



Morgan Great Court at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art as installed for the 2015 re-opening of the Morgan Wing after a multiyear renovation of the building. The hanging of art of several centuries and countries was suggested by Giovanni Paolo Panini's *Interior of a Picture Gallery with the Collection of Cardinal Silvio Valenti Gonzaga*, 1740, which is a feature of the installation. Photo courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

RADICAL CHICK & TAYLOR MADE

by Jay E. Cantor

Accessibility. A modern mantra. It defines systems, institutions, professional situations, personal relationships and more. Accessibility is the word I find most often invoked by museums when they describe programmatic shifts as well as the physical restructuring of their facility. This issue has engendered the expenditure of vast sums of money to make outdated facilities appear modern, and of late, we have seen sparkling new buildings intended to 'open the doors' to institutions that, despite a 50-year history of a new audience awareness, can still appear remote and unwelcoming. Architects who may have produced a single thoughtful and acclaimed museum addition have become the masters of the craft of museum expansion and have, more or less successfully, added new entryways and gallery pavilions to numerous

well-regarded institutions. These are characterized as increasing accessibility as elite institutions struggle, in the face of diminishing dollars, to enlarge their profile and appeal. While the novelty quickly wears off, and the fanfare dies down, the reality of increased overhead and maintenance issues remain in the wake of the headlines. The museum as event is replaced by the recognition that the way the institution addresses its audience is, in the end, the ultimate key to accessibility.

Not surprisingly, the uptick in public awareness, beginning in the 1960s and stimulated by attention-grabbing activities of Tom Hoving at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Carter Brown at the National Gallery of Art, coincided with a host of new federal and state programs and local initiatives that provided both public funds and stimulated strategic positioning for

these institutions. It was, in fact, just 50 years ago the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities were created.

But the history of serious innovation in American art museums began earlier, most notably with two dynamic museum directors who brought significantly different qualities to their institutions and their directorships. A. Everett Austin, known as Chick, at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, and Francis Henry Taylor at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts refashioned their well-established museums and initiated strategies still in place today throughout the American art museum world. This was a time when the mantle of museum management was passing from the grasp of self-perpetuating boards into the hands of trained professionals. Working in smaller and more nimble organizations, these men were able to put ideas in place that were difficult to achieve in more glacial institutions. Ultimately Taylor moved onto a larger playing field when he took over the Metropolitan Museum in 1940 and radically transformed it, but his philosophy had already been tested, lessons learned and ideas worked



Yousuf Karsh (1908–2002), *Francis Henry Taylor*, June 1957, 1957, gelatin silver print, 9⁹/₁₆ x 7¹/₂ in. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester (MA). Gift from the Artist, 1971.83. © Estate of Yousuf Karsh, used with permission.

out in the smaller New England arena. Today, both the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Worcester Art Museum are engaged in the process of re-imagining themselves in a somewhat beleaguered economy and are achieving a significant transformation without new additions.

Chick Austin (1900–1957) can be considered as much an impresario as a conventional museum director. Although he could boast academic credibility, the concept of what a museum director actually is was still in the process of formulation when he arrived at the Wadsworth, at age 27 in 1927. The museum was and is the oldest continuously operating art museum in the country. It originated with the gift of a wealthy local citizen, Daniel Wadsworth, a major patron of contemporary American artists. The Wadsworth was defined as an Atheneum, and ultimately served multiple functions—an art gallery, an art school, a library, and societies for natural and local history, in three discrete sections of the Gothic Revival castle, which opened in 1844. The last of these sister organizations left the Wadsworth in 1964, allowing the museum to fully occupy the original building and its

subsequent additions, the last of which was completed in 1969.

Like many museums in America, the Wadsworth had grown largely through the gifts and bequests from local worthies, many of whom had newly arrived in the arena of art collecting as new industrial fortunes replaced those of the older mercantile establishment. Stimulated by easier access to European travel, greater leisure and the desire to add cultural amenities to cities largely bereft of public institutions for enlightened leisure, this patron class endowed their local environments with lecture halls, opera houses and concert halls, libraries and museums, and motivated the creation of public parks and monuments, all considered the attributes of an enlightened metropolis. While the motives were largely philanthropic, many of the new cultural organizations readily turned into closed corporations.

Art museums tended to mirror the tastes and interests of the patrons who sometimes became the amateur custodians of the collections. Art history was a new discipline, and academic training, as well as the professional management of museums and other cultural organizations, were in their infancy. Museums were overseen by superintendents or managers, collections cared for by untrained amateurs (often collectors themselves) possessing comfortable incomes that allowed them to work for the meager salaries that characterized the museum field well into the 20th century. The larger museums

sometimes turned to Europe, with its deeper tradition of art historical study to find directors and curators.

At the Atheneum, the founding collection was donated and bequeathed by Wadsworth, and significantly supplemented by the bequests of the widow of Samuel Colt and of J.P. Morgan (a Hartford native), each housed in memorial additions to the original museum building, gave strength and diversity to the collections, and provided Austin with the underpinnings for the museum he oversaw during 17 years.

Austin had been trained at Harvard University by Paul J. Sachs, whose innovative program in art museum directing, established in 1922, produced virtually all of the American art museum directors who flourished through much of the last half of the 20th century. From this training, Austin brought a grounding in scholarship and connoisseurship, but he was also determined to make the museum experience engaging, interesting and fun. Austin had a deep theatrical streak that regularly found expression in the art he embraced and in the programming of exhibitions and events at the museum, giving life to a hushed and reverential world.

When Austin and his bride, a member of the Goodwin family, who were related to and business partners of J.P. Morgan, built a house in a Hartford neighborhood, it was a mock Palladian villa, set amidst an area of Tudor mansions. The house appeared more a theatrical backdrop than a solid ancestral



Worcester Art Museum, Renaissance Court where mosaics from ancient Antioch are installed. The museum was a co-sponsor of the excavations in the 1930s. Photo courtesy Worcester Art Museum.



A. Everett "Chick" Austin Jr., in 1927, the year he assumed the directorship of the Wadsworth Atheneum at age 27. Photo courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

manse. To some degree, it was just that. It was 86 feet long and one room deep. Furnished with bits of European woodwork, decorative paintings and sculpture, fabrics and furnishings backed by carefully chosen color harmonies, it was a perfect piece of theater and an appropriate stage for entertaining. The house and the museum became frequent resorts for the most advanced artists, architects and celebrities of the time. Behind the house façade were dressing rooms in the international style deriving from work at the Bauhaus in Germany and considered the first rooms in that vocabulary in America.

Austin redefined the character of the museum through intensive acquisitions in both modern art and baroque painting, which was seriously underappreciated and undervalued at the time.

In the modern field, by the time of the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929, he was already exhibiting Matisse, Braque, and Picasso, and for the latter, Austin organized the first full retrospective in 1934. That year, he oversaw the construction of the Avery Memorial wing, the first

international-style museum building, whose theater was regularly employed for staged productions, concerts, ballets and films, which Austin had begun showing in 1929.

Soon thereafter, he staged the first museum exhibitions of surrealism and neo-romanticism. Artists as wide-ranging as Dalí, Miró, Calder, Mondrian, Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst, and Caravaggio were acquired by Austin for Hartford before any other American museum. And at the urging of Lincoln Kirstein, the Wadsworth sponsored the immigration to America of modern ballet master George Balanchine.

Museum activities in Worcester paled by comparison with Austin's theatrical enterprises, although it too was energized by a new young director, Francis Henry Taylor (1903-1957), who came from a well-heeled Philadelphia family. Taylor's art history training consisted of a year at the Sorbonne studying medieval art under Henri Focillon, and a short stint in graduate school at Princeton before he was chosen to be a curator of medieval art by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1927.

Despite a rather comfortable background, on taking the reins at Worcester in 1931, Taylor immediately understood the role of the museum was to be "an institution of active public service, not simply a repository of art." While he didn't share Austin's enthusiasm for modern art, he acted to energize his institution with programs and exhibitions that could be understood and thus enlighten the visitor. The result for the Worcester Art Museum, which had been founded in 1896 with the bequest of Stephen Salisbury III and had grown haltingly over the decades, was a new burst of energy and, yes, engagement and accessibility.

Its collections had grown without the singular impetus of significant bequests from well-positioned collectors, but industrial wealth helped to underpin the museum's evolution as a jewel box of selectively chosen works.

Turning an elite institution into a

popular retreat during the early years of the Depression took energy and imagination. Like Austin, Taylor turned to the popular medium of film to bring the public in, showing travelogues, documentaries and foreign films that were otherwise unavailable.

With a tradition of popular education and school programs for the region, Worcester was already facing in a good direction. The teaching mission of the museum continued as a major focus, and exhibitions were actually brought into the schools as a prelude to museum visits. Taylor looked boldly outward, even securing a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to create a program of art education for public and private schools across New England.

Teaching at a broader level also was a central focus of his collecting, which he did selectively covering wide-ranging periods and cultures. The galleries were complemented by departmental study rooms, and books were made available in the galleries for those with deeper interest.

To supplement the collections, thematic and historical special exhibitions were organized with loans from other museums, not simply to glorify Worcester's own holdings but to attract and inform a novice audience. Taylor expanded the reach of his ideas and innovations and his enthusiasm for a populist embrace of the rarefied museum world through articles in national magazines. (He even very early on wrote about television, first widely seen by the public at the World's Fair of 1939, and its possible usefulness for museums and art education).

None of these seem surprising today, but in the 1930s, they were an astonishing novelty. With those lessons learned and by now commonplace, what can the Wadsworth and Worcester do to enhance their scholarly position and their popular appeal?

Both cities have faced significant challenges in the last half century, as the flight of industry, the shrinking of capital and the disintegration of inner cities

accompanied by population decline have all meant difficulty in both defining and attracting audience. Although the Wadsworth's collection numbers around 50,000 objects versus 38,000 at Worcester, their endowments and annual budgets are similar.

The Wadsworth has the benefit of a solid acquisitions endowment, which has enabled several recent significant purchases filling out their established collections' strength. Located in the state capital, it has the special advantage of governmental support, most recently manifest in the state's contribution of \$25 million of the \$33 million required for the necessary renovations just recently completed under the watchful eye of current director Susan Talbott. Although this was necessitated by a generation of deferred maintenance on its five buildings constructed over 125 years, with this renovation, the museum has re-dedicated itself to the elegant presentation of its wide-ranging collection. The suite of galleries has been restored to its historical grandeur, allowing many more objects to be displayed. Splendid decorative arts have been incorporated in the paintings galleries, and the sequence through the museum has been improved, thereby providing the visitor with a more engaging experience.

The display of the modern collections is amplified by an ongoing commitment to exhibiting contemporary art. In 1975, following Austin's lead, then-director James Elliott inaugurated a MATRIX gallery with the first museum exhibition for Ellsworth Kelly. More than 50 now-established contemporary artists can boast

their first solo exhibition at the Wadsworth.

Worcester, a city more dependent on manufacturing, has experienced greater difficulty in economic recovery, but the museum, following in the imaginative footsteps of Francis Henry Taylor, has the visitor in its crosshairs. Exhibitions are considered first for the public and only then for peers. The director, Matthias Waschek, has been in place for a few years and has also confronted a building and additions that date back over 100 years. Along with his architects wHY, he has conceived of a treatment described as archupuncture. Focusing on pressure points that become animating forces for the rest of the building and the institution at large, they have revised organic relationships in the building. New display strategies and lighting, hanging and juxtapositions, and more casual seating than the standard and unyielding wooden bench encourage the sense of retreat and belonging. Re-opening the front door and adding an imaginatively designed access ramp readily announces the museum's interest in accommodation. Waschek, with an eye toward openness and enhanced community relations, states the "priority is that of access—in the physical, aesthetic, intellectual and social senses."

The loss of industry benefitted the museum when it received the collection of the Higgins Armory Museum, assembled in the early 20th century by a prominent iron manufacturer. Not only is such material appealing to a younger audience, but the museum found innovative ways to display it, connecting its youthful audience through the inclusion of a figure of

that modern knight, Batman, in the display. It has encouraged a deeper understanding of this material and a contemporary connection by presenting an ancillary photography exhibition: *Africa's Children of Arms* (organized by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting) underscoring the presence of guns and violence in modern society. While some visitors are distressed, the museum recognizes its responsibility to link with the present. In answer to its critics, one might suggest paintings of the Crucifixion and other subjects that focus on violence and war have been a constant theme engaging artists from the Middle Ages forward.

Installations such as *Re-Mastered, A New Look at Old Masters* and a gallery devoted to understanding conservation and changes in works of art have been enhanced with video presentations and supportive text cards. Waschek attempts to "slow the visitors down and encourage them to enjoy as many works of art as possible...to encourage comparative and self-guided viewing, without the need to 'know.'" Intuitive learning replaces rote instruction.

The museum pursues its agenda as a cultural nexus for the community through creative programming and lively partnerships that include other cultural institutions and the 12 colleges and universities in town. Worcester's view extends beyond the local, reaching out to a regional audience as well as being a national resource.

Hartford resident, Mark Twain, on first visiting that city in 1868, commented: "Of all the beautiful towns it has been my fortune to see, this is the chief." Years later, Twain noted in a talk: "[Hartford] is more beautiful than any other city excepting Worcester." While he may have believed that, he was addressing a group of visitors from Worcester. Twain acknowledged his audience and understood how to capture their attention. In that regard, the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Worcester Art Museum are truly following in the great humorist's footsteps. ■



The Wadsworth Atheneum, circa 1920, showing the original Gothic Revival Building of 1844 and the adjacent Colt and Morgan Memorial buildings (1910-1915). Photo courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.