

THE KRESGE ART MUSEUM:

Five Thousand Years of Art History

By Ed Zabrusky

LIKE expectant parents, the staff of the MSU Kresge Art Museum recently crowded around director Joseph Ishikawa as he gingerly unwrapped a package that had arrived in a wooden crate. No one—except Ishikawa—knew what might emerge.

Then, amid “oohs” and “aahs” signaling approval, out came a spectacular altarpiece in tempera, *The Crucifixion*, painted by 15th-century artist Paolo di Giovanni Fei.

“It is perhaps the most important addition to our permanent collection,” assesses Ishikawa. “Not the most valuable, but the most important because it fills our most conspicuous gap—the transition between Medieval and Renaissance art.”

Purchased from the century-old London firm P. & D. Colnaghi at a bargain price of \$80,000, thanks to Ishikawa’s diligent sleuthing, the portable triptych helps to complete MSU’s modest collection—roughly 5,000 objects—as an excellent sampling of art history from neolithic times to the present.

“People who go abroad return to admire the intimacy of our collection,” observes Ishikawa. “Instead of being faced by mind-boggling collections of hundreds of Greek vases in the British Museum, they can take their time and admire a few excellent examples.”

Founded in 1931 within the art department, the museum has bounced all over the campus—the Music Building basement, the Union, Morrill Hall, and all of eight temporary Army quonsets. In 1958, thanks to the Kresge Foundation, it found its home—a brick structure nestled north of the Red Cedar just west of Bogue Street. Last year the art gallery was finally designated a museum.



Ishikawa proudly displays the “bargain” triptych.

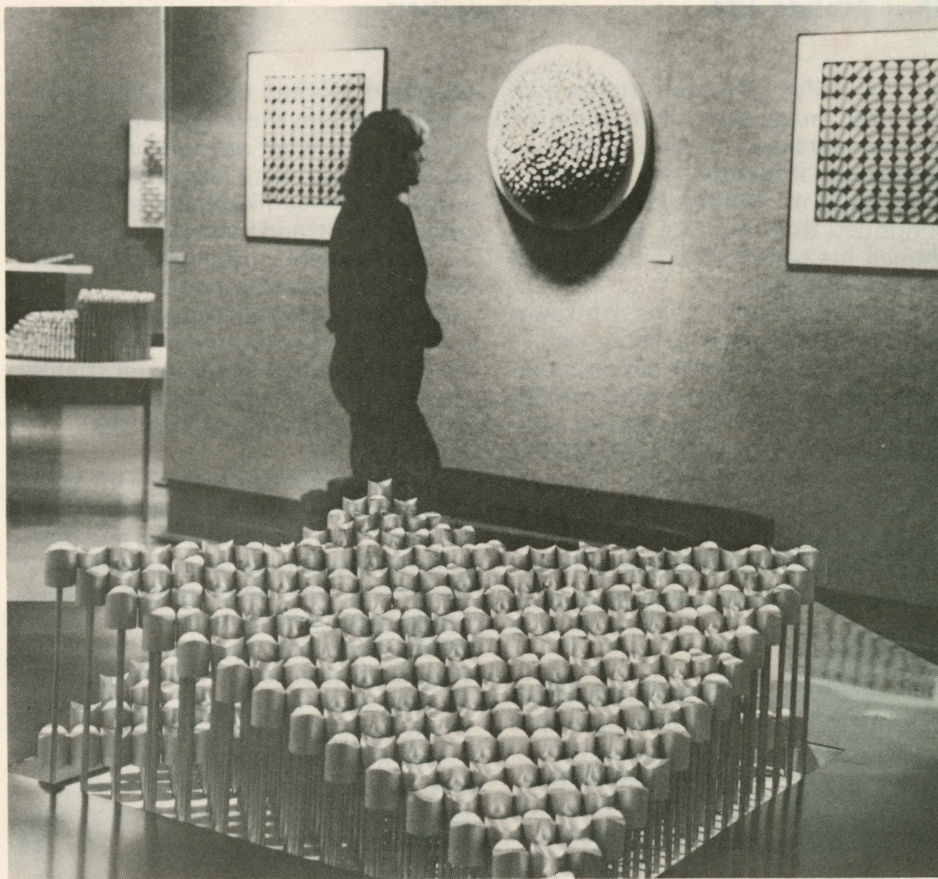
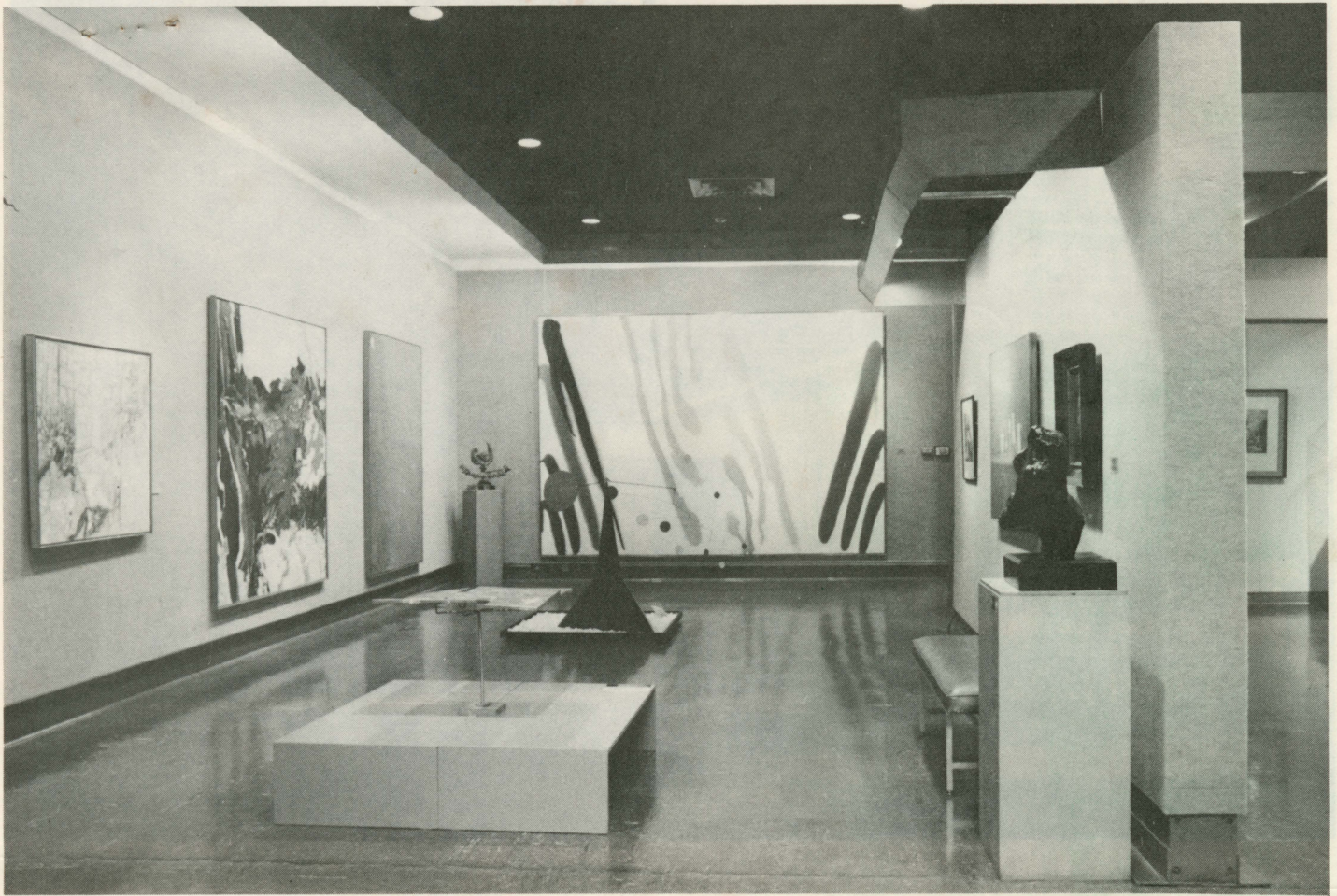
Alumni and the public can visit the museum from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday (Tuesday: noon to 8 p.m.) and 1 to 4 p.m. on weekends. Special guided tours by docents may be arranged [Call (517) 355-7631].

Those who make the tour will discover that Kresge is a microcosm of such famous museums as New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the old Whitney Museum. With just a few steps one can cover five millennia of art history and enjoy virtually every culture, geographic area, medium and technique in the visual arts.

A quick glance into one of the two main galleries will reveal the museum’s intimate eclecticism: *The Vision of St. An-*

thony, by Spanish baroque painter Francisco de Zurbaran flanks Salvador Dali’s gem, *Remorse, or Sphinx Embedded in the Sand*, along with Flemish and Dutch canvases and a color lithograph by Paul Cezanne, while Auguste Rodin’s *Flying Figure* stands in contrast to—just a few feet away—a playful array of Calder mobiles.

Unlike many small museums, Kresge boasts a large set of prints ranging from 15th-century single-leaf German woodcuts to cast-paper multiples. Clay figures from Mexico, heads of Buddha from Siam, 12th-century carvings from India, and watercolors from China accompany early Bronze Age, Egyptian, (Continued on page 20)

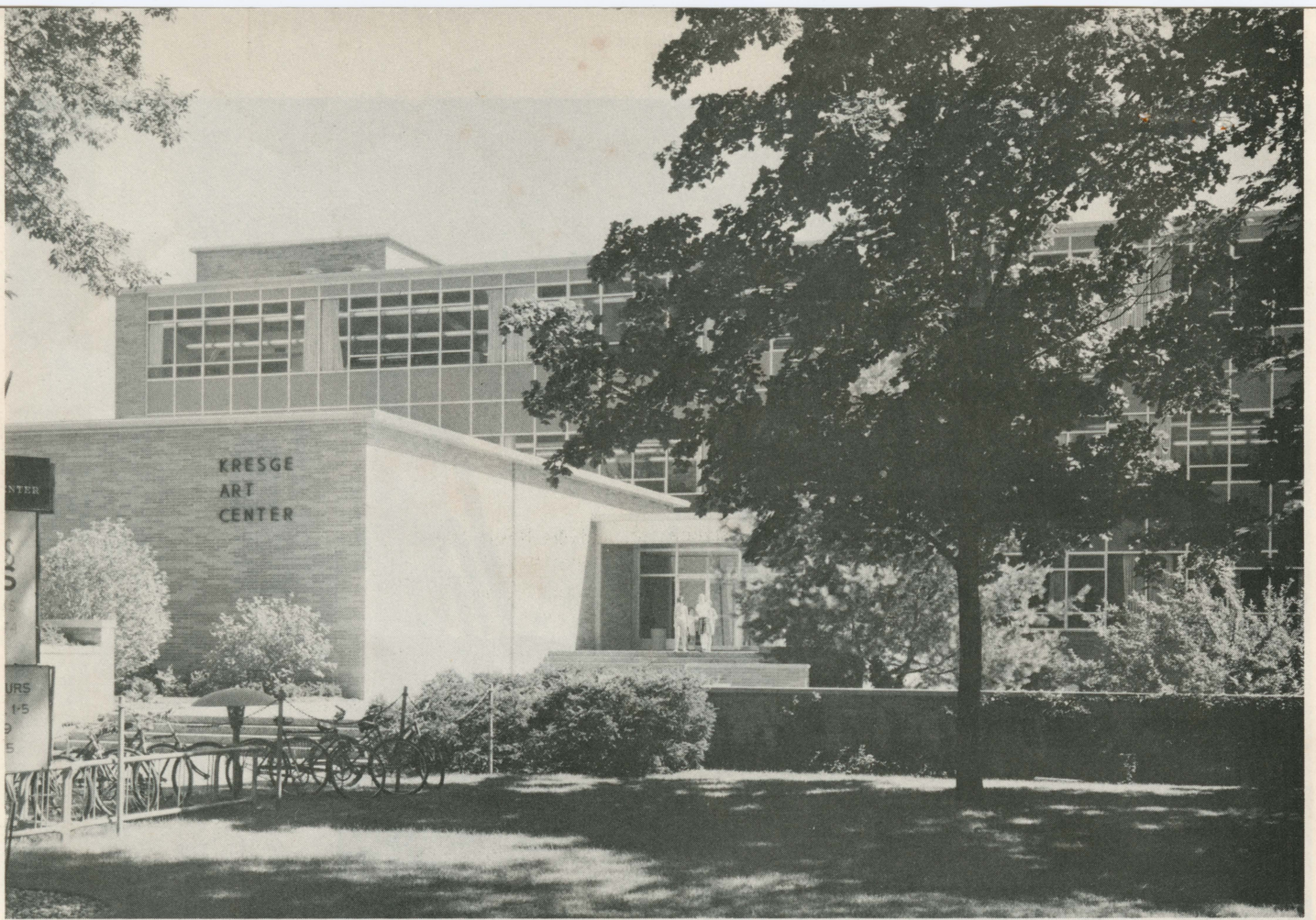


**All passes. Art alone
Enduring stays to us;
The bust outlasts the throne—
The coin, Tiberius.**

—AUSTIN DOBSON
Ars Victrix (1876)



*Aphrodite, a 17th century
bronze by an unknown Italian.*



"It is art that makes life. . . ." —Henry James (1915)

Roman, and ancient Greek art works—including a kylix, which was used to serve wine about 500 B.C. in the Hellenic world.

MANY of the works were acquired with funds donated by Friends of the Kresge Art Museum, established in 1975, and such benefactors as the Ransom Fidelity Foundation of Lansing. Both contributed to the purchase of the triptych.

Other acquisitions came from private gifts, such as the African art collection given by Nancy and G. Mennen Williams, and the imposing Nigerian bronzes donated by Arthur and John Hannah.

"We also have the beginnings of a substantial photographic collection, many given as gifts," reports Ishikawa. "We have been given whole portfolios of photographs from alumni, such as Judith and Irwin Elson of Birmingham, and from friends outside the university community as well."

Ishikawa credits his predecessor Paul Love, director from 1963–1974,

with diversifying the collection, which has taken imagination, determination, and scholarship—as well as the generosity of friends—to augment over the years. But Joe himself has continued that tradition well, even though his path to the museum was not run-of-the-mill.


A native of Los Angeles, Ishikawa hopscotched to East Lansing via curatorships and directorships in Lincoln, NE, Des Moines and Sioux City, IA, and Beloit, WI. If he did not have to climb mountains to reach MSU, it was not for lack of trying.

After majoring in English at UCLA, Ishikawa chose Nebraska over Cornell for graduate study because a UCLA

assistant football coach at the time convinced him there were mountains in Nebraska. What we found upon arrival, of course, were 76,644 square-miles of canvas-like flatness. But he grew to like it, and found some hurdles to leap—such as the desegregation of public swimming pools.

Ishikawa wrestled in college, and he continues to be a bundle of energy, possessing a wry smile and a slightly irreverent sense of humor that has won friends for him and for the museum.

He is especially pleased with the close and valuable relationship that has developed between the museum and the greater Lansing community, as evidenced by the success of a recent fundraiser. The black-tie-optional event in Lansing, sponsored by the Friends of Kresge Art Museum, drew an enormous crowd and became one of the year's big social events.

Given his penchant for topography, one can say that was one of Joseph Ishikawa's career "peaks" since coming to MSU. 



Ed Zabrusky, director of media projects and longtime news bureau director, has been telling the MSU story for 28 years.