

## THOMAS GILCREASE

By MARTIN WENGER\*

Thomas Gilcrease, a well known oilman of Creek Indian, descent and the founder of the Gilcrease Museum at Tulsa keenly appreciated his American heritage. Early in life he commenced to assemble the remarkable collection of paintings, sculpture, books, manuscripts and artifacts pertaining to the American Indian and the American frontier which has come to be recognized as the Nation's most outstanding collection of its kind.

Thomas Gilcrease was born in Robitene, Louisiana, on February 8, 1890, one of the large family of children of William and Elizabeth (nee Vowell) Gilcrease. When Thomas was a few months old, the family moved to Eufaula, Indian Territory, for Mrs. Gilcrease was of Creek Indian descent which gave her and her children land rights in the Creek Nation. A year later, they settled on a farm just south of Ball Mountain where they were neighbors to the Posey family. Thomas Gilcrease attended his first school in this community, taught by Alexander Posey, later the noted Creek poet in Oklahoma history. In about 1898, the Gilcrease family moved farther west to the Twin Mounds, in present Creek County, where they took their allotments of land at the time the tribal rolls and allotments in severalty were made in the Creek Nation. William Gilcrease opened a little grocery store at the Twin Mounds, and later owned two cotton gins and a grist mill in the vicinity. In 1904, he moved his family to Wealaka, an old post office in the Creek Nation where he laid out a townsite and became postmaster and opened a general merchandise store. His son Thomas as a boy picked cotton and drove a wagon and team on the farms; later he worked in the cotton gins and in the store and post office at Wealaka. Oil was struck four miles from the 160 acre allotment of Thomas Gilcrease in 1905, and his land was soon in the famous Glen Pool of the great Mid-Continent Oil Field that pushed Tulsa on its way to become the "Oil Capital of the World." Young Gilcrease had thirty-two producing oil wells on his 160 acre allotment by 1917.

He attended Bacone College at Muskogee, Indian Territory in 1907-08, soon after oil was struck on his land. A few years later, he attended the State Teachers College at Emporia, Kansas. He moved to Tulsa in 1908, which was really his home throughout his lifetime though he lived in California a short time; he

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Portrait by Charles Banks Wilson. In *Gilcrease Museum*

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also lived in San Antonio for a period of years, and traveled abroad for many years.

Thomas Gilcrease carried on his own business interests at an early age—farming, ranching and dealing in real estate. He purchased a tract of land two and one half miles northwest of Tulsa in Blackdog Township of Osage County, in 1912, where he built a large home and bought his first oil painting, *Rural Courtship* by Ridgway Knight.

Young Gilcrease had started his own oil business and entered the field of banking at the age of twenty-one. He soon owned a large interest in the bank now known as the Fourth National Bank at Tulsa, also owned outright the Bank of Bixby, the State Bank of Wagoner, the State Bank of Coweta and also, at one time, the largest bank in Stillwater.

Mr. Gilcrease formed the Gilcrease Oil Company at Tulsa in 1922. The Company brought in the first oil producer in South Central Oklahoma soon afterward, and it was during these oil operations that Mr. Gilcrease discovered a new oil producing strata which is known today as the Gilcrease sand. This spurred the development of the oil pools in this part of Oklahoma such as the Papoose, Sasakwa, Wewoka and others. The Gilcrease Oil Company established an office in San Antonio in 1936, and operated in the East Texas Field, south to the Rio Grande River, west to New Mexico as well as in North Texas, Southern Oklahoma and Kansas. Later, Mr. Gilcrease also established an office in Europe.

He started his extensive traveling abroad in 1925. It was in this that his interest in American culture intensified, and he accelerated his activities in collecting rare objects of art, paintings, books and manuscripts. His visits in Europe taught him that knowledge of civilizations is established by the things that remain from them. It was in Paris that he determined to assemble a record of the American Indian including the pre-historic period which could be obtained only by archaeological explorations. Much of his time during the last years of his life was spent personally excavating remains of ancient Indian cultures.

The Thomas Gilcrease Foundation was established in 1942, "to maintain an art gallery, museum and library devoted to the permanent preservation for free and public use and enjoyment of the artistic, cultural and historical records of the American Indian." A building was constructed of native sandstone by Indian artisans on land near the Gilcrease home, and the museum was opened by a formal dedication ceremony May 3, 1949.

Mr. Gilcrease presented the museum collections to the City of Tulsa in 1955. He also deeded the building and thirteen acres of land surrounding it to the City three years later. Since then,



(Photo, Gilcrease Museum)

In the Gilcrease Museum of Art and History, Thomas Gilcrease with the portrait of Charles Carroll of Carrollton painted by Thomas Sully. The sculptured, bronze head of Abraham Lincoln is on the right.

the fame of the Gilcrease Collection has grown rapidly. Visitors have come from all parts of the world to see this great museum, now officially known as the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art of Tulsa.

Thomas Gilcrease passed away in the morning of Sunday, May 6, 1962, from the effects of a stroke suffered a few hours earlier. Memorial services were held on the lawn in front of his home overlooking the skyline of Tulsa on the following Wednesday. The Reverend Guy Tetrick of the Methodist Church officiated at the services which were highlighted by a eulogy written and delivered by David H. Milsten. Indian burial rites were conducted by Chief Dode McIntosh of the Creeks, Wolfrobe Hunt and other Indian friends. Burial will be in a mausoleum to be constructed nearby. Mr. Gilcrease was married twice, and is survived by two sons, Thomas, Jr., and Barton of San Antonio, Texas; and a daughter, Dea Cygne Gilcrease Denny of Palos Verdes Estates, California.

A friend tells that Mr. Gilcrease once said that of all the things he had ever done, the most useful to the most people—something that will bring pleasure and knowledge—had been the founding of the library and art gallery of the Museum. "It is my aim always to leave something more beautiful than I found it," he remarked.

Thomas Gilcrease enjoyed a rich and happy life that started from humble beginnings. He gave to Oklahoma and America a gift of immeasurable value. He appreciated the ideals and the spirit of the American tradition. He appreciated them so much that he has left for posterity a marvelous and vital presentation of our American heritage that will continue to instill a greater understanding and respect for these ideals in all time to come.

Cambridge April 29, 1775

This may certify that the bearer  
Mr Paul Revere is impinged to the Committee of safety  
and that all dispatch and assistance be given him in  
all Instances, that the business of the Colony may be  
facilitated.  
J. W. M. Chubb