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Jennifer Jones Simon, Academy Award-winning actress who transformed the Norton Simon Museum, dies

By Janette Williams, Staff Writer

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Jennifer Jones Simon, the Academy Award-winning actress and wife of art collector Norton Simon, died on Thursday, December 17, 2009, at the age of 90. Norton Simon, founder of the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena, died in 1993. (Courtesy Photo)

PASADENA - Jennifer Jones Simon, the Academy Award-winning actress whose industrialist husband founded the Norton Simon Museum of Art in Pasadena, died Tuesday at her home in Malibu. She was 90.

In 1989, Norton Simon named his wife - widely credited with sparking his interest in collecting South Asian art - chairwoman of the museum board of trustees.

But it was after his death in 1993, as chair emeritus, that Jones Simon made her mark at the museum. She brought in architect Frank Gehry to complete an ambitious \$3-million renovation, transforming the space while expanding the museum's profile and role in the city.

"There's no question that Jennifer Jones changed the culture of the Norton Simon to embrace the community and improve the facility in wonderful ways," Mayor Bill Bogaard said Thursday. "I'm very grateful to her for that legacy."

The Norton Simon Museum had a rocky start in the city. Resentments lingered over how the famed collector took over the failed Pasadena Art Museum's building - and debts - in 1974, put the modern collection in storage and replaced it with his Old Masters and other artworks.

Beyond its fabled collection of 14th- to 20th-century art, the museum, 441 E. Colorado Blvd., was then known for having limited opening hours and nothing for visitors besides the art.

"I think there were two important things (Jennifer Jones) did, although I don't know all she did," said Jay Belloli, director of gallery programs at the Armory Center for the Arts in Old Pasadena.

"What was really wonderful was she `humanized' the building," Belloli said. "Hiring Frank Gehry's office made an incredible change in how the art was presented and how the building felt...She really wanted to make it as attractive and inviting as possible."

Second, he said, Jones allowed other local arts institutions, including the Armory and the Williamson Gallery at Art Center College of Design, to borrow the Norton Simon's modern works for the first time.

"One of my personal memories of her is the opening night of the `Radical Past' (exhibit). She actually came out to see the show and to see how it looked... I'll always treasure the fact she walked into the Armory to see the show that she'd made possible," Belloli said.

Jennifer Jones Simon, nee Phylis Lee Isley, was born in Tulsa, Okla., on March 2, 1919, museum officials said. She spent a year as a drama student at Northwestern University and attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City.

There, she met her first husband, Robert Hudson Walker, who later starred in such films as "Strangers on a Train." The couple married in 1939 and had two sons before divorcing in 1945.

In the early 1940s, Jones came to Hollywood, where her screen test for David O. Selznick - legendary producer of "Gone with the Wind," "Rebecca" and others - led to a film contract. She married Selznick in 1949 and the couple had one child, the late Mary Jennifer Selznick.

For her first major movie role, Jones received the 1944 Academy Award for best actress in "The Song of Bernadette."

She went on to star in many other films, including "Duel in the Sun," 1946; "Beat the Devil," 1953; and "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing," 1955. Her final film appearance was a 1974 cameo role in "The Towering Inferno."

Several years after Selznick's death in 1965, she met California industrialist and art collector Norton W. Simon. After a four-week romance, they married on May 30, 1971, and continued as dedicated art collectors.

Bogaard said he believes the Norton Simon has become a "major player in our arts and culture" in Pasadena and an important resource in the community and beyond.

"The collection is widely regarded a one of the finest in Southern California," he said. "It's been compared favorably on a regular basis to the wonderful collection at the Getty."

In addition to her work with the museum, Jones spearheaded fund-raising campaigns for mental health, hereditary disease and cancer research.

She is survived by her son, Robert Walker, eight grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Memorial services will be private. In lieu of flowers, the family has asked that contributions can be made to the Norton Simon Museum or the Hereditary Disease Foundation.

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