

Worcester Art Museum Explores The Cat as Artist's Muse and Cultural Icon In New Multi-Disciplinary Initiative, Opening May



Left: Will Barnet, *Meditation and Minou*, 1980. Gift of the Artist. © Will Barnet Trust/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Alexandre Gallery, New York, NY. Right: Rhonda Lieberman, *Cats-in-Residence Program*. Image credit: Brica Wilcox.

Worcester, Massachusetts—April 1, 2016—On May 21, the Worcester Art Museum (WAM) will open *Meow: a cat-inspired exhibition*, a multi-program initiative that explores the cat as both an iconic figure throughout art history and a pop culture, Internet-age phenomenon. The project, which runs through September 4, will feature exhibitions, special installations, interactive public programs, and community engagement—all of which highlight the prolific role of the cat in creative endeavors from ancient sculpture to 19th-century painting to contemporary fashion. Guest curated by scholars and artists, the dynamic mix of programs in *Meow* examines the relationship between the experience of art and our daily lives through active audience participation.

“Cats have given rise to a plethora of creative online projects, videos, and memes that mix humor and artistry. While the Internet has allowed for viral consumption of the content, this phenomenon isn’t new,” said Adam Rozan, Director of Audience Engagement. “The playful and mischievous natures of cats have inspired artists for ages. *Meow* is an opportunity to take this subject, which completely is of the moment, and explore how it relates to the experience of art, from ancient times to today. It’s an exciting, one-of-a-kind project connecting art, people, cats, and popular culture in a way that makes learning about art fun for all ages.”

Among the major elements of *Meow* is the exhibition *The Captivating Cat: Felines and the Artist's Gaze*, which will be open throughout the duration of the initiative. Featuring more than 70 works from the Museum's permanent collection, the exhibition looks at depictions of cats from ancient Egypt and China to the modern day through prints, drawings, photographs, paintings, sculpture, fashion, and armor. Guest curated by Ruth Dibble, Ph.D. candidate in the history of art at Yale University, *The Captivating Cat* is organized around several major themes, including the cat as metaphor for the modern artist and connections in representations of big and house cats. It features works by Will Barnet, Albrecht Dürer, Takebe Ryotai, Toshi Yoshida, and Harry Gordon, among many others.

Visitors will also be able to discover cats throughout other WAM galleries in a self-guided “**Cat Walk**” tour, which will shed new light on major works in the Museum's encyclopedic collections, including *Woman with a Cat* by Gustave Courbet, the 6th-century Roman Worcester Hunt Mosaic, and 17th-century *Tiger Screen* by Kano Naonobu.

“This exhibition breaks from traditional feline-centric scholarship by looking at cats not simply as subjects that artists depicted in diverse media across time and place, but rather as iconic muses with their own, distinctly animalistic, agency,” said Dibble. “A key work in the exhibition is *Asakusa Ricefields and Torinomachi Festivals* by Ando Hiroshige. In it, there is a sense that being a cat is a lot like being an artist. Both are at once at a remove from the world, yet also consuming it through watchful eyes. It raises the possibility that cats influence, rather than only reflect, artistic intention.”

In addition, artist and critic Rhonda Lieberman will present a special contemporary art installation in partnership with the Worcester Animal Rescue League. Part ‘purr-formance piece,’ part social sculpture, *The Cats-in-Residence Program* integrates art and rescue to address animal overpopulation in urban areas. Our local ‘purr-formers’ (adoptable rescue cats from WARL) will interact in an inter-species lounge filled with art for humans and cats to enjoy together.

Volunteers will be on site to facilitate adoptions when a cat and human visitor bond. The installation will be open during regular Museum hours between July 13 and September 4. Merging art and life, the *Cats-in-Residence Program* invites playful fun while drawing attention to an important cause. WAM will be the fourth location for Lieberman's installation, which was previously shown in New York City, Los Angeles, and Hartford, Connecticut, and the first in a museum.

Other highlights from *Meow*, include:

- ***The Meow Opening Party***: Friday, May 20, 8-11pm. The public is invited to join other cat and art enthusiasts at this unique celebration, including live music, costumed entertainers, and a cash bar. Members \$10, Nonmembers \$20

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- **Community Cat Show:** Visitors are invited to submit their own cat-related art, whether self-made, commissioned, or purchased, for a community exhibition of art that will be on view from May 21-July 24, 2016 at the Museum.
- **Cat Craft Classes:** WAM will offer a series of studio art classes and workshops that invite audiences to create pet toys, shelters, and portraits, and to learn more about the representation of cats in the world of art.
- **Helmutt's Dog Show:** For all of the dog-lovers, Helmutt, WAM's canine mascot, will organize a one-painting exhibition of his favorite work of art, *Head of a Dog* by Abbott Handerson Thayer.

Meow is sponsored by Fallon Health, with additional sponsorship support from Reliant Medical Group.

About Ruth Dibble, Ph.D., Yale University

Ruth Dibble is a Ph.D. candidate in the history of art at Yale University, graduating in 2017. Her areas of focus include American material and visual culture from the 18th century to the early 20th century and histories of collection and display from the same period. Her dissertation is titled, "Strike Home to the Minds of Men': Crafting Domesticity in the Civil War Era." She holds an MA in art history from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and a BA in art history from Hamilton College in Clinton, New York.

About Rhonda Lieberman, Artist and Critic

Rhonda Lieberman is a New York-based artist and writer, and a Contributing Editor at *Artforum*. Lieberman's artwork has been included in exhibitions at The Jewish Museum (in *Entertaining America* and *Too Jewish*), The New Museum (in *Bad Girls*), and Stux Gallery (in *The Fake Chanel Show*). She has taught at Yale University, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and in Umea, Sweden. Her *Selected Essays* will be published by Pep Talk in spring 2016. *The Cats-in-Residence Program* debuted at *The Cat Show*, which she curated at White Columns in 2013, and will come to WAM for its fourth iteration.

About the Worcester Art Museum

Founded in 1896, the Worcester Art Museum's encyclopedic 38,000-piece collection covers 51 centuries of art. Highlights include the Medieval Chapter House, Renaissance Court, and Worcester Hunt Mosaic, as well as the recently integrated John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection of arms and armor. The Museum is internationally known for its collection of European and American art. It was the first in America to acquire paintings by Monet and Gauguin and one of the first to collect photography. As the first U.S. museum to focus on collaborating with local schools, it has been at the forefront of engaging audiences and giving them a meaningful and personal experience.

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The Worcester Art Museum, located at 55 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA, is open Wednesday through Friday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and every third Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is \$14 for adults, \$6 for children 4-17, \$12 for seniors 65+, and \$12 for college students with ID. Members and children under four are free. Parking is free. For more information, visit worcesterart.org.

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