PUTTING ART & IDEAS AT THE CENTER OF CAMPUS AND PUBLIC LIFE
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REDEFINING WHAT A CAMPUS MUSEUM CAN BE
We began the process that led to this strategic plan in November 2019, more than two years ago. During those long twenty-four months the world jumped its tracks, and the University of Michigan Museum of Art, and our ideas and ideals about our future, jumped with it. As everyone reading this knows, in the intervening months COVID-19 struck, killing at least five million people, and upending our habits and ideas about work, leisure, labor, education, and much else. The global pandemic was accompanied by a worldwide reckoning around systemic racism, inequality, and colonialism, galvanized by the murder of George Floyd. The last two years also saw a contentious U.S. presidential election cycle and a hyperpolarized political and cultural landscape at the local and national level.

These cataclysmic events profoundly shaped our thinking about UMMA’s mission and future. They made us take up the immediate and long-term ways that art museums, with their histories of colonialism and elitism, could rethink their collections and practices to regain public trust and value. They prompted us to deeply consider what people need and desire from art and public institutions during times of extreme upheaval and trauma. And, they drove us to think keenly about the priorities of our partners on the U–M campus and in the community, to consider their needs and desires as we design programs and exhibitions. These questions and considerations led us to others, about the role UMMA has both on campus and in the community, who we serve well and who we need to serve better, and what our staff and culture would need to meet these challenges. In summary, our inquiry here, and in our museum practice, has centered on the question of how do we lead real change in museums, so that the communities we care about can thrive in the 21st century?

Central to our thinking was attention to which publics, and communities, we prioritize. Museums have a long history of claiming they’re for everyone, UMMA included. We came to realize that it is critical to focus on key communities if we want to broaden the Museum’s value to people who aren’t currently coming, who have been excluded, and felt unwelcome. Campus museums also have a long history of focusing largely on campus audiences. We have charted a path that seeks to engage both the campus and our region’s underserved communities as key audiences, with special attention to marginalized and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, [and] People of Color) students. This focus on underserved communities is a critical part of our contribution to the university’s broader efforts to assert its public value, and its commitment to partner equitably with surrounding communities. We are committed to maintaining teaching, learning, and scholarship activities at the highest level for U–M students and faculty, while also expanding our campus partnerships beyond traditional expectations and embracing our role as a vital public space in the greater community. The tactics in this plan will help us better understand the harmonious overlaps and unexpected tensions of being both of the campus and of the community, and will give further definition to the role we can play.

The plan we’ve crafted develops from the Museum’s own history, and from many of the experiments and directions of the last four years that interrogate encyclopedism, expand on the role of a campus art museum, and extend the ideal of UMMA as a town square. Collection Ensemble was the first reinstallation of UMMA’s historic Apse in more than a decade and it highlighted the collection’s diversity—in artists, regions, and time periods—for the first time. It was later joined by the installation *Unsettling Histories*, which revealed a history of slavery latent in a number of UMMA’s American and European paintings. Finally, we collaborated with the Ann Arbor City Clerk’s office for the 2020 presidential election, and recast the Irving Stenn, Jr. Gallery as a voting site, registering thousands of new voters and offering an artful, thoughtfully planned location for people to cast their votes. This project succeeded in revealing UMMA’s strength as a powerful locus of civic engagement. A turn toward public participation and agency was also reinforced by the innovative exhibition *Take Your Pick*, in which Museum visitors voted on which vernacular photographs would enter the collection, and by the debut of the UMMA Cafe, long advocated for by campus and community. We’ve built on and expanded these directions and achievements as we crafted this strategic plan.
This plan was created with participation from the entire UMMA staff, led by a cross-departmental Strategic Planning Committee who met 14 times. The plan was informed by input gathered through two comprehensive staff surveys, full-staff and small-group discussions, and multiple hands-on working sessions. The Strategic Planning Committee conducted interviews with U-M administrative leadership, faculty partners, students on UMMA’s Student Engagement Council, and BIPOC student group representatives. Perspective was provided through conversations with campus museum directors around the country and by benchmarking against our peers. Finally, we met with our communities—interviewing donors and hosting two focus group sessions with BIPOC community members with and without connections to UMMA, facilitated by the organization NEW (Nonprofit Enterprise at Work) (Nonprofit Enterprise at Work). These focus group sessions uncovered perceptions of the Museum and its programs and what our communities would like to see in and from UMMA. Planning was supported by Vogl Consulting.

The result is a plan built around two vision strategies that reflect the Museum’s vision for the next five years: to Be a Dynamic Space for Civic Life and Shared Experiences and to Engage Diverse Communities and Perspectives, and two foundational strategies that will help us achieve that vision: to Advance Teaching and Learning and Shape a Vital Exhibition Program and Collection for the Times We Live In.

This plan commits UMMA to rethinking our role and responsibilities as a public good, in all of the dimensions of that idea, and in all our activities and interactions in the years ahead.

CHRISTINA OLSEN | DIRECTOR
December 2021
The U–M Museum of Art puts art and ideas at the center of campus and public life. We create experiences that enrich our understanding of one another, foster joy, and build a more just future. Through exhibitions, programs, research, and community partnerships we are redefining what a campus museum can be.

Art is a fundamental element of the University of Michigan and a key component of the university’s vision statement, which calls art a “human essential and a foundation that helps to define our future.” Art has long occupied a prominent place in the university’s mission and values—UMMA is the most public reflection of this priority. The university’s art collections were freely available to the campus and community in 1856, before many of the country’s museums were founded. Artists on the U–M faculty, including UMMA’s founding director painter Jean Paul Slusser, have understood and emphasized the importance of art on the U–M campus—the value of the collection for primary research and the ability of art to substantively extend learning and teaching. Slusser, as an artist and museum director, especially understood the capacity of art to illuminate the lived experience of contemporary society.

UMMA was formally established in 1946 as the primary site for engagement with visual art on campus. The Museum was founded with a strong commitment to the acquisition of contemporary art; UMMA’s early exhibitions focused primarily on modern and contemporary art, a significant departure from the university’s early focus on antiquities. UMMA’s original building, Alumni Memorial Hall, a campus war monument that memorialized the fallen students and faculty of the Civil and Spanish-American Wars, was built through the generosity of U–M alumni and designed specifically to house U–M’s growing art collection. UMMA began as an encyclopedic museum: an institution dedicated to displaying and interpreting art from the world’s many cultures, usually in distinct galleries divided geographically. Like its peers, UMMA did not acknowledge its own subjectivity as a museum rooted in a university in the global North, or how or why it prioritized certain collections over others, or how it chose to interpret them.

When UMMA expanded in 2009, more than doubling its square footage through the addition of the Maxine and Stuart Frankel and Frankel Family Wing, its mission expanded too. It embraced its role as a “town square for the arts” important to both the campus and the region. Along with its galleries, UMMA’s collection has also grown over the years and now totals more than 21,000 objects. The mandate and mission of UMMA has evolved to meet the needs of the state and to fulfill the promise of a meeting place for the arts. This plan builds on UMMA’s history, more fully realizing the ambition of the Museum and its potential as an arts-driven campus connector and a dynamic center for the arts. It also seeks to reckon with the colonialist and racist histories of the Museum and U–M, acknowledging that many of the Museum’s and university’s mythologies are built through the lens of white supremacy.
**ART**

Art strengthens human connection and creates a more just future.

**THIS MEANS WE**
- Create experiences with art that transform the way we see each other and the world
- Support individuals and communities in finding relevance and meaning through art
- Support artists in creating, sharing, and preserving their art
- Embrace the capacity of art to build empathy, social cohesion, and foster joy

**EQUITY**

Access to art is a fundamental human right.

**THIS MEANS WE**
- Actively dismantle barriers to participation for everyone
- Continually build UMMA’s intercultural understanding and anti-racist practice
- Amplify BIPOC voices and under-told stories
- Apply inclusive design principles to create spaces that are welcoming and equitable for all
- Make UMMA’s collection accessible for all, both in-person and online
**COLLABORATION**

Collaboration is central to everything we do.

THIS MEANS WE
+ Embrace partnerships across the U–M campus
+ Invest in intentional, consistent, and reciprocal relationships
+ Learn from and co-create projects with the communities we seek to engage
+ Respect and cultivate diverse expertise

**CHANGE**

Museums must change their practices to be relevant to, and support, a breadth of communities.

THIS MEANS WE
+ Support new ways of creating, collaborating, and learning
+ Take informed risks and learn from our mistakes
+ Initiate challenging projects that illuminate ideas and spark growth
+ Question assumptions about what a campus museum should be

**CARE**

We care for our colleagues, collaborators, communities, and art.

THIS MEANS WE
+ Extend genuine empathy, kindness, and generosity
+ Honor the rich diversity of people, experiences, and ideas
+ Compensate staff and collaborators fairly and invest in their well-being and growth
+ Steward UMMA’s art and resources
This plan is built around two Vision Strategies that reflect the Museum’s direction over the next five years and two Foundational Strategies that will help us achieve that vision.
Engage Diverse Communities & Perspectives
ENGAGE DIVERSE COMMUNITIES & PERSPECTIVES

Why We’re Engaging Diverse Communities & Perspectives Now

Art is a fundamental human right and equity must be central to everything that UMMA does.

Historically, the collections, programming, staff, and visitorship at U.S. art museums have not reflected the diversity of their local communities. More than 80% of artists represented in the collections of major U.S. museums are white, and more than 85% are male. Further, the majority of art museum employees are white. UMMA is no different. In order to fulfill UMMA’s mission we must prioritize new ways of working to contribute to a more equitable future for our communities and institution.

We seek to make UMMA a more diverse and welcoming place. UMMA will be a site where courageous and important conversations can take place, and where empathy is encouraged by considering perspectives across time, culture, identity, and geography. To do this we must welcome, represent, and partner with diverse groups on campus, in the region, and beyond, and build authentic relationships that support co-creation. Over the next five years, UMMA will become a better partner to communities we have not previously served well. We will prioritize deepening connections with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, beginning with U-M BIPOC and first-generation students, and BIPOC residents and K-12 students in Washtenaw County. This builds upon the work underway as part of UMMA’s Commitment to Anti-Racist Action and a More Inclusive Museum and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) plan.
ART IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT AND EQUITY MUST BE CENTRAL TO EVERYTHING THAT UMMA DOES.
In Five Years...

Increasingly diverse people, experiences, and ideas will be present and prioritized within the Museum’s staff, among Museum visitors, and the artists represented in UMMA’s exhibitions, programs, and collection. With investments in programming, education, and community collaboration UMMA will be known as a partner that listens well. UMMA will be transparent about its history and will sustain, and continuously improve upon, the work necessary to be an anti-racist museum. UMMA is working toward a more equitable future in which underserved communities view the Museum as an open, safe, and comfortable place that adds value to their lives.
02

BE A DYNAMIC SPACE FOR CIVIC LIFE & SHARED EXPERIENCES
BE A DYNAMIC SPACE FOR CIVIC LIFE & SHARED EXPERIENCES

Why We’re Supporting Civic Life & Shared Experience Now

Museums should be vital and joyful sites for shared community life. To hold true meaning and value for our communities, we must embrace UMMA’s role as a vital piece of social infrastructure—a free, open space that matters for most people, not just a privileged few. Public institutions, such as art museums, must do more to ensure our spaces are open, welcoming, and joyful sites for dynamic public life. Art has special capacities to deepen shared community life: it helps us understand ourselves and the world around us more deeply; it can bring healing to communities who need it, clarity to those in search of an answer, and empowerment to the disenfranchised.

UMMA’s commitment to civic life and shared experiences expands on U-M’s leadership in developing equitable partnerships that allow for an open exchange of resources and ideas between the university, local and regional communities, and the world beyond. UMMA seeks to inspire others on campus, and at campus museums more broadly, to embrace the importance of strengthening civic life.

UMMA will be a reimagined art museum, one with an irresistible public draw that is a conduit for social life, and encourages interactivity, positive social friction, critical thinking and dialogue, and social bonding that works against isolation, polarization, and transactional exchange.
MUSEUMS SHOULD BE VITAL AND JOYFUL SITES FOR SHARED COMMUNITY LIFE.
In Five Years, UMMA will...

Be broadly perceived by key communities as a dynamic and vital cultural center where they go to socialize, find inspiration, and be exposed to new ideas. By reimagining the use of UMMA’s public spaces, a wide range of visitors will experience deepened cultural engagement that supports their needs and desires. UMMA will understand more about who uses the Museum’s spaces and platforms and how to make those spaces and platforms more widely accessible and welcoming. Other U-M units and campus museums will draw inspiration for their own transformations to build social cohesion through powerful shared experiences. We will have an established reputation as an art museum that connects with its public in unique and meaningful ways.
ADVANCE TEACHING, LEARNING & STUDENT PARTICIPATION
ADVANCE TEACHING, LEARNING & STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Why We’re Advancing Teaching, Learning & Student Participation Now

Museum-based teaching and learning creates a sense of belonging and deepens our understanding of one another.

As an art museum on a college campus, UMMA is deeply committed to supporting learners and educators at all levels. UMMA is a national leader in university curricular integration across a broad range of disciplines both within and beyond the arts. This plan will deepen collaborations both with faculty and students, develop unexpected and innovative university partnerships, and broaden the reach of classroom experiences at the university and in the region’s K-12 schools. The plan also embraces opportunities for UMMA to act as a site for experiential learning and emphasizes UMMA’s interest in learning from student perspectives.

Collections, exhibitions, and programs all serve as catalysts for exploration of current and historical events; UMMA’s collection in particular is a potent resource for understanding the complexities of the human experience. This plan will extend UMMA’s resources to underserved communities through inclusive teaching practices, intentional collaboration and partnership, and development of pedagogical materials for teachers and students with a focus on the ability of art, exhibitions, and programs to tell stories that resonate, challenge, and illuminate.
MUSEUM-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING CREATES A SENSE OF BELONGING AND DEEPENS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ONE ANOTHER.
In Five Years, UMMA will...

Be a center for teaching and learning and a leader in equitable pedagogical practice that is known for experimentation, innovation, and inspiration. UMMA will partner across the U-M campus to increase the breadth of discipline and research in the Museum. We will expand the use of exhibitions and programs by faculty and students through increased co-curation and early collaboration. Members of the Student Engagement Council (SEC) will be involved in important decision-making, and we will provide more opportunities for paid internships and graduate student fellowships. UMMA will transform its K-12 program to meet the curricular and social needs of a more diverse school population by increasing the diversity of educators in its galleries as well as the diversity of the stories it tells.
FOUNDATIONAL STRATEGY 2

02

SHAPE A VITAL EXHIBITION PROGRAM & COLLECTION FOR THE TIMES WE LIVE IN
SHAPE A VITAL EXHIBITION PROGRAM & COLLECTION FOR THE TIMES WE LIVE IN

Why We’re Shaping a Vital Program & Collection Now

Our collection and exhibition program are a dynamic source of ideas, inspiration, and identification for our communities.

UMMA’s collection is a versatile and expansive resource. As the site where art collections meet new generations of people, the Museum has an obligation to steward and realize the potential of the collection. This plan will help the Museum deploy the collection to the benefit of its diverse publics, using art to deepen understanding of the past and present, develop empathy for others and ourselves, and re-imagine potential futures.

This plan will deliver on the potential of UMMA’s collection, deploying artwork through installations that pose and research questions about global narratives of history and art history; expose colonial histories and rebalance the race and gender of artists shown on our walls; and explore the complex role visual culture plays in the world. UMMA has a powerful opportunity, and obligation, to reimagine art museums, and especially those on college campuses. This reimagining will revitalize the meaning and purpose of a collection. Museums can reinforce oppressive and unjust systems through the means and methods used to preserve, curate, and interpret collections. However, these same practices can also amplify marginalized voices through the exploration of diverse cultures. The works of art in UMMA’s collection allow the Museum and its communities to revisit unsettled ideas and explore new ways of thinking.
OUR COLLECTION AND EXHIBITION PROGRAM ARE A DYNAMIC SOURCE OF IDEAS, INSPIRATION, AND IDENTIFICATION FOR OUR COMMUNITIES.
In Five Years, UMMA will...

Have an exhibition and collections installation program that is more tightly focused and deeply researched, with strengths that are well understood internally and externally.

UMMA’s installations and exhibitions will center on salient topics, developed from interdisciplinary and collaborative research and learning with U-M faculty and students and the broader public. UMMA’s collection will increasingly become an exciting site where visitors can wrestle with ideas and arguments about critical issues in the world today.

To realize this vision, UMMA must collect and commission new work and reimagine the Museum’s galleries. The Museum will move away from single time and place schemas, instead drawing on connections between places and periods, exploring multiple narratives, and diversifying global art histories with imaginative installation and gallery design. UMMA will improve physical infrastructure and allocate additional time and resources to research of the collection. To broaden access and understanding of UMMA’s collection, the Museum will partner with artists, scholars, students, and community members by participating in local, national, and international art-world conversations via publications, exhibitions, and events.
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