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CHARLES  
DESMARAIS *Art*

# UC Davis museum designed to teach

## Manetti Shrem opens with focus on education

Northern California has seen more than its share of new, renovated and expanded visual arts buildings in the past year. But the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis, opening to the public Sunday, is the first certifiably new museum. A hybrid set on a leading agriculture campus, it means to be both an unpresuming university facility and a glowing symbol of modern liberal thought.

The Manetti Shrem replaces what was called the Richard L. Nelson Gallery, a knot of repurposed classrooms that had served for nearly 40 years as the closest thing Davis had to the art museums that grace virtually all major university campuses. Professionally run but hobbled by lack of resources, in recent years the Nelson had little impact beyond the local. And zero curb appeal.

But besides its function as a container into which art might

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# Education at heart of museum

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be placed, the Manetti Shrem has little in common with its predecessor, or with other institutions in Northern California. I have had brief discussions with Rachel Teagle, the museum's founding director, about her plans and dreams for the project. But even without ever meeting her, one would easily intuit the differences.

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The best museums — whether we are talking about buildings or what goes on inside them — express a clear philosophy. They function in service of a defined audience — one they seek to understand, even as they help it toward understanding of art and its place in history and the world.

The Manetti Shrem was built from scratch to serve a mission of education through interaction with works of art.

With a total of roughly 30,000 square feet, the \$30 million building is divided into three pavilions, all beneath a flowing canopy twice that size. There's a Gallery Pavilion of 10,100 square feet broken up into several rooms for art exhibition.

But the plan — and we will watch to see how it is executed, of course — is not merely to hang works and wait for an audience to reverentially pass through, absorbing their aura. Equally important are what is called a Collections Classroom, set among the galleries — the museum maintains a small collection, largely related to UC Davis artists and their gifts — and an Arts Education Pavilion with a large assembly room and a teaching studio.

The Collections Classroom seats 30 at a large table, where students can see and work with real art objects up close — mostly prints, like the works by James McNeill Whistler

currently reserved for a class. The assembly space, properly called Community Education, is a flexible lecture hall and meeting room. The studio is meant to be available to students — matriculated or not, art majors or otherwise — around the clock.

The signal is clear: This is a museum meant for teaching. All these spaces are available for the purpose, and some will even host semester-long scheduled classes.

An Operations Pavilion, including staff and volunteer space, completes the array, with a grand lobby tying the three pavilions together. Outdoor spaces, suited to the Central Valley climate, will encourage hanging out — hopefully leading to discussions of art — and even art-making, on a pad outside the studio.

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The college or university museum has a long and re-



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

**An untitled horse sculpture by Deborah Butterfield stands in the lobby of the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis.**

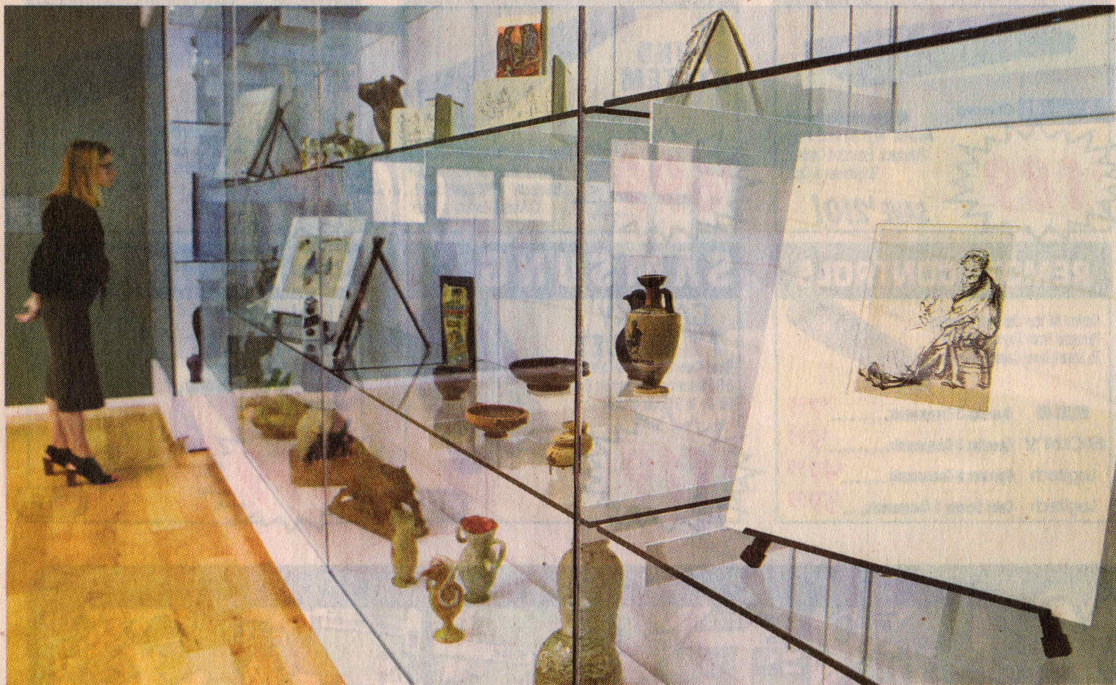
vered history. There are some 700 such facilities on campuses across the U.S., with 90 in California alone. The Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, England, founded in 1677, claims the distinction of being the first, but teaching collections preceded even that.

Originally assembled as teaching tools, such collections and the buildings that housed

them came to be thought of as essential to a liberal education, as well as markers of prestige. In 1864, Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., became the first in the U.S. to include an art museum in its original plan.

But the function of such museums has shifted over time. Museums were once designed for prominent, cen-





Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

**Associate curator Francesca Wilmott reviews artwork displayed in the Collections Classroom, a studio available to students around the clock at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis.**

tral sites on campus, symbolizing a place of honor for the fine arts in the curriculum. As universities slowly dismantle their ivory towers, seeking to

engage the larger communities of which they are a part, art museums have the potential to become hubs of town-and-gown interaction.

For all kinds of good reasons — some altruistic, some political — the university museum often provides as much or more service to the off-campus

**Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art opening events Sunday:** “Under the Canopy: A Birthday Celebration,” featuring artists Wayne Thiebaud and Roland Petersen. 10 a.m. Ribbon cutting and grand opening. Noon. Free. UC Davis, 254 Old Davis Road, Davis. (530) 752-8500. <http://manettishremmuseum.ucdavis.edu>

**For a review** of the opening exhibition, see Monday’s Chronicle.

community as to students and faculty. Accordingly, they have moved to the edges of their campuses, if not off the grounds entirely.

UC Davis and the Manetti Shrem Museum are attempting to have it both ways, which may be tough to pull off but worth trying. On the one hand, shrewdly located across the street from the university’s Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts, the handsome new structure embraces the new symbolism. Like the UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, which opened its own new building in Janu-

ary at the entrance to the Berkeley campus, the museum is strategically placed at a primary entrance to the university.

In that role, the museum announces publicly that the university is a place that accepts all the complexity, nuance and irony that are at the heart of a liberal education. A place that embraces art as a statement of core principles.

At the same time, Manetti Shrem seeks to play the role of classroom — looking inward, toward the school, and back to the days that put education at the heart of the museum experience. To a place that values uncertainty, and where questions are as valuable as answers.

There’s an inherent conflict here that will have to be worked out. Whether and how that is resolved will be the measure of the museum’s success.

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