came to her house ... She always said she was born on a holiday and she would die on a holiday. It was about 6:30 in the morning [Christmas Eve 2003], and the nurse came and woke me, and I sat by her bed and held her hand. The nurse had the movie *Catch Me If You Can* on. Frank Sinatra started singing ‘Come Fly With Me.’ She died at 7:15 ... I said, ‘This is unbelievable. You did it your way ... If you are flying with Frank Sinatra, I want to go.’ I hope she heard me, because she would have smiled. It was so perfect, absolutely perfect.”

Additional interviews with Caroline Wiess Law’s niece Sharon Keller, and friends Mike Cullinan, Randall Jamail of Justice Records and Carol Isaak Barden contributed to this portrait.

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