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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

ALICE'S WONDERLAND

A Walmart heiress builds a museum in the Ozarks.

BY REBECCA MEAD

On the morning of December 1, 2004, Sotheby's offered at auction one of the last great private troves of American art. Daniel Fraad, who died in 1987, made his fortune supplying fuel to airlines; in the late forties, he and his wife, Rita, began amassing American paintings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including works by Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and Edward Hopper. When the Fraads started buying, their taste was not especially fashionable—French art was more in vogue—but by the time of Rita Fraad's death, in May, 2004, American art was highly sought after, and the seventy-eight works on the block at Sotheby's were estimated to be worth between thirty million and forty-five million dollars.

The sale got under way at a quarter past ten, and the first lot, a portrait by the naturalist painter Gari Melchers, sold to a telephone bidder for more than nine hundred thousand dollars, seven times what was expected. The sixth lot, "The Little White House," a 1919 landscape by Willard Metcalf, sold for just over a million dollars—nearly three times its estimate, and also to a buyer on the phone. As a reporter for *Maine Antique Digest* noted, "People began to wonder: with almost every collector one could think of present in the room, who the heck could be on the phone?"

One of the phone bidders that day was a collector whose activities had thus far gone largely unnoticed by the art world: Alice Walton, the daughter of Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, who died in 1992. The youngest of Walton's four children, Alice, who was born in 1949 and grew up in Bentonville, Arkansas, was a member of the richest family in America. The Waltons were worth some ninety billion dollars at the time—as much as the fortunes of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett combined. Alice had started buying art in the seventies, mostly watercolors by American artists, but by the late nineties she had become a more serious collector; she hung the works on the walls of her ranch outside of Fort Worth, where she raised, bred, and rode cutting horses, which are trained to work with cattle. In fact, as the auction got under way in New York, Walton was at the Will Rogers Coliseum, in Fort Worth, preparing to compete in the first qualifying round of the National Cutting Horse Association Futurity.

Crystal Bridges, Alice Walton's new art museum

So it was from the saddle of a three-year-old gelding named IC Lad that Walton successfully bid for several lots from the Fraad collection: "Spring," a gorgeous watercolor of a rural scene, by Winslow Homer; "A French Music Hall," by Everett Shinn, the Ashcan School artist; and "The Studio," by George Bellows, which depicts the artist at work with his children playing at his feet. Collectively,

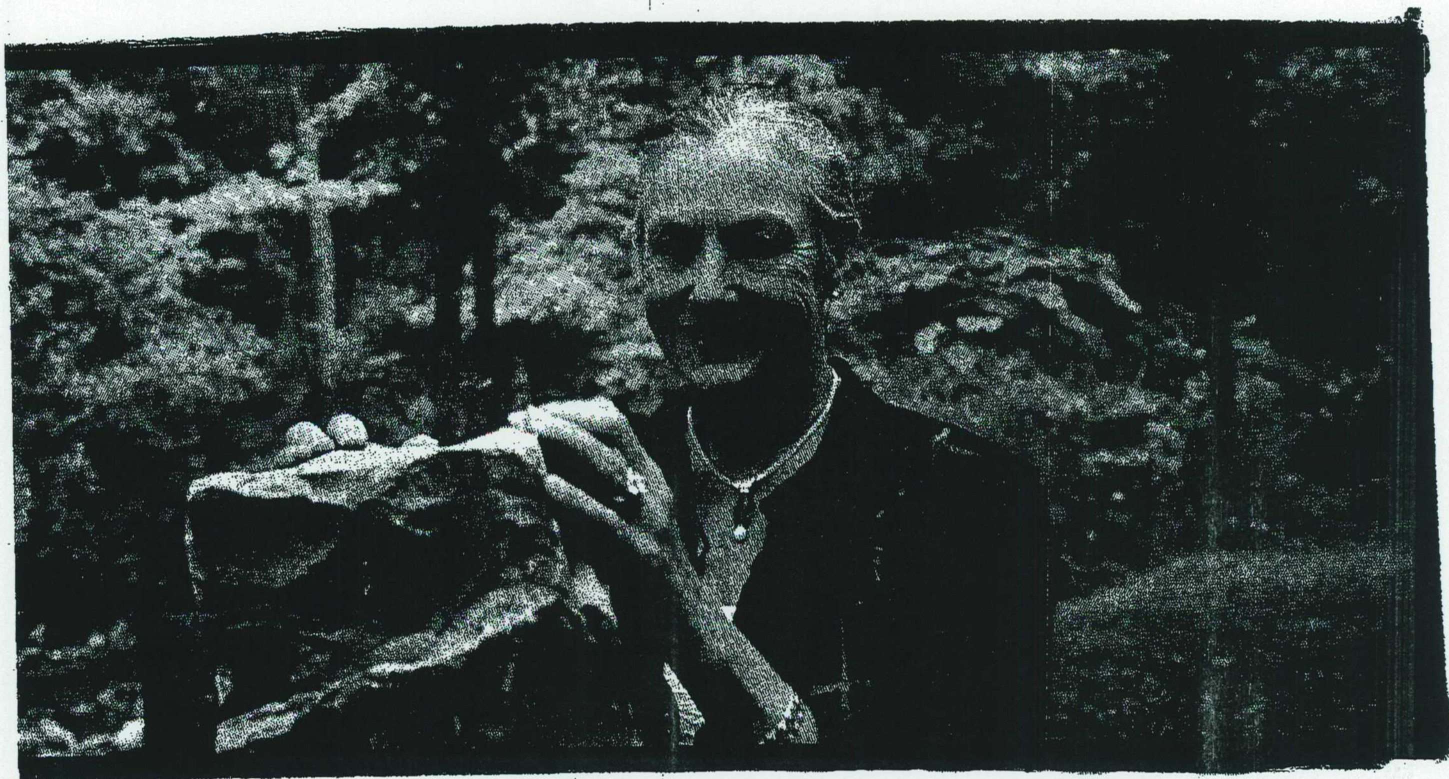
these works cost Walton more than twelve million dollars. She competed with IC Lad before lunchtime—they were in the third round, fourth horse—then returned to making bids during the afternoon session at Sotheby's. From the collection of Pierre Bergé, the co-founder of Yves Saint Laurent, she bought several notable works, including "The Indian and the Lily"—an exquisite rendering of a muscular Native American, by George de Forest Brush—and "October Interior," a sunny, celadon-hued painting of a domestic scene, by Fairfield Porter.

By the end of the day, Walton had spent more than twenty million dollars on art. She had also prevailed at the Will Rogers Coliseum, placing sixty-second out of three hundred and seventy-four entrants, which allowed her to advance to the next round. Indeed, she made it all the way to the finals, which took place on December 10th. Walton came in nineteenth out of twenty riders—not a spectacular result but one that came with a prize of nearly thirteen thousand dollars.

"There is a lot that horses and art share in common," Walton told me one morning not long ago, when I visited her in Bentonville, which is in the Ozarks, near the Missouri border, and is where Walmart has its headquarters. "I have found that most horse people are art lovers, and vice versa," she went on. "I think it is more of an intuitive, circular kind of personality, for starters. And, as I say of horses, the secret to breeding great horses is the three 'B's: bones, brains, and balance. If you look at art, it shares some of the same qualities."

Walton does not have the expensively curated look of a Park Avenue matron: her face is tanned and weather-beaten, and shows no signs of having been submitted to the surgeon's knife. She wears her steel-gray hair pulled back in a straggly bun. For a very rich person, she lives relatively modestly: the house on her ranch in Texas, where she spends most of her time, is a simple one-story affair, apart from the masterpieces that have hung on its walls; when guests visit, she cooks dinner herself, though she has help to do the cleaning up. She speaks with a broad Arkansas accent—Bill Clinton at his most down home—and when she talks about her museum project she avoids loftiness. "One of the great responsibilities that I have is to manage my assets wisely, so that they create value," she told me. "I know the price of lettuce. You need to understand price and value. You buy the best lettuce you can at the best price you can."

As Walton spoke, we were in the boardroom of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, which is being built in Bentonville to house Walton's acquisitions in perpetuity. After four years of construction, Crystal Bridges is scheduled to open in November. Looking out of floor-to-ceiling windows, we could see that a large pit had been dug in the red soil several stories below us. Half a dozen cranes and other pieces of heavy machinery were active at the site, transporting hardware and pumping water from the pit—Bentonville had recently suffered almost two straight weeks of rain. Dozens of construction workers had been toiling since dawn. The pit was flanked by two lozenge-shaped bridge structures, each with a convex ribbed roof, which museum employees liken to the shell of an armadillo. One armadillo was to house two galleries; that morning, glass panels were being carefully inserted into the structure. The other armadillo was to be a restaurant. Eventually, the area between them would be a reflecting pond, filled with creek water. On the far end of the pit was another gallery space, a curvilinear concrete structure with a concave roof. In the end, eight pavilions, made from concrete and inlaid with wood, would be linked by bridges and



in Bentonville, Arkansas, already has an endowment four times larger than that of the Whitney Museum. Photograph by Sylvia Plachy.

walkways that offered visitors views of the trees and the water—breathing spaces from looking at art. The site was wedged in a tight ravine, and hemmed in by dense woodland: a two-hundred-thousand-square-foot cultural palace-to-be, nestled beneath the tree line. This would not be a triumphal acropolis, like the Getty Center, in Los Angeles. Crystal Bridges aimed to complement its natural setting, rather than crown it.

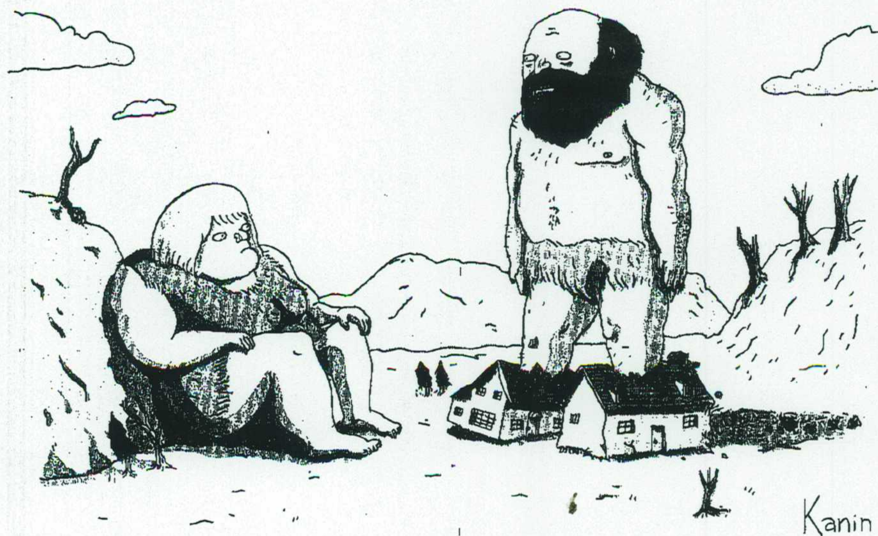
The paintings that Walton bought at Sotheby's in 2004 will be among those on the walls at Crystal Bridges, which will present a survey of American art from the Colonial period to the present. Connoisseurs who know some of what Walton has acquired say that it will be one of the best collections of American art in a museum. "It will transform our field," Eric Widing, who heads the American Art Department at Christie's, says. Walton has been a valued customer there, too: the day after the Fraad sale, she paid more than seven hundred thousand dollars for a Sargent drawing of his teacher Carolus-Duran. Widing told me, "Once, when I was in the saleroom, on the phone with Alice bidding, I heard something in the background and I said, 'Are you on a *horse*?,' and she said, 'Yes.' I said, 'That's the first time I've sold a painting to someone on a horse,' and she said, 'No, it isn't.' "

Walton's ambition to found a major museum of American art first came to public attention in the spring of 2005, when she paid the New York Public Library a reported thirty-five million dollars for "Kindred Spirits," a masterpiece of the Hudson River School, by Asher B. Durand. The library's decision to deaccession the work was controversial. Durand's painting commemorates the friendship between Thomas Cole, the landscape painter, and William Cullen Bryant, the nature poet, depicting them standing on a rocky promontory that overlooks an idealized Catskills vista. In the *Times*, Michael Kimmelman compared the sale to the destruction of Penn Station.

At the time, Walton was tied with her mother, Helen, for the title of richest woman in the world. Each had a fortune of eighteen billion dollars. (Helen died in 2007.) Critics characterized Alice as an exorbitantly wealthy heiress whose aim was to snap up icons and display them as kitschy Americana: Wal-Art. And the Waltons' retail empire—which sold ever-cheaper goods to Americans by outsourcing jobs to labor markets overseas, by forcing the closure of small stores in downtowns across the country, thanks to its vast hypermarkets—was denounced as antithetical to the values underlying the art that Walton was acquiring. "Durand's painting is a touchstone for a set of American ideals that Walmart has been savaging," Rebecca Solnit wrote, in the *Nation*. "Crystal Bridges Museum seems like a false front for Walmart, a made-in-America handicrafted artifact of idealism for a corporation that is none of the above." Just as bad, some of Walton's critics said, the art works were being spirited off to Bentonville, a town of twenty-eight thousand people whose main cultural attraction was the Walmart Visitor Center.

Walton, whose fortune now stands at twenty-one billion dollars, has become a powerful force in the art marketplace. In 2005, the American Jewish Historical Society commissioned Sotheby's to find buyers for half a dozen paintings that it owned, all eighteenth-century portraits of members of a merchant family, the Levy-Franks. Walton, who was at Sotheby's on other business, spotted them and bought the series—one of the finest collections of Colonial portraiture in existence. Two years later, Walton, in collaboration with the National Gallery, struck a sixty-eight-million-dollar deal with Thomas Jefferson University, in Philadelphia, to buy the Thomas Eakins masterpiece "The Gross Clinic," which depicts Samuel D. Gross, a surgical professor, removing a tumor from a man's leg. Under the arrangement, Crystal Bridges and the National Gallery would share the painting. "The Gross Clinic" is considered one of Philadelphia's treasures, and the art establishment there was appalled. Working together, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts raised sufficient funds to thwart Walton's plan, in part by selling Eakins works of their own. "We were obviously disappointed," she told me. "You don't get everything you want." She disputes the notion that she has loosened from the walls of venerable institutions paintings that otherwise would have hung there securely. "I don't think our presence in the marketplace has made a difference in anything—these institutions were going to sell because they needed the money," she said, briskly. "They are there to fulfill a mission, and that is not to keep 'Kindred Spirits' two stories up, in a narrow hallway."

Over time, Walton has earned the respect of the museum establishment, although only those closest to her know the full extent of Crystal Bridges' collection: just sixty-six purchases have been announced, a tenth of what has been acquired. Philippe de Montebello, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum, told me, "I suspect it is going to be a substantial and fine collection of



"Bad news—the cost of shoes is going back up."

American art." (The Met and the National Gallery made a combined offer for "Kindred Spirits," but Walton bested them.) The director of Crystal Bridges, Don Bacigalupi, is highly regarded for the work he did as the director of the Toledo Museum of Art, in Ohio, where he oversaw the successful construction of a new building; and his effort to exchange works with the Louvre, among other institutions, has allayed fears that Crystal Bridges' collection will be simplemindedly nationalistic.

Art-world visitors to Bentonville have been impressed by the museum's attempts to draw in the regional community. Amy Cappellazzo, the chairman for contemporary art at Christie's, recently gave a talk at a Bentonville school that Walton and her brothers had attended. "It was a full house on a Sunday—and Sunday in Bentonville is all about church," Cappellazzo told me. "People asked very intelligent questions, and there was this incredible setup of lemonade and homemade cookies."

Of course, it's hard to withhold respect from such a powerful institution: the Walton Family Foundation recently gave eight hundred million dollars to Crystal Bridges, whose endowment is now four times larger than that of the Whitney Museum. Graham Beal, the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, which has struggled financially as the city has declined, says of Walton, "Normally, one would say she doesn't have a chance of establishing a new museum of this scale, but with the resources she has—it's enormous."

The goal is to make Crystal Bridges a necessary site of pilgrimage for art enthusiasts. "Like it or not, Alice envisions this as a destination point," John Wilmerding, a Princeton art scholar who is on the museum's board, says. Whether it will have the popular appeal of, say, the Guggenheim Bilbao remains a question. A boutique hotel is scheduled to open in Bentonville in late 2012, but construction has yet to begin, and in the meantime the town offers the kind of hospitality-chain establishments guaranteed to dismay bicoastal types. It has a thoughtfully renovated nineteenth-century town square equipped with a bike-rental store and a jewelry shop, but its dining options are limited. There was considerable excitement among recent Crystal Bridges transplants when it was rumored that a new restaurant called Tuscan Trotter was opening downtown; expectations had to be revised when storefront signs announced the grand opening of a place called Tusk & Trotter.

About a decade ago, Walmart began asking its venders to establish satellite offices in Bentonville, and unsightly office parks and gated subdivisions with names such as Liberty Bell have swiftly replaced farmland. Bentonville has become an odd hybrid—a diminutive country town with suburbs on a scale befitting Dallas. The sprawl is at odds with Crystal Bridges' celebration of nature. Even Walton wishes that Bentonville had stronger zoning laws, but she is proud that the town is thriving and dismisses the argument that Walmart has marred the American landscape. "I haven't ever heard of anything that Walmart *hasn't* been blamed for," she told me, laughing. "I don't think Walmart causes anything. The question is, does a merchant best figure out how they can best serve their customers? Look at downtown Bentonville—it's a very healthy downtown. It's always been very healthy, and we've always had a Walmart."

The Bentonville region is growing rapidly: with a population of nearly half a million, it is the twelfth-fastest-growing metropolitan area in the nation, according to recent census estimates. Bob McCaslin, the mayor of Bentonville, says that, five years from now, he can see "a really, really pretty Santa Fe-type city, except a lot nicer place to live—prettier topography, and easier to get to."

Walton bought her first work of art when she was about ten years old. It was a reproduction of Picasso's "Blue Nude," and she got it from the first store that her father owned, a franchise of the Ben Franklin dime-store chain. "I saved my twenty-five-cents-a-week allowance—it was about two dollars, I think," she told me early one chilly spring morning, as we tramped along the Crystal Bridges Trail, one of seven paths that are being laid through the woods surrounding the museum. She was wearing black pants, a black cashmere sweater, and a marled gray wool jacket under a fluorescent-yellow windbreaker that was embroidered with her name and that of Crystal Bridges. She had a brown North Face fleece cap pulled over her ears, fleece gloves, and a pair of slip-on shoes. "I've never been much of a shopper—maybe it's my retail background," she told me. "Maybe I've been in one too many stores. I'd rather be outside. Shopping for clothes is not one of my favorite things."

Sam Walton began his retail career in the nineteen-forties, when he became a management trainee at a J. C. Penney in Iowa. He moved to Newport, Arkansas, and opened the Ben Franklin store. In 1950, determined to build his own business, he opened Walton's Five-and-Dime, in Bentonville, which now houses the Walmart Visitor Center. Artifacts on display include Helen Walton's wedding dress and Sam Walton's 1979 Ford F-150 pickup truck. The family lived in a house designed by Fay Jones, a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright; one wing of the low-slung structure formed a bridge over a stream. The house, which is still used for family functions, is adjacent to the Crystal Bridges site. At the time, the town had a population of twenty-nine hundred. "I grew up riding my horse here," Alice Walton told me as we walked the trail. "We all hiked and followed the creek bed. It was a beautiful, rural, American childhood."

Walton did not often go to museums. The nearest one, the Gilcrease Museum, a collection of Western American art, is in Tulsa, Oklahoma, two hours away. But she and her mother painted watercolors on camping trips; it is no accident, she says, that she started her collection with works in that medium. John Wilmerding told me, "I was quite startled when I first made a visit to her home in Texas. In the bedroom there were watercolors by Childe Hassam and Sargent and Homer, and Alice Walton, and they were not embarrassing."

After graduating from Trinity College in San Antonio, in 1971, Walton entered the family business, but she did

only a brief stint, as a buyer of children's clothes. "They are still trying to get rid of the children's dresses I bought, and that was a while back," she said. "I had fun, but it wasn't my interest." Sam Walton, in his 1992 autobiography, "Made in America," said of Alice, "She's the most like me—a maverick—but even more volatile than I am." After leaving Walmart, she became an equity analyst, and started raising horses. Like her siblings, she sought to avoid the publicity that can come with great wealth. She maintained a low profile even after a traffic accident in 1989, in which she hit and killed a pedestrian. (No charges were filed.) "You don't get over something like that—it's a tragedy," she told me, her eyes filling with tears. "It never leaves you. It becomes a part of who you are."

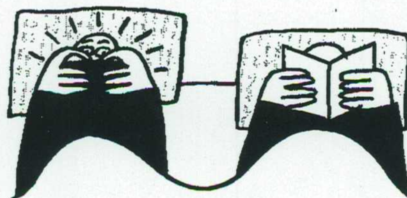
Walton ramped up her civic efforts, becoming the first president of the Northwest Arkansas Council, a nonprofit development group that included business leaders such as John Tyson, the poultry magnate. (Tyson is on the board of Crystal Bridges.) In 1991, largely owing to Walton's efforts, Congress approved funding for the construction of a four-lane highway connecting Bentonville with Oklahoma City, to the west, and with Little Rock, to the east. (On a map the highway looks like a loose thread.) She also spearheaded the construction of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport, which opened in 1998. Direct service from New York City is on a small American Eagle jet, which has the familiarity of a commuter-train car, with frequent fliers comparing their urban diversions.

By the early aughts, Walton had begun to contemplate building an ambitious art collection and a museum. "Collecting has been such a joy, and such an important part of my life in terms of seeing art, and loving it," she told me. "And I was absolutely fascinated by the view of American history that art gave me. It was much more real to me, and much more closely tied to the political and social context of the country, and the changes, when I saw it through the eyes of the artists." About ten years ago, she brought the idea of a museum to her siblings and the Walton Family Foundation. "They said, 'What?' " she told me. Jim Walton, the second-oldest brother, who has been very involved with investment in Bentonville, says, "Our initial reaction was to ask a lot of questions and do a little head scratching. As with most visionary ideas, we wanted not only to understand the concept but to look at the practical considerations."

One practical consideration was resolved in 2005, when the Arkansas legislature passed a bill exempting a "qualified museum" from the state's six-per-cent sales tax. This was a boon to Crystal Bridges, given that it has since bought hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of art. Walton notes that other states have similar art-acquisition laws, and bats away the suggestion that the law was designed to benefit solely her museum, or that paying taxes might be another way of giving back. "It is not unlike tax incentives given to major corporations when they move in," she told me. "If Crystal Bridges does what it should do, in terms of tourism, in terms of the number of jobs it has already created through a very difficult economic period, then it has already made that back in spades."

Walton began seeking advice about architects. She recalled, "I had lunch with the very nice president of Huntington Gardens"—the art museum established by Henry Huntington, the railway and real-estate magnate, outside Los Angeles—"and he said, 'You must go and see the Skirball Cultural Center.' " At the Skirball, which is in the Santa Monica Mountains, the natural setting is artfully complemented with concrete and pink stone. "I fell in love with the flexibility of the space, with the indoor-outdoor," she told me.

Walton called Moshe Safdie, the Skirball's architect, and invited him to visit her in Arkansas. "It was a fairy tale," Safdie told me. "We had dinner the evening I arrived, at her cabin in the woods, and the next day we went out to look at numerous sites in Bentonville. I told her what I thought, and at the end of the day, as I was about to leave, I said, 'I guess you are beginning your architectural selection process,' and she smiled and said, 'I am ending my architectural selection process.' " Safdie and Walton travelled to Europe, looking at other museums for inspiration. They were both struck by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, near Copenhagen, which was built in the fifties by the Danish architects Vilhelm Wohlert and Jørgen Bo. "It is set on a very pastoral site on the seashore, with a series of pavilions which interconnect, and you really feel you are experiencing art and nature together," Safdie says.



Originally, Crystal Bridges was projected to open in 2009, but construction delays pushed the date back. (The museum's cost has not been released, though tax forms estimate that in 2009 the fair market value of its buildings and equipment was more than a hundred million dollars.) A natural spring that runs through the property, Crystal Spring, had to be temporarily diverted underground, since Safdie had chosen not to build on the ridge—which would have meant clearing many more trees—but to build within the ravine itself. "I thought it would be a very powerful sense of place if you built on both sides of the creek, and dammed it to create ponds," he said. Walton told me that there were times when she wondered if the museum would ever get built. "The Ozark Mountains have many caverns," she said. "Most streams run above-ground part of the time and underground part of the time, so every time we'd drill a bore to put in pilings, we'd either hit the fountain of youth or a mammoth cave, which, obviously, you have to fill up with concrete."

From the outset, Walton did not want her name on the museum, and she has not commissioned a portrait of herself. "I would just as soon not see my wrinkles," she says. She and her initial circle of advisers considered calling the place the Benton Woods Museum. The town is named for Thomas Hart Benton, a senator from Missouri in the mid-eighteen-hundreds who advocated the westward expansion of the United States; his namesake and great-nephew was an important artist from the region. "The Benton Woods Museum would have been a perfectly appropriate name," John Wilmerding told me. "We all went to bed, and the next morning she said, 'I have

decided on Crystal Bridges.' I said, 'Oh, Alice, that is so kitschy—it sounds like a second-rate country singer.' She laughed at me and said, 'Well, I like it.' I said, 'Oh, Alice, I do, too.' "

Collecting the artifacts of high culture with the proceeds of big business is a familiar progression for titans of industry. Henry Clay Frick was a coke-and-steel manufacturer and a railway financier before he became the founder of the jewel-box museum on the Upper East Side that bears his name. The core collection of American art at the de Young Museum, in San Francisco, was donated by John D. Rockefeller III, with wealth originally generated by his grandfather, the founder of Standard Oil. In 1903, Isabella Stewart Gardner used an inherited industrial fortune to build a Renaissance palace in the swamps outside Boston. Wilmerding says, "Alice absolutely belongs in that lineage of Isabella Stewart Gardner and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller"—the driving force behind the foundation of MOMA. Although the works at Crystal Bridges have been bought with art history foremost in mind, Walton's taste and interests are much in evidence. Wilmerding told me, "She is constantly trying to give up smoking, which has led to two fabulous smoking pictures. One is an Alfred Maurer, a full-length Sargentesque figure of a woman smoking, and then damned if she didn't go and buy a huge Tom Wesselmann cutout of a smoker's mouth."

Joan Washburn, a gallery owner in New York, who has been involved in a number of the museum's purchases, including a set of screen prints by Jackson Pollock, says, "She says what she likes and what she doesn't like, and she isn't the least bit timid about that." Abstract Expressionism has been one of the harder categories of American art in which to buy, since it is so coveted and so expensive, even for the third-wealthiest woman in the world. (Walton is now outranked by her sister-in-law Christy Walton, whose husband, John, died in 2005, and who is worth twenty-six billion dollars, and by Liliane Bettencourt, the L'Oreal heiress, who is worth twenty-three billion.) For the time being, Crystal Bridges will represent some Abstract Expressionist artists with works on paper and with sculpture, rather than with monumental works in oil. "She does happen to have a very small, beautiful Pollock drip painting, but she is not worrying about competing with what is on MOMA's walls," Wilmerding says. She can be insistent about sticking to a budget. William Agee, an art historian at Hunter College who has advised Walton, recalls, "There was an Edward Hopper painting that came up, and I felt it was a good Hopper, and they are rare. They wanted something like twenty-seven million, and we said it was too much money, and so the dealer sold it the next day to someone for twenty-eight million."

Walton has bought in depth in some areas—the collection contains works by Stuart Davis from all periods of his career, several great works by George Bellows, and several masterpieces by Marsden Hartley. "Marsden Hartley is one of my favorite artists—he was a very complex guy, somewhat tormented, but a very spiritual person, and I love the emotion and the feel and the spirituality of his work," Walton told me. "And Andrew Wyeth—the mystery, the loneliness that is expressed. How do you paint loneliness? I don't know, but they do express it." Walton, who was married briefly in her twenties, has no children, and she has encouraged several of her nephews and nieces to develop an interest in art. "Last year, she went to Basel with some of her family members," Joan Washburn told me. "The NetJets people—the big collectors—go to all the obvious dealers. But she was walking around, seeing everything, taking it all in, having a wonderful time."

Thanks in part to the influence of Don Bacigalupi, who is a specialist in contemporary art, Walton has lately focussed more energy on that sphere: recent purchases include a Warhol silkscreen of Dolly Parton and a Chuck Close portrait of Bill Clinton. One of Crystal Bridges' signature pieces is a monumental sculpture by Roxy Paine of a treelike form, "Yield," which will stand at the entrance. Another contemporary work, "After the Last Supper," by Devorah Sperber, is a bravura reimagining of Leonardo's fresco made from hanging spools of thread, and it is already revealing some of the challenges that the museum may face as it attracts people who have rarely, if ever, visited a museum. When Bacigalupi and Sandy Edwards, the deputy director for museum relations at Crystal Bridges, were showing me

"I don't think it's anything serious, but, just to be sure, I'm going to bill you as if it is."

some slides of works in the collection, Edwards recalled having shown the Sperber to a local group. "The Christians really got into that 'After the Last Supper' idea," she said. "They said, 'After the Last Supper, things just weren't the same.' " Bacigalupi laughed loudly. " 'Nothing was ever the same'—I never thought of that," he said, before remarking that this would be an excellent opportunity to use a wall text to explain the role that visual quotation plays in contemporary art.

In "The Golden Bowl," the novel by Henry James, Mr. Verver is a retired financier who plans to create, in a place called American City, a museum that would be "positively civilization condensed, concrete, consummate, set down by his hands as a house on a rock—a house from whose open doors and windows, open to grateful, to thirsty millions, the higher, the highest knowledge would shine out to bless the land."

Walton has a similarly educative spirit. For some years, she has given money so that children from the county in Texas where she lives can visit the Amon Carter Museum, in Fort Worth. The thank-you letters she has received from the children, Walton said, have reinforced her commitment to the creation of Crystal Bridges: "They say, 'We didn't know we could go to a museum,' 'We thought that was for rich people,' 'We didn't know they would let us in.' " In its mission, Crystal Bridges has something in common with the great institutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which sought to infuse a populace with high-cultural literacy.

Unlike Mr. Verver's museum, Walton's is set amid rocks rather than atop one. "You think about urban museums, and the traditional neoclassical façade and the ascent of the grand staircase into the temple of culture, and this is quite different," Bacigalupi told me last winter, as he conducted me through the then skeletal structures of Safdie's curving galleries. "The museum is to be discovered in the center of this one-hundred-and-twenty-acre wilderness, and, instead of ascending, you really *descend* into the museum. The tree line surmounts everything we have built, and that is a metaphor for the intersection between art and nature. It is also a kind of technique for viewing art—the idea that being in nature opens you up for the experience of engaging with a work of art."

Bacigalupi regularly points out that the Ozarks can look quite similar to the landscapes depicted by Durand and his circle: a PowerPoint presentation he gives includes a slide showing a rocky promontory over a valley with glorious fall foliage; the image deliberately echoes the Catskills composition of "Kindred Spirits." Such an elision, it might be argued, glosses over the painting's history, confirming the fears of critics who lamented Alice Walton's purchase of it. But when Bacigalupi was reminded that the *Times* had likened the painting's purchase to the destruction of Penn Station he expressed bafflement. "How bizarre to think of that analogy, when in fact a Penn Station is being built here, where there is enormous traffic and development and growth, and people living without art," he said. "You could extend that argument, and say no works of art belong in Arkansas, and that is an absurd thing to say."

As it happens, another work of art that Walton has brought to Arkansas is "Excavation at Night," by George Bellows, a dark, gritty canvas depicting the early stages of the construction of Penn Station, when it was nothing more than a hole in the ground. Bellows painted it in 1908, when New York was first asserting itself as a cultural and economic capital, just six years after Richard Morris Hunt's imposing Beaux-Arts façade of the Metropolitan Museum was completed, giving the city a museum as grand as it thought it deserved.

A few years ago, the staff of Crystal Bridges underwent the corporate exercise of crafting a mission statement. They settled on this: "We invite all to celebrate the American spirit in a setting that unites the power of art and the beauty of landscape." Bacigalupi told me, "The idea of the American spirit as an underpinning for all these creative acts was something we really liked, and it resonated strongly with some of the themes in the collection: the idea of American ingenuity, innovation, and engagement with nature."

When I met with Walton, she said that the focus of her collection was, to her mind, an obvious one. "My parents were both very patriotic, and I just would never have considered collecting anything but American art," she told me, as if it were traitorous to even consider buying, say, a Lucian Freud. "I love American history, so it was just a natural thing for me. And we are kind of in the heart of the country—in heartland America, you might say." She'd woken very early that morning, she explained, and had been going over invitations for the opening, and thinking about what to put on the walls of her home in Texas once the art hanging there was sent to the museum. "I can't wait to see people see it, but it is going to be traumatic," she said. "I say that when that truck leaves I am getting my pillow and following."

We walked through the grounds of her museum, through clusters of native trees. Near a stone footbridge, water tumbled over a series of rocky ledges upon which children will be permitted to clamber. They will also be encouraged to play on a work called "Shore Lunch," a sculpture of a bear by Dan Ostermiller, which stands nearby. "We hope children crawl all over him and get paw prints on him," Walton said.

We ascended to an observation deck over the construction site, which has allowed locals to monitor the museum's progress. As we looked down on the workers below, I asked Walton if she had formulated her own definition of the American spirit. "I don't know that I can put that into words," she said. "It's just a feeling I have. I have a spiritual side that is important to me—it's not religious, I don't mean religious—and it's part of the history and the fabric of this country as well." Of "Kindred Spirits," she said, "There's a majesty and a mystery to that painting that, to me, is really all about the American spirit." She went on, "I guess we are a part of that story as well. What my father has done is a part of that. It is the ability to be the best you can be, and to take the opportunity that we have in this country to grow and learn and be the very best we can, and to help other people."

On the site below, a team was placing a copper roof on one of the pavilions, and it glinted in the morning sun like a newly minted penny. By the fall, when the museum opens, it will have started to tarnish, gradually turning to a dull brown; by next summer, it will look like old money. ♦