

HISTORY

The Heckscher Museum of Art serves the community of Long Island through the presentation of great art and art education programs. Since its creation, the Museum has operated with the assumption of the inherent civic value of publicly accessible art.

In 1920 the German-American industrialist and developer August Heckscher opened the Museum and surrounding park for the benefit of the people of Huntington and the surrounding region. Operated by a private foundation, the Museum presented works by Old Masters such as Lucas Cranach, Gustave Courbet, François Girardon, and Henry Raeburn as well as important American painters like Edward and Thomas Moran, Asher B Durand, and George Inness. One can detect a certain Romantic spirit in the preference for images of Venice and the American West within the original collection. In the era before World War II, Long Island was essentially rural with an array of large country estates along the north shore. Figures like Henry Clay Frick, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Theodore Roosevelt owned large estates along the North Shore. For a decade, the Museum enjoyed a charmed existence.

The situation changed dramatically with the crash of the stock market in 1929 and the Great Depression. The foundation governing the Museum was no longer able to operate the Museum and so the collection remained static and was accessible on only a very limited basis. Eventually the efforts of concerned citizens in the late 1940s, including local art teachers and members of the Huntington Township Art League (now the Art League of Long Island), with some assistance from the Town of Huntington resulted in the reopening of the Museum to the public on a regular basis. In 1954 ownership of the institution passed to the Town of Huntington. The modern life of The Heckscher Museum really began in 1957 when the Town of Huntington delegated operational responsibility for the Museum to the Board of Trustees of a newly formed non-profit corporation lead by George Wilhelm. Almost immediately the collection began to grow. Plans were developed for a more active exhibitions schedule and a program of educational activities. In 1962, Eva Gatling was hired as Director, one of the first women to direct an art museum. During her tenure, the Museum made its most important acquisition since the foundation with the purchase of George Grosz's *Eclipse of the Sun*—a monumental painting from the height of his activity in Berlin in the 1920s. Many more objects were added to the collection during her sixteen-year career, including a number of works by Arthur Dove who, like Grosz, had lived in Huntington for an extended period.

In the mid-1960s and 1970s, dreams of expansion were born with initial plans requested from Marcel Breuer. Subsequent directors placed great emphasis on education programs and improved exhibitions. The staff grew in number and professionalism. The addition of the Baker/Pisano Collection of American works in 2001 was the single largest gift to the Museum since the founding donation. A major historic preservation and renovation project, under the direction of Centerbrook Architects, was initiated in 2007, upgrading the exhibition space and highlighting the original architectural features of the building.

Today The Heckscher Museum seeks to thrive and grow in four basic areas—education and public programs, collections and exhibitions.