

Celebrating the American Spirit: Masterworks from the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

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Those who cling to the romantic notion that art is unsullied by commerce could stand another hard look at Warhol's soup cans. The pop master would likely have appreciated this rare new endeavor, in which romance and commerce abound: the inauguration of a museum for American art near the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas, at a time when major arts institutions are limiting their hours, and funding for the arts remains low nationwide.

In her capacity as heiress to the country's largest retail chain, Crystal Bridges' founder and primary patron, Alice Waldon, would surely have interested Warhol as a portrait subject, and it's likely that he would have also recognized something of his own agenda in her project's mission: "The museum's simple but vital purpose is to tell the unfolding story of the United States through the lens of its visual arts," explains the introduction to *Celebrating the American Spirit: Masterworks from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art*, "to probe its collections for insights into our national ideals and aspirations, our tragedies and triumphs, our broadly defining characteristics and idiosyncratic traits."

Featuring art from the colonial period to the present, including preeminent pieces of sculpture and photographs, the museum's first publication highlights 150 objects limited to paintings and works on paper. The limitation is not regrettable: delivering on a mandate to "bring little seen works into public view," the display astounds for its quality and range. An uncharacteristically carefree Wyeth, a cubistic Pollack, and an O'Keeffe still life are the icing; dig further, and the connections between works made generations apart (which are intentionally exhibited together to promote a dialogue) begin to resonate.

Just as the glass, wood, and copper pavilions comprising the new Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art are nestled into hills and ravines on the property where the Waldon children were raised, an overarching theme of this exemplary collection is art with a "rootedness in place." In the drama that is the story of Crystal Bridges, enter, stage left, Asher Brown Durand's *Kindred Spirits*, from 1849. Purchased from the New York Public Library in 2005, it provides the foundation for the museum's impressive mid-nineteenth-century landscapes. The handover of this iconic painting, considering the players and what it says about our times, still has the art world abuzz.

Considering we don't have the luxury of ignoring the ties between books and art and corporations, one way of celebrating the American spirit, and this most American of enterprises, would be to adopt the unceasing vigilance of the living artists featured within the museum. From Kara Walker's delicately powerful commentaries on race relations to James Turrell's transformative environmental works, the finest, most ambitious art will always ask us to bring our best selves to the experience of it. And what could be more American than that?

Twenty-three leading American art scholars contributed the essays accompanying the book's full-page, color plates. The Foreword is by Don Bacigalupi, and a biographical index with thumbnail images rounds out the necessary data.

JULIE EAKIN (Winter 2012)

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