

# Ogunquit Museum opening up its view and its doors wider this season

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By Eric Russell

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Amanda Lahikainen was hired as executive director of the Ogunquit Museum of American Art in 2020. The museum is undergoing renovations and, with a new director and curator along with a new gift, the museum is poised for growth as it rebounds from the pandemic. The museum opens for the season on May 1. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

Few museums anywhere in the country can match the view seen from the Ogunquit Museum of American Art.

## IF YOU GO

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**WHAT:** Ogunquit Museum of American Art

**WHERE:** 543 Shore Road, Ogunquit; 207-646-4909, [ogunquitmuseum.org](http://ogunquitmuseum.org)

**WHEN:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, May 1 through Oct. 31

**ADMISSION:** \$12, \$10 students and seniors, free for members and children

Just steps from its back door is Narrow Cove, which spills into the larger Perkins Cove, long a source of inspiration for artists who flocked to this seaside community in York County. One of them – Maine painter Henry Strater – founded the museum in 1953, nearly 35 years after he first visited what was then a budding artist colony to study at Hamilton Easter Field's Summer School of Graphic Arts.

The panorama typifies the state's beauty, yet for decades, the museum's architecture has partially obstructed the view.

Not for much longer.

This spring, sometime after the museum's May 1 opening, a massive plate glass window will be installed to replace the existing wall, which has a series of vertical and horizontal beams cutting through the panes. Visitors who enter through the front door will immediately be greeted by the ocean, along with a fine collection of American artwork.

The \$1 million renovation is the first phase of the Ogunquit museum's Window to the Future campaign, the vision of Executive Director Amanda Lahikainen, who was hired in May 2020.

The window is literal, of course, but it also serves as a metaphor for where she and others want to take the museum into the future. In addition to the new window, a vestibule has been built that allows visitors to exit into a sculpture gallery in the rear, without moist air getting anywhere near the galleries.

Once the much-needed physical improvements are completed, the focus will shift. Lahikainen envisions an expansion that could include more space for an expanding staff, a community room for events, even another gallery. She also wants to rebuild the museum's educational outreach, which has been limited during the pandemic, and has begun thinking about a multiyear plan for new exhibits with new associate curator Devon Zimmerman, who was hired just last month. She has even floated the possibility that the museum could stay open year-round, rather than just during the tourist-heavy summer months.

"We want people to think of this as their museum, but there has to be a way to improve what we have," said Lahikainen, who is the first woman to lead the museum. "OMAA is a small museum. That's part of our identity. We don't want to turn this place into something it's not."



An untitled Winslow Homer drawing, circa 1890s, was recently gifted to the Ogunquit Museum of American Art. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

The museum also got a major and unexpected gift this spring that is sure to generate some interest: A seascape drawing from famed late 19th century artist Winslow Homer, who spent his later years just up the coast from Ogunquit in Prouts Neck. The gift came from Helen Horn, a local artist and early museum board member whose family has held the piece for more than 70 years.

Carol Leary, the board's president, said she can't remember a time when there has been this much excitement around the museum.

"One thing that is very special and what attracted us, (Ogunquit) is a small residential community during winter and then it starts to burst with energy in the summer," she said. "I don't think there is a museum like it. We travel the world and have been to many, but this is special."



## MAKING CHANGES

Lahikainen was hired in the early months of the pandemic, when the state and much of the world was shut down. She came from Michigan but originally is from Massachusetts and has deep ties to New England. She and her husband own a summer home in Lamoine in Hancock County.

Since the museum's opening was pushed back two months that year, and attendance was lower when the doors did finally open, the new director had more time to think about how she wanted to lead the museum.

"It was a very odd time to start a job," Lahikainen said.

She didn't start small.

The first thing that required her attention was the building itself. Because the rear doors opened directly to the outside, there was no easy way to control temperature or humidity. That's not something to play around with given what's hanging on the walls, she said.

The Smithsonian wouldn't allow a traveling exhibit to visit Ogunquit because it didn't pass its facilities test.



The Ogunquit Museum of American Art sits on three acres that overlook the ocean, with sculptures and gardens throughout the grounds. Ongoing renovations will improve access to all of it. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

It wasn't just the building that needed work, though.

Lahikainen said she got the sense that the small staff there wasn't supported either. She wanted to change that.

“We now offer them all health insurances and IRAs,” she said. “I was sort of expecting major resistance at the board meeting, but it passed unanimously. Everyone was behind these changes.”

Leary explained that one of the reasons the board hired Lahikainen was to bring about change.

“The beauty of Amanda and her leadership is that what she has planned is multi-phased,” she said. “She recognizes you can’t do everything you want to do all at once, but she’s keeping things exciting for us.”

Hiring Zimmerman as associate curator last month is a good example. He comes to Maine from Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum but also held positions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His experience in modern and contemporary art fits in with Lahikainen’s vision.

Zimmerman, who earned his undergraduate degree at Boston College and whose wife’s family is from Massachusetts, said one of the biggest draws for him in taking the job was the museum’s sense of community.

“Take for example Helen Horn’s gift,” he said. “That could have gone anywhere, but she felt strongly that this is where it should be. There are so many people who are so passionate about OMAA and so supportive. It’s a magnificent group.”

As for the museum itself, Zimmerman said: “Where do you find an institution that has a core collection of early 20th century modern American giants on a gorgeous property?”

Horn’s history with the museum dates back to the early 1960s. She was president of the Barn Gallery, home of the Ogunquit Art Association, which was formed by a group of professional artists to exhibit their work and provide educational opportunities. It’s still active today.

“I was new to Ogunquit and could not have found a more welcoming home,” Horn said. “Like many artists there, I was a teacher and had summers off. Back then, artists could afford to live in Ogunquit and had their studios everywhere.”

Strater invited her to join his board.

As for the gift, Horn said it was obvious to her that Ogunquit would be the perfect home.

“My husband and I could not think of a more fitting institution for it,” she said. “Though rather tiny, it can hold its own on any wall.”

## **IMPROVING ACCESS**

The museum houses a permanent collection of about 3,000 paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints and photographs, from the late 1800s to the present, and also showcases modern and contemporary American art by mounting seasonal exhibits.

The collection includes work from artists who were part of the town's storied arts colony, including Hamilton Easter Field, Charles Woodbury and others.

"Maine has an outsized role in modern art," Lahikainen explained. "And we want the story of the Ogunquit art colony to be told."

But it also has pieces from seminal American artists like Rockwell Kent, Edward Hopper, Augustus Saint-Gaudens and more.

Zimmerman will be tasked, in part, with making the collection more accessible and better understood.

"Part of it comes down to knowing and understanding the identity of the institution," he said. "We can and will push for more exciting and different exhibitions, while always keeping in mind the history and the core of collections. There's always a balance."

After a limited 2020 season, the Ogunquit museum welcomed 17,000 visitors last year. That was down slightly from about 20,000 in 2019, but Lahikainen said she believes the improvements will help bring attendance back to pre-pandemic numbers, and even exceed them.

Lahikainen also recently hired a director of institutional advancement and wants to bring on an education director as well. The museum's annual budget of about \$1 million may need to increase in order to meet all of her goals.

But the education piece is vital, she said. She recently launched an adopt-a-school program, with Biddeford Primary School as the first partner, that provides students a hands-on museum experience.

"COVID ruined everything when it came to education. We need to think about ways to bring them back," she said.

In fact, using the museum to host students in the off-season is one idea she's contemplated.



Lahikainen stands among the Ogunquit Museum of American Art's impressive collection. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

The museum hosts two major events, a garden party in June and a gala and auction in September that serve as fundraisers. Museum leaders hope the recent renovations and the timely gift from Helen Horn will offer evidence that Ogunquit is worthy of major philanthropy.

"To get a Homer, you have to have someone who says this museum is worthy of our donation. That was major to the museum," said Leary, the board president.

For Lahikainen, she can't wait to open the doors to the public next month. Though she's only been at the museum two years, she already has a sense of its place in the community, among locals and visitors alike.

"People come back to Maine. Even if they have left. It's a place to come back to. And that's true of Ogunquit," she said. "I know how much people care about this place."

Even if the new window wall isn't installed yet, patrons will be able to sense that change is coming. And perhaps by next year, when the museum turns 70, even more will be underway.

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## ON VIEW

A look at the exhibits that will be offered during the 2022 season at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art, which runs from May 1 to Oct. 31.

**May 1 through July 19, "Josephine Halvorson: On the Ground"**



This exhibit features paintings by Halvorson, a 41-year-old contemporary artist from Massachusetts who focuses on capturing scenes from the natural world. Each piece will consist of two components: a central panel depicting a patch of ground seen from above and a frame that incorporates materials from the site where the interior painting was made.

### **May 1 through July 19, “Philip Koch: Isle of Dreams”**

Koch is a New York painter in the mold of early modern American artists like Winslow Homer and Edward Hopper and, in fact, has completed many residencies in Hopper’s studio on Cape Cod. This exhibit will feature a selection of his recent work that highlights the island as subject and symbol and includes depictions of Maine locations, including Isle au Haut and Ogunquit.

### **Aug. 1 through Oct. 31, “Sue Miller: Personal Voyage”**

The New York City native and abstract artist’s work has been exhibited in galleries there and in Boston, but she’s also been featured in solo exhibitions. Miller’s paintings are often heavily textured and rely on a rich color palette.

### **Aug. 1 through Oct. 31, “John Walker: From Low Tide to High Tide”**

Walker, an Englishman now living in South Bristol who turns 83 this year, has been a well-known and prolific abstract artist for more than 50 years. His work is featured in the collections of museums across the country, including at the Portland Museum of Art and the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland.

*Additionally, six exhibitions will be open for the entire season:*

### **“Jim Morin: Drawing and Painting”**

Morin was a syndicated editorial cartoonist for the Miami Herald for more than 40 years and has won journalism’s highest honor, the Pulitzer Prize, on two occasions. He’s also a longtime oil painter, who now lives and works in Ogunquit. This exhibit will feature a selection of drawings and paintings that spotlight the environment and landscape.

### **“Virginia Overton: Untitled (Cardinal C-80)”**

The museum will present a steel-and-marble sculpture from Overton, a Tennessee native. The steel was originally from a forklift glass carrier that the artist found discarded in Toronto. The pieces of white marble used in the piece were salvaged as well.

### **“The View from Narrow Cove”**

This exhibit will showcase work in the museum’s permanent collection from many artists who have found inspiration along the town’s picturesque coastline, including Charles Woodbury, Hamilton Easter Field, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Rudolph Dirks and others. Selections range from

the late 19th century to the present.

### **“I’ll Bring the Luck with Me: Hunting and Fishing with Henry Strater”**

Strater, a painter who founded the Ogunquit museum in 1953 after coming to the town to learn many years earlier, was an avid sportsman. This exhibit will feature paintings, historic photographs and personal memorabilia that examine the connection between his painting and his love of all things outdoors.

### **“Robert Laurent: Open Studio”**

This exhibit will recreate the late artist’s studio in nearby Cape Neddick with drawings, paintings and sculpture that document his role in the Ogunquit artist colonies. Laurent was a contemporary of Field in the early 20th century. The two built a studio together and co-founded the Ogunquit Summer School of Graphic Arts, where Laurent taught sculpture and wood carving for 50 years.

### **“Hopeful: A Project by Charlie Hewitt”**

The Lewiston artist has become well known after his commissioned work to create public art in Woodfords Corner, a busy Portland intersection. The result was a colorful and bright sign, lit with marquee lights and featuring a bold and simple message, “Hopeful.” Hewitt has shown more hopeful signs in Bangor, Brunswick and other cities and towns.

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