

A Museum for Women

*Will Washington's new
museum focus long-overdue
attention on women artists
of the past and present or
will it segregate them in a
female ghetto?* By Sara Day

The National Museum of Women in the Arts, due to open next April, is probably the first museum of its kind in the world. Its supporters say that the museum came into being in response to a need voiced by artists, art historians, collectors and museum professionals for an institution that focuses on the contributions of women to the history of art, but some of its critics fear that it is an idea whose time has passed.

Many of the museum's critics believe

that at a time when women are making unprecedented breakthroughs in all professional fields, a separate museum for women's art is inappropriate. Others think the museum represents a "ghettoization" of women's art that will do women more harm than good. Some who support the idea of a women's museum are very dissatisfied with the way this particular one has been developing. Its critics say that so far the museum has been unprofessional in its approach to achieving its stated objectives, which are "to acquire, research, interpret and expose for the public the vast achievements of women artists through a strong permanent collection, changing exhibits program, traveling exhibitions, Library Resource Center and public programs."

The driving force behind the museum is its founder, Wilhelmina (Billie) Cole Holladay, who, with her husband, Wallace, has formed a collection of art by women. Billie Holladay, an attractive, elegant woman of regal presence and persuasive abilities, was born in Elmira, New York, in 1922, received a B.A. from Elmira College in 1944 and pursued postgraduate studies in art history at the University of Paris in the early '50s. The Holladays were married in 1946 and have a son and four grandchildren. They are socially prominent in Washington. Wally Holladay is president, and his wife is a director, of Holladay-Tyler Printing Corporation, which prints *Connoisseur* and *Smithsonian* magazines, the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Quarterly* and parts of *National Geographic*. Holladay also owns a successful real-estate investment company, the Holladay Corporation, for which Mrs. Holladay is director of interior design. She has served on several Washington boards, including, currently, those of the Women's National Bank and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and, in the past, the Phillips Collection.

The Holladays found the focus for their collection 20

years ago. Searching for information on the 17th-century Dutch still-life painter Clara Peeters, they discovered that neither she nor any other woman artist was included in the standard college art-history text, H. W. Janson's *History of Art* (the recently published third edition includes some women). Their discovery of this exclusion launched the Holladays' interest in women artists, and they have since acquired a collection of works by women, spanning four centuries and international in scope (although predominantly American), to which they are constantly adding. The paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, artists'

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books and ceramics are currently displayed in their Georgetown house.

When the Holladays decided to donate their collection to an existing institution, their friends the late Nancy Hanks, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and art historian Ann Sutherland Harris, co-curator (with Linda Nochlin) of the 1976 landmark exhibition "Women Artists: 1550-1950," persuaded them that it would have more impact on the public's awareness of the contribution of women artists if it formed the core of a separate museum rather than being dispersed in an existing institution.

Yet Billie Holladay makes a paradoxical patron for today's women artists: politically conservative, she

opposes feminist activism. "I must stress that we are not a part of the feminist movement," she states firmly. Mrs. Holladay thinks of her museum as the Sandra Day O'Connor of the art world: she admires O'Connor's "gentle, dignified," nonconfrontational approach.

Among Mrs. Holladay's critics are many of the feminist art historians and artists who have done most to rewrite the record on women artists in history and to encourage support for contemporary women artists. "They want to disavow any connection with the feminist movement while simultaneously riding on its coattails," says Mary Garrard, professor of art history at American University in Washington and co-editor (with Norma Broude) of *Feminism and Art History*.

If their concerns were not so serious, many supporters of the concept of a separate women's museum say they would hesitate to speak out for fear of damaging a generous effort that everyone would like to see succeed. The Holladays are art patrons. They have accumulated an interesting, if uneven, collection. And museum professionals are well aware that many extraordinary museums (the Guggenheim and the Hirshhorn, for example) were initiated by single-minded individuals in an unorthodox manner and often against a storm of professional criticism. However, the growing ranks of disillusioned former employees, advisory committee

members and museum professionals whose advice has been sought and then ignored are now adding their voices (anonymously in the case of most museum staffers) to those who have been uncomfortable with the concept from the start. Many feel that the museum has been trading on the goodwill of the museum community in Washington for long enough.

At the outset Mrs. Holladay did seek the advice of museum professionals. The advisory committee included such well-known museum figures as Constance (Mrs. Paul) Mellon, wife of the former president of the National Gallery; Harry Lowe, acting director emeritus of the National Museum of American Art; and Adelyn Breeskin, curator of modern art at the National Museum of American Art and former director of the Baltimore Museum of Art. Only two art professionals are now on the committee, both with limited input into the planning process: Caroline Backlund, assistant readers-service librarian at the National Gallery; and Annemarie Pope, president of the International Exhibitions Foundation.

"To establish a museum in the nation's capital is a monumental undertaking," Mrs. Holladay says. "The National Endowment for the Humanities gave us a grant to bring in professionals and consultants." Mrs. Holladay adds that she and her staff are still following guidelines laid down by the NEH self-study workshop for hiring a professional staff and establishing an exhibition schedule. This has been denied by several participants in the early planning process, who feel that their advice has been disregarded.

Despite these and other criticisms, the Holladays and their supporters have made remarkable strides since the establishment of an independent nonprofit corporation in 1981. They have raised over \$10 million of their \$30 million goal

from individuals, corporations and foundations. They have bought, for \$4.8 million, a former Masonic temple just two blocks from the White House. This one-time male bastion, a huge five-story structure built in 1907 in the Renaissance Revival style, is now being renovated. The plans were drawn up by consultant David Scott, who helped design the interior of the East Building of the National Gallery, and funded by a \$30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The new museum will have the latest in climate-control and conservation facilities. However, a former staff member laments that the staff has not been included in the planning of their own facilities, and Scott says he has not been consulted for almost a year.

There will be six exhibition areas on the upper floors: for the permanent collection, for loan shows, for contemporary art, for sculpture, for prints and photographs and for shows of art from different states. "It is through the states' selection committees that we will be able to give contemporary artists a chance," says Mrs. Holladay. "Women artists from each state may be selected for their state's exhibition here. The first state will be Kansas." The artists are being selected by the Kansas Arts Council. After opening in Washington, these exhibitions will travel to the state of origin and to others. The 200-seat auditorium on the top floor of the building will be made available for symposia, lectures, concerts and poetry readings, and the library resource center will be open to outside scholars and students.

A potential problem with loading access to the building, which occupies an island between heavily trafficked avenues, with rear access blocked by a building under construction, has now been solved. In exchange for \$1 million worth of density rights, the developer of the new building

is giving the museum an underground loading dock, a caterers' kitchen and a freight elevator. "We will be the only museum in Washington with seating capacity for 500 and a catering kitchen on the premises," says Mrs. Holladay.

The combined library and study center is one aspect of the museum that has received little criticism. According to librarian Krystyna Wasserman, the library is collecting monographs, general works, master's theses and doctoral dissertations on women artists, women art collectors and women art patrons, American and foreign, of all periods, as well as catalogues raisonnés and exhibition catalogues of women artists, rare books illustrated by women and women artists' books.

The collection of books and exhibition catalogues has grown to more than 2,000 volumes (70 percent were gifts), and the artists' files number more than 3,000. The files, which will include artists' résumés and statements, exhibition catalogues and announcements, correspondence, clippings, photographs and slides, will be computerized and will provide the nucleus of a planned International Archives on Women Artists. The only criterion for inclusion in the NMWA library is that the artist, apart from being female, must have had a solo exhibition.

The museum could not have reached this stage in its development without the dedication of Mrs. Holladay and her staff and the assistance of many volunteers, major donors and paid members. However, the impact of the museum's critics has been seen in the change of name (it was originally the National Museum of Women's Art) and zigs and zags in its stated purpose and policy since its inception. The major criticisms have been over the issues of separatism, quality and professionalism.