

New England is a treasure trove of museums. New modern spaces have opened, including Boston's WNDR; old guards have completely transformed like The Bruce. The University of New Hampshire Museum of Art is now a gallery and stands as a cautionary tale. The Berkshire Museum, once shrouded in scandal, has redefined itself, while the Hammond Castle Museum is experiencing a renaissance through powerful exhibitions, new programming and leadership. The following pages highlight the current exhibitions and happenings in five of the region's most intriguing museums in this moment.

Hammond Castle Museum

by Rita A. Fucillo

How fortunate are we as New Englanders to live in such an intriguing part of the country? One never knows what hidden treasure or architectural wonder resides around any bend in the road. One such wonder lies along Route 127 in Gloucester, MA. Regardless of the weather and against the backdrop of waves crashing along the rocks below, Hammond Castle Museum stands tall. Mysterious, formidable and fascinating.

The Castle was built between 1926 and 1929 by inventor John Hays Hammond, Jr. "Despite the fact that he was one of the most prolific inventors in American history, most people haven't heard of him," explains Caleb McMurphy, the Museum's director of visitor services and education and a Hammond savant. McMurphy's knowledge is astounding; his enthusiasm and love of history and innuendo are perfectly suited for his role. McMurphy shares Hammond's accomplishments with pride, as if he knew the inventor himself. "Most well-known for his contributions to the field of radio control, the same technology behind today's drones... Hammond did a lot of work with remotely controlled boats and torpedoes while that technology was in its infancy... In 1914, he pilots a full-size ship called the *Natalia* from Gloucester to Boston and back using only a system of radio masts on the shore, not a single living soul aboard. This was two years after the *Titanic* happened so that was a pretty exciting experiment..." Hammond's patents range from acoustics, audio dynamics, audio preservation, telephonics, television, and the military (bombs, shells, mines, missiles). Hammond is quoted as saying, "At least it can be said that I have contributed means for man to express his nobler passions as well as his baser ones..."

If one were to play six degrees of separation with Hammond (1888–1965), one would be amazed at how many people he knew, how many lives he touched and how many genres he influenced over his life, from science to the literary, from the artistic to the occult. Not to mention the physical structure around which his life revolved.

Why a castle, though? Or "Abbadia Mare," Latin



Above: The organ console (not the original). More than 8,000 organ pipes are embedded within the upper "keep." Photo: Frank C Grace.

for Abbey by the Sea, as Hammond referred to his home, where 11th century Norman architecture meets 13th French Gothic meets 15th century French chateau along this stunning shoreline. "Hammond had always wanted to live in a castle, according to existing documentation," says McMurphy. The castle offered expansive laboratory space, provided a private home for him and his wife Irene, housed the massive pipe organ he constructed over his lifetime, and, most importantly, "Hammond Castle from 1930 on, has always been open as a museum for the public, in some capacity. Hammond had always intended for the Castle to be a museum. He once wrote that its sole excuse for existence is that it be a museum for public education."

The Museum is helmed by Linda Harvey, an extraordinary fundraiser with a deep commitment to Cape Ann. Over the past five years under Harvey's leadership, museum attendance has increased to more than 60,000 a year. Some seek knowledge of Hammond himself, marveling at his ingenuity; his-

tory lovers want to experience the stunning collection of authentic artifacts, the massive pipe organ (comprised of nearly 8,400 pipes) that is currently under restoration; or to gaze in awe at the museum's architectural presentation. "I love my job," she shares. "Every day there is something new to be inspired by... I can still walk through this building and find things I hadn't noticed before." While there are few women in museum leadership positions, Harvey sees growth and is generally encouraged.

Having always carried a reputation as being a fun and curious destination for New England school children and a family visit during a Cape Ann vacation, the Castle had simply gone through "a quiet period." Under Harvey's watch, the Museum "went from a sleepy little dark secret museum that really wasn't in the public's eye" to one of the most popular destinations on Cape Ann.

The Museum's renaissance continues as it begins to focus more on the inventions and their cultural significance, with an emphasis on primary source documentation about the Castle itself. Harvey's agenda includes new programming aimed at bringing visitors back more frequently as well as constantly restoring the structure. "One of my biggest goals of the moment is to restore the organ and make sure that we can hear it played again." Hammond himself could not play it and yet it meant the world to him. Most exciting to Harvey is when the visit is a young person's first experience *inside* a museum, sparking their sense of wonder. Introducing a museum as a place of mystery, learning—and fun. "I just look for a healthy, growing, interesting future for this museum—and it's on the right path."

And while art exhibitions are challenging to plan due to spatial limitations within the Grand Hall during high season, they occasionally happen in early spring. 2023's *Eric Pape at Hammond Castle Museum* and spring 2024's sequel *Gertrude Cawein at Hammond Castle Museum* showcased Pape's extraordinary oils, watercolors and pen and ink drawings—most of which are in the personal collection of Pape expert/biographer Dr. Gregory Conn. Pape and Hammond were close friends and the former gifted the latter a permanent installation in the form of a stunning mural in the Castle's War Room, detailing *The Wireless Naval Battle of Gloucester Bay*.



A rendering of the upcoming aquarium at the Berkshire Museum which will be located on the main floor. Courtesy of Studio HAU.

The mural's meticulous restoration was a gift from Conn and his wife Dr. Sagrario Ortega. Opening May 1, in the Inventions Room, is *Hammond and the History of Television* which explores Hammond's ahead-of-the-curve impact on the "evolution of television technology from its theoretical beginnings to its digital transformation." On Fridays throughout June, in honor of Gloucester's ongoing celebration of Pride month, Hammond Castle Museum will premiere "a curated series of Pride-focused mini-exhibits. Each will highlight or celebrate the life and accomplishments of a different set of significant Queer figures who either visited the museum or were associated with its founder..." as noted on the website.

Hammond had many friends, engaged in many relationships—intimately, spiritually and intellectually—and, in one way or another, with his epic home as epicenter, influenced the currents of literary, artistic and societal evolution. "Hammond wanted to build this castle because he wanted to have something in stone, a foundation for which people would remember him by," says McMurphy. "He knew his inventions would be improved upon in years to come... he knew his name might not remain as popular in the scientific world yet he wanted to have something that he could share with the community."

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Berkshire Museum Reimagined

by Charles Bonenti

Six years after selling off the cream of its art collection for \$52.3 million in order to stay afloat, the Berkshire Museum is reimagining itself as a storytelling rather than a collecting institution.

A building-needs study has been done with \$10.5 million in improvements planned, \$3.5 million already made, and a final phase to begin at summer's end. A vision plan emphasizing the interdisciplinary aspects of art, science and history is being implemented. Penalties threatened for breaking professional taboos on selling art to pay operating costs had negligible effect. Assumptions that gifts of art or money would dry up were unfounded. And a new director is on board and hiring new staff.

That director, Kimberley Bush Tomio, outlined those gains in a recent interview. The third to hold the post since the 2018 art sale, she welcomed challenges to rebuild the institution. "I have a tendency to want to help the underdog," she said, "I love helping an organization move to the future and making staff more hireable."

Previously director of museum services at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, Tomio expects this post to be her last before retirement. "I have a great staff," she went on. "This is one of the happiest places I've worked."

It's also been a revolving door with six directors since 2000 and attendant staffing changes. Tomio attributed some of that turnover to the roiling im-

pact of high local unemployment and a population outflow after the region's largest employer, GE, departed in the 1990s.

The problem is nationwide, arts writer Robin Pogrebin reported last year: "Museums around the country are undergoing leadership changes at a moment when modern cultural institutions are demanding increasingly complicated skill sets." Witness leadership at MASS MoCA in March 2024, negotiating with unionized employees on strike for higher pay.

On a spring visit, this writer's first since before the art sale (See *Art New England* November/December 2017), the museum was physically and programmatically a work in progress. Major infrastructure improvements were made and new pocket galleries, restrooms, and improved lighting and flooring were in place upstairs showcasing a spectrum of historical, scientific and artistic holdings. Still ahead is a major renovation of the first floor.

The improvements are more discreet than those in the "New Vision" advanced in 2017 by former director Van Shields. That plan would have preserved the façade of the building, while creating a glass-roofed atrium at its center as well as a new lobby and performance space.

More concerning to many locals was Shields's stated intent to "integrate treasured objects with cutting-edge technology and new interpretative techniques. We will transform static museum galleries into active learning laboratories."

The current plan, developed by StudioHAU in