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Rhodes Family Donates Rembrandt Etchings to IWU

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Three notable etchings by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669) were recently gifted to Illinois Wesleyan University to honor the memory of Emery and Anita Rhodes of Bloomington. Their three children, Emery jr., Reilly and Benjamin Rhodes, class of 1969, who is director of development at IWU, made the gift to the university.

In a published catalog accompanying the gift, it is stated by the donors that this gift to the University demonstrates the intent of the donors to not only honor their parents but also to benefit the students of IWU, as well as to provide enrichment and enjoyment for all the citizens of the greater Bloomington-Normal community.

The nearly 400-year-old original etchings, which consist of “The Artist’s Mother Seated at a Table,” “Self-portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill” and “The Virgin with Instruments of the Passion,” will be permanently displayed in The Ames Library on the campus of IWU (1 Ames Plaza, Bloomington).

Rembrandt is widely recognized as the greatest of the 17th-century Dutch Old Masters, and his etchings were internationally renowned even during his lifetime. Etching is a type of Intaglio printing in which the lines in a metal plate made of copper or zinc are bitten (or “etched”) by acid. Rembrandt exploited the etching process for its unique potential, using scribbling strokes to produce expressive, extraordinary lines.

“The Artist’s Mother Seated at a Table,” circa 1631, portrays Rembrandt’s mother in mourning, less than a year after the death of her husband. The artist’s attention to detail is apparent in the expression of his mother’s careworn face and the luxurious quality of her clothing. The piece is one of five etchings and several paintings that Rembrandt, who was known for incorporating friends and family into his works, completed of his mother.

“Self-portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill” is one of about 60 self-portraits created by Rembrandt throughout his lifetime. The work is dated 1639, when Rembrandt was 33 years old, and portrays the subject in Renaissance costume, complete with velvet beret. Rembrandt often

incorporated period and exotic costumes into his work. Because of the elaborate costume and heavy chiaroscuro (contrast between dark and light) often used in his self-portraits, it can be difficult to determine what the artist actually looked like from these works.

“The Virgin with Instruments of the Passion” is said by art critics to be less intricate than the portrait of the artist’s mother. The instruments of the passion, based on their representation in a painting by an unknown Old Master circa 1540, are identified as a robe, a shroud with an image of the face of Christ, 30 pieces of silver, spears, hammer and spikes, dice and other paraphernalia of the crucifixion. However, these items are unidentifiable in Rembrandt’s etching. This incompleteness, as well as the comparatively sketchy appearance of the piece overall, suggest that the print may have actually been a study for a later work, rather than a complete work in itself.

The Rhodes family’s interest in Rembrandt’s art stems from the fact that the family can trace their ancestors back to a Dutch farming family that left Holland to settle in the state of Maryland at the end of the 18th century. In 1824, Ebenezer Rhodes, an early pioneer of central Illinois and Emery Rhodes’ grandfather, settled in Blooming Grove, Ill., the city that would later become Bloomington.

Emery Rhodes, born in 1886, learned the plastering trade from his father and, by the age of 26, was very prominent in the plastering business in Bloomington and Normal. Additionally, Rhodes and Rodier, the firm he co-founded with Napoleon Rodier of Springfield, was highly regarded by the community. The firm was contracted for work on the State Farm Insurance headquarters in downtown Bloomington, as well as large-scale housing projects throughout central Illinois and several university buildings for both Illinois Wesleyan University and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

Anita Rhodes, Emery Rhodes’ wife, was born Anita Margaret Reilly in Springfield, Ill., in 1912. Growing up, she developed an appreciation for poetry and the arts, as well as religious and spiritual values.

A graduate of Brown Business School in Chicago, Reilly married Emery Rhodes in 1939 and, after his death in 1957, she continued to raise her three children and manage the family real estate investments in Bloomington and Normal. Together with members of her family, Anita Rhodes supported several cultural activities on the IWU campus and especially enjoyed attending theatre events presented during the fall holidays. She died in May 2003 at the age of 91.

Commenting on the gift honoring the lives of his mother and father, Ben Rhodes said, “It is our hope that students, teachers and families living in this community will take the opportunity to visit The Ames Library to see firsthand these beautiful and important original works of art by Rembrandt.”

The three etchings will be displayed in museum-quality hangings in the northeast corner of The Ames Library’s fourth floor.

For additional information contact Sherry Wallace, assistant director of University Communications, at (309) 556-3181.

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