

THE JOSLYN


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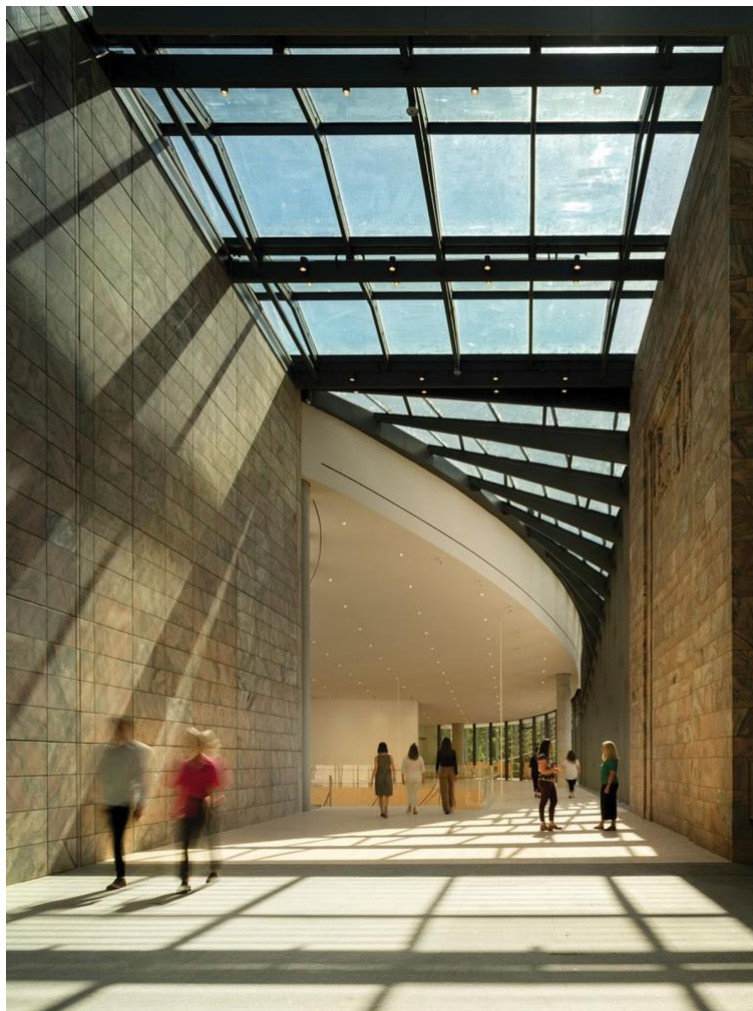
Omaha's Joslyn Art Museum reopens after \$100m expansion

By Gabriella Angeleti

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The museum expanded its exhibition space and reorganised its permanent collection for the first time in almost 100 years—with a special focus on Native American art



Curves and natural light feature in the Joslyn's new space, which the architecture firm Snøhetta describes as having "an almost meteorological, cloud-like form"

Photo: © Nic Lehoux; courtesy of the Joslyn Art Museum

The Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, reopens on 10 September after two years and a \$100m renovation and expansion. A landmark of the Great Plains region, the museum now features a complete rehang of its 12,000-piece collection—including more than 100 recent acquisitions and commissions—and a new 42,000 sq. ft pavilion designed by the architecture firm Snøhetta and the Omaha-based Alley Poyner Macchietto Architecture.

The museum's director, Jack Becker, says the expansion is a milestone for the city's burgeoning cultural sector. It rises alongside other projects like the \$325m development of the RiverFront complex downtown and two buildings scheduled to open in 2026: the \$108m Tenaska Center for Arts Engagement and the \$158m Central Library. "We wanted to think about what's good for Omaha and what's good for this community for decades to come," Becker tells *The Art Newspaper*. "What is it that we can do in the cultural arena to keep people—to have people stay in Omaha or move here?"

The museum's late founders, George and Sarah Joslyn, made their fortune in the ready-print business. The museum opened in 1931 with a \$3m bequest from the Joslyns; later funding was sourced from other notable local philanthropists. Most of the money for the museum's most recent projects has also come from donors and foundations based in Nebraska, including Rhonda and Howard Hawks (founder of the energy company Tenaska), for whom the atrium of the new pavilion is named.

Powerful presence

The original museum was housed in an Art Deco building that "has an enormously powerful presence", says Craig Dykers, a co-founder of Snøhetta, but it "had many challenges in relation to what a museum can be or how it functions". Its 1994 Norman Foster-designed expansion, which added a 58,000 sq. ft building to the campus, was "more or less like a brick or a block on a flat plate", Dykers adds, whereas the new Snøhetta design evokes "an almost meteorological, cloud-like form blowing past these two existing structures".



The redesigned and expanded Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska
Rendering courtesy of Moare

The revitalised grounds and sculpture garden, which span a vast three acres, feature 22 works, including newly commissioned sculptures by Alison Saar and Hank Willis Thomas, and two recent additions to the museum's collection by Mark di Suvero and Joel Shapiro. Winding paths lined with native plants weave through the grounds, with the reflecting pool *The Omaha Riverscape* (2008-09) by Jesús Moroles at the centre.

Cross-cultural perspectives

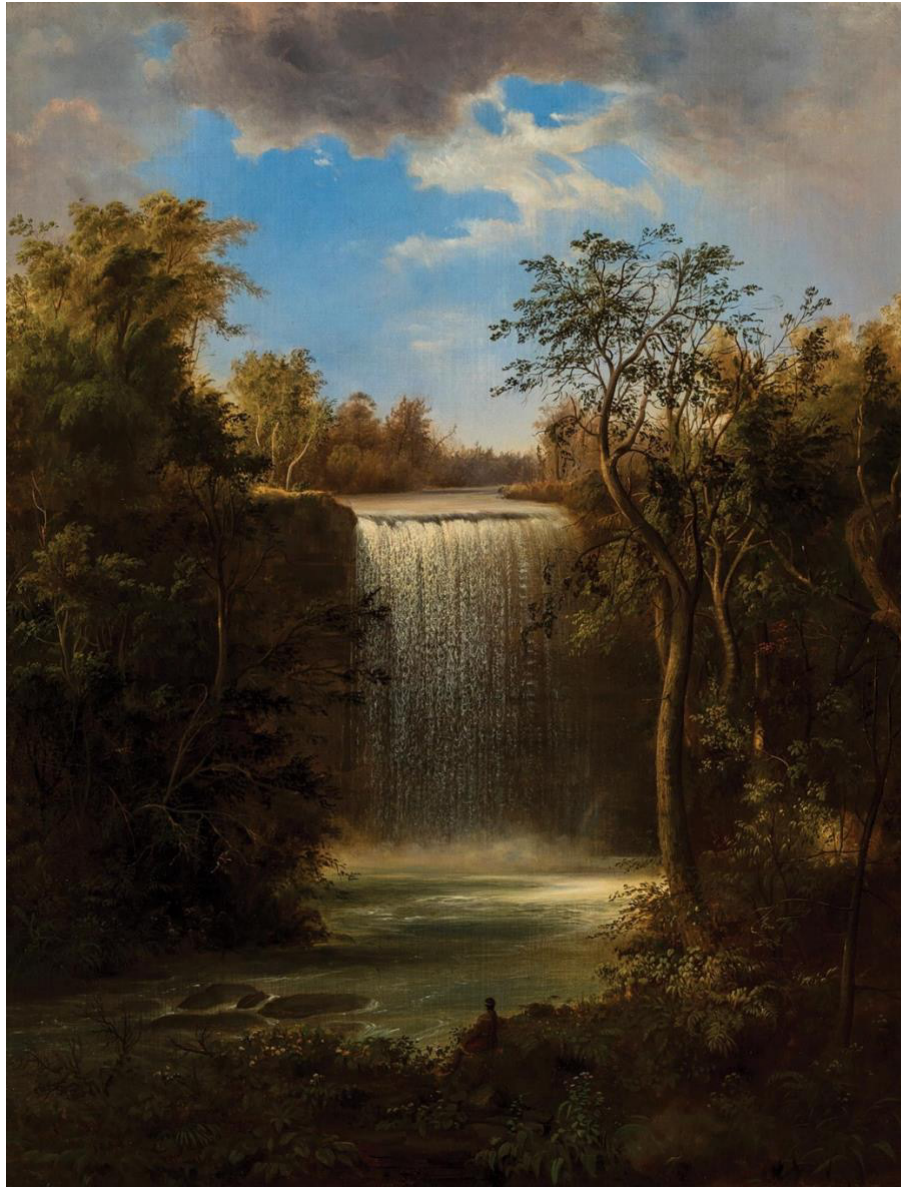
Over the past decade, the Joslyn has worked to diversify its art collection to include more works by women, queer and Bipoc artists. The complete reinstallation of its permanent collection—the first since the museum opened almost 100 years ago—gave curators a “once-in-a-career chance to evaluate the collection and what additions would help us foreground cross-cultural perspectives”, says the chief curator Taylor J. Acosta. She adds that one of the foremost challenges of the rehang was integrating the museum's significant collection of Native American art with the rest of its holdings.

In 2018, the Joslyn received a \$400,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation to hire its first curator of Native American art. Since then, Annika K. Johnson has worked collaboratively with the curator of American Western art, Thomas Busciglio-Ritter, to “tell stories of cultural exchange and resilience”, Acosta says. For example, the collection galleries now feature a section focused on the influence of travel and migration, with works by American artists influenced by French Impressionism—like Mary Cassatt and William Merritt Chase—juxtaposed with pieces made by Native Americans who incorporated imported materials like glass beads from Venice and silk ribbons from Paris.

“We sought to make literal connections to the paintings that represent European subject matter,” Acosta says. “We realise that the notion of travel and migration—whether by force, virtue or privilege—and the horrific circumstances of displacement have an impact on artistic production, and this resonates in several collection areas.”

Recent acquisitions

Notable recent acquisitions include the commissioned work *Wopila* (2024) by the Lakota artist Dyani White Hawk and *Falls of Minnehaha* (1862) by Robert S. Duncanson, a Black landscape painter active during the American Civil War. Considered Duncanson's masterwork, and his last US scene before his self-imposed exile to Canada and the UK, the painting depicts the Dakota woman immortalised in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) and was completed at the outbreak of the Dakota War of 1862—which resulted in the expulsion of the Dakota people from their homelands in Minnesota.



Robert S. Duncanson, *Falls of Minnehaha*, 1862, Joslyn Art Museum
Photograph © Bill Ganzel, Ganzel Group Communications Inc

The overall footprint of the museum's 20th-century collections has been expanded in lieu of a cancelled Kehinde Wiley exhibition following sexual assault allegations brought against the artist earlier this year, which he has denied. Wiley had been commissioned to create a series of portraits of members of the South Sudanese diaspora in Omaha—the largest community outside South Sudan—in the likeness of classic works from the Joslyn's collection. The project "was still very much coming together", Acosta says, and organisers are unsure if it will be reinstated. In the meantime, all mention of the planned *Kehinde Wiley: Omaha* exhibition has been scrubbed from the museum's website.

Ed Ruscha connection

One exhibition that will open at the Joslyn this month features works given to the museum by the late Omaha philanthropist Phillip G. Schrager—who left the Joslyn more than 50 contemporary pieces in 2016—as well as other recent acquisitions, including works by Elizabeth Catlett, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Simone Leigh and Jeff Koons. In addition, there will be shows by Eva LeWitt, the French artist and film-maker Clément Cogitore, and of Ed Ruscha’s gift to the museum in 2018. (Although most often associated with Los Angeles, Ruscha is an Omaha native, and he has also loaned several works to the Joslyn from his personal collection.)

“What we strove to do was to create more connections across collections, not necessarily by inserting contemporary works into historical galleries but thinking about universal human themes that could recur in multiple places,” Acosta says. “We hope that our visitors will see these areas of the collection as more connected and less disparate than in the past.”

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/09/09/joslyn-art-museum-omaha-nebraska-100m-renovation-expansion-snohetta>