

## With a new building, the Stanley returns to an old mission



**FOR NEARLY 40 YEARS,** the University of Iowa Museum of Art sat shaded by sycamores in a quiet enclave, protected from the bustle of the main campus by the gently flowing Iowa River directly to its east.

This setting, good for contemplating the great works the museum contained, had nevertheless two big problems. One, the river does not always flow gently. The grassy plain has flooded twice in the span of just 25 years—thanks to climate change these are no longer 500-year floods—first in 1993 and then in 2008. The other issue was that not many University of Iowa students knew the museum was there, even though it was built for them.

The museum's new home, which opens this August, trades flowing water for flowing traffic along Burlington Street. But Lauren Lessing, the director of what's now known as the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art, thinks the spot

is even more ideal, nestled as it is between the university library and the wellness center, across the street from the colleges of engineering and education, and a stone's throw from the English and communication departments. "I couldn't have designed a better location," she said. "We want to be much more integrated in the fabric of the campus and partner wherever we can with whomever we can."

The mission of all museums is to educate. A curator might select paintings to show the early roots of modernism, for example. But as an academic art museum, the Stanley's main purpose is to serve as a tool for instruction across all fields. Pieces from the collections are selected specifically for their educational use. The Stanley rotates its exhibitions like all museums do, but it also functions similarly to a library in that students and the public can access pieces even when not on display.

Students who did venture across the river before the flood would have seen some hugely influential works. It was home to Jackson Pollock's *Mural*, an eight-by-twenty-foot behemoth given by Peggy Guggenheim in 1951, and one of the largest African art collections in the country.

Lessing sees the museum as the embodiment of a long tradition at Iowa of using the arts to shape a student's educational experience. This philosophy, which became known as the "Iowa Idea," was first developed in the 1920s by then-UI President Walter Jessup along with Carl Seashore, the dean of the graduate program. Thanks to Jessup and Seashore's vision, Iowa was the first school to offer a Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and eventually became the world-renowned hub for writers through the Writers' Workshop and International Writing Program.

"It was this idea that creating and making things could be part of the academic curriculum," Lessing said. "You could blend studio art with other programs, like art history, or history, or English, and the process of seeing how things are made and directly participating in making it would help people learn in a different and more powerful way."

While at Colby College in Maine, where she was the art museum's Mirken Director of Academic and Public Programs before joining the Stanley, Lessing used paintings of textiles by Terry Winters to help a mathematics professor teach knot theory. Now at Iowa, she hopes to develop a certificate program in art conservation with help from the chemistry department. She says that artist renderings could enhance a course on animal evolution.

For more than a decade, the Stanley's ability to be a teaching tool for university students has been blunted by the lack of a permanent home. During this interim period the museum's collection has been split between the Iowa Memorial Union and the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, while *Mural* embarked on an eight-year international tour.

One positive outcome, Lessing says, is that the Stanley's staff have worked to make the collection available online for people anywhere to see. "Almost by necessity, we kind of reconceived ourselves as the art museum of the entire state," she says.

Lessing wants to retain that reach and is looking for other ways to expand the museum's audience beyond those who ventured to that quiet enclave on the bank of the river. But as the museum broadened its audience, its core mission—to use artworks to help university students learn—was impacted.

The new location on Burlington Street will naturally bring more traffic to the museum's vicinity, and Lessing is thinking about how the museum can take advantage of its proximity to student engineers, writers, journalists, educators, and fitness-enthusiasts—or anyone else on campus who wanders by—to further enhance their education at Iowa.

"I want students to leave with a toolkit for how to enrich their lives as adults in the world," she says. "I want people who have a University of Iowa degree to have art be a part of their life."

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The visual classroom offers wood, pull-out easels, a drop-down screen, and an AV projector that retracts into the ceiling. A hearing loop ensures accessibility for all.

Photos by Justin Turner