

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM RECEIVES \$400,000 GRANT FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES TO SUPPORT CREATION OF NEW ARMS AND ARMOR GALLERIES

Worcester, MA—June 29, 2021—The Worcester Art Museum (WAM) today announced that it has recently been awarded a \$400,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to support the multi-year implementation phase for the long-term installation of the John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection of arms and armor. A competitive grant process, the NEH reports that only 30% of applicants nationwide received funding in this category during this round. This grant follows a 2018 planning grant of \$40,000 from the NEH, used to support the Museum’s initial planning and conceptualization for presenting these works. WAM’s new arms and armor installation is expected to open in 2024.

Acquired by the Museum in 2014, the Higgins Armory Collection is the second largest collection of its kind in the Americas, and includes arms, armor, and metalwork from around the world, from antiquity to the 19th century, and is particularly known for its rare grouping of European suits of plate armor from the 15th to 17th centuries. The NEH grant will assist with the final design and conversion of 4,000 square feet of existing space into a permanent gallery installation dedicated to arms and armor. Ultimately, the Museum plans to display the bulk of the 2,000-object collection through an innovative design solution that allows visitors to see a large quantity of artwork in both traditional and non-traditional exhibition spaces.

“We are so grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for recognizing the strength of our plans to bring this major collection of arms and armor back into public view,” said Jeffrey L. Forgeng, The Higgins Curator of Arms and Armor and Medieval Art at WAM. “Arms and armor have a magnetic power, drawing broad interest from audiences across a wide range of ages, education levels, and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. These objects excite visitors’ curiosity, as they imagine what it was like for people in the past to make, wear, and encounter them. With the NEH’s support, our installation will create multiple opportunities for audiences of all ages to engage with and learn from this outstanding collection.”

A major component of the Museum’s installation plan is to rethink traditional ideas for accessibility, both physical and intellectual, in ways that support WAM’s strategic priority of increasing access, equity, inclusivity, and diversity at the Museum. That includes deploying a range of interpretive modes—some of which the Museum has been piloting in its renovated Medieval Galleries—to support and engage audiences with an array of interests, learning styles, and abilities. Among these are: hands-on, tactile interactives, giving visitors an opportunity to address their curiosity about, for example, the weight and feel of armor; new digital tools that will provide in-depth information on objects in the galleries’ open storage; “static interactives,” such as wall maps highlighting key locations for armor production or use; and new approaches to in-gallery seating that provides a relaxing place from which to study the objects—and encourages visitors to do so.

WAM will also continue its unique, ongoing program of live interpretation around its arms and armor collection, including costumed presentations that feature knights and samurai, as well as more informal mobile “art carts,” staffed by educators and docents, which offer mediated hands-on experiences. Supported and enhanced by a substantial corps of reenactors who volunteer at the Museum regularly, the program provides visitors with in-person opportunities to learn about the arms and cultures of ancient Rome, the Middle Ages, and Renaissance swordfighters.

“We appreciate the NEH’s recognition of and support for the Worcester Art Museum, and for our plan to create an installation worthy of this exceptional collection of arms and armor,” said Matthias Waschek, the Museum’s Jean and Myles McDonough Director. “The NEH’s continued support of our work to center this collection underscores the commitment we made to the Worcester community when we brought the Higgins Armory Collection to the Museum. At the same time, their grant recognizes our plan to deliver innovative and engaging experiences with this material, which reflects well on the Museum’s team and will surely help us stand out as a destination for audiences interested in this material.”

The Worcester Art Museum’s Arms and Armor Gallery Project is supported in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom. Additional public funding is provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

About the National Endowment for the Humanities

Created in 1965 as an independent federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities supports research and learning in history, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities by funding selected, peer-reviewed proposals from around the nation. Additional information about the National Endowment for the Humanities and its grant programs is available at: www.neh.gov.

About the Worcester Art Museum

The Worcester Art Museum creates transformative programs and exhibitions, drawing on its exceptional collection of art. Dating from 3,000 BCE to the present, these works provide the foundation for a focus on audience engagement, connecting visitors of all ages and abilities with inspiring art and demonstrating its enduring relevance to daily life. Creative initiatives—including pioneering collaborative programs with local schools, fresh approaches to exhibition design and in-gallery teaching, and a long history of studio class instruction—offer opportunities for diverse audiences to experience art and learn both from and with artists.

The Worcester Art Museum, located at 55 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA, is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and closed most major holidays. Admission is \$18 for adults, \$14 for seniors 65+ and for college students with ID. Admission is free for Museum Members and children ages 0-17. On the first Sunday of each month, admission is free for everyone. Museum parking is free. For more information, please visit worcesterart.org.

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