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FALL PREVIEW '93
Featuring a Look at
What's New at the "U"

The Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum

Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum
Opening in Late November



Both Sides Now

MINNESOTA
SEPTEMBER • OCTOBER 1993

Angel hair,
feather canyons,
ice cream castles
in the air. Welcome
to the museum
of the imagination,
where art's illusions
you'll recall,
even if you
don't know art—
at all

BY PAMELA LAVIGNE

W here once stood a sleepy little hill topped by a small parking lot on the Twin Cities campus, now there's this . . . structure that

causes the average viewer to exclaim, What the heck is that?!

That is the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum—the Fred, as insiders affectionately say.

It's a place for displaying, at long last, the University's art collections; it's also a building that provokes strong reaction. Folks who probably never realized they had an opinion on contemporary architecture are rendering one now: It's ugly; I hate it. It's great; I love it. One disgruntled student wrote the *Minnesota Daily* to ask if protective eye-wear will be issued so we won't be blinded by it on a sunny day.

Let me tell you how I see it.

The University's new art museum is a spirited and welcome new presence on campus, a building that's a piece of sculpture outside and a serene skylit space inside.

Its riverfront face—an unseemly jumble that juts and swoops—is startling at first. But walk or drive over the Washington Avenue Bridge from the West Bank, and the building becomes your playful companion. The stainless steel exterior creates a kind of seersucker effect, dimpling the shiny panels with shadow. At sunrise, it is a silver spacecraft, at sunset a golden castle reflecting its environment like a futuristic mirror. Windows cut into the curves and planes promise intriguing vantage points up and down the river. The bobbing of a tiny white hard hat gives away a hidden balcony. And notice: for all its volume, the facade has an amazing lightness; this building is not going to fall into the river.

Although Cass Gilbert's 1910 prize-winning design for the Twin Cities campus honored its dominant landmark, the deep gorge cut by the Mississippi (designs show students arriving by boat at the river flats and advancing up several stepped plazas to the heights of Northrop), in fact nearly every University building has turned its back to the water—until the coming of this museum and its across-the-river neighbor, the Ted Mann Concert Hall on the West Bank.

Let's check out what's inside.



The museum opens directly onto the pedestrian level of the bridge; a huge metal overhang, curved like the faceplate of a medieval suit of armor, makes a dramatic marquee. The museum shop and art rental office are just inside. Turn right to see what that squiggly facade looks like from the other side. The Dolly Fiterman Riverview Gallery, named after Twin Cities art dealer Dolly Fiterman, '42, is cozy, despite the unusual angles of the wall. From here, downtown Minneapolis is a jumble of shapes; is the museum's exuberant facade really just a humorous interpretation of the view from its own windows?

The museum proper, to the left when we come in, is a high rectangular area divided into five galleries: four *en suite* and a fifth running like an interior street past them all. Awash in softly diffused natural light from skylights, the space is calming and clear—a complete departure from the boisterous exterior. If this building were somebody you knew in high school, it would be the wisecracking kibitzer who turns up for the prom in a tuxedo and dances like Fred Astaire.

Now do you see why I like this new building?

The University Art Museum was formed in 1934 under then University president Lotus Coffman. Growing up in rural Indiana, he had had little or no exposure to art, music, and culture, and he felt keenly the gaps in his education. Consequently, he wrote, his “dream of long standing” was to have “every student at the University of Minnesota, and every individual in this community, exposed as frequently as possible to the things that make life worth living, to the cultural inheritances of the human race.”

But accomplishing Coffman's aim has been difficult. There was scant funding for the enterprise after Coffman's tenure and, in recent years, only minuscule, obscure exhibition space. Art Sandwiched In, the name of the museum's long-running noontime series of informal lectures, might just as well have described the museum's galleries, tucked away on the third and fourth floors of Northrop Auditorium.

With a \$3 million gift from entrepreneur, art collector, and University alumnus Frederick R. Weisman, Coffman's dream is finally being achieved. “I do feel a great deal of satisfaction about the building,” says museum director Lyndel King. “We've been in our ‘temporary’ quarters for about 60 years now.”

A separate museum building gives the visual arts new visibility, she says. “The building by its very design says that it's about art. Our building by its design is a work of art. Even just its presence on campus says the arts are important,” she says. “Finally we'll be able to fulfill our



Alfred H. Maurer
Girl in White, 1901

educational mission.”

Besides the galleries themselves, the museum incorporates specialized teaching space, such as a “black box” classroom, ideal for viewing slides and films (or for a small combo should there be a party in the adjoining Riverview Gallery). The large picture windows on the pedestrian level of the bridge will expose even passers-by to the collection.

Through internships and graduate work, students can delve into the behind-the-scenes aspects of running a museum, seeing what it takes to acquire, catalog, display, store, and ship works of art. For the first time, the art museum in its new space has technical areas that are large, thoughtfully designed, and under one roof.

The museum's gala opening is Satur-

day, November 20. An international symposium “New Art Museums: Revis(ion)ing Architecture, Art, and Culture” will be held December 10-11. The event, which will bring together Gehry and other internationally known architects, will be a rare opportunity to see slides and hear architects talk about museum design and how it interacts with the display of visual arts.

Museum staff member Colleen Sheehy is designing educational activities for the museum's inaugural year; most of the public programs will kick off during winter quarter, she says. For example, Interrogating Museums: Cultural Diversity and Representation in the Visual Arts, an honors colloquium she will teach, examines “how women and people of color—as both subject and artist—have been included or excluded in museums and what museums are doing to redress imbalances,” Sheehy says.

Harrison Fraker, dean of the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, will give a public talk about the building December 5. For those interested in a longer look, University faculty member John Archer, an architectural historian, is teaching a course on the museum as both building and cultural institution.

“Because the building is the embodiment of a very creative artist and architect, we think it can serve as a metaphor for the creativity of a university at its best,” Sheehy says. A series of Sunday-afternoon talks, called Taking Chances: Creativity at the University, will feature University faculty. Invited to inaugurate the series in January is psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of the University of Chicago.

At the end of April, the museum will present a slide-and-interview event “A Conversation with Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence.” Jacob Lawrence is one of several African American painters represented in the University's collection. Now retired as a professor at the University of Washington, Lawrence uses significant people and events in African American history in his work; *Dancing Doll* from 1947 appears in the museum's opening show.

The first group of tour guides—including alumni, student, faculty, and civil service volunteers—went through a six-week training program this summer,



Georgia O'Keeffe
Oriental Poppies, 1928

Sheehy says. Architecture students are also planning to develop more extensive tours of the building in its University context this fall, she adds. "Our mission is to become a University-wide resource."

Evan Maurer, director of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and a University student during the 1960s, welcomes the museum for two reasons: "It gives the University a real art museum," he says, a place that's "an interdisciplinary . . . focus for art on campus." And "it gives everybody a chance to see an important contemporary collection"—the Weisman collection of contemporary art. Unlike the Walker Art Center or the Institute, he says, the new University museum has the space to display the collection continuously.

As for the building itself, he makes a prediction: "It's going to be polemical because it's such a strong statement." Instead of placing a piece of sculpture in

front of the building, the architect "made the facade a sculpture." People will either love it or hate it, Maurer says, but either way "it's going to make people be aware of their environment and of architecture, and make them stretch their capacity to be critical. I think it's going to be a very fascinating addition to our community."

Architect Frank Gehry is known as an enfant terrible of contemporary architecture. This is the man who capped a Venice, California, beach house with a glass-walled room that echoes the lifeguard stands along the ocean, the man whose own traditional home visually disturbs the peace with its tool-shed-like siding and a chain-link fence.

Gehry created a sensation once before in the Twin Cities. The guest house on Lake Minnetonka he designed for Michael and Penny ('74) Winton looks like brightly colored blocks scattered across a lawn by a playful baby giant: cone for the living room, shoebox for kitchen and garage, bunker for bedroom.

In 1986, the Walker Art Center organized a major retrospective of Gehry's work. Besides buildings, he designs furniture, from sinuous nesting chairs made of brown corrugated paper to blond bentwood shapes whose names—"Slap Shot" and "Hat Trick"—and materials—flat wide sticks—reveal the designer's fondness for hockey. His big glass-scaled fish, originally a resident of the Walker lobby, now is suspended above the water lily pond in the Cowles Conservatory at the Minneapolis sculpture garden.

At the same time the University's new art museum was being designed, Gehry's

firm was also working on the American Cultural Center in Paris and on an office building in Prague that the *New York Times* reports has been nicknamed “Fred and Ginger” because its twin towers evoke the famous dance partners.

Gehry’s design for the Weisman museum won the prestigious Progressive Architecture Award in 1992.

Arguably the piece in the University collection best known to the public is *Oriental Poppies* by Georgia O’Keeffe. Those familiar with this brilliant red image from the museum’s notecards will enjoy the much larger scale of the original—and its horizontal orientation. A graduate student doing work on the collection a few years ago realized in looking at early newspaper clippings that the way the painting was hanging and being portrayed—vertically—wasn’t right.

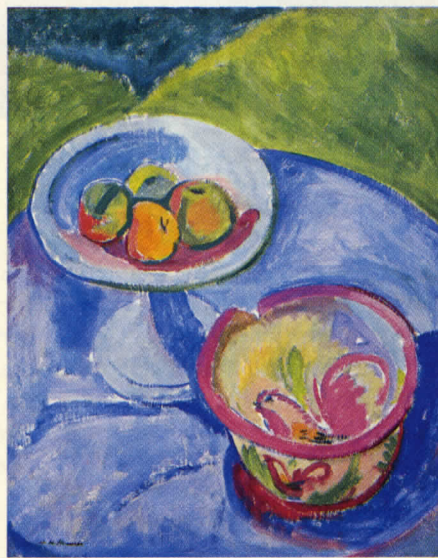
Another O’Keeffe work, *Oak Leaves, Pink and Gray*, was the first piece the fledgling museum acquired, and the trail that led to it led ultimately to the museum’s depth in early twentieth century American painting.

In 1934 the museum’s first curator, Hudson Walker, advised President Coffman not to amass an encyclopedic collection for the University’s museum but to concentrate instead on American painting being done at that time. After only a few months as curator, however, the 27-year-old Walker, heir to the lumber fortune behind today’s Walker Art Center, left to open an art gallery in New York. A dominant figure already on the scene was art dealer Alfred Stieglitz, who was promoting the works of young American artists, one of whom—Georgia O’Keeffe—became his wife.

Meanwhile, the University designated a Fine Arts Room, a space set aside, in the Japanese tradition, for the quiet contemplation of beauty. A single work was purchased: O’Keeffe’s *Oak Leaves*. In February 1936, in 30-below temperatures, the University museum opened its first large exhibit, which featured many of the American artists Stieglitz represented. By popular vote, exhibit visitors determined a favorite artist whose work should be purchased next. Thus, the museum acquired O’Keeffe’s *Oriental Poppies*.

The University has the world’s largest collections of work by Marsden Hartley and Alfred Maurer, explains curator Patricia McDonnell, herself a Hartley scholar. In addition, the museum is strong in works by B. J. O. Nordfeldt, and it has been named recipient of the estate of Charles Biederman, a reclusive artist living in southern Minnesota who is known for his vibrantly colored, highly abstract “constructions.”

Maurer and Hartley were championed by Stieglitz, who organized solo shows for each and included both in several landmark group shows. When Stieglitz became concerned that Hartley was losing focus on his work, he agreed to allow Hudson Walker to represent him. An enthusiastic supporter of the older artist, Walker purchased most of Hartley’s estate when he died. When Maurer committed suicide, Walker likewise acquired all of his estate from his widow. Although his gallery closed after only three years, Hudson Walker and his wife, Ione, continued to collect works by American artists. They are remembered as generous benefactors whose gifts and bequest form the core strengths of the University Art Museum.



Alfred H. Maurer
Still Life, circa 1908

The opening exhibit, *A New View*, will showcase the University Art Museum’s permanent collection plus works from the Weisman collection. In addition, it will

include an exhibit of artists who have influenced architect Gehry. Noteworthy among this group are Claes Oldenburg and his wife, Coosje van Bruggen, who created *Spoonbridge and Cherry* in the sculpture garden across the street from the Walker. Gehry is designing the installation of this opening show.

Some 100 works from the University’s permanent collection will be arranged into four themes, says curator McDonnell. Grouping by content rather than chronology, she says, is a new approach for museums that is particularly well suited to conveying ideas to students who are critically considering art for the first time.

The first theme highlights the collection’s breadth by giving an overview of American painting from the turn of the century through the 1930s. The influence of Matisse and Cezanne are evident in the expressionist works and some early abstractions. The theory of “synchronism” developed by Stanton MacDonald-Wright is brilliantly demonstrated in two abstract paintings shimmering with color, painted between 1915 and 1920.

The second theme offers in-depth profiles of four artists—Hartley, Maurer, Nordfeldt, and Biederman—by showing works from all phases of their careers. The portrait paintings in particular offer intriguing comparisons.

Maurer was well known for his later figurative paintings; *Girl in White*, circa 1901, shows his command of formal composition from early in his career. He painted women’s heads and torsos almost exclusively in the second half of his career. Since the features resemble Maurer’s and the faces age as he does, critics have suggested that these are evocative self-portraits. In his later years these images, with their large, haunting eyes, grow increasingly abstract.

Hartley called *One Portrait of One Woman* a “symbolic portrait,” the “moi” at its base referring to Gertrude Stein. Like Maurer some years earlier, Hartley lived and studied in Paris and frequented Stein’s artistic salons. The central blue teacup on a typically French checkered tablecloth recalls Stein’s afternoon gatherings; the predominantly red, white, and blue color scheme evokes both the United States and France.

The title of a Nordfeldt painting,

Seated New Mexican Man with Light Blue Coat, sums up the image but doesn't convey the treatment, which in its flatness and black outlining suggests a still life rather than a portrait.

The third theme is landscapes. Several Hartley works in this section show the painter's themes of mountains and the moods they evoke in the seasons of fall and winter.

"A Social Consciousness" is the fourth exhibit theme, which is illustrated largely by works on paper, from etchings to photographs. Most derive from the 1930s and 1940s; all depict social conditions in the United States at that time they were made.

The black-and-white photographs are especially affecting. Three by Lewis Hine, circa 1910, show child workers in textile mills and coal mines, their eyes old beyond their years. Photographs by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans document the effects of the Depression on rural Americans during the late 1930s. (The Hine photographs, curiously, had been in the Scandinavian studies department, says McDonnell, and were transferred to the museum in the 1960s.)

Three large murals will also appear in the opening exhibition. Two come from the U.S. Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair: a cartoonish pop art work by Roy Lichtenstein and another by alumnus James Rosenquist, '55, that was inspired by the first U.S. moon landing. The third, a mural fragment by Robert



Marsden Hartley
Portrait, circa 1914

Motherwell, caused a flap when it was shown in the new student center on the Duluth campus in 1956. Students and faculty—118 strong—signed a petition urging administrators to remove the "so-called painting," a "crude daub that looks like a deformed octopus alongside of two decayed dinosaur eggs." It stayed up for the duration of the exhibit. Looking at

this restrained abstraction now, it is hard to imagine what seemed so objectionable in the 1950s.

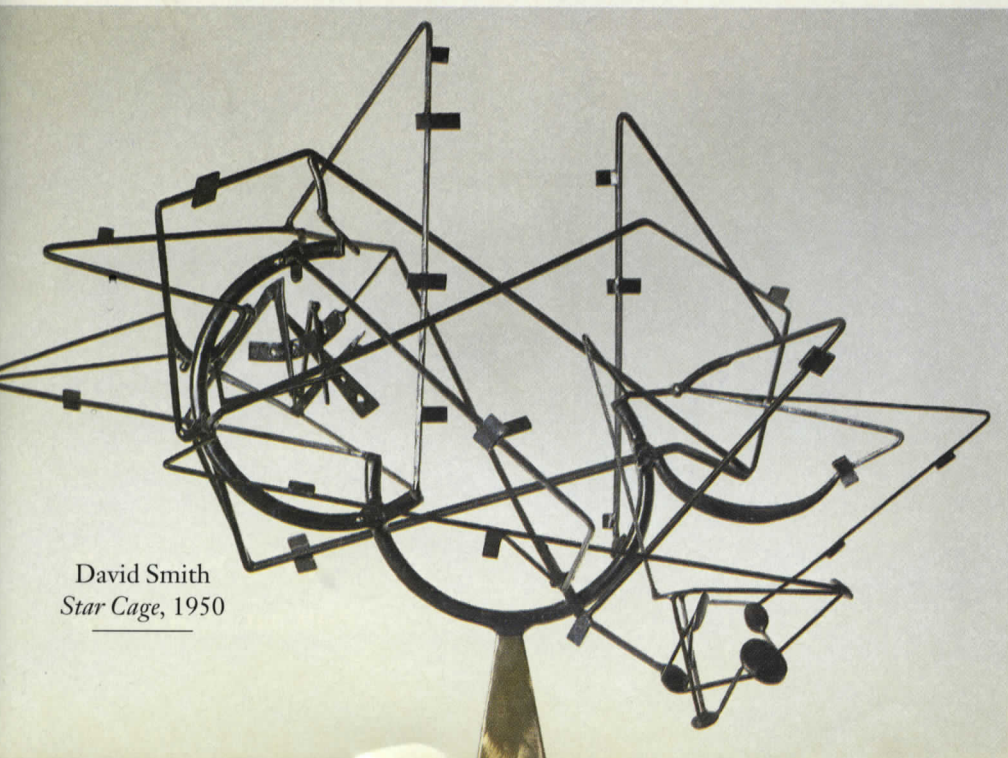
Besides the University's current holdings, the opening exhibit will give viewers a taste of the works in the Weisman collection promised to the University. In one grand gesture, this gift renews the museum's founding commitment: to present works by contemporary American artists.

Pieces from the Weisman collection date from roughly 1970 to the present and will be grouped in two themes: the figure and cultural critique. Among the works is Jonathan Borofsky's sculpture *Flying Frog with Chattering Man* at 2,845,322, a larger-than-life-sized black metal figure with an enormous blue/green neon arc over it. Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe*, a 1967 suite of ten silkscreened images, will be readily recognizable in the cultural critique section. Donor Weisman thinks students may take a liking to another series from his collection; the title describes the content: *Football Shoes*, by Arman.

When the opening exhibit comes down next year, there will still be plenty to look forward to in future shows. The University has the largest collection of Korean furniture outside of Korea, says McDonnell. And there are the New Deal paintings. In two months in the summer of 1934 the University organized its own version of the federal Public Works of Art Project, a predecessor of the Work Projects Administration. The University paid some half dozen artists \$35 a week to produce sketches; a faculty committee then decided which would become finished paintings.

"This is a visual society," says museum director Lyndel King. "The visual arts are important in helping people understand the world around them, helping them express their ideas about the world around them, and making them look at the world in a new way. College is a time when people are doing these sorts of things.

"It's important to have a museum like ours on campus to provide a stimulus, to provide a challenge, to provide a new way for people to look at the world. By its design and by its programs, our new museum is going to do that." ◀



David Smith
Star Cage, 1950