



FEAST YOUR EYES

With the Johnson Museum closed to visitors, CAM offers a virtual tour



MASTER WORKS: The museum's airy lobby provides a backdrop for a trio of pieces by Roy Lichtenstein (from left): *Brushstroke Still Life with Lamp*, *Brushstroke Still Life with Coffee Pot*, and *Brushstroke Still Life with Box*. Opposite page: Alberto Giacometti's bronze sculpture *Walking Man II* is among the Johnson's highlights.

In a typical year, Cornell's Johnson Museum of Art sees more than 80,000 visitors—not only University students, faculty, and staff but local residents, alumni, tourists, schoolchildren, and more. But due to the coronavirus pandemic, this iconic structure—opened in 1973 and designed by the firm of famed architect I.M. Pei—has been closed to normal traffic since March 2020, though it has continued to support Cornell's academic mission in a variety of ways.

With access to cultural institutions curtailed during COVID, it's an apt moment to showcase Cornell's world-class art museum. So CAM teamed up with the museum to bring the Johnson to you: the following pages offer a smorgasbord of

visual delights that constitute just a tiny sampling of its holdings.

In addition to a particularly distinguished collection of pieces from Southeast Asia, the museum—named for benefactor and former University trustee Herbert F. Johnson 1922—boasts the work of famed artists from Rembrandt to Warhol, and its holdings span the globe: pre-Columbian sculpture, African textiles, centuries' worth of European art, modern and contemporary paintings, thousands of prints and photographs, and much more. With a permanent collection of more than 35,000 works covering some 6,000 years, the Johnson is—in the words of its director, Jessica Martinez—"the equivalent of a major metropolitan museum, at the top of the Slope." ▶

PHOTOS: LEFT, ROBERT BARKER/UREL; RIGHT, DIRK BAKKER



STATE OF THE ART

A conversation with the Johnson's director

After Jessica Martinez took the reins at the Johnson Museum in July 2019, she had just one full semester of “normal” life on the Hill before the COVID lockdown struck in the middle of spring 2020—upending operations for one of Cornell's premier venues for public outreach and cultural enrichment. Just the fourth director in the museum's history, Martinez spent



much of her career at Harvard, where she earned an undergraduate degree in fine arts (from Radcliffe) and a doctorate in the history of art and architecture; prior to coming to Cornell, she led the Division of Academic and Public Programs at the Harvard Art Museums. Her experience also includes serving as an educator and administrator at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., and investigating the provenance of Nazi-looted artworks in Eastern Europe.

Does the world need art more than ever right now?

It's such a beautiful question, because it suggests just what we know: that art can bring us out of our current situation and into the world of the imaginary, but it can also help us wrestle with the very real problems of today. We must listen to artists now; they are not only chroniclers of our times, they help us imagine new futures. Art asks us tough questions. What is the nature of sickness? How do we move through political conflict? How do we develop empathy in ourselves and in others? How do we form community? A museum is a place to think of these big questions, whether you're there looking at the original work or at home on your computer. It should be a place of joy and delight, but also one of real rigor.

How does Cornell's art museum reflect its ethos as an institution?

When I think about what “One Cornell” looks like, it looks like the Johnson Museum, because students from every school and college can truly belong here. No matter your area of study, there is a route of access to the collection, and a single work of art can reveal worlds of thought. This is one of the great advantages of having a major museum on such a large campus—that each work gets the benefit of multiple eyes and points of view.

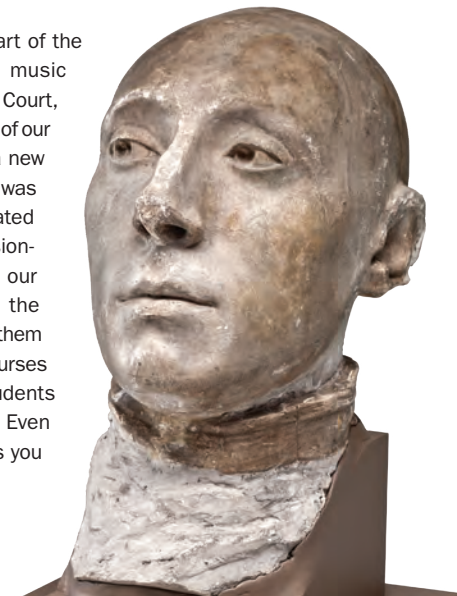
How did the Johnson facilitate learning amid last fall's COVID restrictions?

It was important for the museum to be part of the campus's efforts to de-densify. We had music students rehearsing on our Mallin Sculpture Court, and the AAP architecture reviews used some of our larger galleries. Every week, we installed a new show of student art, a first for the Johnson; it was fantastic, because the students collaborated with our staff to install their work professionally. Faculty in a long list of fields mined our collection to select works that advance the arguments in their classes, and we installed them in our new curricular gallery. Last fall, fifty courses came to the museum and nearly 800 students learned with and through our collection. Even though you're in Ithaca, the museum takes you to every corner of the globe. ▶

PHOTOS: MARTINEZ, JOHN DEPUTY; ARTWORKS THROUGHOUT, PROVIDED



'Art can bring us out of our current situation and into the world of the imaginary, but it can also help us wrestle with the very real problems of today.'



Clockwise from opposite page: *Untitled (CO Yellow)* by Arturo Herrera; Johnson director Jessica Martinez; a sun mask by Cree artist Gene Brabant; *The Kitchen* by James McNeill Whistler; a life mask of the Marquis de Lafayette by Jean-Antoine Houdon



Can you give an example of an artwork that faculty incorporated into their lessons?

There's a painting by David Bailly that's really stunning, what's known as a *vanitas* still life. It takes its name from a passage in *Ecclesiastes*, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!"; its grouping of objects offers a cautionary message about the foolishness of spending time and money on worldly possessions. An Arts and Sciences course on European music from the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque focused on the painting's lute, recorder, and cittern, considering how the temporary nature of music speaks to the brevity of life. A CALS course on the art of horticulture studied the red tulips in the work; they reference the Dutch trade and recall the fragility of life. And at the business school—this is my favorite—a class on luxury marketing discussed the work itself as a costly good and how the language of advertising takes its cues from still lifes of the so-called Golden Age.

How has the Johnson enriched online education for schoolchildren during COVID?

When we realized that [elementary] schools would not be able to visit in person, we wanted to create interactive sessions to complement what students were learning in class. Working closely with teachers, we created online programs where there is close looking, critical inquiry, and engagement with the world. For example, we've been working with a fabulous effigy jar from Costa Rica, in the form of a jaguar, that would have held something similar to hot cocoa. Not only do we share the great artistry of this stunning jar, we also talk about how it was made and encourage students to work with their caregivers to do a creative project at home—complete with a hot cocoa recipe.

Why did you want to lead the Johnson to begin with?

I was really interested in the multiple colleges and schools at Cornell—that faculty and students from so many disciplines could enliven our collection with a range of new questions. We could work deeply with our closest kin departments of art and art history, but in working with ILR we might understand how museums function in new ways; with CALS we might look at our collection and teaching from a different vantage. Inspired by Weill Cornell Medicine and its teaching hospital, we are building a world-class teaching museum. Accomplishing that means putting students at the center of museum practice—supporting exhibition research, program planning, collections management, gallery teaching, and so much more. >



This page, clockwise from below (excluding top row): *Vanitas Still Life with African Servant* by David Bailly; both sides of the medallion *Fiat Vita (Let There Be Life)* by Anthony de Francisci; *Blue Ish*, a mixed-media sculpture by Mary Bauermeister; *Portuguese Church in Gloucester* by Edward Hopper

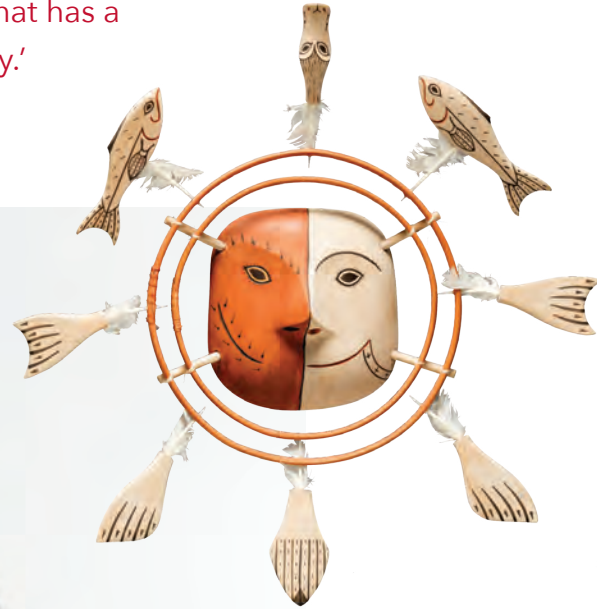


This page, clockwise from top left: The cyanotype *Blowing Bubbles* by Clarence White; a mid-1900s embroidered cloth from Indonesia; a centuries-old jaguar effigy jar from Costa Rica; *Florida Flowers* by Blanche Lazzell





'I know that some love the Johnson as a kind of best-kept secret, but I actually see the museum as this big and muscular place that has a presence globally.'



What's it like to run a major museum so far from an urban cultural center?

It's really interesting. This is where our history comes into play, because even before the concrete was poured, Cornell built a reputation with the groundbreaking show *Earth Art* [in 1969]. This was the first North American exhibition dedicated to presenting works bound to their physical site. It was a high-profile, highly ambitious show, and the world came to Cornell. And we project ourselves into the world outside of Ithaca in many ways, including through traveling exhibitions and an international loan program; our *Most Wanted Men No. 1, John M.* by Andy Warhol was recently at the Tate Modern in London and is now at Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany. I know that some love the Johnson as a kind of best-kept secret, but I actually see the museum as this big and muscular place that has a presence globally.

What do you see as the greatest strength of the Johnson's holdings?

Our Southeast Asia collection is arguably the best of any university art museum—and likely of any public art museum in North America except the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Of course, we have masterworks from China, Japan, and Korea, but the breadth and depth of the Southeast Asia collection is remarkable.

Are there gaps you'd like to fill?

We're eager to not only expand our collection of contemporary art, but work with artists on campus—in teaching, research, and public installations—to think about how they might advance Cornell's academic mission. We're also focused on building our photography collection, to keep up with the changing canon and to support teaching and learning across >



Clockwise from opposite page, top left: *Peasant Mother and Child* by Mary Cassatt; a shaman mask by Harry Oomyun Shavings; a standing bodhisattva statue from the third-century Gandhara region (modern Pakistan); *Tanpa Nama (Untitled)* by Abdull Latiff bin Mohidin; *Kodwa I*, a gelatin silver print by Zanele Muholi





This page, clockwise from above: *Unihaha* by Kim Foon; *Mountain Spirit and Tiger* from Korea's Joseon dynasty; *Man on hoisting ball*, *Empire State Building*, a gelatin silver print by Lewis Hine; a crest mask from Mali representing a male antelope



disciplines. As the Latin American studies program grows, for example, we've been collecting more works of Mexican photographers from the Fifties. There are opportunities across our collections, contemporary and historical, to expand and include even more diverse perspectives.

If the building were on fire and you could only carry out one work of art, what would it be?

I never answer this question—"What's your favorite?" [She laughs.] But our iconic Alberto Giacometti *Walking Man II* surges us forward. He inspires us, this hero of our collection that is very much about looking, about vision, and about movement in a specific historical moment, post-war, that is radically relevant right now.

What have you hung on your own office wall?

I have one of the best offices in all of Cornell because I have a sweeping view of Cayuga Lake. Just above my desk is a wonderful painting by the Korean artist Kim Foon, *Unihaha*, from 1964. It was a gift to the museum from Professor Emeritus Roald Hoffmann

in honor of Martie Young, a professor emeritus of art history who was also Cornell's founding curator of Asian art. Professor Hoffmann won the Nobel Prize in chemistry, and it's a daily reminder of the possibilities for bridging art and science at the Johnson, especially through conservation and technical analysis. And for me, the brushstrokes recall the building's poured concrete and our lovely Morgan [Japanese] Garden.

When you take a busman's holiday, what are your favorite museums to visit?

One is the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. It seeks to give an experience of art and culture, and it questions colonial history in sharp and rigorous ways. Another of my favorites—and this will be a surprise—is the Mesalands Community College Dinosaur Museum in New Mexico. I love that it's a true university museum. There's a study center where they bring out dinosaur bones and you can see the graduate students doing their scientific work. Showing the back-of-house, how a museum is run—really sharing that with public audiences—I find very inspiring.

Once the pandemic lockdown ends, what new exhibits are on tap?

As soon as it's safe, likely next fall, we're going to be mounting a major exhibition entitled *Art and the Global Climate Struggle* that considers indigenous ecology and contemporary art. It's in conjunction with a CALS initiative, an international conference called Transdisciplinary Challenge: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Adapting to Climate Change.

What do you most look forward to when life goes back to normal?

We love to bring people together—to gather faculty, students, visiting scholars, alumni, artists, neighbors, friends, and tourists—because to really interrogate a work of art requires multiple points of view. I miss that in-person engagement so dearly. I think the best way to get to know somebody is to look at great works of art together. >



'We love to bring people together, because to really interrogate a work of art requires multiple points of view.'



This page, clockwise from right: A glass vase by Louis Comfort Tiffany; *Woman Reading* by Rembrandt van Rijn; an American quilt from the mid-1800s; a Mayan ceramic figure dating from the sixth to eighth centuries



ARCHITECTURAL GEM

The Johnson's building is its 'greatest work of art'

'This piece of land is sacred,' Pei said at the dedication. 'To put a building there was a challenge we couldn't resist.'

When Andrea Simitch '79 matriculated on the Hill as an undergraduate architecture student in the mid-Seventies, the Johnson Museum had only recently been completed. Designed by the firm of star architect I.M. Pei, the boxy concrete-and-glass structure was a distinctive statement sited on a prominent patch of campus—a knoll atop Libe Slope that, as legend had it, was where Ezra had declared his intention to found his university.

A teenaged Simitch didn't much care for it. "I thought it was too harsh, and it didn't fit in with the architectural styles of the other buildings," recalls Simitch, now chair of the architecture department at Cornell. "But by the time I graduated, it was hands down my absolute favorite building on campus."

What changed? As Simitch explains, she'd learned to take a closer look. "People might think it's an eyesore because it doesn't fit in with the neoclassical architecture of the campus," she says. "But once you begin to appreciate its complexity—what a rich project it is and how it exists within the environment of the campus—you begin to see how incredible it is. As I became more educated and tuned in, I began to see the poetry that's embedded in the building. I'm not saying it's an elitist structure that requires an education to understand it, but I do think it requires a closer

reading to fully appreciate its subtleties."

Today, the Johnson Museum is one of Cornell's most iconic buildings—second only to the Clock Tower as the most recognizable structure on the Hill. The museum itself may house tens of thousands of precious and irreplaceable objects from around the globe, but director Jessica Martinez calls Pei's creation "our greatest work of art." And currently, that work is getting some work done: the Johnson is in the midst of a seven-month project to redo the roof and drainage system, including piping that's embedded in the poured concrete. "What's really exciting is that if we do everything perfectly right, nobody will know we ever touched the building," says Martinez. "So it's not one of those 'big reveal' renovations—it's a careful, thoughtful conservation project."

Unveiled in May 1973 and costing \$5 million (about \$29 million in today's dollars), the 60,000-square-foot building gave a dramatic new home to the University's art collection, which for the previous twenty years had been located in the A.D. White House. "To build on this site was an obsession with me and others in my office," Pei said at the dedication ceremony. "This piece of land is sacred. This is where the founding father, Ezra Cornell, stood when he told the Board of Trustees he wanted to build a university here. Before, when you looked north across Library

Slope, all you could see was sky and trees, and you can't beat that. To put a building there was a challenge we couldn't resist."

In an essay in the 1998 edition of *A Handbook of the Collection*, John Sullivan III '62, BArch '63—a member of Pei's firm who served as architect-in-charge on the project—recalls the design process that began with the awarding of the commission in spring 1968. "It was to be the third museum building created by the ten-year-old firm, and the largest, most complex one to that date," he writes. "It is singular as a building type: a museum and teaching facility, one that would function for the University and contribute to the cultural life of the surrounding community."

As Sullivan goes on to observe, the concept for the Johnson Museum was "first about response to its site: its great expanse, its limitations, its orientation, its relationships, and the resultant accountability." In early summer, the design team took a long walk to survey its future home, along with University officials, the museum's director, and a landscape architect. "The site was found to have two distinct aspects, each requiring a unique response; a conundrum, as they were in opposition," Sullivan writes. "The dynamic, upward movement of Library Slope required a building of compact volume to provide visual termination, while the approach to the site through an opening in the wall of buildings forming the west side of the Arts Quadrangle required spatial definition without closing off the view beyond."

The ultimate solution was a structure that's at once solid and oddly ethereal, with its blocky concrete elements counterbalanced by swaths of glass and surprising absences of form—most dramatically, the fifth floor that cantilevers over the main entrance, which is housed in a box that seems to nestle beneath that floating upper story. "The lobby, like an overture, establishes the themes and mood of the building," Sullivan writes. "In this instance the prelude identifies the ambiguity of enclosure: it is both an interior and an exterior space. And it defines the building concept: an articulated assembly of enclosures joined by glass, where the focus alternates between the functional spaces and glimpses of the landscape."

In 1975, the building won the National Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects. (Pei himself would go on to win both the Pritzker Prize—architecture's answer to the Nobel—and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and his firm to design such high-profile projects as the Louvre's glass pyramid.) Over the decades, the Johnson's unorthodox form has prompted more than one observer to liken it to a sewing machine or a Kitchen Aid mixer; shortly after it opened, the *New York Times*' architecture critic—in a review headlined "Pei's Bold Gem"—called it "a rather strange, giraffe-like structure on a sweeping, grassy slope." As retired architecture professor Vince Mulcahy '71 puts it: "People look at it across the valley and go, 'My God, what is it?'"

Mulcahy, who was on the Cornell faculty for more than three decades, long taught an architecture survey course for non-majors. He'd often use campus buildings as handy and accessible examples—the Johnson being one of his favorites. "It shows students what architecture is capable of," he says. "It's not about looking at the building, it's about seeing the world through it. It looks like a sculptural object, a self-indulgent statement. But it reframes the world, outside and inside, for its occupants. Not only does it house a collection of works of art, it collects landscapes; it collects selected and framed views."

In 2011, the University completed a \$22 million renovation and expansion of the Johnson; Pei had retired, but Sullivan served as lead designer. The project, which won a local award for historic preservation, includes about 16,000 square feet of additional space, most of it subterranean—echoing an early element of the original design that was never realized, underground galleries

looking out into Fall Creek Gorge.

For Simitch, one of the original building's most striking aspects is that it "belies scale": viewed from a distance, it's not clear how big a person is in relation to it. "From the city, one looks up to it as a kind of abstract sculpture," she says. "It has a monumental position on the hill when seen from the valley—whereas from the campus perspective, it's much more an extension of the space and the Arts Quad. It has a really interesting sort of duality." As Simitch notes, the Johnson wasn't the first Upstate museum designed by Pei's firm; it had previously done the Everson Museum of Art in nearby Syracuse—another unadorned, abstract concrete structure that (as the museum says on its website) "was dubbed 'a work of art for works of art'" when it opened in 1968. Simitch sees the Johnson, like the Everson, as an example of one of the world's premier architecture practices at the top of its game. "I think it's one of the firm's most powerful works," she says. "It's extremely important." ■



BUILT ENVIRONMENT (opposite page): The museum after sunset, with an image from the *Sil/sila* series by Sama Alshaibi projected on its right side and *Cosmos*, an installation by Leo Villareal using computer-driven LEDs, visible beneath the fifth floor. This page, from top: An interior staircase; the lobby; a gallery with a view.



PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, JASON KOSKI; ROBERT BARKER (2); UNDSAY FRANCE/ALLUREL