

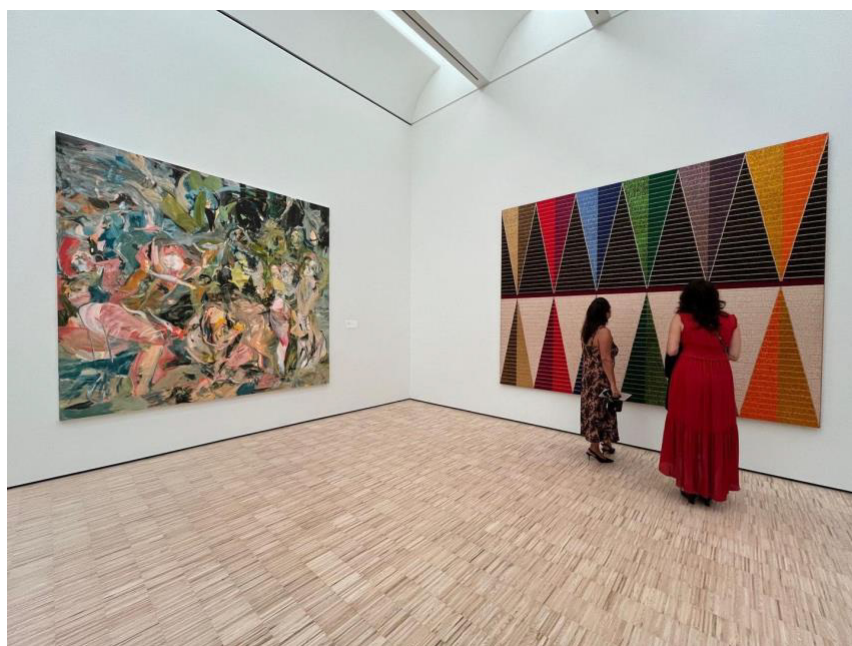
THE JOSLYN Forbes

Joslyn Art Museum In Omaha Does More Than Open New Building

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Dyani White Hawk painting (right) alongside Cecily Brown painting in contemporary art gallery at Joslyn Art Museum.

The Joslyn Art Museum has done it. Completely integrating Native American art into its broader American and contemporary galleries.

Plains beadwork work side-by-side with Mary Cassatt and Childe Hassam paintings in the American gallery. Thomas Hart Benton and the Kiowa Six as neighbors. Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Dakhóta) and Grant Wood.

The Omaha museum's contemporary galleries place Tom Jones (Ho-Chunk) with Mickalene Thomas, and Jeffrey Gibson (Choctaw) with Simone Leigh. A signature alcove given to Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke).

The Joslyn's spectacular new Snøhetta designed building connecting its original 1931 Art Deco jaw dropper with a 1994 addition will receive all the headlines as the museum opens following a

construction closure of more than two years, but a reinstallation of the artwork contained inside makes a greater statement even than the stunning new palace housing it.

American art museums have been making progress towards mainstreaming Indigenous art into their permanent collection display areas for a handful of years now—it's a recent development—the Joslyn goes all the way. No silos. No ghettoization. No *this* here, *that* there. One in the same. Native American art indistinguishable from American art.

"Integrating the Indigenous and non-Indigenous American collections into one American collection was at the forefront of this installation," Taylor Acosta, Joslyn Art Museum Chief Curator, told Forbes.com. "We wanted to tell one—albeit complex and multifaceted story—of American history, and explore 150 years of art and creativity across cultures, across traditions, but also be honest about the history of American Empire and it's continuing effects on Indigenous peoples and on the environment. We knew very early on in this reinstallation process that intertwining those historically separated collections was critical."

Critical in presenting an honest survey of American art, especially here in Omaha, a city named after the Umó'ho" tribe. Critical to defeating racist hierarchies, ending notions that painting on canvas is somehow more artistic or meritorious than painting on a buffalo robe simply because it's on canvas, art for art's sake, as opposed to functional as well. Critical to exposing the hypocrisy and white supremacy brokered by museums for more than 100 years, separating the (white) American art from the Native American art, inferring to audiences that Native Americans are some other, lesser kind of Americans.

It would be a ridiculous leap thinking the equality shown Native American art at the Joslyn will inspire greater equality be shown Native Americans in Omaha, across Nebraska, or nationwide, but it's what an art museum can do, and if every art museum in the nation followed, that would happen.

Joslyn Art Museum Highlights



Historic Native American beadwork in American art gallery at Joslyn Art Museum. Chadd Scott

When considering how to intertwine its previously segregated Native American and American collections, Joslyn staff landed on the themes of migration and travel.

“We have a really fine collection of American Impressionist paintings—Mary Cassatt, William Merritt Chase, Thomas Moran—and those were artists who went abroad in the late 19th century—often by virtue of great wealth and privilege—went abroad to study European approaches to art making and then brought those approaches back to the United States and applied them often to American subject matter,” Acosta explained. “At the same time in the United States, a new style of Native American art emerged which has been described as the ‘Prairie Style.’ This came as a result of thousands of Native Americans being forcibly removed from their homelands, merging and colliding and creating new traditions. This idea that great innovation and creativity comes from travel and migration, whether by virtue of great privilege or by virtue of the most horrific of circumstances, and what it would mean to look at artworks coming out of those two experiences in tandem, not as one being illustrative of the other, but to think about these concepts—and there's also brilliant visual connections between these artworks that were made at the same time.”

More Indigenous artwork is on view than ever before and shown in all-new, state-of-the-art cases, allowing it to be seen as never before, adequately lit, centered, with the pomp and circumstance typically reserved only for artworks descended from European traditions.

Highlighting the American galleries are a pair of buffalo robes on loan from the Ethnological Museum in Berlin acquired by German Prince Maximilian zu Wied during a trip made into the North American interior between 1830–1832. They haven’t been back in this part of the world since.

In the contemporary galleries, it’s Red Star’s *The Indian Congress* (2021) that takes center stage.

“Wendy Red Star was someone the museum had been interested in working with for a long time and we invited her to Omaha and to think about something she might like to devise specifically for (the Joslyn),” Acosta said. “She was interested in the history of this region, particularly in the history of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, and worked closely with our curator of Native American art to develop that installation.”

In 1898, citizens of thirty-five Native American nations arrived in present-day North Omaha to attend the Indian Congress.

Following its initial display in Omaha, the Joslyn Art Museum acquired the work and collaborated again with Red Star on how best to re-display the artwork in its new permanent collection galleries for contemporary art.

The robes and *Congress* exemplify another goal Acosta set out to achieve when reinstalling the museum.

“We wanted to make a display where you know you're at the Joslyn and you know you're in Omaha, not try to do The Met light, but really build something around the collections that we have,” she said.

Undeniably Omaha



Joslyn Art Museum expansion next to original 1931 museum building. Chadd Scott

Almost unbelievably, German-born Craig Dykers, a founding partner in the global architecture firm Snøhetta, spent a great deal of time in Nebraska during the 1980s traversing the state's backroads on an architectural odyssey in search of a then-unknown home designer. With an opportunity to guide the Joslyn's expansion, he called on those memories.

"One of the things that triggered my thinking was what most people don't think of as landscape, and that is the weather," Dykers told the media at a preview event on September 6. "The weather in Nebraska is special. If you're on a horizontal plane, you're looking out across the fields, and you see a storm coming. You know it's coming, and you can feel it. There's this kind of feeling of the clouds moving towards you—those clouds aren't just little puffy things, they can be extreme things, huge, and they go up into the sky a mile. They have an enormous sense of power and color, and to feel that—not many people get to feel that. So if you look at the building, all these swoops and swirls and shapes and moves, which are very different than the shapes of the previous buildings, are bringing people a hint of what it's like to be in the Nebraska landscape."

The Joslyn's two previous buildings, for the swooning beauty of their rose marble exteriors, are both boxy and lack windows. They recall a 20th century mindset.

"The challenge with older museums, the stereotype was that they were like freezers for art, fortresses, you put the stuff in there and they're protected forever—which is great—but it doesn't always work well with the human condition," Dykers explained. "Finding a balance between those two worlds is what we explored here."

The Joslyn's new 42,000-square-foot Rhonda & Howard Hawks Pavilion designed by the New York studio of Snøhetta is all curves and windows.

"(A) big, beautiful, joyous space filled with light," as Joslyn Art Museum Executive Director and CEO Jack Becker calls it.

Snøhetta landscape architect Michelle Delk was similarly inspired by the region when creating the museum's new outdoor spaces. She's from Iowa, right across the Missouri River from Omaha.

"The Nebraska Sandhills landscape that Omaha sits within was really inspiring to us and we were interested in understanding this landscape," Delk said. "At a glance, and what people often think, is that this is kind of a flat, monoculture landscape, but when you start looking more closely, and when you spend time here, when you spend time across different seasons, you find that it's incredibly subtle. There are rolling subtle hills. These beautiful, lush river corridors, and really diverse plants that survive in this grasslands. We imagined how the museum grounds might better reflect this beauty and the subtlety here across all the seasons."

Delk toured local tallgrass prairie and visited the state during its famous sandhill crane migration for inspiration. Turfgrass lawn has been reduced in favor of a native plant palette that once made this region "the American Serengeti" for its incredible plant and animal diversity.

All The Nice Things



Detail of Wendy Red Star, 'The Indian Congress,' (2012) at the Joslyn Art Museum
Chadd Scott

The Joslyn Art Museum spent over \$100 million on its expansion and renovation, a lot for a metro area home to roughly 1,000,000 people, ranking it about 60th largest in the country. That dollar amount is not exceptional for Omaha, however.

In summer of 2023, two major riverfront parks opened here, to go along with Gene Leahy Mall, opened the previous summer, a liner park downtown connecting to the riverfront parks. Total cost: \$325 million. In one of the riverfront parks, a new science center also opened in 2023. Total cost: \$101 million.

Steelhouse Omaha, a midsize live music venue a block from Gene Leahy Mall, opened in 2023. Total cost: \$104 million. The Omaha Performing Arts Center will also be opening its Tenaska center for arts engagement next to Steelhouse Omaha in 2026. Total cost: \$108 million.

A new public library opens in 2026. Total cost: \$158 million.

The city is less than a year into a \$950 million expansion and renovation of its airport set to debut in 2028

Omaha has money. Big money.

Four Fortune 500 companies are headquartered here: Berkshire Hathaway, Mutual of Omaha, Union Pacific, and construction giant Kiewit Corporation.

All those powerful executives and highly paid employees demand nice things. Nice parks. Nice museums. Nice sports and music venues. A nice airport. Nice hotels, like the Farnham Hotel, adjacent to Gene Leahy Mall, three blocks from the riverfront parks, and less than a mile from the Joslyn.

The timing of this civic spending splurge is easily connected to another Fortune 500 previously headquartered in Omaha, packaged food titan Conagra Brands. It decided to leave the city for Chicago in 2015, removing about 1,000 local jobs in the process. Conagra Brands still has a presence in Omaha, but not like before.

"I think that was a wakeup—god forbid Union Pacific leaves," Becker said, channeling public opinion at the shocking news. "We, like all other cities in the Midwest, (are thinking) how do we keep talent here and how do we bring talent here?"

The answer to that question is quality of life. Concerts and festivals and parks and museums on par with what can be found in Chicago or Denver or Dallas. Museums like the Joslyn Art Museum, which opens to the public on September 10, 2024, always with free admission.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/chaddscott/2024/09/09/joslyn-art-museum-in-omaha-does-more-than-open-new-building/>