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Racine Art Museum announces retirement of Executive Director after 50 years of service

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After building a career that spanned five decades and included the creation of a new museum, the Racine Art Museum Association (RAMA) Board of Directors announced that RAM Executive Director and Curator of Collections Bruce W. Pepich will retire at the end of 2024. Pepich plans to remain throughout 2025 as Consultant for Permanent Collection Projects before retiring fully—ensuring the integrity of the largest collection of contemporary craft in North America during the transition of leadership.

Pepich was hired in a programming position at the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts (Wustum), the original of RAMA's two campuses, in 1974. He became Executive Director in 1981 and led the museum through a series of strategic initiatives that achieved regional and then national attention for the institution. In those 43 years, the museum transformed into one of the nation's leading centers for contemporary craft, as Pepich personally grew the permanent collection from 326 pieces to over 11,000 works.

Of this work, Pepich states, "My time at RAM has given me a unique opportunity to sculpt a public collection that helps anchor an underserved sector of the field and brings together artists, collectors, and the public to inspire creativity and share ideas while celebrating the work of the hand."

In 1989, he added the institution's focus in contemporary craft—primarily works made



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in ceramic, fiber, glass, metal, polymer, and wood—to compliment the museum’s original focus in works on paper, which is recognized for its significant holdings in Works Progress Administration-era art, contemporary watercolors, photography, regional prints and drawings, and handmade books. The museum’s holdings relating to works on paper and contemporary craft both grew into a nationally recognized craft collection and a regionally significant representation of the graphics and photography fields. In addition to a broad documentation of artists from around the world, RAM’s craft collection emphasizes American artists and includes archival holdings of multiple works from throughout the careers of major figures.

RAM frequently combines works in all media in changing, collections-based exhibitions to place contemporary craft within the context of painting and sculpture movements of the same period. Approximately 60% of the collection consists of pieces in craft media, while the remaining 40% are works on paper. Demographically, 41% of the artists represented in the collection are women—a substantially higher percentage than most other organizations with permanent collections—and over 1,000 works have been created by contemporary artists of color. The growth and importance of this collection were two of the factors that drove Pepich to lead the establishment of RAM as a second campus for the institution and the home for these holdings. RAM’s award-winning building opened in the heart of downtown Racine in May 2003.

Under Pepich’s direction, the museum has presented numerous culturally and educationally significant efforts, including: an ongoing series of thematic exhibitions featuring nationally known artists in a series of surveys of their work from RAM’s holdings; commissions for its large sidewalk-facing Windows on Fifth Gallery; and a nationally recognized education program for people of all ages at Wustum. RAM serves local, regional, and national audiences through programming at its two campuses, hosting almost 50,000 visitors annually. More than half of these guests come from throughout the region, but RAM also has visitors from an average of 40 US states and 20 foreign countries each year.

During his tenure, the museum achieved professional accredited status from the American Alliance of Museums in 1986 and has retained this recognition through multiple reaccreditation efforts in the ensuing years. Only 3% of museums in America achieve this designation.

“I am grateful to the artists, donors, volunteers, and visitors who have encouraged me since my twenties, and supported my efforts to serve the public in this way,” said Pepich. “Their enthusiasm for my initiatives—and that of RAMA’s Board and our dedicated, hard-working staff—have made



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many things possible, such as our service to the craft field, the creation of RAM, and our expansion of educational services to traditionally underserved audiences. I couldn't have accomplished this without their help."

Pepich concluded, "I particularly want to honor the support of my wife, Lisa Englander, for her help in forging warm and memorable relationships with hundreds of people throughout this region and across the US, who have shared our love for this field, its artists, and the creativity they inspire in others. No professional acts alone in these endeavors, and I am ever grateful for her encouragement of and partnership with me in so much of this work."

The Wisconsin Federation of Museums and Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters have honored Pepich's career achievements with awards. He is also a recipient of the State of Wisconsin Governor's Award in the Arts, and was made an Honorary Fellow of the American Craft Council in 2012—a recognition presented by peers in the field. During his career, Pepich has served on over 150 juries and panels for national and regional art competitions, fellowship awards, and grant competitions. As a writer, his work has been published in a variety of periodicals and books, along with RAM's own publications.

"On behalf of the entire Racine community, I extend our deepest gratitude to Bruce W. Pepich as he steps down from his role after an incredible 50 years of service," said Susan Boland, a recently retired RAMA Board Member. "Bruce's dedication, vision, and leadership have been nothing short of inspiring, and we are immensely grateful for the impact he has had not only on Wustum and RAM, but the art world as a whole. Our warmest wishes go to Bruce and his wife Lisa in their future endeavors. May Bruce's retirement be filled with joy, relaxation, and continued success in all his pursuits."

RAMA has retained Museum Search and Reference, Londonderry, New Hampshire, to conduct a national search for a new Executive Director whose tenure begins in January 2025. After fully retiring, Pepich will be awarded the title of Founding Director Emeritus by the museum's Board in honor of his dedication and service. The museum's Board of Directors has also established the Bruce W. Pepich Legacy Fund at RAM to underwrite care, conservation, and presentation of works in RAM's collection. Contributions in any amount are welcome at any time on an ongoing basis. This fund will continue his work by bringing the public together with the ideas and technical talents of RAM's diverse collection artists.