



April 2019

Dear Town Meeting Member,

We are writing to request your support of Town Meeting Warrant Article 39 "To see if the Town will vote to authorize the Library Board of Trustees to deaccession and/or dispose of by sale, donation, or other means, the Robbins Art Print Collection; or take any action related thereto."

Background

Town resident and patron Winfield Robbins amassed a collection of 150,000 art prints during his travels to Europe, most of which he purchased indiscriminately in bulk. At the time of his death in 1910, he left the collection as a gift to the Town to be held in the Robbins Library. The collection came with a very specific bequest to the Library for the "care, preservation, increase and purchase of his print collection" (\$25,000 in 1910, now worth approximately \$684,000) and his cousin Ida Robbins also provided a bequest for "the purchase and care of Prints" (\$30,000 in 1949, now worth approximately \$548,000).

Unfortunately, these prints have been consistently declining in value and are of minimal interest to collectors and the public. As far back as 1925, library staff expressed concerns about the maintenance of this collection. And every decade since, the Library Board and Library Directors have struggled to find use for the collection and maintain it in accordance with the original bequest. We would like to move forward with resolving this issue once and for all.

Rationale for Article

As the print collection was a gift to the Town, not the Library Board of Trustees, the Town has the ability to determine its fate. In this role, we strongly encourage you to consider the following rationale and support the article so that we may keep the libraries an active and vibrant resource for all community members:

- One of the primary concerns is space. The collection is stored throughout the Robbins Library taking up a significant amount of space and is virtually untouched. Put end to end, the prints would cover over 30 miles. Stacked, the tower of storage boxes would reach 13 stories. This is valuable space that could be used for other purposes that enable the Library to better meet patron needs, including things such as hosting rotating displays of current community artwork.
- The Library's mission states: "The Library is a vital community center for all. We create opportunities for lifelong learning, personal fulfillment and enjoyment that make Arlington a great place to live, work, study, and visit. We are committed to services that anticipate and respond to the needs and interests of all who use the library." It is not meant to curate a massive art collection that is larger than that of many dedicated art museums. Library staff should be focusing on work that is truly relevant to the public in meeting this mission.

- To “deaccession” means to sell or otherwise dispose of an item in a collection. This is common practice at museums and other institutions. In our libraries specifically, there is a collection policy that enables staff to actively cull books and other library collections to ensure we have living, breathing, and constantly evolving collections that meet the needs of our patrons. For years, this collection has been excluded from this standard practice.
- Professional appraisers have repeatedly affirmed that the value of the art print collection is steadily declining (it has dropped about 30% from 2001 to today), and it will only continue to go down until the collection is ultimately of no value.

Next Steps

On the advice of Town Counsel, in agreement with the recommendation of Richard Baiano, the appraiser from Childs Gallery in Boston, if the warrant article were approved, the Library Board and Director would move forward in trying to divest the Winfield Robbins prints in bulk, the same way it was acquired. Selling the prints is the first priority, however, Mr. Baiano shared that it is highly unlikely that the appraised value of the collection (approximately \$365,000 in 2018) is achievable with a sale given the lack of interest in prints today. Therefore we may need to resort to donating or otherwise disposing of the prints. As this is Town property, any funds secured would be directed into the Town’s general fund. If feasible, our request is that these funds be earmarked for continued support of the libraries, as was Winfield Robbins’ original intention.

Town Counsel is also working on a parallel process with the Attorney General’s office to review the bequest language and determine if the original purpose has been frustrated, given that the Library has been unable for decades to use any significant amount of the funds towards the narrowly stated purpose. If that request were approved, the funds would be eligible for some other, yet to be determined, use in support of the Library. With significant renovations proposed in the coming years, we are hopeful that we would have access to these funds to help reduce the burden on the Town and we believe that use would still be well aligned with Winfield Robbins’ desire to support the Library and the community.

Please see the accompanying Frequently Asked Questions document for further details. Please feel free to contact Library Director Andrea Nicolay (781-316-3201) with additional questions or to arrange a visit to see the collection.

We appreciate your consideration and as we reimagine our libraries together for the next 50 years and beyond, we kindly ask that you approve the warrant article as written.

Respectfully,
The Robbins Library Board of Trustees