

Gerret, Tatiana Copeland pledge \$15 million to art museum

Betsy Price, The News Journal

Published 12:01 a.m. ET Jan. 25, 2018 | Updated 3:09 p.m. ET Jan. 26, 2018

Gerret and Tatiana Copeland have pledged \$15 million to the Delaware Art Museum, the largest cash donation in at least 30 years. Suchat Pederson/The News Journal



(Photo: Suchat Pederson, The News Journal-USA TODAY NETWORK)

Wilmington philanthropists Gerret and Tatiana Copeland have pledged \$15 million to the Delaware Art Museum, the largest cash donation in at least 30 years, maybe since the museum was founded.

The gift, described as transformative by museum CEO Sam Sweet, will be added to the museum's now \$17 million endowment. Interest off that endowment is used to run the museum, which has an annual budget of \$4.5 million.

The donation is designed to do two things, Gerret Copeland said. First, it honors his family's three-generation devotion to the museum, which was founded by his grandmother.

Second, he said, it's a statement of faith he and his wife hope will encourage others to give big, too, as the museum continues to transform itself after being forced to sell four art works in 2014-15 to stabilize its finances. He hopes to see new donations double their gift.

"We are a vibrant, alive active museum," said Copeland, who has been chairman of the museum's board of directors. "We're not just four walls with pictures on them."



Gerret Copeland, who has given \$15 million to the Delaware Art Museum, stands at the entrance to the American art wing, near a portrait of his grandmother, who founded the museum. (Photo: Suchat Pederson, The News Journal-USA TODAY NETWORK)

When Gerret announced the gift in a museum board meeting, the room went silent, followed by audible gasps and then spontaneous applause, Sweet said.

"You could just feel the excitement, the amazement of the people in that room and how suddenly optimism came pouring down like rain around them," Sweet said. "It was terrific."

Sweet said the future the board and staff envision for the museum will require long, hard work.

"With this gift, we will be able to move on to a campaign to really solidify our future finances," he said.

The museum can't rank the gift precisely because its electronic fundraising records only go back 30 years. The museum's next largest cash donation in that time is Helen Farr Sloan's bequest of \$6,850,000 in 2005.

Sweet said true long-term financial sustainability starts with restoring and deepening the confidence and trust the community has in the museum. Both were shaken, he said, when the museum sold the art that included a Winslow Homer painting and Calder mobile to pay off \$20 million in debt left from a contentious and litigious 2005 expansion and renovation of the museum. The museum is now debt free.



Visitors roam around the Delaware Art Museum, which will use a \$15 million gift from Gerret and Tatiana Copeland to continue efforts to win back public confidence after selling art to fix financial problems. (Photo: Suchat Pederson, The News Journal-USA TODAY NETWORK)

It had already begun adding and diversifying programming before Sweet was hired in 2016 to help bring in crowds, and now has a five-prong plan to polish the Kentmere Parkway icon's luster.

"We're focusing on how we can really become a vital part of the Wilmington community. In fact, the great Greater Brandywine Valley, even the Delaware community. We are THE Delaware Art Museum," Sweet said.

The core of the museum's plan is to better connect itself to the community, partly through events such as 2015's "Dream Streets" exhibit that focused on Wilmington artists from 1970-1990 and the upcoming 1968 50th anniversary exhibitions and programs. And while the museum seeks to continue celebrating its Pre-Raphaelite collection, the biggest in the U.S., and its illustrative and modern art, it will focus on the acquisition of works by women and artists of color.



Gerret and Tatiana Copeland are giving \$15 million to the Delaware Art Museum, which his grandmother founded, his father helped run/support and where he is chairman of the board. (Photo: Suchat Pederson, The News Journal-USA TODAY NETWORK)

The museum wants to be both a hub of activity that attracts people from all backgrounds and to reach out through programs with institutions such as the Christina Cultural Arts Center and the Latin American Community Center. It's celebrating a new performance series that will take place around the city in a meeting today with board members and donors.

The staff and board believe people are interested and responding. In 2017, just over 80,000 people visited, including 14,000 children, the highest attendance in a decade. It was up dramatically from 2014's 54,000, the year officials announced the art sale.

Family connections

Gerret's grandmother, Louisa d'Andelot duPont Copeland, was one of four people who founded the museum after the death of illustrator Howard Pyle. Gerret's father, Lamot du Pont Copeland, the 11th president of the DuPont Co., was a longtime art museum board member and lifelong supporter.

Gerret is a former Wall Street financier and commercial real estate developer and has been a member of the art museum board off and on since 1981, and chairman since 2004. His wife, Tatiana, once worked in the DuPont Corp.'s international division and has her own accounting

firm. They have already given enough to the museum to have the 2005 new wing named after them, and the sculpture garden named for Gerret and his parents.



Gerret Copeland looks around the Delaware Art Museum, which his grandmother founded and his father helped run and support. The two paintings in the foreground were done by illustrator Howard Pyle. (Photo: Suchat Pederson, The News Journal-USA TODAY NETWORK)

Gerret said the donation will be given over time, but he and his wife haven't decided the details.

If the museum can get matching funds and then get 5 percent interest on its endowment, Gerret said, the interest should pay most expenses and also give the museum some money to reinvest in the endowment and keep it growing.

That doesn't mean the museum won't fundraise, he said. Museums will always have special projects or acquisitions it wants to fund, he said. And the museum will always have an annual fundraising drive, Sweet said.

The Copelands are also big donors and supporters for a variety of Delaware nonprofits, including the Delaware Symphony Orchestra, Delaware Humane Association, Kalmar Nyckel, The Grand Opera House and more.

Copeland said one reason he wants to help the museum achieve financial stability is because he voted to sell the art to clear the construction debts.

"I would go to people asking for money, and they would look at me and say, 'Gerret, why should I give you a penny when you've got \$20 million in debt hanging over your head that you don't know how you're going to pay?'" Copeland said. "And you can't disagree with them."

The museum was excoriated in the national art press for selling the works, and the American Association of Museum Directors took away the museum's accreditation. That made it hard for the museum to borrow pieces from or loan pieces to other museums.

The Delaware Art Museum will reapply for accreditation, Sweet said, but not immediately.

"We are in excellent shape by all accreditation standards, except financial, and we probably have to make more progress there to meet their benchmarks before we apply," he said.

Examples of Delaware Art Museum programming

With twin goals of having an impact on the Wilmington and being a hub of activity, the Delaware Art Museum has designed programs that focus on issues that affect the area, or are groundbreaking in some way:

They have or will include:

- *Dream Streets: Art in Wilmington 1970-1990* – The summer 2015 exhibition drew more than 500 to the June opening. A number of successful programs around the show included reviving the *Dreamstreets* literary magazine for its 51st issue.
- The John Sloan retrospective closing Sunday, and the upcoming *Eye on Nature: Andrew Wyeth and John Ruskin* – The works of the Brandywine Valley master and the 19th century critic and painter will be compared for the first time in a show that only the Delaware museum could do because of its collection of local and Pre-Raph art.
- 1968 50th anniversary exhibitions and programs – In summer 2018 the museum will host three exhibitions and a series of programs to mark the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination and Wilmington riots and National Guard occupation. They include *Danny Lyon: Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (June 30-Sept 9); *The Montgomery Bus Boycott: Drawings by Harvey Dinnerstein and Burton Silverman* (June 30-Sept 9); and a commission by Hank Willis Thomas (title TBD) (July 14-Sept 30) that will use News Journal photos of 1968 demonstrations and occupation to create a new work of art.
- A new Performance Series – With a focus on social justice and cutting-edge presentations, this series brings artists to Delaware who push creative boundaries and respond to present day events in innovative ways. Shows will take place at the museum and around town.

Contact Betsy Price at (302) 324-2994 or beprice@delawareonline.com.