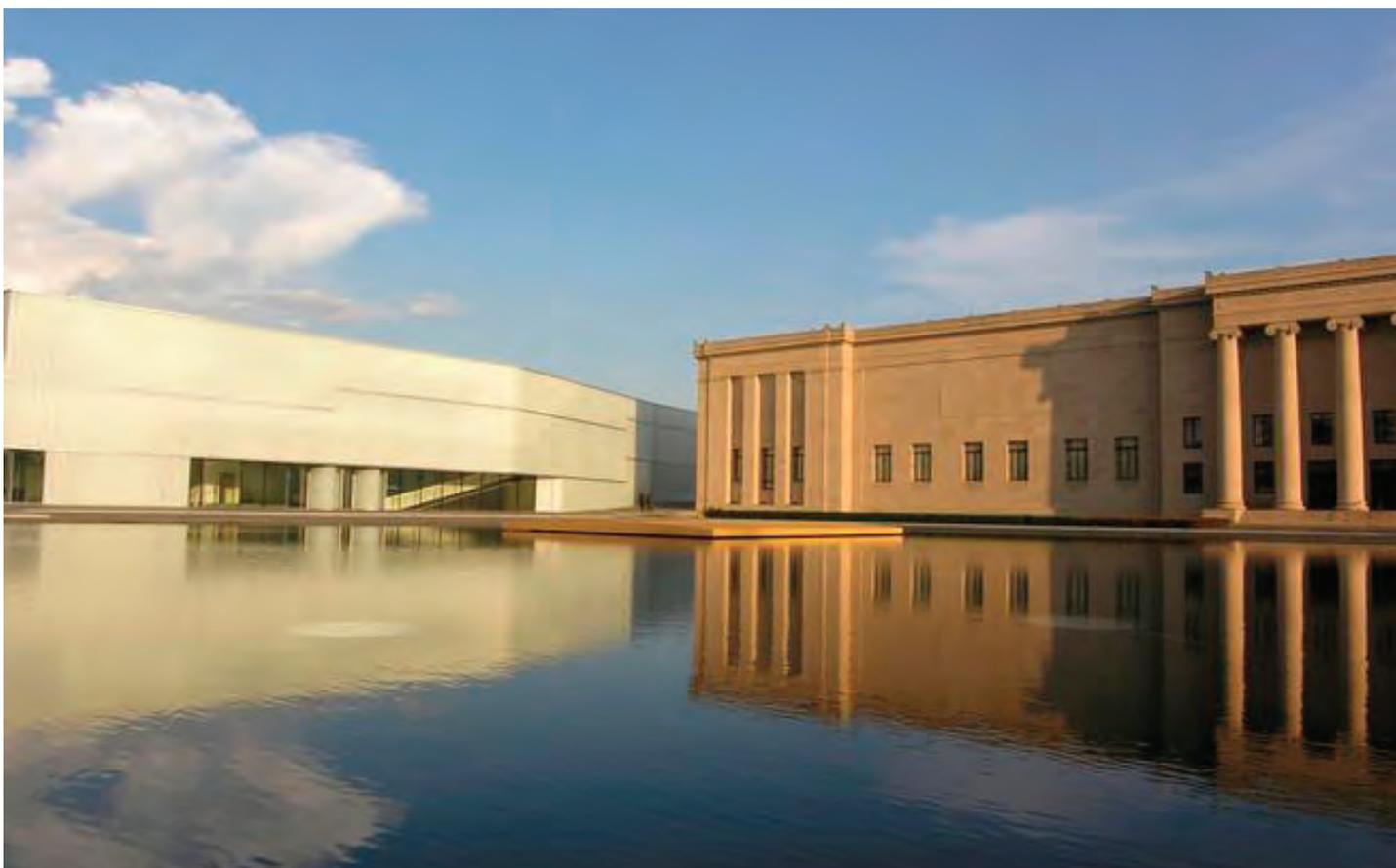


Rethinking the American museum

Has the time come for big art museums to ask not what they can do for themselves? Here are five ways they can rechannel their resources and reach beyond their own walls.



A FREE RIDE. Why can't all major art museums have free admission? The Nelson-Atkins Museum, above, in Kansas City eliminated its admission fee in 2002. The Dallas Museum of Art did the same in 2012. *Photo by Beth Byers, provided by the Nelson-Atkins*

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

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Over the past few decades, American art museums have become wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. A worldwide bidding war over painting, sculpture, even off-beat conceptual works, has pushed the value of the objects they own into the stratosphere.

Just this month, Christie's raised a whopping \$782 million in two days, auctioning work created only since World War II. The sale set records for artists both dead and alive: \$142 million for a painting by Francis Bacon, \$58 million for Jeff Koons' 1994 "Balloon Dog."

A single Andy Warhol, \$57 million; a Rothko, \$46 million. Startling.

The implications of such sales, more and more common, are rich for the country's top-rung art museums, which hold works by the prolific Rothko and Warhol by the score. And on top of that, uncountable efforts by old masters, such as Monet, van Gogh, Rembrandt and Cezanne. And on top of that, new masters such as Picasso, Johns and Clyfford Still.

And yes, on top of that, unlimited artifacts, furniture, photos, regional treasures and commissioned work, all worth hundreds of billions.

What do you do when you possess the biggest fortune in your city? How can you seize the moment responsibly and evolve in ways that live up to your primary mandate of serving the public and connecting the citizenry to history and culture?

For the most part, museums have done what they've always done, using their growing assets to enrich themselves. Horse trading is the order of the day and shrewd operators have bartered up, improving their collections, and giving their customers better examples of Whistler, Remington and O'Keeffe than they had before. Coupled with a healthy wave of private art gifts and an influx of real cash from donors and foundations, museums, by and large, are far better than they were even a few years ago.

But could they be better still, not just internally but externally? Could they use their wealth the same way philanthropic business people do — to increase their influence and the effectiveness of their art-positive missions throughout their communities?

There are lot of questions in there, and also possibilities. Money could enable museums to think in new ways that connect them to the world outside their walls.

They just have to take action, and here are five ways they might start.

1. Face the danger: Spend your money on education, not your collection.

● Museums sell objects from their collections all the time. But the rules of the trade, made by and for museum professionals, dictate they use the proceeds only to enhance their holdings.

But what if the money went toward the very core of their mission: educating the public about art. Schools are in deep trouble, arts education has fallen by the wayside, and that's a tragedy for communities overall who need thinking citizens to thrive, and museums in particular, which need knowledgeable customers to survive.

What if the big museums took on the responsibility, partnering with schools to really teach kids about art history? What if they went beyond rote field trips that impart little and fill their own coffers and instead used their wealth to hire teachers, buy supplies and give kids a genuine immersion?

Here's an example. In 2011, Denver's Clyfford Still Museum sold four of the abstract expressionist's paintings for \$114 million and used the money to create an endowment for its future.

If they sold just two more, of the hundreds they own, they could sponsor 20 art teachers in Denver's schools for 20 years. Nothing could enhance Still's legacy better than creating an entire generation, tens of thousands of people, who have a deeper understanding of and context for his squiggly lines and splashes of color.

Indeed, the idea of liquidating art for non-collection purposes is dangerous. Surely, it would be insane to sell treasures for short-term financial gain or to solve a budget shortfall. But 20 years of public education is not short-term; it's a permanent game-changer and just one way current rules can be adjusted to take museums higher than ever before.

Public schools are not the responsibility of nonprofit museums. But education is, and when you are sitting on money while kids are falling behind, it's time to step up.

2. Open your books: Stop acting like you own the place, even if technically, you do.

● Museums take millions of dollars in public money, more than many government agencies in the cities they serve. Yet, in many cases, they have no obligation to tell the public how they use it.

This is a question of accountability. Under the law, governments are required to disclose every budget figure and salary to the public, release every memo, give advance notice of changes and expenditures and allow time for public opinion before decisions are made.

As private, not-for-profits, many museums must do little beyond file a few IRS forms and release annual reports full of facts they collect and select. Are they run efficiently? Do they meet their own attendance goals? Do they listen to input? Often, we don't know enough to discern if our tax dollars are well-spent.

3 ● **De-snob: Stop naming things after rich people.**

Sorry, if someone's name is on the door you walk through, they own the place, not you. Naming rights, attached to every gallery, hallway, auditorium, and now, job titles are out of hand.

Entering a building to see a collection held in trust for all is a right, not a privilege granted by the Vanderbilt-Rothschild-Medici family.

Reward donors in other ways. Let them borrow a van Gogh for their Christmas party or skateboard in the mummy room after hours. Get creative using your new wealth.

Remember, museums, you're rich now. You don't have to sell your souls.

4 ● **Free your minds: Stop charging.**

If your local art museum makes you pay to get in, demand an explanation. Ask them why major museums in Dallas, Houston,

Los Angeles, Kansas City, St. Louis and other places don't charge.

Museums often find the funding to cover admission costs when they really try. It's just matter of directing generous donors to the noble topic of access for all rather than suggesting they back a new department or curator position or asking that they drop off their David Hockneys upon death.

And while we're close to the topic: Could they stay open a little later?



BIG MONEY. "Balloon Dog (Orange)" by Jeff Koons, sold for \$58.4 million, a world auction record for the artist and a world auction record for a living artist, said Christie's. *The Associated Press/Christies*

5 **Give us a break: Stop acting poor.**

Many people think these are dire times for museums when, in truth, they're sitting on more money than ever before. Like any business, there are highs and lows, but the trends point toward growth. The National Endowment for the Arts expects strong demand for museum professionals through the decade. Foundations, key funders in the area, predict increased giving.

Still, museums act needy. It's their way of keeping donations rolling in, but it's also a collective drag on civic pride.

By allowing the public access to their goods, museums are the greatest tool we have for redistributing wealth across economic class. Museums give everyone a piece of the pie, and we should be celebrating their fortunes rather than worrying about their collapse.

Acting rich makes you rich and opens your mind to ways of accumulating more wealth. We don't really want those skateboarders in our museums, but maybe museums could rent a painting or two for parties and take the cash, or sell shares in their work, or co-own with other museums or businesses. If you've got it, flaunt it, lease it, sell it, and most of all, leverage it.

The box is back

Architecture has taken a sharp turn toward simplicity, at least on the outside.



GETTING INTO SHAPE. Basic geometric shapes define both the outside and the inside of the St. Louis Art Museum's new addition.
Alise O'Brien, St. Louis Art Museum

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

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Architecture in the 2000s was a lot like hair in the 1980s, wild fun at the time but a little bit puzzling just a few years later. Whether we're talking about Bon Jovi's heavy-metal shag or Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall, the question is the same: What was up with all those swoops and curves?

Were Daniel Libeskind's spiky shards or Santiago Calatrava's flying birds any more essential than MC Hammer's pajama pants? You don't want to touch any of it now.

In the present decade, gravity rules. Bangs are back, and so is the box. The most exciting new buildings this year are all about right angles, squat squares and sure-footed rectangles, at least in the U.S., where design trends tend to get their start.

The most pleasant surprise of 2013 is British architect David Chipperfield's stripped-down addition to the St. Louis Art Museum, so quadratic you could send a cake home in it. Down in Fort Worth, Renzo Piano's spectacular expansion of the revered Kimbell Art Museum is a 90-degree masterpiece. Elegant and just two stories tall, it's a crowning achievement for his flashy career.

There's more to come. Next summer, the Aspen Art Museum will put the tiny city on the design map with its \$40 million lattice-covered crate dreamed up by Japan's highly regarded Shigeru Ban.

The boxes make sense for a world that seems to be playing it simpler across the board. College kids are bopping heads to the sort of rootsy guitar-and-fiddle music their great-grandparents listened to, while fashion has left the outrageouscat suit behind in favor of the humble pencil skirt.

Remember molecular gastronomy, the too-recent dining trend that turned sirloin steak into foam and popcorn into powder? Swallowed whole.

Maybe the economy reeled us in, or maybe it's the cyclical yin to Lady Gaga's tramped-up yang, but such sensibilities leave little room for the "starchitects" of Gehry's era, men who made their mark turning titanium walls into waves, assisted by pre-Great Recession money and the same computer programs engineers developed to design jumbo jets and cruise ships. Gehry made amazing things and overthrew our notions of what a building could look like, but the revolution has subsided.

There are exceptions, and they are notable. Architects Thom Mayne and Zaha Hadid continue to push beyond the plane and stay busy, especially in the Middle East where the show goes on. Hadid scored big in East Lansing, Mich., last year with her leaning, stainless steel Broad Art Museum for the University of Michigan.

But the building that got all the design tourists in 2012 was the relatively four-sided Barnes Foundation, the Philadelphia art museum designed by the duo Tod Williams and Billie Tsien.

While Gehry, Calatrava and Libeskind are psychologically mired down in bulky projects that haven't worked out, the architects who stood in their shadows, like Portland-based Brad Cloepfil, are the new heroes.

And rightly so in Cloepfil's case. Best known for smaller projects, he's turning out to be a big influence in the box trend, thanks to his Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, which opened in 2011 to wide acclaim and led the charge to simpler times.

The Still was a humble effort at just \$29 million, and Cloepfil kept it clean, calm and nearly colorless, constructing it inside and out of concrete. It's a bunker, for



sure, though the finest one you'll ever enter with delicate finishes and finely honed details.

The structure is logical and functional; more craft than art, and it served to remind the museum world that a building can hold its own and, more important, not compete with the objects it houses.

Classic inspiration

Piano's Kimbell Museum addition is a building of its time, high-tech, heavy on glass and sensitive to the environment, but it's based on thinking that's been around for ages. It's as symmetrical as the great Parthenon, forever hailed for its proportional balance. Like the Greeks, Piano uses a row of simple columns to hold the place up.

Not that the addition is so straightforward. The roof is made of glass, and its concrete walls are 2 percent titanium, allowing them to be strong yet shiny and soft to the touch. There's a mix of fine materials, too. Piano's ceiling is supported by 300-foot beams made of Douglas fir that are exposed on both the building's inte-

LEADING THE CHARGE.

Portland-based Brad Cleopfil, best known for smaller projects, is turning out to be a big influence in the box trend, thanks to his Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, which opened in 2011 to wide acclaim and led the charge to simpler times.

rior and exterior. It's a long, lean box that speaks to its own era.

Chipperfield's influences in St. Louis are more recent but classic in their own sense, reaching back to the great modernists of the 1960s. His building is as free of ornamentation on the outside as anything Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier might have made. Its austerity is amplified by the fact that it connects underground to the old museum, a Beaux-Arts wedding cake built for the 1904 World's Fair.

This building is no rabbit hutch. Despite its shape, it feels lighter than air and offers a full share of drama. A giant, poured-concrete gridded ceiling gives the place design cred and character, and enclosed, glass-walled side porches connect it brilliantly to the city park it sits in, while allowing in just the right amount of natural light.

Still it has art-first motives. There is virtually no lobby, you hit the painting and sculptures the minute you enter. The plan is wide open with little in the actual structure to detract from the primary reason people are there: to make time with Claude Monet and Max Beckmann.

The new boxes are both straightforward and sly. Ban's Aspen Museum may be squared off on the outside to give it a flat front that fits with its urban streetscape, but it is a complex arrangement on the inside. Programmatically smart, yet never plain.

That's the lesson with all these new buildings. Pretty packaging has its thrills, but who keeps it around once the present is opened? It's as useless as the showy, slanted rooms in a Libeskind building that take curators years to make functional.

None of these buildings are conservative, though all are keenly aware of why we make them in the first place. Boxes need to be strong and secure, and it helps if they're handsome. But they're only as good as the stuff inside them, no better, and hopefully, no worse.

Whose art is it, anyway?

Critics coast to coast are shrieking over the suggestion that bankrupt Detroit sell its art collection to cover debts. But maybe museums should be cashing in on their van Goghs.



CIVIC ASSET. “The Thinker,” by Rodin, is displayed outside the Detroit Institute of Arts. *Carlos Osorio, The Associated Press*

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

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The problem with art is that people like it too much. Too often, they look at it as something mysterious and unfathomable and bestow divine qualities upon it, even though it is, by its very nature, the work of human hands.

People blame their own stupidity when they don't get it. They give even bad artists the benefit of the doubt and, quite often, pay too much for their work.

This veneration leads to all sorts of bad decisions, especially in the public realm. Witness the lack of even routine cynicism as the Denver City Council approved a \$2 million sculpture for the city airport last month. There was considerable talk about how much we all love, love, love art and few questions about whether this particular piece was a good value. Council members, who spend countless hours mastering

sewer plants and zoning codes, vociferously placed the understanding of art above their mortal comprehension and simply voted aye.

Sure, art can swirl above our heads.

Mark Rothko, Miles Davis, Martha Graham: They all take some work to comprehend. But the challenge of art is what makes it worth our beholding. That and beauty.

Reverence is art's ruin, and it leads people to say ridiculous things, as is the case now in Detroit where fundamentalist art beliefs, pro and con, are turning a debate over the city's museum holdings into the national art issue of 2013.

Here is the simple explanation: The city overspent for decades and is now in bankruptcy, with both creditors and pensioners worried they won't get what was promised.

Some people, including Kevyn D. Orr, the government-appointed account settler, think it might be a good idea to auction some paintings hanging in the city-owned Detroit Institute of Arts. Nothing's been decided but Christie's was brought in for appraisals, a first step.

The sell crowd thinks that's fair. You wouldn't spare a private collector his Monets or van Goghs if he ran up debts, and the financial needs for municipal services that protect public health and education trump aesthetic concerns right now.

The don't-sell crowd is shrieking. Pawning art to pay bills is a crime against human nature, an insult to history and civic pride. Art is sacred and separate from other assets and must be kept off the table before municipal number-crunchers, coast to coast, get the wrong idea. The Association of Art Museum Directors agrees, citing its rule that art can be sold only to buy new art, preserving the integrity of centuries-old collections.

Both sides have a point, and both are overreacting. Selling art to cover a short-term crisis is short-sighted, and irreversible.

But insisting a civic asset worth billions of dollars can never be leveraged for the greater good is silly, too. It's as naive a stand on art as the Denver City Council might take.

Art museums are a unique resource in a community. Art helps us understand ourselves and each other, and it makes us happy. Only a fool would deplete such a resource.

But, truth is, collections are drawn up a bit like baseball teams, assembling good names that have no relationship to the city itself, to create an attraction that elevates a false pride. Van Gogh never set foot in Detroit — why should Detroit feel so special that somewhere along the line, some rich family purchased it a painting?

The city did not make the work or contribute to its creation; it “belongs” there on paper.

It’s only when you start to see art in those terms that you can take a realistic approach to its value: to actually increase its power in the community.

There may be ways to accomplish that in Detroit without really hurting its mighty collection. And for one idea, we head back to Denver.

Real suggestions

In 2008, the Denver Art Museum struck a deal with mega-rich patron Phil Anschutz. Essentially, DAM sold Anschutz half-ownership of Charles Deas’ treasured painting “Long Jakes” in exchange for a donation that allowed it to buy another revered work, Thomas Eakins’ “Cowboy Singing.”

Rich guy gets the painting six months of the year, museum the other six. The public gets access to work it otherwise would not have seen. The American Association of Museum Directors raised an eyebrow, but it turned out to be a win-win.

Could museums routinely sell shares of their work, raising billions of dollars they never thought possible? Maybe so.

Consider: The Detroit Art Institute has 60,000 objects in its collection and shows just a fraction of it — maybe 10 or 20 percent — at any given moment. The rest of the time, it sits there, an asset totally unused. A banker might liken that to keeping your money under a mattress rather than putting it in an interest-bearing account.

What if it sold part ownership of a dozen or so pieces? That might help save the city with enough left over to actually purchase additional pieces for the collection, and expand arts education efforts to schools. Even the Association of Museum Directors would have a hard time arguing against that.



COLLECTIBLE. The Detroit Institute of the Arts has one of the best collections in the United States. Pablo Picasso’s 1939 “Bather by the Sea” is one of its stars.

There are other ideas out there, more complicated though maybe more practical. A few years ago, a team of finance experts hatched a plan for museums to sell speculative shares of their works based on the fact that their value keeps going up. The plan would create a futures markets, similar to the gold market. The works would never leave the museum in the same way gold never leaves Fort Knox.

Either of those two concepts — if adopted, regulated, used judiciously — could radically change the economics of museums in this country. Instead of being the town's beggars, they'd become its players.

Museums have reservations over such ideas. They are, overwhelmingly, good stewards of their holdings and there is solid risk letting anything out the door. But they're also smart, with boards of the best wheelers and dealers in town. They could figure out reasonable rules and limits. The museum directors association could even draw up guidelines.

This radical rethinking could be good for art and the public. Rich guys would show off works at dinner parties, or maybe shopping malls and casinos would create galleries to bring in consumers. Either way the works would be seen, always preferable to them not being seen.

There is a broader benefit to commodifying art, letting its value build playgrounds or pay retired firefighters what they rightly deserve. It stops being thought of as a relic and becomes a tool to help us live better lives.

In turn, we can make better decisions about how to use and acquire public art. Truth be told, the Denver airport probably could have bought 10 life-changing pieces for \$2 million instead of one, if someone slowed down to think about it. Or it, too, could have leveraged the value of the cash it has to spend on art with a more creative move, like partnering with the Denver Art Museum to create an eastern outpost that could make the airport an actual destination rather than a billion-dollar concoction people can't wait to get out of.

Ideas like that can't even get on the table until we stare the art gods right in the eyes and challenge their ownership of the work we humans made on our own behalf. No doubt, museums, dealers, artists and critics who profit from the mystery would have to help us get there. Council members and consumers would have to resist intimidation and take a stand.

We'd still suffer over our own stupidity when we don't get something. But we'd feel awfully proud in the effort.

The resurrections of Nick Cave

The artist brings his fabulous works — his religion — to a new exhibit at the DAM.



FULL IMMERSION. Artist Nick Cave stands in front of one of his sculptures in his exhibition “Sojourn” at the Denver Art Museum. *Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post*

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

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Here is Nick Cave now: Confident, grateful, charming, changed. He is just off a very big show in New York’s Grand Central Terminal, a show that was supposed to be very small, just some dancers in hairy horse get-ups entertaining the busy commuters.

But word got out. Thirty dancing horses? In the historic train station? Tens of thousands came just to see the work. Entrances had to be blocked off.

Nick Cave, at 54 and hard-working his whole life, looked out and saw his art take over the masses. People watched. They got it; got into it.

“Right then I realized what my purpose was, that art is my religion and that’s why I

have to do this,” said Cave, reflecting on the 15 performances of “Herd•NY” that he produced in March. “You don’t really know these things until something like this happens.”

Denver gets him next, on this roll. The exhibition “Nick Cave: Sojourn” opens Sunday at the Denver Art Museum and it is fueled by the artist’s renewed sense of certainty. The show features 40 new static works, but it is in one sense a retrospective. Cave has made dozens of his elaborate Soundsuits, the flashy, fashiony, head-to-toe garments that he built his reputation on.

People who have waited for his first outing here will get their fill, and see the suits in action during a public performance on June 28.

But the show also pushes into Cave’s next phase. He unveils freshly made “Rescue” sculptures, constructed from abandoned bric-a-brac woven into nests for ceramic dogs perched upon fancy, French settees. His medium is junk really. All of it comes from Cave’s excursions to thrift stores near his Chicago home.

Like all of his work, the Rescues are, as Cave puts it, “ghetto fabulous on one hand, regal on the other.” They are gaudy, trashy, pompous. Yet there is something precious about dobermans and poodles with their own sofas, even if they are engulfed by cheap, factory-made flowers, beads and birds.

The juxtaposition can read like comedy, as can his Soundsuits, made from recycled materials, like sweaters, toys, or sock puppets. Colorful, and meticulously constructed, his objects pull unbridled glee from viewers.

But Cave insists that is a by-product of the serious intentions of his work.

“I don’t think it’s fun at all,” he said emphatically. His dogs take on issues of loyalty, fragility, history, property. His suits — faceless, raceless, genderless and fully wearable — confront our immediate perceptions of the people around us, our conflicts over how much we want to show off and how much we hide from one another.

“There is a consciousness in the work that speaks about the economic world we live in,” he said. “About waste and greed, the opulence of it all and the fauxness.”

Nick Cave is not a fool for fauxness.

Identity issues

Nick Cave is the exception to most rules that guide the art world. He’s black in a mostly white profession and alternates between performance and gallery shows. He’s Midwestern in a business where everything happens on the coasts. Cave lives in a sizable, two-level loft near Chicago’s Chinatown. It is filled with art, much of it colorful and textile-based like his own.

He has always been other. Growing up in the only black family in a white part

of Columbia, Mo., enrolling as the only black student at the Kansas City Art Institute. Cave came out as a gay man just as the AIDS epidemic hit its stride. His early creative expression took form in the drag outfits he concocted for jaunts to nightclubs, where he danced, he says, mostly alone late into the night.

Knowing these things about Cave gives you a way into his work. His sound suits are an outrageous sort of drag — of course they are, mysterious, anonymous, hard-to categorize. “I am not putting the fact that I am a black, gay artist in your face but this is who I am,” said Cave.

He’s not sure how much of that actually comes through. His work is about identity, but audiences rarely bring up sexuality or gender politics when he gives public lectures. “I think people are afraid to talk about that,” he said.

He makes the work anyway, and a lot of it. Suit after suit, impeccably tailored and detailed with elaborate head pieces;

and other objects, like the Rescues, with scores of individual parts fastened together.

He has assistants who work in the studio downstairs from his living quarters, sorting, tacking buttons. But he does much of the labor himself, a fashion designer who cuts his own patterns and secures his own hems.

“Nick is amazingly ambitious,” said art dealer Jack Shainman, who represents Cave via his sleek gallery in New York’s Chelsea district. “He has great ideas and he’s able to realize them because he’s very focused.”

Shainman has been an important part of Cave’s success, and their eight-year association coincides with Cave’s commercial breakthrough. They’re the kind of match that makes art commerce go around.

Shainman is a respected dealer with a strong roster of international artists and a long list of adventurous buyers (he also reps El Anatsui, who makes art from dis-



AN EXCEPTION TO THE ART WORLD’S RULES.

Nick Cave, shown here at his loft in the Chinatown area of Chicago, is the exception to most rules that guide the art world; most notably, he’s Midwestern in a business where everything happens on the coasts.
Ray Mark Rinaldi, The Denver Post

carded beer labels and showed last year at DAM).

Cave's output is exotic, unique and commercial.

A sound suit might sell for \$60,000, according to auction sites. Shainman acknowledges he has a "waiting list" for them.

"Nick's work touches people in a very personal way. It is profound and tangible," according to Nato Thompson, chief curator for Creative Time, which stages major artworks in the Manhattan area, including "Herd•NY."

Cave takes the big money in stride, but not for granted. His rise is recent enough that he remembers his own disbelief when one day, his bank account jumped from \$6,000 to \$90,000. He recalls moments when he was down on the floor crying, questioning his own worth. "I did not want to grow up so quickly," he said.

But he committed himself to it, rearranging his life and putting off personal relationships so that work was the priority. He still likes to go dancing, but downtime is more likely spent renting a van and traversing second-hand stores in Illinois.

"I remember at one of his early shows, he said to me, 'what do I do next,'" recalled Shainman. "I told him you're going to have another show, and it's going to be better than the last one.

"And he's done that every time."

Transforming DAM

"Sojourn" is the culmination of the story so far. It's a large effort, filling the Anschutz Gallery, DAM's largest space, where the recent Vincent van Gogh show was installed.

The immersion is deep. Visitors first encounter a hallway lined with a "button wall," a piece of mesh 20 feet high and 80 feet long, dotted with tens of thousand of tiny, reflective buttons, all applied by hand.

The next big stop is a "Tondo," a circular disc of fabric, 16-feet in diameter. Cave has ripped, shredded and sewn old sparkly garments together to form constellations in a dark night sky. It's a personal work, harkening back to youthful evenings in the backyard with some of his seven brothers.

But it's also universal, by nature, and maybe the best piece in the exhibit, in that it takes Cave's concept of resurrection the farthest; this time into the stratosphere.

The dogs are around the corner, whimsical and logical. They make sense as an act that follows a career of Soundsuits. They, too, are genderless, hard to place, reborn. Cave connects them to four large panel works, 16-foot frames, loaded with more knickknacks, this time arranged into reliefs.



The show culminates in a room of 20 Soundsuits. One has musical instruments around its face, another a rabbit standing on its head, a third looks kind of like a gorilla.

Cave is all about transforming objects, transitioning one thing into another, like a DJ. He starts with junk but then asks: “How do you mix that into something that’s really fabulous?” So he might stitch in a fine fabric, a piece of Bakelite plastic. It ends up museum-ready.

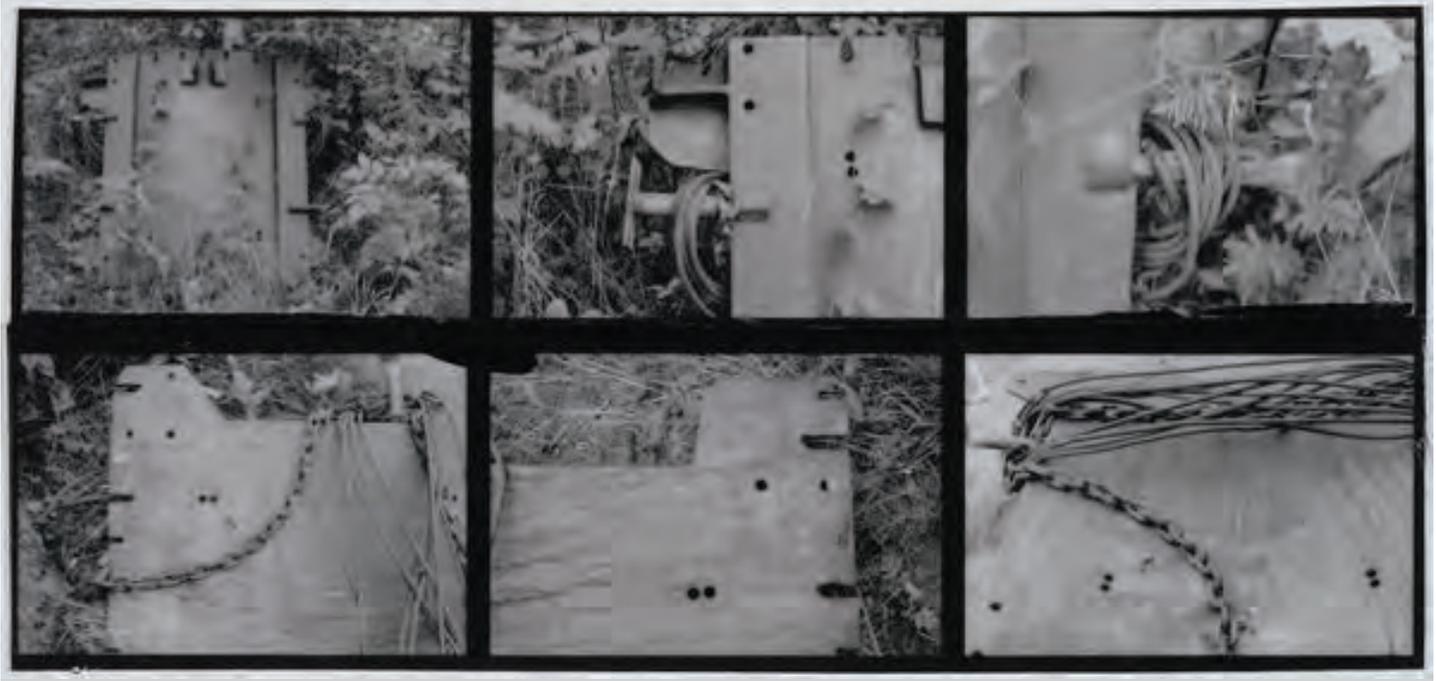
Through this act, he breaks down the barriers between high art and low art. But it’s more than that.

He brings aesthetic value to things most people consider tasteless. He elevates dogs to royalty in this work but also raises up lower-class totems so that they are objects worthy of respect. There’s no irony here, as much as you might want to see it, as folks would likely see it on the coasts.

This is Midwest serious. This is religion, and Nick Cave will have you believe.

SOUNDSUIT CHECK. Nick Cave, center, is all about transforming objects, transitioning one thing into another, like a DJ. He elevates items from lower-class totems so that they are objects worthy of respect.

Loving the art, while hating the artist



SIMPLE DESCRIPTIONS. Heimrad Bäcker photographed the artifacts that remained in Austrian prison camps years after they closed. This set of paired scenes he labeled simply “Remnants in Foundations in the Great Hall of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp.” *Photos provided by MCA Denver*

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

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Now that child nudity, violence against women and tortured crucifixes have become museum standards, the list of topics that might make an art exhibit risky is considerably shorter than it once was. Still, a few polemical classics remain, and one of them is displaying the work of Nazis.

Perfectly fine, of course, to show anything that exposes the power of fascist culture to facilitate pure evil. A gallery could do a photo essay on Mussolini’s vainglorious Roman architecture or host a week-long Leni Riefenstahl film festival, with Hitler as the matinee idol, and no one would suspect it of anything beyond keeping our memories sharp.

But to hang the art of a Nazi on the wall — and invite viewers to take seriously its intellectual properties, hash out its merits, go along on the creator’s personal journey — is to trust deeply that audiences won’t overreact. It’s a brave move, after all these years.

Not that the exhibit of Heimrad Bäcker’s poetry, photos and collected objects at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver is a socialist show-and-tell. “Landscape M”

is full of Holocaust horrors — worrisome testimony to mankind’s greatest disgrace.

It just doesn’t go at things in the usual way. There are no gaunt faces to haunt our dreams, no piles of skulls or shoes. Bäcker’s important scenes begin long after the actual event, showing us the artifacts that remained in the decades that followed.

From 1968, a quarter-century after World War II ended, until his death in 2003, Bäcker visited the abandoned sites of the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camps in Austria, where he lived, taking countless photos of scarred walls, hacked rock in the mines where humans toiled, the key hooks hanging in the crematorium. We see chains anchored to stakes in the ground, coiled ropes and thick, metal walls.

Bäcker’s photos record his archaeological encounters in those overgrown fields over the years and he captioned them with the detachment of a scientist. A triptych of black-and-white shots, centered upon an ominous close-up of bent and rusted nails, for example, is labeled “Iron Remnants in Foundations in the Great Hall of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp.” No more details, no sentiment.

Viewers, versed in Nazi destruction, fill in the adjectives, and the anguish. Bäcker surely knew this would happen.

His own back story comes from curator Patrick Greaney, who teaches German literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder and who worked with Bäcker’s son, Michael Merighi, to assemble the photos. The exhibit also presents artifacts collected at the site, twisted spikes, rods, bolts, brackets.

Bäcker was 12 in 1938 when Germany annexed Austria — and his family, in the city of Linz, prospered in the upheaval. He joined the Hitler Youth and was active as a photojournalist. At 18, with the killing factories and work camps in full swing, he signed on with the Nazi Party. He was, with some abandon, one of them.

After the war, he joined many of his country mates in a broad denial of their complicity in war crimes. Life went on in Austria with little reflection upon the recent past.

But as Bäcker’s own consciousness evolved, he began his obsessive photo-taking, years ahead of a national movement that put more, though certainly not all, Austrians in touch with their responsibility.

There is little one can say definitively about the photos except that they are exhaustive. Bäcker was driven, but why? As documentary shots, they lack a narrative. Bäcker’s brand of modern photojournalism seizes upon authentic details but misses the big story. You must come to the MCA knowing it.

As penance, they fall considerably short. Decades in a darkroom don’t atone for a single life crushed, certainly not the 180,000, or more, taken at Mauthausen and Gusen.

Curator Greaney offers some clues. First, by starting the exhibit with photos Bäck-

er took during his Nazi years romanticizing life in the new order — planes on a bombing raid, crowds at a sporting event. He wasn't just a bystander but a propagandist.

Second, hanging in an adjacent gallery, we get framed excerpts of a poem Bäcker constructed later by simply taking the daily log of a German U Boat and treating each day's entry as a sort of stanza. There is no more to it than that, just the log, separated by day, and deemed a poem by its writer.

There's nothing more to any of it, really, than simply letting it be, and this is where the exhibit succeeds. No useless apologies attached. No inadequate attempts at reconciliation or insulting offers of compensation. No redemption for the guilty, including the photographer himself.

This exhibit reminds us that some bad things are so bad, we can never fix them, only stare. Preservation doesn't soothe anything or even move us forward, although it does keep us from forgetting, and it faces down the deniers, who are the only potent enemy left in the matter.

In the same way, we can't deny the worthiness of putting Bäcker's work on display. It exists, and we are stuck with it, so we might as well look.

Time has significant effect on our memories. In the second half of the 20th century, the world had no choice but to tolerate the coexistence of the people who suffered greatly in the great war and the people who caused it. There were millions on both sides.

That was often uncomfortable, but it served to humanize what happened, and that was important. Men inflicted this unbearable pain. You could see them on the streets, or at work, or on TV.

Now that the actual humans are nearly gone, the atrocities of the era exist as stories alone. What will humanize the Nazis when they are all dead? It will be their architecture, their films and photography. We have to look.



HITLER YOUTH. Early in his career, Heimrad Bäcker took photographs that romanticized Adolf Hitler's conquest of Europe. This photograph, "Closing Ceremonies," was taken in 1943.

The end of big architecture

Architect Curt Fentress' new terminal at LAX wants to soar, like his DIA design, but it's impossible to get any large building off the ground today.



BELLY OF THE WHALE. Curved, skeletal beams hang like ribs from the Bradley terminal ceiling. The clock tower is an LED projection. *Steve McCrank, Los Angeles Daily News*

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

PUBLISHED
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LOS ANGELES»

If there's any lesson in the \$1.9 billion spent on the new Tom Bradley International Terminal at LAX, it's that big architecture can't make your city a destination. Not anymore.

You can build yourself a bit of pleasure, beauty even, in that brief moment before a jet takes off or lands, and you can make security less of a hassle on your next trip to Singapore or Sri Lanka, but even a great building won't get people to fly to you, only through you.

In a world gone virtual, physical spaces are outdated even before the plans are drawn. We'll always need buildings to keep the rain off our heads, but they're no longer mass magnets for our convening or communing. There will never be another Bilbao, the Spanish city the world flocked to because of single building, Frank Gehry's 1997 Guggenheim Museum. Never a second St. Louis, able to develop a tourism industry off Eero Saarinen's giant arch.

It took a building as large as Bradley to make this clear because there were high hopes it would be a landmark, and the project, the largest in Los Angeles County history, did everything possible to make that happen.

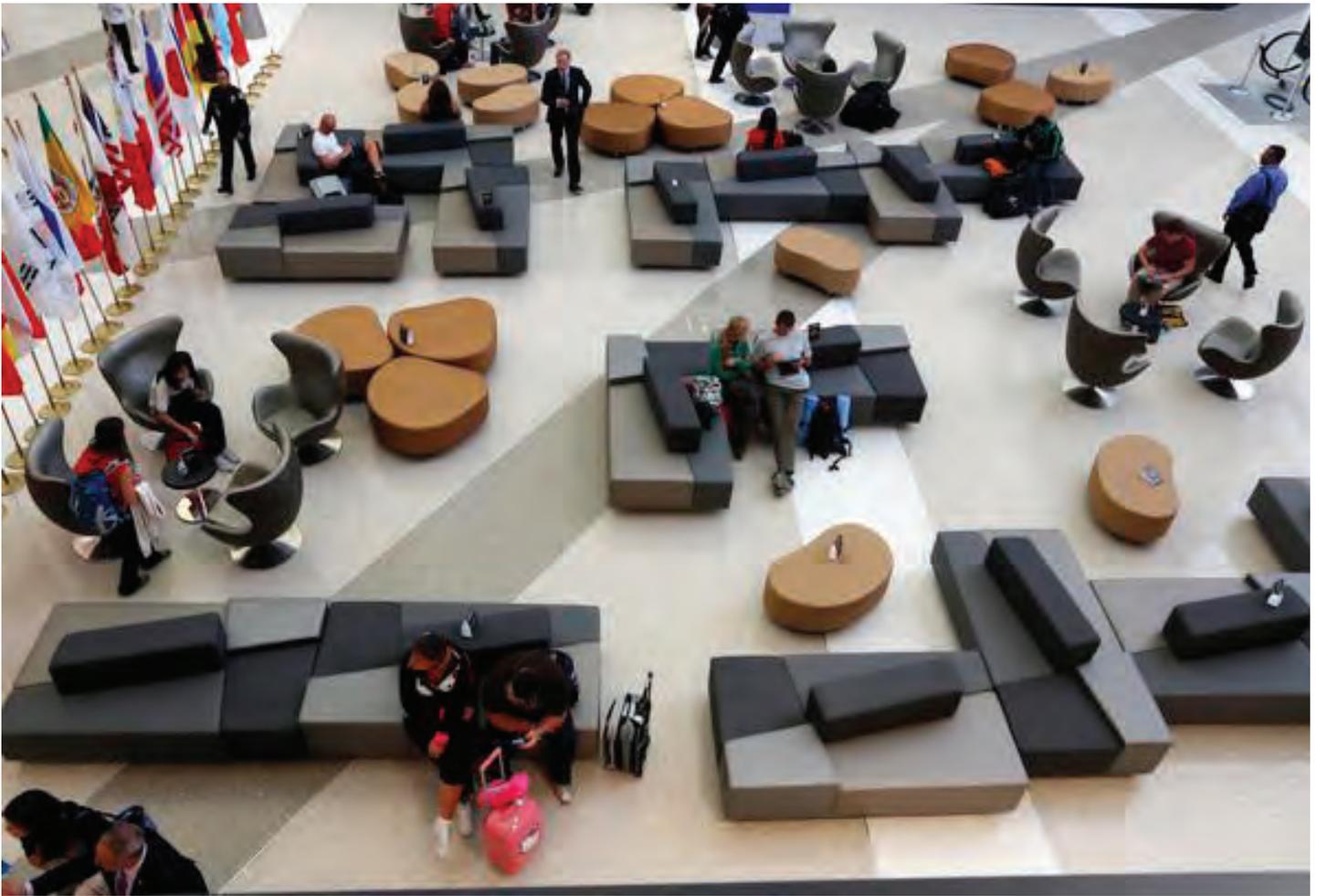
The terminal didn't have a superstar architect in Denver-based Curtis Fentress, but the guy has serious cred, especially in transportation, where he remains a hero for his iconic 1994 design of the playful, white-peaked Denver International Airport. Fentress' 2001 Incheon International Airport, in South Korea's largest city, is revered as a model of efficiency and for spawning the aerotropolis movement, which aims to make airports into cultural centers. The complex is sleek and optimistic, with a golf course, bath house, museum and ice rink.

L.A. let Fentress fly, and his firm developed a scheme with a soaring roofline that repeatedly rises, crest and falls, reflecting the swells of the Pacific Ocean nearby. Inside, it offers the kind of space air passengers long for. The grand hallway, massive with row upon row of check-in counters, is tall with enormous skylights, clerestories and walls of windows that keep it bright and airy. It's a grand piece of Western construction, sprawling and free, and wide enough to haul around your carry-ons.

Fentress allowed the roofline to define the interior, too. The ceiling, all white, arches upward, supported by a skeletal framework of structural ribs. In some corners it feels like you are in the belly of a giant whale.

But locked in the center of the giant "U" that is LAX, it's hard to see the building from a distance, and its exterior attributes are nearly impossible to appreciate. The Bradley terminal had this going against it from the start, though the architectural model looked promising and the sheer power of the pricey project made you believe the building's outline could become the stuff of legend and building tours, and postcards.

In some ways, the idea that an airport could be a design leader is rooted in another place and time, in that era when air travel was glamorous and boarding a plane meant taking a ride toward the future. Saarinen captured it best in the exuberant curves of 1962's TWA terminal at JFK, and scores of airports, from D.C. to San Francisco, Beijing to Dubai, have taken their cues from his ideas. Fentress imitates it with flair at Tom Bradley.



That said, the LAX disappointment may be less about the fact that air travel has become such a drag and more about how we see the world these days, which, by and large, is via computer screens. You used to have to go places to be places, now you can Skype and save the jetlag. You can get to know a foreign culture by looking at its Facebook pages and YouTube posts, hold your business meeting by video conference, see the best work from the world's top museums online at the Google Art Project.

Using your iPhone to share facetime with mom at Thanksgiving isn't the same as eating her green bean casserole, but we're getting accustomed to the convenience. It's less important to be there, or to be anywhere, and that affects our regard for buildings.

You can see a desperate recognition of this at the Tom Bradley Terminal, which overcompensates by turning the place into a shopping mall. There's an L.A. bent to it: Officials invited the major retailers from upscale Rodeo Drive to open outposts in the terminal, and it is crammed with Burberry and Gucci and the like. There are oversized billboards inside, like you see on Sunset Boulevard.

Unfortunately, this is the stuff of bad casinos, not good airports, and it's easy to resent stores most people can't afford, especially when they're out of England or Italy

ON THE RUNWAY.

Travelers sit on stylized chairs and ottomans in a waiting area of the Tom Bradley International Terminal at Los Angeles International Airport. The design by Denver architect Curt Fentress, who also designed Denver International Airport, also has an unusual undulating roofline that mimics the nearby Pacific Ocean, just doesn't ever really take off.

in the first place.

The airport does better with its public art, a series of L.E.D. screens spread about the terminal that show continuous videos, including a full-fledged black-and-white tribute to the golden age of Hollywood musicals that kicks off every hour. The pieces are well done and consumable whether you have 30 seconds or a couple of hours to kill.

This is the moment where the airport seems to truly understand its own time period and geography. The technology is whiz-bang and the inspiration is local. More important, the art is digital and replaceable and it can grow and change as the way people experience art changes.

Good moves like that may be where the real future of architecture lies because they respect its essence. All buildings should be handsome, positive assets to their community, but the thing that separates this art — the very thing that defines it even — is its balance of function and good looks. Presenting art is a noble purpose, just like getting travelers to their gates.

So are all those other things architects have come to focus on in the new millennium. The profession, with its green buildings, practically started the neo-environmental movement and it continues to lead the world to a better places. Today's architects are designing novel public housing projects that bring dignity to their inhabitants, creating healthy work spaces that make labor less a task, preserving history and helping regions define who they are.

There's no shame in designing a tourist attraction, though more and more it seems like a waste of time, a folly for oil states and rising powers with something to prove. The flashy building had its day, but it was never all that noble, and it never made the world a better place.

The art of collecting

The Denver Art Museum's careful strategy for building a Western art collection pays off.



THE WIDE, WILD WEST. Maynard Dixon created "The Trading Post," an oil painting on canvas, in 1915. The artist traveled the region with his wife, the well-known photographer Dorothea Lange, and both captured images of a life in the West that was still new to many Americans. *Provided by Denver Art Museum*

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

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Even in a state like Colorado, where cowboys remain kings and bears still stop traffic, Western art must lasso its own place in the cultural landscape. A major museum has to work hard to build a collection of century-old mountain sunrises and desert sunsets, especially when it's the modern and contemporary galleries that get all the attention these days.

But the Denver Art Museum has made Western art its mission, and stuck to it. DAM is the only major museum in the country to have a department dedicated solely to the genre and it has given over serious square footage for the display of Frederic Remington, C.M. Russell and other legends. The in-house Petrie Institute of Western American Art, founded in 2007, has strengthened the effort with scholarly research on the painters and sculptors who have made the region their muse, building an en-

dowment of about \$7 million.

All that work paid off like a gold strike last week when local businessman and collector Henry Roath officially handed over 50 of his prized possessions to the museum. The gift added nearly 10 percent to DAM's collection, which has been growing in bits and pieces for a dozen years.

But it doubled its importance overnight.

Roath, a retired lawyer and banker, is a picky and focused collector. He didn't just acquire a Thomas Moran, he bought Moran's "Sunset, Green River Butte," a glowing 1916 landscape that may be the revered painter's best effort. He didn't purchase any old Ernest Blumenschein, he got the 1920 treasure "Landscape with Indian Camp."

"That's one of the great moments in that collection and it certainly will be important to Denver's holdings" said Andrew Walker, director of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas, which has its own much-admired collection.

The Roath pieces have actually been on loan to DAM since 2011, as a sort of run-up to the donation, so the strength they add is already evident on the museum's walls. The collection runs particularly strong in Southwestern art.

"There is at least one major work by every member of the Taos Society," said Thomas Smith, who directs the Petrie Institute and is overseeing the transfer and display of the new additions.

The Taos Society, which gathered in Taos for a decade starting in 1915, was known for capturing local landscapes and culture through a framework that combined both formal and indigenous traditions, and for putting New Mexico on the international art map. It was instrumental in introducing Indian cultures, in a dignified way, to the national population.

Among its members' pieces now in DAM's hands: E. Irving Couse's "Moonlight in Taos," a painterly depiction of an Indian reclining under a full moon, Oscar E. Berninghaus' "Indians Threshing Wheat," and W. Herbert Dunton's crowd-pleasing "Black Bears." There are six works by Joseph Henry Sharp.

But the Roath gift is broad and includes three-dimensional works, too. There are two editions of Remington's bronze "The Broncho Buster," including the rare "Woolly Chaps" version, as well as the rider-on-horse "Pursued," by Alexander Phimister Proctor, who Smith praises as "the most important artist to come out of Denver."

There are two paintings each from Charles Patridge Adams, Albert Bierstadt, E. Martin Hennings, William Herbert Dunton and Maynard Dixon, plus important solo pieces from Walter Ufer, Thomas Hart Benton and George deForest Brush.

That Roath focused on attaining one or two exceptional works by the West's big-

gest stars makes his gift “a perfect match for a museum,” which is interested in holding high-quality paintings it can display, rather than owning multiples that end up in storage, according to Smith.

And that DAM has worked so hard to establish its Western art credibility makes the gift logical. Collectors often hope to park their wares somewhere at the end of their run and they need a repository, like DAM, that has proven its scholarly intentions by issuing a major publication every year, and that has achieved a level of financial stability they can trust. It helps that the museum gets a million-plus visitors a year, guaranteeing the work will be seen.

That makes it attractive to a guy like Roath, who grew up in Denver and attended East High School and the University of Colorado in Boulder. He’s been a member of the Petrie’s advisory board since 2005 and knows the operation well.

For DAM, which considers regional collecting part of its mission, a decade of careful museum strategy has paid off. Prior to 2001, it had just “a handful” of Western works, Smith said. Now it has 600. With Roath’s masterworks in the mix it can begin trading off its lesser pieces to expand the collection’s geography, perhaps into far West works from California painters.

There’s a benefit for local museumgoers as well. A higher level of quality makes for a better experience. These works don’t just record the region’s romanticized past, or tell the story of people who lived here for millennia, they also serve as fine examples of what an artist can do with a brush, or the precision he can freeze in bronze.

“It’s not about capturing history,” said Smith. “It’s about art.”



HIS BEST PAINTING?

Ernest L. Blumenschein, perhaps the best-known member of the Taos Society of Artists, started “Landscape with Indian Camp” in 1920. He was known for reworking paintings and added touches to this one in 1929.

What's next? You decide

The city wants your suggestions for its new plan to help the arts grow in Denver.
We offer eight audacious ideas of our own.



CITY LANDMARKS. Clockwise from top left: the Hamilton Building of the Denver Art Museum; “I See What You Mean” sculpture by Lawrence Argent, the Wells Fargo Center (the “cash register” building) and “Mustang,” by Luis Jimenez. *Denver Post file photos*

Story by Ray
Rinaldi

PUBLISHED
MAY 5, 2013

The last time Denver put together a cultural plan, some big, bold things happened in its wake.

The city started its “One percent for art” program, generating millions of dollars as new building went up. It began a collection of public sculpture that now includes hundreds of pieces.

The plan led to real employment for artists, laid the groundwork for entire arts districts and inspired new venues where people hear music and watch plays.

That was way back in 1989, during the Peña administration, and the plan guided the way public dollars were spent for a quarter century.

Now it's time for an update. Denver is developing a new plan, Imagine 2020, which will take public art policy into the next decade.

There's an open invitation for all citizens to have their say on the plan. The city is conducting an online survey where people can give their opinions and make suggestions about how Denver can move forward.

Got an idea?

The survey offers a place to share it. Just go to imaginedenver.org and click through.

To get the ball rolling, here are eight new suggestions for big, bold moves that could radically change the art scene in years to come. The right public policy could help each of them become a reality.

1 Zero. Zip. Nada. Let's make Denver's big cultural institutions free.

That's right: Free. The Denver Art Museum and the Zoo, the Museum of Nature & Science, the Botanic Gardens, the History Colorado Center, the Clyfford Still Museum, at least some of the plays at the Denver Center — they ought to be free, making the region's best cultural attractions accessible to all, seven days a week.

Those organizations will quickly tell you this isn't possible, but don't buy it. The same attractions are nearly all free in St. Louis, a city not too far away. People pop into the museums there without planning or pressure, they meet for lunch at the zoo, they gather for no-charge Shakespeare in the park. These are world-class attractions without the real and psychological barriers of money.

It's just a matter of realigning missions so that these tax-exempt nonprofits put their relationship with the people they serve first. Great municipal institutions aren't about the number of curators they have, or research projects in faraway countries, or the careers of people who work there. They're primarily about connecting the citizens to paintings, zebras and dinosaur bones.

We give these places tens of millions in public dollars each year. What if we just decided to buy our own tickets with that money?

2 No more giant animals. We should rethink our ideas of public art.

Denver has spent millions on public art pieces with little show to for it. The Blue Bear is a hit and the Blue Mustang, too (if only because the DIA sculpture

got a real conversation galloping around the topic of art). But what of the hundreds of thousands spent on art at the new justice center or on street corners, transit stops and parks? What pieces do you remember?

The singular, permanent object isn't really working. Our high-tech world demands change, interactivity, excitement, renewal. We should spend our art money on temporary pieces and let the people play along. What if those funds went toward open-mic stages or outdoor movie theaters instead of giant animals? What if we bought changeable pieces for 1/20th of the price and switched them out annually for 20 years?

Let's go further. What if there was a ballot question every two years where people voted on a new color to paint that blue bear? Or we invited artists to create miniature-golf holes that everyone could play? What if people could write haikus on their mobile phones and project them on the side of City Hall? The more public the art, the better off the public will be.

3 **Real arts education.** **We could teach cultural literacy to every kid.**

You can like Beethoven or not; appreciate Matisse or pass; laugh with or at Oscar Wilde, but you have to know who these people are to decide, and that's where we are failing our kids.

We all know arts education has gone down the tubes in this country, and yet still, we are producing more artists than we can feed. What we need are audiences, people who comprehend art and understand its power to teach and unite the community, to support symphony orchestras and Spanish-language theater and classical ballet companies genuinely, so they don't need public subsidies.

This isn't just about exposing students to violin lessons or square dancing, though that's part of it. It's about offering them a demanding curriculum, worthy of a modern metropolis, that teaches the history and evolution of art across civilizations and instills an appreciation of what elevated thinking can do.



FEED THE AUDIENCE BASE. Teach kids more about art and cultural literacy. We need audiences, people who comprehend art and understand its power to teach and unite the community. *Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post*

4 Let's get famous. One huge and outstanding event might put us on the map.

Austin has the South by Southwest music fest. Charleston has its classical Spoleto Festival. Miami attracts the gallery world with Art Basel, Santa Fe has its opera. Even Louisville, Ky., stages its Humana Theatre Festival of New American Plays. Cities across the globe have won cultural reputations by putting all their efforts behind one signature event and making it terrific.

Denver needs the attention, and we've got the talent and drive here to make it happen. We just need to pick our best shot.

We might be close with the Biennial of the Americas, which is based on the good idea of bringing the best art and thinking from the Western Hemisphere together in one place. What other city is doing that?

The next one starts in July. Let's see what politicians and institutions support it with more than lip service, and let's get the rest on the train.

5 Looks count. We have to up our architectural game.

The last cultural plan — and remember this was 1989 — wasn't even polite about the city's low regard for its own good looks: "Denver lacks a coherent self-image, and consequently a world view that grows out of that self-awareness. The resulting uncertainty is evidenced by the eclectic and frequently derivative architecture of its Cityscape."

A few good things have happened since then — preservation in LoDo, architect Curt Fentress' design for DIA, the stunning, city-owned Clyfford Still Museum, and some swell residential projects in the Highlands and Stapleton.

But much of the construction has been embarrassingly bland: The Four Seasons Hotel, Denver's undistinguished, fourth-tallest building, the University of Denver's soulless expansion, the block housing northwest of LoDo, Curt Fentress' boring Colorado Judicial Center.

Since the problem is the same, let's just repeat that earlier report's solution: "Create a Design Commission to review the design quality of all new public and major commercial development in the City of Denver."

Only this time, let's take it seriously. The building department needs to reward



good design and discourage bad design with all its permitting power. Developers aren't bad people, they just need coaching.

6 Party time. Let's throw an awesome First Friday.

In many cities, First Friday events are more than a chance for art galleries to show off. They're important moments for the culturally minded to come together over art. They are huge expressions of civic pride, and their enthusiasm spills over to other days and other events.

Las Vegas, for example, shuts off its downtown streets, puts up stages and lets the crowds go wild.

Denver's biggest and most popular First Friday, along the Arts District on Santa Fe Drive, tries hard and we should make it policy to help turn it into something more special. Let's barricade the tight, little boulevard, bring in the bands, booths, food trucks and ballet dancers.

We need to party more in this town, and a celebration based on art, rather than

WHAT'S THE NEXT NEW VENUE? Denver has a proud record of building quality arts venues like Red Rocks, above, and the Ellie Caulkins Opera House. We could use a policy that continues that. *Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*

say, beer, would be a legit place to start. Though let's be sure to have some beer there, too, right?

7 Hot pockets. Could we make better neighborhoods through art?

Denver has some lively little commercial zones — South Broadway, the Highlands, Larimer Square, East Colfax, South Pearl Street — places where art, food, shopping and a good attitude come together to give the city some personality. We need more of them, and culture, fueled by an ambitious, take-no-prisoners policy, can make this happen fast.

Invite neighborhoods to come up with a plan to animate their own streets. Hold a competition and give the winners what they need to become truly interesting places. Some urban zones already have a start: Five Points, South Federal Boulevard, East East Colfax, Globeville, Curtis Park.

Give three year's free rent to restaurateurs, classical quartets, children's theaters and gallery owners. Hand property owners cash to upgrade their fronts and create cheap studio spaces. Subsidize curated, independent boutiques, set up amphitheaters, make parking lots.

Five cool new neighborhoods by 2020. It's doable.

8 The new, new venue. Let's build the theaters of tomorrow.

From Red Rocks to the Ellie to the just-announced new amphitheater in Ruby Hill Park, the city has a proud track record of giving its citizens quality performing arts venues. We could use a policy that continues that.

We need to put up or shut up on existing facilities, and rehab places like Boettcher Concert Hall. And we need to update our attitudes. Shared start-up spaces are the trend in business and an arts policy that carves out a similar sort of practical, affordable cooperatives for small arts groups makes sense, too.

The swell rehab of the McNichols Building last year was a bold tribute to our past. Let's move toward the future by embracing technology. Denver needs a high-tech theater and recording space that arts groups can share that will allow them to digitize their work, sending video and audio over the internet, so that people can experience, and interact with, art in real time. The next Red Rocks will live in the cloud.

Appreciating an art form's highs and lows



THIS IS NOT A SET. The Santa Fe Opera, which performs in an outdoor amphitheater, incorporates the New Mexico skyline in its sets. Here, Joyce Di Donato appears as Elena in “La Donna del Lago.” Ken Howard, *Santa Fe Opera*

Story by Ray Rinaldi

**PUBLISHED
AUG. 3, 2013**

If every opera was a success, success would be boring. We need the occasional bum buster, the one-off snoozer, the rare WTF, to remind us just how hard it is to coordinate singers, composers, stagehands, donors, ticket buyers, traffic and the weather into a great evening of the world’s highest art form.

That’s a romantic way of looking at a few nights at the Santa Fe Opera this week, which had at least one soaring success in “La Donna del Lago,” as fine an opera as you might hear in your lifetime, and one duff disappointment in “Oscar,” which was not so bad really, though as deflating as a long, slow burp because expectations for it were so high.

These highs and lows are what make a trip to Santa Fe so grounding. Much like a yoga retreat, an opera fan can find his center there, but also push his limits, stretch his taste level under the assured guidance that such a fine company

guarantees. Yes, you pay for it, but the experience is always rich. Those two productions formed a realistic context for the third, “The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein,” which was terrific in every way, for a title that has the cred of being composed by Jacques Offenbach, but isn’t so much in demand by opera goers.

Even “Oscar” had its highlights, most notably the singing of countertenor David Daniels, who ripped through his part as writer Oscar Wilde with a profound desperation the character warranted. This wasn’t Wilde, the charming, chatty wit most people think of, but Wilde, the tragic victim of English bigotry and homophobia at its most destructive. The opera, composed by Theodore Morrison, with a libretto by Morrison and John Cox, captures him as he is convicted and brutally imprisoned for being gay in 1895.

It’s a terrible story of injustice and cruelty, of genius misunderstood and wrecked. You feel great pity for Wilde.

But you don’t feel empathy. Wilde’s character is never built in a way we get to know and actually like him. Instead of falling for Wilde through his famous one-liners or easy manner, we are expected to walk into the theater already revering him. He is rendered with dull perfection, as a victim with no evident flaws of his own. This is the stuff of respectful, 400-page biographies, though empty drama.

We do catch Wilde’s humanity via his well-acted suffering, and through his longing for Bosie, the lover he is separated from, and Daniels does make this real when he sings a beautiful aria about “my sweet rose, my delicate flower, my lily of lilies.”

But the song comes after a full hour of mostly exposition, which makes it lovely, but late, and exposes the lack of a story development. It doesn’t help that Bosie is portrayed as a silent dancer with moves that are more 1970s than 1890s and far



TENDER. David Daniels, as Oscar Wilde, and Reed Luplau, as Bosie, in Santa Fe Opera’s “Oscar.” Ken Howard, Santa Fe Opera

from seductive. There's a kiss – between men, unusual – but this affair might have been earthier on stage in 2013.

Morrison's score is more mature and of-the-moment, influenced as classical music is these days by everything from Verdi to movie soundtracks. Conductor Evan Rogister led it with great faith and gave the singers a chance to work. Heidi Stober, as Wilde's gal pal Ava Levenson, took full advantage.

Morrison also creates something special in the second act when he sets Wilde's actual poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," to music. The haunting tale of a prison execution is riveting right through to its neck-snapping end.

The sets and costumes, by David Korins and David C. Woolard, are special too. Somehow, a gray prison is transformed into the ethereal hall of immortal writers Wilde joins in the end. In the same mysterious way, a nursery full of toys becomes the jury at Wilde's trial, full of colorful clowns and puppets. In Santa Fe, amazing is the norm.

That was certainly an apt adjective for "La Donna del Lago," Gioachino Rossini's tale of the beautiful maiden Elena, torn up by war in the old Scottish highlands and her three suitors: the sincere, sword-wielding Malcom, whom she loves; the brave rebel leader Rodrigo, the macho man her father wants her to marry; and the crafty Uberto, who is actually the enemy King James in disguise.

Director Paul Curran lets the action fly and Kevin Knight, who does both the sets and the clothes, conjures some effective settings, mixing scenes of scorched earth, cozy cottages and grisly battlefields, complete with heads propped on sticks like human lollipops; it's all action-packed and a little gross, like one of those present-day movies rated R for violence.

Still, this opera conquers the old-fashioned way, with a heavenly score and stratospheric singing. Joyce DiDonato enters big in front of a New Mexico sunset as Elena, and exits triumphantly into the night with one of Rossini's showiest arias. She runs a marathon through it all, but sounds like she could run two more. Lawrence Brownlee, Rene Barbera and Wayne Tigges maintain the pace.

Trousered up as Malcom, mezzo Marianna Pizzolato has moments of sheer wonder, summoning notes so pure they actually halted the air traffic that seems to hover endlessly over the opera's outdoor amphitheater. This really happened.

Elena and Malcom's kiss – between two biological women, more WTF at the opera — gets at all the romance Rossini and the story's original writer, Walter Scott, meant it to have.

As for "The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein," its energy came from the star power



of Susan Graham romping around in the lead role and taking nothing seriously except her singing. Director Lee Blakeley, who added dialogue in English to move the French libretto along, kept the high jinx high in this comedy of royal mixed marriages, and conductor Emmanuel Villaume kept up the tone as well as the orchestra's volume.

Charm is always welcome on an opera stage and in this case it did much to balance a trio of consecutive performances. Santa Fe is also doing "The Marriage of Figaro" and "La Traviata" in rep this season, so there's more balance, and a bit of familiarity, for anyone with the stamina, free time, attention span, wallet and wardrobe to attend five operas. Those of us who can't swing that, envy it, sort of, sometimes, not really.

Still, the diversity of hanging in there guarantees success for opera-going, if not for every opera going. You live those highs and lows; you get the romance of the risk and the pay off when it works. You get the cross-fit training. Santa Fe, with so much squeezed into so little time each summer, allows for the country's greatest immersion into the world's highest art form.

STAR POWER. Susan Graham charms her way through "The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein" at the Santa Fe Opera. *Ken Howard, Santa Fe Opera*

Our crazy French crush

The Impressionist wave of 2013 washes in with the opening of “Passport to Paris”



LIFE AND ART. The “Passport to Paris” exhibit at the Denver Art Museum focuses on French art from the late 1600s to early 1900s and explores changes in art and society during three key centuries in art history. Here, Constance Mayer’s 1801 “Self-Portrait of the Artist with Her Father” is paired with a dress from the early 1800s. *Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

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Maybe it’s a reach to compare the zeitgeist of Paris in the 1890s to that of America in the 2010s, but how else to explain this crazy crush we have on 19th-century French painters right now? The rebel posturing of Gustave Courbet, Camille Pissarro’s all-or-nothing nerve, the swagger of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec as he got down and dirty on the streets of Montmartre, it all attracts our contemporary spirit.

Museums across the U.S. built their major shows around Impressionism in 2013. The Met in New York, the Philly and the Art Institute of Chicago all made the most of their Monets this summer. St. Louis and Kansas City followed, teaming for a significant exploration of the lasting impact of Renoir, Manet and their peers.

Today, the Denver Art Museum jumps in with “Passport to Paris,” which out-blockbusters those blockbusters by combining three attractive exhibits under one

slanty, titanium roof: the traveling “Court to Cafe,” the locally composed “Nature as Muse,” and an intimate assemblage of small works on paper titled “Drawing Room.”

All the French superheroes, plus their trusty sidekicks, make appearances in each.

The Denver exhibits play well together, and they take the national obsession with painters from a certain time and place in new directions, adding both historical context and a Western twist. That comes mostly from the extensive presence of work owned by Denver collector Frederic C. Hamilton. His holdings, rarely seen in public, make up the bulk of the most interesting piece, “Nature as Muse,” a collection of 36 landscape paintings.

An important collection of French paintings in Colorado? *Oui, mesdames et messieurs*, and it is beautiful from start to finish.

The main attraction in Denver is the much larger “Court to Cafe,” featuring 50 paintings, all owned and on tour from the Wadsworth Atheneum, one of New England’s sturdiest, old art castles, located in Hartford, Conn. The show traces French painting from its formal Nicolas Poussin and François Boucher days to its more radical era defined by Paul Cézanne, and (French-ish) Vincent van Gogh.

This is an easy show to look at and like because it doesn’t do anything beyond knock your socks off. It’s one of these (Poussin’s dark “Crucifixion” from 1646) to one of those (Charles-Antoine Coypel’s 1735 dramatic “The Fainting of Armida”) to another one of those (Claude-Joseph Vernet’s sweeping “The Storm,” from 1787).

The journey eventually makes its way through Henri-Paul Motte and Eugene Boudin, with crowd-pleasing samplings of Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Caillebotte and Sisley. There’s a narrative about the breakthrough of Impressionism, though it feels obvious, and the paintings generally speak for themselves.

Interestingly, “Nature as Muse,” put together by DAM director Christoph Heinrich, is a more captivating version of the same story with the same characters moving the action forward. Heinrich supplemented Hamilton’s pieces with another batch from DAM’s permanent collection and the chronology is compact and logical.

This is an old tale, of course. Everyone knows how these painters broke from tradition, rejecting classical subject matter and heavy-handed symbolism, getting out of the studio and presenting nature with all of its gritty imperfections, letting their brush strokes show and their emotions guide their hand.

It has the familiarity of a Shakespeare play or a Verdi opera and we attend its frequent telling in much the same way, looking for a trueness or a twist that makes this version stand out.



Focus on landscapes

“Nature as Muse” does have a unique perspective. By narrowing its subject matter to landscapes, comparisons are easy to track and compare. We watch with a focused eye as those famous lines blur and the paint gets thick and chunky, and a new idea of handsomeness is born.

“Passport to Paris” succeeds in another significant way. Traveling shows, like “Court to Cafe” are a challenge for museums because they can look like cash grabs. Booking Monet into your venue these days isn’t so different from bringing in Madonna or Britney Spears. You jack up the price and let the people in, just like they do at the lowly arena down the street.

But DAM has done much to customize the show for its own space and audience and it reminds us that this is high art. The installation is an attraction of its own, complete with hand-painted stencils, period wallpapers and antique furnishings from the collection scattered about. The museum even attached molding along its walls, giving its ultra-modern galleries a few old-school European touches. There is a contemporary sensibility to the setting, overseen by Ben Griswold of Spatial Poetics, that keeps

ADJUSTMENTS MADE TO ELEVATE THE ART.

DAM’s period furnishings enhance the styling of “Court to Cafe,” based on paintings from the Wadsworth Atheneum. *Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post*

it from being kitsch.

The addition of “Nature As Muse” is credible and ultra-local. No small matter that it hangs in the wing of the museum named, and partly paid for, by one Frederic C. Hamilton.

“Master Drawings” has a regional twist as well. The 39 works on paper come from the collection of Esmond Bradley Martin, who lives elsewhere but houses his holdings at DAM. It’s a small show, well-executed and full of surprises, like the charming, 1859 “Caricature of Grandfather Lebas” by Monet that plays up a different side of the man known for his serious takes on water lilies.

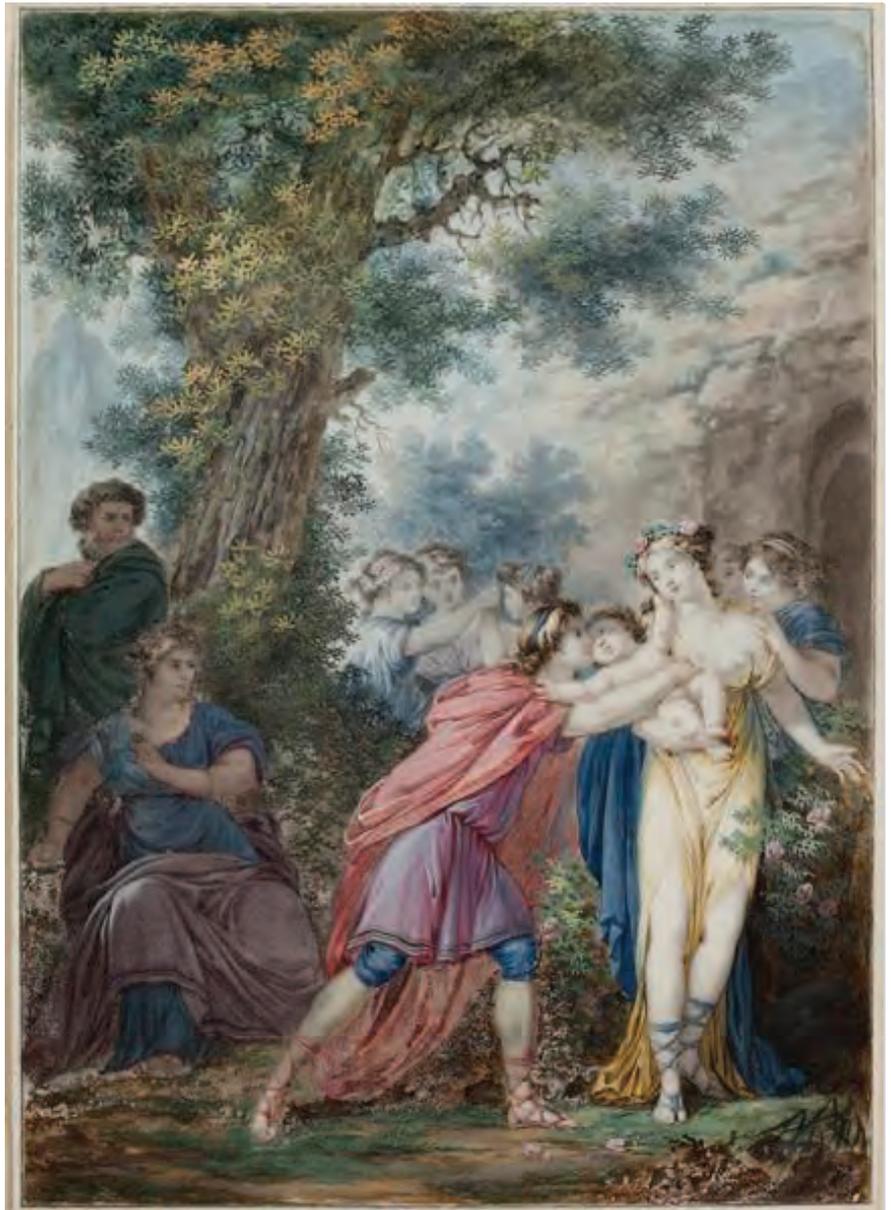
That a Denver museum should go to such extremes makes sense. The quality of this work, its history and humanity, appeals to viewers in every city. But its subject matter has a particular resonance here.

Plein-air painters

These painters honed their craft by moving it outdoors, working en plein air, instead of the studios their predecessors confined themselves to. We like to think we do our own best work in the hills and valleys that surround us.

More than that, these painters were the first to accept nature on its own terms, and revere it above all. They eschewed depictions of Greek gods and their own royals in favor of rocks and creeks and tree stumps. They didn’t frame the countryside through human eyes, they simply explored it, the less tamed, the better.

Maybe it is a reach, but that’s what we do here, albeit with the help of four-wheel-drive vehicles and GPS trackers. More than anyone else on this continent, we consider ourselves subjects of nature, not its masters. These Impressionists, they invented that.



SPLASH OF LIFE. The exhibit “Drawing Room” features works on paper rendered in ink, chalk, graphite and other media. This is Jean-Guillaume Moitte’s “Telemachus Embracing Love Held in Arms of Eucharis,” one of the most colorful objects on display. *Provided by the Denver Art Museum*