

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 17, 2025

**The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Displays Important New Acquisition,
*Portrait of Leana and the Lambeth Children***

The historical family portrait painting includes the children's nanny, Leana, an enslaved woman



Portrait of Leana and the Lambeth Children, ca. 1848, unidentified artist (American or European, active in New Orleans, Louisiana in mid-19th century), oil on canvas.
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art and Revolving Art Purchase Fund, 2024.312

Richmond, VA — Visitors to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) can now see its newly acquired painting *Portrait of Leana and the Lambeth Children* on view in the museum's American art galleries. Acquired by VMFA in December 2024, this remarkable painting will later be a centerpiece of the new American galleries in the museum's forthcoming James W. and Frances Gibson McGlothlin Wing II, which is scheduled to open in 2028.

While the museum is privileged to boast a leading collection of American art, rarely does it acquire a work whose extraordinary orchestration of subject, history and provenance singularly elevates the department's holdings.

"The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts strives to acquire significant works that build on the strengths of the museum's permanent collection," said Director and CEO Alex Nyerges. "This exceptional addition to our American art holdings

sheds new light on slavery in the United States during the mid-19th century and reveals the compelling stories of its subjects nearly two centuries later.”

The painting portrays two daughters of William Meridith Lambeth Sr., Frances “Fanny” Bernard Lambeth and Medora “Dora” Lambeth. In profile at center is their brother, William Slacum Lambeth. William Lambeth Sr. owned several plantations in Louisiana, and the family resided on fashionable Carondelet Street in New Orleans.

Recent research by historian and genealogist Ja’el Gordon has identified the Black figure as an enslaved woman named Leana, who was purchased to be a nanny after the children’s mother died in childbirth. The discovery of Leana’s identity adds to the relevance of this painting. Further research is being conducted to learn more about Leana’s life, as well as the identity of the artist who painted this group portrait.

While Fanny and Dora fix their gaze on the viewer, Leana and the family dog, Bluche, both look intently at William. Five-year-old William died around the time this work was painted, and it is possible that this painting memorialized the boy’s recent death. The verdant nature, middle-ground sailboat, and ephemeral shadows all suggest transitory vanitas objects in what may well be a memento mori (remembrance of death) family portrait.

“Most important here, however,” noted Dr. Leo Mazow, VMFA’s Louise B. and J. Harwood Cochrane Curator of American Art, “is the discovery of Leana’s identity. The power of Leana’s identity reasserts personhood, which is brought into further relief by her naturalistic, empathetic depiction that renders it nearly tangible.”

For more information about the museum’s American art collection, visit www.VMFA.museum. VMFA is open 365 days a year with free general admission.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships Program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA’s permanent holdings encompass more than 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris and one of the nation’s finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Wing I after a transformative expansion, previously the largest in its history. A new expansion, the McGlothlin Wing II, is planned to open in 2028. Comprising more than 170,000 square feet, it will be the largest expansion in the museum’s history and will make VMFA the fourth largest comprehensive art museum in the United States.

Recently named one of the 20 best art museums in the U.S. by *The Washington Post*, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone (804) 340-1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

Media Contacts

Jan Hatchette | (804) 204-2721 | jan.hatchette@vmfa.museum
Amy Peck | (804) 773-1791 | amy.peck@vmfa.museum
Camryn Royal | (804) 204-2717 | camryn.royal@vmfa.museum

200 N. Arthur Ashe Blvd., Richmond, VA 23220