A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Lewis I. Sharp

A TWENTY-EIGHT SIDED, seven storey, glass tile-clad structure designed by Italian architect Gio Ponti with Denver-based architect James Sudler has served as the permanent home of the Denver Art Museum since 1971 [1]. The 210,000 square feet home, now called the North Building, was the first major art museum building in Denver and remains one of the most dominant architectural features in the region. This building has been a wonderfully flexible, efficient and beautiful place for the museum to evolve over the last three decades, but this past October, the Denver Art Museum began a new era with the opening of a dramatic 146,000 square feet expansion named the Frederic C. Hamilton Building [2] in honour of the museum’s chairman and designed by Daniel Libeskind—his first completed building in the United States. The two buildings create a complex that showcases a more complete view of the museum’s holdings while creating an ideal venue in this region for major travelling exhibitions.

Founded in 1893, the Denver Art Museum has defined itself in the last four decades as a museum that does things differently. From the way collections are displayed, to the interpretation that accompanies the work, and most obviously in the structures built to house its collections, the Denver Art Museum has continually challenged traditional notions of the American art museum.

An encyclopedic museum that serves one of the largest geographic areas in the country, the Denver Art Museum has developed holdings of more than 60,000 objects from cultures around the world. The museum’s eight curatorial areas include Architecture, Design, and Graphics; Asian Art; European and American Painting and Sculpture; Modern and Contemporary Art; Native Arts (including American Indian, African, and Oceanic art); Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial Art; Textile Art; and Western American Art. The museum’s Asian collection is truly unique in the Rocky Mountain region, showcasing artwork from more than thirty Asian countries and spanning more than five millennia.
Explosive growth in collections, membership and attendance in the last two decades of the 20th century made obvious the need for an expansion of the museum. The physical demands on the space for staging major travelling exhibitions and displaying our own collections exceeded the capability of the current building. From the earliest conversation about expansion, it was determined that the museum would strive to follow the tradition of bold architecture begun more than thirty years earlier.

The Denver Art Museum expansion is one example of the love story between Denver and the arts that has evolved for nearly three decades. Denver is a city that supports culture in a unique way. The Scientific and Cultural Facilities District is a metro-wide sales tax approved in 1988 and reauthorised by voters twice that distributes upwards of US$35 million to more than 300 arts and culture organisations in the Denver area. This unprecedented support has transformed Denver into a major cultural centre for the region and creates a stability that has enabled the largest cultural organisations to complete major expansions or renovations in the last seven years.

The expansion process for the Denver Art Museum moved forward through a partnership with the City of Denver that allowed the museum to seek approval of bond funds from Denver voters. Continued population growth in the Denver Metro area had significantly increased the community’s appetite for art. That demand, coupled with the museum’s desperate need for space to show more of its holdings, as well as the need for improved space for travelling exhibitions to attract top shows motivated voters. In November 1999, Denver voters approved US$62.5 million in bonds to support an expansion of the museum. Under the direction and leadership of Chairman Frederic C. Hamilton, whose lead gift of US$20 million set the tone for the sort of generosity the museum would experience over the next several years, more than US$60 million was raised in just a few months to supplement the museum’s endowment, and an additional US$47 million was given by the private sector to realise key enhancements to the project.

The museum’s goals for expansion exceeded accommodating more visitors and providing adequate space for our collections and exhibitions. We wanted a facility whose design matched the innovation of our installations and programs. Over the last twenty years, the museum has established itself as a leader in the effort to engage visitors of all ages and levels of knowledge. Our focus and commitment to the visitor experience is evident in our integrated approach to education within the galleries. The qualities of the gallery spaces are unique to each collection, providing an amazingly broad suite of offerings from floor to floor, gallery to gallery.

Studio Daniel Libeskind, along with their Denver-based joint venture partner, Davis Partnership Architects, exceeded the Denver Art Museum’s expectations for the expansion with an angular, titanium-clad design unlike any building in the world. The architecture is bold and daring, but appropriate in scale and complementary to the surrounding buildings. It serves the museum’s needs with major spaces for travelling exhibitions, large volumes of space for permanent collections, adequate areas for operational functions and a grand atrium rising more than one hundred feet from the first floor that serves as visitor orientation, while providing an aesthetic experience unlike any space in Denver. The gallery spaces within the building provide a unique platform for the museum to showcase its collections and spur creativity in ways that will produce some of the most compelling, interesting art museum experiences available today.

The Hamilton Building increases the museum’s gallery space nearly forty per cent, including more than 20,000 square feet divided into

4 The exhibition, Japanese Art from the Colorado Collection of Kimiko and John Powers, installed in the Gallagher Family Gallery of the Denver Art Museum. (see “An Interview with Kimiko Powers” by Ronald Y. Otsuka)

The India Gallery reinstalled in the Jesse and Nellie Shwayder Galleries for Asian Art in the North Building of the Denver Art Museum in 1993
three galleries for temporary exhibitions. One of the most obvious art ob-
jects in the new building is an installation by Japanese artist Tatsuo
Miyajima. Commissioned by the Denver’s Office of Cultural Affairs,
Miyajima has created ENGI (3), an installation that fills the four-storey a-
trium of the Hamilton Building with eighty mirrored discs, each featur-
ing an illuminated LED display that counts between one and nine at
varying speeds (see “ENGI—An Installation by Tatsuo Miyajima at the
Denver Art Museum” by Douglas R. Wagner).

During the building’s inaugural year, the museum will showcase im-
portant Colorado collections with strong ties to the Denver Art Museum.
Two of them will highlight Asian art, both traditional and contemporary.
In the first floor temporary exhibition space, approximately 120 works
spanning nearly twelve centuries will be presented in Japanese Art from
the Colorado Collection of Kimiko and John Powers (4). Amassed over
three decades, this collection features folding screens, hanging scrolls,
handscrolls, sculpture, and lacquer ware. From 1999 to 2004, portions
of this collection, one of the finest in private hands, were placed on
long-term loan to the Denver Art Museum. This exhibition is the first to dis-
play the full range of the collection since it was shown in 1970. Addi-
tional information about this impressive collection may be found in an
interview with Kimiko Powers (see “An Interview with Kimiko Powers” by
Ronald Y. Otsuka).

The largest of the three spaces will house RADAR: Selections from the
Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan (5), including works by major artists
from China, Japan, Germany, Britain, South Africa, the Netherlands,
Cuba, and the United States. This exhibition is derived from the private
collection of Colorado’s Vicki and Kent Logan and objects donated by
the couple to the Denver Art Museum and the San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art. One section of the exhibition highlights works by contempo-
rary Chinese artists (see “China on the Radar: Post-1989 Chinese Art
from the Logan Collection” by Thomas J. Whitten).

The third travelling exhibition space will feature Breaking the Mold:
The Virginia Vogel Mattern Collection of Contemporary Native Ameri-
can Art. This display of approximately 200 objects including Pueblo
ceramics, contemporary oil paintings, Navajo and Hopi textiles and
other contemporary Native American art was donated to the Denver Art

The current Asian art installation in the North Building was part of a
1993 renovation that saw a complete overhaul of two floors of galleries
and enabled the display of more Asian artwork than had ever been on
view at the museum (6). Despite major renovations throughout the late
1980s and 1990s, the museum has not been able to provide consistent
permanent space for each of its curatorial disciplines. With the addition
of the Hamilton Building, that capability now exists. Permanent galleries
for the museum’s modern and contemporary, African, oceanic and
Western American art collections will be housed in the new building,
allowing room for future growth of collection display in the Gio Ponti-
designed North Building.

Ground was broken for the museum expansion in July 2003 and
opened to the public on October 7th, 2006. The Hamilton Building’s
distinct architecture will likely become an icon for the Rocky Mountain re-
region, but also a defining project within Daniel Libeskind’s body of work.
The Hamilton Building has shown that architectural excellence can be
achieved within the typical constraints of civic projects and that it is pos-
sible to be bold and interesting while serving a highly defined function
and a broad community.

We look forward to welcoming you to the new Denver Art Museum
complex in the near future and I would like to thank Arts of Asia for the
opportunity to commemorate this milestone in our history.