



Carl von Marr

# WEST BEND ART MUSEUM



The Lovers



The Adoration Of The Christ Child



The Old Song



Am Chimsee

## An Extraordinary Experience

BY MARCIA SMITH

EXTRAORDINARY IS THE first word that comes to mind. Viewing the collection of Milwaukee artist Carl von Marr for the first time is an extraordinary experience and one that's likely to capture the hearts and minds of even the most mild of art enthusiasts.

The von Marr collection is a Wisconsin treasure housed just 30 miles north of Milwaukee at the West Bend Art Museum. The 21,000 square foot colonial-style building features ten to 14 changing exhibits a year that are surprising in their scope and versatility.

*"The Old Song" is from the Collection of the Margaret Harper Estate; "Am Chimsee" is from the Collection of Bonnie Pick; remaining photos courtesy of the West Bend Art Museum.*

However, the museum's permanent collection is dedicated to early Wisconsin fine artists, with the major focus on the works of von Marr. The museum owns more than 350 Marr pieces that rotate for viewing.

Carl Marr was an amazing talent. Born in Milwaukee in 1858, he was the son of engraver, John Marr, and his wife, Bertha. His earliest drawings, starting at age seven (which are also on view at the museum), show the brilliance of an emerging talent. Marr's gift was appreciated by his parents and after graduation from the German-English Academy in Milwaukee, he was sent to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Weimar, Germany, where he thrived and

became internationally famous. He was knighted by the emperor of Germany and was privileged to use the title "von." During the height of his career, von Marr became the director of the Royal Academy in Munich, a very rare honor for an American.

Recognized as the center piece of the West Bend Art Museum is von Marr's magnum opus entitled "The Flagellants." "It will take your breath away," said museum Director Thomas Lidtke, who has seen it happen time and time again, when people first view the painting.

The canvas, which dominates the upper gallery, measures 13 ft.-10 in. by 25 ft.-8 in. and is one of the largest paintings in the United States. It's an intricate, thought-provoking piece, depicting Europe in the middle ages, when the fear of God and the terror of the Black Plague brought individuals to beat themselves as

atonement for sin.

Six years in the making, von Marr completed the painting in 1889 and received a gold medal for it at the International Exposition in Berlin. It was displayed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. The work was purchased by Mrs. Emil Schandelin and presented to the city of Milwaukee in 1913, it went on display in the Milwaukee Auditorium.

Some sixty years later, the painting's "realism" had lost favor in many circles and in 1976 the masterpiece went on "permanent loan" to West Bend. "Permanent means permanent," said Lidtke, who delights in the fact that today, people from all over the world come to his city to view the great painting.

The West Bend Art Museum owes its very roots to von Marr. In 1961, a descendant of the artist, Mrs. Andrew



Lenore Suder

## WEST BEND ART MUSEUM

Pick Sr., wanted a home for her own collection of von Marr paintings. It was her financial contribution and the donation of a dozen art works that began the fine arts center. The Pick family continues to be very benevolent, according to Lidtke, who added that the museum also receives government and corporation grants to help maintain its ever growing collection.

The museum's secondary collection features leading Wisconsin artists from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries. Lidtke said it's the only collection of its kind and features the works of such artists as Frederick Wilhelm Heine and Franz Rohbeck. Many pieces depict wonderful turn-of-the-century scenes from around the Milwaukee area. Lidtke explained that in January the museum hopes to have the rotating Wisconsin collection permanently housed in a lower gallery.

Another museum attraction for people of all ages is the Walter A. Zinn doll house. The antique house was built by a father for his young daughter, in 1911. It took four generations to complete the interior which includes 700 miniature items, many of them handcrafted and collected from around the world.

The museum has great versatility in its selection and scope of exhibitions. Lidtke pointed to one of their previous changing exhibits that brought in viewers from all over the country called "Vietnam Reflex and Reflections." The museum exhibited the works of people who served in the war—the Americans, their allies and their enemies. The works were showcased in a bunker-like display with six slide projectors shooting images on screens, complete with sound effects of gunfire and '60s hard rock music.

That exhibit "captured the war experience in a way spoken words or photos could not capture," Lidtke explained. "It was so charged, it was incredible, you could feel the tension in the exhibit. Kids going through understood more about the war. We even saw teenage boys weeping in corners—it was that powerful."

Word about the exhibit spread amongst the veterans and they lined up

to see the show. They came from as far away as Texas and Washington D.C. The vets' emotions came flowing when they saw the exhibit, said Lidtke, adding that it triggered an emotional, cathartic release.

Approximately 14,000 people visit the museum annually, and it also serves the community with educational art classes and workshops. The basement houses an extensive art library that includes books on art history, biographies, values and technical subjects, as well as magazines, video tapes and slides. Access and use are free to all visitors. In addition, there are special musical events and artist receptions. Through the efforts of volunteers and staff, the museum maintains a visual arts appreciation program that is presented to area schools each month during the school year.

The museum offers free group tours and also sponsors out-of-state tours to various exhibits. "We have no admission. The museum board insists on free admission to keep it accessible," Lidtke added. The board wants everybody, regardless of income level,

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to be able to experience and appreciate the museum.

The West Bend Art Museum is definitely worth a leisurely ride. Experience the mastery of Carl von Marr and enjoy the current exhibit, "Tales of Enchantment: Legends and Myths." This show features the works of seventy children who explore more than 150 folk and fairy tales from countries all over the world. It ends June 1 and will be followed by the "Selected Works of Mary Bourke," a celebrated Chicago artist whose paintings depict a "surreal, carnival-like interpretation of the world." The Bourke show will run June 7 through July 13.

West Bend Art Museum is located at 300 S. Sixth Avenue, phone (414) 334-9638. It's open Wednesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Sunday 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. **EY**

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