

Recent Acquisitions

Artworks by Former DU Faculty

9.12.2024 – 10.11.2024



School of Art & Art History
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER



UNIVERSITY
ART
COLLECTIONS

Art at DU

Over 100 Years of Making

Art has long been a part of the curriculum at the University of Denver. Starting in the 1880s, the University, then the Colorado Seminary, boasted an art program, but financial hardship ended it before the turn of the twentieth century. After several decades, the School of Art at DU was reborn in its modern form with the purchase of Chappell House, home to the fledgling Denver Art Museum. In 1929, under the leadership of Vance Kirkland, the school grew quickly, attracting hundreds of students each year and featuring celebrated artists as part of the faculty. DU was deeply intertwined with other major institutions, including the Denver Art Museum, Denver Artists Guild, Denver Public Library, and Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. Together, they worked to establish a thriving art scene in Colorado. DU was unique in its early incorporation of art into the University, understanding art as a rigorous, intellectual endeavor, and serving as a beacon for academic artistic training in the West.

The DU Artist Initiative aims to preserve, steward, and promote the legacies of artists affiliated with the University through collection, research, display, and teaching. This exhibition celebrates recent additions to the University Art Collections of diverse artworks by artists who taught at DU as early as 1929 and as recently as this past school year. Along with the artworks, this exhibition features brief biographical and artistic sketches of each artist.

Patricia Aaron

Taught at DU 1998–2016

Patricia Aaron is an internationally exhibiting artist living and working in Colorado. She received her undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland Global Campus in Heidelberg, Germany and earned her MFA from the University of Denver in 1998, studying with Deborah Howard and Lawrence Argent. She has taught sculpture, painting, and encaustic at DU. Aaron has participated in fellowships both locally and internationally, in places such as SIM in Reykjavik, Iceland and the Museum of Outdoor Arts in Englewood, Colorado. Her artistic practice consists of encaustic painting, printmaking, sculpture, and textiles, with emphasis on abstracted responses to her experiences in diverse cultures and the natural world.

Lawrence Argent

1957–2017 | Taught at DU 1993–2017

English-born artist Lawrence Argent's colorful, imaginative sculptures are celebrated around the world and have a special resonance in Denver. One of his most iconic works, *I See What You Mean* (2005), also known as the Blue Bear, leans against the windows of the Colorado Convention Center and has become an unofficial mascot for the city of Denver. Argent grew up in Australia, and in 1956 his family traveled the world for three months, introducing Argent to famous artworks. Argent studied art at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and received his MFA in 1986 at the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland. Argent was particularly inspired by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and his "readymade" objects. Argent's piece on display here, titled *Cojones* (1999), is made of two street sweeper brushes.

Argent settled in Denver and taught at the University of Denver from 1993 until his death in 2017. His efforts to improve the School of Art led to the creation of the Creative Art Materials Fund (CAMF) and the renovation of the gallery space. One of his works, *Whispers*, a series of limestone slabs with the cast lips of (now former) students, can be found outside the Ritchie Center behind Shwayder Art Building. Argent was at the forefront of digital sculpting, using computer-aided design software to create sculptures with impractical forms, bends, and swirls. His sculptures embody a sense of whimsy, question normalcy, and strive to challenge assumptions.

Otto Karl Bach

1909–1990 | Taught at DU 1946–1969

Although he is most well-known as the long-time Director of the Denver Art Museum (1944–1974), Otto Bach taught at DU's Chappell School of Art for 25 years and was himself a practicing artist. Before he moved to Denver in 1944, Bach quickly rose to top museum positions in Milwaukee and Grand Rapids. During his thirty-year tenure at the Denver Art Museum, he oversaw major advances including the construction of the North Building by Gio Ponti (1971).

For most of Bach's life, his professional museum roles took precedence over his own art. Long before the official establishment of the Museum Studies program at DU, Bach taught Museum Practice: "A practical course in art museum methods and procedure given in cooperation with the Denver Art Museum. Practical attention is given to cataloging, installation of exhibitions, curatorial, educational, and docent methods." Bach's dual roles at the Denver Art Museum and DU further strengthened the longstanding connection between these two Denver institutions.

Bach was a champion of the avant-garde. While he received criticism from the conservative public for collecting and exhibiting modernist works, Bach continually worked to educate the public on abstract art through lectures and regular newspaper columns. Bach's own paintings range in style from naturalistic and representational to pure abstraction, like the painting *Windows* on display here. With flat, geometric planes of color, Bach's painting aligns with the modernist style and artwork that he championed throughout his career.

Watson Bidwell

1904–1964 | Taught at DU 1933–1942

Born in Kansas, Watson Bidwell built his career in Colorado. Bidwell received a BFA from the University of Denver in 1934 and later earned a master's degree in education from Colorado State College. During the 1933-1934 school year, Bidwell transitioned from DU student to faculty. In the summer of 1933, he co-taught drawing and painting with Jozef Bakos at the Santa Fe Art School through a program partnership with the University of Denver. Later that year, Bidwell taught watercolor painting at Chappell House, specifically featuring painting outdoors.

Bidwell's early work was largely influenced by his teachers, including John Edward Thompson, Walt Kuhn, and B.J.O. Nordfeldt. His earlier works are mostly watercolor

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landscapes with some modernist and abstract elements. Throughout his career, Bidwell's work became more abstract and gestural. In *Out of the Deep* (1959), Bidwell's vigorous brushstrokes and use of vibrant colors make the painting appear to burst with frenetic energy.

Bidwell taught at DU until 1942 when he entered military service. Afterwards, he returned to Kansas and served as the head of the Art Department at East High School in Wichita. In 1957 he returned to Colorado and joined the faculty at Colorado State College (now the University of Northern Colorado) in Greeley where he taught until his death in 1964.

John Billmyer

1912–2001 | Taught at DU 1946–1976

John Billmyer grew up in Denver and studied at the University of Denver before joining the faculty. He and his future wife, Mina Conant, worked as janitors at DU's Chappell School of Art to pay for their tuition. Billmyer went on to teach ceramics and art history at DU for thirty years.

Billmyer is most well-known for his printmaking and ceramics. The simple earthenware bowl on display here is made with fired and glazed clay. As a teacher of art history, Billmyer often used historic techniques in his personal practice like India ink drawings, woodblock prints, and clay ceramics. This bowl reveals how Billmyer married historic methods with modern abstract and surreal imagery. Using a *Sgraffito*, or "scratched away," technique, Billmyer carved an array of vaguely recognizable shapes, faces, and eyes into the band of his bowl. This abstract style, found in many of Billmyer's works across different media, highlights his place in the Colorado modernist movement.

Marion Buchan

1895–1971 | Taught at DU 1944–1958

English-born artist Marion Buchan studied at the Liverpool Art Academy before emigrating to Colorado in 1919. In the U.S., Buchan studied with the Denver sculptor Robert Garrison and celebrated modernist sculptor Alexander Archipenko, whose particular influence is visible in Buchan's balanced use of positive and negative space in her sculptures. Buchan summarized this sentiment saying, "Spaces are as much a part of the design as solid form."

Through the 1930s, she became well-known for her large garden sculptures and made several monumental sculptural commissions for Denver churches. Her work often interprets Classical and religious sources in diverse modernist styles with sensual, elongated figures.

Buchan was a dedicated advocate for modernism, which often put her and her work at odds with more traditional Denver citizens. The sculpture recently given to the University of Denver exemplifies some of this local controversy. In 1954, the Denver Athletic Club commissioned Buchan to make a sculpture of an athlete. In her sculpture, Buchan balanced strong, dynamic, abstracted musculature with negative space throughout the figure's chest and head. After presenting a model of the proposed sculpture, Buchan received hateful letters and mocking critiques in local papers, including one article titled "Must Athletes Have Holes in Their Heads?"

Buchan wrote a sharp response to the article, encouraging the author to study art before asserting his opinion: "I'm afraid the only 'hole' remains in the head of a perturbed young reporter, I suggest he fill it up with knowledge of the arts." Several female students at DU defended Buchan's modern sculpture. Unfortunately, the Denver Athletic Club ultimately rejected the sculpture, signaling that Buchan's modernist abstraction was not yet appreciated by the Denver public.

Mina Conant

1910–1999 | Taught at DU 1946–1951

Mina Conant began her journey at the University of Denver as a student at the Chappell School of Art in the 1930s. Along with fellow student and future husband, John E. Billmyer, Conant worked as a janitor at Chappell House to help pay for art school. After graduating, Conant and Billmyer moved to Cleveland where Conant began establishing her professional practice as a printmaker, notably exhibiting with the Print Club of Cleveland, the oldest print club in the United States. In 1946 the couple returned to Denver and Conant taught figure drawing and crafts at DU until 1951. Her work is held in collections across the country including the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio, the Charles Marvin Fairchild Gallery at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., the Rockford Art Museum in Illinois, and the Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art in Denver.

Although best known for her prints and paintings, Conant worked in various mediums, including pastels, sculpture, ceramics, stained glass, and textiles. Conant's works are full of children, animals, and fantastical creatures. Her style is colorful, imaginative, and filled with allegory and symbolism, as she believed that "a picture should be a communication- the more you look at a picture the more insights you should get."

Helen Davis, Ed.D.

1923–2023

Helen Davis's life was dedicated to people and art. Her adventurous approach to art was nurtured at Northwest Missouri State University, experimenting across a wide variety of media. Davis moved to Colorado in 1948 and established an arts therapy program at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital.

Davis has long been affiliated with the University of Denver. She received her Ed.D. from DU in 1961. Her experience of gender-based discrimination reinforced Davis's feminist convictions and inspired her lifelong mentorship of and advocacy for women. She went on to lead the art department at Colorado Women's College from 1962 to 1971. Later, Davis led the Boulder Valley School District's art program and helped develop the Boulder Arts Commission. For her pioneering contributions, the University of Denver awarded Davis the Professional Achievement Award in 2009.

The Davis Gallery, named in her honor, opened in January 2022 and has featured dozens of creative and engaging exhibitions, largely emphasizing the innovative work of students in the School of Art and Art History. The University of Denver is immensely grateful for Davis's generous support and leadership.

Silvio Carl Fracassini

1907–1997 | Taught at DU 1934–1945

Silvio Carl Fracassini was a student and later professor at the University of Denver's Chappell School of Art. Raised in Colorado, Fracassini studied under John Thompson and Cyril Kay-Scott before working as their peer. He received his BFA in 1936 and began teaching drawing, lettering, and perspective at DU, bridging the gap between fine and commercial arts. He had his first solo exhibition at Chappell House in 1941 and was acknowledged for his watercolor renderings of the Colorado mountain landscape.

After serving in the military during World War II, Fracassini relocated to Iowa where he taught at Iowa Wesleyan College and the University of Iowa until his retirement in 1977. He received his MFA from the University of Iowa in 1951. His master's thesis reveals his interest in the contemporary artistic climate and the future of American art. Entitled "The Dilemma of the Twentieth Century Artist," the thesis features responses from dozens of celebrated American artists on questions about the nature

of art, particularly the dissonance between abstract and representational art. Fracassini's own work shifted away from landscapes to total abstraction. His mature paintings, like the one on display in this exhibition from 1955, feature Cubist-inspired, geometric forms rendered in bold colors with energetic, expressive lines. He concludes his thesis on an optimistic note, meditating on the possibilities and value of modern art: "... artists are seeking new pieties and interpreting for us new meanings with which to build a better world."

Vance Hall Kirkland

1904–1981 | Founding Director of the School of Art at DU, taught
1929–1932 and 1946–1969

In January, 1929, the University of Denver announced that Vance Kirkland, a promising young artist out of Cleveland, would be the first director of DU's Chappell School of Art. Kirkland took on this ambitious task and quickly built up the program, recruiting important artists to the faculty and attracting hundreds of students. In 1932, when the university refused to grant degree credit for art classes, he left DU to start his own school. Years later, he returned to lead a reformed DU in 1946, and remained with the university until 1969. Kirkland championed art as a rigorous academic pursuit, worthy of a central place in the university, and established DU as a premier American art hub.

Over many decades, Kirkland's prolific artistic output ventured through several styles, from Designed Realism to Surrealism, to Hard Edge Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, and Dot Painting. His works are inventive, iconic, and enchanting. Within his paintings, he created colorful, otherworldly spaces, some of which were inspired by local landscapes and others resembling far-away interstellar nebulae. Kirkland's styles are uniquely his own and marked the leading edge of modern and avant-garde art in Colorado and beyond. His own artistic genius and dedication to students has inspired generations of artists.

Hayes Lyon

1909–1987 | Taught at DU 1933–1934

Hayes Lyon moved to Boulder with his family in 1920. Upon urging from his father, Lyon studied economics at the University of Colorado, Boulder, but he remained drawn to art. Lyon started at DU's Chappell School of Art in 1932, studying with John Edward Thompson and Jozef Bakos. At this time, DU oversaw the Santa Fe School of Art, which fostered exchange between Denver and Santa Fe, bringing Lyon in contact with important American artists Willard Nash and B.J.O. Nordfeldt. Like others at this time, Lyon transitioned into teaching when he was nearing completion of his own degree. During the 1933 summer term he co-taught painting and freehand drawing with Donald Bear, and in 1933-1934 he was named an Assistant in Drawing and Painting at DU. After completing his BFA from the University of Denver in 1937, he studied with celebrated artist Andrew Dasburg in Taos, sparking a lifelong friendship between the two.

Lyon largely focused on the local Colorado and New Mexico landscape in his artworks. Most recognizable are his strong, geometric renderings of canyons with conifer trees which brought him national recognition in 1941. He served in the Mediterranean During World War II and took advantage of his post in Italy, studying art and befriending Giorgio de Chirico. Returning to the U.S. after the war, Lyon taught painting at the University of Texas, Austin from 1946 to 1951, later moving back to Colorado where he worked as an illustrator at Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado until retirement in 1961.

Robert Mangold

1930–2023 | Taught at DU 1960–1964

Using his GI Bill, Robert 'Bob' Mangold enrolled in Indiana University to study art. He began working with metal and taught himself to weld. After receiving his MFA in 1960, he moved to Denver to teach sculpture at the DU School of Art. During his time at DU in the early 1960s, Mangold began some of his most iconic works, the *Anemotive* series of large, spherical, wind-propelled kinetic sculptures. Mangold's lifelong fascination with natural systems, space, time, and motion, can be seen in the sense of movement that his sculptures evoke. Smooth wave-like formations oscillate gracefully and energetic pieces of metal zig and zag out of walls, playing with space and defying expectations of what art is. The sculptures *Wall PTTSAAES* (located in the

Shwayder lobby) and *Yard PTTSAAES #22* (outdoors, between Asbury Ave. and Shwayder), are dynamic expressions of his interest in movement. The titles are an anagram for “Point Traveling Through Space At An Erratic Speed.”

Mangold left DU in 1964 to pursue his own artistic career but was soon drawn back into academia when he was given the opportunity to start the Fine Arts Program at Metropolitan State College of Denver, and where he taught until his retirement from teaching in 1995. Mangold was a founder of the group “Form,” a collective of sculptors showing large-scale sculptures across the region. His artworks have become treasured additions to the Denver landscape in places like Civic Center Park and the Auraria campus.

William Sanderson

1905–1990 | Taught at DU 1946–1972

William Sanderson grew up in imperial Russia and moved to New York with his family in 1923. After studying art at several schools around New York, he found success working as an illustrator and graphic designer for magazines like *Harpers* and the *New Yorker*, as well as political publications like the *New Masses*. During World War II, Sanderson was stationed at Lowry Field in Denver and opted to stay in Colorado after being discharged. He taught advertising design at the University of Denver for 26 years.

Sanderson’s style evolved across several decades, from brightly-colored surrealist compositions to hard-edge abstraction to shadowy regionalist scenes of the West. Through it all, Sanderson remained committed to the social and political power of art. In 1964 he stated, “Unfortunately, most artists today are concerned only with textures, brushstrokes and technique. It isn’t very fashionable to be involved. But my feeling is that a painter has a responsibility to society.”

The works on display here show Sanderson’s range, particularly in color and feeling. *I Love Ruth* exemplifies his expertise in text, design, and lettering, while *Rooster* exudes surrealist whimsy. The electrifying colors in these paintings contrast with the pensive, melancholy, agrarian landscape of Eastern Colorado, to which the artist devoted the later years of his career. For his years of service to DU and sharp, impactful style, Sanderson is rightfully celebrated as one of Colorado’s most influential artists.

Melvin Strawn

1929–2020 | Taught at DU 1969–1985

Melvin 'Mel' Strawn (1929-2020) was born in Boise, Idaho and passed away in Salida, Colorado. When the family moved to Los Angeles in 1947, Strawn began his formal art education, studying at the Chouinard, Otis, and Jepson Art Institutes. After serving during the Korean War, Strawn he re-enrolled at the College of Arts and Craft where he met Saburo Hasegawa (1906-1957) his most influential teacher. Hasegawa introduced him to Asian philosophies and calligraphy, which inspired his later work. Strawn worked as a printmaker, painter, and digital artist. His work evolved throughout his career from modern art to post-war abstract expressionism to twenty-first century digital art. He blended images and themes across media, including some of the earliest explorations of digital fine art and ink-jet printing. His work combines the layering of color, shape, form, calligraphy, and other images that creates depth and evokes thought and emotion.

Strawn taught art for more than three decades, and he served as the Director of DU's School of Art from 1969 to 1985. During his tenure, Strawn oversaw the construction of the Shwayder Art Building. Until the 1970s, the arts had been housed in spare spaces around campus; this new building provided a dedicated space for the arts and continues to house the School of Art and Art History today.

John Edward Thompson

1882–1945 | Taught at DU 1931–1945

John Thompson, celebrated as the “Dean of Colorado art,” is credited with bringing modern art to Denver in the early twentieth century. Thompson grew up in Buffalo, New York and studied art in New York City and across Europe. After returning to the U.S., he headed West to Colorado and Santa Fe in 1914. Influenced by modern painters like Cézanne, Thompson painted the Colorado landscape in a truly new way, abstracting the terrain in flat blocks of color. Exhibiting in the 1919 Denver Artists' Association exhibition, Thompson's style challenged and upset the status quo, inciting outsized critiques. But his artwork excited other artists, and his teaching inaugurated the modern era of art in Colorado.

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Thompson taught on his own and with other Denver art schools before officially joining the University of Denver faculty in 1931. In 1929 he executed a mural for the theater in Margery Reed Hall featuring themes and characters from the works of Shakespeare. This mural was painted over soon after and only recovered and restored in 2007 under the leadership of Dan Jacobs at the University Art Collections.

The monumental panel on display here is one of series commissioned in 1918 to decorate the magnificent house built by Thompson's sister Eleanora and her husband John Leopold Brodie in Buffalo. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was popular to have rooms decorated in the styles of different cultures. The Persian Room was the jewel of the Brodie house. Styled after 14th- and 15th-century Persian manuscripts, the panels feature scenes of Persian royalty engaged in courtly activities surrounded by exotic flora and fauna. Humorously, the artist incorporated portraits of family and friends into the compositions and included a self-portrait on the far left of this panel. Thompson studied Persian art at the Louvre in Paris and remained a student of Asian art throughout his life. This panel is a masterpiece of Thompson's earlier artwork, highlighting his technical expertise as well as his study of global art. The other three panels are in the collection of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

Lester Varian

1881–1967 | Taught at DU 1933–1941

Lester Varian's prints and watercolors showcase great artistic diversity. While some works capture the vibrant landscape of Colorado, others bear witness to the growing industrialization of urban life in Denver. His artworks also recall his international travels and reveal his interest in abstraction.

Varian, the son of noted Denver architect Ernest Phillip Varian, studied architecture at the Pratt Institute of Architecture and Barber's Beaux-Arts Atelier in New York City. Upon returning to Denver in 1910, he founded an architectural firm with his father. Varian became well-known for his architectural prints after they were exhibited at the Denver Art Museum. Many of his etchings and lithographs were created with support from the 1930s Federal Art Project, a New Deal program to fund visual arts in the United States. Varian's prints are held in the collections of the Denver Art Museum and the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Art in Denver, as well as the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington D.C.

Frank Vavra

1892–1967 | Taught at DU 1944–1949

Frank Vavra grew up in Cheyenne, Wyoming and was interested in art from an early age. After serving in France during World War I, Vavra came to Denver in 1923, and dedicated himself to art. He studied with John E. Thompson and Robert Graham, and quickly became a fixture in the Denver art scene. In 1929, Vavra and his wife Kathleen Huffman, moved to rural Insmont, Colorado to be closer to nature. Inspired by these rural surroundings, Vavra painted the local Colorado and New Mexico landscape in an impressionistic style, with bright, vivid colors and rich, textured brushwork.

Vavra returned to Denver with his family in the early 1940s, and taught drawing, painting, and commercial illustration at DU from 1944 to 1949. The combination of the so-called “fine” and “applied” arts was common at the time, providing students with a variety of skills to support them in a career in the arts. By the late 1940s, Vavra’s style shifted towards abstraction and in 1948 he broke away from the more traditional Denver Artists Guild as a part of the “Colorado 15,” who pursued avant-garde art. Vavra brought Colorado landscape painting into a new, modern era by incorporating impressionistic and later abstract expressionist techniques.

Timothy Weaver

Taught at DU 2005–2024

Timothy Weaver is an interdisciplinary artist and instructor, whose work engages with the intersections of art and life science. After receiving Bachelor and Master of Sciences degrees from Purdue University in 1976 and 1978, he pursued an MFA at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1993. He taught at the University of Denver as a professor of Emergent Digital Practice from 2005 to 2024.

Weaver utilizes a variety of innovative digital, immersive, installation forms to deal with ecological memory. The work on display here juxtaposes a close-up photo of bright green feathers with an image of John James Audubon’s illustration of the Carolina Parrot which became extinct in 1918 due to human eradication. Here, Weaver invokes the long history of scientific illustration and taxonomies, inviting the viewer to consider how we know and influence the living world around us.

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