

From Homer to Hopper to Vero

THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION'S AMERICAN MODERNISM SHOW COMES TO THE VERO BEACH MUSEUM OF ART

BY PATRICK MERRELL



Winslow Homer (1836–1910), "To the Rescue," 1886, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., acquired 1926



Edward Hopper (1882–1967), "Sunday," 1926, oil on canvas, 29 x 34 inches, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., acquired 1926

From the first century to the 18th, the world of Western art didn't much change. Commissioned masterworks ruled the day: religious frescoes, mythological paintings, portraits of nobles, historical scenes and the like. The subject matter was high-minded, the execution realistic.

That all went out the window beginning in the mid-to-late 1800s. Modern art was born – a near-century-long explosion of creativity and exploration that saw artists experimenting with materials, color, techniques, emotion, subject matter and the very meaning of what art is.

Opened in 1921 in Washington, D.C., The Phillips Col-

lection was the first museum of modern art in the United States, and 65 of its works by American artists are currently on display at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, continuing until the end of May. The selections range from George Inness's 1869 landscape "Lake Albano" to Helen Frankenthaler's 1965 abstract painting "Canyon."

"It's a pretty epic sweep of American art history," Brady Roberts, VBMA's executive director, says. "The amazing thing about The Phillips Collection is that they have so many important works. And I'd say these are the highlights of their American modernism collection." Because of that, he



Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993)
“Interior with View of the Ocean,”
1957, oil on canvas 49 1/2 x 57 7/8
inches, The Phillips Collection,
Washington, D.C., acquired 1958

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Thomas Eakins
(1844–1916) “Miss
Amelia Van Buren,”
c. 1891, oil on canvas
45 x 32 inches, The
Phillips Collection,
Washington, D.C.,
acquired 1927

Charles Sheeler
(1883-1965)
"Skyscrapers,"
1922, oil on canvas
20 x 13 inches, The
Phillips Collection,
Washington, D.C.,
acquired 1926



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), "Ranchos Church, No. II, NM,"
1929, oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 36 1/8 inches, The Phillips
Collection, Washington, D.C., acquired 1930



adds with a smile, "This would not be the right time to go to see The Phillips Collection" in Washington, D.C.

"The early chapters in this show are Albert Pinkham Ryder and Winslow Homer and Thomas Aiken, just really iconic paintings from the late 19th century," Roberts says. "Then we get into American modernism. That's really the core of this exhibition, between the world wars. It's just a great period in American art – people who had processed European modernism and then were jumping off into their own thing," he says. "There are great examples by Marsden Hartley and Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove. Hopper is so interesting because he still resonates in the 21st century. He really saw something about alienation and modernity that still makes sense. And some of these paintings, like the John Sloan, are just absolutely iconic. I mean, all of the paintings are really good, but some are just fabulous."

Finishing off with the most recent works in the show, Roberts says, "You'll see a shift in scale to abstract expressionism. There's a great Philip Guston painting, Richard Diebenkorn, a Frankenthaler." The Guston

canvas, for example, measures more than 5 feet wide and 6 feet tall. The exhibition also includes a pair of folk art paintings, including one of Grandma Moses' most famous works, "Hoosick Falls in Winter." The lone sculpture, drifting elegantly overhead in the center of the Holmes Gallery, is the Alexander Calder mobile "Red Polygons."

The impetus for bringing this show to Vero Beach grew out of a casual conversation Brady Roberts had in 2017 with two longtime supporters of the museum, Laura and Bill Buck.

"I was chatting with the Bucks, who had just come back from Philadelphia," Roberts says. "And they were telling me about this show at the Brandywine River Museum that had all these amazing paintings." The show was part of a national tour called "Made in the U.S.A.," described as the most comprehensive presentation of American artworks in The Phillips Collection in nearly 40 years. "As I listened to them, I just couldn't believe it. And I said, 'Do you think there's any chance this could come to Vero Beach?' I assumed the answer would be, 'Probably not,' but Bill Buck said, 'Let me make a phone call.'"



The museum's executive director, Brady Roberts, discusses plans for the exhibition with Sophie Bentham-Wood, communications director.

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Two weeks passed, then Roberts got an email from Dorothy Kosinski, director of The Phillips Collection. Roberts remembers it well. “She said, ‘I hear you might be interested in doing the show.’”

“We worked with The Phillips Collection to pull it together,” Roberts says. “It’s tailored a little for us.” The Bucks agreed to be major sponsors of the show. That financial support is crucial, Roberts says. “We have great sponsorship annually, and it allows us to do this ambitious program. The nice thing is that people want great art to come to Vero Beach, and they’ll help us get it here.”

The logistics of bringing any exhibit to town are complicated. “There are a lot of people behind the scenes who do an awful lot of work to make it happen,” Roberts says. “Dana Twersky, our collections and exhibitions manager, and Sean Clinton, our chief preparator – those two people are critical. There are so many details involved. And nobody thinks about it. It’s just, ‘The art’s on the wall. Wow, look at that.’”

Once the loan agreements and other arrangements have been settled, each piece of art needs to be carefully packed up. “If you look at a crate, you’d say, ‘Wow, that’s what a crate looked like 150 years ago.’ And it does on the surface, but the materials on the inside – the kind of foams that they use now, you can carve them so the frame fits in there very snugly. Vibration is a big problem. If you start shaking an old painting, you can get the paint lifting off the canvas and separating.” A vapor barrier made of tar-impregnated paper or nylon sheeting lines the inside of each crate to make it waterproof. Lettering and symbols on the exterior indicate what’s inside and how to handle the crate.

Temperature and humidity need to be precisely maintained. Exclusive-use trucks equipped with air-ride shock absorbers and a climate-controlled environment are used to transport the artwork. “The truck picks up the art from a building that’s 70 degrees and 50% relative humidity. The truck is the same, it comes into our loading dock all the way into our building, the garage door goes down and it enters



After the garage door closes, the temperature and humidity will be brought up to match the conditions inside a climate-controlled truck.



Sean Clinton, the museum's chief preparator, inspects art crates from the recent L’Affichomania French poster show.



Arthur Dove (1880–1946) “Red Sun,” 1935, oil on canvas 20 1/4 x 28 inches, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., acquired 1935

a 70-degree building with 50% humidity,” Roberts says. “Vibrations – bad. Dust and dirt – bad. Humidity change – bad. Temperature doesn’t matter so much as the humidity.”

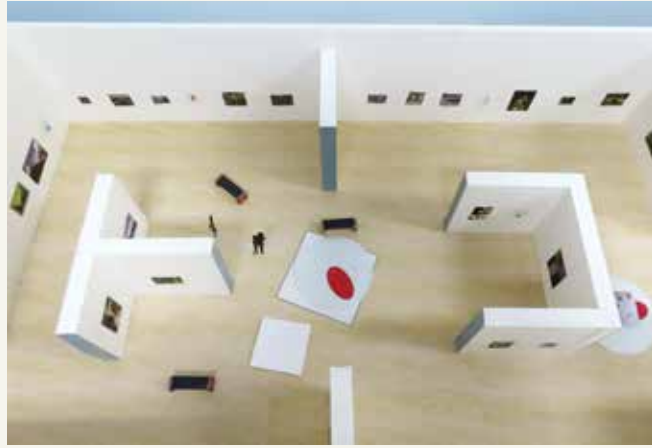
Monitoring and caring for the art at every step are trained professionals known as registrars. “Registrars will accompany the art on the truck,” Roberts explains. “They’re making sure everything arrives safely. They’ll supervise the unpacking. They’ll supervise the installation. The whole idea is to control everything to minimize risk to the artwork.” He then adds, “This show would fit on one truck. Sometimes you break up the shipment. Again, it’s about risk management, and I could tell you more, but I’d have to kill you.”

When handling the actual artwork, workers will wear a pair of gloves made of white cotton or synthetic latex, to avoid transferring oil from their fingers. For the fashion-

conscious, the synthetic gloves are available in scarlet, pumpkin orange, lime green and a few other colors.

Once the truck has pulled into the museum’s loading dock, workers will transfer the shipment to a staging area. “It will acclimate,” Roberts says. “There are subtle shifts in temperature and humidity, so the idea is to give it 24 hours to become part of our environment.” The next day, the registrars will open the crates and inspect every square inch of the each painting and frame. They’ll compare what they see against a condition report they’ve filled out prior to shipment. It diagrams in detail every little problem a painting has.

The empty crates are handled just as carefully as the artwork. They’ll be put in their own climate-controlled storage room until needed for the return trip. Raw wood is



A scale model is used to plan out where the art will go. The large red dot on the floor represents where the Calder mobile will be hung.



Custom-made pedestals, display cases and the like can be fashioned in a fully outfitted wood shop in the back of the house.

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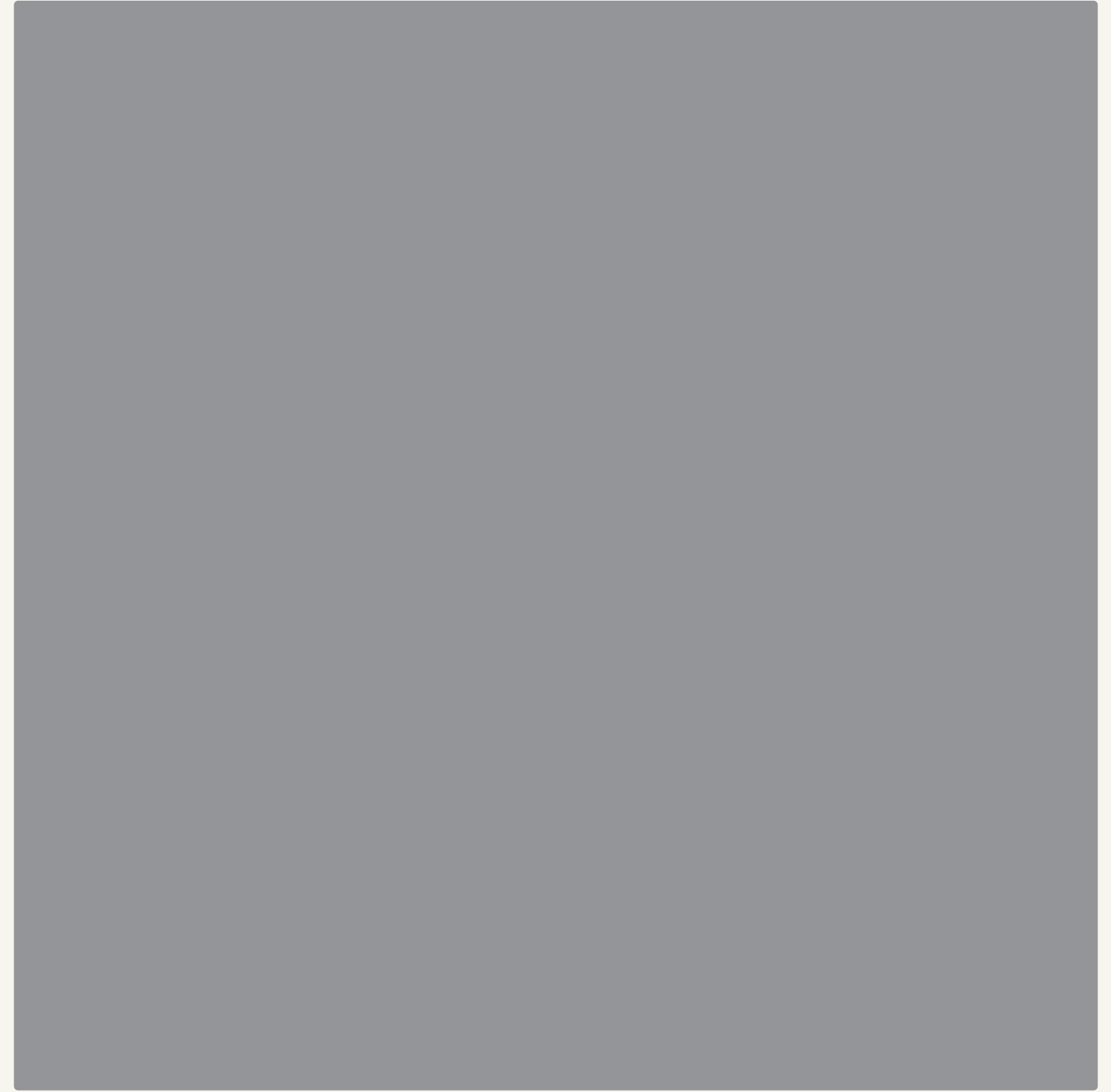
hygroscopic, able to absorb the surrounding humidity. “Stick a painting in there and you have a little microenvironment,” Roberts says.

The last step for the registrars is supervising the long and physical task of installing the art. Preparators, people specially trained in handling art, will do most of the work, under the registrars’ watchful eyes. But that’s it. “No one can be in the space unless they need to be there,” Roberts says. “The more people who are in there, the more risk there is.” Even Roberts isn’t usually involved. “I actually have art training, an art-handling background, and I’ve come through those ranks,” he says. “At every museum I’ve worked at, I’ve helped install a show. It hasn’t happened here yet, but it will,” he adds with a smile.

Once the art is on the wall to everyone’s liking, that’s it. It can’t be touched again until the show ends and the registrars return. “That’s why we work months in advance,” Roberts says. “Where everything’s going to go, what’s the design.” Scale models of the galleries, made of foam core board, help the staff decide where each piece will be placed.

The interior wall layout in the main gallery is often the same, with a U-shape at the near end and a T toward the back. But the museum does have a few configurations to choose from. It’s all about what best displays the art. Wall color is another consideration. “When we did the Victorian Radicals show, it’s the Victorian period, so you want to do something to evoke that. We had wallpaper and warm colors that complemented the paintings and frames, because there were a lot of gold frames. With modern and contemporary shows, the standard is more the white hue. There’ll be a look to the entrance to grab you, but when you have big, colorful art, it just wants a white wall. There’s enough going on.”

“With a show like this,” Roberts points out, “it’s more about the sequence — what are the narratives within this



Marsden Hartley (1877–1943)
“Mountain Lake—Autumn,”
c. 1910, oil on academy board
12 x 12 inches, The Phillips
Collection, Washington, D.C.,
gift of Rockwell Kent, 1926

story of modern art? We'll develop some text panels to explain those different themes." Spacing matters too. "You want to give things the right amount of breathing room. It's a shame when you go into a museum and there are too many great paintings packed into one wall." Using a second gallery for this show helped avoid that problem.

If something needs to be specially constructed for an exhibit, such as a pedestal, a display case or a custom mount, there's a fully outfitted wood shop in the back. Abutting it is a spray room for applying professional finishes or for protecting an outdoor sculpture with a clear coating. Both of these "dirty" areas are separate from the spaces where art will be passing through. Additionally, there are intake fans to keep sawdust and fumes from escaping. Art doesn't like anything foreign in the air. It also doesn't like natural light, so there are no windows in the back building. That also serves as a security measure. "This space is like a vault," Roberts says.

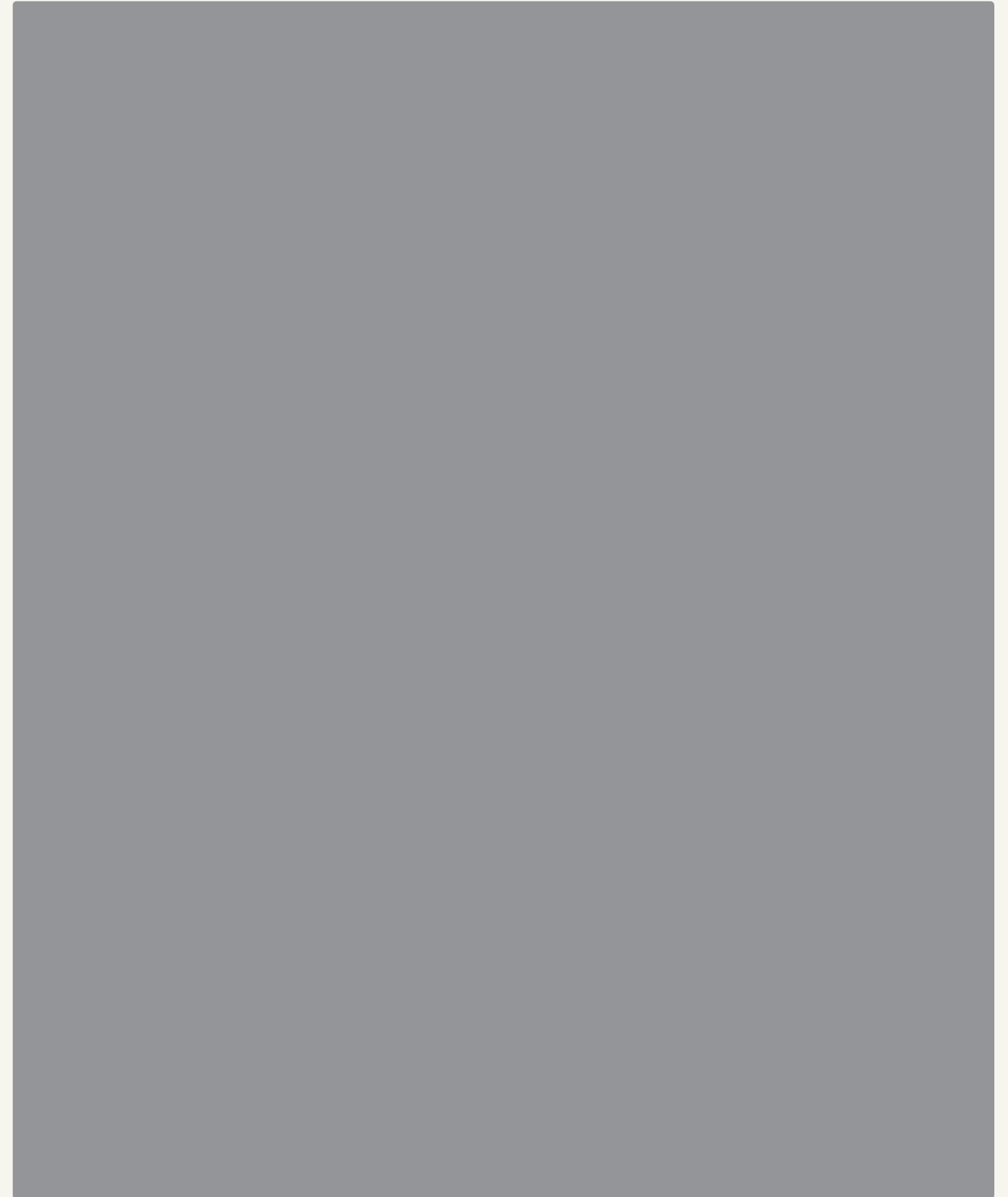
Finally, there's the museum's staff. "We hold staff

meetings," he says, "and we talk about the content of the show and tell people, 'Here are 10 key points.' It's a relatively small crew, so we like to keep everyone informed and excited about what we're doing – because it's great stuff." That includes the guards. "They're here all day," Roberts says, "and people are asking questions, so we want to give them some good information. And it makes their job more interesting." The registrars will also give the guards specific instructions about some of the pieces in the exhibition, such as "this painting is particularly expensive" or "this sculpture can't be touched."

When the exhibition wraps at the end of May, the registrars will return. Working with the preparators, they'll close off the galleries, don their orange or blue or white gloves and go through the same carefully orchestrated process, in reverse order. When all is done, they'll depart in their art-laden truck, leaving behind the museum's empty walls. It'll then be time for the museum staff to start preparing the galleries for the next show. ☺



Maurice Prendergast (1858–1924) "Fantasy," c. 1917, oil on canvas 22 5/8 x 31 5/8 inches, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., acquired 1921



Childe Hassam (1859–1935) "Washington Arch, Spring," c. 1893, (inscribed 1890), oil on canvas 26 1/8 x 21 5/8 inches, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., acquired 1921