

ART & DESIGN

Sherman Lee, Who Led Cleveland Museum, Dies at 90

By **BRUCE WEBER** JULY 11, 2008

Sherman E. Lee, an expert on Asian art who as director of the Cleveland Museum of Art for a quarter of a century elevated it to the top echelon of American museums, died Wednesday in Chapel Hill, N.C. He was 90.

His death was confirmed by his son-in-law William Chiego, who is director of the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio. Mr. Lee had had several small strokes and suffered from Parkinson's disease, Mr. Chiego said.

Mr. Lee, who arrived at the Cleveland museum in 1952 as its curator of Oriental art, became director in 1958. It was shortly after the death of Leonard C. Hanna, a local industrialist and philanthropist who had served on the museum's accessions committee and left more than \$30 million to the museum as a capital fund for acquisitions.

Thus relieved of much of the burden of raising money, Mr. Lee set about improving the museum's collections. He amassed a superb Asian collection and acquired dozens of major paintings by old masters like Velázquez, El Greco and Goya, as well as masterpieces like Frederic Edwin Church's "Twilight in the Wilderness," Jacques-Louis David's "Cupid and Psyche" and "The Holy Family on the Steps" by Nicolas Poussin.

Mr. Lee, who viewed the museum as an educational institution, was wary of artistic fashion, eschewing the contemporary in favor of the time-honored, sometimes to the museum's detriment; the museum did not purchase a Jackson Pollock until 1980 and passed on opportunities to acquire works by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns.

“Sherman Lee had a very strong philosophy that you wait 20 years before you buy,” Evan H. Turner, his successor, said in 1984. “You wait until the first flush of enthusiasm is over.”

Similarly, Mr. Lee found the notion of the “blockbuster” art show anathema, preferring the tasteful, the high-minded, the scholarly. These qualities led John Canaday, writing in *The New York Times* in 1970, to call Mr. Lee's Cleveland “the only really aristocratic art museum in the country.”

“Aristocratic, yes, but in a meritocratic way,” Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, said in an interview on Thursday. He added: “He carried a lot of weight in the community of museum directors. He bought in all fields, his own particularly brilliantly, but in many different fields. He really transformed the Cleveland museum from a regional museum to a major global museum.”

Sherman Emery Lee was born in Seattle on April 19, 1918. He grew up in Brooklyn, attended New York City public schools and went to American University in Washington, where he met his wife, Ruth. They were married 69 years. “He was a tennis player and she was a sorority girl,” said their daughter Elizabeth Chiego.

Besides his wife, who lives in Chapel Hill, and Ms. Chiego, of San Antonio, Mr. Lee is survived by two other daughters, Margaret Bachenheimer of Carrboro, N.C., and Katharine Lee Reid of Chapel Hill, who was director of the Cleveland museum from 2000 to 2005; a son, Thomas, of Raleigh, N.C.; and six grandchildren.

Mr. Lee received a Ph.D. in art history from Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve) in Cleveland in 1941. His dissertation, Ms. Chiego said, was on American watercolorists; he couldn't pursue his interest in Asian art because of the war. He served in the Navy during World War II, and from 1946 to 1948 as a civilian in Tokyo he worked on cataloging and preserving Japanese artworks.

Mr. Lee was associate director of the Seattle Art Museum and curator of Far Eastern art at the Detroit Institute of Art before landing at the Cleveland museum in 1952.

As director, he expanded not only the collections but also the museum itself, notably adding a wing devoted to education in 1971. He also presided over some of the more notorious episodes in the museum's history.

In 1970, a bronze casting of Rodin's statue "The Thinker," which stood outside the museum, was damaged by a bomb, a presumed act of protest against the Vietnam War. Mr. Lee's controversial decision was not to have the statue repaired or recast or put in storage but to remount it in its damaged state.

In 1974, the museum paid between \$1 million and \$2 million for a painting of the Christian martyr St. Catherine of Alexandria, ostensibly the work of the 16th-century German artist Matthias Grünewald. Three years later, however, the work was revealed to be a 20th-century forgery; Mr. Lee admitted the mistake, and the museum got its money back.

And in 1984, Mr. Lee was accused by the French government of having illegally purchased the Poussin "Holy Family" painting, which Mr. Lee had acquired for the museum in 1981. The painting had been brought to the United States without an export license, and the dispute was over whether such a license was necessary. The French went so far as to issue an international arrest warrant for Mr. Lee, but the matter was eventually resolved when the Cleveland museum promised to lend the painting to the Louvre for exhibitions.

Mr. Lee was the author of several books, including a widely used text, "A History of Far Eastern Art" (Prentice Hall and Harry N. Abrams, 1964), and he helped curate important exhibitions, including "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration," a survey of world art at the time of the European discovery of the Americas, at the National Gallery in Washington in 1991; and "China: 5,000 Years" at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1998.

He was also personal adviser to John D. Rockefeller 3d on acquisitions for an Asian art collection that Mr. Rockefeller bequeathed to the Asia Society.

“When he spoke,” Mr. Montebello said of Mr. Lee, “you paused and listened.”

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