

Curatorial Logic

RAFAEL VIÑOLY'S EXPANSION OF THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART FULFILLS THE PROMISE OF THE ORIGINAL DESIGN. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



ON JUNE 27 the Cleveland Museum of Art officially opened its much-anticipated East Wing, the second of four stages in an ongoing \$350 million expansion and renovation project, designed and supervised by the New York-based Uruguayan architect Rafael Viñoly. Sweeping in scope, the overall project includes the complete refurbishment of the museum's two extant buildings—a 1916 Beaux-Arts structure, designed by the firm of Hubbell and Benes, and a 1971 education pavilion by the renowned modernist Marcel Breuer—as well as the addition of three new wings by Viñoly. These will connect the older buildings, harmonize



their disparate architectural styles and add approximately 200,000 square feet of space to the museum, almost doubling its size.

“There has been no time in the history of this institution, except possibly in the years before the opening of the first building in 1916, when there was a greater sense of possibility than there is right now,” says director Timothy Rub. He notes that with the museum undergoing a complete physical transformation, he and the curatorial staff now enjoy a rare opportunity to rethink the entire presentation of the permanent collection. To this end they have been exploring new installation plans that will bring greater clarity to the sequence and display of objects, periods and cultures, allowing the curatorial logic behind one of the country's

most important and comprehensive collections to shine through as never before.

“A friend of mine called me up the day after I had been appointed director,” recalls Rub, who celebrated his third anniversary on the job in April. “He said, ‘Oh, you’re going to Cleveland. I love that place. I love going to the museum and getting lost.’ Hopefully we won’t lose that charm ... but I think, even for those who are familiar with the collection, the new museum will give them the opportunity to see things fresh, as if for the first time.”

Rub's enthusiasm for the project has been widely shared in Cleveland's arts community, despite a few misgivings when Viñoly was first awarded the commission. Some in this proud, if sometimes underestimated, city wondered whether a globetrotting New Yorker, known for designing such sleek modern structures as the Tokyo International Forum and Philadelphia's Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, was perhaps the wrong choice. Writing in the *Plain Dealer*, art and architecture critic Steven Litt warned, “This is no time to repeat the classic Cleveland story: Big-time architect comes to town and gives us his second-best effort.”

But Litt and the general public appear to have been won over by Viñoly's sensitive and meticulous approach, especially after the unveiling last summer of the project's completed first stage, the sumptuous renovation of the 1916 building, which returned the vast marble edifice to its original glory. Warrens of ancillary spaces and ill-conceived partitions that had accumulated over the years were swept away, allowing visitors once again to circulate easily through the building's gracious, well-appointed halls. Skylights that had been hidden by dropped ceilings since the 1950s were reopened, flooding the interior with natural light. New parquet floors were installed, as were modern climate control, storage and



From top: Artist's rendering of the expanded Cleveland Museum of Art, scheduled to be completed in 2012; the original building from 1916; an interior gallery view.



security systems. Several projects that had been envisioned by the original architects but never completed, such as a gallery space in what had been left for 70 years as a semi-finished garden court, were brought to fruition—and all with outstanding results.

The reinstatement of the collection in the 1916 building—which houses Old Masters as well as American art from before 1920—and the East Wing's new arrangement of the museum's celebrated 19th- and 20th-century holdings have both been revelatory. The Cleveland Museum possesses perhaps the most scrupulously rigorous collection of its size in the country. Out of the museum's 40,000 objects, roughly half will be on display when the expansion project is complete, and the majority of the remaining works could easily be rotated into the galleries with little or no loss of quality.

Unlike many American museums of similar age, where the storerooms are filled with redundant or second-tier works acquired through bequests, Cleveland has formed its collection through a systematic plan of purchases, directed by successive generations of curators and continuing up to the present day. Historically, most of Cleveland's major benefactors have not been collectors themselves but civic-minded individuals commit-

ted to the concept of a public art museum and willing to provide substantial funds to create one. For instance, using the considerable income generated by a bequest from Cleveland-area industrialist Leonard Hanna Jr., the museum's famed mid-century director Sherman Lee (who died last year at the age of 90) was able to acquire major Old Masters, such as Jacques-Louis David's *Cupid and Psyche*; iconic works of European modernism, including Picasso's *La Vie*; and a large and varied array of East Asian art, now one of the museum's greatest strengths.

Viñoly's expansion plan could perhaps be called curatorial in its aesthetic and intellectual conception. His new wings have been designed with an eye toward showcasing the distinctive forms of beauty embodied in the museum's stately original structure and Breuer's boxy, angular addition, which lies at some distance to the north, formerly connected by a series of undistinguished out-buildings that have now been demolished. One of the primary virtues of the original building is its classical plan of galleries arranged in a ring around a central court: Viñoly's design repeats this pattern, creating a larger ring that will incorporate the

original building as well as the Breuer addition and feature a massive, glass-enclosed atrium in the center. At the front of the campus, Viñoly's new additions will be executed mostly in glass and white marble in order to blend in unobtrusively with the classicizing tendencies of Hubbell and Benes. Each time Viñoly's facade turns a corner, it incorporates increasingly prominent registers of gray granite, which, by the time one reaches the rear of the campus, harmonize perfectly with Breuer's white-and-gray-striped box.

The West Wing and central atrium complex are scheduled to open in the summers of 2010 and 2012, respectively. Asked about the feasibility of this timetable given the abrupt downturn in the economy, which has led to operating cutbacks at virtually every museum in the country, including Cleveland, Rub indicates that the capital plan for the renovation is on schedule, with two-thirds of the total \$350 million sum already raised and three years left to go. Half of the funds brought in to date have come from the museum's own trustees. "It's going to be challenging," says Rub. "But we've been very successful so far, and I remain confident that we'll get it done." **A**



From top: Pablo Picasso, *La Vie*, 1903, oil on canvas;
Jacques-Louis David, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1817, oil on canvas.