

The Museum, Clark Art Institute | Williamstown, Massachusetts | Selldorf Architects with Gensler

A CLASSIC REMASTERED



A sensitive restoration and renovation of an art museum intensifies its original aura.

BY WENDY MOONAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES EWING

SIMPLER, SIMPLEST Selldorf Architects renovated and restored the white Vermont-marble classical-style museum designed by Daniel D. Perry in 1955. It will still house the permanent collection, although the entrance has been moved from the east side (above) to the west, where Tadao Ando has added a new glass pavilion overlooking the reflecting pool and the visitor center. Inside the museum, Selldorf devised a color palette of soft, muted shades for the various galleries (right).

Annabelle Selldorf was an obvious choice to renovate the venerated museum of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, home to a stellar collection of European and American paintings. Long esteemed by the art world for her minimalist approach, the German-born, New York-based architect designed the Neue Galerie New York (2001), the Stanze del Vetro glass museum in Venice (2012), and several high-profile Manhattan galleries, including David Zwirner's most recent space in Chelsea (RECORD, June 2014, page 168). Michael Conforti, the Clark's director, hired Selldorf in 2007, six years after he commissioned Tadao Ando to design a new visitor center and conservation laboratory. But the two architects, both renowned for museum work, did not collaborate. "Ando and I met after I was hired," Selldorf recalls. "He said, 'I'll do my thing, and you do yours.'" That was the only discussion.

Her program was to do a gut renovation of the museum, a white-marble temple designed by Daniel Devereil Perry, which had barely been touched since it opened in 1955 (in 1973 it was linked by a passageway to the Manton Research Center next door, which Selldorf is also renovating for a 2015 completion).

Selldorf had to rethink the entire visitor experience, since it had already been decided to switch the museum entrance from the columned, formal front to the back. (In 2001, Conforti had adopted a Cooper Robertson master plan that suggested expanding the Clark to the west, behind the museum.) The first move was to change the original circulation pattern, basically a one-way procession around the periphery that ended in the skylit Renoir Room at the center. "I wanted a route of circulation that was not coercive," Selldorf says. By eliminating the corridors, she could ensure that "every space is used for looking at art."

Selldorf also transformed the former white-marble lobby of the original entrance into a well-proportioned winter garden, complete with a new skylight, to display sculpture. By doing so, and by converting former offices into new galleries, the architect gained 2,200 more square feet of exhibition space for a total of 43,770 square feet. "The greatest challenge was making the spaces coherent," she says.

Selldorf is proudest of replacing the putty-colored walls with a muted but varied palette of tones: pearl gray, pale lilac, mauve, and aubergine. "I started looking at where paintings were to be placed and developed a family of colors that is very specific to the art," she says. She adds, with a laugh: "The curators assumed, because I am a modern architect, I'd want white. But I was thinking about colors from the beginning. The day I presented my color scheme was the most anxious



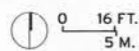
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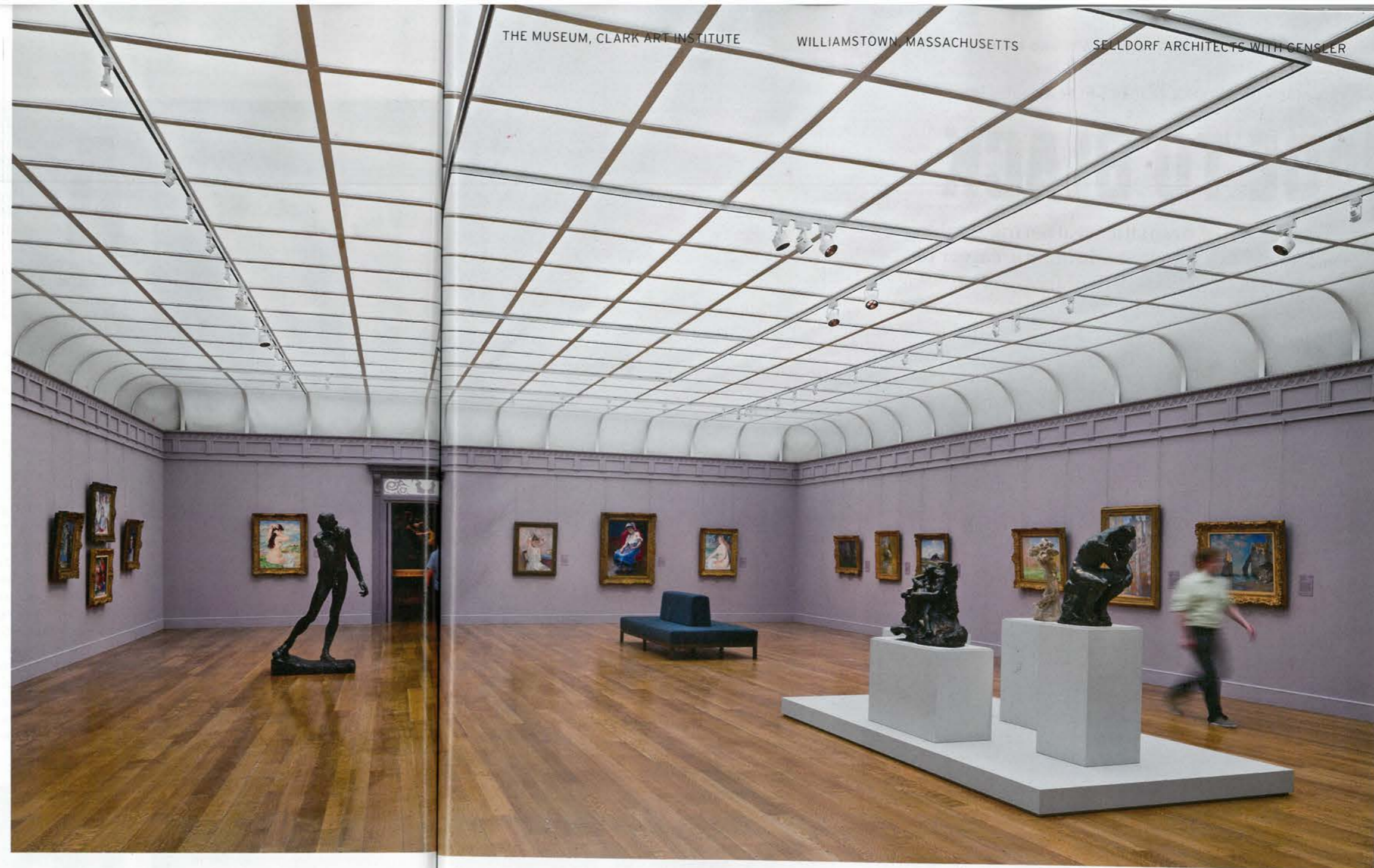
MAIN FLOOR



LOWER LEVEL



- 1 ENTRANCE
- 2 GALLERY
- 3 STORAGE
- 4 STAFF LOUNGE
- 5 OFFICE
- 6 MECHANICAL
- 7 MAIL ROOM
- 8 PHOTO STUDIO
- 9 ELECTRICAL



one for me. Michael warned me he would battle with me over the colors." They did fight, but now Conforti concedes, "I'm glad she won."

The task at hand involved more than coming up with a sophisticated color scheme. Selldorf had to take the walls down to the studs to replace the electrical, plumbing, lighting, and HVAC systems. And she cleaned and updated the laylight for the enormous ceiling in the Renoir room, enhancing the natural light that evenly saturates it.

Most striking, perhaps, are the new galleries for the decorative arts, for which Selldorf designed casework, vitrines, lighting, and furniture. Now the Meissen porcelain and antique Augsburg and English silver glow in their subdued eggplant-colored setting.

Selldorf is modest about her contribution. "The permanent art collection is the jewel in the crown," she says.

MAUVE OVER

The rich colors of the paintings in the gallery where Renoir reigns (above) are set off by tinted walls. The existing oak floors have been stained a slightly darker shade. Selldorf cleaned the laylight and updated it with safety film. Above it and the attic space, the architect replaced the original composite translucent material on the roof with a new version of the same product.

"My goal was to make the museum look better without anyone noticing anything had been done."

The architect also insisted on retaining the museum's "domestic" character—the small galleries with windows looking out at the expansive panorama of nature, to "create a relationship between the art and the landscape," she says.

The one thing Selldorf was not permitted to do was design the new entrance to the west, which faces Ando's visitor center: Ando had already done it before she got there. It's a 2,000-square-foot glassed-in porch that is both lobby and sculpture court, a perfunctory modernist appendage to the white temple. Asked about it, Selldorf says, "Don't get me started . . ."

Nevertheless, now, as soon as you enter the first gallery, you are immersed in the museum's Old World atmosphere. What's great is that, while the interior may feel historic, it's not. It's all Selldorf. ■

credits

DESIGN ARCHITECT: Selldorf Architects – Annabelle Selldorf, principal; Sara Lopergolo, Lisa Green, partners; Julie Hausch-Fen, associate partner; Matthew Conrad, project manager; Joe Smith and Jeanette Trudeau, project architects

EXECUTIVE ARCHITECT: Gensler – Madeline Burke-Vigeland, principal in charge

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Reed Hilderbrand Landscape Architecture

ENGINEERS: Buro Happold (structural); Altieri Sebor Wieber

(m/e/p/fp); Vincent P. Gutlow & Associates (civil)

CLIENT: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

SIZE: 43,770 square feet

TOTAL PROJECT COST: \$145 million

COMPLETION DATE: July 2014

SOURCES

GLAZING: Oldcastle BuildingEnvelope

PAINTS: Benjamin Moore, Farrow & Ball, Sherwin-Williams

SKYLIGHT: Kalwall