

READY TO REOPEN

Museum of Art shines in new digs

BY GREG WAXBERG
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In the Mississippi Museum of Art's new location on South Lamar Street, the lobby is spacious and bright thanks to walls of glass — and, when you enter the building and look toward the galleries, you see a gigantic work of art.

Mississippi native William Dunlap's *Panorama of the American Landscape*, consisting of 14 canvases that total 112 feet in length, is on display as two stacked panels. It's an attention-grabbing example of how the former Mississippi Arts Pavilion is allowing the museum to better focus on Mississippi art because, after

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almost 30 years in its previous location on Pascagoula Street, the new facility has almost double the space.

With contributions of more than \$13 million from individuals, foundations, corporations and government agencies, the new museum, measuring 54,000 square feet, opens Saturday.

The move follows a five-year strategic plan, during which programs and exhibitions were scrutinized and the museum's mission changed from "collecting, preserving and exhibiting art" to "engaging Mississippians with art."

The new mission emphasizes the human element, the community and the state, said Maggie Lacey, director of marketing.

Some programs were eliminated and others were created to make sure the museum's work was making a difference and reaching as many people as possible. To reach more people and give more students access to the art, it was decided that a new building was the answer.

However, the number of people who could walk through the door was just part of the evaluation. More space means more exhibitions, bigger



Liberazione di San Pietro by Sisto Badalocchio (1585-1619) is among the featured works at the Museum of Art.

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exhibitions and room for the permanent collection for the first time.

"We own over 4,000 works of art, and (the previous) building had no room for us to display any of them," Lacey said. "Between exhibitions, we would pull out a few pieces at a time and show them whenever we could, but there was very little space over there."

She points out two other cru-

cial factors: There was no way to control the environment in the gallery and the roof leaked.

"When you have those kinds of conditions, no one will lend you priceless art," she said. "We were really limited in the caliber of exhibition that we could show. Coming to this new building, it was designed with all of that in mind, so that the environment could be controlled, so that we could have whatever caliber of art we could attract."

The Arts Pavilion — the site of previous exhibits from Versailles, Spain and Dresden — was available because no more exhibitions were planned and the city had not decided what to do with the building. The museum negotiated a lease in 2005, the ceremonial breaking of ground took place on June 8, 2006, and the pavilion was redesigned to be, in Lacey's words, "the perfect art museum."

The architects of the new design are Glave & Holmes Associates of Richmond, Va., in collaboration with Dale and Associates of Jackson. Madge Bemiss, head of the Cultural Studio at Glave & Holmes when she met Museum Director Betsy Bradley in Virginia, is the design architect and design team leader. She showed Bradley an article about why people shy away from museums.

"We considered the visitor experience from the moment that one starts to look for the building," Bemiss said. "It was important to make the entrance visible and transparent."

She describes the lobby as "a living room for the community" and said the biggest challenges were working with an existing



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Filip Lippi's *The Annunciation* is among the many works of art that will be on display when the Mississippi Museum of Art opens Saturday.

building and deciding where to focus the design work and money, eventually choosing the entrance and lobby.

"The most impressive attributes are the ways that the materials used and the spaces designed embody our mission of being open, accessible, welcoming and conducive to meaningful personal experiences with art and the community," Bradley said.

Among the renovations are a higher roof and the addition of a front porch for a Southern feel.

"We want people who have never been to an art museum before, and didn't think it had anything to offer them, to be able to know where the door is, look inside, see people like themselves, see what's going on, and know they'll be comfortable when they walk in," Lacey said, emphasizing that the museum offers a relaxed feeling.

The galleries are divided, with multiple entries. One section is

for changing exhibitions, with movable walls that can be re-configured to accommodate anything from one large exhibit to several small exhibits. The other section is the much-heralded gallery for the permanent collection, "The Mississippi Story," which is free to the public.

This story of Mississippi through art was curated by Patti Carr Black, author of *Art in Mississippi*. She spent more than a year sorting through the collection and selecting the most important Mississippi works. The sections of the rotating exhibit encompass the influences of land and people on art, daily life and Mississippi artists living and working elsewhere in the country. There also is a gallery of the most important non-Mississippi work.

The collection will prove beneficial when students visit because they can learn about more than art.

"There's a lot of Mississippi history running through the exhibition," Lacey said. "If they're studying geology or other kinds of science, they can go in the land gallery. They can spend the whole day and, because there's so much more to see, they can come more often."

Within the galleries, the public will find educational spaces that include, for example, further reading.

"The educational spaces are so pertinent to your experience in an exhibition [to] get you thinking about what you just saw and what it could mean," Lacey said. "It won't just have been a blur of paintings as you walked through a gallery, but more of a personal experience."