

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: August 15, 2014

**Material Friction: Americana and American Art
Highlights from the Collection of Jonathan and Karin Fielding**

Images available upon request.

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Williamstown, Mass. – The Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) presents *Material Friction: Americana and American Art*, on view through January 25, 2015. The exhibition provokes questions about the role of “folk” art within museums and art history. It features 80 paintings, decorative arts and utilitarian objects created predominantly in the rural northeastern United States between 1690 and 1840 from the collection of Jonathan and Karin Fielding, most of which have never been on public view. Objects lent by the Fieldings are installed with 45 works from WCMA’s renowned collection of American art. Should museums display materials made by rural artisans or amateurs in isolation, or view them alongside similar forms created by academically trained artists working in urban centers? These questions are central to a new WCMA-taught seminar in the upcoming fall semester where undergraduate and graduate students will re-curate the current installation.

Jonathan (Williams ’64) and Karin Fielding have been collecting folk art for the past thirty years. Highlights of their collection on view include paintings by Ammi Phillips, Sheldon Peck, and John Brewster Jr. Among the furniture are an early (ca. 1720) American desk owned by Ebenezer Devotion and a superb 19th century grain-painted blanket chest associated with the Matteson family of Shaftesbury, Vermont. The exhibition is particularly strong in work created by or for women, with 18th-century needlework as well as scrimshaw corset busks made by sailors for their wives. *Material Friction* reflects the breadth of the

Fielding's collection, including such diverse materials as an iron fireback, small baskets made by Native Americans, mirrors, stoneware, samplers, a tavern sign, and examples of lighting technology.

The current installation of *Material Friction*, organized by Kevin M. Murphy, WCMA's Eugénie Prendergast Curator of American Art, takes three approaches to the display of folk art. In one gallery, objects from the Fielding's Collection are segregated from WCMA's collection. They have been placed in rough chronological groupings that reflect their original domestic function. This gallery installation is typical of major museums across the country where vernacular works are contained in period rooms or otherwise set apart from the "American art". In contrast the two largest galleries juxtapose the Fielding's Collection with works of art from WCMA. "The incredible range and quality of the Fielding's collection make possible multiple curatorial strategies," Murphy said. "We wanted to explore the sympathies and antipathies that occur if we displayed works across time and media that place, for example, allegorical figures or reference nature and the landscape in close proximity." A small gallery displays Amish and Shaker textiles with works by Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Ad Reinhardt, referencing superficial aesthetic connections between modernism and vernacular objects.

The exhibition is integral to WCMA's commitment to developing and teaching innovative museum practice: "The Fieldings generously allowed us to bring works from their collection here to experiment with new approaches to a problematic category of material, which is one of the important roles college and university museums play in larger conversations about the future of museums," said Christina Olsen, Class of 1956 Director of WCMA. "Jonathan and Karin also share our belief in the immeasurable value for students of working directly with objects, which will result in an entirely new installation and interpretation of *Material Friction*."

The current iteration of *Material Friction* will be on view until the beginning of November, after which it will be reinstalled according to the students' research into vernacular art and museum practice. "This is the first time WCMA has integrated a course with a significant installation of the museum's galleries. We want students to understand that traditional boundaries between curators, educators, and exhibition designers are actually fluid in the contemporary museum," said Olsen. The seminar will be led by Murphy and staff from across WCMA, and will work mainly in the museum rather than in a classroom. The *Material Friction* galleries will be open during the student reinstallation, extending the Williams academic experience and process of exhibition making to the public.

The Williams College Museum of Art

WCMA sparks new ways of thinking about art and the visual world through its innovative exhibitions, programs, publications and projects. At the heart of the Williams College campus the museum draws on the collaborative and multidisciplinary ethos of the surrounding college to enliven the more than 14,000 works in its growing collection. The museum and its collection is a catalyst for student learning and community engagement. Situated in the rich cultural landscape of the Berkshires, WCMA is free and open to all. WCMA is located on Main Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts. It is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and closed on Wednesdays. The museum is wheelchair accessible and admission is FREE. For more information, contact the museum at (413) 597-2429 or visit wcma.williams.edu.

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