

Brief History of the Museum

Founded in 1936, the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme is a professionally staffed art and history museum that is accredited by the American Association of Museums.

Located in a stately Late Georgian mansion designed by Samuel Belcher and built in 1817, the Museum and its grounds served in the early years of the twentieth century as the center for one of America's most famous art colonies. Scores of American Impressionists and Barbizon-influenced painters, often fresh from their studies in France, came to Old Lyme to paint landscapes of the rural countryside. Miss Florence Griswold transformed her family home into the colony's boarding house. She converted barns and outbuildings into studios for such nationally prominent artists as Childe Hassam, Willard Metcalf and Henry Ward Ranger, and provided a congenial environment where, as one artist put it, "every day is so in line with work." Grateful for her hospitality, these and other artists painted on the walls and doors of the house. This unique collection is preserved within the Florence Griswold House today, making the building itself one of the most important aspects of the collection.



Shortly before Florence Griswold's death in 1937, artists, friends and relatives formed the Florence Griswold Association in order to preserve the house as an art museum and as an outstanding example of early New England architecture. In 1947 the Florence Griswold House opened to the public on a seasonal basis. In 1955 the Association joined with the newly formed Lyme Historical Society, broadening its purpose to include collecting and preserving objects and archives relating to the history of the towns of Lyme and Old Lyme. Volunteers operated the Museum until a professional staff was hired in 1972. A small professional staff and active group of volunteers manage the Museum today. The Museum was first accredited by the AAM in 1978, re-accredited in 1990, and designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993.

Much of the 1990s focused on reacquiring significant portions of the original Griswold estate with an eye to developing a new kind of museum, one that would encompass art, history and nature in a New England village setting. Between 1991 to 1997, the Museum property grew from 2 to 11 acres and culminated in 1997 in the purchase of Marshfield, a large Colonial Revival House and five key acres of riverfront property that represents one of the most significant painting grounds of the American Impressionists. For the first time, the Museum had taken ownership of the site of the original gardens, outbuildings and studios of the Lyme Art Colony.

In recognition of a profound opportunity before them, in 1998 the Museum's Board of Trustees adopted an ambitious three-phase capital improvement plan designed to reunite the site's historic features and extend the Museum's capacity to serve growing audiences. Guided by an archaeological study, the first phase was completed in 1999 with the opening of the Hartman Education Center, an imaginatively reconstructed barn right in the center of the historic site. Phase Two was completed in 2002 with the construction of a new 10,000 square foot art gallery and collections storage facility designed as an addition to Marshfield. The final phase, completed in 2006, returned to the Griswold House itself and made major changes to its interior, restoring the house as an art colony boarding house, circa 1910. The capital development plans were supported by the Museum's Centennial Campaign, a decade-long campaign begun in 1997 that raised over \$18 million in capital and endowment funds.

The purpose of these capital projects was not simply to build new buildings, but to better fulfill the vision of the institution and capitalize on its uniqueness – the integration of art, history and landscape. The Florence Griswold Museum is one of the only places in America where people can walk through a landscape setting, view paintings of those landscapes and experience first-hand where a colony of prominent American artists lived and worked.

Florence Griswold Museum 96 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, CT 06371 | 860-434-5542 | Tuesday - Saturday 10 - 5; Sunday 1 - 5