

*The Miriam Sample Collection, 1985–2005*

Miriam Sample &amp; Gordon McConnell

Privately printed, 2005. Approx. 600 pages (unpaginated).

Hardcover; not for sale.

Reviewed by Rick Newby

This is a review of a book that you may well never hold in your hands—unless you happen to visit the library of one of Montana’s leading contemporary art museums. Published in an extremely limited edition (rumor has it that there are ten copies), this massive volume, slightly larger than 8 ½ x 11 inches, documents one of the most astonishing gifts to the cultural life of Montana.

In its pages Miriam Sample of Billings offers a visual inventory of her art collection which, for the most part, resides in the storage areas or on the gallery walls of nine Montana cultural institutions, as well as at the Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho; the Portland (Oregon) Art Museum, and the Whitney Museum of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming. The nine Montana institutions, which hold the bulk of the collection, are the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts, Helena; Custer County Art Center, Miles City; Hockaday Center for the Arts, Kalispell; Holter Museum of Art, Helena; Missoula Art Museum; Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls; Rocky Mountain College, Billings; the Montana Museum of Art & Culture at the University of Montana–Missoula; and the Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings.

Although these museums have benefited mightily from

Miriam Sample’s generosity, it is important to point out that her stated intention has been—first and foremost—to aid Montana’s contemporary artists, by buying their work outright. The fact that the museums and the viewing public can enjoy these gifts in perpetuity is strictly secondary. In instances like Miriam’s purchase of (for the Yellowstone Art Museum) more than seventy works by Bill Stockton towards the end of Bill’s life, her largess has made all the difference, in terms of an artist’s financial security and the very tangible honoring of a Montana modernist master.

Nevertheless, Miriam’s vision does include the preservation of works by Montana’s leading modern and contemporary artists, and she writes in her introduction that the “loss of the Charles M. Russell ‘Mint Collection’ [to the Amon Carter Museum in Texas] demonstrates the need to retain major examples of contemporary work as a legacy for the state and region.” This saga of preservation began in 1985 when Miriam teamed up with the curatorial staff of the Yellowstone Art Museum to create a Montana Collection. Using seed money from the Montana Cultural Trust, which Miriam matched, YAM began to build a truly significant regional collection not focused on the past, but on works being created in the present.

While YAM benefited most significantly from Miriam’s determination to make a difference, she “began working with other museums to make sure that more and more works of art stayed in our region.” While the more than 500 works by seventy-some artists illustrated—in full color—in this book include many by younger artists, much of her focus is on the paintings, drawings, multimedia works, and ceramic art of Montana’s pioneering modernists, especially Bill Stockton, Bob and Gennie

DeWeese, Henry Meloy, Rudy and Lela Autio, and Frances Senska. Besides donating works by these artists to the various museums, Miriam has supported major exhibitions by Lela Autio (Missoula Art Museum) and Frances Senska and Bob DeWeese (Holter Museum). Often these exhibitions then traveled to other Montana venues. As Miriam writes, “Collaboration can increase the importance of these collected works, deepening and broadening their impact.”

The true range of the Miriam Sample Collection extends into the present, and includes important works by such younger (relatively speaking) contemporary artists of the region as sculptors Debbie Butterfield, John Buck, Patrick Zentz, Richard Swanson, James Reineking, Clarice Dreyer, and Brad Rude, ceramic artists Richard Notkin, Beth Lo, Tom Rippon, David Regan, and Akio Takamori, photographers Nina Alexander and David Hanson, and a host of painters and printmakers, among them Anne Appleby, Corky Claremont, Mary Ann Kelly, Sheila Miles, Neil Parsons, Larry Pirnie, Jerry Rankin, Harold Schlotzhauer, and Dennis Voss.

A motive, certainly, for all this collecting has been to inspire and challenge other collectors and to help to create, in Miriam’s words, “a market for Montana’s contemporary artists.” As the state’s various contemporary art auctions and the exhibition of the Missoula Art Museum’s permanent collection at the recent grand

opening of MAM’s marvelously expanded facility (with many labels reading “Promised Gift”) attest, both the contemporary art market and the generosity of Montana’s collectors are on the upswing.

I know of no other patron, however, who has given more, made more of an impact on the visual artists and visual arts museums of Montana, than Miriam Sample. Curator and painter Gordon McConnell writes in his foreword to *The Miriam Sample Collection*, “Miriam Sample’s collection is more than an aggregation of unrelated things. It has a shape and unifying vision, and it demonstrates a rare correspondence between a group of carefully chosen art works and a sophisticated collector.”

The next time you visit your local museum, watch for exhibition labels that read “Gift of Miriam Sample.” Each time you spot one, think of that single work multiplied 500 times. Perhaps this book is the only way to comprehend the true vastness of Miriam Sample’s gift to the people of Montana. If you have an opportunity to look at a copy, seize the moment. You will be astounded, by the sheer scope of the collection and by this patron’s vision, passion, and absolute generosity.

**Note:** The Yellowstone Art Museum will mount the exhibition, *Gifts to Montana: The Legacy of Miriam Sample*, July 1–October 15, 2008.