Jim Leach to lead University of Iowa Museum of Art

November 7, 2016

Contact: Jeneane Beck, UI Office of Strategic Communication, 319-384-0054

The University of Iowa has announced that Jim Leach, former Iowa congressman and chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), will serve as the interim director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art (UIMA). Leach will take on the role Jan. 1, 2017, when current director Sean O’Harrow departs to assume a leadership position at the Honolulu Museum of Art. Leach will serve until a permanent director is hired.

Leach, who holds 14 honorary degrees, is UI chair in public affairs and joint visiting professor in the College of Law and the Department of Political Science in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. While serving as the interim director of the UIMA, he will retain his visiting faculty position in both colleges.

“Jim is a passionate champion of arts and humanities education and of the UI Museum of Art,” says P. Barry Butler, UI executive vice president and provost. “I am grateful for his willingness to serve the university in this capacity during an important time of transition for the UIMA.”

Leach served 30 years as a representative in Congress, where he chaired the Banking and Financial Services Committee, the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. In the 1990s, Leach held four years of hearings on Nazi theft of money and art during the Holocaust and served as chairman of the plenary session on Nazi-confiscated art at the 44-nation Washington Conference on Nazi art displacement held at the State Department in 1998.

Following his time in Congress, Leach was a professor at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University and interim director of the Institute of Politics and lecturer at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He then served four years as chairman of the NEH, where he oversaw the creation of the Bridging Cultures initiative, designed to promote understanding and mutual respect for diverse groups within the U.S. and abroad. Under his leadership, the NEH also helped launch a National Digital Public Library, a portal to digital collections of books, artworks, and artifacts from libraries, museums, and other cultural sites across the country.

“We are extremely fortunate to have someone of Jim’s caliber to lead the UIMA as we embark on such a significant project,” says UI President Bruce Harreld. “He is joining a talented team of professionals who care deeply about the museum and its future.”

As interim director of the UIMA, Leach will oversee the remaining phases of the international tour of Jackson Pollock’s Mural and work with external architects and the UIMA planning team on the design of a new museum facility.

“As the first university to grant graduate degrees in the creative arts based on the creation of art rather than the writing of a thesis, the University of Iowa has augmented its innovative approach to teaching by amassing one of the finest university collections of art,” Leach says. “Now it is committed to building a new venue where it can showcase iconic works by artists as diverse as Grant Wood, Jackson Pollock, Joan Miró, Max Beckmann, Robert Motherwell, Marsden Hartley, Philip Guston, Juan Gris, Stuart Davis,
Mark Rothko, Fernand Léger, Franz Marc, Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Hannah Höch, Lyonel Feininger, Georges Braque, Giorgio De Chirico, Gabriele Münter, Robert Arneson, and Mauricio Lasansky.”

Leach and his wife, Deba, have had a long interest in the visual arts. Deba Leach, who is currently a doctoral candidate in the Art History Division of the University of Iowa’s School of Art and Art History, has written books on Grant Wood and Jacob Lawrence. Together, they have donated several hundred works of art to the UIMA. Leach has also conveyed his public and family papers to the University of Iowa Library.