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**\$12 MILLION GIFT FROM LEADING ART COLLECTORS  
WILL HELP CREATE DEDICATED SPACE FOR ART BY WOMEN**

*Muskegon Museum of Art to build new wing*

**MUSKEGON, MI - June 10, 2022** - Two of the country's leading collectors of figurative realist paintings have donated \$12 million in artworks and cash to help create a new wing at the Muskegon Museum of Art (MMA) where they are dedicating space for artwork by women. Fewer than five museums in the world dedicate space solely to the work of women artists.

More than 150 paintings by women artists were given to the Michigan museum by art collectors and champions of gender equality, Steven Alan Bennett and Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt, of San Antonio. Their donation also includes a \$1.5 million cash gift, which will help create a new wing to more than double the size of the museum.

“From the moment we commenced collecting, we were concerned that women artists were not being treated equally with men,” said Bennett. “They have fewer shows; they have fewer pieces in museums’ permanent collections; and their works have almost universally sold for less than those of men. We have seen our Collection as a way to right some of these wrongs and are delighted that the Muskegon Museum of Art is joining us to ensure that the effort continues long into the future.”

The formal groundbreaking ceremony will take place on Saturday, June 11, prior to the MMA’s 110th Anniversary Gala. The project is expected to be completed in early 2024.

Bennett and Schmidt have collected figurative realist paintings by women artists since 2009 creating The Bennett Collection of Women Realists, and in 2018 established The Bennett Prize—a \$50,000 biennial award designed to propel the careers of women painters who have not yet realized full professional recognition. It is the largest art award offered solely to women painters.

The Bennett Prize is currently in its third cycle; two winners, Aneka Ingold, of Tampa and Ayana Ross, of Atlanta have been selected thus far. The call for entries for the third cycle is open through Oct. 7, 2022.

Bennett and Schmidt say their mission is to encourage women painters to take their place among the most celebrated painters, a group currently dominated by men. They also hope to expand opportunities for the public to learn more about figurative realist painting and the creative vision of talented women artists.

Over the past decade, only 11 percent of art acquired by the country's top museums for their permanent collections was by women, according to a survey completed by the art market website ArtNet in 2019. Of the 260,470 works acquired by 26 of the top museums in the United States, less than 15% were by female artists.

The Muskegon Museum of Art opened in 1912 and houses over 5,000 pieces in its collection. With the \$11.2 million expansion, the museum will more than double in size, adding three new rotating galleries, two classrooms, rooftop terrace, museum store, connecting and support space and public plaza. Bennett and Schmidt's cash gift of \$1.5 million joins \$9.6 million in gifts from other lead donors including \$1 million from the Van Kampen Boyer Molinari Foundation, \$1 million from the City of Muskegon, \$500,000 each from Carol R. Folkert & Family, The Hilt Foundation, Patrick O'Leary Foundation, Brad & Kathleen Playford, Shape Corporation, and Mrs. Shaw Walker. About 250 additional gifts total \$11.1 million raised to date.

Paintings donated from The Bennett Collection include works by more than 115 artists, including Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Cassatt, Agnes Martin, Elaine de Kooning, Harmonia Rosales, Julie Bell, Andrea Kowch, Katie O'Hagan and dozens of others representing contemporary and historical women figurative realist painters.

"This is a transformative and once-in-a-lifetime gift," said MMA Executive Director Kirk Hallman. "In the context of an expansion project, it is all the more redefining. The MMA has been honored to partner

with and host The Bennett Prize. Steven and Elaine’s vision is one shared by the MMA. This relationship has helped to elevate this art museum to a national scale. Not only is this gifted artwork, it adds an entirely new dimension and balance to our already impressive collection. In addition, the Bennett-Schmidt gift is a call to action institutionally, encouraging both the Muskegon Museum of Art and other museums to continually expand opportunities for women artists.”

“The artwork being donated to the Muskegon Museum of Art catapults them into the forefront of progressive museums that recognize the primacy and power of the work of women painters,” said Bennett. “What has been an exceptionally good collection will now be augmented with many powerful works by women that span the generations. The people of Muskegon will be the beneficiaries, and their Museum will be able to present a much broader picture of the contributions that painters have made to our understanding of culture, history and ourselves.”

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**The Bennett Collection:** Steven Alan Bennett and Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt established The Bennett Collection of Women Realists® in 2009. The two collectors limit their collection to figurative realist paintings of women by women artists. The Collection includes work by some of the most exciting women painters currently working: Julie Bell, Margaret Bowland, Aleah Chapin, Aneka Ingold, Andrea Kowch, Alyssa Monks, Katie O’Hagan, Mary Cassatt and dozens of others on the cutting edge of figurative realism. In addition, the Collection includes historic women painters from across the generations, including Gertrude Abercrombie, Artemisia Gentileschi, Elaine de Kooning, and many others. More information at [www.thebennettartcollection.com](http://www.thebennettartcollection.com)

**The Muskegon Museum of Art:** The Muskegon Museum of Art is renowned for its fine permanent collection of American and European paintings, sculpture, prints, and drawings. The museum also features many rotating exhibitions throughout the year, ranging from exhilarating nationally traveling exhibitions to contemporary regional and Michigan artist shows. Educational programs, such as lectures, films, workshops, classes, and gallery tours have been key to the mission of the Muskegon Museum of Art since its founding in 1912. More information at [www.muskegonartmuseum.org](http://www.muskegonartmuseum.org)

### **INFO BOX:**

Key Images and Fact Sheet Found at:

<https://muskegonartmuseum.org/media-room/press-releases/12-million-gift-to-muskegon-museum-of-art-boosts-michigans-status-in-promoting-art-by-women/>

The 26,000 sf expansion will double the size of the museum, creating new galleries for changing exhibits and spaces for education, collections, and visitor amenities including:

- 4,000 sf ground-level gallery
- Outdoor sculpture plaza
- Museum shop
- Classroom spaces
- Additional gallery/event space connecting the new entry to the existing museum
- 3,730 sf roof terrace for events
- A contemporary facade featuring glass, light bronze metals, and a dark brick base, providing a brighter contrast to the original building's solid facade

**Lead Design Firm:** Ann Beha Architects, Boston, MA

**Collaborating Design Firm:** Mathison | Mathison Architects, Grand Rapids, MI

**Owner's Representative:** Construction Simplified, Grand Rapids, MI