

New director hopes to draw community to Fitchburg Art Museum

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FITCHBURG -- Nicholas Capasso recalls the first time he set foot in the Fitchburg Art Museum in the 1990s, to see a contemporary art show featuring regional artists, and says he was "bowled over" by what he saw.

"I had no idea that the facility would be so large and so beautiful," he said. "I thought it would be a much smaller place, given the size of the city."

Most cities the size of Fitchburg don't have museums at all, Capasso said, never mind ones the size of the Fitchburg Art Museum.

Under recently retired Director Peter Timms, the museum grew from a single building with three galleries to the three-building complex with 12 galleries it is today.

As the new director, Capasso plans to make the Fitchburg Art Museum "one of the best community art museums in the country" by engaging and exciting local people, artists and institutions about what they and the museum can offer one another.

Capasso, 53, grew up in Bel Air, Md., and currently lives in Acton with his wife, Andrea Southwick, a theatre artist and

educator who teaches at the Boston Conservatory and Northeastern University, and their 14-year-old daughter, Maya. He earned his bachelor's degree in geography and art history at Clark University in Worcester, and his master's and doctorate at Rutgers University.



SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE/ JOHN LOVE Fitchburg Art Museum's new director, Nick Capasso, talks about his vision for the future of the museum.

Capasso also had a pre-doctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution, which he says enabled him to do most of the research for his dissertation on commemorative public art, the centerpiece of which was Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Before being hired as director of the Fitchburg Art Museum, Capasso spent 22 years at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, beginning in 1990 as an assistant curator and working his way up to deputy director for curatorial affairs, enjoying a short stint as interim director.

Running a museum has always been a dream of his, he said, and he was drawn to apply for the job in Fitchburg after having been to the museum on many occasions for exhibits

and serving as a juror in the regional art show about six years ago.

Running the Fitchburg Art Museum is much different from what Capasso is used to at the deCordova, but he's ready to take on the challenge.

Where the deCordova is a contemporary art museum, the Fitchburg Art Museum "has art from Egypt to the present, and I've never had the opportunity to work with an art historical collection before," he said. The other big change is moving from "leafy, well-off suburb" to "gritty city."

"I wanted the opportunity to work with a city, and to connect the museum in better and perhaps more imaginative ways to the community, because I didn't have to do that at deCordova," Capasso said. "The town didn't need deCordova, and deCordova didn't need the town. It just happened to be there."

What he sees in Fitchburg is a whole lot of untapped potential in ways that the museum and the community can be partners in sustaining and elevating one another.

One of Capasso's top priorities is to work closely with Fitchburg Public Schools, and he said he's already met with Superintendent Andre Ravenelle and Director of Arts and After School Programs Maureen Caouette to discuss ways to make the museum's resources available to the school system.

"It could be finding ways to increase the number of field trips here. It could be the educators we have on staff here developing programs in collaboration with the school system so that some of the things we're doing here, either with exhibitions or art collections in the future, meet the needs of their curriculum," Capasso said. "And it doesn't have to be just art curriculum -- it could be history, it could be science,

it could be social studies, because the art and artifacts in this museum have stories to tell about all of those things."

A similar process has also been started with Fitchburg State University, Capasso said. He met with President Robert Antonucci, and they agreed to work together over the next several years to make the Fitchburg Art Museum the de facto museum for the university.

"Really, the possibilities are quite endless," Capasso said.

He's also working with the city in collaboration with these and other entities on a number of initiatives.

Capasso is working with the city and the Twin Cities Community Development Corp. to find ways to turn the neighboring boarded-up B.F. Brown Middle School into artist studios or housing, or some other art-related use.

He's working with the city, FSU and the Fitchburg Cultural Alliance to create a state-designated Main Street cultural district, which would open the city up to marketing and public relations support on the state level, as well as grant money. That same partnership, along with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, landed the city a \$75,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant last year, which will bring temporary public art installations and related educational programming to Fitchburg beginning this summer.

To bring some excitement to the museum, that means a bit of change, Capasso said, from works exhibited to paint and furniture changes. Some of the galleries in the museum, such as exhibitions in the Merriam Parkway building, have been the same for many years, he said, and they are in most need of a change.

"We've been showing the same 40 paintings to the public for at least a dozen years, and we've got a collection of over

4,000 objects," Capasso said. "We need to show some other things."

He's going to start first by highlighting the museum's world-class photography collection, including work by Ansel Adams, Charles Sheeler and Doc Edgerton. The first-floor exhibit, which should open in March, will include between 40 and 50 photos that show not only the history of photography from the mid-19th century to the present, but also tell the story of how the collection was built, Capasso said.

Next, the upstairs decorative arts gallery is going to be taken down for awhile for a show to be called "UFO: Unidentified Fascinating Objects." It will consist of roughly a dozen objects from different art historical periods, Capasso said, and "what ties them together is that we don't know exactly what they are." Each will be accompanied with a card outlining what is already known about the piece, what can be reasonably assumed, and what still has to be figured out, he said. The best part? The public can play a part in solving the mystery.

Capasso also wants to put more contemporary art in the museum, something it has done only sporadically in the past. "I think that the art of our time is important for any museum that wants to be involved in the aesthetic and cultural issues of the day. So I'm hoping that by showing contemporary art, not all the time, but a lot more than we have, we'll get a younger crowd in here, it will be a bigger draw for the university students, and it'll just be more engaging," he said. "I want to provide exhibitions that are so exciting or interesting that people go away and tell their friends they need to come here because they just saw something fabulous."

Capasso is interested in contemporary art that is "fun, beautiful, and accessible," he said, and not "abstruse, theory-driven contemporary art that you need a Ph.D. in art criticism to understand."

While he appreciates and respects that type of work, "it's not what's going to bring excitement to the Fitchburg Art Museum."

He also plans to devote a gallery to museum founder Eleanor Norcross and the history of the city, which can also tie into the local history curriculum in the schools.

Capasso wants to work with as many local and regional artists as he can, because he believes getting the artist community excited about the goings-on of the museum is vital to its success. He plans to continue the regional art show, and will be offering an additional prize to the first-place winner along with the cash award: a small, one-person exhibition at the Fitchburg Art Museum all summer long. Capasso will be starting this tradition this summer with last year's first-place winner, Argentine-born sculptor Nora Valdez.

"There are endless ways to create connections with the community, and I want to pursue as many of them as make sense for the museum and community," Capasso said. "We can't do everything. We can't be all things to all people, but as far as I'm concerned, the focus of this museum, and the only way to sustain this museum, is with a laser focus on this city and this region because those are the folks who care about the museum and you have to serve their interests. And those folks who care about the museum are the same folks that care about the city and the region. So if everybody's working together, we'll get the best results and we'll have the best museum possible for this community."

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