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United States | National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington

Rebecca Atkinson on a venue dedicated to championing women through the arts

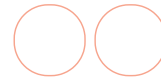
1 August 2024

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[Rebecca Atkinson](#)

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Pregnant Nana by Niki de Saint Phalle, 1995, stands in one of the galleries

Just 11% of all acquisitions at prominent American museums over the past decade were of work by women artists. This statistic is core to the mission of the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in Washington, DC – the first museum in the world solely dedicated to championing women through the arts.

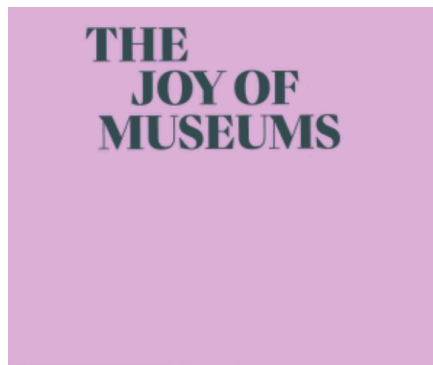
It reopened in October last year following a two-year renovation to protect the historic building and create more space for exhibitions and events, and improve physical accessibility.

The project, designed by Baltimore-based architectural firm Sandra Vicchio & Associates, has seen improvements made to the classical revival building's roof and facade, interior spaces and infrastructure. Gallery spaces have been increased by more than 15% and structural supports concealed above ceilings and within gallery walls give curators the freedom to present heavy sculptures.

This includes *Rubra*, a dramatic six-foot-tall hanging sculpture by Joana Vasconcelos on display in the entrance rotunda. Elsewhere, the collection includes paintings by self-taught American artist Clementine Hunter and Indigenous Australian artist Audrey Morton Kngwarreye; black-and-white portrait photographs by Mary Ellen Mark; and large-scale architectural photographs by Candida Höfer.

The collection highlights a wide range of works in a variety of mediums by artists including Rosa Bonheur, Louise Bourgeois, Lalla Essaydi, Lavinia Fontana, Frida Kahlo, Hung Liu, Zanele Muholi, Faith Ringgold, Niki de Saint Phalle and Amy Sutherland.

The museum's director Susan Fisher Sterling shares details of the project.



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Susan Fisher Sterling

Director, National Museum of Women in the Arts

What state was the museum in before the refurbishment?

Susan Fisher Sterling: There are times when buildings need more than ongoing maintenance. This was that time. Our building was built in 1908 and this is its first comprehensive renovation since it was converted into a museum in 1987.

The main galleries were originally designed as a series of sequential spaces, without clear vantage points between rooms or easy navigation. There was no dedicated studio, so our workshops and educational programmes had to adapt other spaces, rather than having purpose-built facilities.



A glimpse inside the beautifully restored classical revival building

How has the old building been modernised for contemporary audiences?

It was essential that the legacy of the building was respected. Everything was considered, from the subtle colour of the ceiling to the restoration of gold-leaf details. We also made upgrades that enable us to continue to safely and securely house the museum's collection and present diverse programming and ground-breaking exhibitions in a better way.



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This includes elements that visitors might not immediately notice, such as new lighting, and climate-control and security technology to improve illumination and conservation, and others that are dramatically evident, such as our redesigned gallery spaces that create sightlines for dialogue between works and enhance flow.

Improved accessibility means we now offer a welcoming space to all visitors. This includes everything from improved signage for better wayfinding to expanded elevator bays and amenities.

The renovation gives us more usable public space and greater flexibility in the galleries, education studio, library and a refurbished, state-of-the-art performance hall. When we reopened, nearly 40% of the works displayed had never been on view in the museum before.

How did you keep audiences engaged during the closure?

We offered a programme of events, virtual exhibitions and digital content. We also continued our advocacy for better representation of women artists through partnerships and programming, including off-site exhibitions, special events, a virtual advocacy campaign and providing key works on loan to other institutions.



Amy Sherald's 2009 oil painting titled *They Call Me Redbone But I'd Rather Be Strawberry Shortcake*

How does the museum appeal to different audiences?

Our offerings are wide-ranging to meet different audiences' needs. A new evening series, NMWA Nights, offers entertainment, tours and cocktails – and has been selling out within minutes each month.

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We also offer Open Studio times, when museum educators lead drop-in, hands-on crafts and art-making projects for visitors of all ages. Even our traditional lecture-type programmes feature subtle twists, such as a family-style dinner or moderators from outside of the art world.

The collection is also installed thematically rather than chronologically, which allows for a fuller picture of women's contributions to art history. Contemporary artworks hang next to historic artists; paintings next to sculptures; and textiles next to media-based pieces. No matter your interest, there is an entry point.



A work by Beatriz Milhaze

Are there any new commissions?

When the museum reopened, we commissioned nine book artists to create works inspired by NMWA's mission and reflect on spaces that foster women's creative expression.

These commissioned pieces are on view through October 2024 in a special exhibition called Holding Ground: Artists' Books for the National Museum of Women in the Arts. They will become part of the museum's renowned permanent collection of artists' books.

What does the future hold for the museum?

Our mission is more relevant than ever. The truth is that women have never been treated equally in the art world, and, while the discourse has progressed since the museum was founded, women remain dramatically underrepresented and undervalued in museums, galleries and auction houses.

This imbalance goes well beyond the art world and it is important to consider intersectional racial inequality. NMWA addresses the gender imbalance in art by bringing to light important women artists of the past, while promoting great women artists working today.

In addition to advocating for better representation of women artists, the museum serves as a vital centre for thought-leadership, community engagement and social change.

Project data

Cost	\$70m (£56m)
Architect	Sandra Vicchio & Associates
Exhibitions	New Worlds: Women to Watch 2024, until 11 August; In Focus: Artists at Work, 21 October 2024 to 20 March, 2025
Admission	Adult \$16 (£20); concessions \$13 (£16); under 21s free

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