

# FRAGILE ART IN HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAYS: THE WENNESLAND BEAT ART COLLECTION

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In 1971, Dr Reidar Wennesland donated parts of his extensive collection of American contemporary art to his Norwegian high school, Kristiansand katedralskole. The collection is owned by the school, but is under the administration of the Wennesland foundation. Dr Wennesland later donated 136 artworks to the neighboring Agder University, Norway. The two donations together form the Wennesland collection, but only the first donation is discussed here. Similar but less acute problems affect the Agder University collection.

The collection consists of more than 90 artworks and includes artists such as Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown, Fletcher Benton and Roy DeForest. Having worked for decades as a physician and patron to many of San Francisco's so-called Beat artists, Dr Wennesland had over the years acquired a substantial number of art works either purchased from promising but struggling young artists or given to him as payment for medical treatment. In 1970, he saw the need to reorganize and share his collection, and made offers to several American museums. The collection being of variable quality, and many of the artists unknown, the museums wanted to choose only the highlights. This offended Dr Wennesland, who, a known eccentric, decided instead to donate works to the cathedral school of his home town of Kristiansand, Norway. His bequest stipulated that the artworks should be exhibited where they would be seen and appreciated by the students. This has led to wonderful decorations of the high school's hallways, classrooms and cafeteria, where the artworks hang to this day.

The Beat artworks, however, are generally quite fragile. Many combine painting, relief and collage with ready-made objects glued on, or embedded in, paint. Even the more traditional works incorporate experimental material combinations or cheap, low-quality materials. Many have matte, fragile surfaces and exposed untreated canvas or paper. Few are behind glass, meaning that even the more robust artworks are exposed to climate fluctuations, mechanical damages and vandalism. This has resulted in cracking, paint loss, loss of attached original material, holes, tears and scratches, graffiti and chewing gum on surfaces. To all involved, it is obvious that the collection is in great need of treatment and protection, but the suggested solutions differ. This discussion only scratches the surface of a very complex problem concerning the Wennesland collection in terms of conservation and access.

The school, though lacking the funds to improve the condition of the art works, legitimately claims that the collection was donated to the school in order to be directly accessible to students. It is, however, an undeniable fact that this very accessibility has led to extensive damage and a great need for conservation, which could have been avoided in a more controlled environment.

The regional art museum, Sørlandets kunstmuseum, would like the most important parts of the collection to be transferred to their facilities where they would be exhibited and protected. This would improve accessibility for the public, but reduce access for the high school students and thus go against the wishes of Dr Wennesland. The exhibition would also not be permanent, and would not include all art works at once. At the museum, the collection would be taken care of by professionals who would carry out research and treatment. However, the museum is quite small and has limited resources to deal with such an extensive collection, having only one conservator and less than perfect storage facilities. The museum will therefore only take on the responsibility on its own terms and with extra funding from the Wennesland foundation.

The donor's family is concerned with having his wishes respected, and stresses that he specifically wanted his art to be accessible and inspirational to young students, not kept in a museum store. An ideal solution would be a new building designed to house the collection on the school grounds. Acknowledging that this is financially unrealistic, the family sees collaboration between the foundation, the school and the regional art museum as a better solution than allowing the art works to deteriorate in the school building.

Finally, some argue that since the collection is not appreciated at its present location, it should be donated to a San Francisco museum. This would increase access but go directly against the wishes of Dr Wennesland. It is also likely that museums would refuse responsibility for the less important works, which was why Dr Wennesland brought his collection back to Norway in the first place.

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