

ART

Whiteout conditions weren't going to stop **Max Weintraub '93** from supporting his artist friends at the launch of their exhibition at the Allentown Art Museum in February 2015. Then a professor of modern and contemporary art at New York City's Hunter College, he took a bus to the Lehigh Valley as a record-breaking snowstorm pummeled the Northeast.

"I thought this reception was just going to be me and a bunch of food," he remembers. "I was totally wrong."

The masses who braved the elements that evening wowed first-time visitor Weintraub, who recalled the experience five years later when he was asked to join the institution as president and CEO—a position he assumed in November 2020.

"Clearly, the museum had a strong backing from the community it serves, and that was attractive to me," says Weintraub, a seasoned educator and curator who came to Allentown from the Aspen Art Museum in Aspen, Colo., and who previously worked at the Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis as well as New York's Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum of Modern Art.

Leaning out of his office window, Weintraub can glimpse the back of the Miller Symphony Hall, a historic landmark that, along with the museum, helped lure him to Allentown. The cross-country move to a region once devastated by the death of the American steel and cement industries didn't faze him—not even during a pandemic.

"I did my due diligence, and by all metrics, Allentown was on a great trajectory pre-COVID, and that renaissance is continuing now," says Weintraub. "People are moving to live downtown, and we have plenty of restaurants and shops and cultural offerings around us. There aren't many cities this size that have an art museum with a permanent collection as well as a symphony."

The museum, which closed for five months early in the pandemic, had reopened—with reduced capacity and hours—by the time Weintraub took the helm in November. During lockdown, staff shifted programming online and developed new ways to engage audiences through #AAMatHome, offering virtual tours, educational activities, and workshops in everything from embroidery to toymaking to decorative chocolate design.

And even as COVID-19 transmission falls, Weintraub wants the institution's use of technology to climb. Excited about a nascent video art collection, he values "screen time" inside the museum, not just at home. He aims to introduce interactive digital components throughout the permanent collection of more than 19,000 works, which include the library from Frank Lloyd Wright's famed Francis W. Little House and the recently restored *Portrait of a Young Woman* by the Dutch master Rembrandt.

"The 21st century can still appreciate a 17th-century

Rembrandt [painting], but the experience needs to be contemporary," says Weintraub, who studied history at Haverford and has doctoral and master's degrees in art history from Bryn Mawr, plus a master's in medieval European history from North Carolina State University.

New technological features will also make future exhibitions "more dynamic"—although, Weintraub says, they're not short on appeal as is. Current shows, which run through Sept. 12, include *Roots: Sources for American Art and Design*—featuring creations by Plains and Northwest Coast Native Americans, African American artists from Gee's Bend, Ala., and the Shaker religious sect—and *Sleep Tight! Bedcovers and Hangings from Around the World*, a selection of intricate textiles from widely varying cultures.

Amid national conversations about racial and social justice, Weintraub is striving to expand museum access "in all senses of the word," noting that visitors feel unwelcome if they don't see themselves reflected in some measure in the artwork on display.

"We already have diverse representation in our collection, but like all institutions, we can always do better," he says. "We are rethinking our acquisitions to tell more inclusive stories and to be as global as possible in scope. It takes time to shift the center of gravity in a permanent collection, but come hell or high water, we are going to do it."

Weintraub and his colleagues are revising admission policies to ensure that financial barriers don't keep guests from visiting. And this spring, he started a fundraising campaign to establish a paid internship program, which he views as a way to foster equitable access to arts careers. Networks he built during his own internships at the Museum of Modern Art and the Denver Art Museum influence him to this day—and he might have rejected those opportunities if they hadn't come with a paycheck, because, like many students, he needed an income.

"Paid internships transfer dignity and power to the next generation," he says. "Resources shouldn't determine who gets to work here or enjoy our collection. This is the community's collection, not mine. I am simply a steward of it for as long as I have the privilege of being here."

More information: allentownartmuseum.org. —Karen Brooks

