



Musings

by Scott H. Harris, Executive Director, University of Mary Washington Museums

As we approach the end of 2018, I wish to take a moment to review some of the accomplishments of University of Mary Washington Museums. By many measures, it has been a full and fruitful year.

Perhaps the most fundamental and far-reaching development occurred in January, when the administrative framework of University Museums formally went into effect. While placing [Gari Melchers Home and Studio](#) (GMHS), the [James Monroe Museum](#) (JMM), and the [Papers of James Monroe](#) (PJM) under a single executive director was a new innovation for UMW, successful examples of the concept at other academic museums helped inform the planning process here. I cannot stress enough my appreciation to Joanna Catron, assistant director and curator of Gari Melchers Home and Studio, Jarod Kearney, assistant director and curator of the James Monroe Museum, Daniel Preston, editor of the Papers of James Monroe, and their respective staffs, for their help in getting University Museums off to a great start!

Throughout the year, Gari Melchers Home and Studio was the scene of considerable activity to maintain and enhance physical facilities. Much of this work, whether replacement of HVAC equipment, roof repair, or grounds maintenance, is not always apparent to the public. This in no way diminishes either its importance or expense. Among the more visible changes at the site are the addition of security gates at the main entrance and improved orientation and directional signage for visitors. We are also pleased that the historic entrance gates to the Belmont estate are once more functional, thanks to restoration of the wooden gates and the stone piers on which they hang.

The GMHS collection, already the largest assembly of works by Gari Melchers anywhere, was augmented in 2018 by the transfer of three drawings and an oil portrait from the former Corcoran Gallery of Art. Three paintings in the collection were restored and others are awaiting treatment in the conservation lab. This year's spotlight exhibition, *Over the Garden Gate: Gari Melchers' Falmouth*, highlighted the artist's affinity for painting scenes of his adopted hometown with a group of works from the GMHS collection, the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta, Georgia, and private lenders.

The James Monroe Museum continued to commemorate the bicentennial of Monroe's presidency and related themes with public programs that included *Monroe Conversations* with JM character interpreter Jay Harrison and John Douglas Hall portraying James Madison, and Heidi Stello and Katherine Spivey as Elizabeth Monroe and Dolley Madison; Gabriel's Rebellion, the attempted uprising of enslaved African Americans that occurred during Monroe's first term as governor of Virginia; ongoing archaeological investigations at Monroe's Albemarle County home Highland; and the 31st Annual James Monroe Lecture, *Dirty, Nasty Politics in James Monroe's America*, delivered by Dr. Joanne B. Freeman of Yale University. Additionally, the Museum had the pleasure of hosting a reunion of the descendants of James and Elizabeth Monroe on the occasion of the 260th anniversary of Monroe's birth. The opportunity to welcome Monroe descendants to the Museum was a highlight of 2018 for the staff.

In addition to the above, both museums offered a wealth of other programs appealing to varied audiences of all ages: popular First Friday game nights in the JMM garden and celebrations of the birthdays of James and Elizabeth Monroe; a new performance partnership between GMHS and the UMW department of music, and *Art After Hours*, both of which are drawing new audiences to Belmont; the exuberant creativity of youngsters in *Preschool Palette* at GMHS; and much more. Both museums were popular rental venues for functions ranging from weddings and parties to meetings of community businesses and organizations.

The year was also a busy and productive one for the Papers of James Monroe, which welcomed new assistant editor Dr. Robert Karachuk in May. Bob's arrival was shortly followed by publication of Volume 6 in the Papers series, covering the beginning of Monroe's tenure as secretary of state in the Madison administration. The summer saw PJM staff attend the 2nd Annual Political History Conference at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. Editor Dan Preston and editorial assistant Heidi Stello took part in a panel discussion, and Heidi presented a paper on Monroe's White House account books. In October, the exhibit, *James Monroe: The Library of a President* (curated by the very busy Heidi) opened at UMW's Simpson Library; it will move to the JMM in January.

The JMM and PJM, in conjunction with the museum exhibits laboratory class in UMW's department of historic preservation, worked throughout 2018 on a second traveling exhibit commemorating the bicentennial of one of Monroe's presidential tours. *Your Obedient Servant: James Monroe's 1819 Presidential Tour of the Southern States* will go on the road around the beginning of March 2019, hoping to emulate the success of the 2017 exhibit that covered Monroe's northern states tour.

This was a year in which the generosity of donors and grantors of many types provided critical support of University Museums. The Purinton Foundation and Stewart Jones Charitable Trust funded art conservation and the gates restoration at GMHS, respectively. The latter entity also supported public programs at the JMM, joined by the Paul and Jane Jones Trust and Virginia Commission for the Arts, among others. The Fredericksburg Savings Charitable Foundation is also a longtime supporter of both museums. UMW alumni and other friends stepped up in a big way for University Museums during the second annual Mary Wash Giving Day in March—GMHS received \$3,070 from 26 gifts, while JMM took in \$5,430 from 41 gifts. Both giving levels were significant increases in numbers of donors and dollars over the previous year. The PJM, which received its third multi-year \$300,000 grant from the National Endowment for Humanities in 2017, had another success in July 2018 with the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, which awarded the Papers a \$42,000 grant.

The [Friends of Belmont](#) and [Friends of the James Monroe Museum](#) are the bedrock of private philanthropy for both museums, and are also some of our best community advocates. Combined Friends' giving to GMHS and JMM totaled \$130,444 for the first 11 months of 2018. To those who are already members of one or both of our Friends groups, thank you for your support. For those who are not members, we invite you to make an investment before year's end in the stewardship of history and culture; the engaging public programs; and the support of liberal arts education embodied in the University of Mary Washington Museums. To find out how to give, visit either museum's website or the [UMW Arts and Culture](#) page.

Thanks, and best wishes for a peaceful and happy holiday season!

Scott Harris