

DAVID COLWELL



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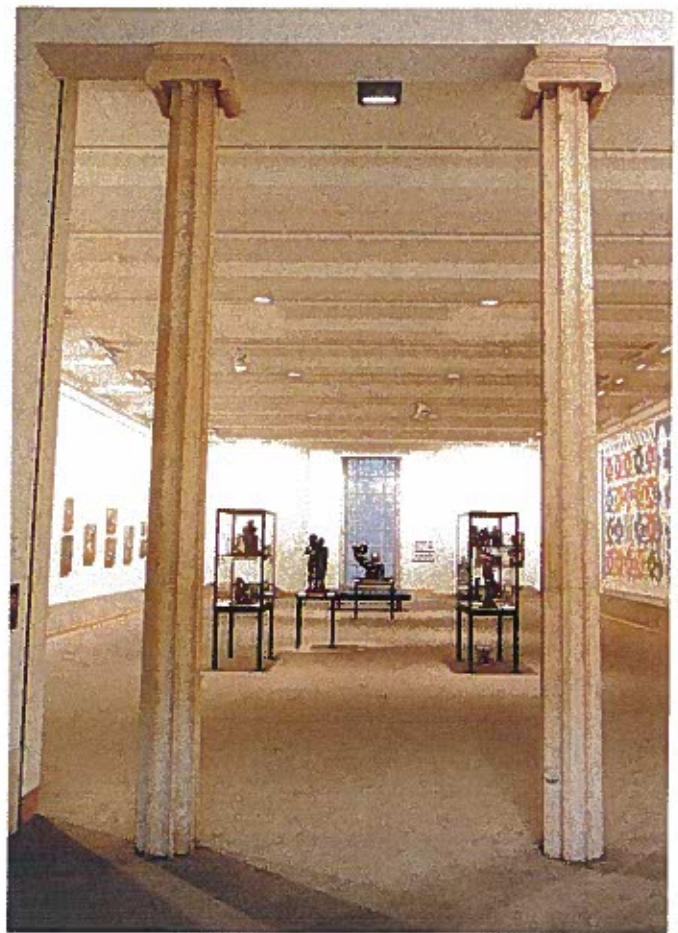
Once again, the Cone Collection has a new home at The Baltimore Museum of Art.

BY JIM DUFFY

Did the two of you divine this before you departed life, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta? Or can you see from beyond the grave what's happened in the 52 years since Etta bequeathed the Cone Collection to (her hometown) Baltimore's then-fledgling art museum? The windfall included everything: Matisses, Cézannes, letters, diaries, postcards, account books, and even a worthless hoard of miscellaneous keys.

We're happy to report that your gift amazes us still. These days, our awe isn't so much about how your name came to share a rarified civic stage with the likes of Pratt, Hopkins, and Walters. Nor is it about the oft-told tale of the high-society sisters who sniffed out the best of modern art so early in the game that they shelled out less for Picasso etchings than they did for dresses. It's not even about Matisse masterpieces like *Blue Nude* and *The Blue Eyes*—most of us who have lived here a while understand how lucky we are to have them.

Why is this woman smiling: Director Doreen Bolger has overseen the BMA's ambitious Cone project.

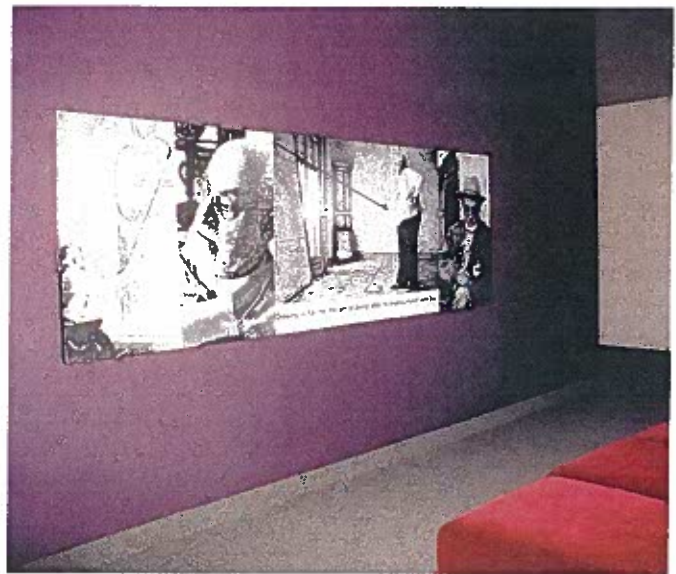


No, this particular 2001 moment finds us marveling over the magical way your gift keeps on giving. You gave it but once; yet we receive it time and time again. It seems that we can't resist the temptation to wrap your collection back up in a metaphorical box every few years and shake up the contents to see how they spill out anew. That way, each passing generation of Baltimoreans gets to fall for the Cone Collection at first sight, through fresh eyes.

It's happening again on April 22, when The Baltimore Museum of Art unveils its renovated Cone Wing. The BMA has been trumpeting this event since shortly after Doreen Bolger became director in 1998, so this is her first truly big moment on Baltimore's cultural stage. "It was an obvious thing to do, to look at the strongest art in our collection as a signature for what the museum will do," she says. "I feel like when this opens, it will say what I think the museum should provide."

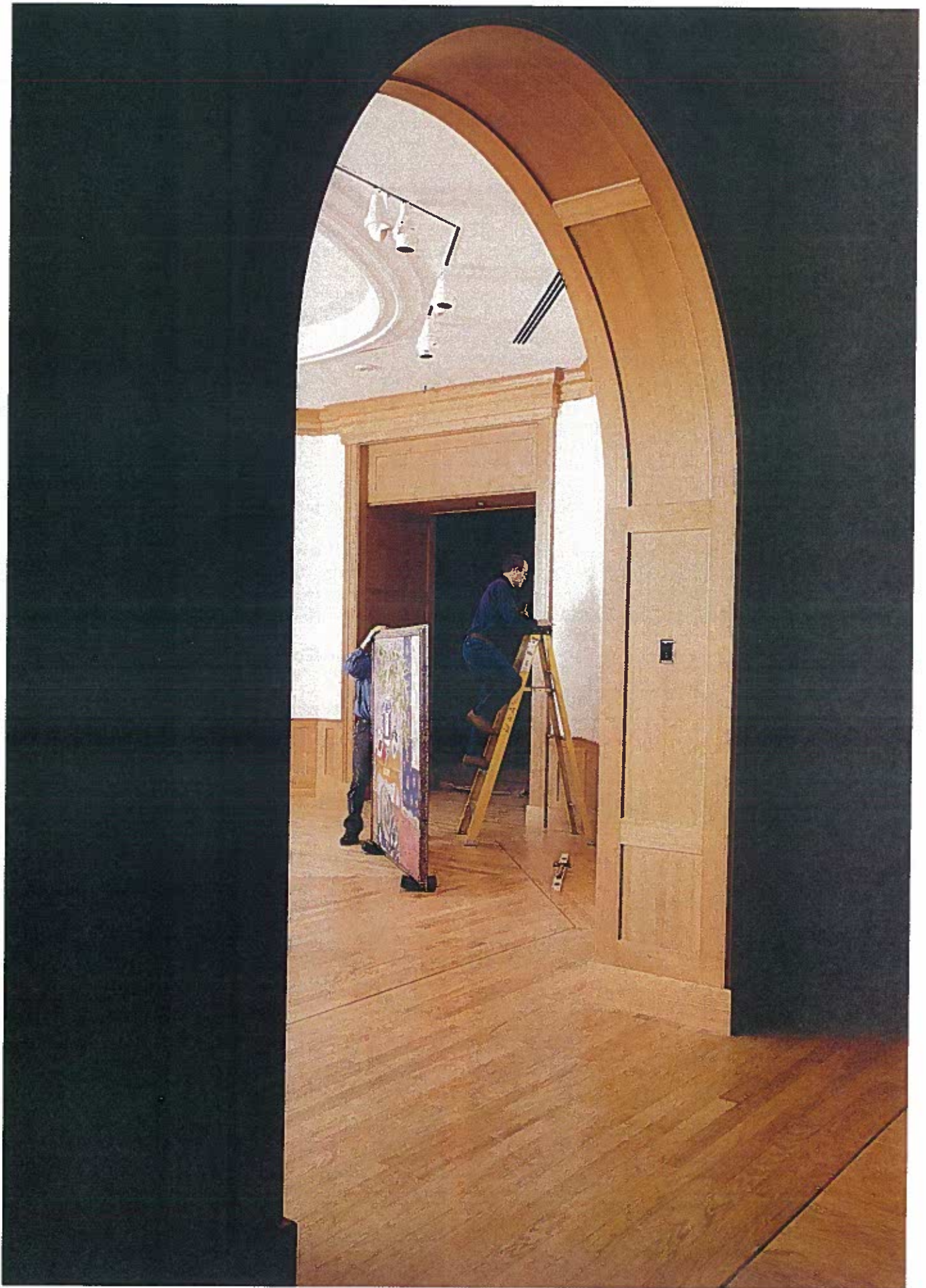
So while her Cone overhaul comes with a \$4-million price tag and provides nearly 50 percent more exhibit space for your collection, it also signals a dramatic shift in strategy for the entire museum. Bolger hopes her legacy as BMA director reflects a devotion to the BMA's permanent collection rather than the touring blockbuster shows to which many museums seem to be addicted these days. She wants to present the collection in fresh, creative ways that will draw loyal patrons back time and again for frequently rotated exhibits and special events.

If you've been counting, Etta—and Lord knows you loved to record every little number in those account books—then you know this is the fifth major Cone opening since your death. Before Bolger came predecessors Adelyn Breeskin, Tom Freudenheim, and Arnold Lehman, all of whom sought to place



Clockwise from top left: the front room of the Cone sisters' Eutaw Place apartment; the BMA's Cone Wing in 1957; a photo mural in the 1970s-era Cone Wing. **Opposite page:** The new Cone Wing is full of tempting turns and vistas.

their stamp on the collection. Breeskin did it twice, in fact, first unveiling the museum's new prizes in a 1950 exhibit in the BMA's original Pope building and then presiding over the 1957 opening of its Cone Wing addition. Hers was a spare, modernist hand, and thus your paintings hung in sprawling galleries with little in the way of distracting décor and creature comforts. *Welcome*, Breeskin announced, *to a place of solemn worship and quiet contemplation.*



Freudenheim ran the opposite way, hiring the designer Rita St. Clair to create a lush and homey showcase for the 1974 incarnation. Aubergine walls, carpeted floors, cushy chairs: Consider it the collection's Purple Period. We might chuckle today at the over-the-top '70s flair that characterized this Cone go-round, but we still can appreciate the way it encouraged us to approach Matisse and Picasso without being awestruck or intimidated.

Jay Fisher, now a deputy director of the museum and a key player in Bolger's Cone project, first came to work at the BMA during the Freudenheim years. "I used to love to go upstairs after hours and lounge on those aubergine couches," he says. "I'd just sit there and look at the pictures and sometimes even take a nap." No doubt, Claribel and Etta, the two of you enjoyed many such dreamy moments in your home—which was gutted in the '70s—at The Marlborough Apartments on Eutaw Place.

Next came Lehman, and with him came controversial curator Brenda Richardson. Their 1986 Cone Collection was a variation on Breeskin's theme—sparse furnishings, a colorless and unvarying lighting scheme, the return of reverence.

We wonder what the two of you would have made of the ruckus over their decision to remove your old frames and display the Matisse's in the thin metal strips favored by those oh-so-hip galleries up in New York City. That move was way out of touch with the grandeur of Eutaw Place, but let's be fair and admit that Richardson had some worthy points to make. Your ornate frames are edge-eaters, often covering an inch or two or even three of precious painted canvas. And all those protruding decorative flourishes really do cast shadows that distort shading and color. Plus, Richardson wanted folks to focus on how thoroughly modern

and abstract some of these works are, and that was hard to accomplish while the works were garbed in Old Master-ish finery.

Of course, Richardson's reasoning failed to resonate with the army of Cone aficionados who share your framing tastes. It's not that much of an exaggeration to say that about 10 years passed before the flurry of outraged letters to the editor in local newspapers finally slowed to a trickle. (It was Bolger who finally ended that odd episode, moving soon after her arrival to reinstall the original frames.)

One other aspect of the Lehman/Richardson incarnation is worth recalling here, because it presents such a contrast with Bolger's plans. In that 1986 installation, gallery walls bore almost no explanatory panels, and works were hung in arrangements more instinctive and elliptical than chronological or thematic. This was supposed to free visitors to commune with artwork unfettered by the shackles of formal criticism and art-history lessons. While it accomplished just that for some visitors, it left many others feeling confused and ignored, like they had mistakenly entered some private club where no one would deign talk to them.

Clarity is an issue the Bolger incarnation is sure to embrace. As conceived by Katherine Rothkopf, the BMA's new curator of painting and sculpture, this Cone will offer lots of enlightening wall panels, some easy thematic groupings—landscapes huddled together over here, musical themes over there—and a basically chronological approach. The opening gallery shows Matisse's early works and leads to another that tracks his development forward to the 1920s and '30s. A dramatic central rotunda presents the collection's Matisse masterworks—including *Blue Nude*, *Large Reclining Nude*, and *Anemones and Chinese Vase*. Part of a side gallery nearby shows



A few gems from the Cone Collection (clockwise from top left: Felix Vallotton's *The Lie*, Henri Matisse's *Purple Robe* and *Anemones*, and Matisse's *Anemones and Chinese Vase*.)





Hangdog: Workers install Matisse's *Interior With Dog* in its new home.

off your other European and American collecting interests, featuring important works by Bonnard, Braque, and others.

Given how many Cone incarnations we've seen, Claribel and Etta, it's amazing that this is the first to thoroughly rethink the wing's original layout. New Yorker David Harvey's design features eight smaller galleries in place of two or three sprawlers. "With the original shape of the rooms," Bolger observes, "you came in and saw perhaps 40 pieces of painting and 20 pieces of sculpture. It was all just out there, with no sense of discovery, no sense of intimacy."

A central aisle through the galleries will present visitors with a number of tempting turns and vistas, something that's designed to encourage wandering and lingering among your paintings. Some critics have complained that since the BMA opened up the Cone Wing's western wall to provide access to the New Wing for Contemporary Art in 1994, the central Matisse gallery has seemed more like a passageway than a destination. "People got the sense that the gallery was a walk-through space," Fisher says. "Now, you'll still have the vista of the contemporary wing, but it won't be that one place to go at the end of the room. You'll be encouraged to circulate before going off that way."

Some of the more innovative and Baltimore-friendly elements of the new installation will be housed in rear galleries, including one offering themed mini-shows that will rotate as often as every 90 days. The first three shows will highlight different groupings of Picasso drawings, while the fourth will explore Matisse's influence on the late Baltimore artist Tom Miller. Nearby is a gallery featuring works by the Baltimore painters you supported and collected; it features works

by hometown heroes such as Herman Maril and Aaron Sopher.

Then there's the gallery that most directly spotlights the two of you, Claribel and Etta. There visitors will find a re-creation of one wall of your Eutaw Place apartment (something that the museum has featured in one form or another since Freudenheim's days), as well as a groundbreaking virtual tour of your apartment—via a computer screen that will lead visitors room by room and show them what works hung where and how you chose to live with them. Here, also, visitors will find drawers and shelves displaying an often-rotating collection of archival materials—your letters from Matisse, your account books, maybe even a sample or two from that endearingly wacky key collection.

We can't say for sure whether you'll like this Cone incarnation—or whether you liked any of the ones that came before it. Forgive us if we feel a little insecure about your opinion of us, but even the two of you harbored doubts about Baltimore. That uncertainty was voiced in Claribel's 1929 will stipulating that the city would get the Cone Collection only if "the spirit of appreciation for modern art in Baltimore becomes improved" by the time Etta died.

Thanks, Etta, for deciding that question in favor of your hometown. And did you hear how the news of your 1949 will went over up in New York City? Alfred Barr of The Museum of Modern Art was soon heard grouching to the press about how the Cone Collection "was far too good for Baltimore."

We hope we've proved him wrong, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta. We hope that our never-ending fascination with the Cone Collection has shown us to be worthy of the incomparable gift you bestowed on Baltimore. ■