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## OPEIU Members at Minneapolis Institute of Art Make the Museum Great

By: Haylee Hilton, Organizer for OPEIU Local 12

“How am I supposed to pick my favorite art piece? They’re all like my children!” As we wind along the halls of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, we’re surrounded by diverse and beautiful works of art from some of the biggest artists and some lesser known ones as well. OPEIU Local 12 members and MIA employees Leslie Ory Lewellen, Joe Doherty, and Debra Hegstrom navigate with ease through the second floor. As we walk, they brag with huge smiles on their faces about how the collection at the MIA is over 90,000 pieces and talk about all the exciting exhibits to come. Union Members at the MIA keep the museum running smoothly by doing every kind of work at the museum one could conceive.

Our first stop was *The Birthday Party* by John Singer Sargent to talk to Leslie Ory Lewellen, the Associate Registrar for Acquisitions. “My role is to take care of transit arrangements for art, coordinate crate building and insurance coverage for works of art in transit, coordinate unpacking, and seeing if things are damaged. I’m also in charge of objects coming in to be added to the permanent collection.” Her favorite part of the job? She is the second person who gets to see art pieces when they come out of the crate. When asked why *The Birthday Party* is her favorite piece, she smiled and said: “Every time I look at it, I feel like I see something different. There’s so much meaning going on in this painting. I feel so much meaning.” She specifically raved about the luscious colors and about how the focus of the painting is unexpected and different.



*Leslie Ory Lewellen with The Birthday Party*

Next we were whisked off to the photography section to talk to Joe Doherty, the Curatorial Department Assistant and Collections Coordinator. His role is to manage the photography collection and the photography study room and assist the photography curator. When asked what the best part of his job was, he said he loves that he gets to work with living artists and he gets to research and put together exhibitions with them. His favorite art in the museum is a series of photographs taken by Karl Blossfeldt called *Equisetum Hyemale (Rough Horsetail)* because he “started photographing plants and plant matter and seeds, but was one of the first photographers to

use a custom made microscope to photograph at high detail. These things you see every day become foreign and almost alien looking.”



*Joe Doherty with Equisetum Hyemale*

Finally, we headed over to Georges Braque’s *The Viaduct at L’Estaque* to talk to Debra Hegstrom, the Senior Educator for MIA. What does her role as Senior Educator entail? “I train the Docents (Volunteer Tour Guides) who give the tours, I teach about the collection, teach gallery strategies, and do a lot of coaching.” Her favorite part of the job is “The people I work with- all the Docents are volunteers who give lots of time and energy and passion to their work here and I get to work with them on the goals we have here for the best experience possible.” While standing next to Braque’s vibrant work of art, she explained why she chose this art piece as her favorite: “I love the way it’s constructed, this artist, Georges Braque, decided to look at nature and objects in terms of their essential elements. So he abstracts the forms and he creates these pathways into this assortment of forms. So every time I look at it I feel like I could just walk right into the painting...I love the colors because the sun is so bright and vibrant in that part of France and he’s captured the feeling of being there.”



*Debra Hegstrom with The Viaduct at L’Estaque*

When asked why they like being OPEIU members, they all had similar answers. Hegstrom said “MIA is a better place to work because of the union. We really have better working conditions, fair pay and fair policies because the union is there for us.” Ory Lewellen said “We’re here for same goal...it’s good to be in this organization together to fight together for employee rights, compensation, and good treatment on the workplace. It’s a way to be united in another way.” Doherty agreed and added by saying “I think we get a voice and support and strength. That’s the beauty of any union.”

The most wonderful part about the around 80 OPEIU members is their love for the job and for advocating with and for one another. The love they have for the museum and it’s art is apparent the second you walk through the door. OPEIU members keep the museum running and are exactly what makes the museum world class.