Wadsworth relives Gilded Age glory days in grand reopening

Every gallery will be open to the public for the first time in 50 years.

The Wadsworth’s director, Susan Talbott, and curator Oliver Tostmann prepare for the reopening of the museum’s European art galleries after a five-year renovation.

**BUILDING PROJECTS**

Hartford. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, one of the oldest art museums in the US, is due to unveil the results of its five-year renovation on 19 September for the first time in 50 years, every gallery in the museum will be open to the public simultaneously. The institution’s rich collection of 17th-century European paintings will be presented comprehensively for the first time in 20 years, inside the restored Morgan Memorial Building. The financier J. Pierpont Morgan, a Hartford native and one of the Wadsworth’s most devoted patrons, paid for the construction of the original building in 1907. The renovation shows how the great collectors of the past lived with art. The museum’s 24ft-tall Great Hall is hung cheek by jowl, as if by a Gilded Age tycoon. A custom-built cabinet of curiosities is packed with 200 objects, many donated by J.P. Morgan.

The project has also resulted in the museum’s capacity being expanded by 27%. We don’t know who carved this cup, for whom it was made or who owned it before it surfaced in Vienna in the late 19th century. But when I found it three years ago, I immediately wanted it for our new Kunstkammer gallery. We know that the bowl and base were carved from the long projecting tooth of a small Arctic whale called anarwhal. However, many of the cup’s early owners probably believed that it so held magical, protective powers.

**THE CURATORS’ PICKS**

Wadsworth Atheneum curators select the first work you should see in the museum’s refurbished galleries

**Édouard Manet**

*The Blenheim Orchestra* (around 1870)

Chosen by Linda Roth, senior curator and head of decorative arts

I had the privilege of studying this painting close up for an entire year during a conservation treatment that revealed many previously lost details and shed light on the artist’s ever-changing technique. I had to account for the fact that Di Cosimo used both egg tempera and oil paint, even though Vasari exaggerated in describing the artist as “more like a beast than a man”. With its serenity and slightly awkward beauty, the work instantly draws me in. Many of Di Cosimo’s paintings, including this one, are as eccentric as he was, although Vasari exaggerated in describing the artist as “more like a beast than a man”.

**Piero di Cosimo**

*The Finding of Vulcan* on Lemnos (around 1500)

Chosen by Ulrich Birkmaier, chief conservator

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**Christian Marclay**


Chosen by Susan Talbott, director and chief executive

Perhaps it was love at first sight, seeing Manet’s masterpiece on my early visits to the Wadsworth Atheneum. The simple composition of grey and black stood out and seduced me. I immediately wanted it for our new Kunstkammer gallery. We know that the bowl and base were carved from the long projecting tooth of a small Arctic whale called anarwhal. However, many of the cup’s early owners probably believed that it so held magical, protective powers.

**Théophile Alexandre Steinlen**

*The March of the People* (around 1900)

Chosen by Oliver Tostmann, curator of decorative arts

When the Wadsworth bought this painting in 1971, the artist was mainly known for his brilliant illustrations of cats. But the work helped to broaden our understanding not only of Steinlen, but also of French art in the late 19th century. One could criticise the painting for its sentimentality, but it balances out a collection dominated by Impressionist paintings. Steinlen forcefully reminds us of the inroads of a French society that was radically transformed on the brink of the 20th century.