



Mr. Smith—and Mrs. Bok—Go to Florida

Curtis founder Mary Louise Curtis Bok advanced culture well beyond the conservatory, helping to establish a center for visual art in the Florida swampland.

BY KRISTINA WILSON



Consider the Lilies

→ ON A TYPICAL DAY AT CURTIS, dozens of people walk through 1726 Locust Street without paying particular attention to the canvases and sculpture that line its walls and hallways. These magnificent works subtly add to the richness of the space, seamlessly blending lush landscapes by George Inness Jr., rocky seascapes by Frederick J. Waugh, and impressive portraits by Norman Rockwell and John Singer Sargent into the grand Victorian décor. Collected over decades by founder Mary Louise Curtis Bok, each piece has history and a tale to tell. However, there is one piece whose backstory—which only became known this past April—reveals a remarkable history of talent, courage, altruism, and, at its core, a convivial yet deep mutual friendship.

In the first-floor rear hallway of 1726 is an etching entitled *Consider the Lilies*. It is both small and unassuming in its presentation with no color, flourish-

ing signature, or ornate gilt frame, and the subject matter—an allegorical image portraying a hovering Christ in a highly industrialized landscape—is dreary at best. As the artist, Jules André Smith, dedicated the piece to “Mrs. Edward Bok,” we know this was a gift and not a purchase. But why is such a piece, so desolate in tone, part of an art collection that leans towards celebrating the beauty of nature, music, and humanity?

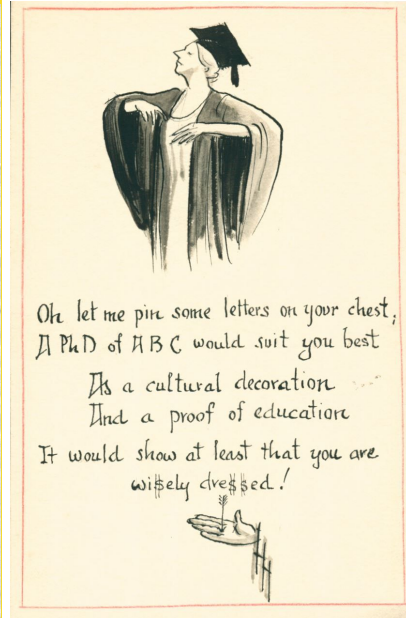
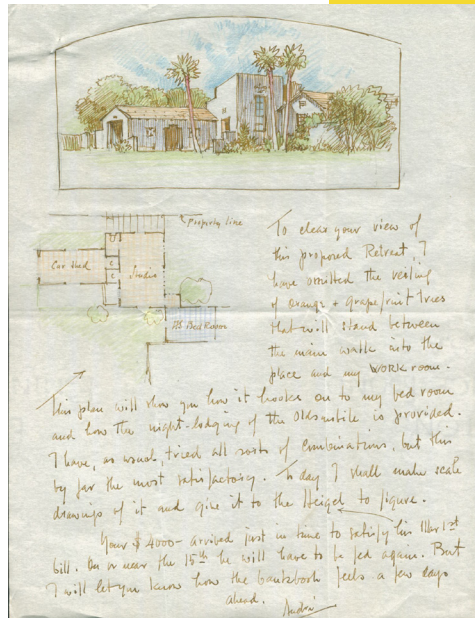
The answer to these questions came unexpectedly last April, when the Curtis Archives received an inquiry from Katie Benson, the Exhibitions Manager at the Maitland Art Center in Maitland, Fla., asking for copies of the correspondence “between our two founders.” Not being familiar with the Maitland Art Center nor with Smith, its founder, I searched Mary Louise Curtis Bok’s correspondence and found a treasure trove—six folders of letters spanning 16 years, from 1936 to 1952.

A Fortuitous Meeting

The story that emerged from these letters is fascinating. Jules André Smith (1880-1959), one of America’s first war artists and the founder of an artist’s colony and research center that today sits just outside of Orlando, Fla., was born to American parents in Hong Kong, but settled in Connecticut by age ten. He earned two degrees in architecture from Cornell University, and subsequently spent five years in a New York architectural firm. In 1911 he traveled to Europe to draw landscapes, which he pursued until America’s entry into the First World War in 1917.

Recognizing that his skills as an artist may be useful to the war effort, Smith enlisted in the Army Reserve, where he rose to the rank of captain and was assigned to accompany the American Expeditionary Force in France. As he documented their activities, he drew upon his architectural training to produce detailed pictures of buildings and places affected by





the conflict, in what he called “disquieting and somber images of the war.” Additionally, Smith designed the Distinguished Service Cross, the United States Army’s second highest military decoration for soldiers who display extraordinary heroism in combat.

After the war, Smith moved back to his childhood home in Connecticut. However, owing to health concerns and the severity of the New England winters (Smith’s right leg had been amputated due to a barbed wire injury that never successfully healed), he and his assistant Attilio J. Banca traveled to Florida in search of a site for a winter studio.

While staying in Winter Park, Fla., Smith became friends with Broadway actor Annie Russell, a professor of theater arts at nearby Rollins College, who, in turn, introduced Smith to her friend Mary Louise Curtis Bok. This proved to be a fortuitous meeting, leading to a friendship built, in part, on a shared passion for the controversial “modern art” that was developing at that time. With this sense of cultural advocacy, the two collaborated on Smith’s vision of an artist’s sanctuary, taking it from a lofty idea to a reality in brick and stone.

A Modern Mayan Paradise

In 1936 Mrs. Bok purchased six acres of land in Lake Maitland, Fla., and funded the initial construction of what would become the Research Studio, a center for classes and exhibits for Smith and select visiting artists. Early in the difficult planning stages, when Smith’s spirits were low, she firmly reiterated her support for his vision, writing in a November 24, 1936 letter that “you are bringing to birth something worth being born and for which enough souls to make it worthwhile are waiting.” Smith responded four months later: “Your idea of giving artists a chance to work without restriction, under agreeable conditions and, if possible, under pleasant relationship with a few other artists is pure gold. Out of that something is certain to come...”

And indeed, something marvelous did. Designed by Smith in a fantastic Mayan Revival style, the Research Studio and its surrounding compound comprised art studios, living quarters, a gallery with a courtyard, a garden, and a roofless chapel. Smith had wanted to name it “The Mary Louise Bok Gallery of Research in Art,” but Mrs. Bok wouldn’t hear of it. “If you ever again refer to the studio,

From left: Plans for the Maitland Art Center Campus by Jules André Smith. Letters from Jules André Smith to Mary Louise Curtis Bok.

the tower, or what have you, as a Bok affair,” she reproved, “you are off my social list from that moment! Our studio is all so simple, and it’s André Smith, not Bok!” Smith capitulated, and Mrs. Bok’s involvement remained a muted part of the center’s legacy.

While the philanthropy of Mrs. Bok is well known in musical circles, her support of another sort of artistry—that of the pencil, the brush, and the chisel—is less so. Though one need to look no further than the extraordinary American art collection that lines the walls of Curtis to see that Mrs. Bok’s interests extended into the larger artistic world, it took a simple email from Florida to show her beneficence extended past simply purchasing art to supporting the artist. The letters exchanged between Mrs. Bok and Smith over a 16-year period not only reveal her steadfast belief in Smith and his vision, but a lively friendship replete with playful banter, deep respect, and the unwavering love that Mary Louise Curtis Bok bestowed on all those fortunate enough to call her a friend.

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