

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Mechanics Hall commissions artists to paint portraits of four Black Americans  
for its iconic portrait gallery**

Worcester, MA—March 20, 2023—Mechanics Hall announced today that it has selected three artists to paint portraits of impactful 19<sup>th</sup>-century Black Americans to join other historic portraits in its iconic Great Hall. The commission of the three paintings includes: one depicting Worcester business owners and abolitionists William Brown and Martha Ann Tulip Lewis (Brown), painted by Brenda Zlamany of Brooklyn, NY; one depicting former slave, abolitionist, and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth, painted by Manu Saluja of Long Island, NY; and one depicting former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, painted by Imo Nse Imeh of Holyoke, MA. The new portraits are expected to be installed in the Great Hall by February 2024.

“This important project allows Mechanics Hall to represent Black American history and to emphasize the abolitionist and women's rights activity in Worcester and in this Hall. Ultimately, the gallery will portray the American story with deeper dimension,” said Kathleen Gagne, Mechanics Hall Executive Director. “We are immensely proud to announce the artists selected for this transformational project and cannot wait to unveil the new portraits in the Great Hall next year.”

The artists were chosen through a formal selection process that focused on technical skill, historical research, composition, legibility in a public location, and thoughtfulness about the context of Mechanics Hall. The six-month process was coordinated by Gloria D. Hall, M.A., Worcester-based public art administrator and preservationist. The selection panelists were Dorothy Moss, Ph.D., Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC; Kelli Morgan, Ph.D., specialist in American art and visual culture, Professor of the Practice, and inaugural Director of Curatorial Studies at Tufts University; Toby Sisson, M.F.A., artist and Associate Professor and Program Director of Studio Art at Clark University; and James Welu, Ph.D., former Chief Curator and Director of the Worcester Art Museum.



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## About the portrait artists

**Brenda Zlamany** is a painter who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Since 1982 her work has appeared nationally and internationally in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. In 2015, Zlamany won the competition to paint a portrait of Yale's first seven women Ph.D.s. The painting is permanently installed in the university's Sterling Memorial Library. Her other public works include *Portrait of Discovery*, a monumental painting depicting five trailblazing women scientists from The Rockefeller University and the *Davenport Dining Room Scene*, a painting on two panels of nine diverse portrait subjects installed at Yale University. In 2007, she became the first female artist to be commissioned by the World Bank when she painted a portrait of the bank's retiring president, James D. Wolfensohn. Her portrait of feminist icon Elga Ruth Wasserman was unveiled at Yale University in late 2022. She is a graduate of Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, and has a B.A. degree from Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn. [Learn more about Brenda Zlamany.](#)

**Imo Nse Imeh**, of Holyoke, Massachusetts, is a visual artist and scholar of African Diaspora art. His work focuses on historical and philosophical issues around the Black body and cultural identity. He is also Associate Professor of Art and Art History at Westfield State University in Westfield, MA. Imeh's works are in the collection of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art; University Museum of Contemporary Art University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and Danny Simmons Collection of Art, among others. Imeh is a recipient of the Mass Cultural Artist Fellowship, as well as grants from the Holyoke and Springfield Cultural Council, and the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts. He received his doctorate in Art History from Yale University, where he studied the art and aesthetics of the African Diaspora.

[Learn more about Imo Nse Imeh.](#)

**Manu Saluja** was born in Brooklyn, New York and now lives and works in Long Island. Her paintings have been exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the Wausau Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin, the Butler Institute of American Art in Ohio, and the Aberdeen Art Gallery in Scotland. She is the 2019 winner of the prestigious BP Portrait Travel Award. Saluja has participated in numerous group shows and has work in public and private collections in the U.S., Canada, U.K., and India. Press coverage of her paintings includes American Art Collector, Fine Art Connoisseur, Artists & Illustrators, the Huffington Post, and Fast Company Design. Saluja studied with artist John Frederick Murray privately and



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at New York's School of Visual Arts, where she earned a B.F.A. degree. She is Adjunct Professor of Painting at the New York Academy of Art, where she received her M.F.A. in 2013. [Learn more about Manu Saluja.](#)

The portrait gallery has been a commanding presence in the Great Hall since shortly after Mechanics Hall was built by the Worcester County Mechanics Association in 1857. The portrait subjects represent a combination of interests that honor the values of the Mechanics Association founders: education, excellence, human welfare, and a wider vision of human endeavor. The gallery includes Mechanics, social reformers, Civil War heroes, and political leaders. Many of the individuals portrayed crossover these categories. Four prominent women of the same time period who exemplify the same values were added to the gallery in 1999.

“The subjects of these new portraits were free and formerly enslaved individuals who actively worked in the United States to abolish slavery and for the betterment of freed slaves and their community during a perilous time in American history, when Blacks, free or enslaved, were least legislatively protected,” said Gloria Hall, coordinator of the artist selection process. “The Fugitive Slave Act and Dred Scott Decision of the 1850’s declared any person of African descent could be captured, declared a fugitive, and returned to slavery and was ineligible for citizenship. Thus, the work these four individuals did was especially heroic and deserving of this recognition.”

## **About the portrait subjects**

**William Brown** (1824-1892) was a successful 19<sup>th</sup>-century Worcester upholsterer and carpetmaker. A free man, Brown came to Worcester from Boston, establishing his trade here in 1841. He and his wife, Martha, operated the business located in the original Central Exchange Building in the heart of downtown. William Brown was first recognized by the Worcester County Mechanics Association (WCMA) in 1849 for the skill he exhibited at that year's Mechanics Fair. In 1867, he became the first Black member of the WCMA. His son, Charles, an expert draper and interior decorator, also became a WCMA member.

According to family tradition, William Brown was involved with the work of the Underground Railroad. Upon the death of his wife, Martha, William received letters of condolence from such influential men as Frederick Douglass, Stephen Salisbury III, Charles Washburn, and Edward Everett Hale, indicating the respect of his



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friends and colleagues. William was a successful inventor as well. He held patents on his own inventions, including “Browns Patent Fruit Picker” (1867) and “A New Improved Sofa Bed” (1868). The fruit picker was mentioned in an 1867 issue of Scientific American.

**Martha Tulip Lewis Brown** (1821-1889), a free woman of African American heritage, was married to William Brown and was his partner in life, business, and abolitionist work. She worked alongside William and later their son, Charles, in the family carpet and upholstery business. She was the first woman of color to become a member of the Ladies Benevolent Society of the First Unitarian Church of Worcester. She and other women raised money for the welfare of freed slaves and fugitive slaves. She was very likely involved in Underground Railroad work with her husband William and his colleagues, which included Frederick Douglass.

**Frederick Douglass** (1818-1895), was one of the most prominent civil rights figures in history. After escaping from slavery, Douglass spent the rest of his life advocating for social justice. He is considered to be one of the most influential Americans of the 19th century. In 1841, while attending anti-slavery meetings, Douglass met William Lloyd Garrison (whose portrait also hangs in the Great Hall gallery), one of the most outspoken abolitionists in the country. After Garrison encouraged Douglass to share his story, Douglass began giving lectures at abolitionist conventions, quickly earning a reputation as an eloquent and compelling speaker. He was invited to address the Worcester County Mechanics Association on at least five occasions before Mechanics Hall was built. He was among the first to take the Mechanics Hall stage in March 1857.

**Sojourner Truth** (1797-1883), born Isabella Baumfree, is considered one of the two most impactful Black women of the 19th century, along with Harriet Tubman. Already in middle-age, Sojourner Truth began her 30-year speaking career in Worcester at the first National Women’s Rights Convention in 1850. She was an abolitionist and passionate advocate of women’s rights. She also advocated for temperance, an important social issue among laborer families. Born into slavery in Ulster County, New York, Truth gained her freedom in 1826 by walking off the farm where she was enslaved. In 1828, she sued a white man for illegally selling her son and became the first black woman to win a court case of that nature. Truth was a member of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, an abolitionist and utopian community in Massachusetts where she lived for several years.



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## **About the Worcester County Mechanics Association and Mechanics Hall**

Established in 1842, the Worcester County Mechanics Association (WCMA) was originally an educational and charitable organization that fostered skills in the mechanical arts required in the new industrial age. The Mechanics were also committed to engaging the entire community with cultural and social ideals. Three social issues were of major concern to the Worcester Mechanics: abolition, women's rights, and temperance. As early as the 1840s, Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists were invited on many occasions to speak to the Mechanics Association membership and the wider community. Women's rights advocates and temperance advocates also used Mechanics Hall as their platform for social reform.

Built in 1857 by WCMA, Mechanics Hall is internationally regarded as one of the world's great concert halls for its superb acoustics and 19<sup>th</sup>-century elegance. Regionally, it is widely considered to be Worcester's finest meeting place. The world's most renowned orchestras and performers—from the London Philharmonic to Yo-Yo Ma and Ella Fitzgerald to Linda Rondstat—have taken the Hall's stage. Among the many luminaries who have spoken at Mechanics Hall are Charles Dickens, Susan B. Anthony, Theodore Roosevelt, and Bill Clinton. In addition to serving as a premiere venue and recording site, Mechanics Hall offers inspiring cultural experiences for diverse audiences through a variety of creative initiatives—including free concerts, community events, a youth chorus, and collaborative programs with local colleges and non-profit organizations. A non-profit organization, Mechanics Hall is owned and operated by the Worcester County Mechanics Association (est. 1842). It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Learn more at [mechanicshall.org](http://mechanicshall.org).

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