



PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Greg Tucker, greg@tuckercomms.com | 410-624-9536

AVAM Board of Directors Appoints Ellen Owens New Director

Arts leader, educator, and artist and current Director of the Castellani Art Museum at Niagara University becomes 3rd Director

(Baltimore, MD) - **The American Visionary Art Museum**—a Congressionally-designated national museum and education center dedicated to showcasing intuitive, self-taught artistry and thought—announces the appointment of **Ellen Owens** as its new Director, following a national 10-month search and unanimous approval by the Board of Directors. Ms. Owens, a native of Middleburg, PA, is currently the Director of the Castellani Art Museum at Niagara University, a position she assumed in 2021. Ms. Owens will formally take-up her new role with AVAM on June 23, 2025.

“On behalf of the entire Board of Directors, we are thrilled to have attracted an arts leader of Ellen Owens’ caliber to lead AVAM forward at this important time for the Museum and our nation,” said AVAM Board Chair **Christopher Goelet**. “Ellen has a keen understanding and appreciation of what AVAM has always been about and the importance of its mission at this time in our nation’s history—to give voice to the diversity of human experience and to inspire our individual and collective commitment to advancing social justice. We have full confidence that she will define a new era of relevance, reach and support for AVAM, as well as an expanded commitment to educational programming.”

“It’s a tremendous honor to be given this opportunity to lead the nation’s museum for self-taught intuitive artists, a place I have often visited and long admired,” said **Ellen Owens**. “I have always been committed to making art museums accessible to the widest possible audience. Visionary art, as one of the purest forms of expression, produces such an immediate, powerful reaction among viewers and is evidence of our intense human desire to create, which many repress, yet some are able to channel to fantastical results. More than ever, we need this kind of artistic expression to reflect, grow, and heal, and ultimately lead us to a stronger, more just, more empathetic society. AVAM rewrites the experience of art museums, using humor, humility, play, and rich personal stories to convey meaningful narratives about life and diverse experiences. I am so looking forward to becoming a Baltimorean and leveraging the solid foundation that has been established these past three decades to build an even stronger future for this iconic and essential institution of Maryland and our nation.”



During her tenure at Castellani Art Museum (CAM), Ms. Owens spearheaded a comprehensive strategic planning process, rebuilding staff and programs to redefine the museum's mission and create new vision and values statements that elevated visitorship by 52%. In just three years, she was responsible for increasing contributed income by 192% and achieving a 100% increase in membership.

For seven years prior to joining CAM, Owens served on the executive leadership team of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the largest university museum in the U.S. In this role, Ms. Owens assisted in raising more than \$4.5 million for her department through grants, sponsorships, and other fundraising initiatives, as well as fostering new collaborations and partnerships. She and her team launched Unpacking the Past, a free multistage education program that serves more than 5,000 public middle school students annually, while still hosting an additional 50,000 K-12 students each year. Owens spearheaded the groundbreaking Global Guides program, which hires local immigrants and refugees to lead gallery tours that relate personal stories to history from their countries of origin.

Underscoring her passion for visionary art, Owens served as executive director of [Philadelphia's Magic Gardens](#) (PMG), a visionary art gallery and museum where she grew the operating budget from \$160,000 to nearly \$1 million in four years. There, she established PMG as a must-see destination in Philadelphia, creating its first strategic plan and popular programs that are still flourishing today.

A senior lecturer in museum studies at Niagara University and formerly program coordinator and lectures in the master's museum education program at University of the Arts, Owens has held several positions at art-, history-, and science-based institutions in the Philadelphia area, including as manager of education at the American Philosophical Society Museum, focused on the intersections of history, art, and science. Owens began her career at Creative Oasis Arts Studio as assistant manager of the gallery and coordinator and instructor of its arts camps; she continues her fiber art and painting practice.

An energetic advocate and volunteer for the arts, Owens has held numerous nonprofit trustee roles with The Print Center, The Museum Council of Greater Philadelphia, the Arts and Business Council of Philadelphia, Citizens for the Arts in Pennsylvania, and others. She is a graduate of notable leadership programs such as the Getty Leadership Institute and Nonprofit Executive Leadership Institute at Bryn Mawr College. Ms. Owens is a graduate of Penn State University where she completed dual majors in painting and drawing, and art education, obtaining her bachelor of arts and bachelor of fine arts degrees. She obtained her masters degree in Museum Education from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA.

AMERICAN VISIONARY ART MUSEUM

[The American Visionary Art Museum](#), a Congressionally-designated national museum and education center dedicated to intuitive, self-taught artistry, has been consistently hailed by leading news, travel and trade publications as among the most desirable destinations in Baltimore and throughout Maryland. CNN declared that AVAM is "one of the most fantastic museums anywhere in America." In both 2023 and 2024, *Baltimore Sun* Readers voted AVAM #1 in the categories of Museum, Tourist Attraction, Gallery, and Wedding Venue; and in 2024 *Baltimore Magazine* readers voted AVAM as Best Art Museum and Best Exhibition (for "If You Build It They Will Come).

In each of the past three years, AVAM has been voted by readers of *USA Today* as one of the top 5 art museums in the nation, as part of the news organization's 10-Best Contest.

For more detail about the American Visionary Art Museum, go to: [AVAM History](#).

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