

The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Transformed

Two years ago, the institution in Washington closed for renovations. Now, it's reopening, with expanded galleries and an eye-popping exhibition.



The "Home Maker" section of the new third-floor exhibition is seen through an artwork by a French American sculptor and painter, Niki de Saint Phalle, titled "Pregnant Nana."

By Jane L. Levere Photographs by Shuran Huang

Reporting from Washington

Oct. 20, 2023

This article is part of the [Fine Arts & Exhibits](#) special section on the art world's expanded view of what art is and who can make it.

The Sky's the Limit.

That's the title of one of the featured exhibitions at the National Museum of Women in the Arts here, which is reopening after a two-year, \$65 million renovation. And why not aim high again? Located in a former Masonic Temple that once forbade women from entering, [the museum](#) became the first one in the United States solely dedicated to championing women through the arts.

The 1908 six-story, wedge-shaped, Classical Revival-style building just three blocks from the White House was designed by the local architectural firm Wood, Donn & Deming. The museum, which opened in 1987, has undergone an interior renovation to create approximately 4,500 square feet of new exhibition and programming space. Galleries have been enlarged to better present contemporary artworks and complex installations, while accessibility also has been improved.

A highlight of the reopening is the museum's inaugural, second-floor exhibition, "The Sky's the Limit," on view through Feb. 25, 2024. It features contemporary sculpture and immersive installations by 13 artists from the United States and overseas. Of a total of 33 works, 17 hang from the gallery's ceiling, including Sonya Clark's 2005 "Curls," a celebration of Black hair made from plastic combs.

And Alison Saar's 2012 "Undone," a blue-black figure of a woman seated in a chair and wearing a gauzy white gown, hangs from a wall and drapes down into the gallery space.

In a recent interview at the museum, its director, Susan Fisher Sterling, said the renovation's goals are to honor the legacy of the museum's founder — the Washington-based art collector [Wilhelmina Cole Holladay](#) — and to rehabilitate its building, constructed as the headquarters of the Masonic Temple of Washington's Grand Lodge, which, Ms. Sterling noted, women could not enter but at one point in its history sat in a neighborhood that had become a red-light district.

On a trip to Europe in the 1970s, Ms. Holladay and her husband, Wallace, also an art collector, saw several still lifes by a 17th-century Flemish artist, Clara Peeters, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Museo del Prado in Madrid, but were surprised to find no mention of her in H.W. Janson's classic art history textbook, ["History of Art."](#)

"If Peeters was sufficient to hang in two of the world's great museums, how was it we did not know of her?" Ms. Holladay asked in her 2008 memoir.

From then on, the Holladays focused their collecting on female artists, obtaining 500 works by 150 painters and sculptors; those works would become the basis of the museum's permanent collection. It now contains more than 6,000 artworks in a wide range of media by more than 1,500 artists from the 16th century to today.



The sculptor, mixed-media and installation artist Alison Saar's artwork, "Undone" (2012).

Renovation work on the museum facade has focused on preservation and restoration; the 13th Street side recalls the form of a temple with paired Doric columns and cornices, while the Greek Doric entablature that extends around the building contains Masonic symbols such as a square and compass, tools of the architect and builder. Brand-new in the museum are a Learning Commons on the fourth floor that contains an exhibition gallery, state-of-the-art library and research center, and a studio for workshops, classes and other programs. The 182-seat performance hall on the fifth floor is being refurnished and equipped with state-of-the-art technology. Wireless and touch-screen technology also is being upgraded in galleries to enhance visitors' experience.

The museum will now be fully accessible, with upgraded passenger elevators, an additional ramp entrance and increased ease of mobility throughout the interior.

Perhaps the most striking aspects of the museum's renovation are the expansion and redesign of its gallery space, which will have 18,800 square feet of exhibition space, nearly 2,500 square feet more than before.

New on the museum's ground floor, directly beyond the entry, is the Long Gallery, where short documentary videos commissioned for the museum's reopening are being screened; they profile women artists in the museum's collection, including the Guerrilla Girls, Delita Martin, Rania Matar and Alison Saar.



Hung Liu's artworks are alongside the museum's library. The \$67.5 million renovation created several thousand square feet of new exhibition and programming space. Shuran Huang for The New York Times

The museum's second-floor galleries have been entirely reconfigured: Columns were removed to open up the space, while other structural elements were hidden within new walls, again to free up space. The new second floor contains both small and large galleries, the latter to accommodate often large contemporary artworks. These replace what Kathryn Wat, the museum's deputy director for art, programs and public engagement, called its former "rabbit warren" of galleries, and create a long sightline through the entire floor.

Sandra Parsons Vicchio, the Baltimore-based architect who oversaw the renovation, said she was "trying to bring the focus on the art and the women artists" at the museum.

Thus, the ground-floor rotunda, just beyond the entryway, contains a striking red chandelier by Joana Vasconcelos that is owned by the museum, has elongated fabric garlands, embroidered crowns and LED light bulbs, and is part of "The Sky's the Limit."

The previously white and terra-cotta rotunda and grand staircase in the museum's two-story Great Hall have been painted white and subtle gray, while a new, taupe, textured textile based on the building's ornate architectural details is being installed on the walls of the Great Hall's mezzanine level. These features are meant to create an appropriate setting for artwork that will be displayed here, including architectural photographs by Candida Höfer and black and white Polaroid prints of teenage high school prom attendees by Mary Ellen Mark, on display in the Great Hall, and portraits of women ranging from Adèle Romany's 1795 "Portrait of an Artist, Traditionally Identified as Mademoiselle Halbou" to Zanele Muholi's 2007 color print of two women at a lake in Johannesburg on the mezzanine.



The Great Hall features a second-level mezzanine with a grand staircase.

“Women were really the pioneers in creating sculptures suspended from the ceiling or jutting out from the wall into the gallery. They tended to work with unexpected materials, to be more creative and more adventurous,” she said.



The artist and sculptor Rina Banerjee's work, "Lady of Commerce — wooden," is featured in "The Sky's the Limit" exhibition.

The third floor contains galleries featuring works from the museum's permanent collection, rehung thematically, Ms. Wat said, "to show the breadth and depth of the collection. This allows us to show the collection as a special exhibition, new every time it is reinstalled."

The nine themes of the new third-floor exhibitions range from photography, featuring everything from an undated portrait of Mae West by Louise Dahl-Wolfe to Dianne Smith's 2021 "Another Sunday Outing," to colors. "Seeing Red" contains "Pregnant Nana," a playful, painted, marble sculpture weighing over one ton by Niki de Saint Phalle, while "No Shrinking Violet," features a 1940 Alice Neel portrait, "T.B. Harlem," as well as Judy Chicago's 2019 chromaluxe print on aluminum, "Purple Atmosphere."

Artwork in the "Home Maker" section includes late 18th-century silver spoons by Hester Bateman and her daughter-in-law Ann-Olympe Bateman displayed in a case with Cindy Sherman's cheeky "Madame de Pompadour (née Poisson), Tea/Breakfast Service," made from yellow Limoges porcelain and decorated with a self-portrait of the artist as Madame de Pompadour.



The American artist Cindy Sherman's artwork, "Madame de Pompadour (née Poisson), Tea/Breakfast Service," is featured in the "Home Maker" section at the museum.

Themes of other sections include "Fiber Optics," "Objectified," "Land Marks," "Elemental" and "Heavyweight."

Two temporary exhibitions are hanging on the fourth floor, one with nine works by Hung Liu, a Chinese-born American artist who, the museum's curatorial department said, "transformed her canvases and prints into evocative memorial sites for women and

children.” Also on display here are 25 prints from Antoinette Buzonnet-Stella’s 1675 series, “The Entrance of the Emperor Sigismond into Mantua.” And on display on the fourth floor are nine new artists’ books inspired by the museum’s mission to promote women artists.

Ms. Sterling said this mission is as vital today as it was 36 years ago, when the museum opened: According to Burns Halperin Report’s [December 2022 survey](#) of 31 American museums, although women represent 50.5 percent of the U.S. population, between the years of 2008 and 2020, only 11 percent of acquisitions and 14.9 percent of exhibitions at these museums were of work by female-identifying artists. The survey also found that the museums’ volume of acquisitions of work by women peaked in 2009.

“We have to make sure that people pay attention to women artists, see them within the larger social context,” Ms. Sterling said. “It can’t be catch-as-catch-can.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/20/arts/design/national-museum-women-arts.html>