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The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Mourns Loss of Ralph T. Coe, Director from 1977 to 1982

Kansas City, MO, Sept. 16, 2010 – Ralph T. Coe, the third Director of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and one of the nation’s foremost authorities on American Indian art, died Tuesday in Santa Fe, N.M.



“We are deeply saddened by the passing of Ted Coe,” said Julián Zugazagoitia, who began Sept. 1 as the fifth Director & CEO of the Nelson-Atkins. “He was an excellent leader during his years at the Museum, and his time here was distinguished by his vast knowledge of the art world. He leaves behind a legacy of genuine enthusiasm for art.”

Coe was an exceptional curator and collector whose passion for European art, Native American art and contemporary art inspired a host of other collectors. Among those were Marion and Henry Bloch, who carefully acquired Impressionist masterpieces over the course of 20 years with Coe’s assistance. Their collection is now considered one of the finest collections in private hands in the United States and is a promised gift to the Nelson-Atkins.

“We would never have had a collection if not for Ted,” Mr. Bloch said. “He picked out every piece of art we ever bought. Many pieces were offered to us by dealers, but I would always contact Ted for his advice. His knowledge of French Impressionists and his memory were unbelievable. He was completely responsible for our collection.”

Coe was born and raised in Cleveland, OH, and was a graduate of Oberlin College and Yale University. He was on the staff of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for a year and served as a general curator at the National Gallery in Washington before joining the Nelson-Atkins in 1959. He began his tenure at the Museum as curator of painting and sculpture, then was appointed director in 1977.

Sometime in the 1950s, Coe was captivated by a Northwest Coast totem pole model that he saw in a shop in New York. In the years since, he championed the aesthetic merits of American Indian art.

Gaylord Torrence, the Nelson-Atkins Fred and Virginia Merrill Senior Curator, American Indian Art, said Coe's contributions to the field of Native American art were enormous, both as a museum professional and as a passionate collector.

"Ted's breadth of vision in recognizing, equally, the significance of both historical and contemporary Native American works of art – and their ongoing connectedness – was unusual," Torrence said. "Unlike most museum curators of the time, Ted knew Indian peoples firsthand. Among his greatest joys were his extensive travels throughout the United States and Canada visiting Native artists within their communities."

During his time at the Nelson-Atkins, he curated a blockbuster exhibition, *Sacred Circles: 2,000 Years of North American Indian Art*, that opened in London in 1976 and then came to the Nelson-Atkins in 1977. It was acclaimed as one of the great, defining exhibitions of Native American art of the 20th century. Together, with an exhibit held at the Museum of Modern Art 35 years earlier, it largely framed the international recognition and understanding of North American Indian art in our time.

A decade later Coe organized a second landmark exhibit, *Lost and Found Traditions: American Indian Art 1965–1985*, the first major exhibition dedicated to the continuing achievements of contemporary Native artists throughout North America. His personal love of Indian art was revealed when his own extensive collection was featured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 2003 exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, which again brought the creative vision of Native American artists to the forefront.

"Ted was an inspiration to many of us in the field," Torrence said.

Coe also was known among Kansas Citians as a driving force to bring modern art to this region and may be credited for encouraging numbers of private collectors within the city.

"He was a very gifted curator, and he made modern art respectable in Kansas City," said Michael Churchman, a former administrator at the Nelson-Atkins. "He enlisted a lot of people in the vanguard of contemporary art."

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

The Nelson-Atkins in Kansas City is recognized nationally and internationally as one of America's finest art museums. The Nelson-Atkins serves the community by providing access and insight into its renowned collection of more than 33,500 art objects and is best known for its Asian art, European and American paintings, new American Indian and Egyptian galleries, photography and modern sculpture. Housing a major art research library and the Ford Learning Center, the Museum is a key educational resource for the region.

The institution-wide transformation of the Nelson-Atkins has included the 165,000-square-foot Bloch Building expansion, renovation of the original 1933 Nelson-Atkins Building, and re-installation of the European, American and American Indian art galleries. It continues with installation of new Egyptian galleries and renovation of Chinese galleries.

The Nelson-Atkins is located at 45th and Oak Streets, Kansas City, MO. Hours are Wednesday, 10 a.m.–4 p.m.; Thursday/Friday, 10 a.m.–9 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.; Sunday, Noon–5 p.m. Admission to the Museum is free to everyone. For Museum information, phone 816.751.1ART (1278) or visit nelson-atkins.org.

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