



NEWS

There is one word that director Lawrence J. Wheeler would emphatically not use to describe the expanded North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, which reopens on April 24 in a new 127,000-square-foot building: "grand." There are no stairs to ascend, no lobby to speak of, not even a main entrance to the structure designed by Thomas Phifer and Partners to showcase 5,000 years of art history. Visitors can enter the museum (which is free) through four doors, opening to the surrounding 164-acre public park. "Intimate" is the term Wheeler prefers for the West Building, as the addition is called, a low rectangular structure clad in anodized aluminum panels and large panes of glass.

Phifer's design embraces two things art museums usually don't: sunlight and expansive views of nature. Technology has made that possible. Natural light pours into the museum through computer-controlled curtains, scrims, and shades, as well as, indirectly, through sculpted fiberglass vaults and coffers on the roof. The methods and materials are so high tech that Phifer "never could have made this building 20 years ago," he says. None of the 40 galleries has four walls, so "from any vantage point you're seeing seven points of the collection," adds Wheeler.

The main collections—European painting, Egyptian funerary art, ancient Greek and Roman art, American art, Jewish ceremonial objects, and contemporary art—flow into one another in an

Intimate, Not Intimidating

Opening up the North
Carolina Museum of Art



▲ A rendering by Thomas Phifer and Partners of the sculpture garden for the expanded North Carolina Museum of Art, where more than 30 Rodins will be on display.

open plan, with vistas of five courtyards. The sculpture hall—the spine around which the galleries are organized—will showcase classical sculpture, as well as more than 30 Rodins, a gift from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation recently finalized after seven years of pursuit, Wheeler says. He also proudly cites new acquisitions of contemporary work by Jennifer Steinkamp, El Anatsui, Jaume Plensa, and Patrick Dougherty, along with paintings by Pablo Picasso, Emil Nolde, and other modernists from the New York collectors Josie and Julian Robertson.

The \$80 million project was financed with state, city, and county money, reflecting the museum's history as the first in the country to be formed by state legislation and funding, in 1947. Wheeler is also in the midst of a \$50 million capital campaign to raise money for operating expenses and an endowment. The

museum's former home, the East Building, designed in 1983 by Edward Durell Stone, will house administrative offices, as well as temporary exhibitions and public programs. On the slate starting in November are shows devoted to John James Audubon, Norman Rockwell, and Vietnamese artist Binh Danh; a gallery bringing attention to work by North Carolina artists will feature figurative sculptures by Bob Trotman. Other future plans include inviting artists to work on issues related to the landscaping and natural systems in the park surrounding the museum. ■