Welcome and thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us for this wonderful occasion.

Today we are here to break ground on what is truly a unique partnership between an extraordinary artist and a remarkable university. Our common purpose is to preserve an enduring legacy. So this groundbreaking is a celebration on many levels. A celebration of creative genius…of intellectual curiosity…of treasured friends…and of generous investors.

But most of all, it is a celebration of life, as seen through the eyes of the great artist, Joseph Sheppard.

Joe is one of those exceedingly rare artists who has succeeded as both a painter and a sculptor. Described invariably as “a genius,” “an interesting mix of past and present,” and “the reincarnation of a Renaissance artist,” he is considered one of the great contemporary masters of figurative art.

Having built an enviable reputation as a realist in the fine tradition of the Old Masters, Joe believes that to portray the human figure in any medium, one must first understand its intricate anatomy. Consequently, he has made that belief the central focus of his life’s work…as an ardent student under Jacques Maroger and Reginald Marsh…a dedicated teacher at both Dickinson College and the Maryland Institute College of Art…and an enormously gifted and accomplished artist, both here at home and abroad.

In fact, over the years, Joe has produced some 2,000 paintings, drawings, and sculptures in a variety of mediums…published a series of highly respected books and catalogs on classical art and human anatomy…received dozens of prestigious awards and commissions…and exhibited extensively around the world.
So it comes as no surprise that his family, friends, and patrons would choose to honor his legacy with a cultural arts resource as truly unique as The Leroy Merritt Center for the Work of Joseph Sheppard at UMUC.

We began this project just a little over two years ago with great vision and an exceedingly generous lead gift from Leroy Merritt, one of Joe’s most enthusiastic supporters.

Not long after that, other friends and patrons like Mike and Patty Batza; Henry and Dot Rosenberg; George and Betsy Sherman; and Rick and Rita Berndt stepped forward with extremely generous contributions of their own….and then reached out to a host of other investors.
We also enlisted the talents of Baltimore architect Jim Grieves, who worked closely with Joe and his wife, Rita St. Clair, to create what promises to be one of the country’s finest cultural arts centers.

In coming up with a design, the team wanted something that was as multi-dimensional as the artist itself…and so it is. Indeed, this impressive new facility will be far more than just another art gallery.

As a lasting tribute to Joe and his amazing work, The Merritt Center includes a light-infused painting gallery in which to display his prolific collection of paintings --- in rotating exhibits --- the first of which will include pieces from two of his most famous shows: “Fifty Years of Art” and “Beast of Burden.” The Center will also incorporate a magnificent indoor sculpture garden that will feature 22 of his finest bronze and marble sculptures.

As a vibrant center for scholarly research and experiential learning, this new facility will advance both the study and the practice of Joe’s beloved classical realism…at a time when many of the country’s art schools are moving in new and more commercially driven directions. That said, the Merritt Center will also incorporate an exceptionally functional library, open to anyone who is interested in mastering the tenets of this art form.

In addition to Joe’s extensive collection of some 1,000 books about classical art and artists, the library will house many of Joe’s own figure and still life drawings and anatomical studies…along with easels for sketching and painting.

And finally, in keeping with UMUC’s longstanding commitment to preserve and promote Maryland’s rich cultural arts heritage, The Merritt Center will serve as a
natural extension of and aesthetic focal point for UMUC’s highly acclaimed visual arts collection.

Launched nearly 30 years ago with only a handful of pieces, the university’s Arts Program has since grown to include the state’s largest and most comprehensive permanent collection of Maryland painters, printmakers, photographers, and sculptors….an ongoing acknowledgment and constant reminder of our deeply planted roots here at home.

And to reflect the university’s ever-expanding global presence, we have also built an impressive collection of Asian art….which includes Japanese and Chinese pieces from as early as the 16th Century.

As you might well imagine then, we are beyond excited at the prospect of creating such an amazing resource as this one…and certainly anxious to begin transforming the ground on which it will soon stand. So on behalf of our Art Board, our Art Program, and everyone here at UMUC, I would like to express our profound gratitude to all of you who have worked so hard and given so generously to make what was once a dream into an imminent reality.

At his time I would like to introduce Mike Batza, one of the driving forces behind this project. Mike has been a true inspiration and tenacious partner to bring this project to fruition.

Thank you.

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