

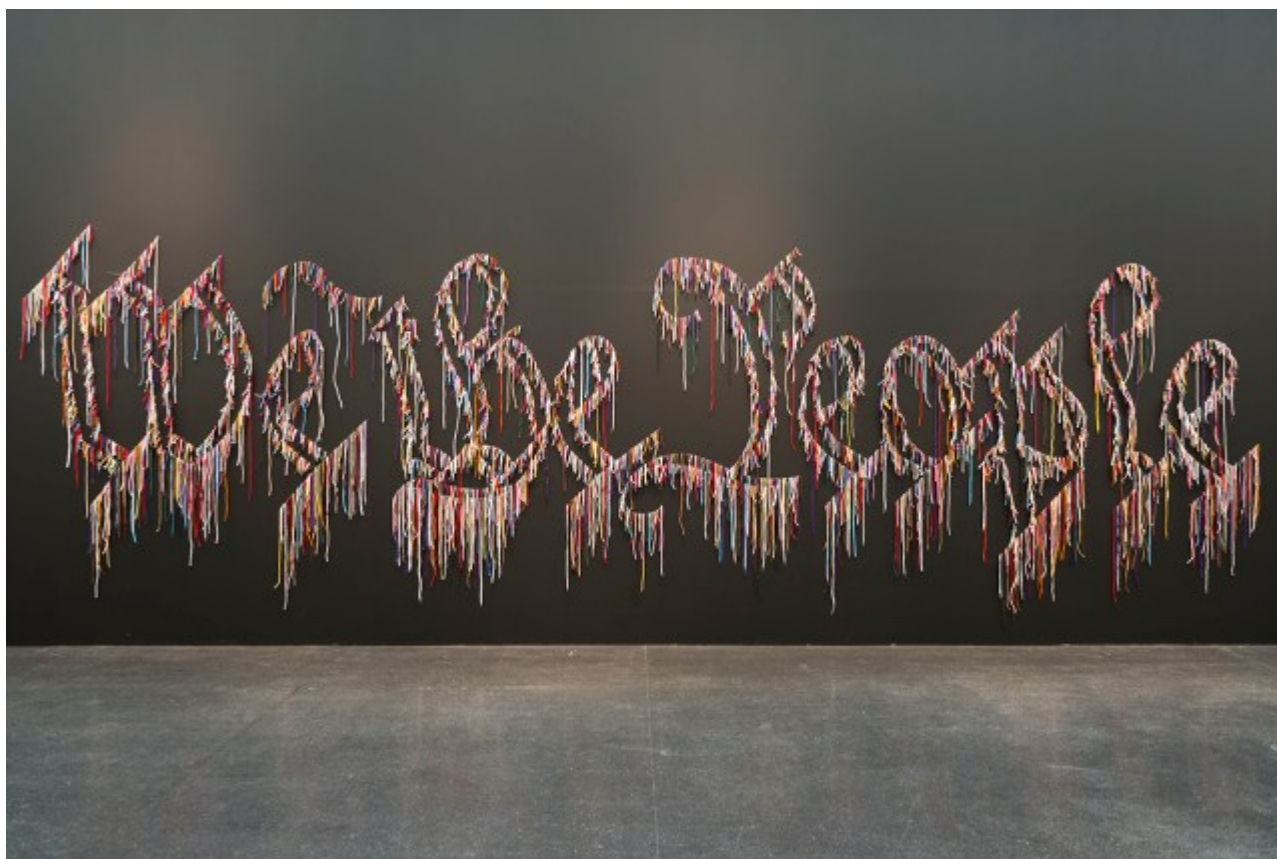
## Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.


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## We the People

### Building Bridges From Bentonville, Arkansas



Nari Ward, *We the People (Black Version)* (2015). Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

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Building [Crystal Bridges](#) in Bentonville, Arkansas—a small town in the middle of the United States—brought great works of American art to an area that previously had little or no access to them, since most major museums are located in urban or coastal areas, far away. Providing access is at the heart of everything we do at Crystal Bridges—both physical access (by locating the museum in the middle of our nation) and economic access (by providing free admission to the permanent collection).

We strive to make the works accessible, intellectually and emotionally, by making visitors feel welcomed. We try to provide tools for engaging with, and thinking about, the works in ways that might relate to visitors' lives. At the museum, we are constantly seeking ways to remove barriers, real or perceived, to a connection with the art: whether through offering programs that reach out to specific groups in our community, such as English language learners or visitors with disabilities,

or by allowing visitors to “see themselves” on the gallery walls.

By creating a new museum from the ground up, in a place where such an institution had not existed, we are developing a new paradigm for museums. As our society changes, our idea of how museums function in that society must change as well.



Georgia O’Keeffe, *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1* (1932). Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

In building Crystal Bridges at this moment, in this place, we are able to take steps in a new direction, without the legacy of traditions and procedures of more established museums. We can look at both the development of the collection and at how we engage with our audiences through a fresh lens.

Art is a fundamental human impulse, and great works of art touch us on the deepest and universal human level. We are moved and inspired by art; it fills us with awe and wonder; it makes us think about things we may never have considered. It can be a catalyst for a powerful thoughts, feelings and actions. In that way, American art today carries the same meaning it always has: it is a distillation of our American culture, flavored by our history and by the events and ideas of our moment in time.

That said, American art, like American society, is now perhaps more varied and complex and interesting than ever before because of the wealth of information and viewpoints that contribute to it.

### **What Does “American” Mean?**

It’s a question that has been asked by every generation of Americans from the Founding Fathers onward. And the answer is constantly evolving. You can see it when you walk through our galleries: the images American artists have used to portray what it means to be American have changed.

In colonial times, Americans portrayed themselves in terms of their European heritage, trying hard to look as “civilized” and

European in their portraits as they could. Later, artists began to use the wide, dramatic landscapes on the western frontier as a metaphor for American grandeur and potential. In the Industrial Age, skyscrapers and machinery symbolized American ingenuity, technology, and power. Both the symbols, and the values they represented, changed with the times.



Charles Willson Peale, *George Washington* (c. 1780-82). Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville Arkansas

Throughout it all, I suppose you could say that the quest to somehow capture and define what it is to be American is itself part of the definition, and because there are many voices and intellects trying to answer that question, there are many different answers. As a museum, our job is to bring those voices together and offer a place where our visitors might engage with and consider them all in the context of our national history and their own experience.

## Living History

Art museums help to bring history alive for our visitors. All art was “contemporary” when it was made, and so each artist creates work that is naturally freighted with his or her place and time—personal experience, emotions, opinions—all of those things are born of the historical realities of the moment and so naturally come to light in the work.

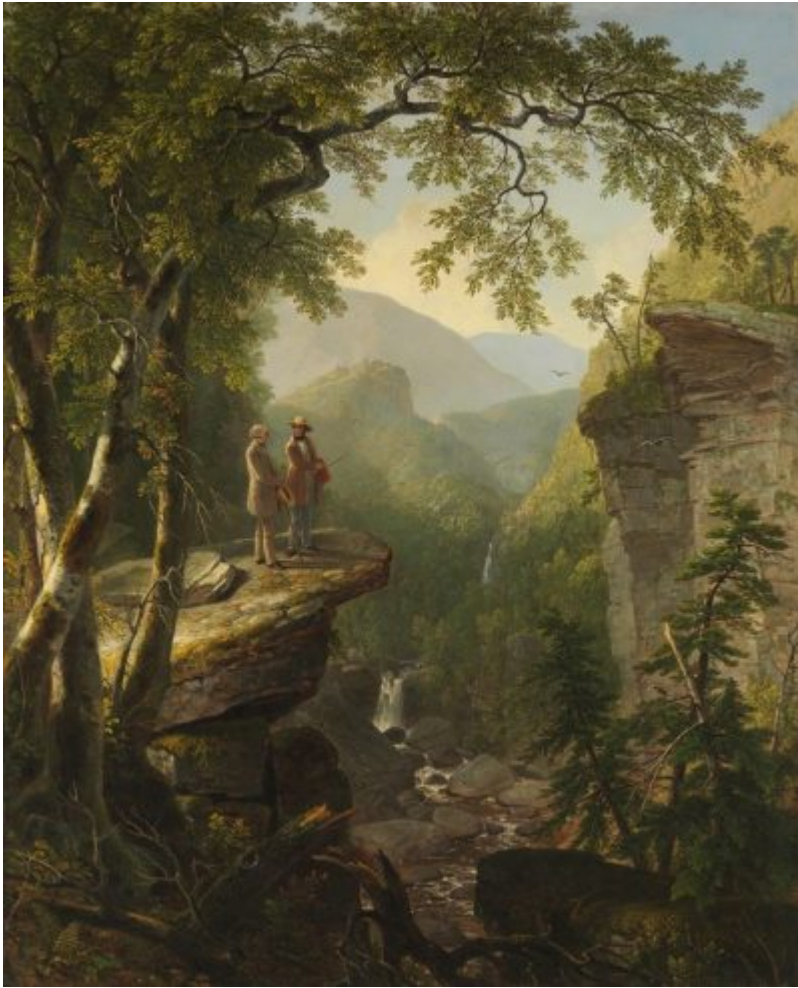
Remembering that there are real, individual, and very human lives attached to each of the works in the collection helps to make those history-book stories much more personal. We know, from a study done shortly after our opening, that experiencing great works of art improves our sense of historic empathy, which enriches our understanding of history and also makes us more tolerant of the differences of others.

The museum also provides what we call “brave spaces”, where we are able to encounter a range of different points of view and enter into conversations about them. In our current political and social environment, that in itself seems to me to be of immeasurable value.

## American ideals

We typically think of American ideals being those of freedom—to be able to pursue one’s own dream, to speak one’s mind, and to follow one’s own beliefs; ingenuity—the ability to come up with ideas to solve problems and improve lives, and to implement them; and community understanding that we are stronger when we work together and support one another than when we are in isolation or opposition. These ideals are manifest in the work of the museum.

We celebrate the creative spirit of American art, which is a physical and living testament to our national ideals of freedom of expression, of speech, and of the individual. We emphasize the power of art to provide us with insights into the challenges we face, both as individuals and as a nation.



Asher B. Durand, *Kindred Spirits* (1849). Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

We serve both as centers of our community: places where people can come together to learn and grow, and as agents of change: actively seeking to make our communities stronger and better through outreach, individual and group experiences, and education. We also strive to shed light on the diverse and complex combination of people, voices, heritages, experiences, and beliefs that make America what it is.

Though the face of America has changed and will continue to change over the course of our history, the fundamental American belief in a truly democratic society—one that provides social equality and justice for all—remains the same. This is, for our museum, perhaps the most important of American ideals: that by bringing together a diversity of voices, and by listening to and considering those voices, we are stronger, freer and more just.