



President's Letter

The story of the Gibbes Museum of Art is the story of the visual arts in Charleston. Today the museum is thriving after a \$17 million renovation completed in 2016, and a return to pre-pandemic visitation, financial stability, and growth. Yet, the pandemic and the social reckoning brought on by the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor changed everything, not only for the Gibbes, but for museums across our country. The journey to creating a strong Gibbes and visual arts scene for our community begins with examining our museum's history and present practices.

The Gibbes is recognized among the oldest arts organizations in the United States. James Shoolbred Gibbes a descendant of an old Charleston family having built great wealth as a merchant factor before the Civil War and himself an enslaver, left a considerable sum of money to the city of Charleston for the erection of an art exhibition hall upon his death. The city turned to the Carolina Art Association founded in 1858 to serve as co-owner and custodian of the new building, which sits in the center of Charleston's historic district. Today known as the Gibbes Museum of Art, the museum opened to the public in 1905.

Like so many early cultural organizations the Gibbes was an all-male membership organization. Women were allowed to join in 1905 but were not granted voting rights until 1921 when the 19th Amendment was adopted. The earliest documented opportunity for African Americans to visit the Gibbes was in the 1930s when segregated evening hours were temporarily established in response to calls from Charleston's Black leaders for admittance to see the exhibition of Old Master paintings from the Samuel Kress Collection. Otherwise, the Gibbes remained racially segregated at least until public schools were desegregated in Charleston County in the late 1960s and early 70s. The first known work of art by an African American artist—Merton Simpson—was purchased for the permanent collection in 1950, and in 1973 the Gibbes organized its first solo exhibition of an African American artist's body of work. The artist was South Carolina-born, William H. Johnson.

Today, the Gibbes serves as the principal repository of the visual record of the Lowcountry with a permanent collection of over 7,000 paintings, works on paper, photographs, and sculpture. Yet only a small fraction represents the diverse demographics of the community. Much work still needs to be accomplished to fulfill the Gibbes mission to offer a thorough

knowledge of the visual culture of Charleston, the Lowcountry, and the American South from the colonial era through today. This journey is one of courage, relationship-building, self-discovery, and sharing our identities with one another and compassionately revealing our blind spots and biases.

We are committed to ensuring that all members of our community feel seen and valued in everything we do. We unlock diversity's power and beauty by intentionally fostering an inclusive, accessible museum fashioned upon a foundation of equity. Only by promoting and living out these values can we truly democratize belonging in our museum and set an example for our field. Art is not neutral, abstract, or solely for aesthetics. It powerfully informs and even creates culture and mores. Consequently, art makers and art stewards have the profound ability and responsibility in shaping and influencing the world around them. As we frequently note, "Art is the reason."

With all of this in mind, the Gibbes continues to move forward with a schedule of wonderful new exhibitions, programs, and events that reflect the Museum's four themes identified in its Ten-Year (2018–2028) Strategic Plan: social justice; innovation, conservation and the environment, and health and wellness. Having recently closed the extremely popular *Fighters for Freedom: William H. Johnson Picturing Justice* exhibition on loan from the Smithsonian, we launch our fall season with work by the acclaimed contemporary artist Bo Bartlett, an 1858 Prize Winner who draws and paints in the tradition of American Realists like Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth. And in November we are thrilled to host our 10th annual Gibbes Distinguished Lecture featuring Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic Jerry Saltz, who will join the ranks of such amazing past speakers Leonard Lauder, Jeff Koons, Maya Lin, and Fred Wilson to name a few. In spring we will once again present *Art Charleston*, our five-day festival that celebrates the visual arts.



Angela D. Mack
President & CEO