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A Gift *to the* Viewer



Reconfigured Galleries Offer a Bold Experience

It's better to contemplate a work of art with wonder than certainty. It's better to explore and discover. That's the philosophy Howard Collinson expressed two years ago when he took the job as director of the University of Iowa Museum of Art. When he opened the doors to the public after closing the museum for a month in the summer of 2001, Collinson invited visitors to explore and discover a bold, new look for galleries that had remained unchanged for three decades.

The museum had never been closed before for an extended period of time, according to curator Pamela Trimpe. But behind closed doors during August 2001, she and curators Kathleen Edwards and Victoria Rovine added finishing touches to a reinstatement of roughly 22,000 square feet of gallery space.

Some of the changes are cosmetic. The museum now features the kinds of amenities commonplace in galleries across the country these days: a coffee shop that serves hot and cold beverages and snacks; an expanded gift shop that boasts a dazzling array of jewelry designed by University of Iowa art students, as well as books and cards relating to current exhibits; and a space for live performance. The museum also reopened with new hours: noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, with extended hours until 10 p.m. on Thursday and Friday.

Students from the School of Art and Art History find inspiration in an expanded display of African art.



But the biggest change is the way the galleries have been arranged and the art explained.

The museum's new space accommodates more drawings, paintings, and sculpture from its permanent collection of more than

12,000 pieces of art. Collinson and his staff have orchestrated an arrangement that features twice as much of the museum's African art; a new configuration of Navajo, Hopi, and Pueblo art; video and film works; and more European and American art. Within these areas, the reinstallation has grouped artwork together based on broad topics, with paintings within movements and from specific eras organized so visitors can follow the evolution of a particular style.

"We wanted to make this a museum about art, instead of just a museum of art," says Collinson, who holds a doctorate in art history from Yale University. "I believe in making each visit rich with meaning and interactive participation."

Collinson and his staff rewrote signs for every exhibition and composed detailed title cards that provide history and information beyond the basics.

"People don't care to read merely that Mark Rothko was born in Russia," Collinson says. "You have to describe the relevance of facts."

Plexiglass racks on the walls at the front of each exhibition contain one- or two-page manuscripts that convey artistic, historical, and social contexts, giving visitors another way to learn about what they're seeing.

Halogen lamps have replaced incandescent bulbs inside the museum, a change that uncovers the vibrancy of colors in paintings and other works. Gone is the yellow cast of old, Trimpe notes, pointing out that the new lights elicit nuances of color that were hard to see before.

Even repositioning a piece of art can provide new insight. An enormous painting nearly 20 feet wide, Jackson Pollock's *Mural* used to hang in the museum's central court, but the curators moved the painting to a room that forces the viewer to stand within several yards of the work, an intimacy that makes its size all the more impressive.

"It's like seeing it for the first time, like getting an idea of what it must have been like in the foyer of Peggy Guggenheim's apartment 50 years ago," Trimpe says.

The changes also include creative ways of integrating the museum with the rest of the campus. Through live performances inside the museum over the past year, Collinson has welcomed other parts of the arts campus, such as Hancher Auditorium, the School of Music, and theatre arts, as well as areas of the larger campus as wide-ranging as undergraduate rhetoric classrooms and the Writers' Workshop.

Collinson also hopes to make inroads into the world beyond the Iowa campus, establish rapport with community agencies, and cultivate a following of art lovers among the state's schoolchildren. When the exhibition of William Wegman's photographs of Weimaraner dogs opened this past January, for example, Collinson and his staff helped bring Wegman's work to life through a variety of local events, including a lecture from the director of the Iowa City Animal Care and Adoption Center about the problem of homeless dogs.

What's next? Just as an artist might follow the adage that a work of art can never be completed but only abandoned, Collinson has reached a stopping point.

"This is a first draft," he says, with an appraisive nod toward a room full of explosive landscapes, jagged ribbons of crimson and black, and vermilion nudes in a primitive paradise. "I'm optimistic."

Art lovers from Iowa City's City High School come to spend time with curator Pamela Trimpe (left) and Jackson Pollock's famous *Mural*.

