

*Wild about the Weisman*

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StarTribune

So, the building looks great, but does it work? That's the question every client wrestles with after the architect decamps and the construction crews sign off. In the case of the recently expanded Weisman Art Museum, which opened a \$14 million suite of new galleries this fall, the answer is, "Yes, splendidly."

The University of Minnesota museum essentially doubled its exhibition space with the addition of three brick-covered cubes that appear to pop out of the building's back, facing the campus on the south and east. Perched on tall pillars, the new boxes animate a facade that was previously a dull brick wall. Another gallery was added on the north along with a new entrance canopy. Designed by Los Angeles architects Frank Gehry and Edwin Chen, who did the original 1991 building, the harmonious extensions improve the original.

The building not only looks smarter and more complete, but it functions better. All the spaces flow seamlessly, woven together by new wooden floors, intriguing vistas and inviting angles.

#### Artists at work

Only two of the original galleries, both near the entrance, remain unchanged. In the first, New York artist Sharon Loudon and her assistants assembled "Merge," an extravagant cascade of thousands of ribbon-like strips of aluminum flashing. Curled, clumped and puddled, the aluminum pieces ripple down the walls, undulate across the floor, reflect sunlight and creep amoeba-like into the entrance hall. Alluding to the museum's gleaming metal facade, the piece welcomes visitors on a celebratory note.

In the adjacent gallery, Duluth artist Eun-Kyung Suh offers a meditative response to the museum's collection of traditional Korean furniture. She created mirage-like spaces defined by diaphanous panels of blue silk printed with old photos of Korean immigrants as they assimilate into their new communities.

The Weisman's new "collaborative studio" is nearby. Designed as a work space, the gallery has an inviting window overlooking the building's entrance plaza, where 20,000 students pass daily en route to the West Bank campus. Concrete floors, plywood-topped tables and push-pin wall displays emphasize the studio's utilitarian nature. It's now full of drawings, notes and videos by architecture firms that competed to redesign the entrance plaza. While the videos are sometimes difficult to hear, the casual, interactive display is engaging and even includes a drawing table on which visitors can sketch their own ideas.

#### Korean connection

Then comes the big gallery that's now the museum's centerpiece. A large skylit room filled

with 20th-century paintings and sculpture, it's an inviting area that feels – and works – like a plaza in the middle of a small European town. Instead of  
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78aller galleries, bays and alcoves attached, all irregularly shaped and Page 1 of 2  
interconnected.

Low platforms line one alcove, providing display spaces for antique Korean furniture, paintings and ceramics given to the museum by Edward Reynolds Wright, an educator who acquired them while living in Seoul in the 1950s and '60s. Beautifully decorated with exotic wood and ornate metal hinges, the chests and boxes are an unexpected cultural asset in a state with deep Korean connections and more Korean adoptees than any other state.

#### American paintings and sculpture

A bequest from Brainerd-born New York artist Edith Carlson funded a nearby room for light-sensitive prints and photos. Carlson's own delicate "Desert Light" abstractions – beautifully sketched squares of shimmering color – are featured along with drawings and photos by artists who shared her affection for the American Southwest, among them Agnes Martin, Ansel Adams and Marsden Hartley.

In an adjacent bay hangs a splendid display of Hartley paintings, 10 landscapes, abstractions and neo-primitive portraits spanning more than 40 years in a prolific career that took him from Maine to Berlin on the cusp of World War I and then back to his homeland. Mostly a bequest from Hudson Walker, an early director of the museum, the paintings are among the Weisman's greatest assets. Note especially the iconic 1914 "Portrait" of a German officer represented entirely through symbolic artifacts – flag, helmet, Iron Cross – and the extraordinarily delicate pastels of "Elsa Kobenhavn," a 1916 abstraction depicting a Danish ship.

Keen eyes will spot two important Georgia O'Keeffe paintings in the next gallery, her sensual 1927 "Oriental Poppies," and beautiful "Oak Leaves, Pink and Grey" of 1929. An unusual ceramic sculpture of two dancing figures by Alexander Archipenko and a handsome rainbow-hued landscape by Stanton Macdonald Wright number among the early-20th-century American masterpieces for which the Weisman is rightly known.

#### Centuries of ceramics

Then daylight beckons. The final gallery in the loop has a big west-facing window overlooking the Mississippi River that serves as a welcome orientation point. Dedicated to ceramics, the gallery now houses a lively sampler of the museum's collection, which ranges from ancient Greek vases to 18th-century German figurines and contemporary Minnesota pottery -- including a case full of pieces by internationally known Warren Mackenzie, a regents professor at the university and Weisman adviser.

With its eclectic mix of media and art forms, the Weisman prides itself on offering U of M students and others a lively introduction to art – all now properly housed in a building fit for

**the task.**

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