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“For the Benefit of the Public”

The Walters Art Museum

Luncheon Speech

Eleanor Hughes, The Walters Art Museum

Hello, and thank you so much for having me.

It was suggested that I speak today about the Walters Art Museum’s connections to its community and the engagement efforts that we are currently undertaking to maintain and strengthen our connections in Baltimore and the region. This is in some ways an easy task: the place and nature of the Walters role within its communities are written into the museum’s vision and mission statements. The former states our ambition in this regard: the Walters is a *transformative force in the region* and inspires people to connect with each other through meaningful experiences with great works of art from across the globe and throughout time. And our mission statement reads: the Walters Art Museum brings art and people together for enjoyment, discovery, and learning. We create a place where people of every background can be touched by art. We engage and strengthen our community by collecting, preserving, and interpreting art.

The harder part is telling you all the ways in which we endeavor to deliver on those ambitions in just 20-30 minutes; so what I’d like to do is use our strategic plan as a lens that encompasses all of the activities of the museum, and give you a few examples of how each of our strategic priorities involves these connections.

The first of those priorities is “Activating the Collection.” The museum focuses the expertise of its staff on preserving, conserving, and interpreting the museum’s collections, buildings, and stories.

The collections were largely amassed by William T. and Henry Walters, father and son, whose wealth came first from the liquor business, then railroads and investing.

On his death in 1931, Henry gave 22,000 works of art to the Mayor and Council of Baltimore, “for the benefit of the public.” The collection has since continued to expand ever since, to 35,000 objects. The museum opened fully to the public in 1934, and ten years ago, admission became free.

The collections range from the third millennium B.C. to the 21st century, from mummies to arms and armor, old master paintings to Art Nouveau jewelry, and includes collections of Ancient American and Islamic art. The Walters' Egyptian, Greek and

Roman, Byzantine, Ethiopian, and Western Medieval art collections are among the finest in the nation, ranking with those at the Met, Getty, and Morgan, as are the museum's holdings of Renaissance and Asian art and French 19th century painting.

So the Walters is an institution rooted in Baltimore and very much of Baltimore: our challenge is, with these collections, to continue to create relevant, meaningful, and welcoming experiences for all audiences, facilitated by our free admission and open access policies—not only is admission free, but special exhibitions and majority of our family, adult, and school programs are free.

Each of these areas play a vital role in making our collections accessible and informative, and generating a positive impact on our community. We serve visitors from birth to adult through a variety of intergenerational programs, including our numerous Free Family Festivals that each attract between 1,000-1,800 visitors from all over Maryland. These festivities include multicultural celebrations; among them a Chinese New Year Celebration, the African American Family Festival, and the Day of the Dead Festival.

Our programming for adults offers new, intimate, and deeper levels of engagement with art, including monthly lectures, museum tours, and *Make Nights*, workshops that give visitors opportunities to explore their own creativity in a social atmosphere—wine is served! Recent *Make Night* activities include yoga, charcoal drawing, Islamic paper marbling, Islamic calligraphy, Latin dance, and tempera painting. Each of these workshops is accompanied by a brief visit to the galleries for a group conversation about relevant works in the collection.

School and teacher programs are a key part of our educational programs, providing students the opportunity to engage with art and deepen their education on a variety of levels. The Walters is a leader in arts integration and place-based learning, and our teachings align with the Common Core Standards and Maryland State Content Standards in the Visual Arts, Social Studies, Science, Math and Language Arts. During the 2015-16 school year, over 35,000 students and teachers took part in a Walters' student or teacher program. We provided \$44,000 in bus funding to over 7,000 Title one students who otherwise would not be able to attend the museum.

To give you one example of a way we continue to vary experiences while maintaining the level of scholarly rigor for which the Walters is known: this weekend we open *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*. Showcasing objects dating from the 12th through the 16th century and drawn from the Walters and from major collections in the United States and abroad, *A Feast for the Senses* explores the ways that works of art in medieval Europe engaged, excited, and appealed to all the senses. A series of interactives will allow visitors to engage their own senses to explore the meanings that the senses were understood to convey in the medieval period—there are sounds, smells, and things to touch.

In all of these projects and programs we work with local institutions, as part of our strategic initiative to serve as a cornerstone in the Baltimore region as a collaborative leader and innovative partner. We partnered with a number of organizations for our last major loan exhibition, *Pearls on a String: Artists, Patrons, and Poets at the Great Islamic Courts* in order to draw a diverse audience of new attendees to the Walters and also to educate our current visitors on Islamic art and culture. The collaborative nature of this exhibition was exemplified by events such as a panel discussion entitled, “Local Lens: The Muslim Experience in Baltimore.” This talk was moderated by Alison Kysia from the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies, and featured a dialogue about Baltimore’s Black and Latino Muslim communities from Professor Harold Morales from Morgan State University and entrepreneur Saafir Rabbof from Interculture. This event in particular drew a high degree of positive feedback from visitors; we believe these relationships strengthen the Walters’ role in the community, not least by introducing many to the rich holdings of Islamic art at the museum. And they help to develop the Walters’ reputation as a safe place to hold sometimes challenging discussions.

I’ve mentioned Morgan State a couple of times. The university is one of the four local institutions with which we have formal strategic partnerships, along with Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), Kennedy Krieger, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). Creating such partnerships is another of our strategic initiatives, and it is partly through these that we also strengthen our accountability and sustainability and aim to build a more dynamic team, sharing the common goal of greater diversity and inclusion. To this end, one of the things we’ve been doing is giving a talk at Morgan State University (MSU) in which we elicit from the students a map of who works at the museum.

All of this comes together in a current project, the refurbishment and reinstallation of one of our historic buildings, 1 West Mount Vernon Place. Early last year, Walters staff were alerted to the fact that the building had been targeted by a “Guerilla History Team,” made up of students from the Baltimore School for the Arts, who, in celebration of Black History Month, were affixing posters to buildings in Mount Vernon with information about former residents.

The poster informed us that among the residents of One West Mount Vernon in the early 1860s were two enslaved women, one of them a cook named Sybby Grant. She lived in the house during the tenure of its first owner, John Hanson Thomas, a medical doctor and banker. The flyer quoted from a letter that Grant wrote to her master, John Hanson Thomas, on December 6, 1861, when he was imprisoned for his secessionist sympathies. One West Mount Vernon was built for Thomas in the years 1848-50 by the prominent Baltimore architectural firm of Niernsee and Neilson, which several years earlier had designed 5 West Mount Vernon place, the house that was later purchased by William Walters. When One West Mount Vernon was completed, an article in *The Baltimore Sun* dated January 24, 1851 announced that it was “One of the most elegant and princely specimens of architectural taste and mechanical skill.” The building became

part of the museum in the mid-1980s and opened to the public in 1991 as the site for a sumptuous display of the Walters' collection of Asian Art, in a balance between historic house and art installation that very much reflected the scholarship, museological thinking, and tastes of its moment. 25 years later we face necessary upgrades and repairs to mechanical systems and infrastructure—including a fire suppression system that is sensitive to art, to the historic fabric of the building, and to the people who will visit and work in it.

The vision for the program in the house has to encompass not only the Walters spectacular collections of art, but also the building itself as an object for preservation, research, and interpretation. We are bringing a new approach to this balance, in line with our strategic priorities of continually exploring the museum's history and its collections from fresh perspectives, and of using the collections and the expertise of our staff to engage audiences in conversation, creating new connections to the art and culture of our shared past.

With this in mind, when we learned about Sybby Grant, the enslaved woman who had lived in the house as the Thomas family's cook, and the letter she had written, we tracked it down; it had been brought to light by an auction of archival materials belonging to the Thomas family in 2011. A web search revealed that the letter was with a book dealer in Philadelphia.

We all felt that, given the mandate to interpret the Museum's collections and its buildings, and the people who lived in them, acquiring the letter would not only be appropriate but would also, because of our open access policy, ensure that Sybby Grant's words would remain in the public domain.

And so we acquired the letter and have begun the work to research and interpret it, assisted by historians and art historians at Morgan State. In it, Sybby addresses her master as "My Friend" and emphasizes her skills as a cook. She writes, "Yesterday we had a fine pair of canvas backs ducks made a present to Miss anna. they was cook splendid and i wish yous was here to enjoy them. those terrapins ... i done them in stile for you know that no one can do them like i can"—reminding her imprisoned master of her worth and of a certain reversal of fortune at a moment that was particularly tenuous for enslaved people in Baltimore. The capacity for genuine affection between masters and enslaved nonetheless did not obviate the inequities that defined the institution of slavery—it was always clear where the power lay. We hope that the letter will create opportunities for partnership with local institutions such as the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture and the Maryland Historical Society.

The themes raised in the letter as it relates to the house, including the issue of invisible labor, of Baltimore's and Maryland's particular histories during the civil war, and of the identities of enslaved people, have already inspired our thinking about how to install and reinterpret works from the Walters' collections in the rooms of the house,

disrupting expectations about domestic display in a mid-19th century house. We are also working on contemporary art installations that might explore and interrogate the nexus of history, art, and food that the letter's presence here suggests.

Hackerman House at One West Mount Vernon is only the first of the five buildings of the museum's campus that over the next years we will be assessing and reinstalling, bringing new light to bear on the Walters' spectacular collections, its buildings, and its history, and engaging our communities in new ways. We hope that you will visit, and visit again!