

# Museum History

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NBMAA History

The New Britain Museum of American Art, with its new state-of-the-art Chase Family Building, is a cultural gem located next to historic Walnut Hill Park, designed by nationally known landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted.

The Museum traces its beginnings to the New Britain Institute, which was chartered in 1853 to foster learning by a community of newly arrived immigrants who worked in the city's numerous factories. In 1901 the Institute moved from rented spaces to a new building in town that accommodated 75,000 volumes, a children's room, and a history room. The site also included a windowless "art room" in which portraits of prominent figures—both national and local—were displayed.

In 1903 John Butler Talcott, former New Britain mayor and chairman of the Institute's building committee, established the first purchase fund for "original modern oil paintings either by native or foreign artists" in the departments of art known as figure, landscape and genre subjects. Charged with making art acquisitions, the Library Committee sought advice from New York gallery owner William Macbeth, whose gallery would be the site of the controversial urban realist exhibition of The Eight in 1908. Macbeth suggested that the committee begin by collecting "backward and forward" (from colonial to contemporary), using the John Butler Talcott Fund, which yielded \$875 annually.

In 1928, the art room's first curator, Fanny J. Brown, began expanding the exhibition program to include current international art trends—such as a display of contemporary French work—to mixed critical review. As one local editorial read, the controversy of such exhibitions "will do yeoman's service in arousing the populace to a realization that we have art exhibits of such caliber in town that they are worth a clash of opinion". Miss Brown is holding high the torch of art interest in New Britain and we intend to encourage her. Further encouragement came in 1934 when a New Britain philanthropist left the Institute an endowment and a stone mansion to the Institute. There, the Art Museum of the New Britain Institute opened to the public on July 1, 1937.

"A Worthwhile Gallery of American Art"

In 1937 with its new, inherited space for its collection, the New Britain Institute further refined its collecting mission under

the guidance of Robert Macbeth, the son of its first art advisor. Macbeth remarked that "New Britain already has more art interest than most cities of its size" and suggested a plan that would make "the Institute not a one-room collection of beautiful pictures, but a worthwhile Gallery of American Art."

In addition to bolstering the collection with acquisitions of historical and educational significance, the Museum reinstated its ambitious loan exhibition program (which had lapsed during the years of the Great Depression). The Museum also remained committed to local, emerging talent, annually exhibiting the work of artists in and from the area. The 1949 exhibition "Young Talent" showcased the work of Sol LeWitt, who was raised in New Britain. Less than a decade later, the 1957 show "Five Decades of Your Museum's Progress" highlighted the Museum's active exhibition program and burgeoning collection. As the Museum's director remarked, "It is felt that this exhibition in its entirety represents a great stride forward since the first painting was bought in 1908." In apparent agreement with this assessment of success, the trustees were confident enough to give the Museum a separate identity from the Institute, naming it the New Britain Museum of American Art.

The New Britain Museum of American Art continues to build on its successes. Its collection dates from 1739 to the present and has grown to approximately 10,236 works of art as a result of purchases and donations. It includes oil paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, photographs and illustrations. Exhibitions continue to strike a balance between the historic and the contemporary, emphasizing the importance of art's past and its relevance to the present. As one of the first institutions dedicated solely to American art, the New Britain Museum of American Art continues to play a vital role in shaping our understanding of the rich history of the nation's art and the art's dynamic relationship with community.

The visitor can experience an entire survey of our nation's artists ranging from John Singleton Copley, Frederic Church, and Thomas Cole, to Georgia O'Keeffe, Thomas Hart Benton and Sol LeWitt. The collection is especially rich in American Impressionism; Mary Cassatt, William Merritt Chase, Theodore Robinson, Childe Hassam, John Henry Twachtman, Julian Alden Weir, Willard Metcalf, Frank Benson, Frederick Frieseke, Richard Miller, Arthur Clifton Goodwin, Ernest Lawson, Maurice Prendergast, and Guy Wiggins are all well represented.

Also of special interest to visitors is the Sanford B. D. Low Memorial Illustration Collection. Begun in 1964 and comprising more than 1,700 works, the Low Illustration Collection is the nation's first museum-based collection covering the history of American illustration from the 19th century to the present.

As it began its second century in 2003, the New Britain Museum of American Art faced two extraordinary challenges: to teach the next generation of Americans to appreciate and preserve the heritage that the collection represents and to create a facility worthy of the renowned collection. In response to their challenges, the Trustees embarked on a capital fund drive for the future of the Museum: expansion and renovation of our facility; developing formal education programs for children, adults and families; conservation of our priceless collection; enhancing our operations; and building our endowment.

In 2000, Ann Beha Architects of Boston completed a master plan for the expansion of the Museum. Our new Chase Family Building, a 43,000-square-foot building with 10 new galleries, opened in April, 2006. It is part of a \$26.2 million project that has made the New Britain Museum of American Art one of New England's largest museums.

The expanded Museum is now better positioned to carry out its mission of drawing diverse segments of the community together in appreciating and understanding their common humanity through art.