



Exhibitions at
PAAM

Sincerely Yours

Inscriptions from the Permanent Collection

CURATED BY MADELEINE LARSON AND KATHERINE SMAILS
ON VIEW DECEMBER 6, 2024 - MARCH 16, 2025
IN THE MOFFETT GALLERY

The visual perspective of a Collections Manager can often be a technical one, frequently focused on the minor details of an artwork—the tiny area of surface flaking, the miniscule scratch on the glass, the paper’s texture in raking light.

A museum Collections Manager is trained to notice everything about the work of art so it can be stored and displayed safely and for as long as possible.

In early 2024, PAAM began undertaking the process of digitizing its Permanent Collection and conducting a full-scale inventory of its artwork holdings. A full collection inventory can be a daunting task for any museum, especially for one that is 110 years old, but it provides the invaluable opportunity to dig into artwork rarely seen, accessed, or discussed. As the Collections Manager, the process of collection digitization and inventory has given me incredible new insights into artworks, as the project requires close looking and analysis of every piece to find new details and capture new data.

One of these new data points not previously (consistently) captured was signature and inscription information: if and where the artwork is signed, dated, editioned, marked, stamped, labeled, or otherwise inscribed. While many of these inscriptions communicate objective artwork information, like a print’s edition, others could be considered more extraneous to understanding the piece. Throughout the inventory and digitization process, combing through our collection, I was always delighted to find artworks with scratches of more personal text in the corners—the “with love”s and the “Happy Birthday”s.

In Collections Management practice, signatures and inscriptions are vital to an object’s record, as they can illuminate authorship, date and location created, ownership, and provenance. As shown through the pieces in this exhibition, inscriptions can also give viewers insight into another dimension of an artist, such as the intent behind and background of a piece—not only the what, but the why. The works in this exhibition reflect a variety of different types of inscription: many are

personal dedications, either to the sitter of a portrait or to denote the artwork as a gift to a loved one; some are tributes to fellow artists—peers, students, or teachers. These inscriptions draw attention to the humanness of each individual artist and ask viewers to imagine the art-making process on a much more intimate scale.

This exhibition invites close looking, and I encourage you to not only connect with the content of each artwork, but to imagine the author's hand as they inscribed their work of art to a friend, a lover, a fellow artist, or perhaps to nobody specific at all. Look in the margins, and consider what the signature and inscription might tell you about an object that its title, its date, or its subject matter may not. These pieces urge us to see artwork as not only a practice of making, but one of sharing and gifting as well.

I give endless thanks to Katherine Smails and Seth Abrahamson for their incredible work in getting PAAM's inventory and digitization project off the ground.

—*Madeleine Larson, Registrar and Collections Manager*

All interpretive text on in the checklist and on artwork labels was written by Katherine Smails, summer 2024 Collections Associate at PAAM.

ARTWORK LIST

William Harry Warren (WHW) Bicknell (1860-1947)

Untitled (Wharf Scene, from a sketch by Stacy Tolman), n.d.

Etching

Gift of Mrs. W.H.W. Bicknell, 1964

W.H.W. Bicknell was a versatile artist who etched portraits, book pages, landscapes, and architectural views. Bicknell and Stacy Tolman were friends and fellow art students who shared an art studio in Boston. Tolman's most well-known artwork, *The Etcher*, on view at The Met Museum in New York City, depicts Bicknell intensely focused at work in their shared studio. Details of their relationship are not widely documented, and that tendency towards privacy is demonstrated here in a simple acknowledgement of Tolman's model sketch. Bicknell's inscription obfuscates the meaningful and productive friendship the two enjoyed and instead simply gives credit where credit is due.

Edwin Walter Dickinson (1891-1978)

Untitled (Provincetown Buildings), 1916

Etching

Gift of Eliza Ayrault Magee, 2021

Edwin Walter Dickinson (1891-1978)

Untitled (Provincetown Street), 1916

Etching

Gift of Eliza Ayrault Magee, 2021

Nancy Jo Ferguson (b. 1935)

For Harriet, n.d.

Ink on paper

PAAM Permanent Collection

Red Grooms (b. 1937)

Tappy Toes, 1969

Ink on paper

Gift from the Richmond Bequest, 1978