



JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



## Acquired Jersey City Museum Collection

### Transcript

Story by Maddie Orton

MADDIE ORTON (VOICEOVER):

I'm Maddie Orton and you're listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast.

Jersey City has made the news quite a bit as of late—the Pompidou Center in Paris is slated to create an outpost in Journal Square, St. Peter's Peacocks had an incredible NCAA basketball run, and rents are skyrocketing. So how did we get here? Jersey City's history is a long and fascinating one of industry, immigration and gentrification—and while it's not so different from cities throughout the country, this is also a uniquely New Jersey tale.

The Jersey City Museum, which opened in 1901, chronicled the city's many chapters through its collection of historical items and artwork. The museum closed its doors to the public in 2010, but gifted its collection to the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in New Brunswick in 2018.

The Zimmerli's first show displaying works from this collection opens on September 8th. It's called "American Stories: Gifts from the Jersey City Museum Collection."

I spoke with Donna Gustafson, Chief Curator at the Zimmerli, about what we can look forward to seeing. Take a listen.

Maddie Orton (MO):

After the Jersey City museum closed, the stewards of the Jersey City Museum's pieces I think must be very happy to have the Zimmerli take ownership over them, right? To make sure that they're safe and seen by the public?

Donna Gustafson (DG):

Yeah, I think, you know, it was important to us that the collection remain in the state of New Jersey, right? I mean, it is part of the heritage of the state of New Jersey. Rutgers is the state university of New Jersey, so it seemed to make a lot of sense for us. I do wanna give credit to our previous director, whose name was Tom Sokolowski. It was his decision to take on this collection. And one of the things that is

PRESENTED BY





JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



important for us all to realize is that we are an art museum, and we were interested in the art collection. There are many things in the collection that are not really part of what we would collect.

MO:

Sure.

DG:

And the plan is that we are going to return as many of those historical items back to Hudson County, to Jersey City, to, you know, historical societies around the state who are interested in that, because that is not really anything that we are going to exhibit in our galleries. And that process is kind of ongoing.

MO:

Sure. And for this first initial show that you're creating from the Jersey City Museum collection, how did you select these pieces?

DG:

I can say that, as the curator for American art and the art of The Americas, I was very excited by the wealth of diversity in the Jersey City collection. And I give full credit to the curators at the Jersey City Museum. Alejandro Anreus and Rocio Alvarado were two of the curators that were there right before the museum closed, and they made a real push to collect interesting artists, contemporary, and diverse artists to really expand their collection. And we are the beneficiaries then now.

So the exhibition is called "American Stories: Gifts from the Jersey City Museum Collection" and what we wanted to really do with that is give our audience, and the state of New Jersey, really, a new look at what had been, you know, the highlights of the Jersey City Art Museum collection.

So we've pulled out incredible pieces by Melvin Edwards and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and Chakaia Booker, May Stevens, Al Loving, wonderful artists who were associated with Jersey City and the New York area and had been featured in exhibitions in Jersey City over the years that Jersey City was doing these wonderful exhibitions.

There's a lot of very interesting work, and that is really to the benefit of everyone who's going to come to the Zimmerli Art Museum. And it gives us the opportunity to really integrate the Jersey City collection into our own American collection, and really, I think, do a much better job of telling the stories that we need to tell.

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

MO:

PRESENTED BY





JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



And so is this first show—is this your highlights? The pieces you're – I don't wanna say most excited about, but the pieces that you really want to show?

DG:

Yeah. Well, we wanted to really try to represent the character of the Jersey City collection. There are a lot of pieces that, you know, are images of Jersey City, sort of landscapes around Jersey City, pictures of, you know, the Pulaski Skyway, you know, the sort of urban landscape of Jersey City. That's part of it. And then the other part of it is who are the people of Jersey City? And that has to do a lot with the diversity that's represented, you know, the themes that we talked about—politics, and immigration and, you know, religion. So all of those create a sort of first look at what this collection is. And then in the future, we'll be just rotating these new works into our own galleries and sort of thinking of them as part of our collection.

MO:

Let's talk a little bit just going back [laughs] just going back a hundred and twenty years, what was the idea behind the Jersey City Museum originally?

DG:

Well, you know, Jersey City has been one of New Jersey's most populated and important cities for many, many years. And that has to do with it being close to New York City, Newark, you know, the whole area of Northeastern New Jersey was a real hub for industry, and transportation and immigration. So I think that, in 1901, the city decided that it wanted to really start collecting its own history. And a lot of the materials that were early donations to the museum were collections from people's homes. So there are collections of, you know, correspondence and letters and China and costumes and historical dolls and games. There's all kinds of incredible material—material culture, really, of the city of Jersey City.

MO:

And then there was an expansion toward art collection within the museum.

DG:

Yeah. I would say, like, in the 1970s and for many, many years, the Jersey City Museum was housed on the second floor of the Jersey City Library. So the library and the museum were interconnected. And then in the 1970s, the director and some of the curators that followed after that director, really pushed the museum to collect and exhibit contemporary art.

And they did some wonderful programs with local artists, they were very early doing workshops with artists and school children, and they really pushed the envelope. And the Jersey City Museum became

PRESENTED BY





JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



known for being a place for contemporary art. It was a very, I think, locally admired place. I remember going many times to see fantastic exhibitions at the Jersey City Museum.

MO:

Oh, wow.

DG:

Yeah. You know, sadly, the museum had to close. It's a shame because, you know, Jersey City has one of the highest number of artists per capita in any city in the United States. And now, of course, you have Mana and you have a group of galleries in Jersey City, and there's quite a lot of artists and artistic activity in Jersey City.

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

DG:

So our show really is called "American Stories," and it's meant to kind of broaden and expand the way we think about American art. So a lot of the works in the exhibition are works by immigrant artists or Latino/Latina artists. There's quite a few works by African-American artists. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is a Native American contemporary artist.

New Jersey is one of the most diverse states in the union, it's also one of the best-educated states in the union, so, you know, we have a lot of very smart, very talented, very interesting artists making work that reflects the place that they work in, live in... So immigration, gentrification, the ups and downs of city life – all of those are part of the exhibition stories that we're trying to tell.

MO:

The Zimmerli is, of course, an art museum, but if you're looking at these works as primary sources of the moments that they were created, they really do sort of round out a historical telling of Jersey City and of Jersey in general, right?

DG:

Yes. And that's where we're kind of thinking of the Jersey City collection as a sort of microcosm that really talks about all of the cities in the state, and truthfully, the cities across the country.

MO:

Sure.

DG:

PRESENTED BY





JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



But, you know, artists tell these stories with a lot of very personal details. And I think that's one of the things that makes an artist telling the story different from a historian telling the story, if you know what I mean. There's a lot of personal connection. And you know, personal connection in this world where everything is very divided is very important to remind us all that, yes, we're all in this together... We can all sympathize with each other and understand each other in this way.

MO:

Sure.

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

MO:

Let's go over some of the pieces that you sent because they're really stunning, they're all super different, and tell me a little bit about these artists who are going to be featured in this first show of the Jersey City Museum Collection.

DG:

I wish that I had a photograph to share with you of Sheila Pepe's "Tunnel." So this is a particular work that was given to the Jersey City Museum in 2005 and was on view in the art museum in Jersey City. It is an installation, it was packed up and put away, and it hasn't really been seen since 2005, so we're very excited. In fact, Sheila Pepe is coming today to install – to finish installing the work. Maybe I can send you a photograph later.

MO:

Yeah, please do. We'll throw it up on the website if we can.

DG:

It's called "The Tunnel," and it really relates to the fact that she—she's Italian, which you can probably tell by her name, and her grandparents and great-uncles and relatives were immigrants to the city of New York. And they were involved in digging tunnels. Right? So the tunnel system, which connects New Jersey and New York, right, is used by hundreds of people. The Lincoln Tunnel, the Holland Tunnel, right? And so those tunnels were built by immigrant labor and are really one of the things that makes it possible for New Jersey and New York to be such tight and close neighbors.

MO:

I'm sure it goes without saying, but obviously incredibly dangerous work at the time.

PRESENTED BY





JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



DG:

Right.

We have a wonderful work in the show by May Stevens, who is a feminist artist who is really known for her work in the 1970s and on. The piece that we have is called "Big Daddy Draped," and it's, you know, it's a great sort of poking fun at the materialistic and paternalistic military culture. And she was very much against the United States being involved in the Vietnam War, and this particular piece is really a kind of an exposé of the type of character that was in favor of the war, of sending young American soldiers over there to be killed, and to fight against the North Vietnamese army.

So it's a great piece, and it's very large, so it will be a big presence in the gallery, and it's painted in red, white and blue, so it's very much a sort of American theme. So that starts us off early with thinking about art and politics, and artists' visions of their responsibility to the world and their need to sort of speak up for their own beliefs.

MO:

Listeners should go take a look online. It is [laughs] I don't even know how to describe it. But there is an American flag draped over a somewhat self-satisfied older man with a helmet and I think it's a bulldog sitting on him? Who just looks very content.

DG:

Yeah. It's a great image.

There's a wonderful sculpture by Chakaia Booker, which is called "Mother and Child." We have several of Chakaia Booker's prints, but we did not have any of her sculpture. Like she's really known for working with rubber tires and creating these incredible sculptures by twisting, and turning and cutting, you know, old rubber tires...

MO:

Wow.

DG:

...And creating these really beautiful things. Um, but this work is a very interesting work because it's early in her career, and it's really an assemblage, so, um, almost a three-dimensional collage of, you know, sort of old boxes, and chair and Coca-Cola crates, I guess, is how we would describe it. Right.

And she talks about this as having been inspired by a subway poster that she saw in the New York subway that was, um, really sort of calling attention to, you know, the need for mothers to take care

PRESENTED BY





JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



when they were pushing their strollers over the, you know, the, the gap between the platform and the train. But one of the things she noticed was, you know, that the poster didn't really represent what it's really like to be an urban mother in New York with a baby in a stroller, and all the groceries that you're taking, and your purse, and whatever other bags you have, right? So this is really a representation of the balancing act and the weight, you know, and really the burdens of an urban mother trying to navigate a system that is not built for ease of transport of children.

MO:

As a mother in a city, I feel this image now that you explain the idea behind it. My arms are tired. That's great.

And tell me about this image, which is also the cover image for the webpage on this exhibit.

DG:

It is called "Lotto", and it's by Luis Cruz Azaceta, and it's a print. It is something that, to us, spoke about the American dream, right? There's so many—people come to America hoping for a better life, hoping to, you know, create more opportunities for themselves and their children. But in fact, um, not every immigrant is successful in America, right? So it is something of a lottery game. You come, you do your best, but, um, it's not guaranteed. I mean, the myth is that if you work hard, you'll make it in America, but as we all know, the game is somewhat rigged and not everyone makes it, and there are people who have more advantageous connections, abilities, and so that makes it an unequal playing field.

And that's something that I think this print kind of talks about. And, you know, it's a numbers game in a way. All those numbers all around that car, right? It's, you know—how many of us do buy lottery tickets, hoping that we are going to hit the lucky number?

MO:

And it looks like inside the car there's this bucolic, suburban imagery of rolling hills and beautiful houses. Is that the idea that you, you make it and maybe you move out of the city and you get a house?

DG:

Yeah, I think that for many that is the American dream. I think that—I think that for many, that is the American dream, right? A house in the suburbs in a sort of safe neighborhood with nature around you and, um, both privacy and, you know, the ability to live, you know, the life that you, that you choose.

["A Little Wiggle" MUSIC]

MO:

PRESENTED BY







JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



I feel like we would be remiss talking about Jersey City without talking about the big headline around Jersey City right now. And I'm just going to read *The New York Times* headline to you: "Which city is most expensive for renters? You might be surprised. With a spate of new luxury developments luring tenants from across the Hudson River, Jersey City has made itself the priciest city in the nation." This feels so timely to me that this exhibit will be going up early September, and this is the news around Jersey City right now. Do you think that they sort of work in conversation in a way?

DG:

I think that that is an astounding headline. I was shocked to read that because I had no idea. I mean, I knew that Jersey City was becoming more and more expensive because I have friends who live in Jersey City, and they've--they often talk about the changes in the city. But it's happening very quickly now. It is an important kind of coda to the show that we're planning because, again, it's the life and death and rebirth of cities, right?

Cities change constantly, and it is often the case that a city that is a comfortable place for people without a great deal of money to spend, and they make lives there, and then suddenly, you know, someone else sees it as being a real estate opportunity, right? And before you know it, more and more people are interested in moving into the city that you call home. And with that comes increased rents, and new buildings and gentrification and all of those things, right, that we've seen happen over and over and over again.

Like on the one hand, I guess it's--there's a lot of positive things for Jersey City becoming such a, um, well-regarded city that so many people want to live there, but you know, at what cost to the current population? I think that's always the thing that we should keep in mind.

MO:

Sure. Well, I really look forward to seeing the show. We're going to have the pieces that we spoke about on the JerseyArts.com website, so people could check it out. And Donna, thank you so much for your time.

DG:

It was a pleasure, Maddie. Thank you so much.

MADDIE ORTON (VOICEOVER):

In addition to "American Stories, two other exhibits featuring older Jersey City-related works will be running concurrently at the Zimmerli: "Beauty Among the Ordinary Things: The Photographs of William Armbruster" and "Picturing Jersey City: Nineteenth-Century Views by August Will."

PRESENTED BY







JERSEYARTS.COM  
**Features**



For more information on “American Stories: Gifts from the Jersey City Museum Collection,” visit: [Zimmerli.Rutgers.Edu](http://Zimmerli.Rutgers.Edu).

If you liked this episode, be sure to give us a review, subscribe and tell your friends.

A transcript of this podcast, as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on [JerseyArts.com](http://JerseyArts.com).

The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey: Advancing a state of creativity since 1986.

The show was co-founded by, and currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on Arts, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This episode was hosted, produced and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive Producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. Special thanks to Donna Gustafson and the Zimmerli Art Museum.

I’m Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

PRESENTED BY

