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TACOMA (AP) - The sleek, silvery new Tacoma Art Museum is an architectural shrine to the region. It frames Puget Sound icon Mount Rainier and celebrates the cloudy climate with a stainless steel skin that - like the mountain - seems to disappear and reappear in the mist.

Architect Antoine Predock and stone artisan Richard Rhodes, who designed the stone sculpture in the \$22 million structure's central courtyard, "captured the essence of the Northwest in our building,"

Janeanne Upp, the museum's executive director, told reporters at a recent preview.

"As you move through the building, I hope you will sense a connection to place."

The connection is inescapable.

Predock has placed windows in surprising places to capture glimpses of the nearby waterfront, the city's gritty industrial core, passers-by and greenery. In the education studio and resource center upstairs, a wall of windows overlooks the Museum of Glass opened just last year and glimmering now-you-see-it-now-you-don't Mount Rainier.

An outdoor balcony provides a sense of immersion in the evolving downtown core, with the University of Washington's Tacoma campus across the street, the Washington State History Museum straight ahead and the Chihuly Bridge of Glass spanning the freeway and railroad tracks on the left.

In the courtyard, open to the sky to draw daylight into the galleries, Rhodes used 500-year-old granite blocks from Chinese roads, worn smooth by centuries of human and animal traffic, to create a mini-sea with a cresting wave of stone. The 2,000-square-foot work is mirrored as far as the eye can see by the courtyard's reflective two-way glass walls - a skateboarder's dream with no public access.

The Northwest theme carries through to the exhibits chosen for the May 3-4 grand opening, like a love letter to the region's art community.

The first stop at the galleries, arrayed in a rising spiral around the light-filled courtyard, is "Building Tradition," a selection from recent gifts to the museum. It includes some of the region's hottest new artists, including Seattle painters Faye Jones and Dennis Evans, and Portland glass artist Michael Brophy.

In a tip of the hat to Eastern Washington, there are works by Pullman-based artists Gaylen Hansen and Robert Helm. Longtime regional photographer Mary Randlett's works offer candid looks at Jacob Lawrence and other masters-in-residence.

Next is "Northwest Mythologies," two rooms full of works from the so-called Northwest School of artist-mystics: Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson. The 1953 Life magazine declaring them a force to be reckoned with is also on display, though their productive alliance was faltering by the time it hit the streets.

Finally, in the museum's 4,200-square-foot main gallery, is Tacoma-born glass artist Dale Chihuly's "Mille Fiori" - a lush, lavish, vividly colored garden emerging from reflective black Plexiglas like a tropical dream. Chihuly has created an exuberant festival of color and form that stretches almost to the room's 27-foot ceiling.

The museum's 50,000-square-foot new home includes room to grow, Upp says, and should be the last stop for the institution founded in 1935 in a spare room at the University of Puget Sound. It has occupied several downtown spaces since - in the old city jail, a storefront between a Bible store and a liquor store, and, since 1971, a dignified but cramped former bank building.

"It will be a poignant moment when we close the doors of our old home," Upp reflected. "We've been there 32 years."