

NEW ENGLAND'S MUSEUM LEADERS JANET ECHELMAN CONNECTICUT BERKSHIRES

# ART NEW ENGLAND

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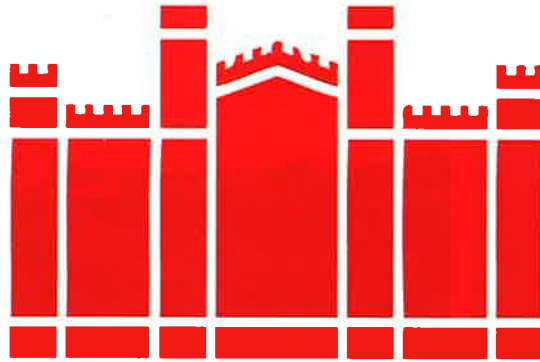
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Special Museums Issue

Milton Avery

# REVIVING THE Grande Dame



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

SUSAN RAND BROWN

**T**WO 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 mausoleum than museum. Galleries were closing and favorite paintings sent out on loan or locked away. Directors came and went, feuding board members were fodder for the daily news, and a proposed new building was publicly reviled. Today this classic on Main Street is back from the brink. Reinvention 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 sandy-haired 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.

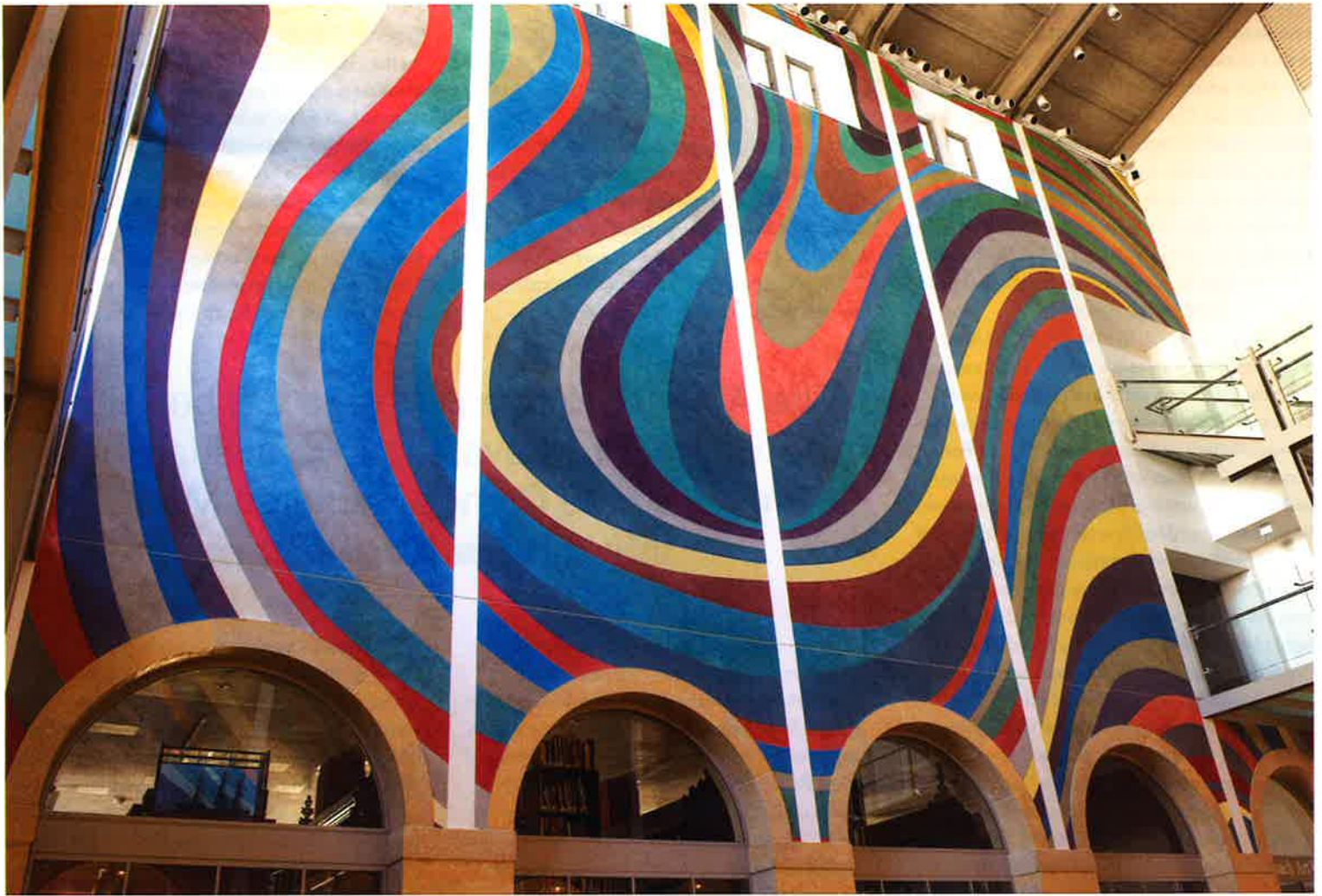
Talbott talks about her early days on the job, fielding midnight calls about leaky ceilings and water seeping through walls. She shuttered galleries and placed paintings in storage. She moved posthaste from near-disaster to an all-out transformation of the museum's three floors and five connected buildings 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 Styles, 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 "dustbuster"), 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 Amistad 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 dowagers of Downton Abbey, the original Gothic structure possesses good bones. A welcoming Sol LeWitt wall drawing, *Irregular wavy color bands on two 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 catwalks cross the vast space, highlighting second- and third-floor galleries with de facto



theatrical stages, so visitors can be observed from above and below.

The contemporary art gallery, with its signature Warhol (*Early Colored Jackie*, 1964) and Rauschenberg (*Retroactive I*, 1964), an ode to the Kennedys and the Space Age, lies straight ahead. A generously spaced installation by Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art, marries works from the collection with new acquisitions. It's a treat to find favorites like Bob Thompson's monumental, Gauguin-inspired *Garden of Music* (1960), jazz musicians in an abstracted forest, across the gallery from Kara Walker's newly acquired *Wall Sampler I* (2013), her signature white stenciled figures on a black surface commenting on the antebellum South.

Stacked wooden box forms, *The Mazes and Snares of Minimalism* (1993) by Carl Andre—the same conceptual artist whose controversial *Stone Field Sculpture* (1977) lies across from the Athenium—gain context within view of *Kiruna* (1982), an almost colorless, wall-mounted circular structure by the acclaimed Martin Puryear.

Kiki Smith's chilling representation of a disembodied female torso bound in metal, *Daisy Chain* (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 Athenium'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 Promethean 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. McMillen'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

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year marking its 40th anniversary of presenting artists working outside the mainstream (many MATRIX artists, such as Laurie Anderson, Cindy Sherman and Chuck Close, have established international reputations). McMillen's apparition of dereliction and decay is one end of the spectrum of *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008*, the museum's blockbuster whirligig, unwinding like an old-timey boardwalk through the enlarged and renovated third-floor special exhibition galleries.

"More people fall in love at Coney Island than any other spot in the world" pronounced the *New York Times* early in the tumultuous heyday of this repository of the nation's sunny aspirations and its libidinous underside. For *Coney Island*, Robin Jaffee Frank, chief curator and Kriebler Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, assembled fine art pieces and related cultural artifacts from hundreds of institutions and individual sources to recreate the colors, textures and sounds of this unprecedented cultural phenomenon of boardwalk and beach on Brooklyn's southern tip. "An astonishing array of artists found Coney Island aesthetically liberating," Frank said during a gallery walk-through.

Art and artifacts offer "prisms through which to view the American experience," according to Frank, and they fill the entire third floor surrounding the central lobby. Each of the exhibit's five sections is painted in a distinctive shade, ranging from sunrise yellow to rainy-day gray. The colors characterize, in chronological order,

the mood of the park from remote, genteel seaside resort to lover's paradise, house of horrors, or near-abandoned yet wistful seediness with a faint promise of renewal.

This is complemented with works that range from impressionist treasure *Dunes Back of Coney Island* (c. 1880) by John Henry Twachtman to a lace-like mixed-media installation by Caledonia Curry (aka "Swoon"), whose *Coney, Early Evening* (2005) sets silhouetted figures in the shadows of the deserted Cyclone roller coaster.

Reginald Marsh, capturing the voyeurism central to the Coney Island experience, are worthy of their own exhibit) 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, artworks restored and the Renaissance Revival building, designed around an atrium, return to historic splendor.

## 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...**

In the same gallery, bumper cars and the other iconic Coney Island roller coaster, 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 (the suite of exuberant paintings such as *Wooden Horses* [1936] by

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* (c. 1616–18), the Baroque masterwork whose acquisition 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





Previous spread: Sol LeWitt, *Irregular wavy color bands on two facing walls* (north-wall detail), 1996, mural and walkways in the Gray Court. Courtesy of the Wadsworth Atheneum. Opposite: Contemporary art installation view, featuring Adolph Gottlieb's *Under and Over* (center), 1959, oil on canvas, 96 x 48". Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gift of Susan Morse Hilles, 1961.5. Above: Reginald Marsh, *Wooden Horses*, 1936, tempera on board. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, the Dorothy Clark Archibald and Thomas L. Archibald Fund, the Kriebler Family Fund for American Art, the American Paintings Purchase Fund, and the Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 2013.1.1. © 2013 Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Left: Red Grooms, *Weegee 1940*, 1998–99, acrylic on paper. Private Collection. Image courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York, © 2013 Red Grooms/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

and-white Polaroid prints. Having the rail-slim godmother of punk at the museum created an energy worthy of A. Everett "Chick" Austin, 1930s Atheneum director legendary for wooing Hartford's avant-garde artists such as Martha Graham and Gertrude Stein, and staging America's first comprehensive Picasso retrospective.

*Warhol & Mapplethorpe: Guise and Dolls* opens shortly after Talbott's departure. This show looks backward and forward, conjuring the feisty spirit of Samuel Wagstaff, Atheneum curator (1961–1968) and collector influential in creating acceptance for photography-based art. Wagstaff cultivated personal and professional ties to Robert Mapplethorpe 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 sunnier spot on the New England art map. It's a Phoenix reborn. ■

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### Coney Island: Visions of An American Dreamland, 1861–2008

On view through May 31, 2015  
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art  
Hartford, CT  
[thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org)

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 *Camera Solo* (2011) intimate black-