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Former Eiteljorg museum leader John Vanausdall dies at 68

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John Vanausdall was hired as president of the [Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art](#) in October 1996. (Photo provided by Casey Cronin)

John Vanausdall, CEO and president of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art from 1996 until his retirement in 2023, died Saturday. He was 68.

Vanausdall, who grew up in Lebanon, oversaw signature Eiteljorg initiatives such as a biennial contemporary art

fellowship, the annual Indian Market and Festival and the annual Quest for the West Art Show and Sale.

Vanausdall's work at the Eiteljorg included facility upgrades such as the redesigned Native American Galleries that debuted in 2022 on the second floor of the building that opened in 1989 as part of White River State Park. The \$6 million renovation phased out displays arranged by geographic region and instead focuses on three themes: relation, continuation and innovation.

Kathryn Haigh, formerly the chief operating officer at Newfields art museum and gardens, succeeded Vanausdall as CEO and president of the Eiteljorg.

"This is a great loss for the Eiteljorg Museum and our entire community," Haigh said in a written statement. "John Vanausdall devoted decades to celebrating and uplifting the arts, histories and cultures of the Native peoples of North America and all the diverse peoples of the American West. His kindness and consideration toward others will long be remembered, and his strategic thinking that positioned the museum for the future will leave a lasting legacy. I feel fortunate to have known him, and I know all of us at the Eiteljorg will try to carry on his good work."

The museum's Native American art collection includes items from Native nations throughout North America. The Eiteljorg's Western art collection includes works by Georgia O'Keeffe, Frederic Remington and Charles Russell.

Before his tenure at the Eiteljorg, Indiana University alum Vanausdall worked at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis from 1978 to 1996. His roles at the Children's Museum included director of research and planning.

Julie Goodman, CEO and president of Indy Arts Council, paid

tribute to Vanausdall when he announced plans to retire.

“John Vanausdall is a visionary leader whose impact on Indianapolis arts and culture cannot be overstated,” Goodman said in 2022. “His commitment to inclusion, access, equity and community partnerships throughout his 26-year tenure have made the Eiteljorg Museum the dynamic cultural center it is today—not only in Indianapolis, but nationally.”

Vanausdall is survived by his adult daughters Emily and Hannah, four grandchildren, his partner, Carrie, and Carrie’s two sons. Arrangements are pending at Leppert Mortuaries in Indianapolis. Memorial contributions can be made to the John Vanausdall Capital Improvement Endowed Fund at the Eiteljorg.

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