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Greenwich's Bruce Museum Reopens with a Triumphant Redo

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Case with rare minerals at the Bruce Museum. (Photo by Ben Crowther)

By **BRIAN T. ALLEN**
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A rare museum dedicated to art and science gets new space and shows off art, crystals, and penguins.

AMONG the strengths of the American museum system are its variousness and the independence of its thousands of parts. Museums here, unlike in Europe, are almost always freestanding, privately funded nonprofits run by trustees.

American museums, as a totality, cover most aspects of human existence from art to plants, history, dinosaurs, pets, voodoo, sex, and Elvis Presley. And each museum expresses the idiosyncrasies of its region, founders, donors, directors, and curators. The trajectories are endless. That's one reason why American culture is so dynamic.

The Bruce Museum in Greenwich is in southwestern Connecticut. I visited earlier this spring to see its addition and renovation — very nice — and its premiere exhibitions. Robert Moffat Bruce, a textile magnet, bequeathed his spacious house near Long Island Sound to the Town of Greenwich in 1908 for use as an art museum and for the study of nature and history.

Greenwich, even then a tony suburb of New York, was already the home of an informal art colony of American Impressionists such as John Twachtman, who attracted visiting painters, including Childe Hassam, Ernest Lawson, and Robert Reid. Interest in culture was strong.

The mix of art and natural history wasn't unique, either. The Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield in western Massachusetts opened in 1903 as a place to combine the missions of the Met, the Smithsonian, and the Museum of Natural History, and then there was Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia, which opened in the 1790s to show how humanity and nature could thrive together. Good artists, of course, often studied geology and the palette and shapes of nature. Disciplines weren't silos then.

The Bruce grew over the years, existing in the old mansion and showing a modest collection of art and a very good collection of minerals and birds. An addition in 1992 basically embedded the house in a large, modern building that became a proper museum. It was still a funky place, mostly for the locals and especially for school children. I went to look at the art only twice, I think, in the past 30 years. I went because I loved the mineral displays for their bizarre colors and shapes and the galleries on Connecticut's geology and the land's relationship with the Long Island Sound. By birth, I'm a Nutmegger. Besides, nature is a very fine artist.

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The Bruce entrance. (Photo by Ben Crowther)

Over the past two years, the Bruce has been closed for a complete — and splendid — overhaul and reimagining. It's transformed, and with beauty and practicality intertwined. The $67 million project expands the Bruce from 32,000 to 74,000 square feet, renovates its 1992 incarnation, and adds new gallery space, a commodious but not aggrandizing entrance, and a lecture hall. Its delicately striated façade, made from precast concrete and glass, suggests the surfaces of stone found in Connecticut quarries. EskewDumezRipple, a New Orleans firm, designed the project. They did a great job.

Greenwich is a rich, chichi town, but, with 60,000 people, it's also big. There are plenty of captains of the universe there but also an Italian-American and Irish-American cohort whose families arrived years ago to service the estates in Greenwich's backcountry. One of my great uncles came from Italy in the '20s to work in Greenwich as a chauffeur. It's more kaleidoscopic than we think. Still, Greenwich is as loaded with dough as the Upper East Side and wants its own proper museum. Few think that Manhattan is magical these days.

I love what they've done to the building. The new entrance replaces the old, cramped one. It's the right size for the visitorship, which was about 70,000 a year before the Covid lockdowns. It will probably go to 100,000, given the new building and the Bruce's exhibition schedule. The entrance — and a big part of the museum — is light-filled. The Bruce is in a park with lots of trees, so windows give us views of the Sound and the park and, in the winter and on the west side of the museum, gorgeous sunsets.

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Gabriel Dawe, Plexus No. 43, textile, 2023. (Photo by Ben Crowther)

The entrance leads to an elegant, double-height staircase to the galleries. Over the stairs is a rainbow-colored hanging textile by Gabriel Dawe, a Mexican-born artist based in Dallas. The stairs are grand but sleek. Lovely light, Dawe's textile, and generous ceilings give the visitor a nice processional feeling, making arrival at the Bruce an event and building anticipation. After the hurly-burly of the outside world — a world of traffic, noises, and rushing — these dynamics slow us down. My blood pressure dropped.

School children on tours, alas, enter through the old matchbox-side entrance. I've written a few times about separate entrances for children. Everyone should enter a museum by the nicest entrance. Kids sense elegant, spacious entrances like the new Bruce's. Let them savor it. They're the future.

View of gallery with sculpture by Elie Nadelman. (Photo by Ben Crowther)

The new galleries are beautifully and variously proportioned. The new sculpture gallery, showing a selection of work by Elie Nadelman, is a big hit. It's got bold, big windows and plenty of light and good views. It also has a stone floor — the right material for a sculpture space — and its square, coffered ceiling makes it look modern.

I never really knew what was in the Bruce's permanent collection of art. One day — I hope soon — it will probably put its collection in a public database, but the problem in the past was the absence of permanent-collection galleries, which meant that many things were kept in storage. There's a nice Hassam painted in Greenwich and a good Brittany scene by Daniel Ridgway Knight. These are the kinds of things Greenwich people used to collect. There's some Native American material, as well as stuffed birds and minerals.

View of gallery displaying art from the Cos Cob School of Impressionists. (Photo courtesy of The Bruce Museum)

The Bruce's trustees approved the expansion in 2014, so there was a long period of curiosity, then excitement. These stimulated an avalanche of loans from private collections, outright gifts, and promised gifts.

People from Greenwich collect art, too. More and more collectors don't want to give art to institutions such as the Met, which owns hundreds of thousands of objects and acres of vaults into which most new acquisitions disappear, unseen, unstudied, and unappreciated. Collectors are best to give to small places like the Bruce, the Clark, or their college museum where their art is actually displayed and enjoyed.

I was happy to see Edward Hopper's *Two Comedians*, from 1966. It's his final painting and a tour de farce depicting Hopper and his wife, on stage, dressed as commedia dell'arte actors, bowing to an audience. It's a brilliant painting that once belonged to Frank Sinatra and sold at Sotheby's in 2018 for $12.5 million. A private collector who, I think, lives in Greenwich is lending it to the Bruce. I think it's Steven Grossman, a philanthropist and industrialist, my modest detective work suggests.

Good for him, or whoever it is. It looks fantastic, displayed as it is across the gallery from what I think is a unique Hopper horse picture — *Bridle Path*, from 1939 — that came to the Bruce as a promised gift. As part of the same gift, the Bruce is showing, also a promised gift, a lovely, pivotal Sargent painting from the time he spent in the Cotswolds in 1885, when he also painted *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. A striking gallery of American Cubist and Surrealist work is composed mostly of loans from locals. Two lovely works on paper, a Matisse self-portrait and a Picasso Cubist gouache depicting a bouquet of flowers are promised gifts of William Richter, one of the Bruce projects big donors.

There are a lot of promised gifts. I don't like promised gifts because they're loose ends, and while it's rare for a collector to renege, it happens. Years ago, promised gifts were a Sunbelt thing and never done in New England, but the world has changed.

Nothing succeeds like success. With a brand-new building, and lots of spacious galleries where everything looks great, the Bruce is bound to get gifts of art. People will see that their art philanthropy is treated with honor and given a place of pride.

Azurite. (Promised Gift of Robert R. Weiner Photo by David A. Ross)

Much of the mineral collection came as a gift from Robert Wiener, a Westchester County philanthropist, collector, and real-estate investor. It's magnificent. If the permanent galleries and entrance spaces glow with the light, the mineral galleries are dark. The cases are lit so that the minerals, some large, glitter. Quartz, hematite, stibnite, malachite, layered gypsum, and dozens of other minerals and rocks are nature's sculpture and chromatically dazzling. The mineral gallery is near the sculpture gallery, so the transition is dramatic as well as sensible.

Pyrite on Calcite. (Promised Gift of Robert R. Weiner. Photo by David A. Ross)

A piece of calcite with pyrite bits is fetching indeed. Pyrite, or fool's gold, is a lustrous, white-yellow mineral adding a touch of dazzle to a calcite base. On its own, it looks like an abstract royal crown. Early guns used it for ignition. Today, it's in the recipe for sulfuric acid and semiconductors. I cracked a few electronic books open in preparing this story and found myself deep in the world of crystals, or I should say Crystals, since minerals might have spiritual properties, at least in the world of New Age healing. I felt I was in Santa Monica in the early '80s.

"I love lying down with this stone on my chest while feeling the vibration of possibility," one crystal goddess wrote to another. It "enkindles self-esteem and confidence" and "nurtures, soothes, and restores emotional trauma." So does a dirty martini. It protects us from negative energy, I see, and this fixes my attention. There's too much negative energy in the world. Incoming college students should get this radiant rock as an antidote to woke indoctrination, which is all about negative energy.

View of installation of American Cubism. (Photo courtesy of The Bruce Museum)

Individually or together in a case, healers or not, the mineral collection is impressive. It also resonates nicely with the American Cubist and Surrealist pictures.

I don't know why the Bruce follows the succinct mission statement on its website with a long paean to equity, diversity, and inclusion and nary a word about programs, much less the philosophy behind a museum that mixes science and art. As a practical matter, what we call equity, diversity, and inclusion is race-based hiring, promotion, and evaluation and mediocrity. It's a pretty-sounding poison. There's nothing new or compelling in it as far as the public is concerned. It's bad HR, on steroids, and insider baseball as well. The message it sends is "We're into navel-gazing," which is sad, since the Bruce is, in fact, exterior-focused. Why salute a toxic fad, relayed in PR jargon, as its calling card?

Let's hope a phony-baloney "land acknowledgment" isn't next. Not even a limousine liberal in Greenwich would shed a tear over the purchase of what's now Connecticut's Gold Coast from the Siwanoy Indians — for 25 coats. And not even mink coats! Today's residents like living there too much, and they should. It's a lively, classy town.

Penguin dioramas. (Photo by Ben Crowther)

The Bruce, I hope, will develop a new website that does justice to the wonderful new building. This takes money, of course, but not a lot. I commissioned a new website for the Addison Gallery when I was the director. It didn't have lots of bells and whistles, but that's good. Some museum websites look as if NASA built them.

The Bruce, bless them, are on the very edge of completing their fund-raising. The museum has no debt. Its endowment is around $28 million. That's not ample given the size and scope of the expansion and its budget. Next on the horizon is an endowment campaign. Greenwich is Greenwich, so there's lots of money, but everyone has his or her hand out. Given the quality of the product, though, the Bruce will be fine.

Robert Wolterstorff is the museum's very good director. He is an architectural historian, giving him the right expertise for a building project. He's been there since 2019. Charming and erudite, he's a reassuring presence and good with millionaires. Peter Sutton was his predecessor. He was the director of the Wadsworth Atheneum — an impossible job given its schizophrenic board — and, before that, the Dutch art specialist at Sotheby's and a curator at the MFA in Boston. He also lives in Greenwich and is involved in Greenwich social life.

With his ample connections in the art world, Sutton was able to develop blockbuster temporary exhibitions, such as an Alfred Sisley retrospective in 2017, which was amazing, and *Love Letters*, a loan exhibition on Dutch art that marked the only time a Vermeer painting came to Connecticut. This was in 2004. These and other Sutton shows put the Bruce on the map and educated the locals on its possibilities.

Success for a museum has a few elements — quality of the collection and scholarship are two. That's the Bruce's next phase. The Bruce is a place where visitors feel that they can take ownership. It's a comfortable place on the one hand and, on the other, a place that delivers a frisson. People in Greenwich love it already but will come to love it even more.

Next week, I'll write about the Bruce's exhibitions, mostly about its blissful retrospective of the work of painter Lois Dodd but also about the Bruce's show on penguins.

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BRIAN T. ALLEN is National Review's art critic.

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