



November 2014

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art Chronology

- 1771 Daniel Wadsworth is born on August 8.
- 1775 George Washington visits Jeremiah Wadsworth at his home in Hartford, on the site of what would become the Wadsworth Atheneum. Washington will visit the house twice more: with Rochambeau, Hamilton and Lafayette in 1780; and while president in 1789.
- 1783 Jeremiah Wadsworth and his son, Daniel, visit the London studio of John Trumbull, who paints a double portrait of them.
- 1793 The Louvre opens in Paris as a national museum.
- 1807 The Boston Athenaeum, a private institution, is founded.
- 1807 Thomas Sully visits Wadsworth and paints portraits of him and his family.
- 1809 Wadsworth finishes Monte Video, his country estate in what is now Avon. It is the first Gothic revival house in New England.
- 1826-1828 Wadsworth is a principal patron of Thomas Cole.
- 1838 The National Gallery in London opens.
- 1841 Wadsworth turns 70 and offers the family property on Main Street as the site for a Gallery of Fine Art. Others convince him to create an Atheneum that would also include other established institutions: The Connecticut Historical Society; The Young Men's Institute (the forerunner of the Hartford Public Library); and The Natural History Society of Hartford. By December 1, 133 subscribers had pledged \$31,730.72.
- 1842 The Wadsworth Atheneum, America's first public art museum, is incorporated by the State of Connecticut, and construction begins.
- 1844 The Atheneum, designed by Ithiel Town and Alexander Jackson Davis, opens to the public with over eighty works of art on view. They include John Trumbull's Revolutionary War paintings, Thomas Cole's *Mount Aetna*, and Sir Thomas Lawrence's portrait of Benjamin West. The admission fee is 25¢.
- 1846 The Smithsonian Institution is founded in Washington, D.C.
- 1846 Frederic Church, a Hartford native, sells the Atheneum his first painting, *Hooker and Company*, depicting the founding of Hartford.

- 1848 Daniel Wadsworth dies, and his personal collection of paintings comes to the Atheneum.
- 1855 The subscribers to the Atheneum, also called proprietors, turn over to the corporation of the Atheneum all of their individual rights to the holdings of the Gallery, giving the Trustees full control.
- 1858 The sculptor Edward Sheffield Bartholomew dies in Rome. He was from Connecticut, and spent two years, beginning in 1845, as an employee of the Atheneum, hired to mind the Gallery, and known as either the keeper or the curator. After his death, the Atheneum raises funds to purchase sculptures from his studio. James G. Batterson, founder of the New England Granite Works and The Travelers Insurance Company, is chosen to travel to Italy and secure Bartholomew's works. They are all installed, including *Eve Repentant*, by 1861.
- 1864 The Watkinson Library addition is completed, but not opened to the public until 1866. David Watkinson had left \$100,000 to the Atheneum for his proposed reference library in 1857.
- 1870 The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston are founded.
- 1884 The Trustees vote to close the Gallery to the public for want of funds. An editorial in the *Hartford Courant* berates the citizens of Hartford for not supporting the Atheneum. "What they pay for is a good lively minstrel show at the opera house or some other similarly permanent and enduring means of entertainment. And so we go on year by year, young people growing up by thousands in the city and their characters shaping themselves under the prevailing influences; and the prevailing influences seem to be those which close libraries and art galleries and open doors that lead to different places of entertainment."
- 1886 The Gallery is reopened after The Art Society of Hartford, recently incorporated, enters into an agreement with the Atheneum. The Society will underwrite the Gallery, free of charge to the public, and in return the Trustees will allow the Society to hold art classes in the Gallery.
- 1889 The Rev. Francis Goodwin tells his cousin, Hartford native J. Pierpont Morgan, that the "Atheneum and its semi-affiliated institutions must either be revived or else decently buried." In London, Goodwin has a similar conversation with Morgan's father, Junius Spencer Morgan, who responds with a pledge of \$100,000. J. Pierpont Morgan then pledges \$50,000. In this first appeal for public funds since the founding of the Atheneum, over \$400,000 is raised for the renovation.
- 1893 The refurbished Atheneum and adjoining new building for the Watkinson Library opens to the public. J. Cleveland Cady is the architect.
- 1893–1896 The Henry and Walter Keney Fund, of \$50,000, is established as the Atheneum's first endowment for the purchase of works of art.
- 1897 The Atheneum trustees appoint George H. Story, Curator of the Painting Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, as the "Honorary Curator of the Art Gallery." For the next twenty-five years, he will be a major voice in selecting paintings for the museum.
- 1904 A section of Daniel Wadsworth's house on Prospect Street is opened as the museum's Annex gallery. The house, built by Jeremiah Wadsworth for Daniel in 1795, had been purchased by the Watkinson Library in 1858, rented to various organizations, transferred to the Atheneum in 1890, leased to the Hartford Club for some years, and then renovated to house a part of the Hartford Public Library, the Hartford Art Society, and the Annex gallery. The building will be demolished in 1932 to make way for the Avery Memorial.

- 1905 Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt, widow of Samuel Colt and a founding member of the Art Society of Hartford, dies, leaving her art collection to the Atheneum, and \$50,000 for a new building to house it.
- 1907 J. Pierpont Morgan, who had been quietly buying property adjacent to the Atheneum for some years, proposes building the Junius Spencer Morgan Memorial, and pledges \$500,000 for the construction, though it will eventually cost him over \$750,000. The architect for this, and the Colt Memorial, is Benjamin Wistar Morris, son-in-law of the Rev. Francis Goodwin.
- 1910 The Colt Memorial and the Main Street section of the Morgan Memorial are officially open to the public.
- 1911 Frank Butler Gay is appointed the first director of the Atheneum. He had begun working there in the library in 1876, and through successive years was named Superintendent of the Building (1883–1907), Custodian of the Gallery (1908), and Curator (1909–1911). In 1897 he had become the Librarian of the Watkinson Library, as well.
- 1915 The remainder of the Morgan Memorial, including the great hall, is completed and opened to the public.
- 1917 J. P. Morgan, Jr., presents the Atheneum—per his father’s will—with more than 1,300 objects from J. Pierpont Morgan’s collection of decorative arts.
- 1918 Florence Paull Berger, the first professionally trained museum staff member, is hired as the Atheneum’s General Curator. She begins the process of cataloguing the entire collection.
- 1918 Samuel P. Avery, Jr., gives the Atheneum \$225,000 for a new building. Funds will triple by 1932 when construction on the Avery Memorial begins.
- 1922 The Atheneum issues the first museum *Bulletin*.
- 1926 The Wallace Nutting Collection of Pilgrim Century Furniture is purchased for the Atheneum by J. P. Morgan, Jr. It had been installed in the museum the previous year.
- 1927 Over \$1 million from the estate of Frank C. Sumner is left to the Atheneum for the purchase of “choice paintings.” Sumner made the bequest, in part, to honor the wishes of his elder brother, George G. Sumner, who had made a provisional bequest in his own will twenty-one years earlier. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund memorializes both men’s wives. This is still the primary acquisition fund of the museum.
- 1927 A. Everett Austin, Jr., becomes director.
- 1929 Austin exhibits contemporary French masters, including Braque, Matisse and Picasso, and shows motion pictures in the museum for the first time.
- 1929 The Museum of Modern Art is founded in New York.
- 1930 The Atheneum presents America’s first Italian Baroque exhibition.
- 1930 Austin and his bride, Helen Goodwin Austin, move into their newly built house on Scarborough Street in Hartford. Now the largest object in the Atheneum’s collection, the Austin House will be designated a National Historic Landmark in 1994.

- 1931 Austin stages the first Surrealist exhibition in America, and purchases a small painting by Salvador Dali, the first work by the artist to enter an American museum.
- 1933 At the urging of Lincoln Kirstein, the Atheneum sponsors George Balanchine's emigration to America to found the School of American Ballet. They soon move to New York, but the first public performance of what will become the New York City Ballet is in the theater of the Avery Memorial in December 1934.
- 1933 Austin purchases the Serge Lifar Collection of designs for Diaghliev's Ballets Russes.
- 1934 The Avery Memorial wing, with the first International Style museum interior, opens with the nation's first comprehensive Picasso exhibition, and the premiere of the Gertrude Stein–Virgil Thomson opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the first American opera with an all-black cast. The architect for the building is Robert O'Connor, from the same firm as built the Morgan Memorial, although Austin made extensive contributions to the design of the interior.
- 1934 A thematic, multi-week film series, "The Motion Picture, 1914–1924," is shown in the Avery Theater.
- 1935 Austin selects *Composition in Blue and White* while visiting Mondrian's studio in France. The painting is in the Abstract Art exhibition at the Atheneum that fall, and the museum pays for the work, the first Mondrian to enter the collection of an American museum, the following year.
- 1936 Austin stages the Hartford Festival, a week-long celebration of the arts that features an exhibition of almost 400 paintings from Hartford collectors, a retrospective of early film, a Satie symphonic drama with a set by Alexander Calder, a Balanchine ballet, and a Stravinsky chorale. It culminates with the grand Paper Ball, with designs by Pavel Tchelitchew.
- 1941 The National Gallery of Art is opened in Washington, D.C.
- 1943 The Atheneum acquires Caravaggio's *Ecstasy of St. Francis*, the first American museum purchase of a Caravaggio.
- 1944 The Goodwin Parlor, from the Major James Goodwin house on Woodland Street in Hartford, is installed in the Morgan Memorial. It will be renovated in 1990.
- 1944 Chick Austin resigns, and Florence Paull Berger becomes acting director.
- 1945 Frank Lloyd Wright designs Guggenheim Museum.
- 1946 Charles C. Cunningham becomes director. He will establish curatorships, departments, and auxiliary organizations that will modernize the administration of the Atheneum
- 1949 Cunningham begins the summer intern program.
- 1950 The Women's Committee is founded.
- 1950 The Connecticut Historical Society leaves the Wadsworth Atheneum, moving to new headquarters.
- 1951 Cunningham purchases Zurbaran's masterpiece *Saint Serapion*. He will continue to acquire exceptional paintings and objects that broaden the Atheneum's collections.
- 1952 The Watkinson Library leaves the Wadsworth Atheneum, becoming a part of Trinity College.

- 1956 The Hartford Public Library leaves the Wadsworth Atheneum, and reopens in its new building in early 1957.
- 1957 The Atheneum receives a bequest of fourteen paintings, including works by Renoir, Monet and Degas, from Anne Parrish Titzell, who lived in Connecticut and was known primarily as an author of children's books.
- 1958 The first museum handbook is published.
- 1964 The ground-breaking exhibition, *Black, White and Grey*, is organized by Samuel J. Wagstaff, Jr., the Curator of Paintings, Prints, and Drawings, and includes works by Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg, Tony Smith, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol.
- 1964 The Hartford Art School leaves the Atheneum, moving to the campus of the University of Hartford. In 1956, it had joined with Hillyer College and The Hartt School of Music to form the University.
- 1965 Work on the James Lippincott Goodwin Building begins, along with the complete reconstruction of the interiors of the Wadsworth and Colt buildings. The architectural firm is Huntington, Darbee and Dollard of Hartford. The Watkinson Library building is demolished.
- 1966 Charles C. Cunningham leaves the Atheneum.
- 1966 James Elliott is appointed director.
- 1966 The Paper Dress Ball is held at the Atheneum. Participating designers included Bill Blass, Rudi Gernreich and Peter Max.
- 1968 The museum is closed in order to complete the new construction.
- 1968 The Docent Council is organized. Classes to train docents begin in January 1969.
- 1969 The Atheneum reopens. For the first time, all the museum buildings are devoted to the exhibition of art.
- 1972 The Lions Gallery of the Senses, a tactile gallery conceived for the blind, opens. Its mission expands to offer all visitors a way to use their other senses for aesthetic discovery. The last exhibition in the gallery will be MATRIX 106, in 1989.
- 1973 Alexander Calder's *Stegosaurus* is installed on the Burr McManus Mall, adjacent to the Atheneum. Although it is not the property of the museum, the Atheneum did have a major role in choosing and approving the sculpture.
- 1974 The first Festival of Trees is held.
- 1975 MATRIX, a changing exhibition program of contemporary art, begins with works by Ellsworth Kelly. Sol LeWitt designs the opening poster and is the third MATRIX artist. MATRIX remains a forum for art that is challenging, current, and sometimes controversial.
- 1976 James Elliott resigns as director.

- 1977 Tracy Atkinson is appointed director. He will oversee the modernization of the Atheneum buildings, including new heating and air-conditioning, rewiring, and a state-of-the-art security system. Coupled with the capital improvements is “Project Iceberg”—a reinstallation of the renovated and new galleries, which will bring thousands of objects from storage to join the mere fifteen percent of the collection that had been on view.
- 1981 The Society of Daniel Wadsworth is created.
- 1981 The Auerbach Library Associates are organized.
- 1982 Fine Arts and Flowers begins.
- 1983 The first Goodwin Medal is awarded to Genevieve H. Goodwin.
- 1984 The Costume and Textile Society is formed.
- 1985 *The Great River: Art and Society of the Connecticut Valley, 1630–1820* celebrates the culture and artistic heritage of the Connecticut River Valley. It is one of the most expansive exhibitions ever held at the Atheneum, with 375 art objects and artifacts.
- 1985 The Austin House and most of its contents are given to the Atheneum by Helen Austin and her children.
- 1987 Tracy Atkinson retires as director.
- 1988 Patrick McCaughey becomes director.
- 1988 The Simpson Collection of African-American art and artifacts is acquired by the Amistad Foundation and placed on deposit at the Atheneum.
- 1989 *200 Years of American Painting: From the Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum* is exhibited in Paris to celebrate the bicentennial of the French Revolution. It is the first major international exhibition of the Atheneum’s collection. In 1991–1992 another major group of Atheneum paintings will tour Japan.
- 1989 *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, the nationally controversial exhibition, is shown at the Atheneum, drawing enormous crowds.
- 1990 The Douglas Tracy Smith and Dorothy Potter Smith Fund, with a capital sum of \$5.7 million, is vested in the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving with the Atheneum receiving 90% of the income for the sole purpose of acquiring works of art.
- 1990 The Martin Office of Museum Education opens.
- 1992 The Decorative Arts Council is founded.
- 1992 The Wadsworth Atheneum celebrates the 150th anniversary of its founding with the exhibition and catalogue, *The Spirit of Genius*.
- 1995 The Helen and Harry Gray Court is dedicated, marking the complete renovation of the interior of the Wadsworth Building. The Sol LeWitt wall drawing is installed in the court the following year.
- 1996 Patrick McCaughey resigns.

- 1996 Peter Sutton is hired as director.
- 1998 *New Worlds From Old: 19th Century Australian & American Landscapes*, jointly organized by the Atheneum and the National Gallery of Australia, opens at the Atheneum after being shown at two venues in Australia. It is the first exhibition to compare and contrast the landscape traditions of the two nations.
- 1998 A painting by Jacopo Zucchi, which had been bought in good faith by the Atheneum but subsequently found to have been stolen during World War II, is returned to the Italian government. In return the Atheneum is loaned works from Rome that form the basis for the exhibition, *Caravaggio and His Italian Followers*.
- 2000 The exhibition, *Salvador Dali's Optical Illusions*, breaks attendance records. It is the first of a series of exhibitions built around a painting in the museum's permanent collection. Others will include *The Impressionists at Argenteuil* (which set a new attendance record), *Gauguin's "Nirvana,"* and *Picasso: The Artist's Studio*.
- 2000 Peter Sutton steps down as director.
- 2000 Kate Sellers becomes the new director.
- 2000 Plans are begun to make major architectural changes to the museum that will involve the replacement of the Goodwin Building with a new structure, which will stretch from Atheneum Square North to Burr Mall.
- 2002 Because the new building program will require the museum be closed for an extended period, arrangements are made to send major portions of the Surrealist, Modern, Old Masters, and Hudson River School collections on tour.
- 2003 Kate Sellers leaves the Atheneum.
- 2003 Willard Holmes is hired as director.
- 2003 The renovation plans are halted, the Atheneum remains open, but the collection tours continue as scheduled. The paintings from all the traveling collections will return by the end of 2007.
- 2004 A Sol LeWitt wall drawing is installed in the grand staircase of the Morgan Memorial.
- 2005 The Hartford Times Building on Prospect Street, behind the museum, is leased from the state, to be used by the Atheneum for public space and administrative offices.
- 2007 Willard Holmes resigns.
- 2007 The lease on The Hartford Times Building is terminated.
- 2008 Susan Talbott is hired as director and CEO. She launches the Community Engagement Initiative.