



‘A Great Gift to the City’

Dedicated in memory of a beloved son,
the Memorial Art Gallery looks forward to
its centennial celebration in October 2013
as a community landmark and
resource for the arts.



By Marjorie Searl



MEMORIAL GIFT: Work began on the Memorial Art Gallery in 1912 after Emily Sibley Watson established the museum as a memorial to her son, J. G. (opposite).

AS



crews broke ground for what would be Rochester's new art museum in May 1912 on the University Avenue Campus, it's not difficult to imagine the profound mix of feelings—grief, civic charity, and simple personal gratification—that may have settled on Emily Sibley Averell Watson. With the construction site just around the corner from her mansion on nearby Prince Street, she could not have helped but reflect on the events that had led to the momentous project.

Her first marriage to Isaac Averell, the son of a prosperous Ogdensburg, N.Y., banker, had ended in divorce in less than a decade. Her two children from that marriage were gone. Her nine-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Louise, died in 1886; her 26-year-old son, James, known as J.G., in 1904. Both succumbed to infectious diseases that periodically ravaged pre-antibiotic America.

Her beloved mother, Elizabeth Maria Tinker Sibley, the wife of Western Union cofounder, Hiram Sibley, had died in 1903. Noted philanthropists, the elder Sibleys had bequeathed the mantle of civic leadership to their daughter, as well as the greatest wealth in Rochester.

In 1891, she had married James Sibley Watson, the son of her father's longtime business partner and himself an heir to the Western Union fortune. Together, they had a son, also named James.

And there was the art museum. For more than three decades, Rochester's civic and cultural leaders had discussed the need for a museum worthy of a bustling, growing, and industrious city like Rochester. Buffalo had opened a museum in 1905, as had Indianapolis in 1906. Toledo was preparing to open one in 1912.

Art museums, like most other institutions of the period, were founded and managed by men of means and influence.

Rochester's would not follow suit. A woman of means in her own right, Watson was one of the few women of her time to establish, singlehandedly, a major cultural institution. She not only fulfilled the hope of then University President Rush Rhees to include an art building on the University's campus, but in so doing she enshrined the memory of J.G., the son she had lost at such an early age.

She had one important stipulation: that the museum be administered as a community treasure, open and available to all citizens of Rochester.

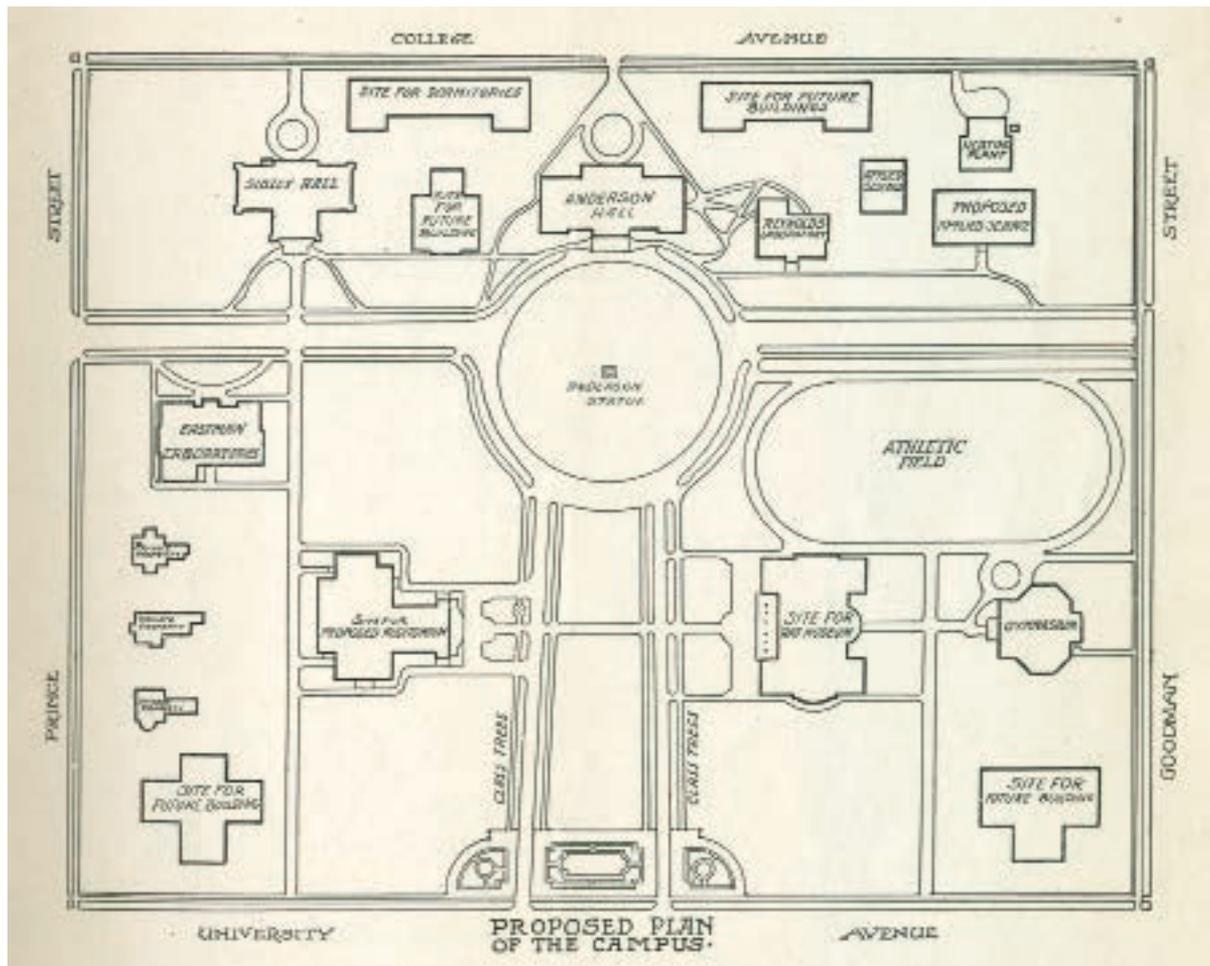
In 2012, that museum, the Memorial Art Gallery, has firmly established itself as one of the country's leading community art museums owned by a national research university. The museum's grounds even look a little similar to the construction site of 100 years ago as work continues on a new sculpture park that will be opened in time for the Memorial Art Gallery's centennial celebration in October 2013. As with the gallery itself, the Centennial Sculpture Park has been designed as a resource for the community to enjoy as well as a cultural expression of Rochester's leadership in the arts.

The first major expansion in 25 years, the park represents the latest chapter in the gallery's 100-year history of serving the community, a commitment that began with the expression of a mother's grief.

Emily Sibley Averell had grown up in a family that prized art and collecting. By the time construction began on the new gallery, she and her husband, James, were said to have one of the finest private collections of art in the country. In her 90 years of life, she traveled the world but remained loyal to her home of Rochester.

For more than three decades, the professional and cultural lives of the Watsons and the Sibleys had intertwined with that of the





City of Rochester. In 1877, Hiram Sibley built Sibley Library on the Prince Street campus, a year that also marked the birth of both of Watson's children—Elizabeth Louise in January and J. G. in December.

That year also marked the birth of the Rochester Art Club, an organization that gave structure and voice to a diverse but energetic group of painters, sculptors, and Rochesterians sympathetic to their cause. The club furthered its mission of “the cultivation and advancement of fine and industrial arts and promotion of social involvement of members” by offering studio classes. Its honorary membership included the upper crust of Rochester society, which was nearly identical with those who would, it might be hoped, support the organization financially.

Among them was Emily Sibley Averell, who was elected to honorary membership in 1891 along with her future husband, James Sibley Watson.

Since founding the club, its members had searched for a permanent meeting and exhibition space, but efforts had proved futile. In other parts of the country, Greco-American edifices housing public art collections fast were becoming fixtures in cities that wanted to demonstrate the importance of culture and civic standing.

Why not Rochester? Rochester's civic leaders were conversant

with the City Beautiful movement, a philosophy that emphasized grandeur in urban planning. Industries and businesses with an international reach were humming: Eastman Kodak, Bausch & Lomb, and, of course, Western Union.

At the same time, two institutes of higher education were growing within the city limits—the University of Rochester and Mechanics Institute, today known as the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Typically, the civic art museums of the day were founded and funded by wealthy citizens who were also collectors and connoisseurs. In Rochester, in the first decade of the 20th century, only two people could legitimately fill that role: Emily Sibley Watson and Eastman Kodak Co. founder George Eastman.

While both steadily built important art collections (the Watsons had art delivered to them on their yacht at least once), Emily Sibley Watson was also considering how best to commemorate J. G. As someone who regularly stepped in to fill needs of all kinds, whether giving food to the poor or providing tuition for an impoverished student, the need for an art building at the University must have been compelling to her, as not only did she prize art, but her son had also been a lover of the arts.

Watson had inculcated that lifelong interest. J. G. Averell lived a life that was in marked contrast to that of his grandfather, Hiram

PRINCELY PLACE: A 1905 plan for the Prince Street campus included a site for an art museum (above), but it remained on the drawing board until Emily Sibley Watson's efforts to build a museum in memory of her son, J. G. (opposite), were realized.



HIRAM SIBLEY.

Sibley, who came to Livingston County at the age of 16, and soon after opened a machine shop and a wool-carding business. At 16, J. G. was at boarding school preparing for a Harvard education and the life of an upper-class gentleman. Yachting and equestrian sports were shared family interests. At Harvard, he was on the golf team, and he was renowned as a polo player. In spring 1904, after enjoying a European tour, he joined the architectural firm of Herbert D. Hale in Boston.

By November, he had died of typhoid at his mother's Prince Street home. He was buried next to his sister, Louise, in Mt. Hope Cemetery. His grave was marked by a headstone designed by his mother's friend, the architect and designer Claude Bragdon. Like his grandfather and mother, J. G. had been a collector; on his final trip to Europe, he purchased a group of fine prints, which became the nucleus of the Memorial Art Gallery's collection of works on paper.

As mourning was a largely private experience in those times, little remains to indicate how Watson coped, except to assume that her attention would have been directed even more fully toward her surviving child. But she was not inactive.

Following her mother's death in 1903, she commissioned a memorial painting by family friend George Haushalter to be installed at St. Andrew's Church. The subject: the biblical story of the gifts of the magi. She joined the Wednesday Club in 1908. She continued her philanthropic activities, contributing to the needs of St. An-

drew's Church as well as helping young violinist David Hochstein advance in his musical studies.

Meanwhile, as Rhees steadily advanced his plans for expanding the University's campus on Prince Street, he followed in the footsteps of college presidents by trying to match up a willing donor with a campus need.

Whether strategically or not, the positioning of the need alongside the common good may have made the case more attractive to Watson. From the very beginning, the Memorial Art Gallery was aligned with the community.

In an undated article pasted on a page in the March 21, 1912, minutes of the University's Board of Trustees, the case was made clear:

"An abiding faith, held by all local lovers of the fine arts, that in due time some generous citizen would bestow upon us a permanent and beautiful home for paintings and sculpture, has been justified by the munificent gift of Mrs. James S. Watson to the University of Rochester, and through the university to the people of Rochester, in memory of her son, James G. Averell. . . .

"An art gallery has been badly needed in Rochester and will be the more appreciated because the lack of it has been felt for so long a time. In every work that has been attempted within recent years for the advancement of arts in Rochester, Mrs. Watson has upheld and assisted those who assumed active management, and her latest act of generosity lays the people of Rochester under another debt

CIVIC LEADERS: Partners for several decades, Hiram Sibley (right) and Don Alonzo Watson cofounded Western Union in Rochester. They and their families became fixtures in Rochester's civic, cultural, commercial, and social circles of the 19th and 20th centuries.

of gratitude to her for her practical methods of expressing civic patriotism. The plans for the gallery, which have already been made public, give assurance that the building will be a dignified, artistic, and enduring memorial.”

On May 18, 1912, George Herdle, the president of the Rochester Art Club who would become the first director of the Memorial Art Gallery, extended the personal thanks of the club in a series of resolutions that underscored how widely Watson’s gift to the community would be appreciated:

“Whereas, through the munificence and progressive spirit of Mrs. Jas. S. Watson, provision has been made for the erection of a museum and art gallery for Rochester be it resolved: That the Roch. Art Club realizes that the gift to the people is of the highest importance to the moral and aesthetic uplift of our citizens, gives dignity and high opportunity for the conservation of the Fine Arts, and places Rochester on a par with the leading art centers of the nation.

“Resolved: That the building shall be dedicated to the memory of a gifted and lamented lover of the Fine Arts and its kindred creative activities is felt by the club to be a most appropriate provision, which will act as an incentive to the youth of our city, to emulate the example of our departed co-laborer, who worked in the interest of all that was beautiful and progressive.”

The New York firm of Foster and Gade, whose principal was architect John Gade, was hired to design the building. Gade’s wife, Ruth Sibley, was Watson’s niece and a favorite cousin of J.G. With the local assistance of Bragdon, Gade supervised the construction.

The gallery’s first board, as noted in the agreement between the University and Watson, included Watson, her husband, her brother, her niece, Marie Atkinson Perkins Willard, sister-in-law and philanthropist Mrs. Granger A. Hollister, Rhees, and Eastman. Filling out the board was a group marked by overlapping interests in art, social welfare, and business.

At the formal dedication on October 8, Rhees prefaced his introduction of the speaker, Metropolitan Museum of Art president Robert DeForest, by tracing the history of art instruction at the University. That history included lectures for students and the public by art professor Elizabeth Denio, the first woman to teach at Rochester, whose salary originally had been funded by Watson.

Overlooking the dedication ceremonies was a plaster version of a life-sized sculpture commissioned by Watson from the prominent sculptor William Ordway Partridge, an artist known for his equestrian sculpture of General U.S. Grant (1896) in Brooklyn’s Grant Square and the heroic *Pieta* (1906) at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York.

Partridge had hoped to have the hooded figure of *Memory* finished in time for the dedication, but work on the marble sculpture had been delayed. In the following spring, the original was installed as a formal tribute to J.G. Averell, complete with a pedestal inscription: “He Loved Life and Beauty and Honour.”

In the June 1914 issue of *The Common-Good*, arts advocate, artist, and Mechanics Institute instructor Anna Page Scott described the impact that the Memorial Art Gallery was already having on the community:

“The Memorial Gallery [*sic*], which stands in the spacious campus of the University, has proved within less than six months, that it is a center of aesthetic culture, and a source of true inspiration for all Rochester. The students, the workmen in the neighboring factories, the pedestrians who daily pass by, cannot help being affected by the silent influence of this gem of architecture; it is a great



Celebrating 100 Years

The dedication of a new, multi-acre sculpture park in October 2013 will mark the 100th anniversary of the Memorial Art Gallery’s founding. Under way since 2010, the Centennial Sculpture Park, near the intersection of University Avenue and Goodman Street on the gallery’s grounds, will feature work by sculptors Tom Otterness, Wendell Castle, Albert Paley, and Jackie Ferrara.

Representing the largest site-specific installation in the Memorial Art Gallery’s history, the park is designed to carry on the gallery’s tradition of serving as a public resource for the community while also emphasizing Rochester’s contributions to the nation’s cultural history.

For more information, visit <http://mag.rochester.edu>.

gift to the city, this Memorial to one who was himself a lover of the beautiful and a designer of fine buildings. The highly cultural effect of the exhibitions and lectures upon hosts of young people who will gather there for inspiration and study, will show itself in the higher aims of the citizens of the future, and will crystallize in various beautiful forms.”

One hundred years have passed since the doors opened; millions of people—people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities, have visited, studied, and created within its walls.

Much has changed: the University has expanded to include the Eastman School of Music, the Medical Center, and the River Campus on the banks of the Genesee River, the Mechanics Institute has become Rochester Institute of Technology in Henrietta, and the Memorial Art Gallery itself has expanded its footprint nearly to Goodman Street.

The common thread is a commitment to the common good, manifest most currently by the transformation of its grounds into Centennial Sculpture Park.

The creation of an urban park filled with sculpture and providing access to all is only the most recent fulfillment of Emily Sibley Watson’s gracious, generous, and unprecedented intent to honor a son’s memory by providing a center for the fine arts for the community. **R**

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