SVAC show is American art history in 33 pieces

This is a must-see show and you have until Sept. 1 to see it.

By Richard L. Brown
Herald Staff

"From Cassatt to Wyeth" presents 33 pieces that are the cream of the permanent collection of the Cedarhurst Center for the Arts in Mount Vernon, Ill. This body of work has virtually never been seen outside the Cedarhurst gates. It is our good fortune that when Cedarhurst needed renovations, the directors decided to travel the collection rather than store it. The Southern Vermont Arts Center is the first of only a handful of venues to be visited.

Mostly collected between the 1940s and the 1960s by Cedarhurst founders John R. and Eleanor R. Mitchell, the show consists primarily of two-dimensional figural work by American artists who worked after the Civil War.

The Mitchells were intelligent collectors. With few exceptions, each work is representative of its creator's general body of work, making the collection a capsule course in American art history. Huge museums have been built to house collections acquired by the carload, but this gem is proof that wonderful things come in small packages, and marks the distinction between true collecting and acquisition for its own sake.

The exhibition is in the center's Elizabeth de C. Wilson Museum. Built specifically to house the center's permanent collection and to present traveling shows, the museum's design recalls Colonial houses, with a steep pitched roof and several gables. The high ceiling can accommodate very tall works, but also has the potential...
of dearth smaller ones Curator Scott Dimond has avoided this paradox by grouping each with a stable spatial frame and spotlighting each, allowing the viewer to focus on individual pieces without being distracted by its neighbors or by the height of the wall.

Here is some of what you will discover:

Just inside the door is the only sculpture, "Smoking Up," a 1914 tabletop bronze by Charlie Russell (1864-1926). Attributed to a barking horse, chapel flopping gallop hat slightly askew and Megan hold aloft, a cowboy celebrates the end of a cattle drive. Unlike many "Western" artists, Russell lived the life he painted, hunting and wrangling cattle. A passionate admirer of the West, a conservationist and champion of Native American culture, Russell knew his subjects intimately and portrayed them sympathetically.

Step into the main gallery and you're face to face with "Young Mother Nursing Her Child" (1908) by Mary Cassatt (1844-1926). There is at least one other version of this work in the Art Institute of Chicago. This one is apparently unfinished: part of the right side and lower right corner are unpainted, revealing bare canvas. This unfinished area is more significant for what it doesn't reveal any signs of a preparatory sketch. One can't be certain without X-ray evidence, but the absence of a sketch suggests that Cassatt painted the work alla prima, applying paint directly to the canvas so that the final work is developed immediately from the first brushstroke rather than relying on an underdrawing. Painting in this manner was a common practice among the French Impressionists with whom she worked. The powerful brushwork is consistent and energetic, and sets up an interesting tension with the calm and intimate subject.

Childe Hassam (1859-1935), like Cassatt, was drawn to Impressionism while visiting France, and was one of the "10 American painters" who championed Impressionism over the dark Germanic style favored by the late 19th-century American art establishment. "The Table Garden" (1910) shows a woman seen from the back looking through curvans to the ocean outside. Between her and the window is a table holding trays of summer fruits. The figure is seen "in profile," with only a portion of the turned away face visible — an enigmatic approach fairly common in Hassam's work.

The show is rich in portraiture, with works by Robert Henri (1865-1929) and John Sloan (1871-1951) among the highlights. Henri's "Japanese Girl" (1882), for example, is a fine example of Henri's "American" style, characterized by its direct, loose brushwork and vibrant colors. Sloan's "Girl in a White Dress" (1915) is a classic example of the "Hudson River School" style, with its emphasis on natural beauty and romanticism.

And the surrealistic Siegfried Bernhard (1925-1984), one of the few Americans to have a solo show in the Vatican Museum, whose contribution features a woman's head protruding from an antique tub and giant mother-of-pearl cufflinks. This is a must-see show, and you have until Sept. 1 to see it. After that you can catch it in Orlando if you're planning a Disney trip over the holidays.

The Southern Vermont Arts Center is at 20 West Road in Manchester Village. The museum is open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sundays from 1 p.m. Adult admissions are $8, students $5, seniors are free. The center's phone number is 802-4440 and the Web address is www.svac.org.

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