REVIVING THE Grande Dame

Refreshed galleries, dynamic shows and the return of favorite works bring visitors back to the Wadsworth Atheneum.

SUSAN RAND BROWN

TWO DECADES AGO, HARTFORD'S Wadsworth Atheneum, the "oldest continuously operating public art museum" in the country, was becoming a ghost of its former self, more museum than museum. Galleries were closing and favorite paintings sent out on loan or locked away. Directors came and went; losing board members were fodder for the daily news, and a proposed new building was publicly reviled. Today this classic on Main Street is a back from the brink. Reinvestment meant strengthening collaborations and looking within, playing to strengths: an enviable back catalog of European and American art, and a history of championing modernism.

The upward trajectory began with sandaled Susan L. Talbott, appointed director and CEO of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in 2008, whose all-hands-on-deck attitude and willingness to color outside the lines brings to mind the post-war painters Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, whom she lists among her favorites.

Talbott had left the Smithsonian Institution versed in defining art through cultural artifacts and planning multifaceted exhibitions, and catering to a broad public. She joined the Atheneum charged with shoring-up aging buildings while also increasing public presence. She's the museum's tenth director since its 1842 founding, and the second woman to hold the top post.

Talbott talks about her early days on the job, fielding midnight calls about leaky ceilings and water seeping through walls. She shuttered galleries and placed paintings in storage. She moved post haste from near-disaster to an all-out transformation of the museum's three floors and five connected buildings filled with grand open spaces as well as nooks, crannies and stairways that didn't always connect. What did connect was her unshakable faith that these architectural mini-museums, spanning 170 years of design and representing Gothic Revival, Renaissance Revival and the International Style, were worth saving.

When complete in September, this roof-to-basement renovation—the largest in the museum's history—will open all 32 galleries to the public for the first time in 50 years. Without expanding the footprint of existing buildings (one design proposed in the late 1990s was mockingly referred to as the "drawsucker"), there will be 25 percent more gallery space to showcase collections, from Chinese porcelains and American paintings by Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth to 21st-century digital media. This has all occurred at a cost of $33 million, much of which was funded by the state of Connecticut.

The Artistic Center for Art and Culture, a sister organization that collects and exhibits art and artifacts of the cultures of the African Diaspora, has also redesigned and reopened its second-floor galleries.

Like the surroundings of Downton Abbey, the original Gothic structure possesses good bones. A welcoming Sol LeWitt wall drawing, irregular sony color bands on rose facing walls (1996), pulls the eye around the cathedral-like front lobby and up its three stories in rhythmic swirls, punctuated by clerestory windows under its peak. Four glass atriums cross the vast space, highlighting second- and third-floor galleries with de facto...
Kiki Smith’s chilling representation of a disembodied female torso bound in metal, Daisy Clare (1992), suggests a different kind of link. Her father, Tony Smith, is among the roster of bold-faced artists whose works are within the three nearby, reopened gallery bays devoted to the post-war period. Tony Smith, whose trapezoidal steel sculpture Amaryllis (1965) is a fixture on the Athenæum’s front lawn, has made generous museum donations, including a Mark Rothko from his own collection.

Strolling through the post-war galleries, visitors can almost overhear passionate conversations about art and politics flying across the room. Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Rothko and Smith are Prometheus figures within a generation of abstract artists who could stir-up some heat, only hinted at in these works. Gottlieb’s passionate fire-red circle, Under and Over (1959), comes close, as does Frankenthaler’s Sea Picture with Black (1959), where a blue sea is dominated by explosive black brushstrokes.

Michael C. McMillan’s Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire) (2010), a six-foot representation of a crumbling seaside hotel, hangs askew in the darkened MATRIX contemporary art gallery, this
The mood of the park from remote, gentled seas, where art reverberates to loving'sful promises, house of bourgeois, corner-abandoned yet wistful seedlessness with a faint promise of renewal.

This is complemented with works that range from impressionist treasure David Rickey of Coney Island (c. 1880) by John Henry Twachtman to a lasso-like mixed-media installation by Caledonia Curry (aka "Swoon"), whose Career, Early Evening (2013) sets silhouetted figures in the shadows of the deserted Cyclone roller coaster.

Reginald Maris, capturing the voyeurism central to the Coney Island experience, are worthy of their own exhibits and much subtlety and substance, will travel to museums including New Haven’s Yale University Art Gallery. Its catalog is remarkable in both its depth and breadth:

European paintings and decorative arts have their day in the sun when the Morgan Memorial galleries reopen, artwork restored and the Renaissance Revival building, designed around an atrium, returns to historic splendor.

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In the same gallery, bumper cars and the other iconic Coney Island roller coasters, the Thunderbolt, are featured in a clip from Woody Allen’s Annie Hall (1977). Iconic photographs by Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, Arthur "Weegee" Fellig, Robert Frank, Mary Ellen Mark, Lisette Model, and others also speak to the allure of Coney Island.

This major museum undertaking, with its share of big-name glitz like suits of eucharis: paintings such as Wexler House (1936) by Artemisia Gentileschi’s Self-Portrait as a Lute Player (c. 1446–1456), is the Baroque masterpiece whose acquisitions Susan Talbott negotiated, will make its public debut as a centerpiece of the collection, joining Caravaggios, 17th-century Dutch masterworks and other timeless paintings.

The Atheneum’s renaissance will be Talbott’s swan song. She says goodbye this fall, having restored the Grande Dame on Main Street into a New England must-see, quite unlike the retreat for contemplation envisioned by founder Daniel
Wadsworth, Talbott's legacy, beyond renovation and conservation, includes protecting cultural resources, strengthening collections, expanding the endowment and broadening participation (on one Saturday afternoon, neighborhood families were busy creating Romare Bearden-like collages). Extending the museum's proudest moments, she has been a staunch champion of 20th-century art.

Wearing her curator's hat, Talbott exhibited Patti Smith's Camone Solo (2011) intimate black-and-white Polaroid prints. Having the rail-thin godmother of punk at the museum created an energy worthy of A. Everett "Chick" Austin, 1950s Aachen director legendary for wooing Hartford's avant-garde artists such as Martha Ginsburg and Gertrude Stein, and staging America's first comprehensive Picasso retrospective.

Warhol & Mayphetteme: Guice and Didi opens shortly after Talbott's departure. This show looks backward and forward, conjuring the lively spirit of Samuel Wagstaff, Aachen curator (1961–1968) and collector influential in creating acceptance for photography-based art. Wagstaff cultivated personal and professional ties to Robert Mayphetteme and Andy Warhol and gave minimalist Tony Smith his first museum exhibition.

Not long ago, the building's Gothic castle-like facade might have signaled nothing more than a bus stop, yet the Wadsworth is once again a major player in the life of the city and a summer spot on the New England art map. It's a Phoenix reborn.

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thewadsworth.org