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## A Place of Serene Excitement, Inside and Out

WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass. — In a time of hubristic museum expansionism, the beloved if rather rusty Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute here has managed something distinctly surprising: It has gotten bigger and better.

To a great extent the Clark, which is known especially for its holdings in French Impressionism and 19th-century academic painting plus a handful of

Renaissance masterpieces, has done this by doubling down, intensifying but also elaborating its founders' mission: the individualistic contemplation of art within domestically scaled spaces in a pastoral setting. Sounds pretty soft, I guess. But now, it has been finely tempered into a sharp reprimand of several noxious museum trends, including gigantism, spectacle and pandering to the public. At the least, it should give the most expansion-prone museum direc-

tors pause.

What has been achieved at the Clark is not without flaws. Nonetheless, Michael Conforti, its director of 20 years, and his trustees have fashioned their museum into a welcoming, comfortable place, where looking at art is the first order of business, environmental responsibility has become a lived commitment, and education is an increasingly multileveled project. The directors and trustees of every art museum in the

country should schedule a visit to the Clark sooner rather than later. I am almost certain the experience would stimulate fresh thinking about what their own museums can be, regardless of size, location or architectural ambition.

The Clark has moved cautiously. Since adopting a master plan and enlisting the Japanese architect Tadao Ando in 2001 and adding the New York architect Annabelle Selldorf to the team in 2007, it has built two new Ando buildings

and refurbished its two existing ones from the wall studs out (Ms. Selldorf's purview). Working with Reed Hilderbrand, landscape architects from Cambridge, Mass., it has reconfigured its 140-acre campus, planting 1,000 trees, protecting wetlands and extending its elaborate network of footpaths. Also new are robust sustainability programs, including seven new geothermal wells

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to reduce heating costs.

Now, the master plan's centerpiece is in place: Mr. Ando's new, serene, low-slung Clark Center, opened on July 4 with an inaugural show, and it, too, is a gem. It is an exhibition of over 30 millennium-old bronzes that are pinnacles of Chinese culture from the Shanghai Museum and rarely seen outside it.

But the exemplary redo by Ms. Selldorf also makes the original buildings and collections shine. For the first time, the Clark's Winslow Homer paintings and its recently enriched holdings in George Inness works have their own gallery. And familiar masterpieces have been given a new power to stun, notably Piero della Francesca's majestic "Virgin and Child Enthroned With Four Angels," the greatest example of this Renaissance artist's work in this country and was seen at the Frick Collection last year.

You approach the new Clark Center



in the small galleries of the first Ando building, the Lunder Center at Stone Hill, which opened in 2008 and also houses the Williamstown Art Conservation Center.

As important as the new Ando buildings are, an equally big story is Ms. Selldorf's transformations — one complete, one continuing — of the interiors of its two existing buildings, the 1955 neoclassical marble temple designed by the architect David Perry, which houses the permanent collection, and the red granite Brutalist monster by Pietro Belluschi that was attached to the temple's side in 1973 and whose reworking will be finished next spring. Called the Manton Research Center, it houses a large research library used by visiting scholars and students in the graduate program in art history co-sponsored by the Clark and Williams College.

From the new Clark Center an enclosed corridor leads visitors into a new glass-walled lobby for the temple. After one more set of doors, you're inside the original Clark, now formally called the Museum Building, which looks pretty much as its founders envisioned it, only more so.

It has been subtly but extensively reworked, including lighting and environmental systems, with an additional 2,200 square feet of exhibition space derived from converted offices and preparation areas. Stairways have been removed, and doorways moved, added or merely implied: The long corridors that wrapped around the two central galleries — one for Impressionist, the other for academic painting — have been broken up with short walls that create an effective illusion of galleries.

Some wall colors — lavender for the large Impressionist gallery, deep purple for the academics — might be improved, and devoting two new galleries to the silver collection seems a bit of a waste. But a third gallery devoted to the Clarks' collection of European porcelain is radiantly beautiful. This gallery offers the bonus of a knockout painting by Murillo — usually off view because of its large size — though its placement here is further proof that the silver galleries might be put to better use.

But there is really little to complain about. Degas's bronze sculpture (with gauze tutu) "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen" has its own small gallery, which intensifies its physical and psychic realism. Nearby hangs one of several new gifts, Odilon Redon's poetic "Head of a Woman With a Vase of Flowers."

Perhaps the best change of all is that it is possible to get deliriously lost in these galleries.

The 2015 reopening of the Manton Research Center should put a final feather in the Clark's cap. This building will contain a gallery devoted to works on paper and its penthouse may become a restaurant overlooking the campus. But most promising of all, its central triple-height atrium will become a generous public reading room, where visitors can browse art magazines, books and catalogs, as well as online resources.

The research library will expand into this space in a novel manner: Ms. Selldorf plans to line its upper level with bookshelves — out of the public's reach but very much on display — available for the time being only to staff, students and scholars on narrow walkways.

It is amazing to look up into this expanse, still full of scaffoldings, and realize that in many other museums it would serve as an event space. The idea that at the Clark, people cannot only read about art but also look upward to the means of further study seems little short of radical.



along smooth walls of red granite that can feel a bit daunting. But a reward is imminent. The first thing you see through the museum's new main entrance is the mesmerizing view of a broad terrace overlooking three stepped reflecting pools. (They cleverly disguise an elaborate water recycling system.) This breathtaking vista imposes a kind of Zen calm even before you know it, and announces the museum's priorities. You are being slowed down, the better to contemplate art and nature.

The new Clark Center provides a climate-controlled loading dock, a bookstore and the museum's first real cafe as well as 11,000 square feet for temporary exhibitions in three galleries. The smallest, overlooking a reflecting pool, holds "Cast for Eternity: Annual Ritual Bronzes From the Shanghai Museum." Spanning the 18th to the first century B.C., these containers held food, wine or water during ritual ceremonies.

They offer a diversity unmatched by American museums, forming the best initiation into Chinese bronze you may ever see. Vividly encapsulating the evolution of different vessel forms and surface decorations, they exude a suave yet undeniable fierceness, and not just because so many of their shapes and patterns are based on animals.

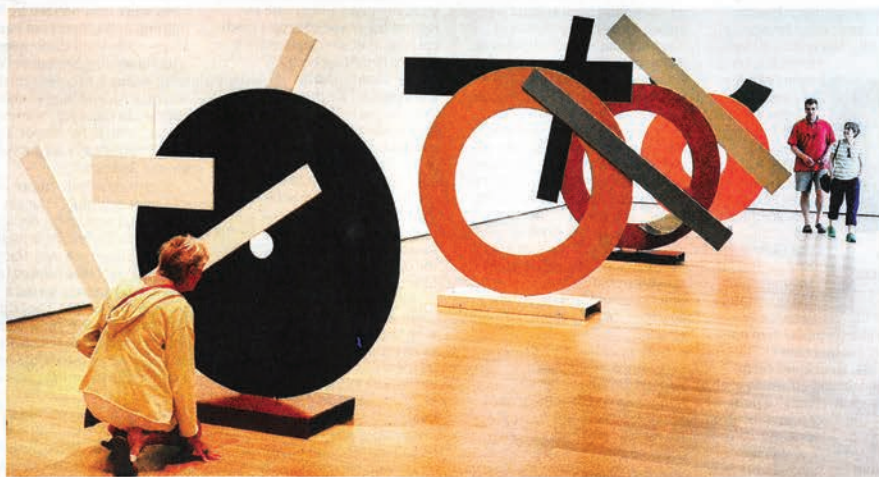
On Aug. 2, an exhibition of Abstract

Expressionist painting and sculpture from the National Gallery of Art in Washington will open in the Clark Center's other galleries, which are below grade but get some natural light from large window wells (though the larger gallery is marred by a diagonal wall).

Another part of the reopening celebration is "Raw Color: The Circles of David Smith," a highly focused show of painted steel works from the early 1960s that are among Smith's most colorful and abstract sculptures. It can be seen



The exhibition "Cast for Eternity," top, displays ancient Chinese bronze ritual vessels. From far left: Rodin's "The Thinker" sits amid Impressionist paintings; Degas's "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen"; Piero della Francesca's "Virgin and Child Enthroned With Four Angels." Below, David Smith sculptures in the "Raw Color" show.



"Cast for Eternity: Annual Ritual Bronzes From the Shanghai Museum" runs through Sept. 21 and "Raw Color: The Circles of David Smith" through Oct. 19 at the Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.; 413-458-2303, clarkart.edu.