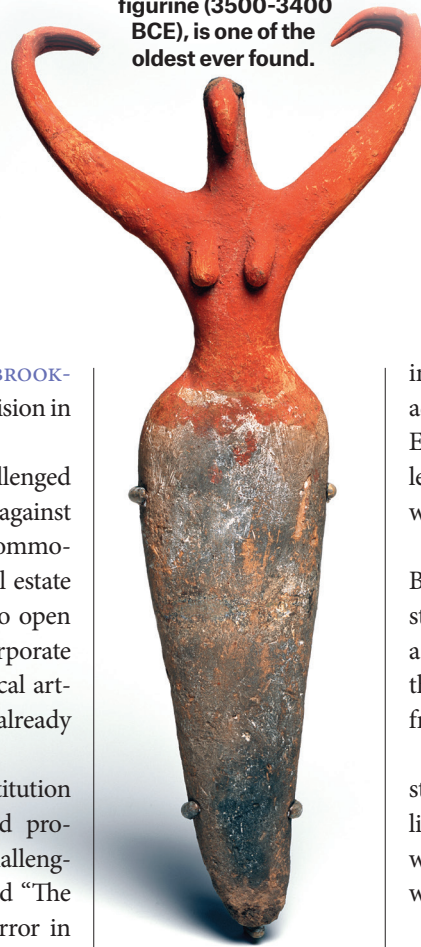


"Woman With Bouquet"
(1940) by Laura Wheeler
Waring (1887-1948) is
part of the museum's
American art collection.

Brooklyn Museum

This Egyptian figurine (3500-3400 BCE), is one of the oldest ever found.



IN 2015, AS NEWLY APPOINTED HEAD OF THE BROOKLYN Museum, Anne Pasternak described her vision in two words: “Our museum.”

That commitment to community was challenged early in her tenure when a local movement against gentrification saw the institution as too accommodating to powerful pressures in the local real estate market. Pasternak’s response was not only to open discussions with the protesters, but to incorporate their arguments into an exhibit, selecting local artwork directly critical of the museum for an already scheduled show on political art.

Under her leadership since then, the institution has expanded its bold, community-focused programming, diving into some of the most challenging social issues of the era. In 2017, it hosted “The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America,” created in collaboration with the Montgomery, Alabama-based nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative. As home to The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, the museum is building awareness of feminism’s cultural contributions through a robust collection that educates new generations about meaning in feminist art. Further exhibitions addressed other important issues of our time, such as the history and legacy of the Stonewall Uprising and global environmental awareness.

Beginning in October, the Brooklyn Museum will celebrate its 200th anniversary with a yearlong series of events and programming, including the launch of Museum on Wheels—an Airstream trailer designed by Brooklyn artist Chris Meyers where presenters

interact with local artists and community members across the borough. The new Toby Devan Lewis Education Center opened this year also, a supportive learning environment for adults and the elderly as well as for children.

One of the celebration’s exhibits will feature Brooklyn artists. Another will be a complete reinstallation of its American Art collection framed as a reimagining of the history of American art from the perspective of minorities traditionally excluded from art history books.

“Lots of museums can tell that classic American story well,” Pasternak told *The New York Times* earlier this year. “So we wanted to see what other stories we can tell. We’re bringing the past in conversation with the present.”

The museum highlights artistic excellence across many creative disciplines, sometimes featured in the private collections of those she calls “powerhouse creatives.” This past year, for instance, has seen shows drawn from the expansive personal collection of filmmaker Spike Lee, and the large works by Black and diasporic artists from the collection of renowned musician couple Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz.

The history of the Museum is similarly associated with celebrity. Founded as a library in 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette laid the cornerstone in 1825. Walt Whitman, still a child at the time, was in attendance and later served as acting librarian.

Today the Brooklyn Museum is known as one of the two major “encyclopedic” museums in New

As the Brooklyn Museum marks its 200th birthday, Director **ANNE PASTERNAK** talks about the institution’s transformation. By Brunswick’s **DARRELL ROCHA** and **MADDIE HICKEY.**

REIMAGINED

York. Pasternak is the first woman to lead either one. The Shelby White and Leon Levy Director of Brooklyn Museum, she previously served as the Director of Creative Time, an arts organization dedicated to presenting socially engaged public art, where she worked with hundreds of leading artists and projects, including the “Tribute in Light” memorial for 9/11.

“I’m proud to have worked on several projects at Creative Time that allowed artists to dream big, experiment, engage public spaces, and really push on contemporary issues,” she tells the *Brunswick Review*. “I’ve carried that spirit with me to the Brooklyn Museum.”

Pasternak is also a member of the board of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. In 2019, *Crain’s* included her on its Most Powerful Women in New York list.

We spoke with her recently about her leadership, the history of the Museum and the plans for its 200th anniversary celebration.

In a 2018 interview, you said the Brooklyn Museum offers an “ability to connect the past to this radical present—and also to engage in broad creativity.” What does that mean to you, to connect with “this radical present”?

We look at the big questions of our day. We don’t shy away from addressing contemporary, even difficult, issues. Instead, we embrace the opportunity to engage audiences in deep, nuanced and historic understandings of who we are, where we come from and why. It’s an essential role of museums to bring us together in learning and understanding.

There was skepticism about the direction of the museum when you took over. Did you have to adapt to address that? Or was it more a matter of convincing people that you had the right vision?

When I stepped into the role, people were understandably concerned. I hadn’t worked in a museum, nor had I run an organization this large. They were also concerned that although I studied art history, my career was focused on Contemporary Art—I personally see this as a strength and can’t imagine why someone focused on the past would be better at meeting the present.

But the Museum’s trustees knew what they were looking for: someone who would advance the Brooklyn Museum’s history of social good, generate shows that would create global buzz and strengthen the Museum’s reputation in the world. And that’s what I am doing.

“We embrace the opportunity to engage audiences in deep, nuanced and historic understandings of who we are, where we come from and why.”



Anne Pasternak

Our founders established the Museum two centuries ago to create a space where Brooklynites could connect through shared cultural experiences and build a stronger, more inclusive society. This guiding principle has always been central to the Museum’s identity, and with my mighty team I have been building on this legacy. And I am incredibly passionate about it.

You’ve been at the Museum for eight years—have those battles all been won? What challenges remain?

The world feels very different now from when I first joined the Museum in the fall of 2015. And yet, despite a rapidly changing cultural landscape and various organizational challenges—financial stressors, shifts in our support base, increased pressure to present unique and impactful exhibitions to compete against other world-class institutions around the city to name a few—I’m immensely proud of the progress we’ve made at the Museum.

Over the years, we’ve been fortunate to receive support from elected officials and the city, a testament to the resonance of our work within both the community and the broader art world. This support has translated into historic investments, such as \$50 million allocated to renovate our fourth and fifth floors, \$9 million for our newly renovated Education wing and approximately \$15 million for our Arts of Africa galleries, among other exciting building improvements. We’ve also seen significant growth in both our visitors and our board membership, with numbers more than doubling.

However, the journey is far from over and the headwinds are strong. Not a day goes by when I’m not anxious. But I believe in the Museum. I love the work. So, we’re going to keep building upward, finding new ways to engage our community and expanding our efforts to include even more diverse voices and perspectives. We’re going to continue our efforts to make sure our Museum is the best that it can be, because that’s what our community deserves.

You’ve called yourself a populist, a term that politically can have some negative connotations. How do you define it for your own work?

When I refer to “being a populist” in the context of institutional leadership, I’m referring to the fact that I want all people to find love, inspiration, learning, empathy and joy at the Museum. I love a great temple of high art as much as any other person, but we can be more, and we can be better. And we must remove the traditional barriers to entry.



So, we're working hard to create a truly inclusive and accessible Museum. We're doing this with a wide array of smart exhibitions spanning masterworks from our collection to shows on fashion, design, contemporary art, and a whole lot more—as well as our public programs, ranging from Art History Happy Hours, Drink and Draws, giant dance parties and Brooklyn Talks with creative legends. This mission is embedded into how we approach education and art making for people of all ages and abilities. It's in how we approach expanding access and our admissions policy. Ultimately, it's our hope that everyone finds a home here where they feel inspired, respected and included.

As society and social issues become even more polarized, do you see your role changing? Is it harder to manage that level of stakeholder involvement?

The Brooklyn Museum has long been a place championing the social good, so I understand why people may want us to get behind their cause. I may even personally feel the pull to participate, but I've learned that care and time are essential.

We have to assess if, when and how to weigh in. We are asking ourselves, is the issue critical to our mission? Do we have real expertise in this subject? Does our participation have a positive impact on the issue? What are the harmful consequences of participating to the cause, our business, and stakeholders? If we decide to get involved, are there better ways to participate than what we are being called on to do? Frankly, there are a dozen other essential questions we consider, and a dozen issues we can be asked to support on any given day.

First Saturdays at the Brooklyn Museum present free programming for the community. Above, a crowd of attendees in 2022.

Below, an Egyptian Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman displayed at the museum dates back to the 1st century, C.E.



DARRELL ROCHA is a Director at Brunswick Arts and former Co-Worldwide Head of Communications at Sotheby's auction house. **MADDIE HICKEY** is an Account Director at Brunswick Arts. Both are based in New York.

Honestly, this work is hard. But two things are clear. First, though the volume and hostility of contemporary discourse can make us want to pull away from these conversations, we must listen and learn to speak to one another across differences. Second, as a public space, it is imperative we remain focused on being a place of welcome and belonging, a place to discover our common humanity. That's what art does. That's what the Brooklyn Museum does, and it is of deep importance, especially now as our society is faced with so much suffering, loneliness and division.

In the history of the Museum there have been inflection points—it started out as a library for instance. Is it right to think of the 200th anniversary as a new inflection point?

Absolutely! As we celebrate this important milestone, we're redefining what it means to be a museum in the 21st century and building new foundations. More than looking back, this moment is about transformation and launching us into a new future.

We're reimagining the visitor experience to create a museum of even greater welcome and belonging. We're launching by throwing a giant, wildly fun birthday bash that goes on for three whole days! As we make transformational investments in our physical spaces, we're bringing our 120-year-old building into the future. We're also launching a new and improved brand and strengthening our collections. And that's not even 1% of what's happening!

The opening of the 200th birthday year includes the reinstatement of the American Art galleries, called "Toward Joy," that foregrounds Black feminist perspectives. How did that come about?

Our American Art collection has long been heralded as one of the greatest in the world. At a time of such divisiveness in our nation, we have a responsibility to continually reexamine and update the stories we present. There's abundant opportunity to expand the content of the stories we tell, and who is telling and shaping them.

Our exceptional curator of American Art, Stephanie Sparling Williams, has been the vision behind a new, innovative approach. She has collaborated extensively with various curatorial departments to present our historic collections in a new light. This reimagined presentation expands our idea of what constitutes "American art." It explores bold curatorial ideas, and invites and centers more diverse voices and perspectives, ensuring that our museum truly reflects the diverse and dynamic society we serve. That's the Brooklyn way. ♦