AN INTERVIEW WITH GERALD GRIFFIN,
ART GALLERY DIRECTOR

Editor's Note: Gerald Griffin spoke with David Pulsipher on 13 December 2002.

David: I think a lot of people are unaware of your role on campus. We know that you teach art, but what is the title of your other capacity and what are your responsibilities associated with it?

Gerald: We have always had one person in the Art Department designated as the Gallery Director; that's the title. That person has historically put together an art show about once a month, and that was very much a part of the Art Department's program. We would try to put up a new exhibit for the students as they came through the Spori building.

David: And this was student art and also faculty art, and occasionally art from outside?

Gerald: No, the only student work that we exhibit in the gallery context is the annual student art show in the spring. All the rest of the shows are invited, scheduled visiting artists. Traditionally there hasn't been a lot of funding, which is why most of the art work that we saw in the 80s and the early 90s was from local artists. We also had a vexing problem in that we didn't have secure facilities to show art in the Spori gallery. The old Spori gallery was just a hallway and consequently it was open anytime the building was open. Security was low and people were hesitant to put valuable works of art there.

David: It seems to me that the whole campus is a gallery in which you are displaying art, as your job includes buying art for all the buildings. Is this something that has come about recently?

Gerald: Arlo Coles, an emeritus faculty member, was Gallery Director for many years, and he pioneered the opportunities that we

Trees and Chair
by Sergei Bongart
have to display art around campus. He worked with Tom Liau in the library to secure funds to buy pictures, particularly to buy some Sergei Bongart paintings. Bongart is a recognized artist now deceased but who was a master teacher and quite a famous figure in the Western United States, and we were able to acquire several of his works. That was the first attempt that I know of by the Art Department to place artwork around campus. It was done on a very limited basis. With the Taylor Building there came a time when there was not sufficient work to use as décor in the hallways. There was a scramble, and someone ordered pictures from the Church Distribution Center, but there came a realization that something more needed to be done in these new buildings. This case ushered in the concept of what the art gallery has become, and it has been tremendously supported and facilitated by President Bednar. One of the really great things he’s done in his tenure here is realize the need to beautify the buildings with high quality works of art.

David: I want to focus on the role of art within the LDS community and particularly on our campus. You’re addressing art needs, appropriate uses of art on campus. Do you want to address the broad philosophical question?

Gerald: I think this is a really important forum in which to do that. Let me first give you a little bit of history of the Art Gallery. Matt Geddes, our dean, and I realized that we needed to do more than was being done because people were coming to us and asking if the Art Department had works of art to place on their walls. We had pretty much exhausted what we had. We didn’t have much of a budget; we just didn’t have the resources to do what we needed to around campus. So Matt and I made a proposal to the President’s Council, which then went to the Development office. We asked for a sum of money, which we received along with the comment that everybody was happy about it.

This encouraged us that people were interested in beautifying the campus, in learning from art, and in seeing what art could do for people. So we tried to get some special things for the Taylor Building, and with our new resources we expanded our view of placing works of art around campus.

The little problem is that now we are seen as interior decorators for the campus and people have different ideas of
what constitutes good art. And of course this is the burden that art bears because it is different from demonstrable and measurable scientific disciplines. Bad science is pretty obvious to everyone; bad art isn’t. It’s a real challenge to place things in buildings that are appropriate to the use of the building, that are educational to the students, and that are aesthetically pleasing to the people who work there. It’s a bit of a juggling act, but we accept it heartily because we feel that it’s important.

David: I was thinking about the challenge this creates. For example in the Taylor Building you have the Humanities Department at one end and the Religion Department at the other end. You have very different art in the one end of the building from the other end. You have Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe series at one end, and at the other end you have pictures from the Sacred Grove. Maybe you could address specific buildings like the Taylor or the recent Hinckley Building in terms of some of this challenge.

Gerald: That’s a very good question. There was a chuckle from the audience when we realized at the inception of the Taylor Building that Humanities would be on one end and Religion would be on the other end. It’s a great balancing act, and I think it’s very healthy for a university such as ours. There are issues of appropriateness blended in with issues of education, and that all strikes at the heart of what art does, what art is meant to do. One of the things that art is mischaracterized to do is just be pretty and lull everybody into a sense of aesthetic stupor. That’s not really the exclusive role of art. Matisse did say, “Art should be like a comfortable armchair at the end of a long day,” and I agree that art can do that. But it also should challenge people and allow them to grow. Without that aspect of art it simply becomes decoration, and of course that’s completely unacceptable because we know the power that art can have on people. Ironically enough, as I talk to Jim Keller, who’s the dean of the College of Religion and Family Living, he had a desire not to have exclusively gospel-related artwork in the Taylor.
We like to give examples of art trends, of styles, of different mediums and techniques. Humanities is the study of the achievements of mankind, and some recent achievements in the field of art now have a historical context to them. Pop art, for example, is a well recognized style of the 1950s and 60s, and we had some of it available. People in the Humanities Department were interested in it so we put it on the wall. Recently, a student came out of a Relief Society meeting and saw those images of Marilyn Monroe, and there was some conflict between her feelings about what they represented and the way she was feeling after her church meeting. I would regret if it upset somebody, but I think we need to learn to deal with questions. Ours is not only a role to comfort and accommodate but also a role to challenge. Seen in this spectrum, challenges on this campus are extremely moderate. We do not display controversial, vulgar, or politically charged works of art. There are issues of nudity and vulgarity and depravity and different things like that, and there’s much of that kind of artwork in the world today. But we steer very clear of it.

David: Let’s talk about the Hinckley Building because that was your first blank-slate building. I know that you ran into challenges with some of the expectations about what should be in there. I think you did a very interesting thing in putting essentially landscapes throughout the building, some of them sacred in nature, showing temples, some of them in familiar areas like Lehi, Utah, and yet others from areas that are not necessarily Mormon or connected to the Church but with a spiritual feel to them.

Gerald: Right, and that’s an excellent point and one that I think people sometimes miss. Let me say that it was the Kimball Building where we were given pretty much a clean slate. Let me start there and then go to the Hinckley Building because there are a few things that would make sense in that order. One of the things that people generally do not recognize is that a work of art carries a spirit with it. Art can be a spiritual thing in and of itself. Many people are oriented to the subject matter, which means that if they see a recognizable figure such as Lehi or Nephi or Peter or John, that must be good art because it has a sacred character or it’s telling a story about the scriptures. But narrative content and subject matter are not the only things that define excellence in art.

David: Or even its spiritual quality…
Gerald: …or even its spiritual quality: that’s exactly right. A beautiful landscape, a beautiful still life, a portrait that has a certain mood to it—all impart a spiritual essence to people. It can if you allow it to. And so spirituality is not confined to subject matter, and in my view there’s a tremendous problem with that in general, but on this campus in particular because we are so involved with those things. I have no debate or disagreement with people who want to put religious subject matter in their offices and in their homes and be surrounded by it, but I do think that we run into a trouble when we seek to put those kinds of images everywhere, because we never develop the appreciation that should exist for other kinds of images that could do much good.

In the Kimball Building we realized that people were pretty much going to put what they wanted in their own offices and in the commons areas of offices. But in the general hallways, we realized that this is a very contemporary building and taste changes as times change. Take the Kimball Building itself. One hundred and fifty years ago it would not have been deemed appropriate for the administration of a Church-run school. It is based in some measure upon the Bauhaus model, which is modernism. As we looked at the building, we thought, “Wouldn’t it be appropriate to put beautiful, inspiring art work that was a little bit more contemporary?” And so we found these beautiful serigraphic prints from an artist down in New Mexico. They are all landscapes. They are reminiscent of Van Gogh, who was a post-impressionist painter in the 1880s and 90s. He was essentially a modernist painter. As we framed these in nice clean metal frames and put them in the building, it was our opinion that they were very beautiful and very appropriate, an opinion shared by virtually everyone in
the building. Now on the very first day of hanging those up, some people were a little confused because they are bright in color, they are a little contemporary, they don’t have an overt religious tone to them. We did get questions. But as time has gone by, people’s appreciation of what art can do has grown, and they’ve realized that every picture on campus doesn’t have to be overtly religious or illustrative.

In the Hinckley Building we have additional challenges because it has two chapels and is used heavily for religious activities. I admit that at first I made a few mistakes in assessing what artwork would be needed for it, and I took a lot of artwork up there and leaned it against the walls and had the impression that it would not be appropriate in that building. The mistake on my part was having purchased that artwork specifically for that building. But I’m glad that I followed my intuition and changed the direction that I was going. What I felt was appropriate was a blend of two goals: good original works, not posters or cheap reproductions, but original works of art; and works that didn’t have an overt religious theme but nevertheless had a spiritual quality. Fortunately I discovered Kent Spencer, who did beautiful landscape works, but had done a series of paintings that depicted Temple Square, the Martin Harris farm, and other sites that are well known to members of the Church. So I was able to kind of combine those two goals. Also I discovered several other artists, such as Jonathan Hotz, whose paintings exemplify the point that I’m trying to make—they impart very definite spiritual quality even though they’re simple landscapes from the New England countryside.

David: Oh, his are my favorite paintings, and I love that Bantry Bay that’s up on the landing. And also the others that are in the foyer where the Hinckley portrait is. Those are just gorgeous. And they do have a wonderful spiritual feel to them.

Gerald: Let me make another point in regard to that building. Those works of art are expensive; they’re not cheap. Art is expensive because it represents a production of something unique, and so people charge money for it. That’s the way they make their living. We tried to place that artwork on the first floor around the perimeter of the chapel, and in those areas that we felt were appropriate. On the second floor there is not quite so much of a religious tone to the building.
David: You have more prints and photographs, I noticed.

Gerald: Yes, photographs and prints, and those are just wildlife scenes and things to beautify the building that don't really carry any heavy message with them. They're just there to be enjoyed, so you will see a definite difference between the first and second floors.

David: It is very clear. Since the whole campus is a gallery, I was wondering where your favorite places are. The Snow Building has a natural gallery in the foyer area; obviously the Kirkham is being used as the formal gallery while the Spori is under construction. Which is your favorite space on campus?

Gerald: Well, if I could speak to the future, I know where it is going to be: it's going to be in the new Spori Building because art is at home in the art building. I think people are going to be just astonished to see that building and really appreciate what art can do. I'm very excited about those possibilities, especially about the formal gallery, which will be the place people go specifically to view artwork. It won't simply be a hallway in the building. Apart from that, I feel the library is an excellent place to display art. The library offers some very interesting views down stacks of books and around little alcoves and in the general areas. We've tried to purchase pieces that are a little smaller to hang above the computer terminals and so forth.

I think we've been very fortunate to be able to do some of these things. And again I want to make clear that our administration has been extremely supportive and continue to be. So we've been able to purchase a tremendous variety of scale and subject and technique, and place them in the library. Of course the Snow Building, with what they call

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Bantry Bay

by Jonathon Hotz
the fish bowl, is a pretty good place to put artwork, although the lighting is not the best. That’s a building that contains theater and music and drama; those people are appreciators of art so we can be a little more daring there. The Kirkham Building is somewhat of a disaster when displaying art. It’s a temporary gallery and we just…

David: …it’s out in the middle of that big open space, hard to control the lighting and everything else.

Gerald: It is hard to control everything there, especially the way students eat and sleep and study in those areas. I’m convinced that most people on campus don’t even know we have a gallery in the Kirkham Building, but it’s a band-aid, just a temporary solution.

David: Is there any one piece of art that is a hidden gem on campus, that’s in an out-of-the-way corner that you think maybe people are walking by and not even seeing?

Gerald: We have many hidden gems in the collection that are still hidden. They’re in the art storage room and they will be revealed at the appropriate time and place. We have two original Picasso works. We have a legitimate Rembrandt print. We have a Gustav Courbet portrait study. We have some things that are of museum quality that right now are not displayed; we are looking for the opportunity to do so. Of the things that are displayed, there are some that I would think maybe aren’t hidden gems, such as the two paintings on the landing of the Hinckley Building by Ovanes Berberian. Their style may not be subtle, but they’re certainly tremendous works of art, and anyone who wants to see brilliant painting technique ought to go and stand in front of that still life for ten minutes. In the library on the second floor more in the east wing there are several serigraphic prints of New Mexico churches and a variety of other subjects that show what can be done in silk screening. I think that oftentimes students think they are posters, that they are mechanical reproductions, but they’re not. They are hand pulled silkscreen prints. There are a few others. There are some nice landscapes hidden in the Snow Building. And there are some in the president’s room in the Manwaring Center. 

David: You mentioned having a lot of paintings still in the art storage room, and I know that the new gallery will have a part dedicated to the permanent collection, some pieces which will be on
permanent display in spaces that are literally made for them. What particular pieces are you planning to exhibit there? Will you rotate other parts of the permanent collection that can't all be displayed at once through the gallery as well?

Gerald: That's an excellent question. This is not a museum but a gallery, and there is a little difference in the definition. The word “museum” kind of adds an aspect of permanence, and when you go to a place like the Institute of Fine Art in Chicago, you go there with the expectation that you are going to see certain things displayed.

David: You always see the Georges Seurat piece in that one room.

Gerald: That's right: *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte*. You expect to go see that; you want to see it. And you want to experience it with friends. We do have some important pieces that we would like to exhibit permanently or at least semi-permanently. We have a Gainsborough, and the Corbet that I mentioned, and some more classically oriented paintings that will probably be on permanent display in the gallery. We have not yet worked out the details simply because we haven't been able to completely define the space. But people will see this summer what is going to be there. And then another portion of that gallery space will be dedicated to rotating exhibits. We already have scheduled several national
exhibits, including the Society of Illustrators’ Show from New York City.

David: And I imagine that one of the rotating exhibits might consist of other parts of our permanent collection that are not permanently displayed.

Gerald: That’s a good possibility. We have come a long way in a hurry. You cannot believe how bleak the world of art was on this campus until a few years ago. We have made exponential growth these last years, and much of this is due to several key people. President Bednar is obviously one of them. Dave Richards is another who has really helped. Bruce Hobbs has helped from an administrative point of view. Matt Geddes is a very prominent figure in all of this. He has encouraged it from his position as Dean and also as a member of the Art Department. Kelly Burgener, the Art Department chairman, has been 100 percent behind the effort. And a member of the Aesthetics Committee and a person with a great appreciation for art, and a wonderful traveling companion and friend, is Jack Reinwand, from Sociology and Anthropology, who has dedicated a lot of his time to helping me not be alone when it comes to picking out artwork.

I like to go out about every other month or so and visit galleries and museums and artists’ studios looking for things that I think would work well on this campus. I don’t always buy what I personally enjoy the most. I try to buy a nice variety of things that will have a broad appeal, and every once in awhile I buy something that I know will not appeal to some people but will be the “Brussels sprouts” of the art collection—that down the road people will appreciate. It has been a wonderful, wonderful opportunity to get out and make connections in the world of art, and people all around the Western United States are starting to recognize the name BYU-Idaho and are eager to learn about our campus. In this context, when the gallery is complete it will be a tremendous public relations tool for this University. We are planning an educational outreach program to bring grade schools, junior highs, and high schools to view the collection in the gallery, and also to invite people from all over the region to come to our shows. That really hasn’t happened yet on this campus. We also have art students who will be trained to assist people when they go through the art gallery. We just see this as a real educational opportunity.
David: Addressing how you go about collecting art, you mostly travel the West Coast and metropolitan areas in the West: Denver, Santa Fe, Los Angeles, San Francisco: are those your four main places? I know you also visit galleries in Salt Lake, although there aren't as many there as in some of the other locations. You have also taken trips to Europe and Mexico to collect. I believe you have a really fantastic range of art from what I see around campus.

Gerald: We have almost 600 works of art on campus and their valuation is somewhere around $1 million. When we say that we traveled to Europe and Mexico, that's maybe a little exotic and people might get the wrong impression. Normally our travel has been to places like Los Angeles and Denver. We're lucky to be near resort areas here, too. We have Sun Valley, areas in Montana, and Jackson Hole, and these places kind of sprout art galleries. I've done quite a bit of purchasing in Bozeman, Montana, some in Jackson Hole, some in Sun Valley. We try to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” In other words, we realize that there is significant mark-up in the world of art and we try to be shrewd. We do bargain with people, but we always want to give a fair price, especially to the artist, and we want to leave people with a good feeling about us, that we've treated them fairly. We have been contacted after making purchases, we have been sent notes, we have been encouraged to come back, people have said, “We love to see you come; we love to talk about the University and what it is trying to do in the world of art.” We also do some purchasing on the Internet, although it is not a substitute for seeing the art firsthand.

David: It's the difference between a reproduction and the original art. You can't ever get the same feel.

Gerald: We buy prints on the Internet but we have never bought a painting on the Internet, for the very reason that you just mentioned.

David: Well, any last comments? Things that we didn't cover that you would like to?

Gerald: One thing that we ought to mention is that in the 19 years I have been associated with the Art Department, we've had only one theft and one act of vandalism against the art collection. That has got to be a remarkable record for any institution this size. We are going to develop policies that provide safeguards.
for the collection, especially those things that are exhibited in our buildings. I would like to compliment the campus community on the way they have treated these valuable items, and I hope they will enjoy the artwork placed around the campus, learn from it, become involved with it, and appreciate it. That’s the reason we’re here—to educate people, heighten their awareness, increase their sensitivity, and have them appreciate what art can do for them.