

New Tacoma Art Museum celebrates city around it

By Sheila Farr

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You can easily overlook the new Tacoma Art Museum as you navigate the traffic and construction along the city's main drag. With steel-and-glass walls nearly flush to the street and an entryway skewed into a triangular plaza, the building wraps the slant-corner of Hood Street then cantilevers the bulk of its form away from Pacific Avenue. Set alongside its high-profile neighbors — the dramatic Museum of Glass, the imposing Washington State History Museum and the grand old Union Station next door — TAM tends to disappear.

That's why a shock wave may erupt Saturday, when the \$22 million museum opens its doors with a 24-hour celebration party, and people get a look inside. Scattered through the corridors and galleries are a little-known Mark Tobey mural, a spectacular Chihuly installation, a look at the early years of Northwest art and at TAM's permanent collection. But the surprise is the museum itself.

The 50,000-square-foot Antoine Predock-designed building is an ode to light and the surrounding cityscape that bows to the looming presence of Mount Rainier. The building's interior courtyard mimics the mountain's volcanic core, shedding natural light into the galleries that enclose it in a gentle spiral. Inside the mirrored-glass courtyard, arced like a frozen wave, is a quiet sculptural installation of ancient Chinese paving stones by Seattle designer Richard Rhodes.

The museum's spiraling walkway suggests Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York, but there's little comparison. The sea-shell interior rhythm of Wright's building is utterly self-sufficient. Predock's design lives for the world around it. Each room, each corridor and passageway holds a portal to some stop-you-in-your-tracks view of the city or, within, to the meditative courtyard. Light seeps into the galleries from slits along the ceilings or floors. The large view portals come equipped with scrims as well as full covers so that exhibit designers can adapt the galleries to the light levels appropriate for the art.

"The function of the building is in its flexibility," says the museum's new chief curator Patricia McDonnell. "For big sculpture or ceramic shows, you have lots of ambient light. For a show of photographs or works on paper — you can accommodate that as well."

Three galleries wrap the interior courtyard and lead upward to a dramatic fourth space, the Annette B. Weyerhaeuser Gallery (as is usual now for museums, every room and corridor of the building is named for a donor). With 4,000 square feet of floor space — out of a total 12,000 for the galleries — and 31-foot ceilings, the only problem the Weyerhaeuser Gallery presents will be finding art big enough to fit it. TAM now has the capacity to show contemporary sculpture and installations on a scale that many other museums would envy.

The building also has a few quirks and misfires:

Some of TAM's galleries share, though not as conspicuously, the sloped ceiling lines and odd angles that also challenge exhibit designers at New York's Guggenheim.

Tacoma Art Museum opening exhibitions

"Northwest Mythologies:

The Interactions of Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson," May 3-Aug. 10.

"Building Tradition: Gifts in Honor of the Northwest Art Collection," May 3-Oct. 10.

"Dale Chihuly: Mille Fiori," May 3-Oct. 12.

Opening activities: Grand Opening 24-hour celebration begins 8 p.m., Saturday, \$5.

Regular hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, noon-5 p.m. Sundays. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays through Sept. 1. Admission \$6.50 adults, \$5.50 seniors and students. Third Thursday of each month free. 1701 Pacific Avenue, Tacoma (253-272-4258 or www.tacomaartmuseum.org).

The cafe is a bigger issue. The street-side hole-in-the wall first-floor room — even without tables, chairs and people — seems confined and unwelcoming. That's too bad for any museum, but part of TAM's mission is to be a hang-out — "the living room of the community," as McDonnell put it — so having a great place to sit, snack and enjoy the view would really help. Maybe in summer, when some outdoor seating opens up, the place will have more appeal.

But the oddest thing is how the most captivating part of the building almost feels thrown away. Up the stairway from the main lobby and the Weyerhaeuser Gallery is a long glass-enclosed, light-struck corridor with heart-pumping views out over the city, to the water and to Mount Rainier. Yet there's no place for museum visitors to sit and appreciate that high point of the building, itself an exhilarating space. The upper level holds the education wing and resource center, a suite of rooms overlooking Pacific Avenue. Too bad that charismatic top-floor space couldn't have included a drop-dead-gorgeous cafe or some other, more public, function, as well.

The 'Big Four'

Like the Museum of Glass, TAM didn't have a chief curator at the helm during the planning for its opening. Headlining the exhibition lineup is "Northwest Mythologies: The Interactions of Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson," guest curated by Sheryl Conkelton and Laura Landau, both formerly with Seattle's Henry Art Gallery. Conkelton proposed the show as a way to take a fresh look at the Northwest's famous "Big Four" and the Life magazine article that rocketed them to national attention in September 1953.

She and Landau selected works from the 1930s through 1953, especially paintings owned outside the region that are seldom seen in the Northwest. They authored a scholarly catalog of the show, published by University of Washington Press in conjunction with the museum.

An unusual Tobey mural, hanging in the stairway, is the show's wild card. It was commissioned in the 1950s by architect Paul Thiry for the Washington State Library in Olympia and is on loan to TAM as plans progress for remodeling the former library building.

TAM's associate curator Rock Hushka put together a selection from the museum's fine — and rapidly expanding — holdings in regional art. "Building Tradition: Gifts in Honor of the Northwest Collection" is the first part of a series of shows that will highlight some of the 200 recent gifts to the museum.

Hushka says he has tried to target works that fill gaps in the existing collection - for example, a large Roger Shimomura painting and a recent, major Fay Jones - and is emphasizing the work of emerging contemporary artists.

The grand finale of the lineup is Dale Chihuly's glass installation "Mille Fiori" (A Thousand Flowers), a dare-devil extravaganza that looks like something out of "Alice in Wonderland." The huge fantasy garden — like a pond sprouting with shimmering multicolored reeds and blossoms shooting more than 20 feet in the air — will no doubt be the crowd-pleaser of the opening lineup — and a tough act to follow.

Odd competition

It's a reminder, too, of the odd competition between the Museum of Glass and TAM over the affections of the flamboyant glass impresario and Tacoma native.

Chihuly was involved in the initial planning for the glass museum, which was to be named after him. But he got diverted by another project, a massive installation at Union Station — just a stone's throw from the site of the new glass museum. Museum trustees weren't too happy about that project, Chihuly told the Times last year: "They thought it would detract from what they were doing."

Then Chihuly got busy on the Bridge of Glass, a pedestrian overpass leading across the freeway to the glass museum. At that point, he withdrew his name from the museum and — without him as an icon — its mission began to waver.

To further confuse things, when the Museum of Glass (now subtitled the International Center for Contemporary Art) opened last summer, it headlined with a show of vintage Northwest paintings featuring Mark Tobey, Morris Graves and John Cage. That show stepped squarely on the toes of regional art-oriented TAM, which was planning "Northwest Mythology" for its grand opening. TAM retaliated by inviting Chihuly on board.

How the two museums will sort out their relationship and their roles in a relatively small community remains to be seen.

Any new museum presents challenges in the beginning, McDonnell says. That was the case a decade ago when she was part of the staff that opened the Frank Gehry-designed Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota. McDonnell found Gehry's building wonderfully art-friendly, but said a curator always has to adjust her thinking to fit the personality of any new gallery.

"We will have a learning curve with this new building," she said. "It will be a process of how to best use this space and find the best projects for the galleries."

She isn't fazed by the slanted ceilings and odd angles in some of the galleries. "I think the space is neutral enough. It's important architecturally that the galleries have some character."

Mood changes

McDonnell arrived at TAM in August, after the museum's opening shows had been set, so we won't see how her eye — and her exhibition philosophy — play out until later. She describes herself as "a good 20th-century generalist" with a special interest in American painter Marsden Hartley.

A museum is always more than the sum of its shows and its galleries, however, and McDonnell says the personality of this building lies in the way it changes with the whims of the Northwest weather.

"One of the things I adore is that it's a building of many moods, whose quality changes with different climate conditions," she said. "A feature of Predock's architecture is that it creates complicated geometries that rise to another level with sunshine. It brings another completely different reading."

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