



Courtesy of Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum

After undergoing a massive expansion and quadrupling its former space, the Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum unveils four centuries of North Carolina masterworks.

PERMANENT COLLECTION



by Miriam Sauls



Courtesy of Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum

Since its beginnings in the 1960s, St. John's Museum of Art in Wilmington had amassed a large collection of art. Most of it, sadly, had little hope of ever seeing the light of day. The museum, cobbled together from an old house, a Masonic Lodge, and a Greek Orthodox Church, had far too little exhibit space for its permanent collection, so much of the artwork was relegated to storage.

A year ago, however, the museum underwent a renaissance. Renamed the Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum, it moved to a new location — with plenty of space — and now showcases its long-hidden collection. The 42,000-square-foot facility houses artworks spanning four centuries, beginning with 18th-century paintings and continuing into the modern era — with paintings, prints, drawings, sculpture, computer-generated art, ceramics, and glass.

The museum's transformation began in September 1997 when the Bruce B.

Cameron Foundation created a \$4 million grant to St. John's Museum of Art, the largest ever to a cultural organization in Wilmington's history. At the same time, the children of Bruce Cameron and the late Louise Wells Cameron donated land valued at more than \$2 million to the museum in memory of their mother, after whom the museum is named.

Bruce Cameron went on to issue an unprecedented \$500,000 statewide challenge to ensure completion of the project. His challenge enabled the museum to qualify for a prestigious

Above: Outside seating for The Forks restaurant affords visitors a view of the sculpture court.

Left: The contemporary Galleria evokes a sense of modern art.

Right: Through works such as *Sorting Fish*, Wilmington artist Claude Howell captured the coastal lifestyle.



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Inspired by vivid dreams and in response to the vibrant setting of Airlie Gardens where she worked as a gatekeeper, African-American visionary artist Minnie Evans created *Mythological, Made at Airlie*, 1957.

Kresge Foundation matching grant, which helped it meet its capital campaign goal of \$12.1 million.

While many physical things about the museum changed, its mission stayed emphatically the same — to be the only institution of its kind whose primary purpose is collecting, archiving, and displaying the art of North Carolina.

A sculptural structure

Inside the museum's Galleria, just beyond the entrance, daylight streams in. It's a welcome transition from the outdoors, and the natural light strikes highlights on an impressive collection of North Carolina pottery and old decoys, some on loan from Bruce Cameron's collection.

"You go in some museums, and you could be in a mall or a hotel lobby," says C. Reynolds Brown, director of the museum. "We wanted an immediate feeling of art."

Inside the heart of the museum, all of the traditional demands — such as lighting, humidity control, and floors strong enough to withstand heavy sculpture — are beautifully woven into

the overall design of the building. The Cameron Museum was fortunate to have a world-class architect to oversee both the functionality and the aesthetics of the museum.

"There are endless details in a project like this," says Brown. "Turning someone's specs into a reality is a tremendous challenge. I felt our architect was extremely interested in our point of view. He incorporated everything we asked for down to the smallest details and found a way to make them attractive." A door at the rear of the gallery, for instance, is large enough for a truck to drive through, and the beautiful Brazilian cherry floors, which are four times harder than oak, are strong enough to withstand the truck.

Brown considers the architect, Charles Gwathmey, to be "probably one of the five major architects working in the United States today." As the head of a 75-person firm in New York City, Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects, Gwathmey easily could have sent his associates to do the lion's share of the project, assuming the role of architect in name only. But

he immersed himself in it and likely for sentimental reasons.

Gwathmey grew up in Charlotte with his parents, painter Robert Gwathmey and photographer Rosalie Gwathmey, and spent his childhood summers vacationing at Wrightsville Beach. He is perhaps most noted for his renovation and addition to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in the early 1990s and is currently designing the new United States Mission to the United Nations in New York.

Other museum projects include the renovation and addition to the Henry Art Gallery (University of Washington, in Seattle, Washington), the addition to the Werner Otto Hall of the Fogg Museum (Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts), and the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, Florida.

The building itself resembles a complex and contemporary work of art, designed around straight lines and shades of gray, pyramidal skylights, and the textural contrast of glass, metal, and brick.

"I enjoy watching people react [to the structure's appearance]," says Richard

Sceiford, director of communications and outreach for the museum. “I’ve watched people adapt to the architectural and design nuances. I think the town is still trying to get its eyes around the project.”

An inside job

One of Wilmington’s favorite sons is well represented in a gallery bearing his name — “Claude Howell: Carolina Interpreter.” The collection traces Howell’s development over the decades, culminating in his well-loved, colorful scenes of local architecture and vibrant waterfronts. Because Howell was greatly influenced by Robert Gwathmey, a painting by Gwathmey hangs in the gallery as well, adding a familial touch to the walls designed by his son.

Howell left his estate to the museum upon his death in 1997, approximately \$1 million strictly designated for the acquisition of North Carolina art. “Claude was so instrumental in our vision to focus on North Carolina art,” says Brown. “He kept reminding us that we couldn’t be the Louvre or the Met. He was emphatic our specialty should be North Carolina art. And his bequest has made it possible for us to purchase some key pieces, like our recent acquisition of a Romare Bearden.”

Another local artist of national and international interest with multiple pieces on show is Minnie Evans, a visionary artist named in her later years as one of two great outsider artists in the world by the *New York Times*. Evans, who died in 1987, was 43 years old when she began to draw pictures based on the strange dreams that had haunted her all her life — giant birds, biblical figures, intricate flowers, mysterious faces, and other fantastic images. She worked as gatekeeper at Airlie Gardens for 25 years and did not see her work as “art” according to her son, George Evans, who reports that his mother was initially reluctant to draw but was unable to resist the powerful spiritual admonition.

A particularly valuable and beautiful collection on display is a set of 13 color prints by Mary Cassatt. Given to the Museum by the late Thérèse Thorne McLane, who lived part-time in Southern Pines, the collection includes a rare, complete set of “The Ten,” a portfolio Cassatt executed and exhibited in Paris in 1891.

Other important names represented in the permanent collection galleries include Francis Speight (landscape painting), Jacob Marling (oil painting), Ben Berns (photo-realism), Ben Owen (pottery), and Kenneth Noland (abstract expressionism). And one entire room is devoted to art on loan from the North Carolina Museum of Art. There are two notable pieces in the 2,300-foot reception hall, which hosts weddings, receptions, movies, and lectures. “Two Trees Amid Harvest” is a stunning round stained-glass window by Rowan LeCompte, given to the Museum by Rachel Mellon. And “Entrance to the Enchanted Castle,” a massive sculpture by Dorothy Gillespie, hangs on an adjacent wall.

The 4,500 square feet of changing

if you’re going

The Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum features 10 galleries of the permanent collection wing, five inaugural exhibitions, an expanded gift shop, a state-of-the-art changing exhibition wing, and The Forks café restaurant. It is located at the intersection of Independence Boulevard and 17th Street in Wilmington.

Admission is \$5 for adults, \$2 for children ages five to 18. Children younger than age five are admitted free. The museum offers free admission for all visitors on the first Sunday of each month.

Gallery Hours: Tuesday–Thursday: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Friday: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Saturday: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday: 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Forks: Tuesday–Thursday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Friday: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.; Saturday: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Sunday: 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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exhibition space can be configured into several different galleries or one large gallery by installing or removing walls. On display in the changing gallery through June 29 is “Reverend McKendree Robbins Long: Picture Painter of the Apocalypse.” Long’s paintings reflect a vivid style and relate his passionate and highly personal reading of the Gospels and the 30-plus years he spent preaching throughout the South, from the 1920s to the 1950s. This exhibition marks the most comprehensive showing of Long’s work ever assembled.

A masterful menu

A visit to the museum is not complete without partaking of the stylish gourmet fare offered at the in-house restaurant, The Forks. From the bread basket filled with grand biscuits and corn muffins, to the salads and entrees with their own signature flair, to the must-have desserts, the meals are works of art in themselves.

The restaurant is named after a significant Civil War battle that took place on the museum grounds. The Battle of Forks Road on February 20, 1865, was the last stand for the Confederate Army defending Wilmington. The old breastworks at the site are being restored and add another interesting attraction for visitors to the museum.

A new education building that will house a children’s interactive discovery center, art studios, and student galleries is being built adjacent to the museum in the next few months. “The new building will have a welcoming, festive feel,” says Sceiford. “It will playfully counteract the formalism of the museum.” And what was an already impressive community and educational outreach program has been expanded as well.

“There was unbelievable camaraderie among our staff and wonderful volunteers (the museum has 500 or so, representing the equivalent of 12 full-time positions) during our move,” says Brown. “We’ve had a year now to settle in. But we haven’t wanted to settle for being just bigger and better. We’ve all tried to reach beyond our potential — we want to be better than any of us ever imagined.” So far, so good. 🗺️

Miriam Sauls lives in Raleigh.