

# Arlene Schnitzer (1929–2020)

By Barbara Bennett Peterson

Arlene Schnitzer was a patron of artists, a philanthropist, and the namesake of the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in Portland. Her financial support and business acumen transformed Portland's art scene, beginning with an art gallery in the 1960s and extending until her death in 2020. She and her husband, Harold Schnitzer, were central to the city's social, economic, and cultural civic life, acting as one of the lifebloods of Portland's philanthropic giving.

Arlene Director was born in Salem on January 10, 1929. The family lived in Salem, and her parents—Simon, who had immigrated from Chortoriysk, Russia, in 1910, and Helen Holtzman, who had arrived from Warsaw in 1915—had three daughters. In 1931, they moved to Portland, where Arlene attended Multnomah Grammar School and one year at Lincoln High School before transferring to Westlake School for Girls in Los Angeles. After graduating in 1947, she attended the University of Washington for one year.

The Directors owned the Jennings Furniture Company on Southwest Tenth Avenue and Washington Street, and Arlene worked on the switchboard and in sales. In 1949, setting aside her desire to become an actress, she married Harold Schnitzer, a metallurgical engineer who worked in his father's company, Schnitzer Steel. Arlene and Harold balanced each other: she was bold, direct, and outspoken while he was quiet, introverted, and contemplative. Shortly after their marriage, Harold sold his share of the company to his brothers and formed Harsch Investment Properties, which developed rentable office and multifamily living spaces. The couple had a son in 1951.

In 1958, Arlene Schnitzer enrolled in the Museum Art School (now the Pacific Northwest College of Art), where she found her life's passion. She "absolutely was hooked," she said in a 2003 interview on *Oregon Art Beat*. "It was like I came home." In 1961, with her mother and Edna Brigham, a family friend, she opened the Fountain Gallery of Art in Portland, which promoted local artists and strove to increase Oregonians' appreciation for the arts. Schnitzer represented such artists as Louis Bunce, Carl and Hilda Morris, Mike Russo, Robert Colescott, Mel Katz, Gregory Grenon, and Laura Ross-Paul, providing them with a venue to show and sell their art. She was Portland's primary art patron and ran the Fountain Gallery for twenty-six years.

Capitalizing on her husband's business connections, Schnitzer sold artworks to corporations such as U.S. Steel, Bank of California, and Pacific Power & Light, often framing and installing the art herself. As a consultant, she helped businesses assemble art collections and convinced them that art was a wise investment. Elegant and inspiring, she became Portland's foremost advocate for the arts. For fourteen years, she hosted a Portland current events television show, *Open Door*, on Oregon Public Broadcasting and featured local artists and art events on *In View* for KOAP-TV.

Schnitzer bought and sold fine art, hosted glamorous receptions and openings, and purchased at least one piece from each featured artist for her own collection. "I devoted myself and committed myself to the artist who was living in the Northwest," she said. "I wanted to keep them here. A city without your art community has no soul." Over time the Schnitzers collected over two thousand works of art, donating several important pieces during their lifetime to the Portland Art Museum, with the bulk of the collection being donated to the Jordon Schnitzer Family Foundation and its Traveling Exhibitions Program.

The renovation of the Paramount Theatre in downtown Portland was the Schnitzers' most significant philanthropic project in 1983–1984. The theater, which had opened in 1928, had fallen into disrepair, and the City of Portland bought it to make it into a concert center. The Schnitzers donated \$1.7 million to the project, and the theater re-opened as the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in September 1984.

The Harold and Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation, which the Schnitzers established in 1998, donated to local institutions that served the public, including Oregon Public Broadcasting, Oregon Ballet, Portland Opera, New Avenues for Youth, the Portland Japanese Garden, Oregon Museum of Science & Industry, Oregon Historical Society, and Oregon Zoo. Foundation support for Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) established the Center for Women's Health and the Harold

Schnitzer Diabetes Health Center, and Arlene served on the OHSU Foundation's Board of Trustees and Executive Committee from 1990 until the end of her life. Over the years, the Schnitzers donated \$150 million to civic projects and charities from their foundation to support cultural institutions, local social services, medical care facilities, and at-risk youth.

The Schnitzers contributed to the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwest Art, an expansion of the Portland Art Museum, completed in 2000. They donated their collection of pre-Han and Han Chinese ceramics to the museum, which became the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Collection of Early Chinese Art, and endowed the position of curator of Asian art. PAM presented an exhibit on *Mysterious Spirits, Strange Beasts Earthly Delights* in 2005. Two years later, the couple was honored as PAM's first Life Trustees. An exhibit in 2014–2015, *In Passionate Pursuit: The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Collection and Legacy*, honored her civic leadership.

The Schnitzers attended Temple Beth Israel and ascribed to Judaic religious teachings, which encouraged people to give back to their community. Arlene advocated for social justice and humanitarianism, and the couple supported the Harold Schnitzer Judaic Studies programs at the University of Oregon and Portland State University in 2004. They spent winters in California's Coachella Valley, where Arlene arranged exhibitions and was a trustee of the Palm Springs Art Museum from 2007 to 2020. She also raised funds for the College of the Desert and supported the McCallum Theatre. The Schnitzers contributed to the Fine Arts Museums in San Francisco and the Performing Arts Committee for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Following Harold's death in 2011, Arlene honored him by donating \$2.3 million to Portland State University for the renovation of Lincoln Hall, the home of the School of Fine & Performing Arts.

Arlene Schnitzer made her philosophy clear in her January 2020 remarks explaining her largest-ever donation to PAM: "I want to inspire other people and other families to do things for their community. If you don't do it, and I don't do it, who is going to? You owe something....You have to be responsible....you have to show a community you care about it." In 1987, she received the Governor's Award for the Arts, and both Arlene and Harold received the Portland First Citizen Award in 1995. PSU honored her with a Doctorate of Humane Letters in 2004, and she received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from Pacific Northwest College of Art in 2011. At PAM, she established the Arlene Schnitzer Prize to honor gifted artists, and each year the PSU School of Art & Design awards Arlene Schnitzer Prizes in the Visual Arts to recognize talented student artwork.

Arlene Schnitzer died on April 4, 2020.

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