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A Volunteer Docent Told a Philadelphia Museum She Would Leave It 'a Little Something' in Her Will. She Surprised Them With \$8 Million

Estelle Rubens told the academy she'd leave it "a little something," but they had no idea what was coming.

Caroline Goldstein, April 22, 2019



The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts building. Photo courtesy of Google Arts and Culture.

Over the 15 years that Estelle Rubens served as a beloved volunteer docent at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, she and her husband Raymond were amassing a collection of modern and contemporary American art. The couple had donated several works to the museum over the years, so it wasn't a big surprise when Estelle mentioned in her will that she would be "leaving a little something" to the academy.

The shock came after Rubens died in January 18, at the age of 88, and that "little something" turned to be a gift in the form of an endowed scholarship fund totaling almost \$8 million—one of the largest donations in the institution's history. Rubens lived her entire life in Philadelphia and, along with her late husband Raymond, became an active member and supporter of the museum and the school, which counts artists Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Thomas Eakins, and Mary Cassatt among its alumni.

The museum's president David R. Brigham told the Philadelphia Inquirer, "we knew the bequest was coming, but we had no idea of the magnitude. It far exceeded our expectations."



Red Grooms, *Wounded Bird* (1978), gift from the private collection of Estelle and Raymond Rubens. Courtesy of PAFA.

The result is a two-part gift from the Raymond D. and Estelle Rubens Travel Scholarship Fund, awarded to students based on merit. Participating students receive \$5,000 for travel expenses to Europe following their third year of study, as well as two semesters at the academy paid in full. The fund stipulates that at least three scholarships will be awarded each year. Eight scholarships will be announced at the academy's upcoming commencement celebration on May 10.

The couple previously donated an additional six works to the museum by artists Larry Rivers, Alexander Calder, Red Grooms, Earl Horter, Al Hirschfeld, and Alice Neel.