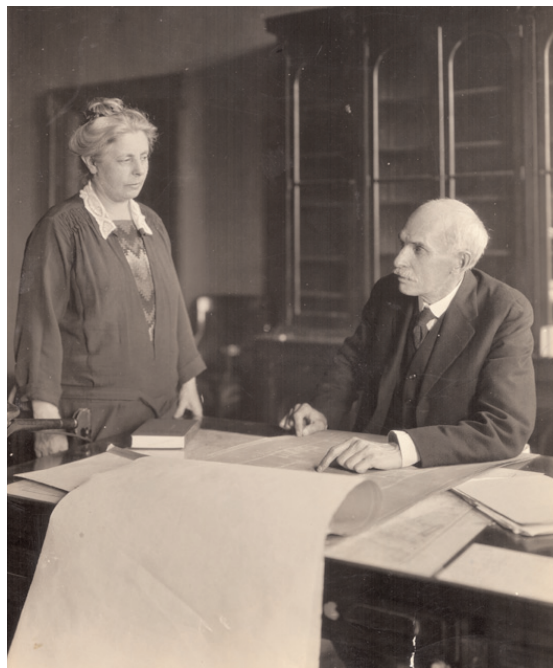


A Museum and Its City

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In the autumn of 1929 the museum founded by John Cotton Dana (1856–1929) had just marked its twentieth anniversary and was settled into its sleek new building, designed by Chicago architect Jarvis Hunt and funded by Newark department store owner Louis Bamberger. The new building, opened to the public in 1926, was not “a temple in a park,” as were most large city museums, but a welcoming, useful museum in the heart of a thriving downtown. Dana and Bamberger wanted to bring good design and cultural literacy to a wide audience. Their partnership resulted in a building full of light, organized to attract “ordinary” people—the thousands of Newark’s office workers, factory workers and children—who were not necessarily museumgoers. The Newark Museum in 1929 was the opposite of every other major museum in America’s industrial cities, and that was no accident.

The Newark Museum began as two large skylit exhibition spaces, one devoted to art, the other to science, on the fourth floor of the Newark Free Public Library. These spaces were in place when Dana, one of the most revered librarians of his day, arrived to take over the library’s grand new Renaissance palazzo on Newark’s Washington Park. Dana immediately began to expand the library’s operations beyond the traditional domain of books, pamphlets and periodicals. In 1902 he began to organize annual displays of paintings and sculpture; and as early as



Beatrice Winsor with John Cotton Dana, circa 1924, reviewing plans for the new museum building.

1904, his friend Dr. William S. Disbrow, a physician and collector, designed exhibitions of rocks, minerals, botanical and zoological specimens.

Since its incorporation on April 29, 1909, the Museum has assembled some of the most important and highly regarded art collections in the nation; it has for *over* a century exhibited and collected specimens of rocks and minerals, plants and animals to illustrate the natural sciences; and it has designed educational programs that connect objects and ideas in ways that are both inspirational and transformative for people of all ages from the diverse communities that form its audience. In Dana’s words: “A good museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questioning, and thus promotes learning.”

The contextual presentation of objects from many cultures absorbed Dana and his staff and defined the Museum’s early projects. In 1908 Dana convinced Newark pharmacist George T. Rockwell to lend his collection of Japanese art for an exhibition, which was so successful that the Museum founder then persuaded the city to buy the collection for the new institution in 1909. In 1910 the art gallery hosted an exhibition of over 200 pieces of modern American pottery. In 1911 Dana exhibited modern photography, and asked the family of founding trustee Edward N. Crane to donate a collection of Tibetan artifacts in his memory. The following year Dana traveled to Europe to collect objects from craft shops and department stores, while organizing the pioneering exhibition *Modern German Applied Arts*, which



John Cotton Dana speaking at the dedication ceremony for the new museum building, May 14, 1925.

circulated to five midwestern cities and is considered the first exhibition of modern industrial design in the United States. He tirelessly approached scholars and collectors and acquired African, Native American, Latin American, Chinese and Oceanic objects, which he displayed both in the library gallery and in the new museum building over the next fifteen years. During his last visit abroad in the late 1920s he collected North African material in Morocco and Egypt. Although Dana shared the intellectual biases of his day, he firmly believed that art was global and that all cultures produced objects of beauty and utility that could be used to educate and enlighten.

Dana’s innovative “process exhibitions” emphasized regional industry and were intended to benefit factory workers and their families. Clay and textiles of New Jersey appeared in 1915 and 1916; the leather and jewelry industries of Newark were highlighted in 1926 and 1929. Even more radical were exhibitions mounted in the last two years of his life, when Dana proclaimed provocatively that “beauty has no relation to price, rarity, or age.” Hundreds of

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everyday objects of good design—all acquired at local department stores for anywhere from ten cents to one dollar—were displayed in the Museum’s marble-floored galleries.

Although he resented the influence that “fine art” had in American museums, Dana believed in supporting American artists, who were ignored by many museums in favor of European artists and “old masters.” Having hosted an exhibition of “The Eight” in its founding year, Dana organized one-man shows for Childe Hassam, Max Weber and Stuart Davis. Group shows of modern American artists in the 1910s and 1920s underscored this mission to promote the “art of our time.” Dana cultivated Newark’s civic leaders to establish a core collection of American painting and sculpture, following his premise that “[a]rt has flourished where it was asked to flourish, and never elsewhere.”

Although Dana appreciated the inherent beauty and value of art, applied art and natural science collections (he himself collected Japanese prints and art pottery), he believed above all that a public museum should complement the educational roles of public libraries and public schools. Drawing on learning theories that would not be widely accepted until the late twentieth century, he reasoned that certain people learned through books, while others learned through objects, and therefore modern cities needed both public libraries and public museums of art and science. While his emphasis on the educational value of libraries was typical of Progressive thought of the era, his view of the museum as an educational institution was revolutionary. The Museum established a lending department (today the Educational Loan Collection) to send objects to schools, branch museums and public libraries; and the Junior Museum was founded to serve the region’s schoolchildren. Dana also created the Apprenticeship School, the first American program to train museum professionals.

Following Dana’s death in 1929, his assistant Beatrice Winser became director, leading the institution during the difficult years of the Great Depression and Second World War. Ambitious exhibitions of modern design in metal, international ceramic art and American folk art were completed before the financial impact of the Stock Market Crash hit. Despite the Depression, Winser continued to build upon Dana’s precepts, managing to display real airplanes in the Museum’s court and extolling the virtues of chemistry in modern life. The painting and sculpture collections acquired some of their most important modernist icons during these years through trustee support; and in 1938 an exhibition was mounted to celebrate a major gift of Native American art from Amelia Elizabeth White, a pioneer collector from Santa Fe.

Winser asked her staff to develop programs to meet the needs of those with “an excess of enforced leisure,” a euphemism for unemployment. In 1930, targeting city children, the Museum began using live animals in the Nature Corner of the Junior Museum, the forerunner of today’s Mini Zoo. In 1933 the Museum held workshops for adults in sketching, modeling, nature studies and stamp collecting; today’s Arts Workshop was formally established soon after. Musical performances were held in the court of the Museum’s 1926 building and in its one-acre garden. Perhaps Winser’s most important contribution was the purchase of the neighboring John H. Ballantine House and an adjacent office building in 1937.

Alice Kendall, who had been Winser’s assistant, served briefly as director from 1947 to 1949, followed by Katherine Coffey, who had been the curator in charge of exhibitions and programs since 1925. Coffey established separate curatorial departments in the arts and sciences in the early 1950s, hiring a cohort of talented, innovative curators. Although the Museum had collected antiquities previously, the monumental gift in 1950 by New Jersey collector Eugene Schaefer of Egyptian, Greek and Roman objects created a new department. Coffey championed diversity in Museum projects, highlighting the collections and carrying on the tradition of embracing art from all parts of the world. Exhibitions devoted to African art, Buddhist art and Judaic art were mounted alongside educational “dictionary” displays of ceramics, glass and silver. Science exhibits and programs focused on such topics as the geology of New Jersey and the technology of satellites. In 1953 the first planetarium in New Jersey was installed, funded by trustee Leonard Dreyfuss and his wife Alice.



(from left) Richard Maximilian Akwei, U.N. Ambassador from Ghana, Newark deputy mayor Lewis Perkins, Newark Museum director Samuel C. Miller and Mrs. Akwei at the opening of the exhibition *Art of Africa*, January 1969.

In 1967 Coffey hired young art expert Samuel C. Miller from Buffalo’s Albright-Knox Art Gallery. He arrived just as Newark was shattered by the cataclysmic riots that would overshadow the city’s reputation for the next forty years. Miller, who became director in 1968, helped the sixty-year-old institution not only to survive but to thrive as never before. The staff and trustees responded to their city’s crisis by acknowledging the Museum’s role in helping to rebuild the city. “Without a vital museum,” Miller declared, “the hopes of the city cannot be achieved.”

Working with the Museum's strong collections of African and African-American art, Miller reached out to Newark's African-American community, with choreographer and anthropologist Pearl Primus as an advisor. With her collaboration, the major exhibition *Art of Africa* opened in 1969, accompanied by a landmark two-week Festival of Africa. *Jazz in the Garden*, one of the Museum's most enduring summer traditions, was also established in 1969, and was followed in 1976 by the annual *Newark Black Film Festival*.

Miller successfully expanded the collections by working closely with the curators to solicit donations and make major purchases to fill gaps in the holdings. Miller's open-minded love for art in all forms embraced each of the curatorial departments, from jazz-age abstractions to powerful Yoruba sculpture, from Tibetan tangkas to masterpieces of Victorian silver. His sympathy for the nineteenth century saved the 1885 Ballantine House, the first floor of which was restored for the Bicentennial in 1976 as a showcase for the decorative arts.

In 1967 Miller began a collaboration with architect Michael Graves, which led in the early 1980s to the beginning of the largest museum project in the history of New Jersey. Creating an architecturally cohesive campus that doubled gallery space, added new classrooms for adults and children and provided much-needed public amenities such as the Billy Johnson Auditorium and the café in the Charles Engelhard Court, the project won the American Institute of Architects' Honor Award in 1992.

Director Mary Sue Sweeney Price began her career at the Museum in 1975. Under her leadership the Museum has dramatically increased the depth and quality of its collections and has expanded its engagement with diverse audiences. Overseeing a marked increase in dedicated endowments for purchasing collection objects, Price has, with the support of the trustees' Acquisitions and Collections Committee, encouraged all of her curators to seek out objects that bring national significance to their collecting areas, resulting in the acquisition of more major works during the last decade than in any other time of the Museum's history. She has in particular encouraged the purchase of contemporary works from all around the world, embracing the art of today in all its diversity, including significant acquisitions of photography and new media. Price has championed collaborations between curatorial departments to acquire these new works, which often refuse to fit neatly in inherited museum categories. Responding to the demographic changes in New Jersey's vast population, Price has carried on the Museum's founding mission to be useful to the community, establishing advisory committees for the Latino, Chinese, Ghanaian and Indian communities linked to major exhibitions held at the Museum. *Badge of Honor* (1994) involved an installation by artist Pepón Osorio in a Newark storefront followed by an installation at the Museum; *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African-American Identity* (1999) drew on the experience of local residents as well as the Ghanaian diaspora in New Jersey; *The Bride Wore Red: Chinese Wedding Traditions* (2005) compared wedding traditions before and after immigration from China; and *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal* (1995) explored the transference of Bengali rituals to suburban America.

In 2001, under Price's leadership, the reinstallation of the American art galleries, *Picturing America*, pioneered a radical new approach to understanding American art as the story of the nation seen through the eyes of its artists. The completion of the Ballantine House restoration in 1994 included a dramatic new interpretation of the decorative arts collections in *House & Home*, an interactive presentation linking objects to the evolving concept of "home" that remains unique in any American art museum. The Junior Museum continues to mount child-focused interactive exhibitions in its own gallery, drawn from the global span of the Museum collections. After two decades of planning, the Victoria Hall of Science opened in 2002, an interactive, specimen-rich learning environment that supports the state's natural science curriculum.

Director Price and her staff have generated support from national, regional and local philanthropy, which complements the ongoing historic operating and capital support that the Museum receives from the City of Newark and the State of New Jersey. This represents civic generosity at its best, underscoring the bond between the Museum and its loyal visitors.

Today the Newark Museum celebrating its 100th anniversary is a far larger, more complex institution than its founders envisioned. Nonetheless, its trustees, director and staff continue to build upon the Museum's historic commitment to outstanding collections, innovative exhibitions and dynamic educational programs. It remains the very model of the *new museum* that was imagined at its inception: a museum dedicated to objects and to the ideas embodied by them.



The Dalai Lama at the consecration ceremony of the Museum's new Tibetan Buddhist altar, greeted by (from left) Desmond M. Tutu, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa; Theodore E. McCarrick, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Newark; and Valrae Reynolds, Curator of Asian Collections, September 1990.