

Huntington Acquires New Sculpture and Paintings to Fill Gaps in American Collection; Announces Further Expansion

SAN MARINO, California April 29, 2015

American art sculpture



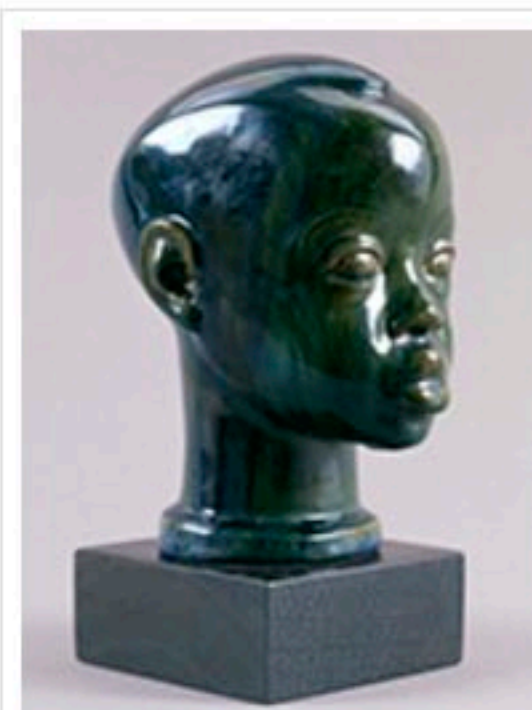
Milton Avery (1885–1965), *Burlisque*, 1936, oil on canvas, 36 × 28. The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. © 2015 The Milton Avery Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
(The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens)

[Tweet](#) 0 (ArtfixDaily.com) **The Huntington's** Art Collectors' Council purchased two 1936 paintings—*Burlisque* by Milton Avery and *Irises (The Sentinels)* by Pasadena artist Helen Lundeberg—as well as a ceramic sculpture, *Head of a Boy*, by Sargent Claude Johnson, for the American art galleries at its 21st annual meeting April 11. The Council, composed of donors from across the region, spent nearly \$1 million to help fill gaps in The Huntington's collecting areas.

"We had a hugely successful Art Collectors' Council Gala, which this year was devoted to American art," said Kevin Salatino, Hannah and Russell Kully Director of the Art Collections. "The quality of the works acquired underscores how seriously we and our donors take our commitment to building a first-rate collection of American art." The new works will go on view in the Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art this summer.

"All three pieces will play important roles in the galleries," said Jessica Todd Smith, Virginia Steele Scott Chief Curator of American Art. "The Avery helps us talk about modernism, the Lundeberg strengthens our representation of both female artists and painters working in California, and the Johnson joins our growing collection of work by African-American artists."

The year's annual meeting was dedicated to Kerstin and Steven S. Koblik. Steve Koblik, president of The Huntington, retires at the end of June after nearly 14 years in the position. During his



Sargent Claude Johnson (1888–1967)
Head of a Boy, ca. 1928 Glazed stoneware, 7 ½ × 4 ¾ × 6 in.
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

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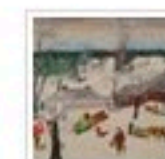
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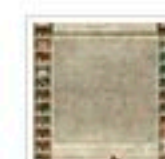
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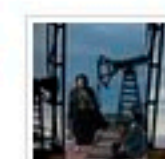
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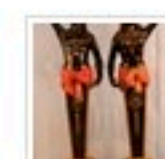
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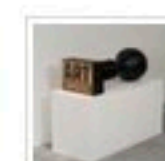
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tenure, he raised substantial funds to renovate the Huntington Art Gallery, which houses the institution's European art, and to significantly expand the American art collections and Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art.

Meanwhile, The Huntington has closed the oldest portion of the Scott Galleries for renovation and further expansion, the third such project in seven years. "American art, one of our primary collecting areas, has been growing fast," said Salatino. "We think this is a good moment to seize the opportunity to consolidate, integrate, and expand the American galleries. We're delighted that Frederick Fisher and Partners, who designed the 2005 expansion, the Lois and Robert F. Erburu Gallery, will be designing this project as well."

The 8,600 square-foot expansion completes a section of the Scott Galleries that was part of Fisher's earlier thinking about the building, yet never done. It adds more than 5,000 square feet of gallery space where a narrow courtyard now sits; and improves visitor flow. Opening summer 2016, the reconfigured galleries and the new construction will feature a stately glass entrance and lobby as well as eight new rooms for art display.

The section of the Scott Galleries that has closed to visitors is the original structure that houses American art from the 17th century through the mid-19th century and includes works by John Singleton Copley, Eastman Johnson, and Gilbert Stuart, as well as a gallery devoted to the work of architects Charles and Henry Greene. The rest of the galleries remain open, and highlights from the early American art collection will go on view temporarily in the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery in September.

In his 1936 oil on canvas, *Burlesque*, American painter Milton Avery puts the viewer in the middle of a striptease, with the show's star taking center stage, crossing her arms and legs demurely, obscuring her nudity. Chorus girls dance in the background, while a group of gawking men in the front row look on (or nap), their heads and faces rendered with flat shapes of color and simple lines. Avery stood apart from other artists of his time, principally because his work wasn't easy to categorize. "*Burlesque* is the perfect Avery for The Huntington," said Smith. "It relates to the social realist art of the 1930s, which is a growing strength in the collection, while demonstrating the flattened forms and distinctive color choices that made Avery's work feel modern and earned him the sobriquet 'The American Matisse.'"

Avery was born in New York and raised in Hartford, Conn., where he studied at art schools while working at a variety of jobs. At 39, he eloped with Sally Michel, a recent high school graduate who also was an artist. She supported the family as an illustrator, which allowed Avery to concentrate on art full time.

Avery's work anticipates post-war abstraction and *Burlesque* will help address the transition between the pre- and post-war art in the galleries at The Huntington.

Along with other artists connected to the Harlem Renaissance, Sargent Claude Johnson worked to countervail the hateful racist stereotypes that saturated American culture, Hollywood films, and magazines. After a childhood on the East Coast, he went to San Francisco in 1915 and studied at the California School of Fine Arts. Though he lived a long way from New York City, he was included in major exhibitions and books that now define the Harlem Renaissance. In a 1935 interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Johnson talked at length about his wish to produce an artwork that depicted African-Americans in an uplifting and positive light. He said, "I am producing a strictly Negro art...aiming to show the natural beauty and dignity in the characteristic lip, that characteristic hair, bearing and manner."

Head of a Boy, a glazed ceramic portrait of an African-American boy, reflects Johnson's statement. "The sculpture is small—under a foot in height—yet it commands attention," said James Glisson, Bradford and Christine Mishler Assistant Curator of American Art. "Moreover, the child looks wide eyed and expectant while at the same time being dignified."

The piece will join Johnson's monumental 1936 pipe organ screen, purchased by The Huntington's Art Collectors' Council in 2011.

While painted in 1936, the same year as *Burlesque*, Helen Lundeberg's *Irises (The Sentinels)* couldn't be more different from Avery's work, said Smith. Two tall, bearded irises tower in scale against the mountains in the distance. Their positions and stature suggest their role as sentinels over the empty desert landscape. Two flowers are rendered in full bloom, while one remains closed either in the phase of growth or decay. Withering stalks and dead leaves remind the viewer of the transitory nature of life. "In Greek mythology, Iris was a messenger to the gods who acted as a link between heaven and earth," said Smith. "Purple irises were planted over the graves of women to summon the goddess to guide the dead on their journey."

The dreamlike nature of the plants in the arid environment suggests the influence of Georgia O'Keeffe, said Smith. Like O'Keeffe, Lundeberg exhibited an interest in botany, but Lundeberg was particularly interested in the flower as a symbol expressing the theme of life and death. The mountain range in *Irises* may suggest the area around Pasadena's Arroyo Seco. This particular geography features in paintings throughout Lundeberg's career; the artist grew up in Pasadena (she was born in Chicago) and graduated from Pasadena Junior College. At art school in Pasadena, she met Lorser Feitelson, an artist who had spent time in Paris and was exposed to the French avant-garde. Eventually, Feitelson and Lundeberg married and became lifelong artistic collaborators.

The painting will hang with The Huntington's growing collection of California landscapes.



Helen Lundeberg (1908–1999) *Irises (The Sentinels)*, 1936 Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens