

ALBANY INSTITUTE OF HISTORY & ART

HISTORY OF THE ALBANY INSTITUTE OF HISTORY & ART (1791-2001)

As one of the oldest museums in the country (older than the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum and the Louvre), the Albany Institute of History & Art possesses a rich and fascinating history chock-full of personalities who molded the institution into what it is today. Many famous political, library and artistic figures have been associated with the institution, and the strong interest and support of individuals in the Albany area and region through many generations have made the Institute what it is today. Many of the thoughts and ideas proposed in its past remain relevant. So it is with a similar spirit, the Albany Institute continues to refine its museum and look ahead to the future. The highlights of today's Albany Institute of History & Art history and lineage follow:

18th & 19th CENTURY

1791 A learned society, the Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Arts and Manufactures, is founded in New York City, then State and National Capital. The first scientific organization in New York State, and an informal advisor to the State Legislature, the Society's purpose is to study new methods of agriculture, manufacturing and useful arts in order to improve New York's economy and the lives of its citizens. Founded in the Senate Chamber of New York City's Federal Hall, which then functioned as the seat of federal and state government, the Society's founders include Robert Livingston, Simeon DeWitt and Samuel Latham Mitchell. Because the Society is closely associated with state government, all members of the Legislature are given honorary memberships, and meetings are held where the Legislature convenes.

1797 After Albany becomes the State Capital, the Society moves to Albany and is headquartered in City Hall.

1804 The Society is reincorporated as the Society for the Promotion of Useful Arts (SPUA), continuing to emphasize agricultural achievements and offering prizes for useful discoveries.

1814 A Fine Arts Committee is established at the SPUA under the chairmanship of Albany portrait painter Ezra Ames. Committee members include silversmith Isaac Hutton, architect Philip Hooker, and crayon portraitist and engraver Louis Lemet. Their first official act is to commission Ezra Ames' posthumous portrait of the Society's first president, Chancellor Robert R. Livingston (This remains the Institute's earliest fine arts accession).

1819 The State Board of Agriculture is established, obviating the role of the SPUA. With a decline in membership and loss of state funding, SPUA turns its attention to mineralogy, astronomy and geography.

1823 The Albany Lyceum of Natural History is founded by Theodoric Romeyn Beck, a local physician-scientist and secretary of SPUA. The Lyceum focuses on the preservation of mineral and botanical specimens collected in New York State surveys. Its library and collections of specimens are located in Albany Academy, in what we now refer to as Academy Park.

1824 SPUA merges with the Lyceum to form the Albany Institute. Stephen Van Rensselaer III is named president, T. Romeyn Beck is vice president, and Joseph Henry is appointed curator of the natural-history department. Henry, a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at the Albany Academy and a pioneer in electromagnetism, leaves Albany in 1832 to accept a teaching position at Princeton and 14 years later is appointed the first secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. By joining forces, the collections consist of natural history, an extensive library, fine arts, and historical artifacts.

1830 The Institute's library collections have more than doubled, due in part to a bequest by Governor DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828), who had been a member of SPUA and the Lyceum. The bequest was characterized as being "one of the largest and most valuable [libraries] then belonging to any private person in the state."

1831-1843 The Institute's departments of Physical Science and Arts and Natural History are active, acquiring a total of 15,500 scientific specimens.

1836 The Institute helps to establish the State Natural History Survey that eventually leads to the founding of the New York State Museum.

1836-1840 The Institute is the informal coordinating agency for the State Board of Regents meteorological observations system.

1839-1851 The Institute enters a period of decline after the death of the Institute's primary benefactor, Stephen Van Rensselaer III in 1839, and the creation of several cultural institutions in the 1840s which duplicate roles of the Institute (Rensselaer Institute, Union College, the Albany Medical College and the Young Men's Association).

1846-1854 The Albany Gallery of Fine Arts (AGFA) exists, exhibiting paintings, prints, and sculpture in annual exhibitions, with most works of art being borrowed from collections outside of Albany (usually New York City, Boston and Philadelphia). James Hart, the now well-known second generation Hudson River School painter, works there as "Janitor" where he hangs exhibitions and takes tickets. The Gallery depends on subscriptions for its financial base and dissolves in 1854. The membership lends its collection of 21 paintings and two engravings to the Young Men's Association, where it remains until 1898 when they are given to the Albany Historical and Art Society which merges with the Albany Institute in 1900 (Six of the works remain in the collection of the Albany Institute of History & Art).

1851 The Albany Institute hosts the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences at Albany Academy, reviving the fortunes of the Institute. Many new members join, which gradually leads to a change in the focus from a scientific to a general learned society.

1857 John Van Schaick Lansing Pruyn is elected president, serving until his death two decades later. A financier and officer of the New York Central Railroad, with experience as a lawyer, congressman and chancellor of the University of the State of New York, Pruyn leads the Institute through a period of change, turning its vision outward to engage public interest.

1867 The Institute donates its science and natural history collections to the State Cabinet of Natural History (now the New York State Museum) and puts its energies into historical pursuits and amateur natural history. Later in the century, the Institute's geological collection is also transferred to the State Museum.

1886 Albany celebrates the 200th anniversary of the chartering of the city (July), providing the occasion for an artistic presentation that stands as the single most important event underlying the present-day character of the Albany Institute of History & Art. Housed at the Albany Academy, the Bicentennial Loan Exhibition includes 4,000 historic relics and art objects from the city's leading families: the Van Rensselaers, Schuylers, Gansevoorts, Lansings and Cornings, among others. The show is an artistic, financial and popular success that boosts civic pride and interest in regional history. The Albany

Historical and Art Society (AHAS) is founded (December) to raise funds to house and maintain many of the objects from the Bicentennial Loan Exhibition.

1897 AHAS purchases a building at 176 State Street, and an addition was built for an art gallery.

1898 AHAS is incorporated "to foster, in and about Albany, a love for the arts and local history."

20th CENTURY

1900 AHAS merges with the Albany Institute to form the Albany Institute and Historical and Art Society (AIHAS). William Law Learned, erstwhile justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, is installed as the first president.

1904 AIHAS purchases property on the north side of Washington Avenue near the corner of Dove Street.

1907 AIHAS president James Ten Eyck officiates at the laying of the cornerstone for the new museum.

1908 The museum building is dedicated. Designed by the Albany architectural firm of Albert W. Fuller and William B. Pitcher, it is a Renaissance-style structure of sand-lime brick and Indiana limestone. In the Albany Evening Journal Albany Mayor Charles Henry Gaus describes the Institute as "the capstone of educational development in our city"; in an editorial in the Argus, it is described as "A Museum for the People."

1909 First major exhibition opens in new building. Titled The Historical Loan Exhibition in Connection with the Hudson-Fulton Celebration, the exhibition commemorates the 300th anniversary of Henry Hudson's navigation of the river that bears his name, and the 100th anniversary of Robert Fulton's first steam navigation on the same waters.

1924 In need of more exhibition space, the Albany Institute donates some of its book collections to Albany's Harmanus Bleecker Library. The pamphlet and newspaper collections are transferred to the New York State Library that same year.

1926 AIHAS changes its name to the Albany Institute of History & Art (AIHA) in an effort to "do away with the disjunctive in the former name and avoid the unusual repetition of an institute at one end and a society at the other... The [new] name brings no change in the relations of the institute, preserves the name of each and makes the name more symmetrical."

1926-present AIHA continues to define itself as a regional museum; and research, collections, exhibitions and education programs consistently reflect this mission. AIHA starts seeking a wider audience by making the collections more accessible to the public through lectures, concerts, plays, art classes and school tours.

1932 Despite the uncertainties of the Great Depression, AIHA begins to offer a range of outreach programs funded by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to extend AIHA's educational work and develop links with schools.

1934 Ledyard Cogswell, Jr. and Dorothy Stanton, AIHA's director of educational activities, found The Print Club of Albany. The purpose is to "promote and encourage among its members and in the community an appreciation of the graphic arts." AIHA hosts the Club's meetings, exhibitions, lectures and demonstrations by nationally recognized printmakers.

1936 Inspired by the 250th anniversary of the Albany Charter, AIHA displays an exhibition of contemporary regional art. The Regional Exhibition by Artists of the Upper Hudson is the beginning of AIHA's commitment to contemporary regional art. Repeated annually, this exhibition became nationally recognized over the next two decades.

1941 John Davis Hatch becomes director of AIHA after serving as director of the Art Institute of Seattle. In his first year, Hatch inaugurates a series of exhibitions featuring regional artists, notably a tribute to Hudson River School artist Thomas Cole that represented the first major 20th century retrospective of the painter's work. Also in his first year, Hatch begins a reorganization of the collection records to conform with record-keeping systems in other major museums.

1945 Hatch assembles *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, a nationally-recognized exhibition of work by 45 African-American artists which travels from the museum to the Brooklyn Museum.

1948 Robert Wheeler is promoted from assistant director to director of AIHA. He proposes a more refined policy that limits acquisitions to the arts, crafts and history of an extended area around Albany, or bore a link to the area or its residents. He reorganizes and refurbishes the galleries, and creates special exhibitions focusing on the community.

1956 Janet MacFarlane is made director of AIHA after serving as curator of the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown. She is one of only seven women in the country directing a museum.

1961 The Women's Council of AIHA is founded with Mrs. Edward J. Crummey, Jr. as its first president. During its 40+ year history, the Women's Council contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars and as many volunteer hours to support AIHA.

1967 Norman Rice is promoted from curator to director of AIHA, a position he would hold for nearly 20 years.

1968 The historic William Gorham Rice home and the Rice Annex are purchased by AIHA and remodeled to house the administrative and curatorial offices and the library collections.

1968-1986 Rice spearheads an acquisition effort that assembles the over one million special collection items that are in the library today. The AIHA art and decorative arts collections are significantly expanded and refined.

1986 Christine Miles is named executive director of AIHA after serving as director of the Fraunces Tavern Museum in New York City. She focuses AIHA on preparing for the 21st century by increasing the museum's capacity to serve, attract and broadly reflect the communities and cultures of the region.

1989 The Museum Ball and Contemporary Art Auction is initiated to raise funds for a newly created Contemporary Collections Fund and to support local artists. Since then, AIHA holdings of late-20th century regional art have more than doubled.

1989 AIHA begins a 10-year comprehensive documentation and cataloguing project to increase the intellectual and physical accessibility of its permanent collection and facilitate its use for research, publication, exhibition and public programming.

1990 The first exhibition resulting from the City Neighbors Project, *City Neighbors: The Black Experience*, opens. The City Neighbors Project is designed to collect and promote a broad and inclusive understanding of the history and people of Albany.

1994 Solomon +Bauer Architects Inc selected to design Albany Institute's expansion and renovation project; preliminary schematic design begins (November).

1995 The Board of Trustees of AIHA votes to embark on a major capital campaign to provide funds to restore, renovate and expand AIHA facilities for the first time in the 20th century, with a fund raising goal of \$10 million.

1996 Albany Institute announces Heritage Campaign (October 8) with \$5 million raised to date, including a bequest of \$1.9 million from trustee Marjorie Doyle Rockwell and an appropriation of \$1.25 million from the New York State Senate. KeyBank makes lead corporate gift of \$250,000 plus an additional \$250,000 challenge to stimulate support from Capital Region corporations.

1997 In honor of the museum's expansion, internationally renowned artist George Rickey donates the sculpture, "Etoile Variation V" to the Albany Institute, which will be permanently installed in the new glass atrium of the expanded museum. The fund raising goal for the Heritage Campaign is increased to \$12.5 million.

1998 New York State Assembly appropriates \$1 million to Albany Institute's Heritage Campaign. The Kresge Foundation awards the Albany Institute a \$500,000 challenge grant, contingent on the museum completing its fund raising campaign and reaching the goal of \$12.5 million by June 1, 1999. The Albany Institute breaks ground for its construction project on October 8, and announces the community gifts phase of the campaign. *200 Years of Collecting*, the first comprehensive catalogue of the Albany Institute's collections, is published in November.

1999 Museum closed for renovation in April. The Heritage campaign concluded in June after exceeding its goal and raising \$14.1 million. The following month, AIHA opens its temporary location at 63 State Street in downtown Albany.

2000 AIHA adopts Strategic Plan 3 by the Board of Trustees. In June, Achieving Excellence in the 21st Century was announced with \$5.6 million goal and Matthew Bender IV donates \$1 million. New collections storage wing is completed in September. Alan Goldberg pledges \$1 million in September.

2001 AIHA celebrates the completion of the atrium in May and installation of second floor galleries in June. The installation of the third floor galleries (including Colonial Albany, Hudson River School and Ancient Egypt) are celebrated during Grand Opening Weekend in September. In October, AIHA welcomes the first traveling exhibition to the new facility, *Scenes of American Life: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum*, as the beginning of a series of Celebration Year exhibitions.