

# *Mechanics Hall*

*Where Community and Culture Meet*

## PRESS RELEASE

### For Immediate Release

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### **Three new portraits of Black Americans to be revealed at Mechanics Hall on March 14**

Celebration events include free artist talk and gala with dinner and dancing

Worcester, MA—February 21, 2024—Mechanics Hall has commissioned three portraits of 19th-century Black Americans which will be revealed to the public for the first time on Thursday, March 14. The paintings portray with vivid color and poignant symbolism individuals whose contributions to abolition and women’s rights are still felt today. They are the first portraits to be added to the 167-year-old concert hall since 1999 and are expected to have a transformational effect on the space. The subjects include Worcester business owners and abolitionists William Brown and Martha Ann Tulip Lewis Brown, painted by Brenda Zlamany of Brooklyn, NY; formerly enslaved abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth, painted by Manu Saluja of Long Island, NY; and the formerly enslaved civil rights leader, orator and writer Frederick Douglass, painted by Imo Nse Imeh of Holyoke, MA.

“This is a historic moment for Mechanics Hall and our vibrantly diverse community. Many of the world’s most renowned performers take the Great Hall stage every year. They and their audiences will now share the hall with—and be inspired by—these striking paintings of Black Americans who lived extraordinary lives of courage. Our community, and especially our children, can look up to the individuals honored in the gallery with pride and hope,” said Kathleen Gagne, Mechanics Hall executive director and co-chair of the [Portraits Project](#).

Commissioned in the fall of 2022, the completed portraits were delivered to Mechanics Hall in late January and early February 2024. They will remain covered until March 14, when they will be revealed to the public



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during a celebration event, called “Beyond the Frames.” The event begins at 5:00 p.m. with an artist talk that is free and open to the public. During the hour-long program the three portrait artists will discuss their creative processes and experiences painting their portrait subjects with Juliet Feibel, executive director of ArtsWorcester, as moderator. Registration is required and can be done at [mechanicshall.org](http://mechanicshall.org).

A gala event begins at 6:15 p.m. with dinner by Russell Morin Catering and dancing to the Silver Arrow Band. A live auction will benefit the Mechanics Hall portraits project educational and cultural programming. A silent auction of portrait art by Worcester public high school students will benefit the Worcester Educational Development Foundation and the student artists. Tickets are \$150 per person and can be purchased at [mechanicshall.org](http://mechanicshall.org).

The Mechanics Hall portrait gallery is a commanding installation honoring 19th-century Worcester innovators, social reformers, Civil War heroes and political leaders. The portrait subjects represent a combination of interests that honor the values of the [Worcester County Mechanics Association](http://Worcester County Mechanics Association), which founded Mechanics Hall in 1857. These interests include education, the pursuit of excellence, human welfare, and a wider vision of human endeavor. Four prominent women of the same time-period were added in 1999, and now four impactful Black Americans—including two formerly enslaved persons—will join the gallery of distinguished individuals. Full information about the Mechanics Hall Portraits Project can be found at [mechanicshall.org/portraits-project](http://mechanicshall.org/portraits-project).

“The architectural grandeur of Mechanics Hall and its exceptional musical performance space is recognized locally and internationally. Less is known of its historical position as a venue where social reform leaders of the 19th century convened and presented. The Portraits Project centers this history and the Great Hall’s portrait gallery,” said Gloria D Hall, co-chair of the [Portraits Project](http://Portraits Project).

## **About the portrait artists**

**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



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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.](#)

[A photograph of Imo Nse Imeh is available here.](#)

**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 has appeared in *American Art Collector*, *Fine Art Connoisseur*, *Artists & Illustrators*, *Huffington Post*, and *Fast Company Design*. Saluja studied with artist John Frederick Murray privately and 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.](#)

[A photograph of Manu Saluja is available here.](#)

**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 to earn a Ph.D. 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,



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Maine, and has a B.A. degree from Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn. [Learn more about Brenda Zlamany.](#)

[A photograph of Brenda Zlamany is available here.](#)

## **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 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 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 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



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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.

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

Established in 1842, the Worcester County Mechanics Association 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.

## **About Mechanics Hall**

Built in 1857 by the Worcester County Mechanics Association, 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.



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Among the many luminaries who have spoken at Mechanics Hall are Charles Dickens, Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, and Mark Twain. 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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