

THE THRIVENT FINANCIAL COLLECTION OF RELIGIOUS ART

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HUNDREDS OF RICH IMPRESSIONS of history and culture from eight centuries of Western religious art are represented in the Thrivent Financial Collection of Religious Art. From a late-thirteenth-century hand-painted miniature on vellum depicting St. Helena with the “true cross” (Plate 1) to seventeenth-century copperplate etchings by Rembrandt van Rijn (Plate 57) to a twentieth-century lithograph by Pablo Picasso (Plate 89), this collection’s historical breadth and significance are remarkable. Comprised of more than eleven hundred works, it is unique among corporate art collections nationally for its focus on religious subject matter and works on paper. This collection is a dynamic, shared part of Thrivent’s heritage and commitment to supporting the arts, culture, education, and the community.

The Thrivent Collection has received global, national and local media recognition for its excellence. *Art + Auction* magazine listed the collection among its “Top 101 Active Corporate Art Collectors” in 1988, and local arts editor for the Star Tribune newspaper, Mary Abbe, described it as “one of the Twin Cities’ great artistic treasures.”¹ In 2015, the collection was included in a globally distributed publication, *Global Corporate Collections*, published by Deutsche Standards, and supported by Sotheby’s, that features 81 corporate collections considered to be among the best in the world. This publication brings focus to what some companies are doing today to actively support and preserve original art, and make art an essential part of their corporate culture. Many works from the collection have been studied by scholars in Europe and the United States, with their research published in academic books and journals. For thirty-three years, the art collection has served the Twin Cities and greater regional areas as a

source of spiritual enrichment, artistic pleasure, and art historical and theological education and research. It is often considered a great hidden treasure because people are sometimes surprised such marvelous works of art are tucked away in a seventeen-story corporate building in downtown Minneapolis. Yet the collection has reached many thousands of viewers, through scholarly and public exhibitions, loans, gallery talks, lectures, and other educational programming. Our hope and plan is to preserve, share, enjoy, and learn from this magnificent collection for many years to come.

THE COMPANY

A collection of religious art is appropriate for Thrivent given its long history and strong connections to Scandinavian Lutherans in the Midwest. For its first nineteen years, from 1982 until 2001, the collection was known as the Lutheran Brotherhood Collection of Religious Art; the name changed along with that of the organization when the two fraternal benefit societies Lutheran Brotherhood and Aid Association for Lutherans merged to create the largest fraternal benefit society in the United States. A fraternal benefit society is a not-for-profit organization that not only offers insurance and investment opportunities to its members but also promotes the well-being of its members and the public through various educational, social, patriotic, charitable, and religious programs and activities. Members of a fraternal benefit society share a religious, ethnic, or vocational bond: in the case of Lutheran Brotherhood, Aid Association for Lutherans, and Thrivent, this bond is a belief in the Christian faith.

This Christian heritage has deep roots throughout the entire history of these organizations. Aid Association

for Lutherans was established in 1902 as a result of efforts by German Lutherans in Appleton, Wisconsin; Lutherans throughout eastern Wisconsin were recruited in order to obtain the requisite five hundred members for the business's state charter. Lutheran Brotherhood was founded in Minnesota after the 1917 merger convention of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. Lutheran insurance commissioners Jacob Preus from Minnesota and Herman Ekern from Wisconsin proposed a not-for-profit mutual aid society, Luther Union; after much debate, the proposal passed, and three years later, in 1921, the organization was renamed Lutheran Brotherhood. The grassroots campaigns for both organizations were motivated by a concern for the security of Lutherans, and primarily the companies offered life insurance to protect Lutheran families.

The name Thrivent Financial for Lutherans was approved by members after the corporate merger in 2001. Thrivent united the combined 183-year history of the two fraternal benefit societies and remains a not-for-profit membership organization of Christians. Today Thrivent serves all Christians, helping them be wise with money and live generously. This is the result of a 2013 member vote to extend our common bond from Lutheran to Christian. This Fortune 500 financial services corporation now has nearly 2.4 million members and manages more than one hundred and five billion dollars in assets.²

The organization's acquisition of art extends beyond the collection of religious art. A corporate art collection begun by Lutheran Brotherhood and Aid Association for Lutherans is separate from the collection of religious art and includes a great variety of paintings, sculptures, ceramics, textiles, and other art objects. Many of these pieces were purchased or commissioned for corporate centers or offices. Members may be familiar with such memorable works on display in Minneapolis as the Viking ship model and the Reformation window, a stunning creation in stained glass by the renowned Pickel Studio. Although distinct from the collection of religious art, the corporate collection also demonstrates the organization's support of the arts and its priority to enhance the workplace of its employees and the experience of visitors to Thrivent with the presence of art.

THE COLLECTOR

Reverend Richard Lewis Hillstrom, a Lutheran minister

and art collector, is responsible for collecting the majority of the works in the Thrivent Collection and served as its founding curator. When he began to build the collection in 1981, he was already a great connoisseur of art and a recognized collector. He had been developing his own personal collection of primarily American drawings, prints, paintings, and sculpture for almost forty years. He was involved with several local museums and had close friendships with many artists and art dealers throughout the United States and Europe. His colleagues at Lutheran Brotherhood trusted his expertise and substantial experience when appointing him to establish this collection of religious art.

Born and raised in Dassel, Minnesota, Hillstrom left this small town to attend Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. After his graduation in 1938, he moved to Rock Island, Illinois, to study at Augustana Seminary. In 1942 he was ordained a Lutheran minister, and he served a congregation in Indiana until 1947; during this period he began collecting art. He returned to Minnesota in 1947 to serve as assistant pastor at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, and in 1952 he accepted a ministerial position at Bethesda Lutheran Medical Center in St. Paul, where he served as chaplain and then director of chaplaincy services until his retirement in 1981.

While he was a young minister, Hillstrom traveled the world and slowly built his personal collection. Befriending dealers and artists yet always remaining the frugal Swedish Lutheran pastor, he negotiated the price of works he desired, occasionally arranging payment plans and sometimes waiting years to buy a piece he loved. His tales of buying Old Master prints and drawings on the streets of Paris for dollars in the 1940s and of visiting with American artists Birger Sandzén and Elof Wedin as he contemplated which of these artists' works to purchase are entertaining and astounding. He lived on the modest income of a pastor and carefully planned and saved for his regular travels and art purchases. He considered his collection a great source of enjoyment and a preservation of culture, as well as a sound investment. Indeed, his personal collection and the Thrivent Collection have both proved appreciably successful investments, a fact Hillstrom believed was appropriate and complementary to the financial services focus of the organization. Yet he reflected that for himself and for Thrivent this art collection reveals more about the reputation

of the corporation than about its financial aspect: "The company is not just there to make or manage dollars and cents, but to actually make a contribution to the community through this cultural vehicle."

In 1978 Hillstrom was elected a trustee of the Minnesota Museum of American Art in St. Paul and was chair of its collections committee. He served on the Board of Trustees at the Minneapolis Institute of Art from 1994 until 2000 and participated in its accessions and development committees. From 2000 to 2006, he served as a non-trustee member of the accessions committee until he resigned at the end of that term for health reasons. He supported the creation of the Print and Drawing Curatorial Council at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in the early 1980s and was an active board member of this group. He even promoted a dynamic art program at the Bethesda Lutheran Medical Center, regularly organizing art shows and sales there.

Donating works from his own collection to local arts institutions was important to Hillstrom. He gave many artworks to the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Minnesota Museum of American Art, and the American Swedish Institute. The bulk of his personal collection was donated to the art museum of Gustavus Adolphus College. His significant contribution to this museum comprises much of its permanent collection, and the museum was named the Hillstrom Museum of Art, a notable tribute to his generosity and his many years of studying and collecting art. He also helped establish an endowment for purchasing works on paper for the permanent collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. He was an influential and much loved figure in the Twin Cities arts community for decades, and his gifts created a legacy that will maintain and continue his devotion to the arts.

Until his death at the age of ninety-nine, in 2014, Reverend Hillstrom remained a rich source of art historical knowledge, strong connections to local and international artists and institutions, and extraordinary stories about his long life dedicated to ministry, travel, and the arts. The Thrivent Collection is the perfect expression of his dual passions, religion and art, as well as a vibrant statement of Thrivent's commitment to education and the preservation of religious heritage.

THE COLLECTION

In 1981, Lutheran Brotherhood was moving into a new

home office at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Sixth Street in downtown Minneapolis. Reverend Hillstrom and individuals working at Lutheran Brotherhood believed this was the ideal time to start a new corporate art collection. Discussions ensued between Hillstrom and Dr. Edward A. Lindell, executive vice president in the Fraternal division, and soon Hillstrom was hired as the company's art consultant and curator. He worked closely with David Swanson, manager of the Advisor Community/Ethnic branch of the Fraternal department, to establish guidelines for the collection within a corporate setting. They hoped the collection would express and support a commitment to art, education, and religious history. By early 1982, the collection was officially begun.

This initial team had a specific vision: the collection would represent only religious subject matter. This focus was ideally suited to Lutheran Brotherhood's historical ties to the Lutheran church, and Hillstrom and his colleagues knew that a religious collection would set itself apart from other more secular corporate art collections. Another distinctive aspect would be the collection's emphasis on works on paper, or prints and drawings. Originally, Hillstrom planned to acquire several artistic media, including paintings and sculpture, but it soon became apparent that for storage and preservation reasons a concentration on works on paper would be more appropriate for a corporate environment. The five paintings in the collection are exceptions among the more than eight hundred prints and drawings. The Thrivent Collection may be unique in the world for featuring works on paper devoted to religious subject matter.

European prints and drawings from the early modern period (the fifteenth to the late seventeenth centuries) comprise the largest portion of the collection. These Old Master artworks highlight artists of the northern and southern Renaissance and Baroque eras, as well as early prints and miniatures from the late medieval period. Sixteenth-century Italian drawings are abundant in the collection, and holdings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are strong as well, notably nineteenth-century European religious drawings and twentieth-century German and European expressionist prints. Thematic areas that developed include the Passion, scriptural and biblical topics, Marian iconography, imagery and iconography relating to Christ, and works from the time of the Protestant Reformation. Throughout the collection

a wide range of religious and theological material is represented, from the Stations of the Cross to depictions of great cathedrals, the saints, and scores of scriptural and non-canonical religious subjects.

The first piece that Hillstrom acquired for the new religious art collection was a lithograph by American artist George Wesley Bellows, *Crucifixion of Christ* (Figure 3). Two years later, in 1984, Bellows's painting of the same subject (his only known religious painting) was also acquired (Plate 86). Hillstrom had long admired the work of Bellows, whose art, including another impression of the *Crucifixion of Christ* lithograph, was in his personal collection. Bellows is considered one of the most influential American artists of the twentieth century; he and other members of "the Ashcan School" in New York City (also known as "The Eight") sought to express artistic realism through depictions of urban life. The *Crucifixion* is large in scale and visually powerful, and the early acquisition of this painting demonstrated the historical breadth of the collection, which would include dramatic modern works as well as more traditional religious art from the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries.

Certain prints are vital inclusions within any significant print collection, and the Thrivent Collection is fortunate to own impressions of two of Albrecht Dürer's well-known masterprints: *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (Plate 12) and *St. Jerome in His Study* (Plate 13). Other central works or series in the oeuvre of Dürer represented wholly or in part in the collection are his revolutionary *Apocalypse* series (Plate 8) and his marvelous sets of the Large Passion (Figure 18), the Engraved Passion (Plate 11), and *The Life of the Virgin* series (Plate 10). These series were important in Dürer's time for being highly collectible, devotional, and educational. Holding many such sets enhances the scholarly potential of a private collection: we can view the entire set of these prints today and attempt to emulate and understand the original functionality, aesthetic enjoyment, educational and devotional aspects, and multiple and artistic qualities of the series, both in individual works and through the unity of these works together as a series.

Hillstrom utilized several avenues for collecting. He subscribed to auction catalogs and participated in national and international art auctions, and he spread the word about the new collection among art dealers in the United States and Europe with whom

he had previously worked. His fine reputation as a collector preceded his role as a curator and collector for Lutheran Brotherhood, and dealers were eager to offer exceptional pieces that would be appropriate for the new collection. Unique preparatory drawings and sketches by such renowned artists as John Singer Sargent, Eugène Delacroix, Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres were ideal, marvelous contributions to the collection. Hillstrom's keen eye was also responsible for the acquisition of works of historical and theological importance. *Protestant Satire on the Eucharist* (Figure 35), a small roundel drawing by German artist Sebald Beham that depicts a specific theological issue during the Protestant Reformation, was an excellent addition to the collection's Reformation holdings.

Any collector can tell you that choosing a single favorite work of art is difficult, yet certain works do stand out as Hillstrom's favorites. He enjoyed series or sets of prints, perhaps for the stories they tell and their frequent close connection to Scripture. He considered Dürer's *Apocalypse* series, arguably one of the most influential sets of prints in Western art, essential for the collection. The monumentality of the print series is further showcased in Max Pechstein's *The Lord's Prayer* (Plate 81), a series held in complete in the Thrivent Collection. Hillstrom also loved James J. Tissot's gorgeous *The Prodigal Son in Modern Life* series (Plate 76) and Domenico Tiepolo's *Flight into Egypt* (Plate 39), a staggering twenty-seven plate set expanded from one brief scriptural reference. As Hillstrom charmingly commented, "The Bible said, essentially, 'They went to Egypt' [Matthew 2:14], but Tiepolo figured out about twenty-six other things they did along the way!" Indeed, the print series format is ideal for the visual and thematic expansion of the imaginative nature of such rich stories of humanity. Hillstrom also treasured *First Communion at Mont St. Père* by Léon Augustin Lhermitte (Figure 6), a beautiful large charcoal drawing depicting children's first receipt of the sacrament; Lhermitte's gentle handling of the lace on the young girls' veils feels simultaneously sumptuous and delicate.

Both the organization (first Lutheran Brotherhood, then Thrivent) and the curators have always sought to share the holdings of the collection, making the artworks available for viewing and study. A primary duty of a collection is preservation and conservation, to ensure the care of the art, but equally important is the duty

and privilege to promote the art through educational programming and exhibitions. The Thrivent Collection is a source of ongoing scholarship, as its curators and other art historians use it to research academic and theological topics. Providing access to the art is further accomplished through in-house and loaned exhibitions, gallery talks and lectures, and a number of tours and study sessions. Hillstrom and others in the company also maintained a strong conviction that the collection should be seen and appreciated by members of the fraternal organization and by our larger community. In the late 1980s a program was established to send works from the collection to Lutheran congregations throughout the United States, and for more than ten years Hillstrom facilitated these small exhibitions. Hundreds of churches of all sizes hosted these exhibitions at no cost, and the Thrivent Collection reached many thousands of members and nonmembers, frequently traveling to areas that did not have a local museum or access to fine art.

Through the years Hillstrom encouraged an important relationship for the collection with the Minneapolis Institute of Art. The curators of the museum's Print and Drawing department were friends and colleagues whom Hillstrom often consulted on significant purchases. The Thrivent Collection has loaned numerous works to Mia, and Thrivent provides considerable support and gifts to Mia for special exhibitions. Thrivent partnered with the museum as the 2010 sponsor of Public Tours, a program of free, docent-led, daily tours of the museum's collection, demonstrating its desire to extend its curatorial vision and emphasizing its enthusiasm to promote the arts, education, and culture in our community.

Today, the original vision is continued and vastly expanded with dozens of tours, gallery talks, lectures, and exhibitions each year. In 2008 a lecture series was initiated to coincide with in-house exhibition openings. Guest lecturers speak on topics related to the current exhibition in the gallery; these successful events bring members and nonmembers from the Twin Cities into the Thrivent corporate center to view the collection and learn about the art. Educational programs remain crucial to the collection's curatorial goals and serve as an expression of the fraternal benefit society heritage of Thrivent.

The in-house galleries on the second floor of the Thrivent corporate center hang approximately forty to

sixty works in one or two themed exhibitions at a time. Showing works from the collection with accompanying didactic labels is a priority for the collection curator, who rotates the works to highlight theological and art historical scholarship and themes, as well as to protect the art and maintain its continued preservation. Recent exhibitions include *Familiar Image, Sacred Impressions: The Reformation and Beyond, The Saints: Image and Devotion in Religious Prints, Made to Fit: The Meaning of Dress in Religious Prints, The Passion: Five Hundred Years in Art, and Modern Impressions: Color and Expression in Twentieth-Century Religious Prints*.

Reverend Hillstrom had never worked with an assistant curator or curatorial assistant until I joined him as assistant curator in 2001. He retired from the collection in 2005 at the robust age of ninety, and I became its curator. I aim to preserve and enhance much that Reverend Hillstrom created, while implementing educational and scholarly programming and research to maximize the potential and reputation of this notable collection.

With his legacy of two outstanding art collections as well as donations to many art institutions, Richard Hillstrom demonstrated his great passion for art and his truly generous spirit. A self-taught art connoisseur, he lived the essential principle of collecting: you must genuinely love what you collect. After all, you look at your art day after day, so it must give you pleasure. Thrivent is proud to follow Reverend Hillstrom's fine example and delight in its exceptional collection of religious art, continuing its commitment of the past thirty years to preserve, share, and enjoy these beautiful and important works of art.

Notes

1. "Corporate Chart: Our Top 101 Active Corporate Art Collectors," *Art + Auction XI*, no. 3 (October 1988): 168–75. Mary Abbe, "The Saints: Image and Devotion in Religious Prints," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis–St. Paul), December 23, 2007, 4F.
2. Additional information about the history and current status of Thrivent Financial is available on the organization's web site at www.thrivent.com.
3. The author enjoyed the great privilege of working with former curator and collector Reverend Richard Lewis Hillstrom for four years before he retired from the collection. Much of the information about the collection's history was gathered from

Hillstrom's and the author's recollections as well as from a formal interview conducted with Hillstrom by the author in September 2009 in preparation for writing this book. Direct quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from that interview.

Opposite: Pablo Picasso, *David et Bethsabée* (detail; see Plate 89), 1947. Lithograph. Pablo Picasso © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Left: Thirteenth-century Italian Master, *St. Helena with the True Cross* (detail; see Plate 1), c. 1290. Gouache and ink on vellum.

FIGURE 1. Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom, Rome, May 7, 1950.

FIGURE 2. *The Passion* exhibition on display in the Thrivent Religious Art Gallery, Minneapolis, 2010.

FIGURE 3. George Wesley Bellows, *Crucifixion of Christ*, 1923. Lithograph.

Above: FIGURE 4. Albrecht Dürer, *St. Jerome in His Study*, 1514. Engraving.

Right: FIGURE 5. Max Pechstein, *Our Father, Who Art in Heaven*, from *The Lord's Prayer* series, 1921. Hand-colored woodcut. Max Pechstein © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Pechstein Hamburg / Toekendorf / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Above: FIGURE 6. Léon Augustin Lhermitte, *First Communion at Mont St. Père*, 1884. Charcoal.

Left: FIGURE 7. Richard Hillstrom in the Thrivent gallery, 2000.