

**Agendum  
Oakland University  
Board of Trustees Formal Session  
June 21, 2021**

**APPROVAL OF SALE OF MEADOW BROOK HALL PAINTING**

**A Recommendation**

1. **Division and Department:** University Advancement, Meadow Brook Estate
2. **Introduction:** The owners of Meadow Brook Farms in rural Rochester, Michigan, Alfred and Matilda Dodge Wilson (heiress to the Dodge Brothers Motor Car Company), built their 110-room, 88,000-square-foot Tudor-revival home, Meadow Brook Hall, on their estate between 1926 and 1929. They furnished their new home with furniture, decorative and fine arts and a wide assortment of collectibles from world travels, among them a large number of paintings.

One of the paintings was a 17<sup>th</sup>-Century work by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Infant St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*. The painting was from a group commissioned by merchant Giovanni Bielato and subsequently donated to a Genoese monastery. From there the painting traveled to London to the Duke of Westminster's country estate, where the painting was sold at auction by Christie's in 1924.

The Wilsons purchased the painting from the John Levy Gallery in New York in 1926. The painting was hung in Meadow Brook Hall's living room beginning with the Wilson's occupancy in 1929, through the founding of Oakland University in 1957, Mrs. Wilson's death in 1967 and well into the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century. During that time, Meadow Brook Hall became a renowned historic house museum and cultural center, and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2012.

Early in 2013, the Executive Director of Meadow Brook Hall and the curator of European art at the Detroit Institute of Arts ("DIA") agreed that the DIA would restore and conserve the painting in exchange for having the painting on loan at the DIA for five years.

As described in a February 10, 2014 article in Oakland University's student newspaper, the Oakland Post:

"As part of the collaboration between the DIA and Meadow Brook Hall, a series of visits by undergraduate art history and studio art, history, communication and chemistry students was built in so they could observe the scientific analysis and conservation that DIA specialists undertook on both the painting and its frame. The students had the rare opportunity to see DIA scientists and conservators at

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work and to have access to information produced only in the world's top museums.”

The conservation process was recorded by Oakland University personnel who produced a half-hour program that was subsequently posted to both organization’s websites. The conserved painting was unveiled in a ceremony at the DIA on February 6, 2014.

Since that time, the painting has hung in the prominent European Arts Gallery at the DIA, the loan term renewed for an additional five years in 2019.

Given its age, construction, scale and mission as a self-supporting historic house museum (as opposed to an art museum), Meadow Brook Hall cannot adequately provide appropriate climate control or security that a painting of this importance demands.

The DIA, as one of the world’s premier art museums, offers some of the finest climate control and security measures available.

The painting and its story are not central to Meadow Brook Hall’s interpretive story that focuses on the lives of people associated with the Meadow Brook Estate and the architecture of the National Historic Landmark building, representing just one of dozens of paintings in Meadow Brook Hall that illustrate the Wilsons’ general collecting interests.

The painting has not been at Meadow Brook Hall for the past six years. In its place, a replication hangs along with an interpretive panel explaining the partnership with the DIA and the conservation process. This presentation offers more prominence to the story of the painting, and is used as an instructional tool by docents as they inform visitors of some of the challenges Meadow Brook Hall faces with preservation and conservation.

Oakland University, Meadow Brook Estate and The Dodge and Wilson families, their descendants, and the Matilda R. Wilson Fund have had a long legacy of supporting the DIA. In 1972 the Matilda R. Wilson Fund donated "Man Wearing a Plumed Hat and Gorget" by the Workshop of Rembrandt to the DIA.

The DIA has expressed interest in discussions regarding the potential purchase of the painting. This is desirable as it would keep the painting in Southeastern Michigan, where it has resided for the past 94 years. The University is also willing to consider other museums who may be interested in purchasing the painting. In support of the potential sale, the Executive Director sought counsel from several industry sources, including appraisals, and recommends that representation by Sotheby’s, or another similarly renowned fine and decorative arts broker, would be most advantageous.

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3. **Previous Board Action:** None.
4. **Budgetary Implications:** Sale proceeds will be used to support the Meadow Brook Estate, such as care for the most critical of Meadow Brook Hall's 75,000 collection items, enhance museum operations and enrich interpretation of the Dodge-Wilson story, and other direct support.
5. **Educational Implications:** A replica and the story of the painting's provenance and its conservation by the DIA will be displayed at Meadow Brook Hall during public touring.
6. **Personnel Implications:** None.
7. **University Reviews/Approvals:** Proposed by the Curator and approved by the Executive Director of Meadow Brook Estate, the Vice President for University Advancement and the President.
8. **Recommendation:**

**RESOLVED**, that the Board of Trustees authorizes the University's President to enter into a private sales agreement with a fine and decorative arts broker (Sotheby's or another renowned broker) to sell the painting, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Infant St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, to an interested art museum (the DIA or another museum), with the proceeds to be used to support the Meadow Brook Estate, such as for collections care, museum operations, and interpretation of the Meadow Brook story for public touring and scholarly research, and other direct support; and, be it further

**RESOLVED**, that the private sales agreement shall be reviewed by and be in a form acceptable to the Vice President for Legal Affairs and General Counsel prior to execution, and be in compliance with the law and with University policies and regulations, and conform to the legal standards of the Vice President for Legal Affairs and General Counsel; and, be it further

**RESOLVED**, that the Board of Trustees also authorizes the President, and her designees, to perform all acts and deeds and to execute and deliver all contracts, instruments and documents required by this resolution that are necessary, expedient and proper in connection with the sale of the painting, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Infant St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, to an art museum; and, be it further

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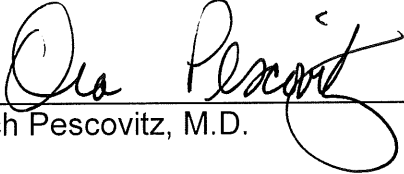
**RESOLVED**, that all said contracts, instruments and documents shall be reviewed by and be in a form acceptable to the Vice President for Legal Affairs and General Counsel prior to execution, and be in compliance with the law and with University policies and regulations and conform to the legal standards of the Vice President for Legal Affairs and General Counsel.

**9. Attachment:** Photograph of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Infant St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*.

Submitted to the President  
on JUNE 18, 2021 by

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael J. Westfall  
Vice President for University Advancement

Recommended on 6/18, 2021  
to the Board of Trustees for approval by

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, M.D.  
President

