



A Curator's Vision with Natalie Mead

MEET THE HUNTSVILLE MUSEUM OF ART'S NEWEST CURATOR

BY ERIN COGGINS

PHOTOS BY DOKK SAVAGE

She knew better, but the pull of the artwork was just too much. The masterpiece, hung in a Moscow museum of art, was just too tempting. She reached out to touch the gold-plated name of the artist.

"I was struck seeing that painting beyond a textbook," Huntsville Museum of Art curator, Natalie Mead said. "I just had to have a reaction to it."

Mead, who started as curator this past December, started her relationship with creating art as a fourth grader in Kansas. Her drawing of a sunflower was selected to hang in the state's capitol building. Her high school art teacher, seeing something in Mead's talent, fed her knowledge of art by incorporating lessons on the history of art.

"She was the first to share stories behind the artist. It kind of started a movement of 'what's behind the artist' for me," Mead said. "Instead of just making art, I started to see the people, places and time behind the pieces."

With the budding passion of art in her veins, Mead began working as a paid intern at the Historic New Orleans Collection. While working

there, she found a paid position as a museum educator at the Louisiana Art and Science Museum in Baton Rouge.

"The role of educator confirmed in me the importance of what was behind the art. I was less excited about making art," Mead said. "I believe this role in art education has formed and shaped my approach to curatorial practices throughout my career," Mead said.

After graduating with master's in art history from Louisiana State University, Mead joined the curatorial staff department at the Louisiana State University Museum of Art, working as a curatorial assistant, then assistant curator and finally as curator. Her last project was an exhibition on the Harlem Renaissance which received the inaugural Association of Art Museum Curators Award for Outstanding Curatorial Visions and garnered national attention from the National Endowment for the Arts.

"This exhibition garnered national attention because it filled a major gap in the historiography of the intersection between African American art and music, but also looked at this national movement from a local perspective," Mead said.

From there, Mead took two other

positions in Louisiana, including working for a private collector in Baton Rouge where she managed one of the largest and most impressive British art collections outside of the United Kingdom.

"Working at the private gallery introduced me to the stress of international shipping," Mead said. "It provided me with more insights into the logistics of exhibitions in terms of paperwork, crating, shipping and general care of art vs my role as a curator where I'm less concerned with the logistics and more about the visual impact and story being exhibited. In this position, I worked more closely with a small number of works, becoming more knowledgeable in a field that few outside the United Kingdom are familiar with—20th Century British painting."

Mead was the curator at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga when she was contacted by a job recruiter describing the curator position at the Huntsville Museum of Art.

"I was not looking to change jobs, but I became excited about the Huntsville Museum of Art and all the potential I feel it has—from expanding the collection to diversifying who or

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what we display and why we display it,” Mead said. “I could see myself in the role, and I could see how I would be able to propel the museum forward.”

And propelling the museum forward is something Mead plans to do. While she is still accessing the Museum’s collection, the pieces she has viewed have brought her much excitement, especially the large collection by female artists.

“It’s a big step forward for an institution to have a large collection of art by female artists, and with 2020 marking the hundredth anniversary ratification of the 19th Amendment,” Mead said. “It is an exciting thing to acquire at the time.”



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-NATALIE MEAD

Mead’s goals. She describes herself as a firm believer that museums should respond to community needs and provide a place to reflect upon current issues.

“I think exhibitions should be poignant and organized with an emphasis on visitor experience, inclusivity, collaboration and community engagement,” Mead said. “This is important as audiences shift

shouldn’t be expected to hang in a frame.”

She refers to the upcoming show by a New Orleans-based artist, Courtney Egan whose exhibit will be a series of video projects or the upcoming show of interactive glass works by Ginny Ruffner characterized as augmented reality experiences.

“I love the notion of bringing in nationally recognized traveling shows or partnering with major institutions on the east and west coasts to present some of the biggest names in American art,” Mead said.

“But I am equally excited about exhibitions of regional artists or emerging artists that are



Janet Fish, *Untitled*, 1980. Oil on canvas. 12 x 16 inches. Gifted to the Museum by the artist.



She is also impressed with the acquisitions that have been made since she has taken the curatorial position, particularly a painting by artist Janet Fish. The artwork was a part of an Encounters show at the Museum.

“The piece is by another prominent female artist and is another good acquisition for Huntsville,” Mead said. “Her gallery gifted it to us. It is one of my favorites of Fish’s art. It can be displayed in unusual ways, either with a historical or contemporary exhibit.

Incorporating more diversity into the Museum’s exhibits is one of

and change. We need to break long-established barriers set by art institutions, and we need to do a better job of bringing underrepresented voices into the long-established narrative.”

Although Mead is not at the point to share which artists the Museum is in talks with, she can reveal that she is speaking with artists from diverse backgrounds that are presenting art in exciting and sometimes challenging ways.”

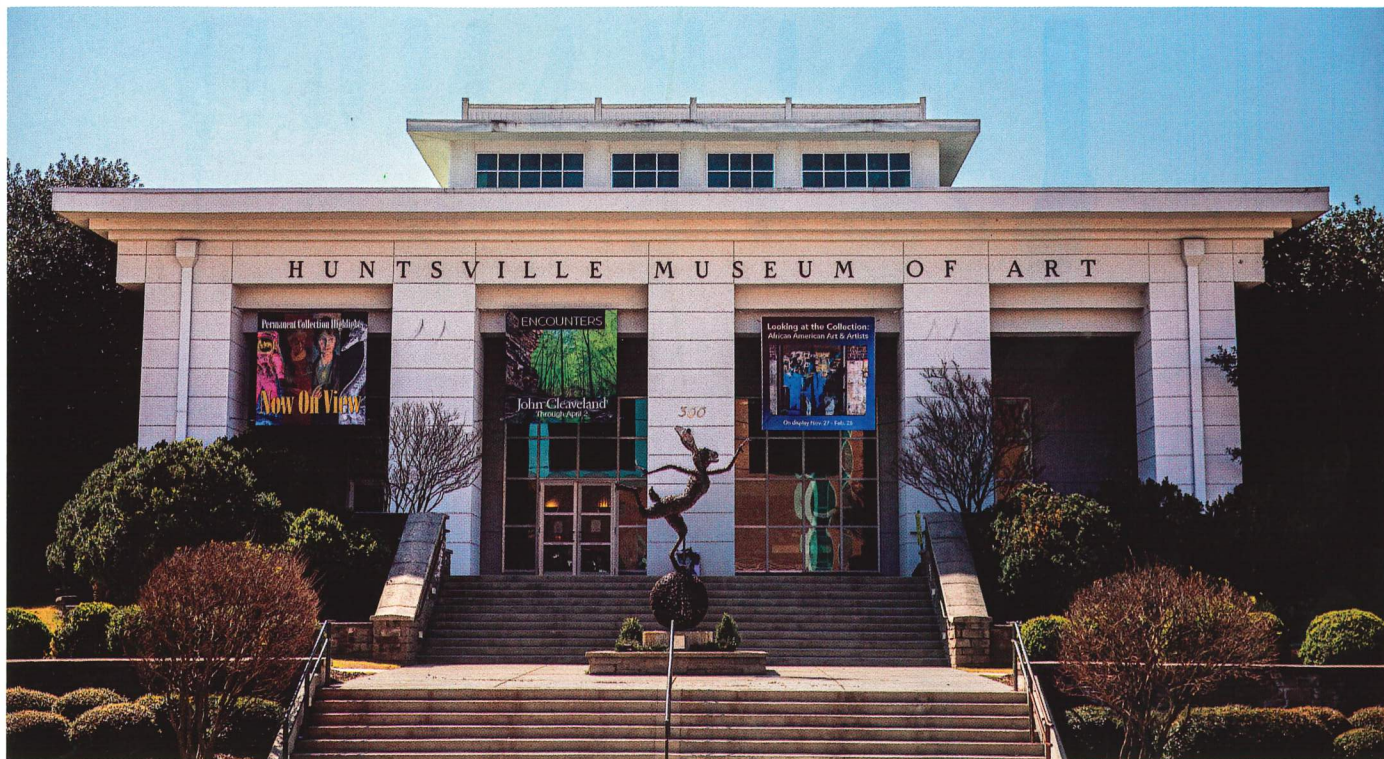
“We are doing this in an effort to better present the overall story of American art,” Mead said. “We are also redefining what art means. Art

experimenting with medium or expanding the boundaries and understanding of art.”

The list of artists that influence her work as a curator include Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon and Theaster Gates. Mead has also had the “incredible opportunity” to work with artists Nari Ward and Gabriel Dawe.

“I’m a big fan of their work,” Mead said. “I’m also excited about the work of Deborah Roberts, Ebony Patterson, Lisa Hoke and Etsuko Ichikawa. And I was recently introduced to the work of artists Justin Favela and Moffat Takadiwa

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that I would love to see in-person.”

Along with this small sampling of contemporary artists, Mead has a long list of what artists considered historic or early American art and is drawn to the Harlem Renaissance period and artists like Gwendolyn Knight.

“All of these artists inspire me as a curator because I want the ability to share my excitement for an artist with those around me,” Mead said. “I want to say ‘Hey, come watch this artwork by Gregory Scott come to life within the painting.’ And I want to see people’s reactions when they enjoy it as much as I do.”

That feeling of wanting to give others an experience is what dictates Mead’s curatorial mindset. Sometimes an exhibit is based on encountering an artist’s work and wanting patrons to experience the same reaction, other times, she has a larger theme in mind and selects artists or artworks that fit within that theme.

“Curators say that exhibitions take two to five years to plan, but I have been working on some shows for over 20 years,” Mead said. “I have ideas for exhibits, but not every show fits every museum. I try to meld the vision and needs of the institution with the needs of the community, and probably a bit of my own interests at times.”

Mead describes herself as a storyteller, but instead of telling stories

with words, she tells stories by combining artworks. This idea blends well with Mead’s way of getting people out of the “art is not for me” mentality.

“Saying art is not for me is like saying clothes are not for me or food is not for me. You say have you tried pizza? Ice cream?” Mead said. “People just need to develop a personal connection to art. The Huntsville Museum of Art is on the cusp of making grander connections. We are equipped to better reach those and think art is not for them.”

With a small team, Mead says it takes all of the Museum departments to bring an exhibition to fruition. The concept usually begins with her, design and logistics get the help from her two-person curatorial staff. Then the educational staff chips in for interpretive material and guides for the cell component. There are those who raise the funds, promote the exhibits and of course volunteer docents that help lead tours.

“I must mention the gift shop. We have one of the best Museum gift shops around,” Mead said. “When we plan an exhibition it’s great, but it will always be much better when we all brainstorm together. It takes us all.”

Although Mead has lived all over the world, she says she feels at home in Huntsville. She credits the people in Huntsville for that feeling.

“Nowhere has felt like home until I

came here. I always felt like an outsider,” Mead said. “All the people here are friendly. From the people I work with to the grocery store clerk, everyone is so kind. They don’t have to be, but they want to be. It’s also the small things like a large city with a small town feel. Huntsville is a nice balance of neighborhoods, commerce, nature and the food is great.”

When Mead gets acclimated and has the green light to turn her ideas into reality, patrons to the Museum will be treated to new experiences. Her goal is for visitors to make better connections as they walk through the Museum.

“I would love to see an installation piece as soon as visitors walk into the main exhibit space. Let’s embrace that big space,” Mead said. “Then include some non-traditional type art to grab some interest. And expand our permanent exhibits to help visitors establish favorites. Let these be on display for a year or so and give patrons something to grow up with, to share with others in the future. I want people to look at art and see an old friend.”

