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## **Expanding on a Legacy The Story of the Montclair Art Museum**

Ever since opening its doors in 1914, the Montclair Art Museum has enjoyed a national and international reputation for its superb collections of American and Native American art. The institution was inaugurated as New Jersey's first public art museum. For many decades it remained the only one in the state devoted entirely to art. The Museum has been unique as a significant institution located in a suburban locale. It is now widely considered by scholars and critics to be one of the best medium-sized museums in the United States. In 1999 *Art & Antiques* cited it as "a model of the best that America's regional museums have to offer today." The institution was a pioneer: one of the country's first museums primarily engaged in collecting American art (including the work of contemporary, nonacademic artists) and among the first dedicated to the study and creation of a significant ethnographic art collection. This pioneering spirit still reverberates in the Museum's pursuit and presentation of high-quality art that characterizes and celebrates America's diversity and multiculturalism.

### **Origins of the Montclair Art Museum**

During the late nineteenth century, the bucolic town of Montclair evolved into a lively community of artists and collectors. Among its most prominent inhabitants was America's greatest landscape painter, George Inness, who resided in Montclair from 1885 until his death in 1894. He attracted a following of painters and sculptors, and galvanized the collective consciousness that eventually gave birth to the Museum. Others, such as the neoclassical sculptor William Couper, served on the town's Municipal Art Commission (MAC), established in 1908 to beautify Montclair and preserve its country town charm. Presiding over the commission was the civic-minded William T. Evans, a dry-goods magnate and prolific collector who had acquired the Montclair estate of George Inness Jr. in 1900. Evans purchased some 800 American paintings between the early 1880s and 1913, making his the largest collection of American art before World War I.

Evans' commission proposed a "suitable Town Common" in Montclair, to feature "new educational, art, and recreation features," with a public art gallery as its centerpiece. Although the Town Common was not realized, Evans pledged thirty-six American paintings for a new gallery in 1909, with the condition that they be housed in a fireproof building. Evans hoped that his gift would inspire others and "Montclair, as generously endowed by Nature, may be enriched by Art and so rendered even more attractive as a select residential town."

Evans soon received a pledge from Montclair resident Florence Rand Lang. A painter herself, Lang had inherited a fortune from her father, Jasper Rand of Ingersoll-Rand, and cultural inspiration from her mother, Annie Valentine Rand, an avid collector of Native American art. Lang had three stipulations: first, that "definite and adequate arrangements" be made for the building's future maintenance; second, that it be a museum as well as an art gallery; and third, that part of it be named in honor of her mother and devoted to exhibiting her Native American art collection.

A town referendum for funding was defeated in 1910. MAC disbanded, and its members created a new entity, the Montclair Art Association (MAA). With Evans as president, MAA incorporated and established the Museum through private means. The organization was governed by a fifteen-member board of area notables, among them William Couper and Frederick Waugh.

A three and a half acre site located at the corners of Bloomfield and South Mountain Avenues was purchased in 1912 for \$32,500 by additional capital from Evans and Lang. New York architect Albert R. Ross, whose previous distinguished commissions included public libraries, monuments, and memorials, designed the building in

a neoclassical Greek Revival style. The brick-and-stone structure included three main galleries on the principal floor: Center Court for sculpture and the work of local artists, South Gallery for American paintings, and North Gallery for the Rand Collection.

As work on the physical and organizational structure proceeded, the Museum's mission also developed. The institution would serve as a locus of both art and learning, a place where children and adults could come to be inspired and educated. The Museum's first curator and director, Miss Helen Kent Taylor, recommended by Lang and appointed in late 1913, had been an art supervisor in the Montclair public school system.

As part of its mission to encourage the creative arts, the Museum also resolved to promote artists from its vicinity and around New Jersey, an undertaking that continues to the present. The opening celebration was attended by more than 500 people, and featured a loan exhibition of works by sixty artists living in Montclair and the surrounding area.

Also on view were the collection of paintings presented to the Museum by Evans, and Lang's valuable collection of Native American artifacts. In the Evans group were works by George Inness, Ralph Albert Blakelock, Homer Dodge Martin, Childe Hassam, John Twachtman, Frederick Waugh, and other leading painters. The Rand Collection, begun by her mother and significantly augmented by Lang, encompassed several hundred objects- baskets, clothing, jewelry, weaponry, games, tools, and household item- that revealed the country's cultural traditions.

Evans' and Lang's largesse included two sculptural works that became signature pieces for the institution. Evans gave *The Sun Vow* by Hermon Atkins MacNeil. This bronze blends American and Native American themes, and has adorned the grounds in front of the building since 1914. Lang donated *Crown for the Victor* by founding artist-trustee William Couper.

### **The First Decades: 1914 to 1940**

In 1916 Helen Kent Taylor was succeeded as director by Miss Katherine Inness (no relative of the painting Inness family). In the same year, the Museum's Le Brun Library was founded through a gift of art and architecture books from patrons Michel and Pierre Le Brun. Before his death in 1918, Museum cofounder Evans augmented his original gift with a total of fifty-four paintings and two sculptures by such major turn-of-the-century artists as Daniel Chester French, Theodore Robinson, and Julian Alden Weir, as well as local artists Charles Warren Eaton and Frederic Ballard Williams.

The first several decades saw continuous growth for the fledgling institution in spite of war, the Depression, and still nonexistent public funding. While continuing to mount collection and loan exhibitions, the Museum also developed and initiated public programs, including lectures, workshops, classes, and other activities.

In 1922 the Museum's faithful benefactor Lang offered a new means of financial support: a \$10,000 gift to provide an endowment fund for operations, with the promise of \$10,000 more if members matched her initial award. Membership surged, the challenge was met, and the Museum finally was financially stable.

At the Museum's tenth anniversary, Lang provided another major capital gift for the construction of the present facade, the Library, a second-floor gallery and curatorial offices. The Museum's Art School was inaugurated in 1924, offering studio instruction for both children and adults by a distinguished faculty of artists. In 1926, a Picture Buying Fund was established. Members were asked to contribute to this fund and earn the privilege of voting for the purchase of a painting from a scheduled exhibition. Robert Henri's Jimmie O'D was the first work to be acquired in this fashion.

When Museum director Inness died in 1929, she was succeeded by a third Lang candidate Miss Marion Haviland, who previously had served as director of New York's Washington Square Gallery.

A new expansion funded again by Lang kicked off the next decade. A fireproof, steel-and-stone East Wing opened in 1931 to provide more exhibition space for the Rand Collection and also studios for the popular Art School. By now, the Native American collection had grown to more than 1,500 objects and included items from all of the Native culture areas of the United States.

The Museum's focus, predisposed by the interests and offerings of Evans and Lang, was affirmed in the 1930s with the gift of George Inness's Delaware Water Gap. Another major acquisition of this era was Edward Hopper's Coast Guard Station.

Although Haviland introduced a published Bulletin and oversaw a sizeable increase in Art School enrollment, she lost favor with the Museum's trustees and resigned in 1932. She was succeeded immediately by Mrs. Mary Cooke Swartwout. Swartwout was director for twenty years and is credited with reversing perceptions of exclusivity by engaging and involving a greater part of the local population in Museum activities.

### **The 1940s**

Beginning in the pre-World War II era, greater attention was given to the aesthetics of the Museum grounds for visual stimulation and educational function. In the 1940s trustee, architect, artist, and horticulturist Howard Van Vleck took responsibility for the planning, planting, and care of both indigenous and rare trees. In 1986 the Museum grounds were officially designated the Van Vleck Arboretum.

Lang died in 1943, and the Museum lost the greatest patron it had ever known. Over thirty-two years, she donated to the Museum more than 2,000 works of American and Native American art, and provided financial support totaling \$252,000. Her will gave an additional \$200,000, and her estate yielded another \$1 million for the Museum.

From these final bequests the Lang Acquisition Fund was created in 1944. The Museum was now able to adopt a more ambitious program of collecting. Its first purchase was also its first Asher B. Durand painting—the Hudson River School masterpiece *Early Morning at Cold Spring*.

The Museum's first eighteenth-century painting, Gilbert Stuart's lively portrait *Caleb Whitefoord*, entered the collection in 1945. Together with the Durand landscape, it signified the launch of a comprehensive plan to collect American art from the 1700s to the present. This acquisition program was cemented further in 1946 with the establishment of the Blanche R. Pleasants Purchase Fund designated for contemporary art (works no more than fifteen years old). Raphael Soyer's *After the Bath* was among the first to be acquired by this fund.

### **Dramatic Growth of the Collection under Director Kathryn Gamble from 1952 to 1979**

Swartwout retired in 1952, and stewardship of the Museum was placed in the hands of Miss Kathryn E. Gamble, assistant director since 1944. Gamble refined the aesthetic vision and educational purpose of the burgeoning institution for twenty-seven years.

The indispensable Lang Acquisition Fund was used to make twenty-seven purchases to enhance the Museum's holdings. Interior renovations in 1954 and 1957 updated and expanded the building to increase space for collection storage and to accommodate staff. The first of these remodelings, designed by architect J. Lloyd Berrall of Montclair, also created a second floor above the North Gallery to house the Rand Collection.

The Museum published the first catalogue of its collection in 1961, securing the attention of the public, the arts community, and the critical and popular media. Its holdings were featured in the exhibition *Montclair in Manhattan* at Hirschl & Adler Galleries in New York. During the 1960s, works by Benjamin West, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, Thomas Moran, Washington Allston, Arthur Dove, Elsie Driggs, and Arshile Gorky were purchased. In 1973, the Museum became the first in New Jersey and one of the first in the country to earn the prestigious accreditation of the American Association of Museums.

Artist Moses Soyer and his wife, Ida, added to the collection in 1974 with a bequest of more than 100 works. Pieces by Raphael Soyer, Ben Shahn, Reginald Marsh, Philip Evergood, and others provided representation of American art between World Wars I and II. The *New York Times* reported that the Museum had “evolved into one of the country’s leading small museums and a major showcase for American art.” The Museum’s growth was documented in a second collection catalogue published in 1977.

## **The 1980s**

In 1976 Gamble hired Robert J. Koenig as assistant director. After Gamble retired, Koenig became director in 1980. The trustees honored Gamble with the title of Director Emeritus.

Koenig’s eleven-year tenure included many benchmarks. One of the most significant was a gift to the collection in 1985 from Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed of more than 9,000 objects. Included were the work and personal papers of Morgan Russell, a cofounder of Synchronism, the first American modernist art movement. The Museum acquired a collection of Currier & Ives prints from George Raimon Beach and Mrs. William C. Ridgway. In 1987 a special gift from Mrs. Florence F. Schumann enabled the Museum to expand its small holding of post-World War II American art with acquisitions of work by Louise Nevelson, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, and Richard Diebenkorn. In 1989 the Museum’s most comprehensive collection catalogue of American paintings was published.

The Museum’s collection has always served as a catalyst for significant exhibitions, including the landmark *Asher B. Durand* in 1971. During the 1980s the Museum organized its first major traveling loan exhibitions, notably *Down Garden Paths: The Floral Environment in American Art*, curated by William H. Gerts. Former Curator of Collections Marilyn Kushner’s pioneering *Morgan Russell: A Retrospective* was circulated by the American Federation of Arts in 1990 and 1991.

## **The Museum In Recent Years: 1990 to the Present**

In 1991 Koenig resigned and Ellen S. Harris, a deputy director at the Museum of Modern Art, became director. In 2001 Patterson Sims, formerly of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art became Director.

In the 1990s acquisitions reflected the Museum’s commitment to its long-range plan of acquiring 300 years of American and Native American art. Major acquisitions of late George Inness paintings like *Sunset* and *Gathering Clouds*, and *Spring, Montclair, New Jersey* augmented one of the largest collections of the master’s work. A renewed commitment to acquire modern and contemporary art brought in works by Man Ray, Georgia O’Keeffe, Philip Evergood, Stuart Davis, and Andy Warhol.

Many recent acquisitions demonstrate intercultural connections, such as those seen in works by modernists Steve Wheeler, Will Barnet, and Peter Busa, all influenced by Native American traditions. Numerous assembled artists emphasize modern and contemporary art’s multiculturalism through the diverse scope of gender, heritage, style, and subject matter. These include African American artists Jacob Lawrence, Lois Mailou Jones, Charles

White, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Whitfield Lovell.

Additionally, the Museum has in recent years developed a notable collection of contemporary art by Native American artists including Jody Folwell, Kay WalkingStick, Tony Abeyta, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Dan Namingha, Fritz Scholder, and Allan Houser among others.

Under leadership of Ellen Harris, the Museum also actively augmented its collection of American photographs during the mid-1990s. More than 100 works were assembled with an aim to develop a survey of the medium to complement the Museum's painting collection. Among the photographs entering the collection were works by Walker Evans, Aaron Siskind, Berenice Abbott, Margaret Bourke-White, Helen Levitt, Harry Callahan, James VanDerZee, Gordon Parks, Weegee, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander.

The development and presentation of the Museum's collection were complemented by its increasingly ambitious program of loan and traveling exhibitions, accompanied by scholarly catalogues. With Elsie Driggs's *Queensborough Bridge* as its centerpiece, *Precisionism in America 1915-1941: Reordering Reality* (1994-95) was hailed in *New York Magazine* as "one of the best shows to not come to New York this year." The Museum also mounted the first museum retrospectives of American modernists Steve Wheeler and Hananiah Harari, in 1997, and of Will Barnett in 2000-2001. Other groundbreaking shows were *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America* (1999-2000) and *Paris 1900: The "American School" at the Universal Exposition*, which completed a nationwide tour before traveling to the Musée Carnavalet in Paris during spring of 2001.

A related innovation, begun by Harris, was the Museum's creation of a consortium of a dozen museums, stretching from New Hampshire to northern New York State to Florida, which sought to reach new audiences by sharing collections and exhibitions. As part of this effort, the Museum circulated *Affinities and Influences: Native American Art and American Modernism* (1995-96), which was the first show in the history of the Museum to bridge its two primary collections.

The last decade of the twentieth century also brought continued and considerable progress in terms of administration and operations. In 1997 the Museum appointed Twig Johnson its first official Curator of Native American Art, publicly affirming the weight and magnitude of that collection. The following year, the merger of two locally, regionally, and nationally praised studio instruction programs resulted in the Montclair Art Museum Yard School of Art. Also of note, an enlarged board of trustees- now numbering thirty members, in contrast to the founding fifteen- assured the involvement of a broader range of community and business leaders, who bring to the institution a wide diversity of experience and expertise.

A re-envisioned emphasis on public service was manifested by an expanded slate of offerings, including family-g geared Sunday Sampler programs; free admission on Saturdays'; improved interior and exterior accoutrements, such as user-friendly signage; collaborations with other arts and cultural organizations; and many other initiatives.

One of the most important of these was the institution's vital inventory of its Native American artifacts, which evaluated objects with respect to regulations of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), exhibition readiness, conservation needs, and storage requirements. Another was the launch of the Museum's website [www.montclairartmuseum.org](http://www.montclairartmuseum.org), which affords instant access to its collections and activities to the global community.

In the mid-1990s the Museum endeavored to fulfill its current role and envisage its future in preparing its strategic plan. Revised and ratified by the trustees in 1997, it included a major renovation and expansion plan designed by distinguished architect Richard Blinder. Meeting the needs of its growing audiences as well as its ever-growing collection, this major enterprise would allow the Museum to thrive as a living environment for art,

education and interaction.

A 1937 article in *The Montclair Times* reported that “the institution has been carried to its present size and capacity for usefulness by the generous gifts of time, money and art treasures from interested citizens.” The same words could have been written at the close of the century as the Museum breached this historic milestone. The \$14.5 million project kicked off in late Spring 2000 with a groundbreaking ceremony with Governor Christine Todd Whitman as keynote speaker.

The new facility was completed in 2002, and doubled the square footage of MAM. Major modifications were made to the existing building, and an expansive new wing was added. The design incorporates eight galleries, seven for the continuous display of collection masterworks and one for the active program of special, temporary exhibitions. Honoring the Museum’s spiritual genesis and the father of Montclair’s early art colony, one of the new galleries is designated for the permanent installation of its George Inness works.

Additions and improvements also created three studio spaces for both regular art classes and workshops for visiting school groups, public areas for programming and special events, an education resource room, elevator access to its four floors, a library reading room, and essential art storage, preparation, and conservations areas.

As it moves forward in the 21st century and approaches its centennial, the Museum remains true to the vision and intent of its founders. At the core of the Museum’s identity is its collection, which has always been guided by a broad acquisition policy. As Lloyd Goodrich, leading American art scholar and former director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, observed more than thirty years ago:

*One of the outstanding features of the collection is the breadth of viewpoint it displays, its recognition of merit in the works of widely differing artists...The museum has never been doctrinaire in its judgments, nor seduced by the currently fashionable...It has judged artists as individuals...Obviously the sole criterion has been quality- of the artist, and of the particular work.*