

The Common Good:

Collaboration among Cultural Institutions in Maine

by Jessica Skwire Routhier

It ought always to be remembered, that literary institutions are founded and endowed for the common good, and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them for education.... If it be true, that no man should live to himself, we may safely assert that every man who has been aided by a public institution to acquire an education, and to qualify himself for usefulness, is under peculiar obligations to exert his talents for the public good.

Inaugural address of Joseph McKeen, president of Bowdoin College, 1802

Ever since the early years of the nineteenth century, Maine has attracted and cultivated a reputation as a place where artists can work in peaceful solitude. From Frederic Edwin Church's breathless reflections of Mount Katahdin in the mid-nineteenth century to Neil Welliver's thickly wooded forest interiors of the twentieth, many iconic images of Maine suggest stillness, quiet, and isolation. Although such paintings are legitimately the output of a single hand and a singular artistic vision, they are nevertheless rooted in the assistance, intellect, skill, and ingenuity of many others. Church had the railroad, the support of galleries and patrons in New York, and the invaluable help of a network of outdoorspeople that would eventually become the Maine Guides. Welliver also had New York connections and those of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, as well as a tight-knit community of professional artists in Lincolnville, Maine, where he settled in 1970, and from which he commuted to Philadelphia, where he worked for 19 years. Though both artists were famous for going alone into the wilderness to paint, their communities—variously defined—provided the base camp for their artistic expeditions.

The stories of Church and Welliver testify to the strong impulse in Maine to work collaboratively to advance the complex process by which art is conceived,

constructed, supported, questioned, improved, challenged, sold, shared, and promoted. In the context of today's Maine arts and cultural institutions, that impulse is deeply connected to a longstanding dedication to the common good, a concept articulated more than 200 years ago by Bowdoin College president Joseph McKeen in words that remain poignantly relevant today. Maine has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to the arts and humanities: some of the world's most beautiful and richly varied scenery, first-tier museums and academic institutions, and summer weather that was preordained for painting outside. But it also has daunting challenges: deep economic, cultural, and geographical divides; relative isolation from the rest of the country; and darkness at 3:30 p.m. in December. Throughout Maine's history, collaborative initiatives among the state's cultural practitioners have sought to share the blessings and transmute the difficulties, providing evidence that Mainers remain committed to working together for the benefit of our state arts community.

Such collaborative efforts have their roots in the earliest days of Maine statehood, almost from the time of McKeen's remarks. The recognition of the arts and their attendant industries as legitimate professions was made manifest in the formation of the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association in Portland in 1815. Using the contemporaneous definition of mechanic as simply a person who makes something, the association provided educational opportunities and financial assistance for its members, which included a guild of "painters, glaziers, and brush makers." In fact, the group hosted the first large-scale exhibitions of art in the state as part of its recurring fair and exhibition, held in 1826, 1838, 1854, and 1859.¹ With a fine arts department organized by critic and polymath John Neal, these events provided valuable visibility for many artists, artisans, and other creative people. Perhaps inspired by the vitality of the Portland-based association, the Bangor Mechanic Association was founded in 1828 with a

similar educational mission. It established and ran one of several libraries in Bangor for many years, until in 1875 its collections became the foundation for what is now the Bangor Public Library (Alpert et al. 1998). Both the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association and the Bangor Mechanic Association (closely affiliated with the Bangor Public Library) continue to exist today, and in the 200 years since their founding, many other associations have been established on similar ideals of mutually supporting both the professional and cultural lives of Maine's citizens.

The Union of Maine Visual Artists (UMVA), for instance, founded in 1975 to foster better communication and support among artists and to advocate for artists' interests and rights, helped bring back the statewide group show in the 1970s and 1980s. UMVA members advocated for the importance of such exhibitions in identifying and encouraging emerging talent, and they persuasively argued against the levying of submission fees for juried exhibitions (<http://www.umvaonline.org/>). In response, and for more than a decade, some of Maine's leading arts institutions—the Portland Museum of Art, Maine Coast Artists Gallery (now the Center for Maine Contemporary Art), and the museums at Bowdoin College and the University of Southern Maine—shared responsibility for hosting the *All-Maine Biennial* (a juried exhibition open to all Maine artists) as well as the biennial exhibition of the Maine Crafts Association.

Such efforts have evolved today into a constellation of juried art exhibitions spanning the geography of Maine and beyond. The Center for Maine Contemporary Art has held its biennial almost continuously since the late 1970s, with director Suzette McAvoy overseeing a 2014 show that was praised for being “gritty, ranging, realistic and fresh” (*Maine Sunday Telegram*, October 5, 2014). The Portland Museum of Art (PMA), buoyed by an endowment bequest from artist William Thon, has hosted its own biennial since 1998, recently overhauled by Chief Curator Jessica May. And in 2009, University of Maine Museum of Art (UMMA) director George Kinghorn imaginatively added the *I-95 Triennial*, hosted every three years and connecting Maine artists to their colleagues along New England's main highway corridor. The jurors for these exhibitions have ranged from Maine arts insiders to visiting dignitaries; many have worn both of those hats, including frequent *New York Times* contributor Deborah Weisgall and artist-scholar David Driskell.

But the group show has not been the only way in which Maine's arts institutions have worked together historically. Mindful that museums and other cultural organizations must also operate as businesses, the directors of Maine's leading art museums formed the Maine Art Museum Trail in 1997. This shared marketing initiative presents a road map—no metaphor there—to experiencing Maine art from the Ogunquit Museum of American Art to the UMMA in Bangor. Its goal is to “promote public access to the arts, to educate the public about the state's cultural heritage, to enable the museums to become strong visible partners in the state's efforts to promote cultural tourism, and to forge new partnerships among businesses, the arts, and education.”² Early leadership of the trail was provided largely by Kristen Levesque in her role as director of marketing and public relations at the PMA, so it is especially fitting that the PMA will host *Directors' Cut: Selections from the Maine Art Museum Trail in 2015*. This special exhibition will feature artwork from each of the eight trail museums' collections, personally selected by their directors. A force on the scene for 18 years now, the Maine Art Museum Trail—which in 2014 expanded to include the Monhegan Museum of Art and History—stands as an exemplar of how the state's arts organizations work collaboratively and independently at the same time, much to their mutual benefit and that of the public.

Grounded in that same spirit is another collaboration that coalesced roughly in tandem with the Maine Art Museum Trail: the Maine Curators' Forum. This loosely defined consortium of museum professionals and independent scholars is best known for the ambitious, multi-venue, statewide exhibition initiatives it has organized: the Maine Print Project (2006), the Maine Drawing Project (2011), and the Maine Photo Project (2015). From the beginning, these shared endeavors sought to cast new light on underused public collections in Maine; the focus to date has been on works on paper, since their relative fragility and sensitivity to light mean that they are less frequently displayed than paintings and sculpture. The projects of the Maine Curators' Forum have been an essential point of intersection among arts institutions, artists, and curators-at-large who are engaged with these media. Print scholars Bruce Brown and David Becker, for instance, provided much of the vision and curatorial voice for the Maine Print Project and its accompanying book (Becker 2006), and photography historians Libby Bischof, Susan Danly, and Earle G. Shettleworth Jr. are literally writing the book

on the history of Maine photography in conjunction with the Maine Photo Project.

Supported in part by a grant from the Maine Arts Commission that has underwritten much of the Maine Photo Project's outreach and promotional expenses, the Curators' Forum has been able to reach beyond the familiar parameters of *arts* with this 2015 collaboration. Among the more than 30 participating organizations are not only art museums but also libraries, academic institutions, historical societies, and even an ocean science laboratory, featuring exhibitions whose topics range from 1840s daguerreotypes to images made from electron microscopes. Thought to be the largest such collaboration ever undertaken in the state, it is only the latest one in a decade that has also seen the Maine Folk Art Trail (2008) and the Maine Civil War Trail (2013), both initiated and organized by Maine Maritime Museum founder Charles E. Burden. The Print Project, the Folk Art Trail, and the Photo Project have all been accompanied by publications from Down East Books (the Photo Project book is forthcoming in September 2015), with contributions and images from Maine's most cherished public collections.

A strong partner in the latter two Maine Curators' Forum projects has been the Association of Maine Archives and Museums (familiarily known as MAM), the state's only membership organization dedicated to supporting and promoting Maine's collecting institutions. More than half of the organizations participating in the Maine Photo Project are among MAM's roughly 300 members, testifying to how successful MAM has been in fostering community and nurturing a sense of a shared purpose among state cultural institutions. Since its establishment in 1990, MAM has done for Maine's collecting institutions what that UMVA has for Maine artists: supported and advocated for them, both in broad, general ways and in response to specific cultural and legislative matters that have affected its constituencies. I served as MAM's president in 2013 and 2014, and during that time MAM took a vocal stance on several state and national issues: the restoration of tax incentives for charitable giving in Maine; the elimination of the University of Southern Maine's American and New England Studies graduate program; U.S. Senator Paul Ryan's 2014 national budget proposal, which would have effectively eliminated the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities as well as the Institute of Museum and Library Services; and a recent budget proposal from Maine Governor Paul LePage that,

in part, compels Maine municipalities to levy property taxes on nonprofit organizations. In every instance, MAM has been able to point to a 2013 economic impact study of its membership that challenges the misperception that nonprofits take more than they give (MAM 2015). With the power of MAM's numbers behind them, Maine's cultural organizations can demonstrate with confidence that their collective economic impact is wholly positive: they draw millions of visitors to the state, generate millions of dollars in revenue, employ hundreds if not thousands, and do so without depending upon funding from municipal, state, or national governments.

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Nonprofit professionals from other states often observe that the kinds of collaborations so firmly established in Maine are rare elsewhere. This is especially true of several extraordinary group efforts to save and secure Maine art and artifacts for collecting institutions in the state. These have not been one-sided initiatives, but are ones in which scholars, museum professionals, dealers, collectors, and philanthropists have recognized a common goal and shared their resources in order to achieve it. In 1997, Cyr Auctions in Gray, Maine, received for consignment a 1,000-page illustrated journal from 1864 to 1899, recording in remarkable detail the world of middle-class businessman John Martin in Bangor and Ellsworth. Appreciating that the object belonged in a public collection, Cyr worked with scholar Arlene Palmer Schwind (now the curator of Portland's Victoria Mansion) to research the journal and work on its placement. Ultimately, in what then Maine State Museum Director Joseph R. Phillips (1997) described as an "unprecedented" achievement, a coalition of institutions and individuals—including the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Maine State Library, Bangor Public Library, Maine Historical Records Board, and Maine Historical Society, along

with several corporations and individuals—funded the purchase of the journals for joint ownership by the Maine State Museum and the Maine Historical Society. Martin's journal went on to become a highlighted object in the book for the Maine Folk Art Trail in 2008, fulfilling Martin's own ambition to have it communicate to successive generations the "the manner in which the Pioneers of this section of the country procured their education and livelihood, [and] enjoyed their amusement" (Murphy 2008: 94).

Thirteen years later, Maine's leading cultural organizations were once again spurred into action when the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association announced that it was financially compelled to auction off 17 hand-painted antique banners, originally created by the association's various guilds and used in an 1841 parade down Portland's Congress Street. All agreed that these rare, fragile relics of nineteenth-century Maine art and culture were important, and most sought to sustain them as a single collection in Maine; however, the \$200,000 estimate put the banners well beyond the ready acquisition funds of any single Maine institution. Just as for the Martin journals, the solution was to work together. While the auctioneer, James D. Julia, created incentives for the banners to be purchased together as a single lot, representatives from the Maine Historical Society, Maine State Museum, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Maine Maritime Museum, Portland Museum of Art, and the museums at Bowdoin, Bates, and Colby Colleges pooled their resources. With additional support from individuals and corporations including Earle Shettleworth, James Julia, L.L. Bean, Diana and Linda Bean, Chris Livesay, Elsie Viles, the Libra Foundation, and an anonymous Boston foundation, these organizations purchased the banners for the permanent collection of the Maine Historical Society, which had effectively served as their steward since the 1980s. Then-director Richard D'Abate was gratified by the largesse. "The focus, hard work, and unselfish generosity of the cooperating museums was unprecedented in my experience," he noted in an August 30, 2010, press release (Routhier 2010: 13). "I think we owe that to our common recognition that the banners were one of the state's true artistic and historical treasures. They had to be saved."

How do we explain such magnanimity? What could impel organizations that are perennially low on resources, and particularly on acquisition funds, to spend their precious dollars to build someone else's

collection? Conventional business philosophy would say that it makes no financial sense, especially since nonprofits cannot take advantage of any kind of tax benefit for charitable giving. The donations generated public goodwill and positive media coverage, to be sure, but nothing with a cash value that would compensate for what the organizations contributed. Is this just a case of nonprofit arts and cultural organizations doing what they are so often assumed to do reflexively—serving high-minded educational missions at the expense of sound fiscal management and sustainability?

That simple explanation is mistaken, and it belies the sound business background of many leaders of Maine cultural organizations. The leaders of Maine's museums know business, but they also know their business, one that has flourished here since the Maine Historical Society was founded in 1822. They are not thinking just about the next fiscal quarter, but also about the long game—what things will look like in 2022, and then again in 2122—and that means concerning themselves with the health and strength of the entire industry—the fullest landscape of art, humanities, and cultural organizations—and not just their own fiefdom. As a general rule competition is a nonstarter in the Maine museum world. The leaders of this field understand that whenever any one museum—or any arts or cultural organization in Maine—has a success story to share, the entire industry benefits. And collections, the artwork, documents, and other artifacts that museums preserve, display, and interpret, are at the center of that, as they are the material expression of the history and cultural wealth that would be lost without these institutions. So while it's certainly true that those who helped purchase the Martin journals and the Charitable Mechanics Association banners acted selflessly, it's also true that they can expect a return on that investment. Part of that return will be the ready and eager support of colleagues for the next group initiative.

Within the Maine cultural community there is a shared understanding of the value of our material heritage, the importance of preserving it, and the solemn responsibility of collecting institutions—working both independently and collectively—to promote and provide access to it. Organizations such as the Portland Public Library and the Maine Historical Society have sought innovative ways to build their capacity to do just that, notably in the shared collections storage facility that they purchased and outfitted together in 2014 with both institutions' needs in mind. Though the project

had some critics (who feared that off-site storage would limit public access to both library and museum collections), it has indisputably and exponentially increased the ability of both organizations to grow and care for their collections. In fact, the Maine Historical Society has long been a trailblazer in providing access through collaboration. Its Maine Memory Network, a free, searchable online database of some 20,000 historical items uploaded by more than 270 participating organizations (<https://www.mainememory.net/>), was developed in 1999–2000, when such initiatives were almost unheard-of. Maine Memory Network continues to grow and adapt today, but as always, its vitality and worth is rooted in the contributions of its participants. (See Bromage [2015] for further discussion about Maine Memory Network.)

Another recent project with many stakeholders is the Langlais Art Trail, a wide-ranging campaign to place works from the estate of sculptor Bernard “Blackie” Langlais, a native of Old Town and a longtime resident of Cushing, in public Maine collections. “The project is startling in scope,” wrote Geoff Edgers in the *Boston Globe* (July 6, 2014), “as unorthodox as the artist’s career, and the result of a complex collaboration between a college art museum, land preservationists, and a Wisconsin-based nonprofit art foundation.” In 2010, Langlais’s widow, Helen, left the Colby College Museum of Art the entire estate that she had inherited from her husband: \$750,000 plus three buildings and 90 acres of land filled with thousands of works of art, from relatively modest drawings to the massive outdoor wooden sculptures for which the artist is best known (Figure 1). Although, in terms of sheer square footage, the recently expanded Colby Museum is the largest art museum in Maine, it is nowhere near large enough to absorb such a massive body of work. Rather than auction off the collection piece-by-piece—a solution other museums have attempted with varying success and the inevitable loss of cultural heritage—Colby reached out to Wisconsin’s Kohler Foundation, the nonprofit

arts wing of the well-known bathroom fixtures company, which has gained a reputation for preserving outdoor artists’ installations and for relocating works that can no longer stay in place. Kohler purchased much of the estate from Colby, and the two organizations have successfully shared it with “over fifty institutions in more than forty Maine communities [that] now hold artworks by Langlais” (<http://langlaisarttrail.org/>).

Press coverage of the initiative has given much of the credit for the collaboration to the vision and perseverance of Colby’s Curator of Special Projects Hannah Blunt, and her leadership role cannot be overstated. However, like so many other Maine collaborations, the success of the project arose from the efforts of many: Colby and Kohler, of course, including Colby Museum Director Sharon Corwin and Kohler’s Executive Director Terri Yoho; the Georges River Land Trust, led by Gail Presley, which assumed ownership and preservation of Langlais’s 90 acres in Cushing; Portland gallery owner Andres Verzosa, who represented Langlais for decades and worked with Colby to match works from the estate with institutions that would value them; conservator Ronald Harvey of Lincolnville, who cleaned and stabilized many of the sculptures before they went

FIGURE 1: **Bernard Langlais, Horse (1966), Cushing, Maine, 2008**



Photograph by Pixel Acuity, courtesy of the Colby College Museum of Art

to new homes; and the leaders of the many Maine museums, libraries, schools, and cultural centers that welcomed the gift of Langlais's artworks and celebrated them in a flock of exhibitions across the state in the summer of 2014.

Unprecedented—the word used by both J. R. Phillips and Richard D'Abate—is clearly no longer the right way to describe such collaborations that, however unusual elsewhere, now have a deep history in Maine. The *Boston Globe* called the Langlais Art Trail “unorthodox,” perhaps better reflecting the boldness and vision of that project as well as all of the other initiatives described in this essay. That word, indeed, also describes Langlais's peripatetic career: he was an artistic prodigy who emerged from a hardscrabble upbringing in Maine to rise to the top of the postwar New York art world, only to retreat in midlife back to the woods of Maine. But *unorthodox* plus *Maine* plus *retreat* does not equal *recluse*—as we must also remind ourselves when considering that other Maine artist, Winslow Homer, who is so famously (and largely inaccurately) assumed to be a hermit. Langlais and Homer—and indeed, Church and Welliver—chose Maine because it is beautiful and serene, but also because it is *welcoming*, offering the simultaneous possibility for independence and community. All of these artists relied not only on their own gifts, but also upon an infrastructure that enabled, underwrote, and promoted the sustained work that they did here. Langlais, who is probably best known for the gigantic Indian statue he completed on commission for the town of Skowhegan, knew this as well as anyone. While he might be surprised today to see the extent to which his sculptures are now represented in public collections, he would probably be less surprised to learn that the cooperation of Maine nonprofits was behind their placement.

Only a decade and a half into the twenty-first century, we have already seen monumental changes in the ways that we all live, work, and communicate. Maine cultural institutions have responded to that, in part, through collaborations that have broken new ground and removed perceived barriers between art and history, profit and nonprofit, coast and interior, your place and mine. In 2020, Maine will celebrate 200 years of statehood, and we can do so with the knowledge that the full span of that history has been characterized by collaborative efforts to support the arts, preserve history, and share our cultural heritage, all in the interest of the common good. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. More information about the Maine Charitable Mechanics Association is available on the Maine Memory Network website: https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/1403/page/2058/display?use_mmn=1
2. <http://www.portlandmuseum.org/exhibitions/directors%E2%80%99cut-selections-maine-art-museum-trail>

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