

New National Museum

The birth of a new museum in the nation's capital is not an unusual event; they appear with elephantine regularity. But in the case of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the fanfare of this week's multiple openings is justified. This is the overdue inauguration of a national museum of modern art, something the capital has conspicuously lacked.

Washington has extraordinary collections, from the impeccable old masters of the National Gallery and the oriental treasures of the Freer to the "nation's attic" esoterica of the Smithsonian Institution. And the city has talked about an official modern art museum since the nineteen-thirties. But only with Joseph H. Hirshhorn's remarkable gift of 6,000 works of contemporary art, including some of the more spectacular sculpture of this century, has the dream come true. This work will form the sizable nucleus of a collection, under the aegis of the Smithsonian, that can be refined and expanded as time goes on. Mr. Hirshhorn has had the commendable foresight to allow future curators freedom to sell and exchange material—the often necessary de-accession process—and thus strengthen the whole, for a truly national museum.

The capital is less fortunate in the museum's architecture than in its art, however. It is regrettable that the new structure is one more stillborn monument on the Mall. Doubts that were raised about putting a sculpture garden on that uninterrupted greensward have not been allayed by the unrelentingly concreted setting. The sculpture would have graced the site more eloquently with no architectural design at all.

But the museum functions well in other ways, and the works of art, in comfortable galleries, are often glorious. With only about one-seventh of the total on display, the potential impact of the gift is overwhelming. Both the capital and the nation are the beneficiaries of Mr. Hirshhorn's desire to go public, and an extra and lively dimension has been added to Washington's impressive art and museum resources.