

Worcester museum opens front door

New director uses free admission to attract donors, visitors

By **Geoff Edgers** | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 20, 2012



ERIK JACOBS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Worcester museum has struggled in the shadow of Boston's institutions.

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For three years, the bronze front doors at the Worcester Art Museum's Salisbury Street entrance have been locked, a reminder of the institution's perpetual money crunch. That changes Wednesday, as recently installed director Matthias Waschek announces the first part of his plan to revive the sleepy institution.

The museum is opening those doors permanently and, for July and August, waiving

the \$14 visitor entrance fee.

The aim is to focus attention on the Worcester museum, which draws 75,000 visitors a year and struggles in the shadow of the Museum of Fine Arts, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and other art institutions in the Boston area.

“This is the unsung jewel,” said Barry Morgan, the Worcester native whose contribution has enabled the museum to open the entrance. “It’s hard to pull people from the view that everything is in Boston. You have to lure them to Worcester.”

Museum leaders hope that Wednesday’s announcements will be a fresh lure. The museum, which opened in 1898, boasts a collection that includes masterpieces by Monet, Gauguin, and John Singer Sargent. The Worcester Museum’s golden era was in the first part of the 20th century, when as many as 200,000 people visited each year. These days, the museum runs a \$1.5 million deficit on a \$9 million budget.

Waschek wants the news to signal a new era.

Part of that message is being delivered by allowing visitors to enter through the Salisbury entrance, which opens into Renaissance Court, a majestic space with a 43-foot-high ceiling and skylight and, on the floor, the museum’s prized Worcester Hunt mosaic. At nearly 500 square feet, the mosaic is believed to be the largest ever brought to the United States.

The Worcester Art Museum’s Salisbury Street doors opened in the 1930s after a museum expansion. They were closed in 2009 to save money, leaving visitors to use the museum’s Lancaster Street doors. That entrance is functional and will remain open — it borders the museum’s education wing and café — but has none of the beauty of the Salisbury Street approach.

“I think of all the kids who come to visit the museum and are dragged in the side door, which is worse than most factory openings,” says Morgan, who remembers entering through the bronze doors as a child. “When you walk into that front hall with the incredible mosaic, it’s almost spellbinding.”

Reopening the doors will cost about \$30,000 a year to hire a worker to greet visitors, Waschek said. He hopes the move will pay off by impressing newcomers.

“This is the wow factor for our museum,” Waschek said earlier this week as he showed

off the refurbished entrance. "It's also a living room for our city. All of it is part of our trying to have a higher profile."

To that end, Waschek said he is planning to launch a publicity campaign to spread word of the Worcester museum's rich holdings. The museum has increased its marketing budget from \$160,000 to \$400,000, primarily for billboard ads on the Massachusetts Turnpike and Interstate 290 and Interstate 84. The museum also plans to do more advertising in Boston.

Waschek is also in the early stages of planning a capital campaign. He wants to renovate the museum's interior. The complex is made up of three buildings, the first constructed in 1898, the second, which includes the Renaissance Court, in 1933, and the third building in 1970.

The museum does not yet know how much the renovation will cost, Waschek said.

First, the new director has to deal with what has become a regular deficit. The museum will finish the current fiscal year with an approximately \$1.5 million gap and pay for it by drawing some 8 percent from its \$90 million endowment. Typically, Waschek said, museums draw no more than 4.5 percent from endowment, to avoid depleting their savings.

He says he has no other choice. If he were to balance the budget without drawing that money, Waschek estimates he would have to let go 25 percent of his staff of 75 full-time workers.

By offering free attendance, Waschek is hoping to draw more visitors which, in turn, should lead to other funding opportunities.

"If you want to attract philanthropic money, you have to show your relevance, and one of the measures of relevance is foot traffic," he said.

In the next decade, Waschek hopes to increase attendance to 200,000 a year. He also wants to consider making the museum free permanently, though he is not sure if that is possible. The museum receives no public money to offset lost ticket revenue.

Along with the symbolism of opening the bronze doors, Waschek invited a group of speakers to Wednesday's announcement who he feels represent the attempt to widen the museum's reach.

Those speakers will include MFA director Malcolm Rogers; Anita Walker, executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council; and Lisa Simmons, director of public relations for the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism. State Senator Harriette Chandler is also slated to talk.

“The founding industrial fathers of Worcester have moved away and died out,” Chandler said. “This has been a tough time, and what they’re saying is: ‘We’re opening to everyone, and this is what we consider incredibly important. You don’t have to be wealthy to come to the museum.’”

Since starting as director in November, Waschek estimates that he has met with more than 10 representatives from area colleges to work on developing relationships.

He also recently met with Rogers to talk about the museum. It was Rogers who opened the MFA’s doors to the Fenway in 2008, as part of that museum’s dramatic expansion.

Did that provide some inspiration? Waschek was asked.

“Our doors were closed,” he said. “You don’t need an inspiration to open them.”

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