

Philip Conisbee, 1946 - 2008

Ebullient former curator of LACMA

By ANNE-MARIE O'CONNOR
Times Staff Writer

Philip Conisbee, a celebrated curator of European paintings at Washington's National Gallery of Art whose reputation for blockbuster exhibitions and significant acquisitions followed a distinguished tenure at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has died. He was 62.

Conisbee died Wednesday night at his home in Washington's Georgetown neighborhood after a battle with lung cancer, which was diagnosed last summer.

During his five years at LACMA, Conisbee acquired such significant works as Paul Cézanne's "Sous Bois (Under the Trees)," and he became known for the wildly popular exhibitions he co-curated at the National Gallery.

Respected for his scholarly depth, Conisbee exuded such unrestrained excitement for the works he coveted that he once described opening crates of new paintings at the gallery as being "like Christmas time."

During a 1999 exhibition of the works of French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, in an interview in front of a portrait, Conisbee "began with her arms and shoulders and went to her décolletage, and by the time he got to her neck, you thought he was having a love affair with her," National Gallery spokeswoman Deborah Ziska said.

"He had a real *joie de vivre*," she said. "Whenever he was describing a work of art or taking people on a tour of a collection, he would talk with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye as if he had some wonderful secrets to divulge."

His passions for his popular area of art resonated with museum-goers. In 1996, nearly 500,000 people attended "Van Gogh's Van Goghs," a collection of 70 masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. When it

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director, National Gallery of Art

moved to Los Angeles, 900,000 people turned out.

"Philip brought to the Gallery a wealth of knowledge of European art and a great enthusiasm for sharing his insights," Earl A. "Rusty" Powell III, the director of the National Gallery, said in a statement last week. Powell hired Conisbee twice, first at LACMA in 1988, and then at the National Gallery in 1993.

Charming and funny, the bespectacled, silver-haired Conisbee was known for friendships with curators throughout the world, as well as such contemporary artists as David Hockney.

Conisbee wrote widely about art in a number of books and publications such as *Art in America* magazine and the London-based *Times Literary Supplement*.

Conisbee began his career as an art professor. Born Jan. 3, 1946, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, he grew up in London and earned a doctorate from the University of London's Courtauld Institute of Art in 1978. He taught at the University of London and two other British universities until 1986, when Boston's Museum of Fine Arts hired him as associate curator of French painting.

Powell was director of LACMA when he lured Conisbee to Los Angeles two years later, as curator of European paintings and sculpture.

Conisbee became one of the most

valued members of LACMA's staff, organizing such popular exhibitions as the 1991 "Monet to Matisse: French Art in Southern California Collections."

He was credited for the acquisition of the majestic Cézanne landscape "Sous Bois," in 1992. "The acquisition of 'Sous Bois' ranks among the most important in the history of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art," wrote *Times* art critic Christopher Knight in early 1993.

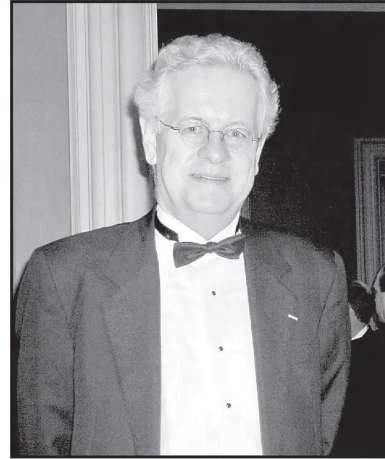
Conisbee also acquired Old Masters for the museum by such artists as Philippe de Champaigne, Carl Fabritius and Domenichino. He presided over two significant gifts, the 15th century altarpiece "Christ on the Cross with Saints Mark, John the Baptist, Vincent Ferrer and the Blessed Antoninus," and "The Last Supper," painted by Spanish artist Pedro Berruguete in the late 14th century.

"Philip Conisbee was a well respected colleague whose passion and knowledge of French art was infectious," Stephanie Barron, LACMA's senior curator of modern art, wrote in an e-mail. "He was a dedicated scholar who championed marvelous exhibitions and acquired many important works of art for our collection when he was curator at LACMA."

When Powell ended his 12-year tenure at LACMA to move to the National Gallery, he wooed Conisbee away again, this time as curator of French paintings at the National Gallery.

On Sunday, at Conisbee's house, Powell recalled to family, friends and colleagues who gathered there how Conisbee — always open to new experiences and new people — immediately replied, "Sure," when he was offered the job, Ziska said.

"He was an excellent curator, a great scholar and a wonderful friend," Powell told *The Times* on Monday. "He was responsible for many great acquisitions at LACMA, particularly the great Cézanne landscape. He had a wonderfully dry British wit and a



National Gallery of Art

ART ENTHUSIAST

As curator of European paintings and sculpture, Philip Conisbee was behind some of LACMA's biggest acquisitions, including Cézanne's "Sous Bois," and organized some of its most popular exhibitions, such as 1991's "Monet to Matisse: French Art in Southern California Collections."

twinkle in his eye. He had an enormous number of friends. I'd hire him a third time, if I got the chance."

Conisbee's departure was considered a great loss to LACMA.

In 1998, the National Gallery promoted Conisbee to Senior Curator of European paintings.

In some of his most memorable shows, such as "Cézanne in Provence," which drew more than 335,000 visitors in 2006, he worked with French colleagues. The French government bestowed two awards on Conisbee, the Chevalier des Arts et Lettres in 2000, and the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur in 2004.

Conisbee, who became a U.S. citizen in 1994, spoke of art in accessible, often tactile terms. In an interview on Cézanne, Conisbee told National Public Radio that Cézanne's mentor, Car-

mille Pissarro, helped Cézanne move away from less interesting still-life paintings and adopt the vivid brush style of Impressionism.

"You couldn't imagine biting into one of his apples, yet at the same time they seem to have the quintessence of apple-ness," Conisbee told NPR.

Among his survivors are wife Faya Causey Conisbee, head of Academic Programs at the National Gallery; son Ben Conisbee Baer of New York; daughter Molly Conisbee-Rijke of Bath, England; and stepson Jan Causey Frei, whom Conisbee adopted. He is also survived by his father, Paul Conisbee, and brother, Alan Conisbee, both of London. His first marriage, to Susan Baer, ended in divorce.

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