John & Anne Marion: On Eisenhower, Art and the American West

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As a rancher, businesswoman and philanthropist, Anne Marion cherishes her West Texas roots, as both she and husband, John are committed to the western lifestyle and the preservation of western heritage. Anne fondly remembers the time spent on her family's ranch in Guthrie, Texas and calls growing up there "the most important thing that ever happened to me. It kept my feet on the ground more than anything else."

So it is not surprising that when John and Anne Marion took the reins of a recent Eisenhower Medical Center fundraiser it ended up having an authentic western theme. The March 2007 event, which included a movie premier and an intimate concert performance by Country Music Association Duo of the Year Brooks & Dunn, was created, organized and underwritten by John and Anne, long-time supporters of the hospital. Thanks to the Marion's generosity, the event raised $1.55 million for Campaign Eisenhower Phase Two, which will help complete the construction of the 160-bed Walter and Leonore Annenberg Pavilion, the 24-suite Stacey and Greg Renker Pavilion, the Tennity Emergency Department and other expansions. "It is vitally important for an area such as this to have a place like Eisenhower Medical Center," says John, a member of Eisenhower's Board of Trustees. "A large percentage of this community spends 40, even 50 percent of their lives here in the desert. Health care is extremely important, especially when you're away from home or in a place you reside only part of the year. The people of this area have something in Eisenhower they can really depend on."

Anne and John both admit that their personal health and the health of their 19 year marriage has remained strong through laughter and working on meaningful projects together. Anne's mother first introduced the couple. "It was a rather unusual way to meet, but when Anne's mother found out that she was very ill, she wanted to put her affairs in order, and part of that was her art collection. I was president and chairman of Sotheby's at the time," explains John. "I was asked if I would be prepared to go to Texas and talk to Anne's mother. I did go, and we hit it off. Anne's mother then mentioned to me that I needed to meet her daughter because when she goes, Anne is not going to know what she is doing. This is still one of the great jokes between Anne and me, because Anne always knows exactly what she is doing all the time! At any rate, the next day, the three of us had lunch together, and I met Anne."

That was in 1978. Anne's mother passed away in 1980, and while Anne and John met as friends and did some business together regarding her mother's collection, their association politely ended there. Then in 1986, the two met for a dinner date. "That is when I stopped thinking of her as a client," remembers John. "I often wonder about Anne's mother and what she would say if she was looking down on us now. I think she would be pleased. I know our marriage has been the greatest thing in my life."

Anne and John's love of art, travel and the American West has taken them on some fascinating journeys together. Anne's interest in the arts started early. "I've just always been interested in art. My mother had quite a nice collection of German expressionists. I grew up around it, and I was an art history major." Adds John, "Art plays such a valuable role in this world — it is civilization speaking to us."

Anne is proud of her work as the head of the building committee for the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The new structure, designed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando, has 53,000 square feet of gallery space. Massive planar walls of architectural concrete and 45-foot high transparent walls of glass framed in metal provide excellent viewing and circulation around the structure. "I traveled to Japan to see all of Ando's work," recalls Anne. "It was wonderful being part of this project. It is a remarkable building."

Also close to the Marion's hearts is the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It used to be that travelers to the area were often disappointed to find only a few works of the celebrated artist, who called New Mexico home for nearly 40 years, at the local Museum of Fine Art, a state-run museum. With a few O'Keeffes in their collection, the Marions were approached by a retailer, fellow Texan and part-time Santa Fe resident, Stanley Marcus. "Stanley came to visit us, and asked if Anne would lend some of her paintings to the museum and donate money to create an area dedicated to the work of Georgia O'Keeffe," explains John.

Anne considered Stanley's offer and came back a couple days later with an idea of her own. "I wanted to do something different. I wanted a private museum and I wanted to dedicate it to the work of Georgia O'Keeffe," says Anne. Stanley reminded the Marions of the expense of such an endeavor. Passionate about the concept, Anne and John dipped into their own pockets and hired an architect to renovate the existing 10,000 square-foot adobe building. On July 17, 1997 the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum opened with a makeshift staff and 94 O'Keeffes. Today, it is Santa Fe's most popular art museum, and this year celebrates its 10th anniversary. "We've had over two million visitors and there are now more than 2,000 works in the collection. There is also a research center that does scholarly pursuits and develops symposiums. It is a living, breathing institution that has new exhibitions all the time, which deal with American Modernism. It really is one of the accomplishments we're most proud of," says Anne. (See Get Up & Go on the O'Keeffe Museum.)

Common interests, a down-to-earth sensibility and a rich sense of humor have helped John and Anne Marion enjoy a life full of good health, and the things they love and hold the most dear. "I am very proud of some of the things that have been accomplished during the time that we have been married," says John. "It has been a very good strong combination of two people supporting each other. I think we have been able to accomplish some pretty special things."

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