

# Washington Post

## NYC American Folk Art Museum celebrates 50th anniversary with new exhibit, has \$3M in pledges

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NEW YORK — The American Folk Art Museum, long plagued by financial problems, is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a new exhibition, renewed optimism for its future and its collection intact.

At a preview of a new exhibition celebrating its anniversary Tuesday, museum officials discussed its financial status and projection of its future.

The museum in September received a \$2 million pledge from a longtime trustee and an additional \$1 million commitment from other trustees and supporters, said Monty Blanchard Jr., president of the museum board of trustees. Those pledges gave the museum “significant runway to continue the operations of the museum and built it to new heights of artistic greatness,” Blanchard said.

In addition, he said, the museum has received \$500,000 from the Ford Foundation.

As late as this summer, the board had been in discussions about possibly turning its collection over to another institution but with the goal of keeping it in New York City.

But “the pledges and other money we had put us in a financially solvent position,” Blanchard said. “The pledges provided that ballast for future operations” and allowed the museum to make the decision to remain independent.

He identified the long-term trustee as Joyce B. Cowin.

The museum, founded in 1961, houses traditional folk art dating to the 18th century, including 5,000 quilts, weather vanes, textiles, sculptures, paintings and decorative arts in a 6,000-square-foot space in Lincoln Square, across from Lincoln Center. It also has a large collection of works by self-taught artists, including thousands of drawings, watercolors and unpublished manuscripts by Henry Darger.

The institution has faced financial challenges for a long time but they took a turn for the worse in 2009 when it defaulted on a \$32 million debt. The museum had taken out the money to build a new midtown Manhattan museum, on the same block as the Museum of Modern Art.

To pay off the debt, it sold the building to MoMA in July, but continued operating at its Lincoln Square branch, a location it has owned since 1989.

The folk art museum is searching for a new director and recently added a new member to its board of trustees. It anticipates adding up to two other new members by June. Several previous members had left during its financial trials.

The museum's other strategic plans include long-term loans to other institutions and collaborative arrangements with other museums.

"Our first goal is 'get the art out there,' to develop collaborative opportunities for positioning the art that we love within or with other institutions," Blanchard said.

The museum currently has 14 iconic pieces on extended loan at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new American Wing galleries for paintings, sculptures and decorative arts.

A traveling exhibit, "Kaleidoscope Quilts: The Art of Paula Nadelstern" will be shown at Endicott College in Massachusetts in the spring. A number of other works are currently on loan at the Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Mass., and the museum is in active talks about a possible exhibition this summer of works from its collection at the South Street Seaport Museum.

"These are examples of activities we are doing to fulfill our mission of getting our art out there," Blanchard said.

He said there are no plans to reduce staff and, in fact, once a new director is hired, the number will probably rise and the museum will embark on a longer-term fundraising plan that would involve raising endowment money.

Blanchard anticipates operating costs to range from \$2.5 million to \$3 million annually.

The anniversary exhibition that opened Tuesday, "Jubilation/Rumination: Life, Real and Imagined," features nearly 100 highlights that represent the scope of traditional folk art and outsider art, or works by self-taught artists.

It includes a Darger illustration, "Gigantic Roverine with Young" from his 15,000-page manuscript, "In the Realms of the Unreal," and a metaphorical self-portrait by Nellie Mae Rowe titled, "Cow Jump Over the Mone."

"We have been ruminating on our past," he said, referring to the exhibition title. "But we are jubilant about our future and the art that we present."

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