

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Giant Munkácsy masterpiece traveling from Art Gallery of Hamilton to Hungary for 5-year loan

On Wednesday, July 22nd, two huge crates will board an airplane to begin the journey to the Déri Museum in Debrecen, Hungary's second largest city. Inside these crates rest the canvas and frame of the 500-pound, 14 by 21 foot oil painting, *Christ before Pilate* by Mihály Munkácsy (Hungarian 1844–1900). The painting features a crowd of life-size figures posed in various attitudes and was the first work in the artist's famed Passion trilogy.

Christ before Pilate was donated to the AGH as part of over 200 works gifted by philanthropists and art collectors Joey and Toby Tanenbaum in 2002. When the work entered the AGH collection, the Gallery honoured a generous precedent set by the Tanenbaums in 1995, agreeing to loan the painting to the Déri Museum where all three works in Munkácsy's Passion trilogy were displayed. The trilogy was visited by tens of thousands each year, and was an important field trip for Hungarian schoolchildren. In accordance with Moveable Canadian Cultural Property Export rules (under which the painting entered the Gallery's collection), the painting returned to the Art Gallery of Hamilton in late 2007. *Christ before Pilate* was featured in an exhibition at the AGH from February 16 to April 27, 2008, on view in one of the few Gallery exhibition spaces large enough to house the epic work.

For the next five years – with special permission from the federal government's Department of Canadian Heritage for the loan – the massive picture will reside in a special wing of the Déri Museum built especially for Munkácsy's Passion trilogy. The Déri Museum will also undertake needed conservation work on the 128 year-old painting.

"Having the work on view in the Art Gallery of Hamilton was truly a visual treat for our Members and visitors and illustrated the strength of our collection," said AGH President and CEO Louise Dompierre. "I've stood before this painting and experienced its grandeur, so I can appreciate how attached the Hungarian people are to this key work in the trilogy. I know visitors to the Déri Museum will be thrilled to see all three works together again."

Founded in 1914, the Art Gallery of Hamilton is Canada's seventh largest public art gallery (and Ontario's third largest), owns one of the country's best art collections, welcomes over 160,000 visitors per year, and hosts an extensive programme of exhibitions, educational programmes, performances, talks, literary events, and film screenings.

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Backgrounder

Munkácsy and Wannamaker: The Artist and the Entrepreneur

When Munkácsy created the epic picture in 1881—his most ambitious project to date—he had already established himself in Paris as the most internationally successful Hungarian artist of the 19th century. Orphaned at an early age, Munkácsy was apprenticed to a carpenter, but showed an aptitude for drawing, and began taking lessons from an itinerant painter. He burst upon the Paris art scene in 1870 when his painting, titled *Death Row*, unexpectedly won a gold medal at the Paris Salon, and became famous practically overnight. After his marriage to the widow of Baron De Marches, he became one of the most popular painters of wealthy Parisians, particularly renowned for his drawing room scenes. In 1900, he died in a German sanatorium, and was buried in Budapest with great pomp.

John Wanamaker, founder of Wanamaker department store chain in Pennsylvania and New York, purchased *Christ before Pilate* from the artist on February 8, 1887 for an undisclosed sum which was nonetheless reported by The New York Times as “higher than has ever been paid before for a modern painting.” In 1888, Wanamaker purchased another massive painting from Munkácsy – entitled *Golgotha or Christ on Calvary* – a second in what became a Passion trilogy by the artist. Wanamaker loaned both paintings to the World Exhibition in Paris in 1889, and then the Chicago Exhibition in 1893. Beginning in 1928, the two paintings were displayed on the grand concourse of the flagship John Wanamaker department store in downtown Philadelphia every Easter.

The Wanamaker chain fell into financial difficulties, and the paintings – along with other works from the Wanamaker art collection – were auctioned by Sotheby’s in 1988, where collectors Joey and Toby Tanenbaum purchased *Christ before Pilate*. When the work entered the AGH collection in 2002, the Gallery honoured a generous precedent set by the Tanenbaums in 1995, agreeing to loan the painting to the Déri Museum in Debrecen, Hungary, where all three works in the Munkácsy Passion trilogy were displayed.

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