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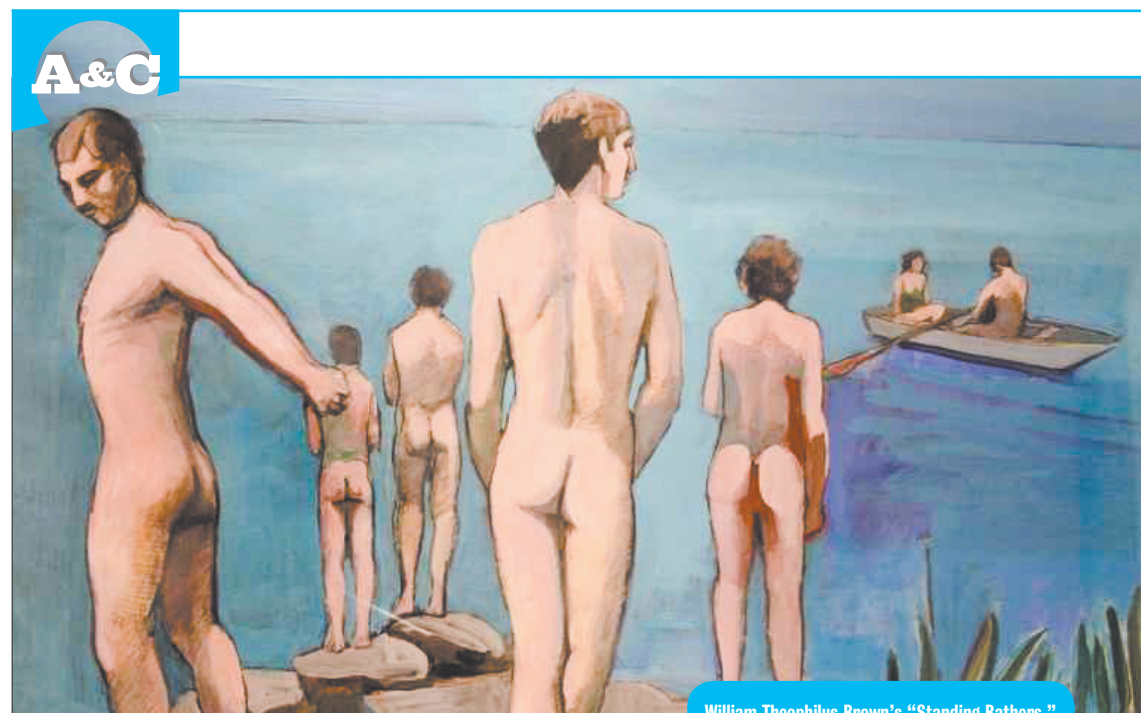


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF PAUL WONNER AND WILLIAM THEOPHILUS BROWN

William Theophilus Brown's "Standing Bathers."

## Funding the form

A gift by two late figurative painters will help emerging LGBTQ artists

BY MOZES ZARATE / mozesz@newsreview.com

Paul Wonner and William Theophilus Brown were a well-respected painting couple. But respect doesn't always draw attention from art collectors.

In Scott Shields' experience, their paintings—best known for helping establish the Bay Area figurative style in 1950s—tend to be priced for less than contemporaries such as Elmer Bischoff, David Park and Richard Diebenkorn. Another potential factor: Nude male paintings, of which Wonner and Brown created many, are in less demand than female ones.

"I think that they did suffer in terms of being able to lead their lives," says Shields, Crocker Art Museum's associate director and chief curator. "The art market has been a little less fair to them."

Wonner and Brown died in 2008 and 2012, respectively, but their goal—to lift emerging LGBTQ artists—carries on at the Crocker. In March, the downtown museum announced that it had received a gift of more than 1,800 works by the pair. The artists' wishes: Sell the artwork, and use the money to make queer art more visible.

The museum is working with Heather James Fine Art, which has several galleries across the country,

to price and sell the pieces. Shields says the money will be pooled into an endowment fund named after Wonner and Brown, and the interest income will be used to pay for exhibitions, lectures, residencies, publications and more. Crocker also plans a 100-piece exhibit spanning the couple's 60-year catalog, opening in 2023.

"Narrowing it down, that's the tricky part, but that's the fun part," Shields says. "I want to really show off their whole career."

Each painting is still being valued, including "Untitled (Cows)," an acrylic painting by Brown which shows lounged cattle. The total value, and thus the endowment's possible fund size, is unclear.

"Frankly, it's going to take a long time to sell 1,800 works," he says. "We'll never sell all of them."

The project is in the early stages, and so the beneficiaries haven't been considered either, Shields says. The artists won't be restricted to Sacramento, and won't have to be alive.

Wonner and Brown met in Berkeley in the '50s, both students in UC Berkeley's graduate arts program.

They rented out a studio above a Volkswagen dealership and held drawing sessions with other notable figurative painters, including Christopher Isherwood, Don Bachardy and Nathan Oliveira.

They moved around California, and so did their styles of still-lives, figures and landscapes. The works evolved, with Brown known for painting coppered industrial scenes later on, and Wonner for richly colored everyday objects.

A constant was the figurative paintings. They painted hundreds.

"For them, it was just the beauty of the human form regardless of what gender," Shields says. □

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**Scott Shields,  
associate director, Crocker Art  
Museum**