

Art Exhibition Displays Tools in a Whole New Way

Sponsored By: [Columbia Museum of Art](#)

July 28, 2017



Jacob Lawrence, *Carpenters*, 1977, lithograph. Photo courtesy of Joel Breger.

At first glance, an art exhibition titled “ReTooled” might sound like a display of vintage saws and hammers, but don’t let the name of the current exhibition at the [Columbia Museum of Art](#) fool you.

[ReTooled](#) highlights the collected works of John Hechinger, owner of a chain of mid-Atlantic hardware stores. He's often credited with launching the home improvement store concept. In 1978, Hechinger moved his company into a new headquarters just outside Washington, D.C. He quickly infused the sterile building with his creative spirit, first hanging a suite of silkscreen prints by Jim Dine from his own collection. Dine's *Tool Box* combines tools with images from pop culture.

Company associates responded positively to the artwork, and Hechinger began to grow his collection with pieces that related directly to the company's focus as a hardware store.

"It was the hope that surrounding employees with artistic expressions of the same objects they handled in the tens of thousands would bring a sense of dignity to their jobs," Hechinger said later.

Ultimately, the building was filled with tool-inspired paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, photographs and folk art, primarily from the post-World War II era.

Upon his death, Hechinger left his collection to [International Arts & Artists](#) in Washington, D.C., which created a traveling exhibition.

About one-tenth of Hechinger's collected works have made their way to the Midlands. On display at the Columbia Museum of Art are more than 40 works by 28 contemporary artists, including photographers Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans, pop art legends Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg, abstract sculptor Anthony Caro, and cubist-inspired masters Jacob Lawrence and Fernand Léger.

Museum curator Catherine Walworth says in her research leading up to the exhibit she developed a respect for Hechinger's understanding of the impact that art and beauty have on people.

She describes Hechinger as an "astute collector" and believes visitors to the Columbia Museum of Art will be pleasantly surprised by the diverse range of works in the collection.

"I think a lot of people don't feel they know enough about contemporary art to enjoy it, but that wasn't Hechinger's intention," Walworth says. "He collected with his employees in mind, and the works in turn inspired his employees to seek out more beautiful tools to sell."

The exhibition includes everything from hand-painted saws by folk artist Howard Finster (eccentric friend of the band R.E.M.) to a plan for a bridge made of giant screws by Claes Oldenburg, as well as that original suite of Jim Dine prints.

"It's such a great opportunity for people because the range of work in this exhibition is so broad," Walworth says. "We have really big names from the pop art world, for example, plus contemporary craftsmen, a feminist artist and outsider artists. It's a smattering that feels really good."

The museum is also offering special talks and guided tours during the "ReTooled" exhibition, which runs through Aug. 27.

To learn more about ReTooled and other exhibits, visit ColumbiaMuseum.org.