DIRECTOR'S LEGACY

Larry Wheeler at the NCMA, 1994–2018



North Carolina Museum of Art

DIRECTOR'S LEGACY: LARRY WHEELER AT THE NCMA, 1994–2018

A tribute to 24 years of service to the people of North Carolina

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COVER AND RIGHT: Photos by Art Howard

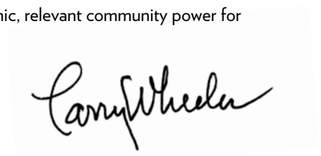


FROM THE DIRECTOR

An active belief in the power of community has been central to my career in public service. Hired in 1974 as the director of community programs in North Carolina for the U.S. Bicentennial, I traveled to all 100 counties facilitating community conversations about big projects they could create to strengthen them for the future. When I was appointed deputy secretary of the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources in 1977, my challenge was to help enrich the lives of our citizens with libraries, historical sites, and the arts. In 1985 I was off to Cleveland, where for nine years I energetically extended the abundant resources of that great art museum. In each of these cases, the hallmarks were liveliness, broad community engagement, and sincere appreciation by diverse peoples for being included in these far-reaching endeavors.

Returning to North Carolina as director of the NCMA, I had a clear mission—to honor the people who owned this incredible arts destination and resource. We designed programs and exhibitions that intrigued and excited visitors from all over the state. We added great works of art of international stature to a collection already internationally renowned. We built programs around film and the performing arts. We organically grew a park where nature and art partner to transform lives. We built a dramatic new building to house our art treasure and animated the older building with exhibitions and learning activities. We have become a campus of extraordinary experiences based in art.

But it is the love we receive from our ever-expanding community—and the love we return to you through the excellence of what we do—that assures the NCMA will remain a dynamic, relevant community power for all time.





LEFT: **Mickalene Thomas**, ***Three Graces: Les Trois Femmes Noires***, 2011, rhinestones, acrylic paint, and oil enamel on wood panel, 108 × 144 in., Purchased with funds from the North Carolina State Art Society (Robert F. Phifer Bequest)

TOP RIGHT: **Ellsworth Kelly**, ***Blue Panel***, 1980, oil on canvas, 109½ × 95 in., Gift of Mary and Jim Patton in honor of Lawrence J. Wheeler

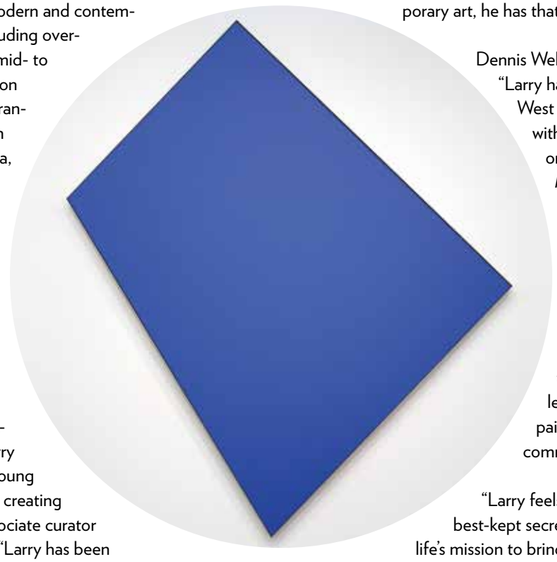
BOTTOM RIGHT: Egyptian, ***False Door of Ni-ankh-Snefru (Called Fefi)***, circa 2321–2278 B.C.E., white limestone with traces of paint, H. 63½ × W. 44½ × D. 4½ in., Purchased with funds from the North Carolina State Art Society (Robert F. Phifer Bequest) and funds from the bequest of Elsie M. Kramer, the bequest of W. R. Valentiner, and Mrs. William Gage Brady, by exchange

WORLD-CLASS ACQUISITIONS, EXEMPLARY EXHIBITIONS

"Larry Wheeler was the first NCMA director to fully embrace the art of our own time," says John Coffey, curator of American and modern art and deputy director for collections and research. "His commitment to contemporary art in all its myriad expressions is absolute."

When Wheeler came to the NCMA in 1994, one of his first orders of business was to acquire a major work of art for the Museum by a major contemporary artist. That work was Anselm Kiefer's monumental *Untitled* (1980–86), an apocalyptic triptych that acknowledges the horrors of World War II. Since then he has worked diligently to bring the art of a diverse range of modern and contemporary artists into the collection, including overseeing a gift of works by masters of mid- to late-20th-century American art: Milton Avery, Richard Diebenkorn, Helen Frankenthaler, Adolph Gottlieb, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Motherwell, Frank Stella, and many others.

In addition to championing acquisitions by young contemporary artists with national reputations like Kehinde Wiley and Mickalene Thomas, Wheeler has also committed himself to searching out homegrown talent. "More than any other museum director I've known," says chief curator and curator of contemporary art Linda Dougherty, "Larry has gone out of his way to support young and emerging artists." "He's all about creating a bridge to the community," says associate curator of contemporary art Jennifer Dasal. "Larry has been so supportive of free openings for our free exhibitions of North Carolina artists. We bring artists to these openings so that visitors can actually engage with people who are making art right now. I'd say accessibility is very important to Larry."





While Wheeler has sought to strengthen the NCMA's contemporary photography collection and helped acquire its first work of video art, *The Quintet of Rembrance* (2000), he has also looked out for the quality of the collection as a whole, which represents over 5,000 years of artistic culture worldwide. "Larry was very supportive when we acquired a significant piece for the Egyptian collection, Fefi's False Door, which provides terrific context for so many of the objects we already had," says curator of ancient art Caroline Rocheleau. "Even though a very good deal, it required a significant amount of money from the art acquisitions endowment fund. He knew how important it was, 'a must have,' in Larry's words. Though his specialty is modern and contemporary art, he has that kind of dedication to our collections at large."

Dennis Weller, curator of Northern European art, adds, "Larry has been very supportive of the *kunstkamer* in West Building and maintained a strong relationship with the Kress Foundation, which funded it. We're one of the few American art museums to have a *kunstkamer*—an 'art room' that was the prototype for what we now call a museum—which allows us to put art in context."

A collection of this magnitude requires a team of dedicated experts who maintain these priceless works of art. Says Weller, "Larry has been supportive of our Conservation Lab and the care of the state's art collection; the sheer volume of full treatments—31 paintings in my area, for instance—shows a commitment to North Carolina's art treasures."

"Larry feels the Museum's collection is one of the south's best-kept secrets," says Dougherty, "and he has made it his life's mission to bring it to the world and to get people outside the region to come to the NCMA."

A PASSION FOR RODIN

For years Wheeler also dedicated himself to securing a gift of 29 Rodin sculptures from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, sealing the deal in 2009 and making the NCMA the largest repository of Rodin's work in the American South. The substantial gift included seminal sculptures—such as *The Kiss* and *Fallen Caryatid with a Stone* (1881–82)—in addition to one of Wheeler's favorite Rodin masterpieces, *The Three Shades* (circa 1886), which graces the lily pond in West Building's Rodin Garden.

To build enthusiasm for bringing such an important collection of Rodins to Raleigh, Wheeler capitalized on the enormous popularity of the NCMA's Rodin exhibition in 1999. Over 300,000 visitors attended the show, to date the most widely attended exhibition in NCMA history.

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A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

1943 — **Born Lawrence J. Wheeler in Lakeland, Florida.**



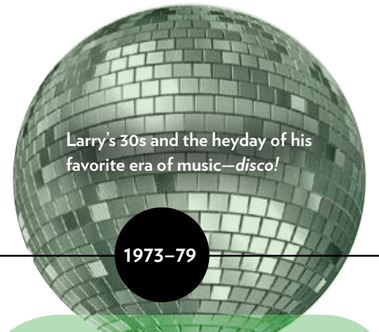


1961 — Arrives in North Carolina to attend Pfeiffer College, a Methodist school near Charlotte, where he later taught European history in the '70s.

1972 — **Earns a Ph.D. in European history from the University of Georgia.**



1973–79 — **Larry's 30s and the heyday of his favorite era of music—*disco!***



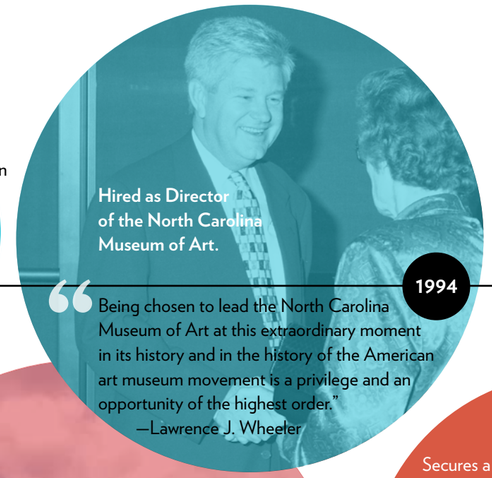
SOME OF HIS FAVORITE TRACKS:
Alicia Bridges, "I Love the Nightlife"
Thelma Houston, "Don't Leave Me This Way"
Sylvester, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)"
Donna Summer, "Last Dance"

1974 — Hired by the North Carolina Bicentennial Commission, created within the Division of Archives and History of the Department of Cultural Resources, to aid in planning the nation's 200th anniversary celebration.

1977–85 — Serves as deputy secretary of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

1985–93 — Serves as director of development and assistant director at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

1994 — **Hired as Director of the North Carolina Museum of Art.**



"Being chosen to lead the North Carolina Museum of Art at this extraordinary moment in its history and in the history of the American art museum movement is a privilege and an opportunity of the highest order."
—Lawrence J. Wheeler

"The people of North Carolina deserve a museum that is, in all its expressions, equal to its great collections." —LJW

1994 — Heads to New York to add his first acquisition as Museum director—an untitled triptych by contemporary German artist Anselm Kiefer.

1996 — The Museum receives its **five millionth visitor** since opening in 1956.

Summer 1996 — **The first events are presented in the Joseph M. Bryan, Jr. Theater, which will go on to host performers Wilco, Sheryl Crow, Tift Merritt, and many more.**



1996 — Launches the first NCMA website, pre-Google!

1999 — Hosts the Rodin exhibition, topping previous exhibition attendance records with more than 300,000 visitors.

2000 — Named Tar Heel of the Year by the Raleigh *News & Observer*, which called him "the godfather of the Triangle's cultural boom" and cited his skill at melding "arts, politics, and commerce into a powerful new cultural force."

2001 — In recognition for significant contributions to the arts, France decorates Wheeler as a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters.

2006 — **Secures the donation of an exciting collection of Rodin sculptures from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, making the NCMA the repository of the most extensive Rodin collection between Philadelphia and the West Coast.**

2010 — Celebrates grand opening of the newly constructed West Building, the central piece to a three-year expansion plan, designed by New York City–based Thomas Phifer and Partners. It was awarded a 2011 American Institute of Architects (AIA) Honor Award, the AIA's highest recognition for building design.

2014 — Secures a major gift of works by masters of mid- to late-20th-century American art from the private collection of Jim and Mary Patton. Continues to build community of contemporary art collectors, leading to the donation of 100 works to celebrate his 20th year as director. Donated during Wheeler's tenure: over 800 works of art.

"Gazing at the piles of dirt, I can envision the spectacular new building amid the lush landscaping, the coalescing of art and nature that will make our Museum renowned as a preeminent venue for art in this country and a source of pride for North Carolinians everywhere." —LJW

2014 — Celebrates 20th year as director of the North Carolina Museum of Art.

2015 — The *New York Times* publishes an article about the Museum Park transformation: "Officials hope to expand the idea and purpose of their museum at a time when cultural institutions around the world are foraging for ways to connect not just with a core audience but the general public."

2016 — **Redeveloped Ann and Jim Goodnight Museum Park entrance reopens with the goal of helping distinguish the NCMA as a regional cultural destination for engaging with art and nature.**



2017 — The Joseph M. Bryan, Jr., Museum Park Amphitheater kicks off its 20th anniversary concert series with shows by Rhiannon Giddens, Mandolin Orange, Jason Isbell, and more, breaking previous concert attendance records.

2017 — Inducted into the Raleigh Hall of Fame.

2017 — Announces plans to retire in 2018.

2018 — **Builds the contemporary photography collection from 22 works when he arrived at the NCMA to nearly 600 photographs, including significant works by Alec Soth, Hank Willis Thomas, and Zanele Muholi.**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

BLOCKBUSTER ATTENDANCE

"The key to his success?" asks curator of European art David Steel. "He's practical and very strategic."

From the start Larry enthusiastically campaigned for the Rodin project. "All he asked was to make the Rodin exhibition, which included 60-plus works from the Cantor Foundation, 'the best Rodin show ever,'" says Steel, "and he didn't flinch when we borrowed an additional 60 works, including several from Europe." With over 120 sculptures by one of the greatest interpreters of the human form, the Rodin exhibition drew visitors from all over the country.

That show marked the beginning of Wheeler's warm, personal relationship with benefactor Iris Cantor, which eventually led to the donation of 29 Rodin sculptures from the Cantor Foundation, an enormous gift that "helped Larry make a convincing case for our need for West Building, a place to house our growing collection," says Steel.

Blockbuster exhibitions with popular appeal became a signature of Wheeler's 24-year tenure at the NCMA. Under his leadership the Museum presented *Matisse, Picasso, and the School of Paris*; *Norman Rockwell*; *Rembrandt in America*; *The Worlds of M. C. Escher*; and the huge hit *Monet in Normandy*. "For the Monet exhbition," says Steel, "we started with the concept of a small-focus show of about 15 paintings, and Larry said we've got to go for more, to make the show great. He kept pushing, and we ultimately ended up with 50—quite a feat for a museum of our size and means."

"Larry Wheeler has a vast, big-picture view," says Dasal, "always encouraging the Museum to think bigger, think better." He demanded the utmost from his talented staff, says Steel, "and he got it."





ABOVE: Larry Wheeler with *Untitled* by contemporary German artist Anselm Kiefer

RIGHT: **Auguste Rodin**, ***The Three Shades***, modeled circa 1886, enlarged circa 1901, Musée Rodin cast 1981, bronze, H. 75½ × W. 75½ × D. 42 in., Gift of the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation in honor of Lawrence J. Wheeler



You Are Here: Light, Color, and Sound Experiences

It is fitting that one of the last contemporary shows the NCMA presents under Wheeler's direction is its very first interactive exhibition, *You Are Here*, opening April 7 and running through July 22. It offers immersive adventures in art, presenting high- and low-tech installations by pioneering artists who invite visitors to break out of their passive roles as mere viewers and become part of the artwork itself. From May 17 to 26, a special "light graffiti" project developed by Austria-based artist collective OMAi allows visitors to draw and animate their own outdoor works of art projected onto Museum structures. See the enclosed *Preview* calendar for details, or learn more at ncartmuseum.org/here.

TRANSFORMING THE MUSEUM'S CAMPUS TO SERVE ART, NATURE, AND PEOPLE

"Art should connect you with nature at every point. It should not be a policed experience."

Speaking at the 2017 Hopscotch Design Festival, an annual gathering of international creatives in Raleigh, Director Wheeler articulated his vision for museums of the future—one that blurs the line between indoors and outdoors, and allows visitors to dictate their experience in gathering spaces designed for a broad, diversified community.

Wheeler has been working toward that vision for more than two decades, his efforts culminating in an ambitious Park expansion over the past two years. In 2015 he spoke to the *New York Times* about how the NCMA is intentionally pushing traditional museum boundaries by reimagining its outdoor spaces. "We are dead set against overpopulating this area with works of art," said Wheeler. "We are not trying to create a sculpture garden but a unifying idea of what people perceive as a museum and what they perceive as a park."

Now, on the eve of Wheeler's retirement, the Ann and Jim Goodnight Museum Park is more integrated with the Museum's mission than ever before. New features include a promenade connecting the Park and galleries, contemporary wave and parterre gardens, tree-lined parking, and the Ellipse—a spectacular lawn overlooking the Park's rolling meadows. The Museum has installed significant sculptures by Mark di Suvero and Hank Willis Thomas, with works by other important contemporary artists to follow. All of these additions serve to connect the Museum and Park as one memorable destination, with works of art and elements of design integrated into thoughtfully crafted experiences.

Wheeler's vision of this multipurpose campus was fully realized at the November 2016 community celebration of the expansion. The new outdoor spaces hosted a popular installation of artist Amanda Parer's *Intrude*, featuring a collection of giant, inflatable, glow-in-the-dark bunnies that drew more than 25,000 people over 11 days. The exhibition peaked with a daylong Park celebration on November 11 that welcomed more than 10,000 people to the grounds, breaking the Museum's single-day attendance records.

All of these changes stand in stark contrast to the land's original roots. The tract served as a Civil War training site and later the site of Polk Youth Prison for juvenile offenders. The youth prison was relocated, and only a smokestack remains as a reminder. Now, thanks to Wheeler's vision, it is a regional cultural destination with beautifully designed entries and endless possibilities to explore and engage with art in nature.

A YEAR IN THE PARK

"Art can become a portal on the landscape," says Wheeler. And no matter the season, the landscape offers a variety of experiences.

SPRING

In the spring the grounds burst with color. Lush sculpture gardens, designed by Lappas + Havener, unite stirring landscape design and sustainable environmental standards. Three reflecting ponds filled with water lilies and lotus plants accent the outdoor gathering spaces, and bulbs in the wave and discovery gardens send up colorful blooms.

SUMMER

During the year's longest days, the Museum's summer performing arts series heats up. It celebrated 20 years with its record-breaking 2017 season, hosting everyone from rockers and folk legends like Wilco and Joan Baez to pop trailblazers and local favorites like Sheryl Crow and Tift Merritt. Soon after he started at the NCMA, Wheeler hired Director of Performing Arts George Holt, who has managed the series during its entire run.

FALL

In the autumn the NCMA is a community hotspot, hosting fun outdoor celebrations like HOOPLA parties, themed festivals inspired by the permanent collection, and an array of events that encourage visitors of all ages to treat themselves to a creative escape.

WINTER

Even in colder months, the Park teems with activity, as museum-goers, bikers, and joggers enjoy exploring the various paths and wooded trails that wind through one of the largest properties—164 acres—belonging to an American art museum.



With generous support from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, the Museum's retention pond controls and cleans storm water before it enters North Carolina's streams and rivers. The pond renovation is part of a comprehensive storm water management initiative for the Museum campus, which also includes a 90,000-gallon underground water storage cistern, rain gardens, and drought-tolerant plantings and fescue lawn.



ARTFUL MISSION ACCOMPLISHED: WEST BUILDING

Under Director Wheeler's guidance, the NCMA has more than doubled in physical size. It was due to his creative, forceful leadership that the new, modern West Building came to be. Finished in 2010 after more than a decade of planning, West Building gave the NCMA's expanding art collection a fresh, modern home in a radical departure from the look and feel of East Building.

Dan Gottlieb, director of planning, design, and the Museum Park, says "Larry was always clear he wanted to do something 'Next' in a new building—capital *N* Next. A Next-generation museum campus, Next-generation architecture, and Next-generation art engagement."

The building was not going to be your grandmother's museum, or even necessarily a typical contemporary museum; rather, it would use innovative architecture as a powerful tool to engender close encounters with the art collection. Built on just one level with an open plan, West Building allows visitors to make their own connections between cultures and chronology, encouraging them to circulate freely. It feels intimate and personal.

Larry's perseverance and dedication to the vision of the Museum helped foster support for the new building, whose forward-looking design grew out of a forward-looking philosophy that synchronized the ideas of connecting art and nature. He supported the vision to make a building that reconciled the experience of light and art, traditionally two enemies in the art world, since daylight, if uncontrolled, can damage artworks. Visitors entering the building are immediately embraced by serene light, open spaces, and one of the finest art collections in the world. It is the way light enters West Building—through elegant filters and high-tech coffers—that keeps the art safe, satisfying the most exacting conservation standards.

Designed by Thomas Phifer and Partners with North Carolina–based Surface 678 landscape architects, West Building has won many awards, including prestigious national honor awards for architecture and landscaping. It was also selected by *Architectural Record* as one of the 125 most important buildings completed since the magazine's founding in 1891.

The city of Raleigh and the Triangle area were rapidly growing concurrently with the Museum's development, and the NCMA perfectly reflects the region's expanding cultural scene. "During these past 20 years of growth under Larry's leadership, the Museum matured from adolescence into young adulthood," notes Gottlieb. "When downtown, it was a like toddler. Moving out to Blue Ridge Road brought growing pains while the collection became more established and cohesive. With success, the collection and program outgrew the gallery space, and completing a new building became the priority. With West Building showcasing the permanent collection, we're now a young leader in the museum world," says Gottlieb. "This, I believe, will be Larry's legacy: West Building, and the art inside it, is now a destination for travelers from around the world."

DIRECTOR'S ENDOWMENT

Great institutions are defined by great leadership. As the search for a new director begins, the North Carolina Museum of Art Board of Trustees and the North Carolina Museum of Art Foundation Board are prioritizing fund raising for the Director's Endowment in honor of Larry Wheeler's tenure and in support of the new director.

If you would like to make a contribution to this endowment, please contact:
Director of Development Ellen Stone at estone@ncartmuseum.org or (919) 664-6757.