

Articles of Distinction

Arts and Letters
March 14–July 3, 2026

In 1915, Permanent Secretary of the American Academy of Arts and Letters Robert Underwood Johnson wrote to members soliciting “articles of distinction” for a new collection.¹ As a public service, the directors intended to create “a treasure house of literary and artistic Americana.”² They received an eclectic mix of artworks and memorabilia that reflected members’ values and tastes, and often, objects by which they could be remembered. Early gifts included Mark Twain’s pipe, a Winslow Homer watercolor, and a plaster cast of Robert Frost’s nose. As the collection continued, it gained formal portraits, musical manuscripts, bronze busts, and more—over a century of creative lives accumulated.³

To create this exhibition, we invited current members of Arts and Letters to select objects from the collection and write texts to accompany them. What objects did they find compelling and why? Some were drawn to archival documents; others considered paintings and sculptures, artists’ tools, death masks, and furniture. The resulting texts range from personal meditations and close readings to imaginative projections.

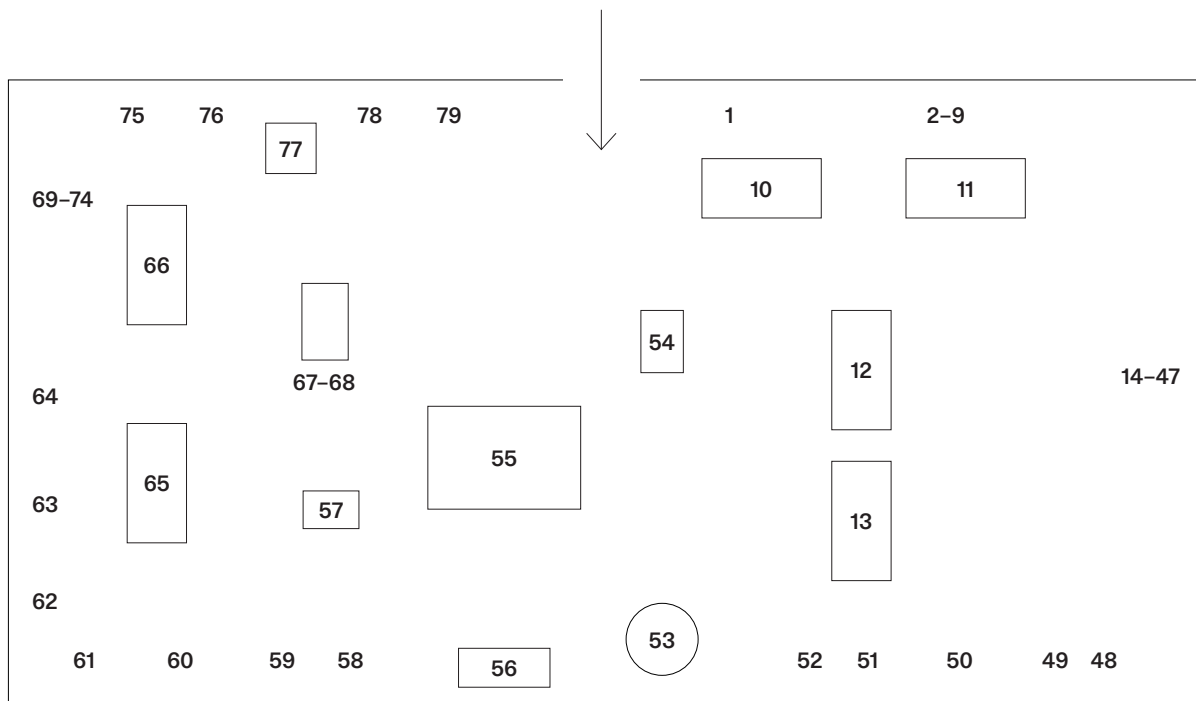
Composer Annea Lockwood selected Charles Ives’s metronomes, describing him as “a generative ancestor.” Architect Sharon Egretta Sutton, who chose a drawing by Jacob Lawrence, writes about how the artist “pried open the doors of the art world.” Artist Amy Sillman assembled a group of plaster and metal casts of members’ hands. The hand, Sillman explains in her text, “extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others.” All the objects here are also gestures—extending themselves toward others, and across time.

The collection’s value, then, lies not just in what it preserves but in what it sets in motion: encounters between past and present, conversations among disciplines and generations. Poet Grace Schulman picked Winslow Homer’s 1883 watercolor *The Incoming Tide* and wrote a poem that extends the painting’s drama. She concludes by connecting Homer’s battle with the sea to her own battle with language—“the same struggle in which these words are born.”

Jenny Jaskey and Kristin Poor

1. This period of active collecting continued until the early 1940s, when the institution’s focus shifted to supporting living artists. Robert Underwood Johnson, “Archives of the American Academy: An Important Enterprise: An Appeal to Members for Contribution of Memorabilia,” c. 1915, Academy History Development of Collection Box 1, Folder 1, Archives of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. For more information on this history, see Lillian B. Miller, “The Collection of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters,” in *Portraits from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters* (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1987), 3–33.
2. William H. Sloane, Brander Matthews, and Hamlin Garland, “To the Members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and Its Friends,” *The American Academy of Arts and Letters News Bulletin*, no. 1, c. 1920s, Academy History Development of Collection Box 1, Folder 1, Archives of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. See also Robert Underwood Johnson, letter to Edwin H. Anderson, February 27, 1915, Robert Underwood Johnson Member Box, Box 1, Folder 6, Archives of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
3. Thank you to Arts and Letters Archivist and Collections Manager Mitsuko Brooks for her invaluable research on the history of our collections.

South Gallery



1. Winslow Homer (Art, elected 1905)

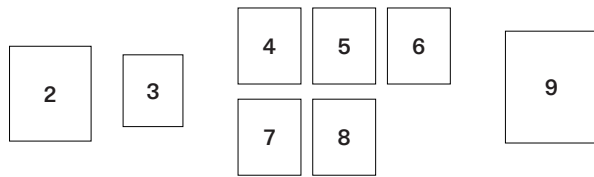
The Incoming Tide, 1883

Watercolor

Gift of Charles S. Homer, 1918

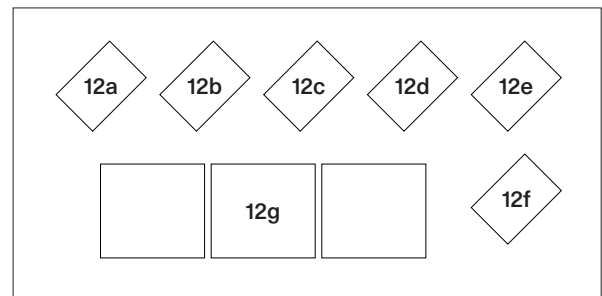
Selected by Grace Schulman (Literature, elected 2019)

Wall

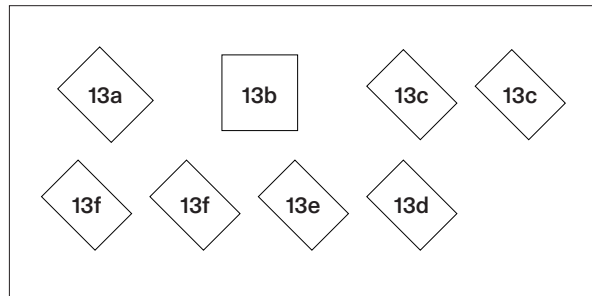


2. Leonebel Jacobs
Portrait of Sinclair Lewis, n.d. (Literature, elected 1935)
Pastel on paper
Gift of Sinclair Lewis
3. Edward Steichen
Sinclair Lewis, 1932 (Literature, elected 1935)
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Sinclair Lewis
- 4–8. Carl Van Vechten (Literature, elected 1961)
Gelatin silver prints
Gift of the artist, 1962
4. *Carson McCullers*, 1959 (Literature, elected 1952)
5. *W. H. Auden*, 1939 (Literature, elected 1948)
6. *James Baldwin*, 1955 (Literature, elected 1964)
7. *James Branch Cabell*, 1935 (Literature, elected 1937)
8. *Henry Mencken*, 1932 (Gold Medal for Belles Lettres and Criticism / Essays, 1950)
9. Abbott Handerson Thayer (Art, elected 1898)
Henry James, c. 1881 (Literature, elected 1898)
Pencil on paper
Selected by Adam Gopnik (Literature, elected 2025)
10. American Academy of Arts and Letters
The Members' Book, 1929
Mixed media on vellum, leather- and fabric-wrapped board, metal
Gift of Archer M. Huntington (Literature, elected 1911)
Selected by Laura Owens (Art, elected 2024)
- 11a. Palette and four brushes belonging to John White Alexander (Art, elected 1898), c. 1915
Wood, paint, bristles
Gift of Elizabeth Alexander
- 11b. John White Alexander (Art, elected 1898)
Two sketchbooks, 1877
Ink and graphite drawings on paper
Selected by Paul Muldoon (Literature, elected 2008)

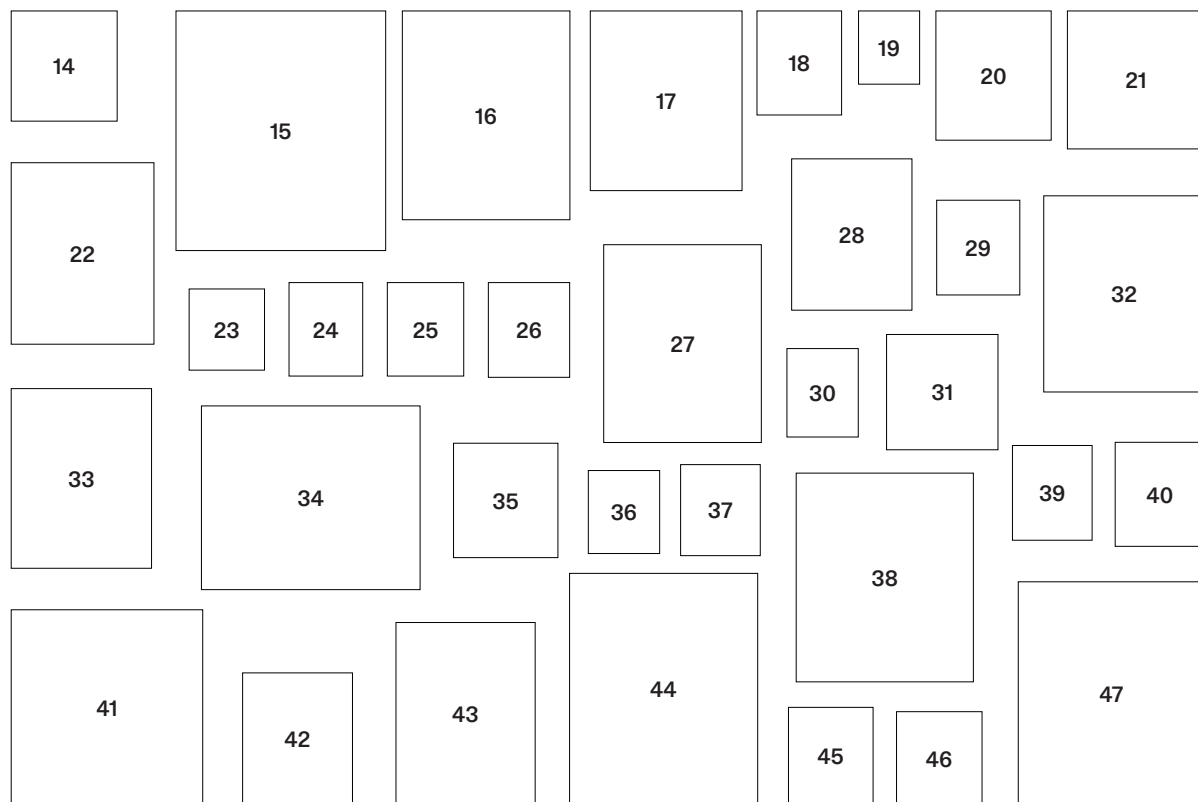
Vitrine



- 12a. Cast of right hand of Archer Milton Huntington (Literature, elected 1911), 1935
Metal
Gift of Huntington, 1935
- 12b. Cast of right hand of Anna Hyatt Huntington (Art, elected 1927) holding a tool, 1935
Metal
Gift of Huntington, 1935
- 12c. Cast of left hand of Augustus Saint-Gaudens (Art, elected 1898), n.d.
Plaster
Gift of A. A. Weinman (Art, elected 1910), 1934
- 12d. Cast of left hand of George Wharton Edwards (Art, elected 1925), 1925
Painted plaster
- 12e. Cast of right hand of Charles H. Niehaus (Art, elected 1916), n.d.
Plaster
Gift of Charles H. Niehaus, 1935
- 12f. Cast of right hand of Edwin Howland Blashfield (Art, elected 1898), n.d.
Plaster and pencil
Made on-site at the Academy
- 12g. Edwin Howland Blashfield (Art, elected 1898)
sitting for plaster cast of his right hand, n.d.
Three black-and-white photographs
Selected by Amy Sillman (Art, elected 2020)



- 13a. Cast of left hand of Childe Hassam
(Art, elected 1898), 1893
Plaster
Bequest of Childe Hassam, 1936
- 13b. Cast of hands of George Washington Cable
(Literature, elected 1889) and Louise S. Cable, n.d.
Plaster
Gift of Louisa Bartlett Cable Chard
- 13c. Two casts of right hand of Wellington F. Ruckstull
(Art, elected 1898), 1898
Plaster
Gift of Wellington F. Ruckstull, 1933
- 13d. Cast of right hand of Timothy Cole (Art, elected 1908), 1927
Plaster
Made on-site at the Academy
- 13e. Cast of right hand of John Quincy Adams Ward
(Art, elected 1902), n.d.
Plaster
Gift of Rachel Quincy Adams Ward, 1923
- 13f. Casts of right and left hands of Richard Watson Gilder
(Literature, elected 1898), 1909
Plaster
Gift of the Gilder Family
Selected by Amy Sillman (Art, elected 2020)



14–47. Eugene Speicher (Art, elected 1930)

Portraits, n.d.

Oil on canvas

Bequest of the artist, 1962

Selected by Nicole Eisenman (Art, elected 2018)

- 14. *Portrait: Brown Jacket*
- 15. *Portrait: Mara*
- 16. *Portrait: Woman with Hair Piece Sitting on an Orange Cloth*
- 17. *Portrait of a Woman with Red Beads (Mae Murray)*
- 18. *Portrait: Girl with Pendant*
- 19. *Portrait: Girl in Orange Dress*
- 20. *Portrait: Seated Girl with Red and Pink Collar*
- 21. *Portrait: Mlle. de Vilmorin*
- 22. *Portrait: Girl in Cerise Blouse [Mrs. Deanie (Kathleen) Elwyn]*
- 23. *Portrait: Young Cuban Woman*
- 24. *Portrait: Girl in Red Sweater*
- 25. *Portrait: Girl in Brown Dress*
- 26. *Portrait: Red Headed Girl with Necklace*

- 27. *Portrait: Miss Yvette von Kories*
- 28. *Portrait: Woman in Gray Coat*
- 29. *Portrait: Mara with Pink Rose*
- 30. *Portrait: Woman in Gray Blouse*
- 31. *Portrait: Cuban Woman (Cuban Head)*
- 32. *Portrait: Winsley*
- 33. *Portrait: Girl in Lavender Dress (Portrait of H)*
- 34. *Portrait: Mrs. C.V. Whitney*
- 35. *Portrait: Girl in Velvet Dress*
- 36. *Portrait: Girl with Blue Bow*
- 37. *Portrait: Girl in Green Neck Piece*
- 38. *Portrait: Lady in Black Velvet*
- 39. *Portrait: Girl in Plum Colored Jacket (Ribbon in Hair)*
- 40. *Portrait: Bibi*
- 41. *Portrait: Tissane*
- 42. *Portrait: Ester Langstaff*
- 43. *Portrait: Girl in Flower Dress*
- 44. *Portrait: Miss Sally Gracie*
- 45. *Portrait: Woman in White Ruffled Collar and Plum Jacket*
- 46. *Portrait: Agnes*
- 47. *Portrait: Jeri Sauvinet*

48. Palette with paint belonging to Gari Melchers (Art, elected 1898), n.d.
Wood, oil
49. Martin Puryear (Art, elected 1992)
Untitled, 2001
Hardground and softground etching with drypoint and chine collé
Gift of the artist, 2003

Selected by Nader Tehrani (Architecture, elected 2021)
50. Pipe belonging to Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) (Literature, elected 1898), 1904
Wood, assorted materials
Gift of Albert Bigelow Paine (Literature, elected 1918)

Selected by Mel Chin (Art, elected 2021)
Selected by Gish Jen (Literature, elected 2025)
Selected by Nader Tehrani (Architecture, elected 2021)
51. Abbott Handerson Thayer (Art, elected 1898)
Portrait of Mark Twain, 1881
Oil on canvas
52. Albert Bigelow Paine (Literature, elected 1918)
Portrait of Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), 1906
Black-and-white photograph

Selected by Ron Chernow (Literature, elected 2018)
53. H. B. Nims & Co.
The Franklin Terrestrial Globe Geographical Divisions and Political Boundaries to the present date carefully compiled by the best authorities, c. 1853
Paper, wood, metal
Gift of Archer M. Huntington (Literature, elected 1911), 1923

Selected by Francine Prose (Literature, elected 2010)
- 54a. Ron Sisco
Death notice box, 2017
Wooden box with stone inlay
Personal collection; Promised gift of Ann Patchett
- 54b. Betty, n.d.
Iron miniature dog figurine
Personal collection; Promised gift of Ann Patchett

Selected by Ann Patchett (Literature, elected 2017)
55. William Mitchell Kendall (Architecture, elected 1914)
McKim, Mead & White
Member chairs #2 and #19, 1911
Carved Italian walnut, leather, inscribed brass plates
Installed in Members' Room in 1923
Gift of Robert Underwood Johnson (Literature, elected 1898), 1911

Selected by Arlene Shechet (Art, elected 2023)
56. Alan Hovhaness (Music, elected 1977)
Paul Hindemith (Music, elected 1947)
Odeon Partos
Talin Concerto for Viola and Strings / Music of Mourning (Trauermusik) / Yiskor (In Memoriam), 1957
12-inch vinyl record
MGM Records
Turntable courtesy of Audio-Technica

Selected by David Lang (Music, elected 2014)
57. Metronomes belonging to Charles Ives (Music, elected 1946), n.d.
Wood, metal
Gift of Charles Ives Tyler, 2012

Selected by Annea Lockwood (Music, elected 2022)
58. Carl Ruggles (Music, elected 1954)
"Men: Rhapsodic Proclamation for Horns and Orchestra" from *Men and Mountains*, 1927
Ink on paper
59. Carl Ruggles (Music, elected 1954)
Men and Mountains, n.d.
Ink on paper

Selected by George E. Lewis (Music, elected 2018)
60. Joel Shapiro (Art, elected 1998)
Untitled, 2008
Charcoal on paper
Courtesy of the Joel Shapiro Estate and Paula Cooper Gallery

Selected by Henry Threadgill (Music, elected 2021)
61. Varujan Boghosian (Art, elected 1986)
Orpheus, 1997, from *Centennial Portfolio*, 1998
Multiple-color etching with chine collé

Selected by Edward Hirsch (Literature, elected 2017)
62. Orlando Rouland
Portrait of Edward MacDowell, n.d. (Music, elected 1898)
Oil on canvas
Gift of Archer M. Huntington (Literature, elected 1911), 1932

Selected by Charles Gaines (Art, elected 2022)

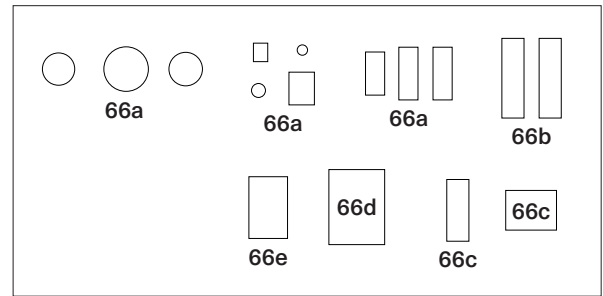
63. Childe Hassam (Art, elected 1898)
Miss Ingram Reading a Letter, 1913
 Oil on canvas
 Bequest of the artist, 1936
64. Edward H. May
Portrait of Edith Wharton (at the age of eighteen), 1881
 Oil on canvas
 Gift of Edith Wharton (Literature, elected 1926), 1930
 Selected by Ann Hamilton (Art, elected 2014)

Vitrine

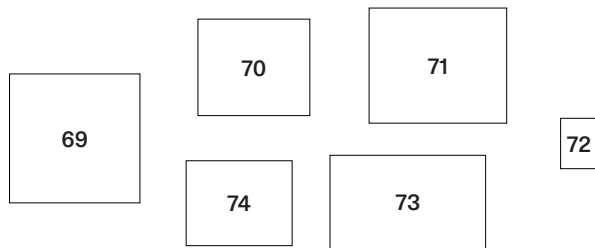


- 65a. Struthers Burt (Literature, elected 1926)
 and Henry Seidel Canby (Literature, elected 1931)
 Insignia-related correspondence, February 20, 1937
 Typescript letter
- 65b. William Dean Howells to Robert Underwood Johnson
 (both Literature, elected 1898)
 Insignia-related correspondence, 1909
 Typescript letter
- 65c. Struthers Burt (Literature, elected 1926) to
 Arthur Train (Literature, elected 1924)
 Insignia-related correspondence, January 16, 1945
 Handwritten letter
- 65d. John Steinbeck (Literature, elected 1939) to
 Felicia Geffen (former Academy and Institute administrator)
 Correspondence, 1951–63
 4 handwritten letters; 1 typescript letter
- 65e. Academy key belonging to Childe Hassam
 (Art, elected 1898), 1920
 Gold
- 65f. Institute lapel rosette (1941–76)
 and Academy lapel rosette (1909–present)
 Silk ribbon on metal base
 Selected by Henri Cole (Literature, elected 2017)

Vitrine



- 66a. Original ribbons, rosettes, thread, and pins
 for creating Academy and Institute insignia
- 66b. Academy ribbon insignia, 1922–30
 Silk ribbon, gold ornaments, and button,
 hand-assembled on metal pin
- 66c. Institute lapel rosette (1941–76)
 and Academy lapel rosette (1909–present)
 Silk ribbon on metal base
- 66d. Gilbert Cass (Architecture, elected 1906)
 Sketch for Academy insignia; drawn at Century Club
 with Hamlin Garland (Literature, elected 1898), 1930
 Ink on paper
 Gift of Hamlin Garland
- 66e. Tiffany & Co.
 Sketch for design of the Academy
 and Institute lapel rosettes, c. 1909
 Watercolor and ink on paper
 Selected by Henri Cole (Literature, elected 2017)
67. Walker Hancock (Art, elected 1941)
 Detail of nose from portrait bust of Robert Frost
 (Literature, elected 1916), n.d.
 Plaster
 Gift of the artist
 Selected by Kwame Anthony Appiah
 (Literature, elected 2008)
68. Piece of stone on which George Washington stood
 to take the presidential oath of office at Federal Hall on Wall
 Street in Lower Manhattan in April 1789, with handwritten
 note by John Quincy Adams Ward (Art, elected 1902), n.d.
 Stone, ink on paper
 Gift of Rachel Quincy Adams Ward, 1929
 Selected by Billie Tsien (Architecture, elected 2007)



69. *Major General George Henry Thomas* (1879)
by John Quincy Adams Ward (Art, elected 1902), n.d.
Black-and-white photograph mounted on board
Bequest of Rachel Quincy Adams Ward
70. *Water, Power, and Light* (1948) by Hugo Ballin
(Art, elected 1908), c. 1948
Black-and-white photograph
71. Alexander Calder (Art, elected 1960)
Cowboys with Horse and Rope, 1932
Pen and ink
Gift of the artist, 1968
72. Willa Cather (Literature, elected 1929)
My Antonia, 1926 (originally published 1918)
Hardcover book
Boston: Houghton Mifflin
73. Ezra Stoller
*National Center for Atmospheric Research (1961–67),
Boulder, CO, Architect: I. M. Pei*, n.d.
Gelatin silver print
Gift of I. M. Pei (Architecture, elected 1963), 1971
74. Childe Hassam (Art, elected 1898)
Moonrise at Sunset, Harney Desert, 1908
Oil on canvas
Bequest of the artist, 1936
Selected by Michael Maltzan (Architecture, elected 2023)

75. Mary Frank (Art, elected 1984)
Utmost, 1981
Oil on panel
Gift of the artist, 2007
Selected by Mary Gaitskill (Literature, elected 2020)
76. John M. Johansen (Architecture, elected 1979)
Mummers Theater (The Stage Center Theater)
(1970, demolished 2015), Oklahoma City
*John M. Johansen: A Life in the Continuum of Modern
Architecture*, 1996
Softcover book
Milan: L'Arca Edizioni
77. John M. Johansen (Architecture, elected 1979)
The Froth of Bubbles, 1988
Plastic, metal
Gift of the artist, 2001
Selected by Marlon Blackwell (Architecture, elected 2021)
78. Wolf Kahn (Art, elected 1984)
Study for Little Shed in the Woods, 1987
Pastel on paper
Gift of the artist, 1992
Selected by Joyce Carol Oates (Literature, elected 1978)
79. Jacob Lawrence (Art, elected 1965)
Rural Scene, 1967
Ink, crayon, and graphite on paper
Gift of the artist, 1968
Selected by Sharon Egretta Sutton (Architecture, elected 2024)

Participating Arts and Letters Members

Kwame Anthony Appiah, Literature; Marlon Blackwell, Architecture; Ron Chernow, Literature; Mel Chin, Art; Henri Cole, Literature; Nicole Eisenman, Art; Charles Gaines, Art; Mary Gaitskill, Literature; Adam Gopnik, Literature; Ann Hamilton, Art; Edward Hirsch, Literature; Gish Jen, Literature; David Lang, Music; George E. Lewis, Music; Annea Lockwood, Music; Michael Maltzan, Architecture; Paul Muldoon, Literature; Joyce Carol Oates, Literature; Laura Owens, Art; Ann Patchett, Literature; Francine Prose, Literature; Grace Schulman, Literature; Arlene Shechet, Art; Amy Sillman, Art; Sharon Egretta Sutton, Architecture; Nader Tehrani, Architecture; Henry Threadgill, Music; Billie Tsien, Architecture

Articles of Distinction is organized by Jenny Jaskey, Chief Curator, and Kristin Poor, Curator, with Mitsuko Brooks, Archivist and Collections Manager, and Lekha Jandhyala, Curatorial Fellow.

Arts and Letters exhibitions are made possible by the Childe Hassam Fund, Eugene Speicher Fund, and Huntington Exhibition and Museum Fund.

Thanks to Audio-Technica for donating turntable equipment.

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