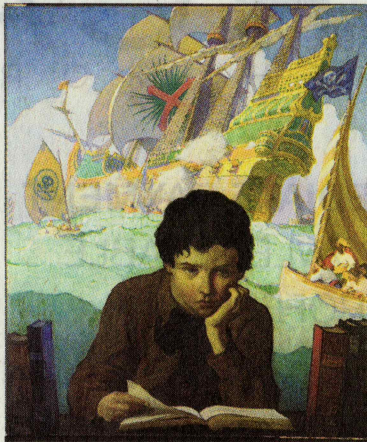


“The Story-book,” an oil on canvas from around 1921 by N.C. Wyeth (1882-1945), is among the impressive artworks in George Lucas’ collection, which he hopes to display at Treasure Island.



Lucas Museum of Narrative Art

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Lucas’ works hint at great museum

Just inside the gate of the George Lucas estate in San Anselmo is a small guest house, a pristine reproduction of a Craftsman bungalow. In its illusionistic accuracy and warm oaken glow, it seems the perfect metaphor for a way of seeing the world — one to which many of us were introduced in Lucas’ breakout

► **Matier & Ross:** Big names push for museum at Treasure Island instead of Los Angeles. **C1**

movie, “American Graffiti.”

Leaning against the walls and sprawled on tables is a selection of 55 original drawings and paintings, as well as eight thick notebooks containing more than 700 photo-

graphic reproductions of works in Lucas’ art collection. All are slated to become part of the first holdings — the Seed Collection — of the long-planned Lucas Museum of Narrative Art.

Guiding me through the images, which were brought here just for our meeting, is

Desmarais continues on A14

FROM THE COVER

Peek at Lucas art collection hints at great museum

Desmarais from page A1

Don Bacigalupi, the museum's founding president and a much-credentialed art historian and museum director. Bacigalupi says the museum also will have its pick of the rest of Lucas' collection — about 10,000 paintings and works on paper and 30,000 film-related objects — that the renowned filmmaker has assembled over a period of 40 years, and is still growing.

It seems nearly everyone has an opinion about the collection of the Lucas Museum, which made Bacigalupi its first professional staff member last year. "It's a 'Star Wars' museum," some have speculated. "It's a Hollywood memorabilia museum." On Twitter, Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight called it "George Lucas' planned Treacle Museum." But who has actually seen the collection? Only a few people, says Bacigalupi — and no journalist. Until now.

Having had the first opportunity to evaluate the collection, I am glad to say it is none of those things. In fact, it is the core of what could become a great museum.

Lucas has been attempting to build his eponymous museum since at least 2010, with widely publicized false starts at San Francisco's Crissy Field and, later, on a lakefront site in Chicago. In June, he canceled the Chicago plan; his team is once again in discussions for a San Francisco site, this time on Treasure Island. They are also talking with officials in Los Angeles.

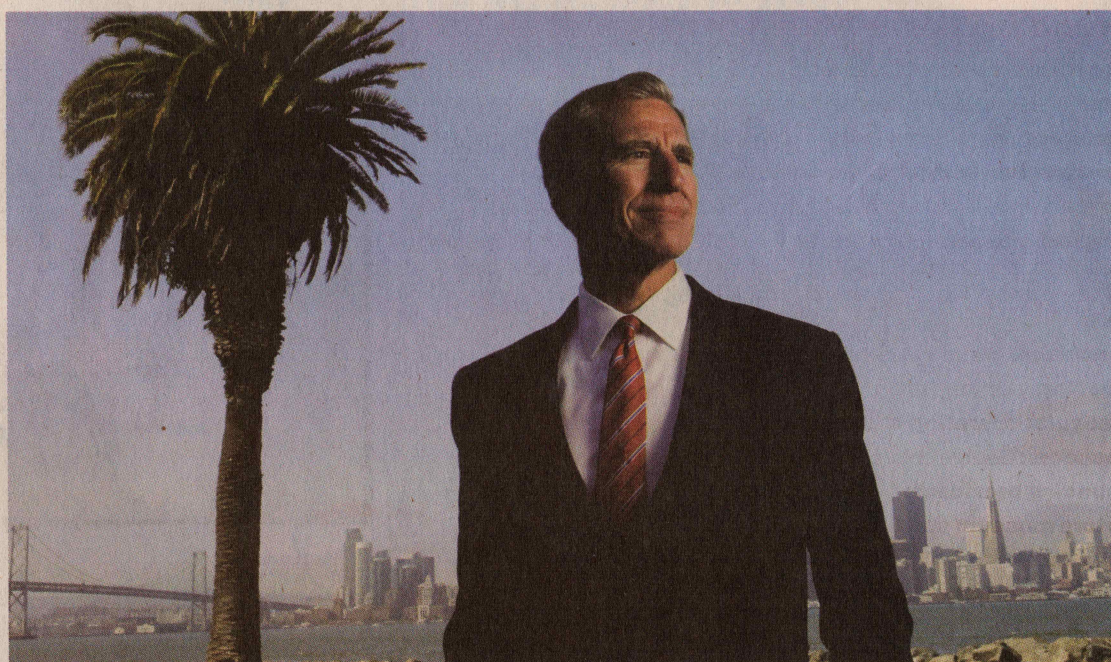
The San Francisco bid is

likely to go better this time. A recent Treasure Island master plan designates the site for a cultural use. It has broad backing: Key members of the Board of Supervisors and Mayor Ed Lee support it. The museum's architectural design promises to be much improved over the Crissy Field proposal. (Chronicle architecture critic John King, who derided the first try, says a building by the new architect, Ma Yansong, "could be provocative fun.")

But there's another crucial element that bodes success: a much greater attention to communicating the cultural, social and historic value of the collection as an artifact and an unparalleled resource. This time, it's about the art.

Key decisions made over the past year began with a change of name, from the confusing Cultural Arts Museum to the more descriptive Museum of Narrative Art. The project has acquired some of the significant trappings of any serious museum, with an informative website and a qualified board that includes the founder and prominent educators, museum professionals and business executives. In hiring Bacigalupi, the museum landed a strategic thinker about art and audience and an articulate spokesman for the institution's mission and *raison d'être*. He will soon be joined by a new director of curatorial strategies and a director of film strategies.

Bacigalupi, a colleague when I was a museum director, has a doctorate in art history and has had a distinguished career as the leader of some classic museums (San Diego Museum of Art, Toledo Museum of Art).



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Don Bacigalupi, founding president of the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, says the museum will have its pick of 10,000 paintings and works on paper and 30,000 film-related objects.

He also worked with the strong-minded, fabulously wealthy Alice Walton to develop and build the widely praised Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., which opened in 2011.

He calls the work he did with Walton and is now pursuing with Lucas — and a new central player, Mellody Hobson, whom Lucas married in 2013 — “the act of translating the vision ... from a founder to a viable institution that can actually work.”

All the discussion of the proposed museum's architecture and siting has been well placed, but it is beside the point if it lacks a solid institutional idea at its core. Bacigalupi grants that the first building designs started from the outside. “It was a little cart-before-the-horse,” he allows.

So, what is the Lucas' vision? Will it further enhance the Bay Area's already extraordinary cultural assets? And do we really need such an institution?

I delved into the collection records over two half-day visits, and spent additional hours over several days in discussion with the new president about

what is in place and what is planned. I came away believing that no other city in the United States would be a better setting, intellectually and artistically, for the Lucas Museum.

“Narrative art is, simply stated, visual art that tells a story,” Bacigalupi says. “It manifests itself in every kind of medium, in every culture, in every form that you can imagine.”

That's clear enough in concept, but making a museum collection out of it would be a daunting challenge. It would start with cave drawings and go on from there, encompassing all but the abstract and the purely symbolic. But there is a more focused idea: a mission, really, to provide an alternative to the current institutional view of what is worthy of preservation and study as art. In terms of the Bay Area, the Lucas Museum would be a critical enhancement of the work of our many existing museums and public galleries, and not at all duplicative.

“The museum world has often ignored ... some of the most compelling narrative art

forms,” Bacigalupi argues. “So they tend to be relegated to the status of low art, or popular art or media art — all the binaries that we set up with ‘high’ and ‘low,’ and ‘popular’ and ‘fine.’”

In the 20th century, he says, “the most popular arena for storytelling in visual form has been things like film and illustration and comics and animation. ... Instead of us getting into that debate about what is art and what isn't art, the museum really doesn't pay attention to that capital ‘A’ Art, and instead looks for this through line, this continuity in whatever form, whatever context, whatever medium ... for this very basic human impulse: to tell stories.”

There has long been academic scholarship on popular art forms, particularly film, but serious consideration in museums has been slower to develop. In this country, three very credible institutions have taken on aspects of the task — the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pa., near the longtime home of the Wyeth family; the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Mass.; and the Wolfsonian, a museum of design and propa-

Proposed Lucas Museum of Narrative Art

A nonprofit museum, governed by a board of directors

Site: Treasure Island, Avenue of the Palms and California Avenue

Architect: Ma Yansong, MAD Architects, Beijing

Construction budget: approximately \$740 million

Size: approximately 300,000 square feet

Program spaces: approximately 100,000 square feet of exhibition galleries (collections, 65,000 square feet; temporary exhibitions, 30,000 square feet.); several cinema theaters; education center; library

Amenities: two restaurants; museum store; observation deck

Opening: approximately 3½ years after groundbreaking

Inaugural operating endowment: \$400 million

Founders: George Lucas and Mellody Hobson

Founding president: Don Bacigalupi

Future museum staffing: 300-plus

Seed Collection gifts (as of August):

Two-dimensional works, including paintings, illustration, comic art, children's book illustrations: approximately 2,900

Arts of Filmmaking (including costume designs and costumes, storyboard drawings, set paintings, etc.) from films such as "The Wizard of Oz," "Casablanca," "The Ten Commandments" and "Star Wars": approximately 2,000

Works by selected individual artists: Norman Rockwell (147 works); Maxfield Parrish (41 works); N.C. Wyeth (63 works)

Educational programs: curriculum-based school tours; interactive gallery experiences; workshops and classes for children, adults and pre-professionals; daily film screenings

ganda at Florida International University in Miami.

But none of those are as broad-based in mission as the intended Lucas Museum, or have the resources — Lucas plans to spend more than \$1 billion — it can bring to the effort. Nor are they embedded in the broader art museum context San Francisco provides.

To describe even part of the Lucas Seed Collection is to make a very long list.

There's a nascent photography collection that, frankly, needs work. In the context of a collection otherwise boasting unique and rare materials, reprinted classics and posthumous prints are out of place.

There is a vast Arts of Filmmaking portion that would require its own catalog, including costume designs and costumes, storyboard drawings, set paintings and objects from such films as "The Wizard of Oz," "Casablanca," "The Ten Commandments" and

"Star Wars." Though movies will be shown at the museum regularly, film itself will not enter the collection; these objects have been assembled because they are invaluable in studying the creation of narrative — telling the story of story-making.

As significant as the film-related objects may be, I looked most closely at materials like original watercolor, pen and ink, and painted illustrations from the children's books that were our (and our parents' and grandparents') first exposure to literature. An 1864 Sir John Tenniel drawing from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"; classic works by Kate Greenaway (1846-1901) and Beatrix Potter (1866-1943); Arthur Rackham's jewel-like, anthropomorphic depictions of animal life at the turn of the last century; Jean de Brunhoff's original "Babar" drawings from the 1930s.

The value of these materials goes beyond their rarity as



Lucas Museum of Narrative Art

"Call the Doctor," an oil on canvas from around 1889 by Fred Eric Remington (1861-1909), is part of the Lucas collection.

objects. Even — no, especially — with all their outmoded preconceptions and prejudices, they are the irreplaceable source of our view, literally, of the world. To study them for the beliefs that artists and publishers meant to inculcate in us is to understand ourselves more deeply.

And then there are the social documents that were coded in other ways, epitomized by the images of social harmony and responsibility for which Norman Rockwell became so famous and beloved. Lucas' Rockwell holding of 147 works continues to grow. It includes his auction-record-setting 2013 acquisition of the artist's most important painting, "Saying Grace" (1951), a formerly anonymous purchase made public last week. This work, in terms of emotional impact, is among the most significant of all magazine cover illustrations.

The Lucas Museum collection is a study in contrasts. The society that embraced the Saturday Evening Post illustrator's moralism emerged, confoundingly, from an age that loved Maxfield Parrish's worldly, even libertine portrayal of the way things are, or might be. Parrish is represented by 41 original works.

There are, of course, many works by artists embraced by mainstream institutions. A

series of 23 drawings by Jacob Lawrence related to "Aesop's Fables" (1969) is a case in point. The museum is actively collecting, its perspective broadened by Hobson, who, even before she joined the board, was building a personal collection of contemporary art with an emphasis on African American artists. Recently added are prints by Kara Walker and a large painting by Keith Haring, two artists whose narrative acuity is indisputable. They join works by a broad range of artists from Ingres to Frida Kahlo to Rirkrit Tiravanija.

The boy in me has a nostalgic connection to the paintings (by at least six different illustrators) for Mad magazine covers, and the drawings for comic characters like Uncle Scrooge by Carl Barks (1901-2000), Little Lulu by Marge Buell (1904-1993) and, best of all, Al Capp's (1909-1979) Li'l Abner. There are superheroes, from Captain America to Batman, not to mention newspaper strip mockups for Little Orphan Annie, Dick Tracy, Pogo, Peanuts, Doonesbury and many others. And drawings for animated films: "Dumbo," "Sleeping Beauty," "Bambi," "Cinderella," "Peter Pan," "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

It is a seemingly inexhaustible stockpile of invention and

fantasy. But, as surrealist compositions of the highest order, nothing approaches the visual and conceptual heights of Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo" reveries and George Herriman's "Krazy Kat" antics. The wealth of detail in these early-20th century graphic short stories required oversize sheets, 2 feet high and almost as wide.

The majesty of the Bible itself is encompassed by an extraordinary recent acquisition, and it may be the best bridge to understanding the potential value of the Lucas Museum.

Robert Crumb of Zap Comix fame undertook a five-year effort to hand-letter and draw all 50 chapters of the Book of Genesis, "a text so great and so strange," he says, that he tells the story straight. Exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2009, the year it was completed, the monumental series was most recently presented in a major exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum, alongside the work of five other "graphic masters": Dürer, Rembrandt, Hogarth, Goya and Picasso.

Exhibition curator Chiyo Ishikawa, the Seattle museum's deputy director for art, said she had seen the Crumb piece in Venice and never doubted its inclusion among works by some of the greatest artists through history. The reactions of visitors, she said, happily confirmed that.

"We had the printmaking audience and also the comics audience," she said. Some came only to see R. Crumb, bypassing the earlier work, and others sped up at the end, but, for the most part, people accepted the history for the continuum it is.

And then there was the group of the hippest narrative artists — zine producers invited to a tailored event — who all said, "We just can't believe we're here."

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