

# NEW BEDFORD FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS SCOPE OF COLLECTING GUIDELINES: ART COLLECTION

## Purpose of the Special Collections

As defined in its Strategic Plan (2017), it is the mission of the New Bedford Free Public Library to “through free and equal access to materials, information, knowledge and technology, [enrich] the lives of the community by cultivating a community of lifelong learners and readers.” The vision statement clarifies the role of the Special Collections to the library’s mission by mandating that the library “be New Bedford’s primary place to go for materials, information and educational support for all ages, learn about each other in a safe and welcoming environment, **preserve local history, special collections and the art collection** for increased access, and build an engaged and connected community.”

The New Bedford Free Public Library’s Special Collections Department acquires, preserves and makes accessible in perpetuity historic materials of local, regional and national significance. Materials designated for inclusion in the Special Collections are deemed worthy of permanent retention based on their historic, aesthetic or cultural importance, or rarity. These materials contribute significantly to research, exhibition and educational purposes.

These scope of collecting guidelines deal with the art collection. Historic objects, manuscripts, whaling logs, personal papers, institutional and business records, ephemera, photographs and rotogravure images, etc., are covered by separate collecting guidelines, as are printed genealogical and historical materials.

## Purpose of the Art Collection

The art collection provides visitors with examples of work of high artistic quality by some of the most noted American artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and with ways of viewing local history through art. The first donations to the art collection came early in the library’s history, in the 1850s. The library served as the city’s first museum, continuously displaying loaned work by local artists and paintings from its own collection since its inception.

## Art Collection Objectives

The New Bedford Free Public Library collects art work that relates to the life of the city; and illustrates the impact of both the whaling and textile economies on the cultural development of the city, as more disposable income allowed for the purchase and commission of fine art by members of the local community. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the greater New Bedford area had become a magnet for artists, in part due to the creation of the Swain Free School of Design in 1888. Artists and their students often settled in the surrounding towns and were represented by a

proliferation of galleries along William Street. It is the objective of the library's art collecting guidelines to obtain examples of the highest quality by the best of these artists.

## Collecting History

The scope of the existing collections was primarily shaped by two individuals: Robert Ingraham, the New Bedford Free Public Library's first head librarian from 1853-1901; and George Tripp, the second head librarian, from 1901-1937. While Ingraham's main focus was on development of an archive of local history material, a number of notable art-related donations and purchases were made under his administration. The most significantly of these was the gift of a complete set of John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* double-elephant folio in 1866, which purportedly became the catalyst for developing a Special Collections Department. Ingraham also encouraged the purchase of works by local artists, like William Allen Wall.

Under George Tripp, the art collection expanded considerably. It was during this period that the library acquired all three of its paintings by Albert Bierstadt, as well as pieces by other notable American artists, including Augustus Saint-Gaudens, William Dodge Macknight, Robert Swain Gifford, Clifford Ashley, Bela Pratt, Thomas Crawford, A. Caleb Slade, Charles Hawthorne and Francis Millet. Several of these works were purchased using money from various sources, such as the fines collected from overdue book returns. Tripp actively purchased art and used artists such as Swain School of Design director Harry Neyland, New York Tonalist painter Dwight Tryon and illustrator Clifford Ashley as advisors. The result was the creation of a core collection of museum quality.

The general collecting emphasis in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was on formally trained artists who were members of the National Academy or similarly recognized academic groups and who had exhibition histories, particularly in major international venues like the Paris Salon. In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the art collection continued to expand, though not on the same scale as earlier. While works of significance still found their way into the collection (paintings by William Bradford and Ralph Fasanella, for example), with values in the art market steadily increasing and no acquisition budget, donations of important historical pieces became rare. From the 1980s on, paintings by local contemporary artists originally commissioned by the New Bedford Arts Lottery, New Bedford Bicentennial Commission, and the New Bedford Cultural Council have been periodically transferred to the library. Among the paintings acquired this way are Pat Churchills' *View of Center Street* (1986), Swain School alumnus Phil Gidley's *Treasure Island* (1985) and six portraits of civic leaders by Deborah Macy. In 2013 and 2014, the library received three notable gifts by living or recently deceased artists: a group of works by Abstract New York painter David Loeffler Smith, probably the most influential figure in the history of New Bedford's Swain School of Design; a series of black and white silver gelatin photographs by Boston and New York artist and designer John Thornton; and a landscape by colorist Severin Haines who trained at Swain and Yale and headed the painting department at UMass Dartmouth.

As late as 2008, the collecting criteria for the art collection was orally defined as any painting or sculpture made or collected by a New Bedford resident. The negative result of such an overly broad interpretation without additional criteria has become more obvious in recent decades as

numerous pieces of lesser quality have been accepted by the library. Wherever possible, when dealing with the backlog of unaccessioned works, this material has not been accessioned but has instead been designated as library property. However, this material still requires basic tracking, maintenance and storage, which utilizes staffing resources and occupies space the library cannot afford to spare.

The steady stream of this lesser quality work has been introduced into the collection due to the lack of collecting guidelines, specific written collecting criteria, and any formal review system. A particular issue is the major influx of portraiture of mixed quality that has been accepted since the late 1990s. From examination of library records and correspondence, it seems that this began as a New Bedford Arts Lottery or local Cultural Council project in which grant money was originally used to enable a specific artist to paint a series of portraits of members of the present-day New Bedford community not traditionally represented in portraiture. The library was approached as a location to hang these pieces, which were ultimately donated. After the project was completed, the same artist continued to be funded by a private patron to create portraits specifically for the purpose of donating them to the library collection with the expectation that they be permanently hung in the Main library building. The library is not involved in the selection of subject or artist, nor are the pieces properly vetted. The present arrangement has created an unrealistic expectation on the part of individuals within the community that burdens the library's limited exhibition space and does little to enhance the art collection. In several cases, these portraits have been added to the historic object collection when the subject and his or her personal story is of particular historical importance locally, regionally or nationally (examples include civil rights activist Dr. Jibreel A-K. Khazan, a.k.a. Ezell A. Blair Jr., one of the Greensboro Four; and Holocaust survivor Abraham Landau). Still, the unregulated growth of this segment of the Special Collections needs to be checked and criteria established for inclusion in either the art or historic object collections.

## **Existing Art Collection**

The strengths of the Art Collection are in the areas of nineteenth and twentieth century American art, including painting, sculpture, prints and drawings by nationally and internationally known artists. Several artists represented in the collection had some connection to the southeastern Massachusetts area, either by birth or residency. Some, notably Albert Bierstadt and William Bradford, went on to have major national and international careers, are well-represented in major collections throughout the United States, and are acknowledged as influential figures in American art history. Other local artists represented never gained the same level of recognition but their work offers insight into the artistic and social milieu of 19<sup>th</sup> century New Bedford. Examples include the portraits of William Allen Wall; the maritime paintings and etchings of Lemuel Eldred; and the prints and watercolors of Benjamin Russell and Joseph Shoemaker Russell.

## **Paintings**

The painting collection currently consists of approximately 132 pieces, the majority of which are on exhibit at the Main Library, the Lawler Branch Library and New Bedford City Hall. The

collection is particularly strong in 19<sup>th</sup> century American art, specifically examples from the Hudson River and Luminist schools. Among the painters of this period in the collection are Albert Bierstadt, William Bradford, Joseph Whiting Stock, Charles Henry Gifford, Dwight W. Tryon, Robert Swain Gifford, Clement Swift, William Allen Wall, Benjamin Russell, Frank Shapleigh, Lemuel D. Eldred, William Sonntag, Frederic Porter Vinton, Joseph Oriel Eaton, Ange-Joseph Antoine Roux, Mauritz Frederik Hendrik de Haas, Hendrick Dirk Kruseman Van Elten, and Joseph Morviller. The three Bierstadt paintings – *Sunset Light*, *Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains* (1861), *Salt Lick in Sunset Glow (Sunset near the Platter River, ca. 1875)*, and *Mt. Sir Donald* (Rocky Mountains in the Selkirk Range, ca. 1889) – are considered, along with the works of John James Audubon, to be the cornerstones of the library's collection. These works span the three major phases of Bierstadt's career as the country's preeminent interpreter of the American West.

Several fine examples of the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century artists range stylistically from the traditional Salon-style treatments to figural abstraction. Of particular note are paintings by regional artist Charles Hawthorne; several works by Brandywine School illustrator Clifford Ashley, created as part of his *Sunbeam* series documenting the declining whaling industry; muralist Francis Millet; outsider artists Ralph Fasenella and Finn Gudmundsson; Boston Modernist William Dodge Macknight; portraitist Ernest L. Ipsen; and Boston School painter Margaret Serena Peirce, an artist worthy of re-evaluation. Influential figures connected to the Swain School of Design represented in the collection include Harry Neyland, Ernest Pettegill, Milton Brightman, Severin Haines and David Loeffler Smith.

## **Sculpture**

The sculpture collection consists of 15 pieces. In this small collection are works by the following: Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Thomas Crawford, Bela Pratt, Richard Henry Park, James Toatley, Charles Alden, Walton Ricketson, Charles Henry Niehaus, Arthur Waagen, Bertel Thorvaldsen, Jean Louis Gregoire, Etienne-Henri Dumaige, and Charles Frates. The remarkable Arts and Crafts Movement work of 20<sup>th</sup> century New Bedford woodcarver Leander Plummer should also be considered within this category.

## **Works on paper**

Prints make up the largest percentage of the art collection, estimated to number between 1300 and 1400 items. The most important pieces within the print collection are a complete set of the double elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon, consisting of 435 hand colored engravings (unbound in 2000 for preservation reasons); and a complete set of the Imperial edition of Audubon's *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* (150 hand colored lithographs, bound in two volumes by the library). Complimenting the Audubons are an incomplete set of the hand colored engraving for Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology*, the first study of its kind in this country and a major influence on Audubon's work. Other notable components of the print collection are the Thomas Card Collection of American Prints, a study collection of most of the major engravers in the United States active from the early 18<sup>th</sup> through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; maritime prints published in Holland, Germany, France and the United States between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19th centuries; and a group of early 20<sup>th</sup> century European and

American travel posters created by Ludwig Hohlwein, Julian Lacaze, Vittorio Grassi, Constant Leon Duval, Max Ettler, Ben Blessuin, Elio Ximenes, and others.

Also of note is a small collection of Japanese woodblock prints and silk panel paintings which appear to have been acquired mainly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among the artists represented are Utagawa Hiroshige, Shibata Zeshin and Ohara Koson. This collection may have particular significance and needs further study.

The library will continue to add to the art collection based on the collecting criteria outlined in Section XIII, Acquisitions.

### **Collection Gaps**

Many major artists with ties to New Bedford are not represented in the collection, the most significant being American Symbolist painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. Since the end of World War II many notable artists have worked in the New Bedford area, often through their association with Swain School of Design. Modern and contemporary painters are under-represented in the collection. Those linked to the local art scene whose work has gained national prominence and/or have produced a body of work that attests to a consistent quality and aesthetic vision that will endure should be earmarked for inclusion in the collection.

Examples of area artists spanning the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21 centuries whose work is appropriate to the collection include:

- John Borowicz, painter
- Ruby Deval (1804-1866), outsider artist
- Helen E. Ellis (1889-1978), sculptor
- Howard Manning Gibbs (1904-1970), figurative abstract painter
- Frances Eliot Gifford (1844-1931), illustrator
- Chris Guston, ceramicist
- Michael James, fiber artist
- Roger Kizik, painter
- John Magnan, sculptor
- Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917), painter
- William Sartain (1843-1924), painter
- William Shattuck, painter
- Nathaniel C. Smith (1866-1943), architect, painter
- Carolyn Swiszczy, painter
- Deborah Smith Taber (1796-1879), outsider artist
- Jane Tuckerman, photographer
- Mary Evangeline Walker (1894-1957), painter

This list is not exclusive or exhaustive and other artists will be considered based on the lasting quality and value of the artist's body of work and the collecting criteria outlined in the Acquisitions section below. In particular, work of lasting merit by women artists and artists of color is especially underrepresented and should be pursued.

## **Areas Not Collected**

The art collection will not include the following:

The work of minor area artists.

Study collections (excluding existing collections). Due to lack of space and staffing limitations, the library in general will not acquire study collections.

## **Acquisitions**

The acquisition policy for the art collection at the New Bedford Free Public Library sets forth the boundaries for the acquisition and preservation of historic objects and art work. Objects offered for acquisition must conform to the library's collection objectives. The acquisition will be retained in the collection in perpetuity as long as it retains its physical integrity, identity, authenticity and usefulness to the purpose of the Special Collections.

### **Criteria**

***All acquisitions of art must meet the following criteria:***

1. The present owner must have clear title.
2. Gifts and donations may not contain restrictions by the donor regarding the use, display or deaccessioning of objects. Any such restrictions must be carefully considered and be accepted only on approval of the Director in conjunction with the Board of Trustees.

***In addition, all acquisitions must meet one or more of the following criteria:***

1. Art work is of the highest quality possible.
2. The acquisition does not duplicate material already in the collection.
3. The acquisition is in exhibitable condition.
4. The library can adequately provide for the storage, preservation, protection and presentation of the acquisition according to professionally accepted standards.

***The Art Collection will continue to develop in consideration of the following guidelines:***

1. Acquisition of significant and noteworthy examples of post -1945 American painting and sculpture, concentrating on the most important examples of artwork created by established artists connected to the Swain School of Design.
2. Acquisition of works of eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century New Bedford artists not represented or under-represented in the collection in order to make these collections more comprehensive in representing the history of American art in New Bedford.
3. Acquisition of works by eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth New Bedford artists currently represented in the collection when the work offered shows a facet of that artist's work not already represented, and/or enhances a school, period or regional representation within the collection.
4. Acquisition of individual works of rarity and/or high aesthetic merit.



## **Deaccessioning**

Deaccessioning is a necessary and appropriate tool in collections management, and a way for the library to refine its Special Collections. Often, an object does not fit the organization's scope of collections, cannot be cared for properly or poses a hazard to staff, so it may be considered for deaccessioning. See the separate Deaccessioning Policy for the art and history collections for deaccessioning criteria and procedures.

**Adopted by the Board of Library Trustees**

**February 28, 2017**