

Da Vinci and director De Groft: A win-win

BY KARLA K. BRUNO

By now, most of Tidewater knows about the "Leonardo da Vinci and the Idea of Beauty" exhibit at the Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William and Mary.

Judging by the attendance numbers, most of Tidewater will have seen it by the time it closes April 5. From here, the exhibit makes its way to Boston, the only other venue for this stunning collection.

Most of Tidewater, however, probably doesn't know that the director of the Muscarelle, Aaron De Groft, is the genius behind the da Vinci exhibit.

I had the pleasure of meeting De Groft for a private walk-through of the breathtaking exhibit. His knowledge of art is extensive, as one might imagine, as is his love for the creative process and the personalities and lives of the artists.

But De Groft, a 1988 College of William and Mary graduate, is no ordinary museum director. He is a brilliant entrepreneur in the nonprofit world, and therefore almost as rare as the arrival of da Vinci in Williamsburg.

He understands business. He understands that resuscitating a tiny, foundering college museum means taking command of business decisions that affect its well-being and resisting all attempts to water it down. Colonial Williamsburg and the Virginia Tourism Corp. jumped at the chance to partner with the Muscarelle to bring in visitors for the exhibit, thus boosting Virginia hotel bookings and Colonial Williamsburg tours.

He understands the art world: its glamour, its pitfalls and its opportunities. An eye for unrecognized value and the ability to snag the finest art at a modest price is a talent indeed.

He understands strategy. His ambitious 20-year, \$60 million plan to expand and reconstitute the Muscarelle is doable because he has the vision, patience and connections to make things happen.

He understands fundraising.

Working with the Muscarelle family and thousands of other donors, De Groft provides clear goals and definitive outcomes. May 2 will mark the fifth annual Muscarelle Wine and Run for the Roses, a fundraiser that raises almost half a million dollars to benefit the museum's foundation.

De Groft conceived the idea of comparing and contrasting the idea of physical beauty in da Vinci and Michelangelo works in the same exhibit, something never attempted before. And De Groft brought it to Williamsburg, small-town Williamsburg, with only one other stop before da Vinci and Michelangelo are sent back in protective crates to their separate homes.

What a delight, what a treasure De Groft has given us with this da Vinci exhibit, the latest Muscarelle triumph after the Michelangelo exhibits of 2010 and 2013. What a delight, what a treasure De Groft is. And most of Tidewater should know it.

Bruno, a writer from Alexandria, wishes she had taken art history classes during her undergraduate days at William and Mary.

COMMENTARY