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## VISUAL ART

**Art sale of the decade:**

**The private collection of Charles Rand Penney**

*By Gerald Mead; photos by kc kratt*

Every decade or so, large, significant private/corporate art collections in our area — assiduously acquired over many years — are sold locally, and these are truly momentous occasions. In the 1980s it was the estate auctions of art dealer and artist Tony Sisti. In the 1990s it was the auctioning off of the art collections of Empire Bank and Goldome. The moment for the present decade will come on October 4 when the private collection of Dr. Charles Rand Penney's Western New York art is offered for sale to the public in a one-day-only event.



Charles Rand Penney with his collection.

Why this is noteworthy has as much to do with the notoriety of the collector as it does with the comprehensive nature of his collection: 275 works in all media by 184 regional (Buffalo-Rochester) artists. Collectively, those artists are represented in major museum collections throughout the world. In fact, since some of the artworks are editioned photographs or prints, it is actually possible for you to acquire the exact same artwork that is in one of those museum collections. Additionally, since Penney purchased primarily from juried/curated (selected by arts professionals) exhibitions or auctions, they are often among the artists' best work, frequently selected to represent the artist in exhibition catalogs or invitations.

Some background on art patrons and Penney is in order. Each of the major art museums in our region had private collectors whose generosity and patronage made an indelible mark on their permanent collections and the naming (or renaming) of those institutions reflects the magnitude of their association. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery had Seymour H. Knox and his family, and the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University is indebted to Armand and Eleanor Castellani and their family for the largess of their collection. Finally, the Burchfield Penney Art Center, the Buffalo State College museum dedicated to renowned watercolorist Charles Burchfield and WNY artists, fortuitously found favor with Charles Rand Penney, largely as a result of the mutually respectful relationship Penney developed with former director Anthony Bannon.

Over the course of several decades, Penney, a retired lawyer turned collector/philanthropist, had amassed 100 separate collections of art, collectibles, memorabilia, and antiques. In the early 1990s, he gifted four of those collections—WNY art, WNY craft, Roycroft objects/publications, and works by Charles Burchfield—to the Burchfield Art Center. It was a watershed moment for the museum, since it filled numerous gaps in its collection by adding



Works by Cindy Sherman, John Pfahl, and others are included in the sale.



work by scores of significant artists who were not previously represented. In recognition of the extraordinary nature of these comprehensive donations totaling over 1,400 items—Penney’s coveted Burchfield collection was the largest private collection in the world—the museum was rededicated in 1994 as the Burchfield Penney Art Center.

Penney had been and continues to be one of the most ardent supporters of local artists, so not surprisingly, after his gift to the museum, he continued to collect artwork by artists associated with this region, studiously documenting his purchases and following the artists’ careers. The result, nearly two decades later, is his remarkable second collection of WNY art, the envy of any serious collector. Now eighty-six years old, Penney has turned his attention to finding appropriate destinations for his collections, considering this an important part of the stewardship of the works he has acquired. His recent decision to sell his WNY collection fulfills his desire to “find permanent homes in the community from whence they came, so that people in the area can share in some of the joy I have taken from living with these artworks for these many years.”

Historically, the artworks in this sale range from a 1915 photograph by Buffalo photopictorialist Howard Beach to a mixed media work created by Lockport artist Chris Stangler in 2003. The list of works is an impressive “Who’s Who” of regional artists spanning several decades and includes photographers Lawrence Brose, Hollis Frampton, Biff Henrich, Robert Hirsch, Nathan Lyons, John Pfahl, and Cindy Sherman; painters Virginia Cuthbert, Duayne Hatchett, Catherine Koenig, Bruce Kurland, Roy Mason, Walter Prochownik, and George Renouard; and craft artists Nancy Belfer, Bryan Hopkins, Gail McCarthy, Sylvia Rosen, Carol Townsend, and Robert Wood, among others. There are even a few rare original Burchfield prints.

If all this sounds beyond your budget, you should know that the artworks range in



price from \$50 for original prints published by the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery to \$10,000 for a massive painting by noted painter Edith Lunt Small, but the majority of the works fall in the \$250 to \$950 range—affordable for first-time art buyers and seasoned collectors.

The show and sale—scheduled for October 4 at the Buffalo/Niagara Marriott Hotel, 1340 Millersport Highway in Amherst; see [www.20thcenturyfinest.com](http://www.20thcenturyfinest.com) for details—is organized by Dean Brownrout of 20th Century Finest in partnership with antiques dealer David Devereaux. Brownrout, a native Buffalonian who relocated here from New York City in 2002, is respected by Penney for his recent efforts to promote regional art. Their shared hope for the sale is to pass on the legacy of our region’s art history to the “next generation of art collectors and patrons.”

*Gerald Mead is an artist and educator who was fortunate, as a former longtime curator at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, to curate many exhibitions that incorporated works from the Charles Rand Penney collections.*

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