

Eckhart Grohmann

MSOE Regent

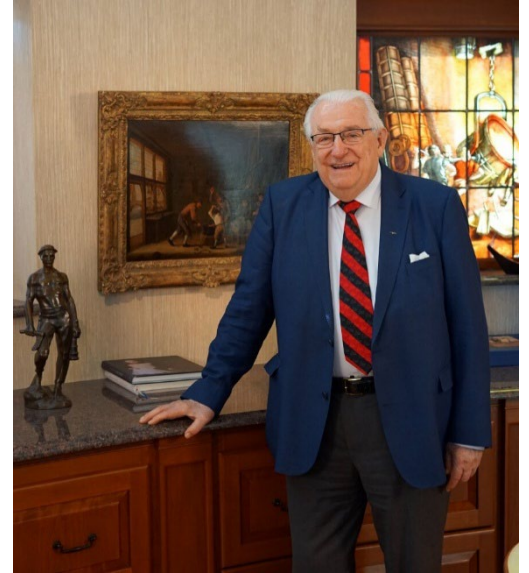
Former Chairman and President of Aluminum Casting & Engineering Co.

Member Since 1968

“I have a painting that was done by an elephant. Would you like to see it?”

The renowned 89-year-old businessman and art collector leads the way to his office, a stained glass-adorned rotunda crowning the top floor of the Grohmann Museum on the Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) campus in downtown Milwaukee.

Beside a large stone fireplace, amidst an impressive display of sculptures and gilded-framed European paintings, is a humble canvas of bright red flowers. Eckhart visited the elephant who painted the flowers while traveling in Thailand. Every one of the pieces Eckhart has acquired over decades of collecting tells a story. As Eckhart shares this one, his smile reveals the youthful dynamism that has shaped his long, distinguished life.



Born in 1936 in Breslau, Silesia, Germany, Eckhart grew up with his grandparents during WWII, living on the premises of the expansive quarrying and processing firm his great-great-grandfather founded in 1819. Eckhart and his three siblings enjoyed a “dream childhood.”

“The plant ran 24 hours a day. My grandfather was the boss. I could go anywhere and watch all the tradesmen at work. Hands-on work always made sense to me.”

Then the war changed everything. When Eckhart was about 8 years old, the Russians arrived and his family was expelled.

“We were moved to West Germany in box cars. We had no money, everything was left behind.”

Eckhart’s entrepreneurial spirit emerged. As a teenager, he began driving wealthy Americans on multi-week tours around Europe. He was delighted to discover that high-end shops would offer a commission to enterprising tour guides who delivered tourists to their doors.

“I always liked traveling. I used the money to help my parents build a house.”

Though he often shirked the lectures, Eckhart earned the equivalent of an MBA from the University of Mannheim Business School. In 1962, at the age of 26, Eckhart loaded his Volkswagen on a ship and set out for New York in search of bigger opportunities. Inspired by his grandfather, he knew he wanted to one day own his own business. He saw an ad in the Wall Street Journal for six executive trainees in the DoAll Company in Des Plaines, Illinois. Eckhart applied, secured one of the positions, and headed west.

Thus began a long, rewarding career in business. In 1965, Eckhart acquired the Aluminum Casting and Engineering Company (ACE/CO), a small foundry of 35 workers on the south side of Milwaukee. He bought the foundry with financing from the Marine Bank on Greenfield and 16th. Because he was such a good client, Eckhart was asked by Marine Bank to join its board of directors just four years later. He went on to serve as a bank director for 13 years until the bank was acquired by Bank One in the late 1980s.

“I was flattered to be asked to join the board. I learned a lot about business in Milwaukee.”

Under Eckhart’s watch, ACE/CO grew tenfold until he sold the business in 2007. Eckhart handled sales for the company and fondly recalls entertaining guests at the old John Ernst Café. A savvy businessman, he was always seeking new opportunities. In 1980, he co-founded Central Control Alarm Corp. When he sold it to Ameritech in 1997, it was the leading alarm company in Wisconsin.

While managing his businesses, Eckhart made time to nurture his passions for art and education. In the 1960s, Eckhart started collecting paintings depicting workers, craftsmen and industry.

“Having a foundry gives you a relationship to workers. This collection is unique in the world.”

He also devoted considerable time and treasure to the growth of MSOE. In 2001, Eckhart gifted his extensive “Man at Work” art collection to MSOE and established the Grohmann Museum, which today houses more than 2,000 artworks from 1500 to the present, reflecting the evolution of work through the ages. Eckhart received an honorary doctor of engineering degree from MSOE in 1999. He has served as MSOE regent since 1990, and he and his wife, Ischi, remain devoted supporters of the school.

“One cannot walk the campus of MSOE and miss the impact of Dr. Grohmann,” said past Rotary president and current VP of Marketing and Community Engagement at MSOE Saj Thachenkary. “From the Grohmann Museum to Grohmann Tower to the Grohmann Scholars/scholarships, his presence and support are clear, and it is not an uncommon sight to find him engaged in conversation with students on campus today.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Eckhart urges young people entering the work force today to lean into hard work.

“You always have to do more than you are asked to do. Then when people look to promote, they will inevitably look to you.”

Eckhart’s generosity, reflected in his mantra that “it is always better to give with a warm hand,” has resonated with MSOE benefactors who often cite Eckhart’s example as one that motivates them as students, young alumni and regents to give back.

Eckhart came to Rotary in 1968 at the urging of his friend Heinz Werwath, then treasurer at MSOE and the son of Oscar Werwath, MSOE’s founder.



“All the movers and shakers of Milwaukee were at Rotary,” Eckhart said.

When Eckhart joined Rotary, the meetings looked different. For starters, there were no women members. Also, attendance was mandatory.

“If you missed a meeting, you had to make it up, and you could do this at any Rotary club anywhere in the world. I loved the makeups. When I traveled with my family, I would seek out the local Rotary. I did this in Japan, China, Australia, India and Africa, you name it. I had perfect attendance for 25 years.”



At one makeup meeting at the Rotary Club in Munich, Eckhart noticed some confusion at the check-in line ahead. A woman Rotarian from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, had arrived at the meeting, but at that time there were still no women Rotarians in Bavaria. As local members stopped the line, debating what to do, Eckhart moved to the front.

“Just check her in,” he said. “In Wisconsin, we have ladies now.”

While much has changed since then, Eckhart’s appreciation for Rotary remains the same. He holds the distinction of being the longest tenured member of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee.

“I’m going to be 90 this year. My hearing is not so good, but I love seeing my friends.”

Editor’s Note: *Rotary People of Action* is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Elizabeth Evans Draper.