

A GIFT OF CULTURE

The Isaac Delgado Museum of Art brings the arts of the world to New Orleans.

The concept for the Isaac Delgado Museum of Art was established in 1910 with a gift of \$150,000 to New Orleans' City Park Commission from philanthropist Isaac Delgado. Delgado, a Jamaican immigrant who amassed millions as a sugar broker in New Orleans, specified his gift was to be used for the purpose of creating a "temple of art for rich and poor alike."

Local lore claims Delgado established the museum to please his French mistress, who complained of the lack of culture in New Orleans. Less scintillating explanations suggest that Delgado wished for a museum to house the art collection amassed by his comely, late beloved aunt, Virginia McRae Delgado.

Fifty-nine architects submitted designs for the museum in a national competition. The winning Beaux-Arts design, selected in 1910, was the work of Chicago architect Samuel Marx of the firm Ledenbaum and Marx. The structure, which opened to the public in December 1911, is set at the end of a tree-lined avenue set amid grassy meadows, swan-filled lagoons and regal ancient oaks. Marx is said to have planned a building "inspired by the Greek but sufficiently modified to give a subtropical appearance." There are six Ionic columns across the imposing portico. The limestone walls are bare, save for terra cotta relief panels. Terra cotta sculptural decorations are set in panels below the entablature on either side of the portico.

New Orleans contractor Julius Koch is credited with original limestone and terra cotta construction.

A 1971 expansion, designed by Arthur Feitel in association with New Orleans firm August Perez and Associates, tripled the size of the original structure, allowing for the addition of an auditorium, education wing and a gallery for both permanent and visiting collections. At this time Trustees voted to change the name of the museum to the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA). The increased size of the facility allowed the museum, for the first time, to host major international exhibitions such as *The Treasures of Tutankamun* (1977-78) and *The Search for Alexander the Great* (1982).

In 1993, private donors joined with

the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana, and the museum inaugurated yet another expansion – this one to the tune of \$23 million. R. Allen Eskew Filson Architects in association with Billes/Manning architects, both of New Orleans, spearheaded the design that added 55,000 square feet of new space to the original Delgado building and renovated its previous spaces, bringing the total space to over 130, 000 square feet. The expansion allowed for the addition of a suite of galleries devoted to the decorative arts, including NOMA's internationally recognized expansive collection of glass, ceramics and silver. Non-western art of Asian, African, Oceanic and Pre-Columbian American origins can be seen in the third floor gallery wing, another attribute of the expansion.

The American Institute of Architects presented Eskew Filson Architects with an Honor Award for the project design.

New Orleans sculptor John T. Scott, 1992 winner of the prestigious MacArthur Foundation award, was commissioned to design the gates to the Booth-Bricker Courtyard accessing the renovated and expanded education wing. Scott installed the "Spirit Gates" in 1994. The gates become two complete sculptures, visually contained units on either end, when they are fully opened. When closed, the gates become a six-panel abstract sculptural wall. The gates were fabricated, not cast, of industrial strength aluminum at Scott's TechArt Studio. Some of the components are brushed; others are ground and polished.

Isaac Delgado's gift represents the city's oldest fine arts organization. NOMA now houses a permanent collection of more than 40,000 objects valued in excess of \$200 million. The collection is noted for its exceptional strengths in French, American, African, and Japanese art, as well as photography and glass. It is considered the premier art museum in the Gulf South and ranks in the top 25 percent of American museums.

Insight and an iconoclastic approach led to the 1953 beginning of the museum's collection of African art. NOMA now possesses a comprehensive collection representing Sub-Saharan Africa's five major art-producing regions. The collection is considered to be

one of the finest in America. One of the most noteworthy pieces is a rare palace veranda post made by one of the few known artists of Nigeria, Olowe of Ise, who is recognized as the great Yorba master carver of the early 20th century. The equestrian warrior figure is considered Olowe's masterpiece. NOMA is also the first American museum to acquire a rare terra cotta portrait head from the Nok culture, which dates from circa 500 B.C. to 200 A.D.

Due largely in part to donations by Dr. Kurt A. Gitter, NOMA's collection of more than 250 Edo Period (1600-1868) Japanese paintings is one of the best in the US. The collection encompasses all of the major schools of Edo painting with particular strengths in the Nanga, Zenga and Maruyama-Shijo Schools. The museum's unique Faberge collection, on loan from the Mathilda Geddings Gray Foundation, includes three Imperial Easter eggs and the renowned jeweled Imperial Lilies-of-the-Valley basket, crafted in 1896 for the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna.

New Orleans' long historic and cultural ties to France are reflected in NOMA's permanent collection, which includes a comprehensive survey of the French School from the 17th century to the present. The Impressionist Period is represented in paintings by Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Pierre Renoir and Armand Guillaumin. Post – Impressionism is represented in works by Paul Gauguin. The museum's collection of works by protégés of the School of Paris includes paintings and sculptures by Picasso, Braque, Dufy and Miro.

The five-acre Sydney & Walda Bestoff Sculpture Garden was unveiled adjacent to the museum in the Spring of 2004. The Bestoff Collection, valued at more than \$25 million, features American, European and Asian works. Offset amongst centuries old oaks, mature pines and lagoons within a camellia garden are such treasures as bronzes by Henry Moore, George Segal, Barbara Hapworth, Isamu Noguchi, Jacques Lipchitz and Ida Kohnmeyer. Highlights include a giant tortoise by Paul Manship and a 10-foot spider by Louise Bourgeois.

The garden is the design of New Orleans architect Lee Ledbetter.