



# DIVINE ART

Bob Jones Jr., son of the evangelist Bob Jones, began purchasing Old Master paintings when he became president of Bob Jones University in the 1940s—and it has become one of the most valuable collections of European art in the world.

by **John Nolan**



President Bob Jones Jr. acquired Botticelli's Madonna and Child with an Angel within the first year of starting a world-renowned art collection at Bob Jones University.



*Madonna and Child with an Angel* ("Madonna of the Magnificat"), Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi, called Sandro Botticelli (and studio), Italian, 15th century, tempera on panel. Museum & Gallery at Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC



(opposite) A fine example of a nineteenth-century Orientalist painting, Edwin Long's *Vashti Refuses the King's Summons* illustrates a rare theme in Old Masters' works.



## Robert Reynolds Jones Jr. was born in the cotton fields of Dothan, Alabama.

When Bob Jones University, the school his father started in 1927, moved to Greenville from Cleveland, Tennessee, in 1947, students and faculty arrived driving through cotton fields in the surrounding countryside. At the same time, scores of mills were making cloth in Greenville for global markets—earning Greenville the title, “Textile Center of the World.” While wealthy mill executives brought an array of fantastic architecture, music, theater, and country club organizations to the Upstate, the European fine art that filled the homes and museums of their big-city counterparts was not to be found in Greenville.

Within a few years following Jones Jr.’s arrival, as president of BJU, he set about changing that. Culture had always been a part of the university’s core emphasis of what a well-rounded education should be. BJU had successful vocal, instrumental, art, literature, and theater programs, but lacked an art collection that could inspire students and expose them to great masters of the past. Over the course of his life, Jones Jr. visited many great art museums around the world while traveling with his evangelist father. In the late 1940s, a friend and well-connected businessman, Carl Hamilton, encouraged Jones Jr. to build an art collection for the school. Hamilton had relationships with many of the top art dealers and curators at the time and offered to help him assemble a museum collection that would not only round out the students’ college experience but serve to inspire the larger community with the beauty and skill of great artists.

When the campus museum opened to the public on Thanksgiving in 1951, twenty-five paintings ranging from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries brought an opportunity for locals to view Old Masters. Prior to that time, they would’ve had to travel to Richmond, Virginia, or Sarasota, Florida, to see anything comparable. The university entrusted Jones with a \$30,000-per-year budget to buy paintings that would build a pre-twentieth-century survey collection of Western European art that had the unique parameters of religious subject matter, with a focus on those depicting scriptural events or Biblical characters.

Recognizable painters were certainly on Jones’s agenda, so patrons could see works by artists with whom they were familiar. Within the first year of opening, the museum was able to secure a beautiful tondo (round) painting by Alessandro Filippini, aka Sandro Botticelli. Today, Botticelli’s works, which fill the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the Louvre in Paris, and the Sistine Chapel in Rome, can also be found in Greenville, South Carolina. *The Madonna and Child with an Angel*, also called “Madonna of the Magnificat,” shows the graceful lines and coloration so characteristic of the master—especially in the faces and hands, which were the aspects that Botticelli painted, while leaving the less important parts for his apprentices to complete.

An even more recognizable artist came when Jones acquired the *Head of Christ* panel painting in 1963, ascribed to none other than Rembrandt van Rijn. The painting’s style is characteristic of the master’s dark brown tones and expressiveness of his subjects. However, as the study of art history advanced, the work was deemed to have been painted by a member of Rembrandt’s studio. Nonetheless, the painting gained an international







*Vashti Refuses the King's Summons*, Edwin Long, R.A. English, 19th century, oil on canvas.  
Museum & Gallery at Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC

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Bob Jones, Jr., 1961. Museum & Gallery at Bob Jones University, Greenville SC

*As president of BJU, Bob Jones Jr. built the core of the widely acclaimed religious art collection that now makes up the university's Museum & Gallery.*

audience in 2011, when it was featured in the traveling exhibition *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus*, displayed at the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Louvre. Though the work was by an unknown student, it hung prominently with six other Rembrandt *Head of Christ* paintings for the first time, as all seven were originally together in the master's studio. It marks a watershed moment when Rembrandt enlisted a Jewish neighbor to pose as the model for Christ—the first time in art history when an artist used an ethnically correct subject for the image of Jesus. Rembrandt would go on to paint ethnically correct Christ characters for the rest of his career, and the collection's painting will forever be part of that momentous change.

Beyond name recognition, Jones assembled a remarkable survey of painters from most of the major Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch, Flemish, British, and German schools with both familiar and unfamiliar names, all with an eye to the quality of the work. A fine example is *Vashti Refuses the King's Summons* by the British painter Edwin Long, which Jones purchased in 1969. It's a great example of an Orientalist painting, but Edwin Long is not a name that most people recognize. Instead of paying an expensive price for a more familiar Orientalist like Jean-Léon Gérôme [note accents], Jones chose a high-quality work by Long that is signed and dated, which fit the collecting focus just as well. Not only did the painting fill a role in representing a key nineteenth-century artistic movement, but the subject matter is a relatively rare theme found among the Old Masters. Here the artist uses Arab-looking women and interior decorative elements that are authentic to the Medo-Persian time period and culture around 600 BC. a great example of an Orientalist painting, but Edwin Long is not a name that most people recognize. Instead





*The Mocking of Christ*, Unknown French or Dutch (follower of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio), French or Dutch, 17th century, oil on canvas. Museum & Gallery at Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC

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The last painting Dr. Jones acquired for the collection before he died in 1997, *The Mocking of Christ* exemplifies many of the characteristics of his purchases over the decades. Painted by an unknown follower of Caravaggio, one of the most respected Italian artists, the work is noteworthy as a seventeenth-century Baroque painting. Nearly half of

*Painted by an unknown follower of Caravaggio, the Baroque work The Mocking of Christ reflects the master's style.*



*Head of Christ*, Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (school of), Dutch, 17th century, oil on canvas. Museum & Gallery at Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC



*The Head of Christ*, done by a member of Rembrandt's studio, is notable for the fact that a Jewish model sat for the painting.

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the more than 400 paintings in the collection are from the Baroque period. It was Jones's good fortune to find and buy quality Baroque paintings for bargain prices in the 1950s and '60s because the style was out of favor with most museums and private collectors at the time. Most scholars agree that the survey of Baroque paintings in Greenville is outstanding. Keith Christensen, curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art admits, "No question, Bob Jones has the best Baroque around."

Like *The Mocking of Christ*, Jones often bought paintings of superior quality that were clearly painted by an accomplished artist but may have lacked a solid attribution or maybe had a wrong one. Even in the hot Old Masters art market in the 1990s, the painting was affordable. His practiced eye had found a gem that he bought for a proverbial song. Today, the value of the painting would be significantly more than what he paid for it. Even four decades into collecting, Jones was still finding bargains like *The Mocking of Christ*. Knowing he could never afford an autographed Caravaggio painting, Jones invested in this one, which demonstrates the master's style better than any other in the collection.



Over time, the collection in Greenville became a bucket-list stop for all art experts and scholars of Old Master paintings. The museum's paintings have traveled around the world and been included in some of the most scholarly exhibitions in the last seventy years. In 1996, the Museum & Gallery became an independent 501(c)3 nonprofit, separate from the university and serving international audiences, college students, and K-12 students statewide, as well as Greenville residents. Thousands have been enriched by the cultural breadth and importance of the collection, which is proposed to be housed in a state-of-the-art civic center in downtown Greenville. Now that the city has become an international tourist destination, it only makes sense that this collection should be highlighted as one of Greenville's—and the world's—greatest assets. **T**

For more on the Museum & Gallery, go to [museumandgallery.org](http://museumandgallery.org).