

Joan Irvine Smith will donate her California Impressionist painting collection to UC Irvine



Granville Redmond's "California Landscape With Flowers" dominates the entrance to The Irvine Museum. (Courtesy of The Irvine Museum)



By **Kathleen Luppi**

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No visitor to Orange County can mistake the impact that philanthropic Irvine family members have made on the growing Southern California landscape.

Since its creation in 1937 by agricultural pioneer James Irvine, the James Irvine Foundation has awarded over \$1 billion in grants to more than 3,000 nonprofits that elevate arts engagement, education and public policy decision-making.

Joan Irvine Smith, an arts patron and the great-granddaughter of James Irvine, who established the Irvine Co. real estate and development firm, announced Oct. 27 that she will donate her entire California Impressionist painting collection, valued at \$17 million, to the [UC Irvine](#) campus.

The collection of 1,200 works is currently housed in The Irvine Museum, a space Smith established in 1993 to exhibit California Impressionist paintings that reminded her of the undeveloped Orange County of her youth.

Smith, who began collecting California Impressionism in the early '90s, founded the nonprofit museum in an office tower off Von Karman Avenue, which today attracts 35,000 to 40,000 annual visitors.

The family plans to christen a personal landmark with an anticipated new museum at the UC Irvine campus, and the permanent home will house the collection that consists of works by Guy Rose, William Wendt, Granville Redmond, Edgar Payne and many others.

"The focus wasn't just about starting a museum — it was to talk about the environment issues we face today, which are just as equally important," Smith's son, Irvine Museum President James Irvine Swinden, said Wednesday afternoon during a tour of the museum. "My mother

has always been involved in these issues, and it seemed appropriate that the collection end up on the ranch."

"See this bridge?" he asked, pointing to a Franz Bischoff's landscape, "Arroyo Seco Bridge." "This now is where the Pasadena Freeway is."

Educational and community outreach has remained one of the museum's paramount missions, Swinden said, as it provides students attending both public and private schools in the Orange County school districts field trips, free busing and a donation of a complete set of hardbound museum publications.

The museum, which offers complimentary admission to all visitors, also welcomes elementary school children to view the collection and travel to the San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary to experience the wetland habitat and its inhabitants.

Many of these children never have set foot in a museum, and oftentimes, Swinden said he learns they return to view the art collection with their parents.

The donation was also seen as a victory for the home team, UC Irvine, as The Irvine Museum collection has traveled across the U.S. and around the world 18 times to international institutions.

"It's so tremendously exciting," said Howard Gillman, who became UCI's sixth chancellor in September 2014. "We know how historic and foundational the collection is for our broader aspirations."

Two years ago, Gillman designed a new program, Illuminations, an arts and culture initiative aimed at preparing students to participate in a discussion that addressed questions of human culture and social values.

The program's list of activities and events coincide with the university's plans to connect with regional arts and cultural institutions, Gillman said, and in the long run, he envisions UC Irvine becoming the center for California art with the Irvine family's "world-class" pieces.

It's an added benefit to have the pieces exhibited on a college campus as current art faculty members may provide valuable insight into the history of works in the museum collection, Gillman said.

Plans for a museum have come full circle since Los Angeles modernist architect William Pereira included a regional art museum in his original campus master plan more than 50 years ago, Swinden said.

UC Irvine will not demolish the campus's Aldrich Park to build a new museum, but it will seek funds to build one near the center of the campus.

"I hope a visitor understands they're observing first-class works of art created by artists who were trained in Paris, New York and all over Europe," Swinden said.

"But I also hope they understand the environment message," Swinden said. "Everyone has a responsibility to preserve natural resources and we're asking, 'How do you take a step further in doing so? How do we maintain that now?' It can't just be preserved in a painting."

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