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Loughman aims to reconnect Wadsworth to community

BY **JOHN STEARNS**

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PHOTO | JOHN STEARNS

Thomas J. Loughman stands next to a painting in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art by Giovanni Antonio Canal of St. Mark's Square in Venice. It was painted around 1731.

Thomas J. Loughman wasted no time making a bold move as the new head of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art when he launched a program in August offering free admission to Hartford residents.

"The goal for it was to restate our relationship with the community," Loughman said of the Wadsworth Welcome he initiated after six months on the job.

He became director and CEO, his first stint leading a museum, on Feb. 1, overseeing about 75 employees and a \$9.3 million budget.

More than 600 residents from throughout the city have signed up for the Wadsworth Welcome and more than half have already visited more than once, he said.

"The Atheneum had changed fundamentally, it had reopened a third of its galleries, it had physically restored itself, and now is the time for us to deliver," Loughman said. "And the community that exists here now is different than the community when we began that construction work ... so it really is a time when we need to reconnect and it's a continual process."

There's a dynamism about Loughman, 45, who says a museum needs to be a future-minded enterprise.

"So many people around a place like an art museum think it's about the past because we celebrate the past in many ways," he said. "But the only way that the past is helpful is in how it serves the future."

What will make the museum relevant, fresh, more impactful or impactful in a different way? Loughman asked. Celebrating only the past is "the road to entombment," he said.

"This is not a tomb, this is not an attic, this is a marvelous opportunity space, to get people excited about their own self discovery, about the human experience, about the potential inside of them, about the potential of cultures over five millennia," Loughman said, noting the museum's art spans 5,000 years of civilization.

Look for future exhibitions to touch areas of world art that maybe didn't get as much attention during museum renovations, he said, noting a planned Japanese exhibition and exchanges with the Museo Nacional Del Prado in Madrid, for example.

Loughman arrived at the Wadsworth with more than 20 years of museum experience, most recently as associate director of program and planning at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., where he worked 7 1/2 years.

"I set off on this career with an ambition to make a difference as a curator and to make a difference as an administrator and I've had a lot of opportunity ... to do both," at the Clark and, before that, as curator of European art and assistant to the director for exhibitions at the Phoenix (Ariz.) Art Museum. He set his difference-making goal as a senior at Georgetown University.

One of his proudest achievements was establishing a relationship with China in 2008 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Clark's founder, Sterling Clark, who traveled through northern China in 1908 to collect small mammals and other items on an expedition for the Smithsonian Institution. Chinese museums along the expedition route showed photos and other works from his trip.

In 2012, the Clark hosted an exhibit of significant archaeological treasures from Chinese museums. And in 2013, the Shanghai Museum showed documents and photos from Clark's expedition and exhibited the Williamstown museum's French painting collection, the 10th stop on an 11-city international tour for the Clark's 19th-century French paintings.

Planning the global tour, which began in Madrid in 2010, was a "massive undertaking" led by Loughman, recalled Victoria Saltzman, Clark's communications director.

She called Loughman "highly intelligent, very driven and relentlessly curious." He's highly qualified to run a museum, she said.

Loughman has two daughters, 9 and 11, who he raises with his wife, Sara.

Loughman's also a sailor. He enjoys captaining a one-man racing dinghy and reading sea stories, particularly by Nathaniel Philbrick. He also loves biographies and stories of exploration — fitting as he leads the Wadsworth and explores art with a community whose museum he considers his dream job to run.

Thomas J. Loughman

Director and CEO, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford.

Highest education: Ph.D. in art history, Rutgers University, 2003

Executive insights:

"One of the things I've learned in my still short and developing career is that it's all about the future. ... Museums are actually opportunities for exploration for every person and an opportunity to reconnect with what it means to be human."