

# | THE WALTERS | | ART MUSEUM |

## Strategic Plan Narrative

Approved by Board at November 10, 2015, Meeting

# A Museum “for the Benefit of the Public”

The Walters Art Museum is the embodiment of a working public-private partnership. In one of the—if not the—greatest acts of cultural philanthropy of the early 20th century, Henry Walters bequeathed his collection, two buildings, and a modest endowment to the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore “for the benefit of the public.” This act of making fully public—with free access—the collection that he and his father before him had amassed set the tone for the museum’s future. The recommitment to free access in 2006, after a period of having charged admission, reinforced and reinvigorated the partnership among the museum, the city, and the citizens of the Greater Baltimore region and Maryland more broadly. This is a partnership on which the museum’s existence is dependent.

Although founded on the collections of two generations of one family, through the principal agency of William and Henry, father and son, the Walters continues to be a vibrant and living museum. Over its 80 years of existence as a museum, the collections have been consistently augmented both through careful and exemplary purchases by the curatorial staff and, significantly, through the generosity of donors and collectors who have also supported the Walters financially. In essence, the Walters has become in many ways a “collection of collections.” As such, the story of “personal” collections transformed into public ones has shaped the experience of visitors: by the very nature of its history and its collections, the Walters provides access to the seven millenia of art from global cultures, and the personal histories of the objects and of the men and women who made and owned them.

## Background and Purpose of the Plan

In 2014, 80 years after the opening of the museum as a public institution and nearly ten years after going free, the Walters began a process to think strategically about its next phase. This process has been instrumental in creating a culture of alignment across the museum and among its stakeholders, from staff to board and volunteers. This process continues to inform the Walters as we experience the changing environments around us. It has driven us to craft a commitment to that which has made the Walters exemplary and will guide the museum into a dynamic future.

The result of this process is a shared vision of the Walters as a transformative force in community and in the museum field. The 20th-century museum cared for, presented, and interpreted its collection, primarily through the mechanism of the temporary exhibition; the 21st-century museum has to find ways to create meaningful personal connections between “art [the Walters’ collections] and people [especially our audiences].” Transformation depends on our public-service value and the contribution we make to our community. It’s what we *DO* with the exemplary collections that builds community ownership.

The plan recognizes the foundation we must lay for sustainability, at the same time that it drives transformation and innovation in the short, medium, and long term—all without losing focus on our mission, strengths, and core activities. There will be increments and phases, metrics and analysis, and systems of accountability that will drive us to accomplish change and to make progress toward our shared vision. Technology and its uses are critical for advancing and accomplishing these priorities, both internally—changing the way we work—and externally—opening up new ways of engaging with global audiences.

Throughout this document, Year 0 is the current fiscal year (FY 16) because we are already living this plan. Year 1 is FY 17; Year 2 is FY 18, etc. The first four years of work (through FY 19) are relatively well developed. The subsequent years primarily outline capital improvements and measures to improve organizational sustainability, which will require significant fundraising. The specific timing of tactics and work plans for each of those years will be developed on a rolling basis.

## The Planning Process

Strategic formulation at the Walters is an ongoing, iterative, and collaborative strategic thinking process. Early on in this process we redefined the task of developing our institutional capacity to identify and assess opportunities and ideas every day. We believe that 21st-century organizations require plans that are strong but flexible, allowing them to be nimble as circumstances unfold. Our intention has been to transform the way we make decisions, and that has already begun, reflected in the ideas and initiatives in this document.

Along the way, we have focused on creating staff structures that facilitate cross-functional communication and coordination. Furthermore, the strategic planning process itself has been a cross-functional and Board / Staff / Community process. We intentionally crafted as inclusive a process as possible recognizing that the responsibility for strategic thinking was shared by the entire staff, the whole board, the various volunteer groups, and many external stakeholders. Every department and every board committee looked at the evolving ideas and thought about the best way to support new directions. We created work groups that brought people and perspectives together in new ways, beginning the process of redefining teamwork. We talked to community leaders, benchmarked the work of our peers and colleague museums, and read about emerging issues shaping museums and other organizations. We grounded decision making in data about our audience, our market, and our operations. We asked “what if?” and then tested, evaluated, and refined our ideas.

This is a living document. We will use it as a framework for priority setting, decision making, and future planning. It will also guide evaluation, and embedded within each priority will be measures for ongoing assessment, research, and analysis. At least once a year, we will return to the plan to evaluate our progress and use that assessment to develop annual work plans and budgets for Board approval.

# Mission

The Walters Art Museum brings art and people together for enjoyment, discovery, and learning. We create a place where people of every background can be touched by art. *We engage and strengthen our community by collecting, preserving, and interpreting art.*

# Vision Statement

The Walters is a transformative force in our region and inspires people to connect with each other through meaningful experiences with great works of art from across the globe and throughout time.

To achieve this vision, the Walters...

- Serves the broadest public through free and open access to the collections
- Continually explores its history and its collections from fresh perspectives
- Uses its exemplary collections and expertise to engage audiences in conversation, creating new connections to the art and culture of our shared past
- Promotes and cultivates a culture of generous public and private support, in the spirit of our founders
- Is innovative in order to effect systemic change
- Fosters a culture of collaborative leadership
- Reflects and speaks to our diverse and evolving city, region, and state
- Contributes to the evolution of the global museum community
- Secures the museum's future through strong stewardship of its collections, facilities, and financial assets

# The Plan: Five Strategic Priorities for the Future

This strategic plan sets forth five priorities that honor the Walters' exemplary past and advance a new vision.

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## **ACTIVATE THE COLLECTIONS**

*To energize audiences and be a leader in the museum field, the Walters leverages its collections and the expertise of its staff to lead the field in preserving, curating, and interpreting its collections and historic buildings.*

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## **ENGAGE THROUGH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES**

*To build participation, relationships, and support, the Walters engages audiences with experiences that are welcoming, meaningful, and exciting.*

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## **CREATE INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS**

*The Walters serves as a cornerstone in our region by engaging in collaborative leadership and by creating and sustaining innovative partnerships.*

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## **STRENGTHEN ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY**

*The Walters operates in a sustainable and accountable manner that depends on a broad base of generous public and private support.*

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## **BUILD A DYNAMIC TEAM**

*The Walters' team of staff, volunteers, and board members achieves excellence through collaboration, accountability, and diversity.*

# Activate the Collections

*To energize audiences and be a leader in the museum field, the Walters leverages its collections and the expertise of its staff to lead the field in preserving, curating, and interpreting its collections and historic buildings.*

The Walters has long been renowned world-wide for the quality of the collections that have been carefully assembled over 80 years and for the expertise of its staff. The reopening of the Centre Street Building and the installation of the Chamber of Wonders gave the Walters a reputation for innovation in contextual museum display. Curators, conservators, and educators have continued to lead their respective fields through active research and scholarship. Our audience-focused education programs for families and school children at all grade levels are excellent models for the field. Our staff has provided mentorship to and training for many professionals in the international museum community, an aspect of the Walters' work that has merited national recognition through prestigious national grants and significant endowment support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Walters has become known as a place where innovative cross-divisional work has created exemplary temporary exhibitions.

In our next phase, we need to build upon these strengths and broaden their appeal in order to energize our audiences. As we preserve, curate, present, and interpret the collections and our historically significant buildings, the Walters will distinguish itself by facilitating exciting connections between the histories of individual objects, the history of our collections, and the personal interests of audiences.

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To accomplish this **Strategic Priority**, the Walters will undertake these **Key Initiatives**:

- Deepen our understanding of the collections—through a combination of historical and technical research—and share that knowledge more broadly
- Develop the collections strategically
- Provide multiple ways for a broad range of audiences—from the first-time museum visitor to the specialized scholar, from our neighbors to a world-wide audience, from visitors in the museum to those we reach virtually—to connect to the collections

# Engage through Personal Experiences

*To build participation, relationships, and support, the Walters engages audiences with experiences that are welcoming, meaningful, and exciting.*

Stories are the keys to connecting 21st-century audiences to objects in the collection, some of which are more than 7,000 years old, and some, made in our own lifetimes. By exploring the stories of the objects and the people who have experienced them over time, we will engage our 21st-century visitors (both onsite and online) with the past, but in a personally meaningful way, so that our contemporary moment enhances understanding of the past and vice versa. In order to further our visitors' personal engagement with the Walters, the museum must create spaces, exhibitions, and programs that are welcoming, comfortable, and accessible. It must provide opportunities for people to engage with others, using art as a starting point to explore new ideas.

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To accomplish this **Strategic Priority**, the Walters will undertake these **Key Initiatives**:

- Deepen shared understanding of our visitors, audience, and donors
- Create more ways for diverse audiences to experience the museum's collections and buildings
- Create customized experiences to build relationships and to expand audience involvement, support, and loyalty
- Promote a clear, compelling institutional identity that appeals to and makes an impact on all of the Walters' target audiences.

# Create Innovative Partnerships

*The Walters serves as a cornerstone in our region by engaging in collaborative leadership and by creating and sustaining innovative partnerships.*

In honor of Henry Walters' wish that the Walters exist "for the benefit of the public," the museum has long played a critical role in the civic and institutional life of Baltimore, the greater Baltimore region, and the state of Maryland. Consequently, throughout its recent history, the museum has been an active partner with educational institutions, such as Johns Hopkins University, and other local arts organizations, such as the Contemporary Museum, primarily through individual projects with directed outcomes. In our next phase, the Walters must develop a focused, consistent, and ongoing approach to relationships with key partners to catalyze change both in our communities and more broadly in our field. These partnerships will be mission- and vision-aligned, mutually beneficial relationships that develop and evolve over 3–5 years.

In the last five years, the museum and academic communities have begun to address critical and pressing issues of diversity in the arts, especially with regard to professional development and training. In focusing on diversity and inclusion as the central criteria in the initial phase of this Strategic Priority, the Walters' sustained partnerships will create a pipeline that provides opportunities for career development and training for those historically underrepresented in the museum field. The museum will consequently both situate itself more firmly in Baltimore—a diverse city that is majority African American—and the region by investing in its citizens and make a contribution to the national arts sector as a whole. In short, through its collaborative, innovative partnerships the Walters' strong commitment to diversity will enhance its relevance and drive its success.

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To accomplish this **Strategic Priority**, the Walters will undertake these **Key Initiatives**:

- Contribute to robust civic dialogue
- Identify and establish strategic partnerships that contribute to an environment of diversity and inclusion at the Walters
- Model strategies to diversity the museum workforce

# Strengthen Accountability and Sustainability

*The Walters operates in a sustainable and accountable manner that depends on a broad base of generous public and private support.*

The Walters is a complex and multi-faceted organization, with a collection of 33,000 works of art, an endowment of \$129 million (at the time this document was approved), an average annual budget of \$14 million, and a campus that includes five buildings used for museum activities, three rental properties, and a parking lot. Its structure as a quasi-city agency, owned jointly by the City of Baltimore and the Trustees of the Walters Art Museum, requires that exemplary stewardship of the organization and its assets is fundamental to ensuring the gift and legacy of the Walters to the city, region, state, and museum-field more broadly. In order to strengthen its sustainability, the museum must focus not only on financial, mechanical, and environmental infrastructure but also on sustainability in its broadest sense: as it cuts across the assets of the organization—from collections, to investments, to buildings, to people.

Our fundamental business model is grounded in ongoing philanthropy from individuals, foundations, and corporations as well as generous public support. Our commitment to accountability in every aspect of our operations reflects the trust and confidence of our donors.

As evidenced by the successful endowment, capital, and annual giving campaigns over the last five years, the Walters operates thanks to a tripartite system of support from government, endowment, and contributed income. This operational model depends primarily on philanthropy that is rooted not just in the disposition of monetary assets but also in the giving of time and talent of those who are loyally engaged in the achievement of the museum's mission. As the nature of philanthropy changes over time, the Walters must develop and implement ways to broaden the number of those who engage with and become loyal to its mission.

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To accomplish this **Strategic Priority**, the Walters will undertake these **Key Initiatives**:

- Deepen financial resources
- Maintain a strong commitment to conserving and sharing the collections and historic buildings
- Conduct fiscally sound and prudent management of all assets through best practices

# Build a Dynamic Team

*The Walters' team of staff, volunteers, and board members achieves excellence through collaboration, accountability, and diversity.*

The Walters is renowned for attracting the very best talent to its team. At the museum, “team” is defined not only as those who serve with dedication and distinction on the staff and board, but also as those who are committed volunteers and/or generous donors. In the 21st century, leadership at the Walters is shared by all team members, a practice that itself reflects the longstanding reputation of the organization as having an exemplary board, staff, and volunteers who work together to achieve the museum’s priorities.

As the next phase in the museum’s history unfolds, best practices in governance, leadership, and management across the organization must be the hallmarks of all activity. An active partner in conversations across the field of museums and non-profits more broadly, the Walters will engage in practices that drive positive change in the industry, especially in diversity and inclusion, and that make the museum an attractive and compelling place to work or to volunteer.

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To accomplish this **Strategic Priority**, the Walters will undertake these **Key Initiatives**:

- Attract, invest in, and retain talented and diverse staff committed to collaboration and innovation
- Create a culture of strong support and collaboration across the organization, including volunteers, staff, and board
- Advance a governance model that actively reflects the diversity of the community and commits to best practices