

MMFA

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

THE MONTGOMERY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS MOURNS THE DEATH OF DIRECTOR EMERITUS MARK M. JOHNSON

Johnson, an esteemed scholar and museum director, led the MMFA from 1994 until his retirement in 2017. He left an indelible legacy on the institution.



Mark Johnson, 2016. Photograph by Darren Freeman.

Montgomery, AL, June 28, 2021 – The Board, staff, and community of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) is sad to share the news of the death of Director Emeritus Mark M. Johnson, who died on Friday, June 25, 2021, after a long illness. Johnson, who was an esteemed scholar and museum director, led the MMFA from 1994 until his retirement in 2017 when, as the longest-serving chief executive of the institution, he was named the Museum’s first Director Emeritus. Over the course of his tenure, Johnson shaped the institution in many ways, including the addition of hundreds of works of art to the collection, organizing a number of exhibitions and publications, and leading two significant expansions of the Museum.

“Our prayers are with Mark’s family and loved ones. Mark was dedicated to building a world-class institution and community of support for the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts. Because of these efforts, the Museum continues this transformation today with extraordinary and inclusive offerings. We thank Mark for his service to our city and our region,” said City of Montgomery Mayor Steven L. Reed.

“Long before our society became sensitized to concepts of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, Mark Johnson breathed their value into his work as MMFA’s Director. Through exhibitions and acquisitions for the Museum’s collection, he promoted African American artists—both those who were classically trained as well as those considered to be “Outsider artists.” He desired that the Museum’s collection have something for everyone in our community, for school children and adults to see something culturally or historically familiar and reflective of their lives. He recognized that the Museum was at its best offering a variety of art that was familiar, beautiful, and thought-provoking,

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providing illumination and greater understanding that could contribute to making Montgomery a better place,” said Laurie Jean Weil, who served as MMFA Board President during Johnson’s tenure.

After a decade of leadership at the College of William and Mary’s Muscarelle Museum of Art in Williamsburg, VA, Johnson took the helm of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in 1994. Under his stewardship, the Museum acquired more than 1,700 objects for the permanent collection, including paintings by a number of America’s greatest artists, Mary Cassatt, Edmonia Lewis, William Sidney Mount, and Thomas Hart Benton among them.



Left to right: Director Mark Johnson, artist Cappy Thompson, and MMFA Board President Laurie Jean Weil, 2006

Mark’s personal passions included Old Master European prints, an interest he shared with one of the institution’s major donors, Adolph Weil, Jr., who worked with Mark to build the Museum’s collection into one of the most important public collections in the Southeastern U.S. Together they mounted major exhibitions, with published scholarship by area specialists, of prints by Rembrandt Van Rijn, Albrecht Dürer, and James McNeill Whistler, all now a part of the Museum’s collection. A second passion was American Studio Art Glass, which was a collection he founded and nurtured over his tenure, and now includes more than 60 examples by

prominent artists such as Harvey Littleton, Dale Chihuly, and William Morris. As a part of the expansion of the Museum completed in 2006, Mark worked with the artist Cappy Thompson to commission and install the major window in the Lowder Gallery, *Stars Falling on Alabama: We Are Enraptured by the Celestial Fireworks...*

Ever the art historian and curator, Johnson also organized a number of exhibitions and publications for the Museum including **ARTNow**, a series of eight exhibitions between 1996 and 2001 focused on contemporary artists; *Hans Grohs: An Ecstatic Vision* in 1996; *Ginny Ruffner: The Flowering Tornado* in 2003; and on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, the Museum published the first major catalogue of its collection, *American Paintings from the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts*.



Director Mark Johnson (left) at the 2014 groundbreaking for the future John and Joyce Caddell Sculpture Garden.

In addition to his guidance of acquisitions, exhibitions, and publications, Johnson’s imprint on the Museum also includes two significant expansions: the additions of the Education Wing and Sculpture Garden. In 2006, after ten years of planning and fundraising under Johnson’s leadership, the Museum completed its most ambitious expansion project to date, opening its 23,000 square foot Education Wing including a doubling of the size of the Museum’s interactive gallery, ArtWorks, two art studios, the Margaret Lowder, Jean Weil, and Wynona Wilson Galleries, as well as staff offices and mechanical rooms.

It is Johnson’s vision for the creation of an outdoor gallery for art, though, that will perhaps be appreciated as his greatest legacy at the Museum. After years of design and development work, in

2018, Johnson returned to the Museum for a gala celebration marking the completion of the John and Joyce Caddell Sculpture Garden, a two-acre setting for the display of art in the ever-changing natural landscape.

Former City of Montgomery Mayor Todd Strange, who worked with Johnson for nearly the entirety of his decade in office, said, “Montgomery was very fortunate to have someone of Mark’s talent to lead the MMFA for so many years. We are indebted to him for his service and for his leadership in moving the Museum forward—including his final project, the creation of the Caddell Sculpture Garden.”

“Mark was a consummate professional, and he dreamed big dreams,” said Barrie Harmon, chairman of the Campaign for the Museum Sculpture Garden. “As his final great contribution to the Museum, he envisioned the creation of the garden to take best advantage of the natural setting of the Museum in the Blount Cultural Park. Working with Mark to bring that vision to reality, I understood how committed he was to making the Caddell Sculpture Garden an important destination that would be accessible to everyone in the Montgomery community and to the entire River Region.”



Yousuf Karsh (Canadian, born Armenia, 1908–2002), *Mark M. Johnson*, 1992, gelatin silver print on paper, Photograph courtesy of the Estate of Yousuf Karsh, © 2021 Yousuf Karsh

Johnson received his B.A. in art history from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater in 1974 and an M.A. in art history and a Certificate in art museum studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1976. That same year, he was awarded an NEA internship in the education department of the Art Institute of Chicago. From 1977 to 1981, Johnson served as a curator and lecturer in the education department of the Cleveland Museum of Art. And, from 1981 to 1985, he served as assistant director and curator of European paintings at the Krannert Art Museum at his alma mater, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. While there, in 1980, he authored the publication, *Idea to Image: Preparatory Studies from the Renaissance to Impressionism*.

Johnson’s first directorship came at the Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA, where he served from 1985 to 1994. At the Muscarelle, Johnson organized a number of exhibitions and publications, including *Photographs by Yousuf Karsh* in 1987, *King William’s Praise: Romeyn de Hogge’s Etchings of William III* in 1989,

Literacy Through Art: A Celebration of the Fine Art of Children’s Book Illustration in 1990 and *Nissan Engel: Nouvelles Dimensions* in 1994.

“Mark’s death is a great loss, not only for our Museum but also for the larger art museum field to which he contributed so much,” said current MMFA Board President Cathy Martin. “The powerful exhibitions and publication projects he spearheaded for other institutions and us will serve as lasting reminders of Mark’s passion for art as well as his commitment to sharing his love and knowledge with others.”

In addition to his contributions to the institutions where he worked, Johnson also served as an adjunct lecturer in art history and museum studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the College of William and Mary, and Auburn University at Montgomery. Johnson also participated in more than a dozen American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums) museum accreditation studies and was a longtime member of the Association of Art Museum Directors.

“Mark’s exuberance and his passion for art of all types had a tremendous impact on the Museum Board,” said former MMFA Board Chair Winnie Stakely. “His ability to communicate the importance of the role of an art museum in a community like Montgomery made our work together as director and board meaningful and important.”

“Mark was a man of great vision and integrity,” said Margaret Lynne Ausfeld, senior curator, who worked with Johnson for the entirety of his tenure. “He and his family, wife Amy, and daughters Rachel and Sarah, were integral to his life and the life of the institution, and our hearts are full knowing their pain at the loss of a husband and father. Mark’s directorship saw the Museum’s role in the community expand to include more programs for school children and adults, and he engaged with the public at large to build institutional support.”



A family enjoys cool treats in the Caddell Sculpture Garden at the opening celebration in 2018.

Angie Dodson, who succeeded Johnson as Director of the MMFA in 2018, said, “I appreciate many of Mark’s imprints on this organization, but none more so than the Caddell Sculpture Garden. Since its opening nearly three years ago, the Sculpture Garden’s welcoming gates have drawn more of the community’s residents and visitors into the Museum. To have these art-filled ‘galleries’ set in nature has been a godsend, especially during this past year’s pandemic when our outdoor spaces allowed us to welcome visitors back to the Museum late last summer and continue to enable us to offer outdoor programming in these months as we begin

to return to indoor gatherings.”

Details for a memorial reception will be shared at a later date.

MMFA BACKGROUND

The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts was founded in 1930 by a group of local artists as a place for both exhibiting art and space for art education. The original intentions of our founders—to exhibit and teach—continue to inspire and inform every action and activity here at the Museum which, since 1988, has shared the 277-acre Blount Cultural Park with our partners across the lake at the celebrated Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Today’s MMFA visitors stroll through art-studded grounds and permanent collection galleries. They see compelling changing exhibitions and learn about art by playing in our interactive gallery, Artworks, making art in its bustling studios, or by participating in other engaging events and programs. And, as of September 2018, MMFA visitors can now relax and recharge in the serenity of our stunning three-acre sculpture garden.

While the Museum’s collection is still home to the art of many of the regional artists who first established it, over time it has become known for its strength in American art and Old Master Prints. Recent, important acquisitions of art made by African American and Asian artists and works inspired by images and themes related to the experiences of these groups represent the breadth and depth of

the lives and concerns of those who call Montgomery and the River Region home. Through the exhibition of this work as well as the programs and events that help connect our communities with it, the MMFA is recognized as a leading arts and cultural resource here in the state and Southeastern region.

The MMFA is a department of the City of Montgomery and is supported by funds from the City of Montgomery, with additional funds from the Montgomery County Commission and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association. Programs are made possible, in part, by grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

GENERAL INFORMATION

WHAT: Mark M. Johnson Memorial Reception

WHEN: To be shared at a later date

WHERE: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts
Wynton M. Blount Cultural Park
One Museum Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117

INFORMATION: mmfa.org
334.625.4333
@MontgomeryMFA

HOURS:
Galleries, Mondays, Closed
Sculpture Garden, Tuesdays–Saturdays, 10 AM–5 PM
Terrace, and Store: Sundays, Noon to 5 PM
Last entry at 4:45 PM

ADMISSION: Free, with ample, free parking.

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MEDIA CONTACT

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