



A Museum Reimagined

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art debuts a new look and feel for its permanent collection by moving walls, adding color and letting the paintings talk to each other in new ways.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

Walking through the newly reinstalled galleries of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art with museum director Mark White is like being at a party where you meet new and interesting people while seeing old friends in a new light.

“Alumni, faculty, staff and students have helped to put this collection together over the past century,” says White, the Wylodean and Bill Saxon Director of the University of Oklahoma art museum. “These works are part of the university family.”

And family, except in rare instances, should not be kept in a vault.

For years, White had been thinking of how to bring important works out of storage and integrate them into existing galleries to create a fresh experience for museum visitors. The best way, he concluded, was also the most labor-intensive. He and his staff would reimagine the museum’s disparate collections as a whole and re-group them in purposeful ways to generate new connections and bring energy and vitality into one of the country’s foremost university art museums.

After a year of planning, an intensive, two-month period of manual labor followed. Museum staff took down existing installations, moved and painted walls, created labels and wrote gallery-entry texts. Led by White and Hadley Jerman, the Eugene B. Adkins curator, the small but mighty team overhauled the museum’s first- and second-floor interiors for its first reorganization and reinstallation in 15 years.

Opposite Left: A recently displayed gift from the late collectors Bill and Roxanne Thams, *Waiting* by Jennie Christine “Jane” Peterson (U.S., 1876-1965). A colorful, carved wooden animal from the museum’s “Menagerie” gallery.

Above: One of the treasures from museum storage is *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* from the studio of Anthony Van Dyck, ca. 1640. Until this past October, the 1982 gift from Mrs. Leonard Woodruff had not been seen by the public for decades.

Their goal was to offer visitors a new perspective on a familiar place. The result, which debuted to the public in early October, reflects a chronological, global survey of the history of art told through the museum’s collections.

Spanning from antiquity to modernity, spaces are filled with art and artifacts from Europe, the Americas, Papua New Guinea, China, and North and West Africa. Galleries are welcoming, open, logical and, most notably, colorful.

Purposefully chosen wall colors accent the undertones of the paintings, sculptures and artifacts on display, offering a visual guide to visitors through the reimagined spaces. Colors represent associations between the work and the space. Warm red, for example, highlights the artifacts devoted to a gallery of Chinese religious iconography. Cool green, deep purple and even neon pink lend to the overall narrative.

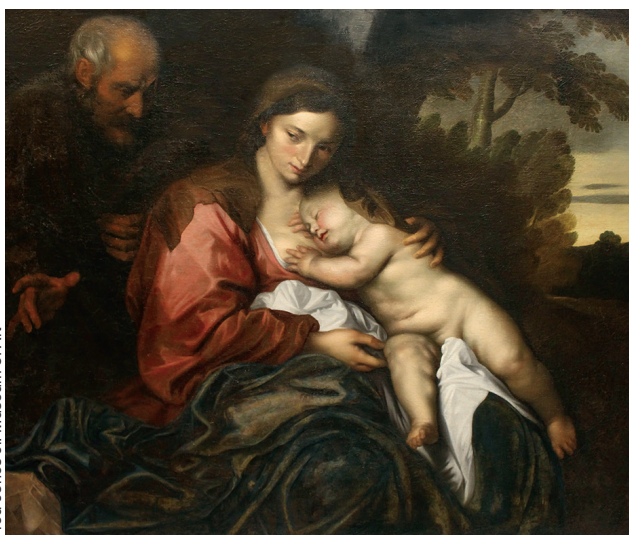
With two exceptions – the Aaron M. and Clara Weitzenhoffer Collection of French Impressionism and the James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection – the various collections donated from individuals are no longer shown in distinctive, separate galleries but have migrated to other parts of the museum, integrated into a thoughtfully conceived art history timeline.

“The concept is to arrange the galleries in a thematic and chronological way, so that one gallery leads to another in a progression that makes sense

to viewers,” says White. “As we took everything out and began putting things together, it was important to create that flow to showcase the collection in a meaningful way.”

A rich and diverse sampling of the nearly 20,000-piece permanent collection is on display, with some works on view for the first time. A once-frameless painting, long stored and unseen, is just one example of rediscovered treasure. *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, a copy from the studio of Anthony van Dyck circa 1640, portrays the holy family in an all-too-human scenario: Joseph as a worried father; Jesus, a hungry infant cranky from travel; and Mary, a loving mother who only wants a moment to comfort her baby. The composition, unseen for half a century, serves as an entrée to the reimagined visitor experience.

“This painting has been in the collection since the 1940s,” says White, “It had been in storage and was in pretty bad



Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art



Mexican muralist Emilio Amero joined the OU art faculty in 1946. Like his contemporary Diego Rivera, Amero gave voice to his cultural heritage and identity. “The Game” recalls Olmec and Toltec sculptures from ancient Mexico.

shape, but I knew I wanted to have it conserved and on view. For the first time in 50 years, this painting is out for people to enjoy, as opposed to sitting in darkness. The reinstatement allowed us to bring out a lot of pieces that had never been seen



Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art director Mark White shows off the second floor of the reconfigured museum, with the newly curated “Going West” exhibition seen in the background.

religions and faiths and for us, that doesn’t mean one faith in particular. Our collection helps us look at how the major religions of the world have created iconographic traditions.”

The reinstatement also offered an opportunity to display

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by the public, either in decades, or ever.”

The work anchors *Picturing Faith*, one of the introductory galleries that showcases the links between human history, art and religion.

“Instead of simply walking into this space, we wanted to explain what you are going to see,” says White. “What the title, *Picturing Faith*, tells you is that art and religion have been hand-in-hand for centuries. Art expresses many concepts of

many pieces of the museum’s impressive African collection as the theme of spirituality and faith is carried forward. *Tangible Spirits* showcases a collection of artifacts from Papua New Guinea in a gallery bathed in earthy green. Ceremonial masks and artifacts representing different tribes offer insight into the complex societies among the county’s numerous islands.

“It was rare to see objects from this part of the world before the Second World War because of its remote location,” ex-



The exhibition *Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture* showcases architectural history from the American School Archive, as well as virtual tours of several residences designed by the late OU architecture professor Bruce Goff and digitally rendered by Skyline Ink of Oklahoma City. The exhibit runs through April 5.

plains White. “This installation offers a representation of the spiritual life of the diverse cultures of the region.”

Moving further into the museum, visitors will encounter Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The pieces in *Sense and Sensibilities* explore how artists created works that were unquestionably modern for the time by adopting new theories of color and perception. The popular *Entrance to the Grand Canal*, by Thomas Moran, is now located there, its move reflective of the overall concept White and Jerman had for the interior redesign.

“Moran created a romantic view of Venice by exaggerating the brilliant hues of the saline atmosphere of the lagoon,” says White. “Light, for him, like for the Impressionists, became a means for creating an emotional response. It makes sense for this painting to be here with works of the same era.”

Showcased at the end of the first floor and visible from the entryway is a grouping of some of the most unique and iconic pieces in the collection: *The Studies for the Riverside Studio Murals* by 1928 OU graduate Olinka Hrdy. Displayed on a striking, light jade-green wall, the pieces serve as a focal point and anchor for the entire first floor – an exploration into the early 20th century when art-

ists turned to the built environment of the city and industry for inspiration.

Hrdy created the Art Deco studies as an abstract visualization of music for the piano studio of a Tulsa home designed by famed OU professor and architect Bruce Goff. The nine murals from the home on Riverside Drive no longer exist, but the studies survived.

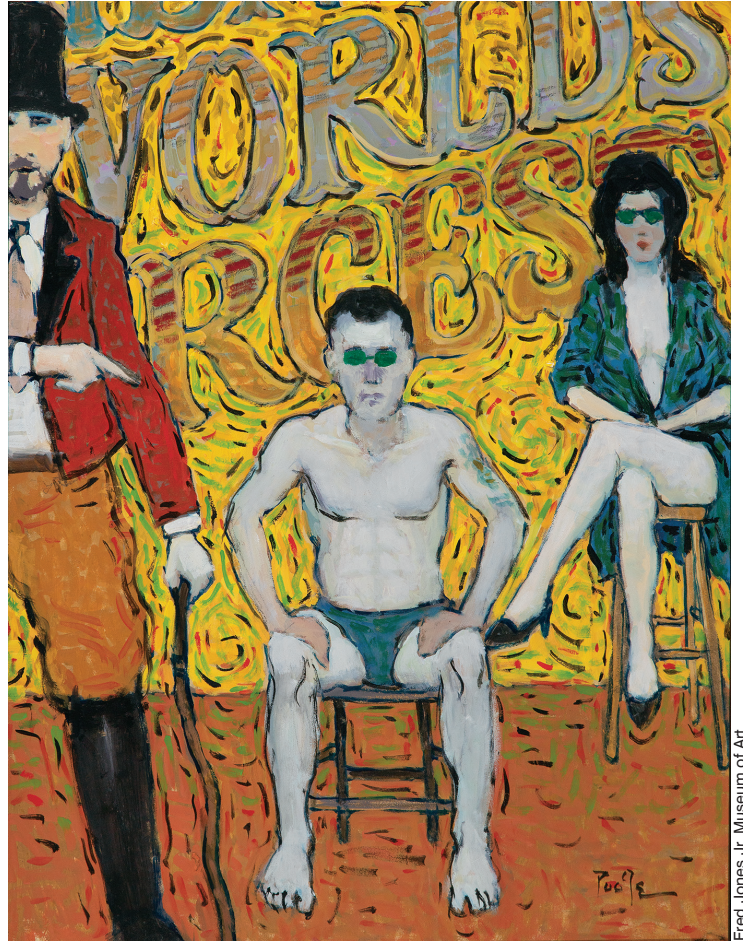
“Here is a good example of our thinking about gallery design,” says White. “This started with the idea of showcasing these iconic mural studies. We knew this wall would be a draw for people coming into the museum because you can see it all the way from the entryway. From the beginning I wanted a color that people would identify from the 1920s and the jade does that in almost a perfect way.”

As visitors make their way around the first floor they will encounter additional gallery titles, including *Living in the Machine Age*, *Art as Activism* and *Digging Deeper: Archeology and National Identity*. Drivers on Boyd Street are treated to a nightly display from the neon pink and yellow walls that showcase *Menagerie*, a fun and playful exhibit that features previously unseen portions of the museum’s extensive collec-



Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art

Quilting, an oil on canvas by OU MFA Eugene Jesse Brown (U.S. 1897-1963), is newly on view at the Fred Jones. The painting was a product of Brown's 1955 master's thesis examining different kinds of work within the African-American community, including textile manufacturing.



Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art

The exhibition *Sideshow*, on display through May 10, features enigmatic and witty caricatures from the mind of O. Gail Pool. The late Oklahoman's commentary on society enlists several styles from the Renaissance to Impressionism, shown here in the swirling background of *Strong Man*.

tion of Mexican and Navajo carvings.

While portions of the Native American collections remain on the first floor as part of the overall narrative of art history and Native culture, one of the most striking changes in the museum is on the second floor. As curator and designer of this space, Jerman says she began her work by dismantling the long walls that had once formed hallways down the center of the room.

Architect Rand Elliott designed the 2011 Stuart Wing with moveable walls to give directors and curators maximum flexibility for installations. For the reconfigured walls, Jerman selected a deep



A whimsical carved owl from the "Menagerie" Gallery.

purple to accent the undertones of paintings and artifacts, creating a sense of intimacy in the vast space.

Southwest and Native American art are strongly represented in the museum's collection, Jerman says, but devoting two floors to the genre stretched the collection in uncomfortable ways.

The assembled works in *Going West* tell a multicultural, comprehensive story of the Southwest and Native art and showcase its importance to art history.

"I wanted to incorporate more ancient art here," Jerman says. "If you start with the Adkins Collection, it is easy to talk about Euro-American artists coming to the



Museum preparator Brad Stevens was kept busy during the reinstallation, matting, framing and installing works from the museum’s permanent collection that had not been displayed in years.

Southwest, having a spiritual experience with that environment, and making art that responded to Native communities.

“It is harder to tell the broader story with just Adkins materials, but by using artifacts from the permanent collection, we can start talking about art in the Southwest as a whole.”

A Navajo blanket on display is one of the first objects purchased for the museum by its original director, Oscar Jacobson. It serves as a connection to the Southwest, to Oklahoma and to OU’s history. The paintings, pottery, weavings, sculpture and jewelry on display on the second floor offer insight into the many interpretations of the American West. It’s a sacred homeland, a romanticized myth and a harsh reality. The perspectives are as vast as the landscapes.

Jerman highlights a historical turning point in the gallery, a painting from the museum’s collection of American artists who were chosen to participate in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) project during the Great Depression.

The 1936 *Montana Earthquake* by Jon Corbino depicts terrified humans and horses struggling to escape a shaking, collapsing barn. The image seems to be a metaphorical observation on the fading ideal of the Western myth.

“This is such a great painting to interpret because of all the activity depicted during an earthquake,” she explains. “You have death, chaos and environmental destruction. Behind the barn a cowboy leads a white horse to safety. This is the idyllic, romantic West. Everything else is collapsing, but he is surrounded by sunshine and mountains. The painting demonstrates what this gallery does – which is showcase artists and their response not only to the mystic West and its popular culture, but also to devastation in the West.”

Jerman also made a conscious effort to incorporate the work of women artists in the gallery and White adds that diversity is an important aspect of the reinstallation.

“We have been able to emphasize the diversity of our collection far more than we had been able to do in the past. For us, diversity is striking a balance

between women and men artists, artists of various racial and social backgrounds. In the end, I think we are really happy with what we have been able to accomplish – forming connections, pulling things together and creating a grand narrative.”

Valerie Moore says she felt joyful during her first visit to the reimagined spaces. As a longtime museum patron, the OU alumna and Norman resident is planning many return trips to take it all in.

“I think the creators of those spaces must have had an absolute ball,” she says. “It’s like an explosion of creativity went off inside on every floor. The spaces are so inviting and open, which supports contemplation and exploration. And I feel as if the paintings are happy to be together, chosen to hang in a thoughtful way. The vibrant colors and wide varieties of art make me want to come back again and again.”

With those sentiments, it seems Jerman and White and their long months of planning have indeed breathed new life into a much-loved and familiar space.



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