The Worcester Art Museum Acquires Paintings by Edward Mitchell Bannister and Charles Ethan Porter
First 19th-Century Works by African American Artists to Join the Museum’s Collection, Expanding Scope in an Important Direction

Worcester, MA—May 25, 2023—The Worcester Art Museum has announced the acquisition of three paintings by artists Edward Mitchell Bannister and Charles Ethan Porter. Bannister’s The Hay Gatherers (about 1893) and Porter’s Still Life with Apples and Grapes (before 1900) and Carnations (1887) are now the earliest known paintings by African American artists in the Museum’s collection, expanding its scope in an important direction as the Museum seeks to represent a more diverse view of the history of art.

Bannister and Porter were both natives to New England and both achieved professional success and were internationally recognized for their works. Bannister’s career was characterized by success beyond what had previously been achieved by any Black artist in the United States. His work, The Hay Gatherers, is currently on view at the Museum in the exhibition Frontiers of Impressionism through June 25 and will be featured alongside Porter’s paintings following a comprehensive reimagining of the early American galleries in Spring 2024.

“Acquiring these artworks by Edward Mitchell Bannister and Charles Ethan Porter allows the Museum to tell a more inclusive story about North American art and culture,” said Matthias Waschek, the Jean and Myles McDonough Director of the Worcester Art Museum. “As a global museum with strong local roots, these important acquisitions allow changes to the canon on an
international stage."

The earliest attributed works by African American artists in the Worcester Art Museum’s collection, these acquisitions are part of a long-term plan to diversify the Museum’s holdings and better fulfill its mission to be a connector of people, communities, and cultures through the experience of art. The Museum works to carry out this mission through other programs as well that are all part of an extensive mission-fulfillment plan, which incorporates the Museum’s entire content output, including all exhibitions and public programs.

Bannister (c. 1828–1901) immigrated to Boston, Massachusetts from New Brunswick, Canada, eventually settling in Providence, Rhode Island, where he was formative in shaping the city’s art scene. He was celebrated for his landscape paintings that honor nature as a gentle force, drawing inspiration from the pastoral scenes and soft brushwork of the French Barbizon school of painting. He was one of the first Black artists to receive national recognition in the arts, and one of few American artists to garner success without studying in Europe. Six years after moving to Providence, he was awarded the first-prize medal for his painting, Under the Oaks, at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. However, upon learning that the artist they had awarded was Black, the jury moved to reconsider their decision, despite the vehement protestations of Bannister’s Providence colleagues. This incident emphasizes Bannister’s extraordinary personal and professional victories, achieved despite the limitations and obstacles he faced due to racism.

Bannister’s work The Hay Gatherers is among his most celebrated and ambitious compositions, demonstrating both technical virtuosity and narrative complexity. Set among the idyllic landscape of South County, Rhode Island, Bannister depicted African American agricultural workers gathering hay on a hot summer’s day. This image of labor would have been particularly poignant in the decades immediately following Reconstruction, when the US government endeavored to reunite the country after the Civil War, and African Americans found themselves increasingly caught between the broken promises of the present, the specters of a slaveholding past, and a hopeful future.

Porter (c. 1847/49–1923) was known as one of the most accomplished still-life painters during his time, recognized for his style that balances realism with dynamic brushwork. Alongside Bannister, Porter was one of the few artists of African American and Native American heritage to achieve professional success in the predominantly white 19th-century American art world. Still Life with Apples and Grapes and Carnations (1887) demonstrates his meticulous attention to detail and rich use of color that defined his still lifes. Porter lived and worked around New England and New York for most of his life and also spent time training in Paris, France, which is evident in his works. Coming to the Museum from a private collection, these paintings will be available to the public for the first time in decades.

About the Worcester Art Museum
The Worcester Art Museum creates transformative programs and exhibitions, drawing on its exceptional collection of art. Dating from 3000 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 10am to 4pm. For information on admission and discounts, visit [https://www.worcesterart.org/information/hours-and-admission](https://www.worcesterart.org/information/hours-and-admission). On the first Sunday of each month, admission is free for everyone. Museum parking is free.

**For more information, please contact:**

Madeline Feller  
Worcester Art Museum  
*MadelineFeller@worcesterart.org*  
508.793.4373

Sascha Freudenheim  
PAVE Communications & Consulting  
sascha@paveconsult.com  
917.544.6057

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