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Meet William Rudolph, New Curator at Milwaukee Art Museum: Bringing a vision to MAM's American Collections

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Meet William Rudolph, New Curator at Milwaukee Art Museum

Bringing a vision to MAM's American Collections

By Curtis L. Carter ([by-author-146-1.html](#))



Three months ago, the Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM) welcomed William Rudolph as its curator of American Art and Decorative Arts. Rudolph's appointment acknowledges the museum's growing importance as a center for these arts. A recent interview provided him the opportunity to explore various aspects of his interest in coming to the MAM and his vision for the museum's American Collections.

First: What is considered American art?

In the past, some historians have held that American art should be limited to art of the United States and the visual art of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Many curators of American art today, Rudolph explains, take a broader view. They embrace, for example, works going back to the Colonial period as well as 19th-century German-American paintings, Chinese export porcelains made for the American market and, of course, African-American and American-Indian artists, including folk and self-taught artists.

Rudolph was attracted to the MAM by its strengths in the areas of American and decorative arts, beginning with the museum's affiliation with the Frederick Layton Collection (founded in 1888) with its riches of 19th-century American paintings, such as Eastman Johnson's *The Old Stagecoach* (1871). Second is the museum's developing collaboration with the Chipstone Foundation, which holds one of the premier collections of American decorative arts. Third is the Hall Collection of folk and self-taught artists acquired by the museum in 1989. Augmenting these are paintings from the museum's own collections, from Colonial portraits to the Ashcan School featuring urban life at the beginning of the 20th century.

Rudolph aims to bring new emphasis to the American and decorative arts by making these collections a major part of the museum's presentations, comparable to the Bradley Collection and other major collections in the museum.

Collaboration with support groups like the Chipstone Foundation will be necessary to secure funding. Rudolph sees Milwaukee as a young American city with great potential for the development of its cultural interests. He says he looks forward to discovering its hidden resources.

Rudolph hopes to generate greater awareness and interest among the public. His plans call for engaging gallery displays that reveal the stories not told directly by the pictures and decorative objects—both their aesthetic and their strangeness. Nontraditional means using the latest technologies, including iPad and cell-phone tours and social networking, will be part of the strategies. The virtual experience, he says, is an enticement to live visits to the galleries—because direct experience of the objects remains essential to understanding art. Most importantly, Rudolph says, he aims to make visitors comfortable in enjoying and learning through art.

The role of a curator, Rudolph says, is to collaborate with other professionals in the museum, including educators, designers, publicists, development staff, administration, members of the acquisition committee and various community volunteers. A curator is responsible for recommending works to collect, conceiving installations of the permanent collection galleries, and organizing special exhibitions. As a scholar, the curator also prepares texts for catalogs and labels.

One of the important questions for museum curators today is how to address cultural diversity. Rudolph believes that the museum has an obligation to collect, show and interpret as many cultures as possible. As well, a curator's responsibility is to make available diverse interpretations of the works so as to offer visitors information to explore and enrich their experiences.

Rudolph's education and experience seem well suited to address the broad range of challenges presented by his new role. His education includes a Ph.D. in art history from Bryn Mawr College in the fields of Colonial and Federal American art and Victorian painting, an M.A. in art history from the University of Virginia covering 18th-century and modern art, as well as special studies at the prestigious Courtauld Institute of Art in London. Prior to coming to Milwaukee, he served in curatorial positions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Dallas Museum of Art and, most recently, at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts.

Curtis L. Carter is professor of aesthetics at Marquette University's department of philosophy. Formerly founding director and chief curator of the Haggerty Museum of Art, he is currently international curator and honorary director of the Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art and president of the International Association for Aesthetics.