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The Past and the Present, the West and the East:

A Case Study on the Renovation and Expansion of Seattle Asian Art Museum

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Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

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Abstract

The Seattle Asian Art Museum (SAAM) is located in Volunteer Park in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, one of the three locations of the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). It was built in 1933 as the museum's first home. After the construction of SAM's second building in downtown Seattle, the Volunteer Park site was repurposed to showcase the museum's Asian collections, reopening as the Seattle Asian Art Museum in 1994. From February, 2017 through February, 2020, the building underwent a major renovation and expansion (Seattle Asian Art Museum [SAAM], 2021). This case study focuses on the history of SAAM, its renovation and expansion, its new curatorial design, and the impact of the new and improved facility. It will explore how the SAAM of the 21st century brings the past to the present and bridges the West and the East.

The Past and the Present, the West and the East:

A Case Study on the Renovation and Expansion of Seattle Asian Art Museum

The Seattle Asian Art Museum (SAAM) is located in Volunteer Park in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, one of the three locations of the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). It was built in 1933 as the museum's first home. After the construction of SAM's second building in downtown Seattle, the Volunteer Park site was repurposed to showcase the museum's Asian collections, reopening as the Seattle Asian Art Museum in 1994. From February 2017 through February 2020, the building underwent a major renovation and expansion (Seattle Asian Art Museum [SAAM], 2021). This case study focuses on the history of SAAM, its renovation and expansion, its new curatorial design, and the impact of the new and improved facility. It will investigate four primary aspects of the renovation and expansion:

1. History of Seattle Asian Art Museum
2. The design of the renovation and expansion
3. The effect of the renovation on curatorial development
4. The relationship of SAAM to the API community and City of Seattle

Through these four aspects, this case study explores how the renovation and expansion allowed SAAM to bring the past to the present and bridge the West and the East.

History the Seattle Asian Art Museum

The forerunner of the Seattle Art Museum, the Seattle Fine Art Society, was founded in 1905. In 1929, it was renamed the Art Institute of Seattle under the presidency of Carl F. Gould. In 1931, Richard E. Fuller, the new president of the Art Institute, and his mother, Mrs. Margaret E. MacTavish Fuller, donated \$250,000 to the City of Seattle to build a museum for their art collection. The building was designed by Carl F. Gould of the Seattle architectural firm Bebb

and Gould, in the art deco style popular at that time. On June 29, 1933, the Seattle Art Museum opened its doors to the public. The art on display included the Fullers' collection of Asian art, primarily Chinese jades and ceramics, complemented by examples of Japanese, Korean, and Indian art, and rotating exhibitions of living Northwest artists. In 1991, the majority of SAM's collection moved to their newly constructed post modern building on First Avenue in downtown Seattle and the now-historic art deco building in Volunteer Park became known as the Seattle Asian Art Museum. SAAM reopened on August 13, 1994 with festivities that included tours, folk art workshops, and performances by local dance and music groups. 6,000 visitors attended the reopening ceremony. Devoting the Volunteer Park building to Asian art allowed SAAM to display much more of their collection, which included approximately 6,000 pieces of Asian art by 1994. (Seattle Art Museum [SAM], n.d.; Seattle Asian Art Museum [SAAM], n.d.; SAAM, 2021).

In 2017, SAAM temporarily closed and the Asian art collection was moved to the downtown location in preparation for the first significant renovation since the Volunteer Park building opened in 1933 (SAAM, n.d.; SAAM, 2021). The construction was funded by a mixture of public and private funds. \$27.1 million of the \$56.5 million budget was raised privately. Of the remaining funds, \$21 million came from the City of Seattle, \$2.9 million from Washington state and King County, plus \$5.5 million from federal historic preservation tax credits (Kiley, 2020).

On February 8, 2020, the newly renovated and expanded SAAM reopened its doors to the public. Over 10,000 people visited during the free reopening weekend, to experience the groundbreaking thematic reinstallation of the Asian art collection in the upgraded galleries. SAAM now houses a permanent collection of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, Himalayan,

and Southeast Asian art. It also exhibits contemporary artworks from Asian countries and by Asian artists living outside of Asia. The new galleries are no longer organized by country but instead seek to tell stories of human experiences across time and place. The new SAAM breaks boundaries to offer a thematic, rather than geographic or chronological exploration of art from Asia. It also features an education center, conservation center, and library (SAAM, n.d.; SAAM, 2021).



Seattle Asian Art Museum. Photo by Tim Griffith.

Past Meets Present, West Meets East

The Seattle-based firm LMN Architects was responsible for the 2017 redesign of the building. LMN has planned and designed a number of significant public and private buildings, including convention centers, cultural arts venues, and education facilities (Architect Magazine, n.d.). The renovation and expansion of the Seattle Asian Art Museum took twelve years from planning through design and construction. The first significant renovation of the 64,250 sq. ft facility since it was constructed, it included the restoration of the historic art deco building and

its facade, improvements to critical systems, expanded gallery and education spaces, and a new lobby that better connects the museum to the surrounding Volunteer Park (Robarts, 2020). The total gallery space of SAAM was expanded from 12,276 sq. ft. to 16,173 sq. ft.

In an interview, Wendy Pautz, the partner at LMN Architects who led the design team, offered a number of insights about the project. The renovation aspired to restore the exterior architecture and gallery spaces as closely as possible to the original intent for the building. Pautz explained:

Over time, elements that largely defined one's experience of the building had been changed or were inactive. The fountains flanking the building entry had been inactive for a number of years and were repaired and reactivated as part of the entry sequence to the building. The wood flooring system, a unique use of a press board material that was indicative of the economy of materials utilized during the 1930s, was replaced and restored throughout all gallery spaces. Reconceiving the skylights in the octagonal galleries to be illuminated artificially, thereby overcoming the UV degradation challenges associated with direct daylight, restored the galleries' experiential quality. (personal communication, March 17, 2021)

The building's location in Volunteer Park inspired the designers to better integrate the architecture and the park setting. The three tall panels of art deco metalwork and glass that form the main entrance were reglazed with transparent glass, so people walking in the park can see into the museum. Simultaneously, visitors in the museum can enjoy the artwork while viewing the park as background. There is a beautiful view of the Space Needle from the Garden Court of the museum. Expanded gallery space, a community meeting room, classrooms, and administrative offices on the lowest level have wide expanses of glass windows, integrating the

museum experience with the activities of the park (W. Pautz, personal communication, March 17, 2021). Pautz described major concerns and challenges in renovating an historic building:

From a renovation standpoint, the most significant challenges were integrating museum-quality mechanical, electrical and audio/visual infrastructure and systems in such a way that didn't disrupt the historical detail of the building or detract from the experience of the spaces. Given that both SAAM and Volunteer Park are on the National Register of Historic Places and are also Seattle landmarks, the expansion of the building needed careful consideration to find the balance between maintaining the design intent of the park and increasing the area of the museum so that SAAM could mount exhibitions that better serve Seattle's diverse population. By stacking new spaces in a three-level addition, the amount of park space utilized was minimized. The park lobby is suspended above the park further limiting the amount of park space required. (personal communication, March 17, 2021)

Similar concerns were voiced by Priya Frank, Director of Equity, Diversity, and

Inclusion of SAM:

It's a historic building and it's actually owned by the City, so we technically rent it from the City... We could not just tear the building down and rebuild. We had to work with the City. (P. Frank, personal communication, February 24, 2021)

Because there are limits on how much the historic building exterior can be modified, the renovation focused on making the gallery spaces more open, to enhance the audience's experience of the interior space. Many of the changes are concentrated in places that are not as visible to the public, such as dedicated educational spaces, a board room that can be used by community organizations, and climate control features.

Regarding how the new design balances the past and present of the historical Western-style building with the Eastern art collections, Pautz stated:

The building, at its time of design and construction, represented the thinking about how a civic and cultural building in 1933 should express itself and, in its own way, is a piece of Seattle history and part of the collection of urban buildings that speak to Seattle's past and our current history. (personal communication, March 17, 2021)

In transforming the gallery spaces, LMN retained original architectural elements, keeping the historical memory as part of the experience. To distinguish them from the original galleries, the new gallery space was designed in a contemporary style with less detail on the walls, a different flooring pattern, and lighting systems integrated into the unadorned ceilings. When talking about the relationship between the building and Asian art collections, Pautz stated, "mounting collections inside a historic building is in large part consideration of the museum's curators" (personal communication, March 17, 2021).

The inaugural exhibition is an interesting study in the way that the curators created a dialogue between the collection and the building. Their approach to the historical spaces is "sometimes presenting the artwork in the forefront and sometimes connecting the exhibit not only to the gallery spaces but also to Volunteer Park and the community beyond (W. Pautz, personal communication, March 17, 2021). Kenzan Tsutakawa-Chinn's permanent light installation, *Gather* juxtaposes pure geometry and 21st century technology with the art deco ornament of the restored Garden Court. In an article on the museum's reopening, Foong Ping, Foster Foundation Curator of Chinese Art, and Xiaojin Wu, Curator of Japanese and Korean art were asked about the relationship between the 1933 art deco building and Asian art:

When asked about the contrast between the ostensibly European architecture and the contents within, the curators were nonplussed, saying that the history of art deco is an international one. Any juxtapositions are productive, and the flexibility of the art deco form, and its adherents in China, India, and Japan, make it a perfect candidate for a multicultural, trans-temporal project like the Seattle Asian Art Museum. (Dreith, 2020, para. 8)

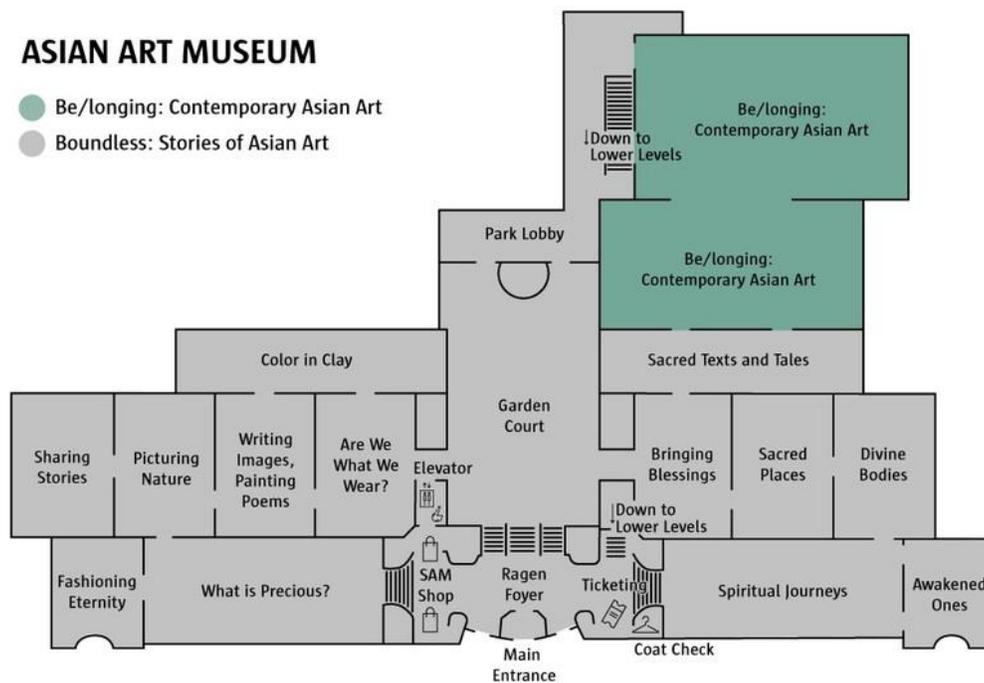


The expansion on the east side of the Seattle Asian Art Museum. Photo by Tim Griffith

Designing for a New Curatorial Concept

The redesigned SAAM supports an innovative concept for curatorial development. Unlike most other Asian art museums, which present collections and exhibitions based on time periods, regions, and genres, SAAM organizes galleries around exhibition themes. When it reopened, SAAM presented its collections and a special exhibition in two sections: *Boundless*:

Stories of Asian Art and *Be/longing: Contemporary Asian Art*. Within the *Boundless* exhibition, the galleries are organized around twelve themes common to Asian countries and societies such as spirituality, color, ceramics, the afterlife, precious materials, and the natural world. The works are inspired by spiritual life and material life or both, and tell stories of when, where, how, and why they were made. Ancient artworks are placed next to contemporary ones and artworks from different countries or regions are exhibited together (Keimig, 2021).



The floorplan of the renovated Seattle Asian Art Museum. Courtesy of Seattle Art Museum.

Asia cannot be defined by a single culture, geography, or history. Its national boundaries have changed over time, its culture and people are diverse, and its history is complex. As Tina Lee, Senior Manager for Exhibitions and Publications at SAAM explained, the new curatorial approach enables "taking advantage of a general theme, so that we can continue rotating works to be on display for longer" (T. Lee, personal communication, July 12, 2021). Different works that share the same theme are brought together and curators have more flexibility. Lee states:

This inaugural exhibition is called *Be/longing*. The idea was that we could extend this display. There's actually no end date right now, but we're thinking several years. It could go on and on and we would just rotate things as needed. (personal communication, July 12, 2021)

Like the old museum, the new SAAM can only exhibit 4.5 percent of its total collection at a time. Utilizing the theme exhibition concept, more different works and cross-cultural groups of works can be presented to the audience at different times (Kiley, 2020).

Globalization has had a huge impact on the people of Asia. Today's Asian artists express their feelings and tell stories about these changes through their works. In her article, “Visualizing Global Asias,” Alexandra Chang, Associate Professor of Practice in the Art History program, Art, Culture and Media Department at Rutgers University, Newark, describes the changes:

Although their works fit into any number of categorizations— from street-influenced, steampunk, contemporary ink to Asian aboriginal, Asian diasporic, or New York-based— their aesthetic productions reflect the multivalent visual narratives and flows that are integral to the envisioning of multiple Asias within a global framework. (2015, p. 79)

SAAM's exhibition *Be/longing: Contemporary Asian Art* shows contemporary artworks from this vast, vibrant, and rapidly changing Asia. It includes works by Asian artists who have spent time or moved permanently outside of Asia. Their expatriate experiences give them different perspectives on their Asian heritage. Their work represents Asia and its relationship to the world (*Be/longing*, 2021). They take Asian culture and art beyond the traditional media of ceramics and ink paintings, to engage the ideas, aesthetics, and stories of contemporary Asians.

Seattle Asian Art Museum's Relationship to the API Community and the City

When the COVID pandemic began in early 2020, incidents of hatred against Asians and Asian groups increased dramatically. The national Stop AAPI Hate center received reports of 3,795 incidents from March 19, 2020, to February 28, 2021 (Horse, et al., 2021). Discrimination and hatred stem from prejudices and misunderstandings against specific groups of people. After these incidents, Asian American artists began to use art to educate and fight back against racism. Neuroscientist turned artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya created *I Still Believe in Our City*, a series of portraits of Black, Asian and Pacific Island people to be displayed in New York City subway stations. The artist said, "My goal with this art series was to turn these hurts into something beautiful and powerful" (Phingbodhipakkiya, as cited in Messman, 2020, para. 4).

Art has the power to infiltrate and influence public opinion. The work of the Seattle Asian Art Museum helps the broader Seattle community appreciate Asian culture and Asian countries' stories. The United States is a multicultural, multiracial country. An understanding of art history can be a valuable tool for cross-cultural communication. Art is a tangible expression of culture. When they move or migrate from one environment to another, artworks themselves can foster understanding. In preparation for the reopening of SAAM, the museum staff hoped that,

The Asian art museum specifically could feel more inclusive... to create a welcoming environment. SAAM is not a museum belonging to a specific group, but the entire Seattle community. The SAM leadership team also engaged in many research meetings with different folks doing little focus groups. The questions included, "what would bring you there [the museum] if you haven't been there? If you have been there, what do you enjoy about it? What would you like to see more of, whether it's the exhibitions, whether it's the

programs, how would you make this a museum for you? (P. Frank, personal communication, February 24, 2021)

While focusing on Asian art, SAAM also hoped to create stronger connections and interactions with the diverse people and communities of Seattle, so that they could better understand and appreciate Asian culture, leading to a more positive perception of the API community. Director Frank expressed confidence in the new SAAM's ability to achieve this mission. "The opening was really incredible. I think it was a really good start, and I think that there's a lot to come. I'm really excited for the future of it and what it will be" (P. Frank, personal communication, February 24, 2021). The expansion allowed SAAM to exhibit more art and offer more programs and resources to the public in its new community meeting room, educational spaces, and library.

SAAM is part of Seattle's living history. The building retains its historical memory, preserving its art deco design through renovation and expansion, bringing together past and present, strengthening dialogue with Asian artworks. The new design opens up views of the park, integrating art with nature. SAAM will continue to tell stories about Asian art and culture to the Seattle community into the future.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Amanda Feng, MFA 2021 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman. Interviews were conducted with Priya Frank, Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at Seattle Art Museum; Tina Lee, Senior Manager for Exhibitions and Publications at Seattle Asian Art Museum; and Wendy Pautz, partner at LMN Architects. Primary research was conducted during the Spring and Summer Quarter of 2021. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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