

## THE AMERICAN PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURE COLLECTION

In the context of an international collection, SAM's American art collection, a relatively new area of focus, contributes to a larger understanding of how cultural exchange has shaped our national identity. On view are outstanding examples by the country's leading 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape painters: Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church, Sanford Gifford and John Frederick Kensett. The collection has grown to include important works by artists at the turn of the century, including John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt, and John La Farge. Paintings and sculpture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are an especially strong part of the collection—in addition to a core group of works by Northwest artists, the museum has key works by Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, and John Covert as well as extensive bodies of work by Mark Tobey and Morris Graves.

When the Seattle Art Museum opened in 1933, founding director Richard Fuller indicted his desire to build a collection that fostered a dialogue between art of the past and artists of the present. To that end he developed an ambitious exhibition and acquisition program to showcase contemporary regional art. He was especially supportive of artists Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, and others who shared a common interest with Dr. Fuller in the arts and philosophy of Asia. Since that time, the museum's holding of early 20<sup>th</sup> century paintings and sculpture has grown through gifts from an increasingly large group of enthusiastic collectors. Today it includes not only important artists of the Pacific Northwest but other painters and sculptors who were among the most original American artists of the early modern period, including Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Arthur Dove.

The work that signaled the museum's commitment to building a collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century American art was the peony-design window created by John La Farge, which was purchased with donations in 1987. Over the subsequent years, the museum added works by La Farge's contemporaries Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent to show the international stature of American artists of this period. Church's landmark *A Country Home* (1854), which celebrates the rural landscape of southern Vermont, sustains the perception of America as a land of enduring peace and plenty. Long a part of the collection, SAM augmented its holdings in recent years with important works by Church's contemporaries. A recent acquisition, Bierstadt's billboard-size painting *Puget Sound on the Pacific Coast* (1870) found an apt home in Seattle. While one early reviewer believed the painting represented a faithful "portrait of a place," the work was actually an imagined view of the region, as the artist created it before ever traveling to Washington.

One of the most exciting new acquisitions in American art is the portrait of *Sylvester Gardiner* (ca. 1772) by John Singleton Copley. Copley was admired by Boston's elite as a highly skilled portrait painter, and his close friend Gardiner was one of the most highly educated doctors in the colonies. Just two years after the portrait was made, both Copley and Gardiner, who were British loyalists, were forced to flee Boston.

Curated by Patricia Junker, Curator of American Art.