Cassatt to Wyeth

Thorne plays host to important visitors

By NICOLE S. COLSON
Sentinel Staff

A group of works by well-known artists had never been seen outside the walls of an Illinois museum until last year, and now Keene in 2007.

Mitchell. They were an Illinois couple who acquired the artwork between the 1940s and 1960s, before it was properly valued. Rister said the Mitchells were entrepreneurs — a furniture store, radio station and oil business.
A known artist had never been seen outside the walls of an Illinois museum until last year, and now Keene is one of only five locations that the public can see the art until it is returned to those walls next year.

The Thorne-Sagendorph Art Gallery at Keene State College will be one of the national venues for “From Cassatt to Wyeth: American Masterworks from the Mitchell Museum.” Mitchell Museum is located at the Cedarhurst Center for Visual Arts in Mt. Vernon. The KSC show opens Friday, Sept. 14, with an opening reception from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the gallery, and it will run through Nov. 11.

The traveling exhibition visited the Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester from June through September last year before it went to Florida until February and finally to Iowa before it stops at The Thorne. It will wind up in Nashville through April 2008.

The Mitchell Museum decided now was the best time to send the permanent collection around the country because the museum is undergoing a major renovation and expansion.

“It’s to safeguard the pieces,” said Vonda Rister, executive assistant to the Mitchell Museum's director of visual arts. Once the project is complete, the collection will be returned in time for the museum’s grand reopening.

The 33 pieces, which include paintings, works on paper, and one sculpture, come from the private collection of the late John R. and Eleanor R.

Rister said the Mitchells were entrepreneurs — a furniture store, radio station and oil investments among their business ventures — and they were world travelers. Eleanor founded the local high school's art department and taught art at the school for awhile. She and her husband were also philanthropists, having founded Cedarhurst and bequeathing their entire estate to the center.

Although the Mitchell’s collection is well known to American art scholars and residents in the area around the Illinois museum, Thorne-Sagendorph Art Gallery director Maureen Ahern said most aren’t aware it exists.

As the exhibit will attract national attention at each venue it travels to, Rister hopes it will put the Mitchell Museum on the map. “It’s the only cultural institution in southern Illinois,” she said.

Showcased will be work by renowned artists, including Mary Cassatt and Andrew Wyeth, as well as Frederick Childe Hassam, John Singer Sargent, George Wesley Beardsley, Robert Henri, William Glackens and others.

They are considered some of the most significant contributors to the development of American art, their work being products of several major art movements.

Several artists featured, including Thomas Eakins, Robert Henri, William Glackens and Maurice Prendergast, were members of a group dubbed by the press the Eight Independent Painters, or The Eight. They were a group who chose to exhibit their work without pre-approval by the juries of the art establishment. Some of those same artists and others exhibited in this show, including George Bellows, were a part of the realist artistic movement known as The Ash Can School, which became well known during the early 20th century. Collectively they were best known for work depicting the poor, urban life. Edward Hopper, a recognizable name, was a student of Henri (as was Bellows) and became part of the Ash Can School later on.

Hassam, who had ties to Charleston, was a member of another exclusive artists’ group known as The Ten American Painters — or The Ten. This bunch of artists, all influenced by Impressionism, resigned from the Society of American Artists in the late 19th century for similar reasons The Eight seceded, namely to protest commercialism. Interestingly, Keene painter Abbott H. Thayer was asked to join when it was formed.

Like Cassatt, she was also attracted to the Impressionist style while visiting Europe.

The show includes three by Cassatt, as well as several seascapes for Glackens, “Landscapes,” Bellport, Long Island, and Prendergast’s “By the Sea” (1906) and Bellow’s “The Huts” (1918). Also two pieces by armistice and war heroes.

See THO!