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**Racine Art Museum celebrates 50 years of leadership with Executive Director Bruce W. Pepich**

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Racine Art Museum (RAM) celebrates five decades of exemplary leadership with Executive Director and Curator of Collections Bruce W. Pepich, who helped establish a brand new art museum from the ground up and assembled the largest collection of contemporary craft in the United States.

Pepich earned a BA in art history from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, in 1974. Later that year, he was hired as a Project Manager at the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts (Wustum). "I became interested in contemporary craft in college and discovered that this work was well-received by the people in this region who were involved in skilled manufacturing and respected the work of the hand," says Pepich. "This connection enabled me to present and support many artists who were not well represented at that time."

Pepich continues, "When I arrived at Wustum in 1974, I planned to spend three months here on my way to graduate school. That changed quickly, as I discovered I could produce programs and organize exhibitions that supported artists by bringing their work closer to people from many communities throughout the Chicago-Milwaukee corridor. As I grew in understanding and appreciating this sector of the field, the museum grew with me to encompass regional audiences, then national audiences while continuing to serve its local communities."

Pepich became Executive Director of Wustum in 1981. Later that decade, he



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established the museum's second focus of collecting contemporary craft—primarily works made in ceramic, fiber, glass, metal, polymer, and wood—in addition to its original works on paper focus. This decision prompted a significant donation of American craft from the late art collector Karen Johnson Boyd in 1991. Throughout her lifetime, Boyd donated more than 1,700 works to Wustum and, later, RAM.

Wustum's permanent collection continued to grow at a rate that eventually surpassed the museum's storage and display capabilities, so Pepich spearheaded a fundraising campaign to build a brand new campus in the heart of downtown Racine. With the help of the museum's Board of Directors, staff, and long-time supporters, over \$10 million in funds were raised to design and construct the Racine Art Museum, which opened in May 2003. RAM's award-winning architecture and significant contemporary craft collection drew national attention and inspired further donations of artwork—expanding the museum's permanent collection from 2,000 pieces to more than 11,000 over the last 21 years.

"The permanent collection had 326 pieces when I arrived," says Pepich. "I have been able to walk more than 11,000 artworks into this museum over the last five decades, which has been both an incredible career opportunity and a gift to me. I have had the great fortune of benefitting from the enthusiasm that so many artists, collectors, and major supporters from 36 states have had for my initiatives, such as establishing the craft focus, the creation of RAM, and providing services to traditionally underserved audiences."

In addition to a broad representation 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. Its works on paper collection has regionally important holdings in Works Progress Administration-era art, contemporary watercolors, photography, regional graphic production, and handmade books. RAM frequently combines these pieces with its craft media works in changing exhibitions to place contemporary craft within the context of painting and sculpture movements of the same period. Approximately 40% of the collection consists of works on paper, 60% are pieces in craft media, and 41% of the artists represented in the collection are women.

"Bruce's impact on contemporary craft—the legacy he has built through RAM—is, frankly, near impossible to measure," says Lena Vigna, RAM Director of Exhibitions. "He has championed craft because he believes in it and the artists, and it is not hard to see that he is genuinely interested in helping to share their creativity with others."

Under Pepich's direction, the museum achieved professional accredited status



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from the Alliance of American Museums in 1986, and he guided the museum through two subsequent reaccreditation efforts in the 1990s and 2000s.

“RAM and Wustum balance local and national audiences, and through craft, Bruce found a way to create an endlessly magnetic and compelling resource for everyone who walks in the door or experiences the collection remotely through publications and educational programs,” says Vigna. “Wisconsin has a rich history with craft. Through industry especially, Racine has a historical connection to the handmade and labor—it was an inspired moment when Bruce connected these threads through the intellectual and actual process of craft. Additionally, Bruce has been a great ambassador for craft no matter where he goes, and, truly, an engaging figure in the field.”

Pepich was recognized for his achievements within the field in 2012 when he was elected as an Honorary Fellow of the American Craft Council (ACC)—an honor equivalent to an Academy Award for Best Director in the field of contemporary craft. In 2013, he was invited to join ACC’s Board of Trustees, a role which he continues to serve. Pepich’s other recognitions include the Wisconsin Visual Art Lifetime Achievement Award from the Museum of Wisconsin Art, Wisconsin Visual Arts, and the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, in 2011; The Ann Koski Professional Excellence Award from the Wisconsin Federation of Museums, in 2010; and The State of Wisconsin Governor’s Award in the Arts from the Wisconsin Foundation for the Arts and Governor Jim Doyle of the State of Wisconsin, also in 2010.

“Under Bruce’s visionary leadership for the past 50 years, our world-class contemporary craft museum has flourished, enriching our community and becoming a cultural destination for enthusiasts near and far,” says Clair Holland, Racine Art Museum Association Board of Directors Secretary. “Bruce’s remarkable career and the deep passion he has lovingly poured into his work has made an indelible mark on the art community and established an enduring legacy in Racine.”

RAM continues to celebrate Pepich’s milestone anniversary throughout 2024, including at the museum’s annual fundraiser, *SAVOUR*. Pairing local artists and chefs for a one-of-a-kind sensory experience, *SAVOUR 2024: 70s Chic—Glitter, Glamour, and Gold* will feature local artists selected by Pepich as well as the premiere of a locally produced video celebrating his continued dedication to the museum. The event theme is also an upscale homage to the decade in which he joined Wustum staff. Further information and a link to purchase event tickets will be available on the RAM website, [ramart.org](http://ramart.org), at a later date.

*Programming at Racine Art Museum is made possible by: Platinum Sponsors—*



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The two campuses of the Racine Art Museum—RAM in downtown Racine at 441 Main Street and the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts (Wustum) at 2519 Northwestern Avenue—are located in Racine, Wisconsin, a historic community on the shores of Lake Michigan. RAM is home to the largest contemporary craft collection in North America and has a reputation for its award-winning architecture and nationally recognized exhibition program. Wustum is home to the organization’s diverse, award-winning art education programs and has presented significant art exhibitions since 1941.

Both campuses of the Racine Art Museum are currently open Wednesday through Saturday from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. Admission rates are \$10 for adults; \$8 for students, seniors (62+), and veterans; and free for RAM members, children under 12, active military personnel, and NARM, ROAM, and AAM members.