

**Worcester Art Museum Provides Rare Examination of Region’s Folk Art Tradition
In Exhibition of Mid-19th-Century Works from Central New England**

**“American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected”
*Showcases Massachusetts-Based Private Collection***

Worcester, MA—March 19, 2015—*American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected* at the Worcester Art Museum (WAM) brings together more than 40 works from an important private collection based in central Massachusetts, recognized as one of the best of its kind in existence. The exhibition features an array of paintings and furniture, many on display for the first time, with a particular emphasis on portraits of children, which illustrate the folk artists’ unique approach to using color and towards the figurative treatment of their subjects. On view July 15 through November 29, 2015, *American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected* brings to life the rich folk art tradition that flourished in the mid-19th century as home-grown artists traveled from town to town to paint portraits for rural families of their loved ones. The artists represented in the exhibition showcase a distinctive folk-art practice that grew out of a popular demand for personal keepsakes, and include John Brewster, Zedekiah Belknap, Ruth Henshaw Bascom, William Matthew Prior, and Sturtevant Hamblin, among others.

“The collection stands out not only for its uniqueness, but also for its outstanding quality and documented provenance,” said exhibition curator Paul S. D’Ambrosio. “It was truly a labor of love for the donors to bring together these works over the course of sixty years, which speaks to their own personal histories as much as the artists and patrons that preceded them.”

American Folk Art sheds light on the geographic and social underpinnings that led to the emergence of this artistic practice, including the rise of the middle class, industrial development, and an environment encompassing both rural and urban landscapes. The paintings on view reflect everyday life as well as the aspirations of ordinary people. As industrialization flourished in central New England between 1800 and 1850, the area witnessed transformative advances in technology, improved transportation, and increased population, resulting in unprecedented levels of prosperity. Individuals carrying higher social status settled in the region seeking success and hired folk artists, particularly portrait painters, to document their achievements and growing families.

The exhibition examines this rise in art patronage and how the portrait served as both a reflection of social standing and a vehicle for preserving memory, often passed on from generation to generation. The self-taught, itinerant portraitists represented in the exhibition learned to work quickly and developed methods for depicting their sitters without having to devote the time and effort to obtain exact likeness.

Specific highlights on view include several examples of children’s portraiture by William Matthew Prior (1806 – 1873), who was a pioneer in making art accessible to the middle class and is recognized as one of the most influential figures in folk art history. Born in Bath, Maine in 1806, Prior spent much of his career in the Boston area, where he continued to document a diverse roster of sitters. Other highlights include outstanding examples of work by Ruth Henshaw Bascom (1772 – 1848), a prolific portraitist whose work can be characterized by its crisp lines, swaths of color and

silhouetted figures. Born in Leicester, Massachusetts as the first of ten children, Bascom's life between 1789 and 1846 is documented in her diary, held at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, which cites more than 1,400 portraits she created during her lifetime.

Also on view as part of this collection are painted furniture pieces, including a "Dome Top Box" attributed to an unknown artist from Worcester County and dating to around 1825, and a blanket chest by Nehemia Randall (1810), one of only two known works by this maker in existence. Such works give insight into the life and tastes of 19th-century New Englanders, providing visitors with a window into a pivotal time in the course of American history.

"In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in American folk art within the museum community and the art world at large. By presenting this exhibition, our hope is to contribute to the field an important chapter in American folk art history by focusing on the unique artworks being produced in antebellum New England," said Elizabeth Athens, WAM's newly appointed assistant American Art curator. "This collection—incredible for its cohesiveness and radiance—can be put in dialogue with larger social transformations taking place in the region at that time. We look forward to sharing these works with our visitors to promote a deeper understanding of central Massachusetts's artistic heritage."

American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected complements the Museum's renowned American Art collection, which spans from 1670 to the end of the 20th century, with particular strengths in Colonial and Federal painting and American Impressionism. Works that have been in storage by Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Marsden Hartley, Grandma Moses, and Jacob Lawrence are among the works on view in an installation of nearly 50 paintings, dating from the Civil War to the start of World War II. Arranged in concentrated clusters, the display both highlights the Museum's most famous works, including a celebrated group of American Impressionist works, and brings paintings to light for the first time, such as the recently restored *Brandywine Landscape* by N.C. Wyeth.

EXHIBITION CREDITS AND CATALOGUE:

American Folk Art, Lovingly Collected is guest-curated by Paul S. D'Ambrosio, president of the Fenimore Art Museum and The Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, NY. The exhibition catalogue is published by the Worcester Art Museum and features essays by D'Ambrosio and Elizabeth Stillinger.

ABOUT THE WORCESTER ART MUSEUM:

Founded in 1898, the Worcester Art Museum serves Worcester and the broader region. The Museum houses an encyclopedic collection of paintings, sculptures, decorative arts, photography, prints, drawings, and new media. WAM's collection has historically been strongest in European Renaissance paintings, but with recent acquisitions and donations, like Veronese's *Venus Disarming Cupid* and the integration of the collection from the Higgins Armory Museum, it continues to diversify and expand its curatorial and programmatic offerings. Symbolized by the opening of the Salisbury Street doors in 2012, the Museum continues toward its goal of accessibility for all visitors.

CONTACT:

Resnicow + Associates
Megan Ardery / Chelsea Beroza
212-671-5178 / 5160
mardery/cberoza@resnicow.com

Worcester Art Museum
Julieane Frost
508-793-4373
JulieaneFrost@worcesterart.org