

Sandow Birk



The Art of World Peace The JSMA's Art Collection Strengthens Cultural Connections

By Sophia McDonald Bennet
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When Gertrude Bass Warner donated over 3,700 Asian artifacts to the University of Oregon in the 1930s, she did more than lay the groundwork for what would become the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA). She presented the campus with a vision for how art could make the world a better place.

"[Warner] thought that if we knew more about cultures that were different than us, we'd have a better chance of living in a peaceful world," says Jill Hartz, the museum's executive director.

This desire to enhance cross-cultural understanding and peaceful relations is still a guiding force at the JSMA today. That's quite evident in the organization's current and planned exhibits.

"Our theme for this year is, 'What does it mean to be American, and what does the rest of the world think it means to be American?'" Hartz says. One of the main shows exploring that question is Sandow Birk's "American Qur'an," which opens January 21. This series of illuminated manuscript pages juxtaposes hand-printed passages from the Muslim holy book against painted images of contemporary life in the United States.

"It's really asking us, 'Where can the culture of Islam, including Islam in America, and the culture of America find common ground, and how can we live in a more peaceful world?'" Hartz says. The exhibition runs until March 19.

The JSMA is also exploring another subject that's very much on the minds of Americans. An exhibit called "Between the World and Me: African American Artists Respond to Ta-Nehisi Coates," which opened in September and runs until March, reflects on what it's like to be black and living in the United States today.

The museum curated the exhibit when the UO decided to make Coates's book the common reading assignment for all incoming freshmen. "Creating a 'common seeing' enhances the campus

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conversation around issues raised in the book and strengthens visual and media literacy,” Hartz says.

The show also meets the museum’s goal of supporting the UO’s broader curriculum and student population. Viewing (or curating) shows from the museum’s copious Chinese, Japanese, and Korean art collections has great value to art and art history students. But it’s also beneficial for students in the Asian studies or history programs, for example.

Students interested in working with children can participate in programs that bring art to Oregon’s youth. As art programs in schools have disappeared, the JSMA has made it their mission to take opportunities for creative expression to young people. The museum’s statewide programs for grade school students include Art Heals, an art therapy experience; Imagination International’s Artie the Art Bus, a former LTD bus that takes art classes to kids; and summer camps at the museum.

K-12 students can also tour the museum with their classmates. JSMA sends exhibit interpreters to schools ahead of time to help students prepare for the experience. Those who visit between February 10 and May 29 may get to see their own work hanging on the walls. NewArt Northwest Kids is an annual juried exhibit that showcases art from Oregon K-12 students. This year’s theme of “The Road Not Taken” was inspired by the Robert Frost poem.

Other exhibitions scheduled for this winter include Gay Outlaw’s Mutable Object sculpture collection; Cuba Ocho, which features works by eight Cuban artists; lithographs from former UO professor David McCosh; a collection of Chinese propaganda posters from the Cultural Revolution; and textile works by Oregon artist Clay Lohmann.

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art is located at 1430 Johnson Lane on the University of Oregon campus. Hours are Wednesday, 11 am to 8 pm, and Thursday through Sunday, 11 am to 5 pm. Limited free parking is available behind the museum. Get more information about the JSMA at 541/346-3027 or jsma.uoregon.edu.