

A Ray of Light

With an Irving Penn retrospective and a show of Impressionist portraits for its debut, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston is gearing up to unveil its new building

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is nearing the final phase of a 15-year expansion project as the construction of the Audrey Jones Beck Building nears completion. The building, whose 39 galleries will permanently house for the first time several collections, will more than double the museum's exhibition space, catapulting the MFAH from 30th to sixth largest in the nation. Marking the institution's centennial anniversary, the building is scheduled to open in March 2000.

"We wanted to build a building whose strengths would make up for the weaknesses of the other buildings. The two would give us the largest range of any museum in the world," says Peter C. Marzio, director of the MFAH. "We now have small, classical spaces and spaces as large as 25,000 square feet. With this new building, there's not a single work of art that we cannot put in its proper environment."



Designed by Spanish architect Jose Rafael Moneo, the recipient of the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1996, the \$83 million project is named in honor of Audrey Jones Beck, a life trustee of the MFAH whose donations of Impressionist and Post-



■ Above Rafael Moneo, architect of the Audrey Jones Beck Building. Right Top Natural light originating from rooftop lanterns provides even washes of natural light against the walls on the second level. Right Construction of the Audrey Jones Beck Building nears completion.



■ Above Model of the Audrey Jones Beck Building.

Impressionist art have been on view at the museum since 1974. Among the collection's paintings are works by Cezanne, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Seurat.

The new building and the service center will span two city blocks adjacent to the existing museum campus, composed of the Caroline Wiess Law Building of galleries, an administration building, the Glassell School of Art, and a sculpture garden. In creating the stately four-level addition (measuring 192,447 square feet with 84,400 square feet in gallery space), Moneo has managed to create a visual relationship with the existing museum structures by using Indiana limestone. "The design style of the two main buildings is very different," says Marzio. "What we've done to weave these different designs together is use Indiana limestone which has a brownish-grey color throughout the entire campus. The base of the van der Rohe building (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed Brown Pavillion) uses this material, the school and administration buildings also use Indiana limestone as well as the interior and exterior of the Beck building."

Moneo's hand is also visible in the classically proportioned galleries and ingeniously designed natural lighting system which characterizes the 28 galleries on the second level. Natural light originating from rooftop

lanterns provide even washes of natural light against the walls on the second level. The first-floor atrium and American sculpture court soar nearly 80 feet to their skylit roofs, while the first-floor American art galleries

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also enjoy the beauty of indirect natural light from strategically located side windows.

The entrance level features permanent galleries for prints, drawings, photography, and American art. Limestone walls reaching to a skylit roof distinctively mark the entrance to the American galleries via the

American sculpture court. The entrance level also features blockbuster exhibition galleries totaling 8,500 square feet. Details of the permanent collection's galleries include finely finished wood floors with stone borders and bronze portals between the galleries.

The galleries for the European collection are arranged in a chronological progression on the second level and range in size, offering intimate as well as grand spaces for the collection. The lower level gallery space is dedicated to small temporary exhibitions. A 4,900-square-foot restaurant overlooks a sunken garden accented by a waterfall. The mezzanine level will house curatorial offices, meeting rooms, and a print and photography study storage facility.

The Main Street tunnel that will connect the Beck Building to the existing museum building will feature a James Turrell-commissioned design. Turrell, like Moneo, has been recognized for his pioneering works—both tantalizing and radical—that incorporate light within a spatial framework. For this project, Turrell has proposed one of his "Shallow Space Constructions," in which the walls of the tunnel will become vessels for light. "In working with light, what is really important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought, to make the quality and sensation of light itself really quite tactile," Turrell says. "My works are about light in the sense that light is present; the work is made of light."

The MFAH opened in 1924, becoming the first art museum in Texas and only the third in the South. By 1955, the permanent collection had grown to nearly 4,000 objects, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe had been commissioned to design an expansion for the museum. Fifteen years later, the permanent collection had grown to 12,000 objects, and the second phase of Mies's project, Brown Pavilion, opened in 1974—transforming the museum into one of the city's landmarks of modern architecture. Today, the permanent collection boasts more than 40,000 works from six continents.