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'Magnet' for region, Crystal Bridges brings high art within reach

Exhibits reflect America's multiple voices

By [Dan Holtmeyer](#)

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File Photo/NWA Democrat-Gazette/CHARLIE KAIJO Students from Holy Family Cathedral School of Tulsa, Okla., look at a piece called "Man on a Bench" at Crystal Bridges in Bentonville. Outside observers and local artists say Crystal Bridges has become an example for other museums and a way for people of any background to access the arts since it opened in late 2011.



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in six years has established itself as an example to emulate and brought art of the highest quality into the lives of people of every background, observers and local artists say.

Crystal Bridges opened to the public in Bentonville in late 2011 and displays works from before the United States formed to the present. It counts hundreds of thousands of students, tourists, artists and other visitors each year -- more than 600,000 last year, said Rod Bigelow, the museum's executive director.

At a glance

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

2018 temporary exhibitions

• Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, Feb. 3 - April 23

Works by black artists from the 1960s through the 1980s

\$10 for non-member adults, free for members and children

• The Beyond: Georgia O'Keeffe & Contemporary Art, May 26 - Sept. 3

Several dozen works by O'Keeffe and later artists

Tickets not yet on sale

The museum makes art itself more accessible and real for each one of those visitors, said Apryl Okoroafor, president of the Artists of Northwest Arkansas professional group. She is an artist, jewelry maker and certified art educator.

"It's a blessing," she said, pointing to high school students she's taken to the museum who otherwise had never been exposed to the arts. "They're just getting this new world of ideas and possibilities opened up before them."

Hundreds of millions of dollars from Alice Walton, daughter of Walmart founder Sam Walton, and donors built the museum, filled its walls, halls and library and made most of its displays free to the public, including installations along several miles of trails. The collection includes more than 2,500 objects and is still growing, Bigelow said.

Philip Kennicott, art and architecture critic at *The Washington Post* who has written about Crystal Bridges, said the museum caught people around the country by surprise, seemingly springing into existence fully formed with a deep and broad collection. But what draws his attention years later is how the museum wields that

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• Native North America (working title subject to change), Oct. 6 - Jan. 7, 2019

Native American artists from the 1950s to today

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Source: CrystalBridges.org

collection, finding and incorporating art by Native Americans, women and other groups the museum world has often neglected.

Crystal Bridges is hosting an exhibition called "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" until April 23. The exhibit features photography, sculpture and other art by dozens of black artists from the 1960s through the '80s. The museum has beefed up its collection of Native American artwork and is borrowing more from other museums.

Many other museums haven't yet been able to match these efforts and show how minority artists have always been part of American culture and history, Kennicott said. Crystal Bridges "should be held up as an exemplar," he said.

Bigelow said the facility's mission is to welcome all comers and show "the complexity of the American experience." Beyond the artwork, Crystal Bridges is running programs like its high school residential internship for students from underrepresented groups.

"We are committed to creating inclusive and meaningful museum experiences," Bigelow said in a written statement. "We can't tell the American story through a singular voice. Everyone's experience is enriched when multiple voices are represented."

Sharon Killian, a painter and board president of Fayetteville's Art Ventures gallery, said Crystal Bridges' efforts show that art can come from anyone and everyone. Consciousness of other cultures makes a better community, she said.

"Sometimes people aren't used to that, seeing someone besides themselves. But it's what we have to have," Killian said.

More broadly, Killian said the museum's work to bring students and their families to the artwork is essential. She said the programs for kids and members have included local artists and break down the notion that only wealthy collectors can buy art. Its presence has helped draw more artists to Northwest Arkansas, too, she said.

"It's only been good -- it's really advanced everything else," Killian said.

Having masterworks a short drive away can be life-changing for anyone with even an inkling of desire to create art, Okoroafor said. She's Cherokee and grew up on a reservation in Oklahoma, always with that desire but without a museum to teach her.

She recalled seeing Vincent van Gogh's works in person for the first time during a layover in the Netherlands a few years ago. Seeing his tools and rough ink sketches, objects that showed the humanity and run-of-the-mill methods of one of the most famous artists of all time, left a profound impact on her.

"It could've been something that I have done. I was crying, and talking about it makes me want to cry," Okoroafor said. "You only get those kinds of experiences through galleries."

Crystal Bridges exhibits often come together in cooperation with other museums. "Soul of a Nation" involved the Tate Modern, a London museum, and Bigelow said other collaborations have included the Musee du Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City is loaning some Native American art for an exhibit later this year, said Julian Zugazagoitia, director and CEO. Working together seems to be a trend in museum collecting, he said, and he sees Crystal Bridges as a partner rather than a competitor.

"It definitely becomes a magnet for the region," he said, with art enthusiasts and other tourists stopping at his museum, Bentonville's and others one after another. Each can offer something different; Nelson-Atkins features artwork from around the world and is showing exhibits of Pablo Picasso and ancient Chinese art this month.

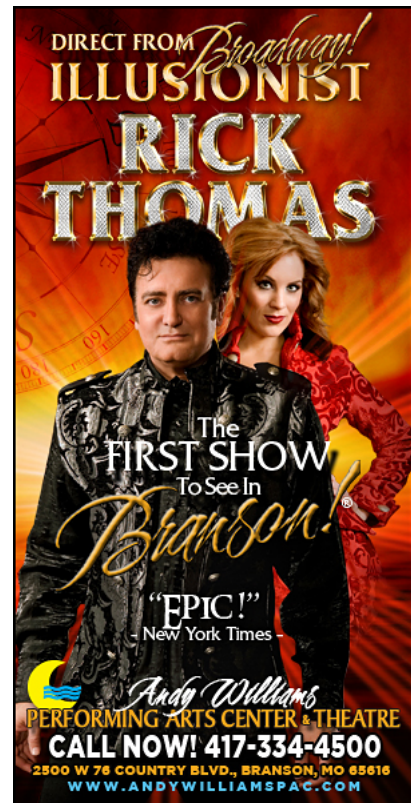
Zugazagoitia credited Crystal Bridges' size, gravitas and professionalism for its ability to make a name for itself quickly.

"The fact that she (Walton) honored the roots of her family and placed it in that beautiful setting in Bentonville makes it more special," he said.

Walton's diving into the art collecting world with deep pockets sparked a little resentment that lingers among some museums, Kennicott said. Wealthy buyers can bump the price of iconic works and push some out of reach for others.

"I think it still has some goodwill work ahead of it," he said. But with its partnerships and high-quality exhibitions and mission to be inclusive, "I think they're doing everything right in that sense."

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