

# The Malden Public Library's special, significant, & diverse art collection

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January 8, 2026



## ***Exquisite art galleries are free & open to the public***

Did you know that the Malden Public Library owns an impressive and diverse collection of artwork that is housed in five art galleries within the Converse Memorial Building? After local entrepreneur and philanthropist Elisha Converse established a trust for the Library's long-term care and upkeep, his wife Mary Diana set up a separate trust to fund art acquisition for the Library. Since then, the Library's Board of Trustees has worked diligently to uphold Elisha and Mary Diana's vision for the building and art.

## **A history of art acquisition**

The first purchase for the Library's collection was made in 1892, a painting by Malden artist Albion Harris Bicknell titled "Cape Ann Pasture."

While much of the collection would eventually spotlight the great American landscape, a number of important portraits are displayed at the Library as well. One of the Library's most prominent paintings is a full-length portrait of 17-year-old Frank Converse, Elisha and Mary Diana's eldest son, who was tragically killed in a local bank robbery. In fact, the Converse family founded the Library in his honor. Next to Frank's portrait is a painting of his parents, Elisha and Mary. The Converse family portraits were also painted by Albion Bicknell, who was a Converse family favorite artist.

Since 1904, when the Trustees began buying art for the Malden Public Library, they've been responsible for acquiring new works and restoring the art, as needed. In 1912 they brought in an expert — Arthur Pope, a highly-respected color theorist and Harvard University art professor — to assist them in finding and securing pieces for their growing collection. Pope, who served as art consultant to the Library until 1962, selected much of the Library's early artwork, including fine paintings by late 19th-century American artists like Thomas Hill, George Inness and Charles Davis. Artwork purchased on Pope's recommendations included "The Great Oak" by artist Frederic Watts and "In the Garden of Versailles" by Hubert Robert. He also helped the Library acquire Japanese woodcuts by Utamaro, Hokusai and Hiroshige. Not only did Pope consult on art acquisitions, he also gave compelling art presentations at the Library, educating attendees about prints, etchings and mezzotints.

In addition to his work at Harvard University and his 50-year run as an art consultant at the Library, Pope was actively involved with several museums, particularly the Fogg Museum (later the Harvard Art Museums), where he was appointed Director. As a friend of Isabella Stewart Gardner, he served as one of the first Trustees of her new Museum, a role he held for 42 years.

## **The galleries today**

Today, the Library's art collection features many talented artists; some of them have Malden-area connections, such as Perle Fine and George Loring Brown. Other represented artists include George Innes, J. M. W. Turner and

James McNeill Whistler.

"It's a great honor to uphold the Converse family's wishes for a world-class art collection at the Malden Public Library. For more than a century, the Library's Board of Trustees has taken tremendous care and pride in acquiring such an esteemed collection of art, including three stunning pieces by local legend Frank Stella," said Library Board of Trustees President John Tramondozzi, who is also Chair of the Trustees' Art Committee. "We encourage everyone to come see the Library's magnificent art collection, which is truly a treasure for our city."

"The Library's exquisite art collection is special and significant, featuring diverse styles from early American to modern, contemporary pieces. A little-known fact is that the Library's art collection is so large that we can only display about a third of our collection at a time," said Malden Public Library Director Dora St. Martin. "Our Trustees have helped lovingly build this incredible collection, piece by piece, for many years. And the Malden community can enjoy this precious art for generations to come."

Among the Library's large collection are two pieces that were originally on display in the Converse family's Malden home: a painting, "The Old Philosopher," which was displayed in Elisha's study, and a statue, "Benjamin." In 1919 an unruly boy "ran amuck" in the Malden Public Library's Lower Gallery, knocking over (and breaking) the "Benjamin" statue. As legend has it, Library Director Herbert Fison restrained the boy, preventing further damage to the Library's collection. "Benjamin" was painstakingly restored and is still on display today.

The Library also has an impressive collection of statuary, bronze figures, lithographs and photographs. The Library not only purchases art, but also receives artwork through the generous donations of individual donors, families and foundations.

The art galleries are free and open to the public. The Malden Public Library frequently hosts art exhibitions and tours where visitors can learn more about the collection. For more information, visit <https://maldenpubliclibrary.org>.

## **About the Malden Public Library**

According to the MPL website, "In 1879, the people of Malden opened the Malden Public Library in a small room in the Town Hall. The library was housed there until Malden's first mayor, Elisha S. Converse and his wife, Mary, donated money to build the Converse Memorial Building.

"Opened in October of 1885, the Converse Memorial Building was designed by renowned architect H. H. Richardson. The building housed the library as well as an art gallery. Today the majority of the library's collection is housed in the new addition which opened in June of 1996."

As a private, nonprofit corporation, MPL offers many free resources, items, services and programming. The building's maintenance, renovations, artwork and books are funded by the historic trust, with help from donations. An unpaid Board of Trustees (Malden residents) oversees the trust. Compared to other Massachusetts libraries, the MPL costs taxpayers less while providing the same essential services. It is located at 36 Salem St. in Malden.