

## MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

# The Knight's Tale

The Memorial Art Gallery has built its permanent collection through the art of storytelling.

By Kathleen McGarvey

YOU'D BE SURPRISED HOW TOUGH IT IS TO find a good suit of armor these days.

For more than a decade, beginning in the 1990s, the Memorial Art Gallery was in search of a suit of armor for its collection, spurred by its sense that such an object would hold a deep appeal for the community—its children especially—and provide an important narrative anchor for its Renaissance collection.

“But it's very, very difficult to find armor intact,” says Nancy Norwood, curator of European art. A popular collector's item in the 19th and early 20th centuries, armor became the victim of a heated marketplace, with dealers cobbling together suits out of wildly mismatched pieces and forgers passing off new items as artifacts of history.

And the gallery wanted a highly decorated suit of armor that would make plain armor's significance as an art object and example of fine craftsmanship and that would—through the decorative metal etching—link to other Renaissance arts. Such a requirement made the challenge of the search even greater.

As she carried out her hunt, Norwood worked with the guidance of Stuart Pyhrr, curator of the Arms and Armor Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For certain pieces, such counsel is essential, says chief curator Marjorie Searl, and the gallery seeks out the opinions and advice of experts in the most specialized niches of art history to be sure it acquires art wisely. “Some people say the best deaccession policy is a strong accession policy, because if you're very careful about what you bring in, then you don't have problems at the other end,” she says.

As the search wore on, Norwood worked to arrange long-term armor loans from the Met. But then in 2006 events moved quickly: the London arms and armor dealer Peter Finer offered the gallery the opportunity to

acquire a partial suit of Renaissance armor from the Brunswick Armoury in Germany, part of a collection sold off by the Royal House of Hanover. British armor expert Ian Eaves, with whom the gallery consulted on the purchase, pronounced the suit “part of a distinctive and highly interesting group ... [that] represents the Brunswick school of armourers at its apogee” and a “work of art of exceptional quality.”

The suit the gallery acquired features a close helmet, a breastplate, a backplate, shoulder plates, a collar—called a gorget—and thigh protectors, called tassets. Norwood likens the pieces to clothes for paper dolls: they are basic pieces of armor that could be mixed and matched as needed, to be worn for the field, tournaments, or parades.

The varied functions of the pieces—the helmet, for example, is heavy armor, not lightweight as the breastplate and tassets are—actually made the suit more interesting to the gallery. “For us, it serves an educational purpose,” says Norwood. Adding to its desirability was its unambiguous history. “We know where it came from, and so much armor has wandered. The provenance was unquestioned, and that's extremely unusual in anything from the Renaissance—especially armor.”

The etched decoration on the armor was also key. It's an exceptionally beautiful piece, says Norwood, with intricate etchings drawn from contemporary printed sources by artists such as Cornelis Bos and Virgil Solis.

The etching on the armor, which results from acid biting into the surface of the metal, emerged from the same practice in decorating medieval metalwork.

“It's something you can build an art story around,” Norwood says.

Today the armor is a showpiece of a new installation, *Renaissance Remix: Art and Imagination in 16th-Century Europe*. “We expected that this suit of armor would



**ART OBJECT:** Intricate etchings on a suit of armor purchased by the gallery firmly tie the popular piece to art history. A medallion on the breastplate (left, middle), which shows the biblical story of “Daniel in the Lion's Den,” is a trademark of the Brunswick armors. An inscription surrounding the medallion—a rare feature—dates the piece to 1562.



really capture people's imaginations—and I think it does," says Searl.

Appealing to imaginations, and doing so through stories that museum-goers might never even be consciously aware they're being told, is a key part of a curator's job in building a museum collection.

"Everything we have really is about communicating—with visitors, with students, with artists—about the story of art," says Searl.

Over the past hundred years, the gallery—which will mark its centennial in the fall—has built its collection, from the improvisational atmosphere of its earliest days to today, when it holds more than 12,000 works in its permanent collection.

In the first year after the gallery's founding, "just a handful of objects were essentially gifts. There was no money to buy art. The whole focus was the building," says Searl. Constructed on University Avenue, the museum building was a gift of Emily Sibley Averell Watson in memory of her son, architect James Averell, who died in 1904.

Members of the Rochester community, together with the larger artistic community, pitched in to help the gallery get its footing. "We borrowed a lot, from patrons who lived in the community—many members of

the board had wonderful collections, and they wanted the Rochester art museum to have the same quality of work," Searl says. "And the director of the gallery, George Herdle, had a lot of contacts in New York, and he'd get shows here with some of his artist friends."

Sometimes Emily Watson would purchase and donate pieces on exhibition. For example, she bought for the gallery a monotype by American Post-Impressionist painter Maurice Prendergast, making the piece the artist's first work to enter a museum collection. "Along the way some of these extremely fortuitous things happened, because people were helping us to acquire work, and they were people who were collectors and connoisseurs themselves," says Searl.

By the 1930s, however, the gallery was beginning to receive not only gifts of art but acquisition funds—funds that came then, and come today, almost exclusively from private donors. The gallery's curators could think more deliberately about what to collect.

When the gallery was founded, the trend was to create encyclopedic collections of art so broad that they encompassed the entire world of art.

That origin is still felt in the gallery now. Its permanent collection spans 5,000 years

and represents every world culture, ancient and modern.

But even with a generalist approach, curators still must make decisions. "What is the story that we're looking to tell—and how do we tell that story through objects?" says Searl.

At the center of the acquisitions process is the gallery's Art Committee, a subcommittee of the board that accepts work for the gallery on the board's behalf, approving all acquisitions, loans, and deaccessions. "You're always trying to prune a collection and acquire in a judicious way. You want to have a collection that's meaningful," says Searl, and she credits the rigorous process that the committee heads—with justifications from curators, evaluations from conservators, and assessments from specialists—as essential to their success.

"Every acquisition is important," says Norwood. "It all has a story to tell, and as a curator it's your job to tell the story—and to make good decisions."

Ultimately, it's a story of art that reaches beyond the confines of any one museum, says Searl.

"We're stewards, and we build a collection. Other museums build similar collections, and we all, together, create a great whole in terms of our cultural heritage." 