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**Francisco de Zurbarán’s “Saint Serapion” Returns to Galleries at Wadsworth Atheneum**  
*Multiple Year Restoration of Baroque Masterwork Complete*

Francisco de Zurbarán’s “Saint Serapion” (1628) is on view now in the Wadsworth Atheneum’s newly renovated and reinstalled European art galleries following an extensive restoration treatment. Begun in 2015 and funded by an award from The Executive Committee of the European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF) with additional support from The Hand Center, Hartford, Connecticut, the collaborative conservation process was led by Wadsworth Atheneum Chief Conservator Ulrich Birkmaier in consultation with an international team of experts including art historians, conservators, a hand surgeon and an artist.

“Saint Serapion,” acquired by the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1951, is a key work in the museum’s celebrated collection of 17th-century paintings. Painted in the visually dramatic Tenebrist tradition for the monastery of the Shod Mercedarians in Seville, “Saint Serapion” is a monumental work that contemplates themes of sacrifice, death and redemption, and is considered one of Zurbarán’s masterpieces.

The conservation treatment addressed a discolored surface coating casting a haze over the original artwork, muting its details and flattening its multidimensionality. Conservators removed the yellowed varnish and old discolored restorations, unveiling various shades of white and strengthening contrasts between light and shadow to once again convey the intense spirituality Zurbarán intended.

Removal of the earlier restoration also confirmed what x-radiographs previously indicated: the painting suffered considerable paint losses (common in centuries-old paintings and often caused by environmental conditions) in the area of Saint Serapion’s proper right hand. All that remained was a faintly visible thumb and traces of the saint’s original index and middle

fingers, which became crucial benchmarks during the restoration process. “Modern conservation approaches consider the artist’s original intent,” said Birkmaier. “We use even the smallest original fragment as guide, bringing in as little of ourselves as possible.” With that goal in mind the conservator used photographic modeling techniques to determine the most likely orientation and projection of the saint’s hand, matching the arrangement of a studio model’s hand with the shadows and finger fragments of the original. Hand surgeon and museum trustee Dr. Duffield Ashmead IV, M.D. helped determine the anatomically correct positioning of the remaining fingers; in the previous restoration they were held tensely parallel, whereas naturally their tips should cascade obliquely, converging toward the base of the thumb. Assured that the reconstructed hand would be rendered as closely as possible to Zurbarán’s original, the conservation team reconstructed Saint Serapion’s lost hand using stable yet reversible pigments.

The conserved painting, along with explanatory text and images of the painting prior to its restoration are now on view in the Wadsworth Atheneum’s Morgan Memorial building, which houses the majority of the museum’s European art collection and was itself renovated and reinstalled as part of a major museum renovation project unveiled in September, 2015. “Saint Serapion” joins other masterworks of the Baroque era, including those by Caravaggio, Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi, Jusepe de Ribera, Salvator Rosa and Bernardo Strozzi.

The European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF) established its Museum Restoration Fund in 2012, contributing up to €50,000 to conservation projects at one or two museums each year. Approved by a panel of independent experts, the awards assist TEFAF-attending museums with restoration initiatives while increasing institutional and public awareness of conservation. The Wadsworth Atheneum’s 2015 award to restore “Saint Serapion” was shared with The Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf for the conservation of “Saint Francis of Assisi in Meditation” (1639), also by Zurbarán. Other TEFAF Museum Restoration Fund recipients include Rijksmuseum van Oudheden and The Wallace Collection (2014), Worcester Art Museum and Ashmolean Museum (2013) and Denver Art Museum and Rijksmuseum (2012).

### **About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**

Founded in 1842, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is the oldest continuously-operating public art museum in the United States. The museum’s nearly 50,000 works of art span 5,000 years, from Greek and Roman antiquities to the first museum collection of American contemporary art. The museum’s five connected buildings—representing architectural styles

including Gothic Revival and modern International Style—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Hours: Wed – Fri: 11 a.m. – 5 p.m.; Sat & Sun: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. Admission: \$0 – 15; discounts for members, students and seniors. Free “Happy Hour” admission Wed – Sun, 4 – 5 p.m. Public phone: (860) 278-2670; website: <http://thewadsworth.org>.

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