

State Art Society ^[1]

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by Wiley J. Williams, 2006

See also: [North Carolina Museum of Art](#)^[2].

The North Carolina State Art Society, precursor to the [North Carolina Museum of Art](#)^[3], began with the work of the [North Carolina Literary and Historical Association](#)^[4], a private organization founded by citizens committed to the state's cultural heritage. In 1924 a fine arts society was organized as a branch of the Literary and Historical Association. *Progressive Farmer*^[5] editor Clarence Poe chaired the society's executive committee, with publisher John F. Blair as founding president. In 1925 the society sponsored an art exhibition, and it held its first annual meeting a year later. In 1927 Blair persuaded Robert F. Phifer, a prominent New York industrialist and North Carolina native, to bequeath a gift of his private art collection and a substantial monetary endowment. The same year, the society was chartered by the state as the North Carolina State Art Society, Inc. In 1929 the legislature passed a law providing for a board of directors, but included no provision for state financial support.

The State Art Society received additional support in 1935, when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) designated Raleigh to receive funding through the Federal Art Project and to establish the first Federal Art Center in the nation. In 1939 the [General Assembly](#)^[6] provided the society with a state art gallery and office space in the former Supreme Court Building. Both the gallery and the art center continued until 1943 under the joint sponsorship of the society and the WPA. With federal aid about to end, the legislature of 1943 authorized the governor and the council of state to grant the society an annual allotment from the state's contingency and emergency fund. In the same year, Governor [J. Melville Broughton](#)^[7] assembled a citizen's committee to discuss establishing a permanent state art gallery.

In 1947 committee member [Robert Lee Humber](#)^[8] persuaded businessman and philanthropist Samuel H. Kress of New York to donate \$1 million to North Carolina for the purchase of art, contingent upon the state's commitment of an equal amount. In April 1951 Governor [W. Kerr Scott](#)^[9] praised the 1947 appropriation as an investment in visual education. The General Assembly voted to release the appropriation and the Kress Foundation confirmed its agreement. Later Governor Scott established the State Art Commission, provided for under the 1947 law. The commission, working in consultation with W. R. Valentiner, a noted art scholar, identified for purchase nearly 200 works of artists from American, British, French, Spanish, Flemish, and Dutch schools.

The 1953 General Assembly authorized conversion of the former State Highway Building into a museum and appropriated funds for its renovation, operation, and maintenance and for staff salaries. The North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) opened in April 1956. In 1960 the Kress Foundation released to the museum 71 works of art, the foundation's largest gift to any regional museum and second only to its gift to the National Gallery of Art.

The General Assembly of 1961 formally established the NCMA as a state institution and agency. Following the transfer of governance to the NCMA, the Art Society continued to promote the public's appreciation of art. Through memberships, private gifts, memorial funds, and bequests, the society also acquired works of art for the NCMA.

By the Executive Organization Act of 1971, the State Art Society and the NCMA were transferred to the Department of Art, Culture, and History, renamed by the Executive Organization Act of 1973 as the [Department of Cultural Resources](#)^[10]. In 1977 the General Assembly formally amended the statutes relating to the Art Society by deleting "State" from its official title. The revised law recognized the society's long-standing role as a membership arm of the NCMA and as a means for citizens to support the NCMA through individual or corporate memberships and participation in the society's diverse programs. Groundbreaking ceremonies for a new art museum were conducted in September 1977, a dedication was given in May of 1981, and a grand opening for the public was held in April 1983.

Reference:

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"An act to place the North Carolina State Art Society, Incorporated, under the patronage and control of the State, to make provision for the exhibit of works of art owned or controlled by it, and for other purposes." *Public laws and resolutions passed by the General Assembly at its session of 1929* Raleigh :Mitchell Print. Co. 1929. p.370-372. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/public-laws-and-resolutions-passed-by-the->

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