

# Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

4525 Oak

Completed 1933; Bloch Building Completed 2007

by Janice Lee

William Rockhill Nelson and Mary McAfee Atkins never met, but they shared an important dream: a fine art gallery for Kansas City. Decades after their deaths, the trust funds from their estates combined to create a museum so magnificent that it surely would have pleased them both. It would take more than 20 years of planning, work, and civic involvement to transform the vision of these two Kansas Citians into reality.

Mary McAfee Atkins, the reclusive widow of a pioneer real-estate dealer, had been inspired by a visit to the great European galleries during the last years of her life. When she died in 1911, she left about \$300,000 of her estate for the construction of a gallery building.

William Rockhill Nelson, owner and editor-in-chief of *The Kansas City Star and Times*, had been similarly moved by a trip to Europe in 1896. Convinced that a truly cultivated city needed an art collection, he purchased fine reproductions of famous paintings as the intended nucleus of a gallery collection. When he died in 1915 he left a trust fund of about \$11 million for purchasing more art. His widow, daughter, son-in-law, and family lawyer apparently caught his enthusiasm, for their wills left funds for a museum to house the collection Nelson dreamed of. Through daughter Laura Nelson Kirkwood and her husband Irwin, the city also gained the Nelson's 20-acre Oak Hall estate for a future gallery site.

When the Oak Hall estate became city property in 1927, Atkins' trustees had been planning to build a small gallery on the Liberty Memorial mall, but they and five other groups of trustees from



the Nelson and Kirkwood estates realized that they were pursuing similar intents. Recognizing that a grander gallery could be accomplished by joint effort, they decided to pool their resources and work together.

Wight & Wight, the most prestigious architectural firm in Kansas City, designed the new gallery. Irwin Kirkwood's will had specified a neoclassical design and a building material of Indiana limestone. The neoclassical design, with its central portico supported by Greek columns, also reflected then-current tastes in art museum architecture. Classical architecture was thought to embody the permanence of artistic values and suggest both a monument and a temple to art. Wight & Wight's design also incorporated ideas from their studies in Greece and Italy and from other museums. Their most direct influence was probably the Cleveland Museum of Art, from which they borrowed elements of the neoclassical design, the setting on a prominent hill, and the garden court (Rozzelle Court).

With the site and architects selected, the gallery project moved quickly. The first stages of construction began with the razing of Oak Hall in the spring of 1928, in keeping with Laura Nelson Kirkwood's will. Although anticipating the much-needed public institution that would occupy the spot, both the public and the *Star* mourned the loss of this beautiful native-stone landmark.

Groundbreaking began in July 1930, the cornerstones were laid in the spring of 1931, and by the fall of 1932 the exterior was complete. The imposing structure, six stories high and larger than a city block, cost \$2.75 million. The east wing would be the Atkins Museum and the west wing the Nelson Gallery of Art. The first and second floors of the west wing would be left unfinished to meet future demands. It would take another year to complete the interior and collect and install the art.

During that year, R. A. Holland, the first curator of collections, and other experts assembled a permanent painting collection spanning six centuries. The first 10 paintings, acquired in 1930 from a local art house, consisted of portraits by artists of the English eighteenth-century school. The overall goal was to create a general historical collection rather than objects from a particular region or period.

The art in place, Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum opened to the public December 11, 1933. It rated high praise in national-circulation magazines and newspapers, which exclaimed over the opulence of the building, the beautiful landscaping, the

outstanding art collection, and the state-of-the-art lighting and ventilation techniques. In the first year attendance totaled about 315,000, an average of more than 1,000 visitors per day.

The first sight to greet visitors' eyes were the 32 gigantic columns, each 40 feet high and 5 feet in diameter, that ornamented the four facades. The rest of the facade featured rich decorative and symbolic detail. Inscribed quotations on the friezes of each façade from the works of Michelangelo, Victor Hugo, and others sounded the theme of art as enduring beauty and eternal reason. Beginning on the exterior of the east façade, sculptor Charles Keck created a series of 23 limestone panels depicting the march of civilization from east to west. The panels depicted such scenes as trappers, traders, scouts, and wagon trains heading west from Westport Landing. The 24 panels of the bronze east side doors present dramatic passages from Longfellow's poem "Hiawatha." The grillwork around the south and east doors depicted the zodiacal birth signs of the Nelsons and Irwin Kirkwood, with oak-leaf motifs added in memory of Oak Hall.

The landscaping by Hare & Hare, the pre-eminent landscape architectural firm of Kansas City, matched the building in grandeur. The landscape architects were proponents of the City Beautiful Movement, which emphasized preserving and enhancing the natural landscape rather than imposing a new or rigid order upon it. The landscape architects planted additional 200 trees around the museum, placed plantings to subtly lead the eye through walks and views toward the building, and added walkways and stone walls that conformed to the natural terrain.

The interior ornamentation received the same care given to the exterior and the grounds. Wight & Wight blended native materials and Midwestern themes with classical motifs and European marbles throughout. Visitors entering the north main entrance entered a formal vestibule into Kirkwood Hall, resplendent with 12, 30-foot-tall black Pyrenees marble columns and tapestry-covered walls. Polished golden pillars of Missouri marble separated Kirkwood Hall from galleries at either end of the building.

In one of the finest examples, William Wight designed the south vestibule to resemble a fifteenth-century villa he had sketched when studying in Italy. The arched and domed foyer juxtaposed native "Kacimo" marble, a variegated native stone polished to a marble finish, with paintings by local artist Daniel MacMorris. MacMorris used a palette and subject matter reminiscent of high Renaissance Italian painting and painted the signs of the zodiac

inside connecting medallions for an added Renaissance flavor.

The 90-foot-square Rozzelle Court, named for the Nelson family lawyer and donor Frank Rozzelle, received a similar treatment. Columns and arches reminiscent of fifteenth-century Italy were blended with walls, floors, and columns of Mankato stone quarried in Michigan. The center of the courtyard featured a huge green marble bowl taken from the Roman baths.

In another splendid touch, a grand marble stairway in Atkins Museum swept from the east doors to the main floor of exhibition rooms. Above it were murals by painter Andrew Schwartz representing the progress of civilization in mastering the arts, from prehistoric times through the Italian Renaissance.

The setting was a fitting complement to the real *pieces de resistance*, the art itself. The art was showcased in a series of 50 small exhibit rooms or galleries, grouped by century and national origin, and arranged in chronological order. Gallery 1 displayed religious paintings from the Middle Ages, for example, and other rooms featured fifteenth-century Italian and nineteenth-century French art. Each room contained no more than 10 or 12 paintings, allowing ample space for viewing while providing a sense of intimacy. The exhibit rooms were interspersed with galleries for special exhibits and rooms decorated to represent various eras, allowing visitors to step into part of a Chinese temple or a colonial American farmhouse.

In contrast to the historic nature of its collection and surrounding, one of the most impressive features of the museum was its modern display and conservation technology. A unique artificial lighting system created an aquarium-like effect by tucking lighting into recessed areas within the walls, eaves, and neutral glass ceilings of darkened rooms. A state-of-the-art heating and cooling system kept temperatures and humidity constant to protect the artwork and filtered air throughout the museum.

Over the decades the museum and gallery have been gradually enlarged and enhanced. Upon opening, about one-third of the west wing had been left unfinished for future expansion. In April 1941 part of the first and second floors of the west wings were completed. Six new galleries opened, including one for Chinese painting and sculpture, and a "Classical Hall." After World War II, the rest of the first floor was completed with the addition of seven new rooms, including a Spanish Baroque chapel and an English Tudor room.

In 1999, when it was clear that the museum had outgrown its space, Nelson-Atkins leaders planned for a building addition. Their Architect Selection Committee chose internationally known New York architect Steven Holl, who intrigued the committee with his innovative design for a new building on the east side of the museum rather than a building addition.

To contrast with the heavy stone Nelson-Atkins building, Holl designed a light “feather” of a building, an elongated shape consisting of five glass “lenses” alternately obscured and revealed by the landscape. A grassy area between and sometimes atop the glass lenses allows visitors to stroll along the rooftop of the building. The exterior features translucent glass walls that refract and bend sunlight during the day and illuminate the building from within at night. A reflecting pool on the north side ties together the two distinctive buildings. Unveiled on June 9, 2007, the building was named in honor of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch, “whose dedication and vision helped transform the Nelson-Atkins.”

The existing museum building was also upgraded and renovated, providing room for more displays, special exhibits, and community education programs.

## Sources

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