

Source: Linda Duke 785-532-7718, lduke@k-state.edu

Website: <http://beach.k-state.edu>

Hometown connection/news tip: Burlington, Chanute, Coffeyville, Erie and Pittsburgh

A KANSAS CONNECTION: WORKS BY ARTIST KNOWN FOR HIS COMMUNITY ART IN SOUTHEAST KANSAS NOW PART OF UNIVERSITY'S PERMANENT COLLECTION

MANHATTAN -- Works by an artist inspired by his southeast Kansas roots and his international experiences have a new home at Kansas State University.

The university's Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art and Hale Library collaborated to acquire works by Robert Blunk, whose community art has gained him recognition in Kansas, Africa and Puerto Rico. The works, which include paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints, as well as his sketchbooks and papers, are now part of the university's permanent collection.

As a noted regional artist, Blunk's work fits in with the Beach Museum's focus of connecting regional art, culture and interests with the outside world, said Linda Duke, museum director.

"As a quintessential artist of the prairie who grew up amid seas of grass and small town venues, Robert Blunk's art nonetheless speaks of a larger world," Duke said. "His paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings can be seen as a unique blend of folk and modernist, prairie and sea, small town and world cultures."

Blunk grew up during the Great Depression in the southeast Kansas town of Salyards, which didn't survive the rough economic times. After graduating from high school and serving in the Marines during World War II, Blunk returned to Kansas, got married and was accepted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study industrial design. But he started taking art courses at Kansas State University and got hooked on art. He enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute, where he had contact with Robert Rauschenberg, Thomas Hart Benton, Charles Birchfield and other noted artists. After graduating in 1950, Blunk was an art teacher for local schools and a community college in Chanute. He earned his master's in sculpture, via night school, at Kansas State College -- now Pittsburg State University -- in Pittsburg. In 1962 he joined the college's art faculty.

Community art became Blunk's passion. He designed pocket parks for the city of Pittsburg, organized art fairs and helped open local museums. He was commissioned to do sculptures and other works for businesses and communities across southeast Kansas, including at the Coffey County Courthouse in Burlington and Neosho Country Courthouse in Erie, as well as various works in Chanute, Coffeyville and in Pittsburgh.

Blunk played a role in establishing the Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum in Chanute, founded to exhibit art brought back from Africa by the Johnsons, the noted explorers. The African art would influence Blunk's own art.

Blunk's community activism led him to Puerto Rico in 1969, where he had a consultancy with the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture and worked with crafts artists developing markets for their work. He took on the same role nearly 30 years later with street children and adults in Zambia.

While Blunk's community art was in the public eye both locally and internationally, he kept his own art at home. He rarely offered his work for exhibition and didn't seek outside representation.

Now in his late 80s and living in Denver, Colo., Blunk's career as an artist continues. His work is part of private collections in Boston, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Chicago and the Emprise Bank Group in Wichita. He is represented by Strecker-Nelson Gallery in Manhattan.