

BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART **A NEW BEGINNING**





## FROM THE ARCHITECT...A PROUD ACHIEVEMENT

**At our first project meetings** nearly four years ago, none of us could have anticipated the vast diversity of challenges that lay ahead or the excitement and satisfaction that would come from working through them with such a dedicated team of clients, consultants, and contractors. Throughout the design and construction process, this group has been united by a shared respect for the beauty and historic importance of the 1894 Walker Art Building as well as a strong commitment to the teaching mission of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

Our first challenge involved providing universal and equal access to a free-standing building of the purest classical form sitting high on a podium above the campus lawn. We studied more than a dozen approaches in detail, hoping to maintain a central axial entry from the Quad.



**left:**  
A dramatic new handicap-accessible entry pavilion welcomes visitors from both the campus side and public side.

Nine galleries have become fourteen, and storage space for artworks has been custom designed and climate controlled.

**above:**  
The Walker Art Building during construction — the floor of the original lower-level galleries had to be dropped by more than four feet.

The resulting design proposed a ground-level entrance to the building beneath the historic loggia. While this plan efficiently solved the problems of access, it became clear to us (and many others) that the dropping of the entry into the plinth dramatically altered the character of the building. Together with the College, we determined that the front elevation of the historic Walker Art Building should not be modified. Instead, a new entry pavilion, designed to symbolize the exciting future of Bowdoin's Museum of Art, should be constructed on the south lawn.

The design of the new entry pavilion presented us with a second unique challenge. The structure needed to be simultaneously deferential to the highly refined Walker Art Building to its north while boldly announcing itself as the new entrance to the Museum. The pavilion was conceived of as a monolithic plane, sheared and folded to become a strictly symmetrical sculptural element in the campus. The nested bronze and blackened steel formations orient the pavilion toward the historic Walker Art Building, collect paths from the town and campus, and guide visitors through the new entry sequence. The dynamic play of light off the pavilion's surfaces of glass and folded metal produces an effect of lightness and dematerialization that is designed to contrast with the monolithic weight of the Walker Art Building.

The routing of the new entry sequence beneath the original terrace presented us with the third and most daunting structural challenge of the project. It became clear to us that the entire floor of the lower level galleries would need

to be dropped by more than four feet to provide adequate head clearance to the entry. This gave us the opportunity to transform the lower-level spaces into well-proportioned galleries with high ceilings worthy of Bowdoin's exceptional art collection. The arduous process of hand digging the alternating four-foot-wide pits beneath the granite footings and pouring of carefully sequenced concrete underpinnings reminded us all of the monumental nature of this project.

A fourth technical and architectural challenge involved the mandate to provide state-of-the-art climate control for the Museum. The nineteenth-century brick and stone building was not designed for this type of climate control system, however. Working with our engineers, we designed new walls to be constructed inside the old brick building shell to create an air cavity between the plaster-coated brick and the newly constructed gallery partitions. Conditioned return air is drawn rapidly through this cavity from a floor-level slot around the perimeter of the galleries to pressurized return ducts that have been installed with a great deal of effort into the historic framing of the vaulted gallery ceilings. This strategy sandwiches artwork safely between layers of climate-controlled air while simultaneously protecting the five-brick-wide exterior walls from freeze-thaw damage by maintaining the building-side warming they have historically enjoyed.

While the four examples I list above illustrate the range of design challenges this project presented us with, they do not accurately

represent the tremendous scope of issues that this team has been asked to address. As I mentioned to Katy Kline, "...this will be a project I will use to teach architecture students for years to come. It has everything." From the technical resolution of geothermal wells, infiltration beds, and other sustainable building systems to the careful selection of historically accurate, dynamic, and art-sensitive gallery and loggia colors, this seemingly straightforward project called upon the full range of our team's design expertise.

Great buildings cannot happen without exceptional clients, and looking back on the past four years, we have to say that the Bowdoin project team has been among the very best we have ever worked with. The many complex design, technical, and construction challenges could not have been resolved without the clear and pragmatic direction of the program committee or the commitment to quality on the part of the contractor, Consigli Construction. Today, we stand together and share a profound sense of pride in what has been accomplished.

Jorge Silvetti

*Machado and Silvetti Associates, Boston*

**left:**  
Interior view of the refurbished Rotunda

**right:**  
An expansive glass curtain wall window on the street side of the Museum invites passersby with a view of the new Assyrian Gallery.



In order to give the Walker Art Building something it has never had—a truly distinguished front door—the architects designed what Museum Director Katy Kline describes as a

“beautiful, muscular but delicate bronze door—an elegant, geometric grille over glass” that brings in light to the Rotunda and provides a visual connection to the Quad from within.



## OPENING EXHIBITIONS

### The Ancients Come to Life

Associate Curator of Ancient Art and Associate Professor of Classics James Higginbotham has designed an exhibition that draws richly from the collection to examine cultural, mythic, and historical themes that play across time and objects in the ancient Mediterranean. The Walker Gallery celebrates the passions of people of the ancient world for aspects of daily life: food, drinking, music, dance, love, and family. With artifacts from Egypt, the Near East, Greece, and the Roman world, this gallery displays a great range of ancient art — most notably, splendid examples of painted Greek vases.

In the adjoining Northend Gallery, *Ars Antiqua: Immortal Dreams* continues the exploration of ancient culture. Using objects of ritual significance, the exhibition investigates contests, conflict, and complex notions of death and the afterlife. “Most of the ancient art like this that you see in museums comes from a funerary context,” notes Higginbotham. “That’s where objects most often are preserved.” Objects in this exhibition include portrait heads, funerary jewels, and vessels. Here also, the subject of one of the Museum’s prized pieces, *Emperor Antoninus Pius* (marble, second-century Roman sculpture), is reunited with his wife, *Faustina*, whose portrait head is on loan from the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.



left to right:  
“Niobid Painter”  
Red Figure Hydria  
Greek,  
ca. 460-450 B.C.E.  
1908.3

*Mummy Portrait of a Lady*  
Roman Egypt,  
ca. 100-150 C.E.  
From the collection of  
Arielle Kozloff  
James Higginbotham  
installing the exhibition in  
the Walker Gallery.







### Giving the King his Due

The head of King Ashurnasirpal II has been brought into accurate, yet whimsical, perspective in its new placement at the top of the Assyrian Gallery stairs. Associate Curator of Ancient Art and Associate Professor of Classics James Higginbotham located drawings of the original wall relief from which the Museum’s fragment came and worked with Associate Professor of Art James Mullen to trace the completed image of the ninth-century B.C.E. king on the gallery’s northern wall. Only with the head restored to its human context, notes Higginbotham, can the king assume his rightful place of ascent. “I listen as people come around the corner and up the stairs,” says Higginbotham. “They see the head displayed in its outline and you hear ‘Wow! That’s great!’ It’s a good reaction to have in a place like this.”



The Assyrian Gallery. Note the installation of a sculpture fragment of the head of King Ashurnasirpal II on the left side of the back wall (detail above).

left:  
*Winged Figure with Embroidered Tunic and Shawl* (detail)  
1860.2

### Moving the Assyrian Reliefs

We don’t know how many people were involved in the 6,000-mile, mid-nineteenth-century move of the giant stone Assyrian reliefs from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II in present-day Iraq. But in the twenty-first century, it required a small army of masons, riggers, and fine art object conservators, as well as a classical archaeologist and an Assyriologist.

The ninth-century B.C.E. gypsum panels had only to travel sixty feet — from the Rotunda to their new home behind the glass curtain wall — but what an arduous journey it was. Workers painstakingly chipped away the brick and concrete that had held the panels in place since the 1930s. Steel lifting eyes were sparingly inserted along the top of the slabs so they could be hoisted an eighth of an inch at a time.

Once they were free, two of the slabs revealed travel instructions: One read “AMERICA”; the other, “Prof. Cleaveland Brunswick, Maine.”

A track was laid to the new location so the two-ton skids holding the panels could be safely moved and fastened to structural steel supports in the new walls. When the last panel was safely installed, the crew breathed a huge sigh of relief.

## A Chinese Dialogue, Old and New

In *Transformations: Traditional and Contemporary Chinese Art in Dialogue* (Center Gallery), traditional Chinese scrolls and prints are juxtaposed with contemporary Chinese art to reveal transformations of classical models and vernacular idioms for a modern audience and context. Simultaneously, the dialogue between old and new offers visitors a chance to reflect upon the enduring power of calligraphy, landscape imagery, and popular symbols.

This exhibition, co-curated by Assistant Professor of Art and Asian Studies De-nin Lee, was made possible through the generosity of the Freeman Foundation Undergraduate Asian Studies Initiative, an organization dedicated to enhancing the study of Asian culture in American university systems. The Freeman Foundation provided funds for the acquisition of five of the major contemporary works on view.

Xu Bing's "Square Word Calligraphy" may look like Chinese writing but it is in fact a hybrid script made up of Roman characters that are phonetic. Here Xu has selected a quote from Chairman Mao, who famously championed "Art for the People." On careful scrutiny, it can be seen to read: "Chairman Mao says, 'Make the past serve the present. Make foreign things serve our nation.'" Translated and transported from a fervent socialist context, Mao's quotation in Xu's work takes on new meanings — empty, ironic, and utopian.



Assistant Professor of Art and Asian Studies De-nin Lee, co-curator of the exhibition, during the installation in the Center Gallery.

right: Xu Bing, Chinese, b. 1955  
*Quotation from Chairman Mao*, 2001 (detail in background) 2006.10.1

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## AT THE MUSEUM

### Behind the Scenes

Beyond public view, vastly improved facilities and private spaces bring the Museum to a new level of functioning. Climate control throughout the building allows the Museum to display and store objects safely and opens up the galleries for loans and exhibitions that could not have been accommodated in the past. Lights in the galleries are now fully computerized, with the capacity to adjust lighting levels to suit each individual painting.

Expansion and renovation of storage areas has more than doubled the number of compact racks to hold paintings, added dozens of drawers for prints, and allowed for custom-molded containers for each object. The new loading dock, with its retractable hood, permits seamless transport of works in and out of the Museum, and a large, new freight elevator greatly saves time and effort in moving works between levels.

**left:**  
Curator Alison Ferris examines paintings in new storage area.

**overlays, left to right:**  
José Ribas, Museum preparator, frames one of more than 150 works for the opening exhibition.

**Museum Director Katy Kline, in the Bowdoin Gallery.**

**Shovels, hand-painted by the Museum staff for use during the ground-breaking ceremony, decorate the corridor leading to the Museum offices. The original foundation wall has been left exposed.**

