

A black and white photograph of a man in a tuxedo looking up at a complex, geometric wooden ceiling structure. The ceiling is composed of numerous wooden beams forming a series of triangles and polygons, creating a star-like pattern. The man is positioned in the lower center of the frame, looking upwards with a contemplative expression. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the wood and the man's features.

Renovation of a Masterpiece

Yale's Louis I. Kahn Building

by Philip Eliasoph





THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
Yale University Art Gallery, Louis Kahn building;
view of west and north window-wall, 2006.
© 2006 Yale University Art Gallery.
Photography by Elizabeth Felicella.

John Trumbull (1756–1843),
General George Washington at Trenton, 1792.
Yale University Art Gallery;
gift of the Society of the Cincinnati in Connecticut.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Lionel Freedman, *Louis Kahn Looking at His
Tetrahedral Ceiling in Yale University Art Gallery*,
1953. Gelatin silver print. Yale University Art Gallery
Archives Transfer.

With the recent reopening of Yale University Art Gallery's Kahn building, this pioneering structure is set to rekindle both admiration and discussion. Having undergone a \$44 million renovation, the well-worn relic of mid-century modernism is set to achieve a fresh relevancy for the twentieth-first century.

When it was built in 1953, it was considered a radical departure from the tradition of American museum architecture. Designed while Louis I. Kahn (1901–1974) was a visiting critic at the Yale School of Architecture, the building—the first of three art museums he designed—was made of brick, concrete, glass, and steel, with a windowless wall along its most public facade. A complete break from Yale's characteristic neo-Gothic buildings, Kahn's design is equally celebrated for its structural and engineering innovations, among them, its electrical and ventilating systems in the ceiling's hollow concrete tetrahedrons that appear to float overhead. Vincent Scully, Sterling Professor Emeritus of the History of Art at Yale University, describes Kahn's structure as a "simple loft space organized around stairway, elevator, and utility centers."

The stark open nature of Kahn's cubic interiors, from concrete slab floors to his tetrahedron cellular ceiling, dramatically increased the difficulty of restoration, which was undertaken by Polshek Partnership Architects of New York City; the team was led by Duncan Hazard with James Polshek and Richard Olcott. To provide context for contractors and local workers, they were invited to a screening of *My Architect* (2003); director Nathaniel Kahn's search to understand his famous architect father. "It...really enhanced their sense of...reverence for the building," reported Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director of Yale University Art Gallery. The renovation restores the building's five floors, allowing for more versatile exhibitions and a dramatic public lobby that will provide a welcoming space for students and visitors. Kahn's innovative "pogo walls" panels are also being re-introduced for the display of artworks.

During the renovation the building's skeletal bones of steel and glass underwent a corrective realignment, while window panels, once fogged



by thermal and moisture problems, now have aluminum frames capable of responding to temperature changes. Most noticeably trans-



formed is the restored window wall on the west side of the building. This facade had been substantially altered in the 1970s, when a courtyard on the basement level was roofed over to create additional interior space, reducing the window wall from five to four stories.

“Our aim is to make the museum more welcoming and friendly,” Reynolds told invited guests at a hardhat walk-through, pointing out where couches and chairs on the first floor would contribute to the inviting atmosphere. “Using art in the curriculum and integrating this great collection into a Yale education ensures that this is a teaching collection,” he added. Pamela Franks, the gallery’s new curator of academic initiatives, has been given the task of transforming the exhibition spaces into working laboratories for learning about the gallery’s encyclopedic collections that range from African tribal carvings to Paul Revere’s silver tankards.

A feature of the restoration is the new fourth

floor study center with its digital database of all 185,000 objects in the collection. In recent times this upper floor was a dark labyrinth of Asian art and rare print exhibits. The new space is a bright and appealing art education center that will offer undergraduates, faculty, and visiting scholars the opportunity to examine original prints, drawings, and artifacts from the collection. Reynolds affirms his mantra: “the idea that art is essential is a precept that is deeply embedded in our past, current, and future.”

Yale’s collections have played an unprecedented role in shaping the history of museology in America. Founded in 1832, the Yale University Art Gallery was the first university art museum in the country. After patriot and artist John Trumbull (1756–1843) gave over 100 paintings to Yale College, including a 1792 military portrait of General George Washington (see page 317), a cornerstone of the collection, Trumbull Gallery was built, using Trumbull’s design, to

THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:

Yale University Art Gallery, Louis Kahn building; second floor; interior view of African art installation, 2006. © 2006 Yale University Art Gallery. Photography by Elizabeth Felicella.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:

John Smibert (1688–1751), *The Bermuda Group* (Dean Berkeley and His Entourage), 1739. Oil on canvas, 69½ x 93 in.

Yale University Art Gallery; gift of Isaac Lothrop.

Yale University Art Gallery, Louis Kahn building, third floor interior, 2006. Center: Anthony Caro, *Table Piece CII*, 1970. Painted stainless steel. Yale University Art Gallery, The Katharine Ordway Fund. Right: Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1967. Oil and wax crayon on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Richard Barnes.

house the paintings. Today a mini-history of revivalist and modern architecture is collapsed within one remarkable campus block. Incongruously attached to Kahn's monument, is Egerton Swartwout's neo-Gothic gallery (1928) inspired by stone vaulted communal structures in Trecento, Tuscany. Nearby we find Paul Rudolph's 'Brutalist' bulwark, School of Art and Architecture Building (1963) on one end, and Kahn's final work, The Yale Center for British Art (1974) anchoring the opposite side of Chapel Street.

The restoration of the Louis Kahn building is part of the University's Master Plan for the Yale Arts Area, a ten-year, \$600 million unification strategy intended to benefit not only the university community, but also the people of New Haven. Already completed aspects of the plan include the renovation of the former Jewish Community Center and the construction of a new building to house the Yale School of Art. The renovation of the Swartwout building and the 1866 Street Hall, a Victorian building across High Street, will enlarge exhibition spaces, collection study rooms, and classroom facilities. The History of Art Department, currently housed in Street Hall will be relocated to a new facility designed by architect Charles Gwathmey. "Walking through these buildings—Kahn, Swartwout, Street—is a continuous lesson in history, periods, eras," says Helen Cooper, the Holcombe T. Green Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture. "We are looking forward with great anticipation to a new home for American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts which will house the finest examples of American culture and civilization." Cooper envisions these future American galleries allowing for innovative possibilities and surprising re-connections of the familiar and new. This spirit of flexibility and experimentation bodes well for future curatorial collaborations. Jock Reynolds concurs, "The gallery's incredible collections are like a stable of thoroughbred horses—we just need to rotate and rest them to maximize their power."

A major touring exhibition of some of Yale's most coveted treasures is scheduled



for the renovation phase of 2008–9. *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness: American Art 1660–1893 from the Yale University Art Gallery* will send more than 200 works rarely seen outside of New Haven to museums in Birmingham, Louisville, and Seattle.

The gallery reopens with a reinstallation of its permanent collection now incorporating recent acquisitions such as the Charles B. Benenson collection of African art, a rare fourteenth-century Japanese hanging scroll, along with paintings by Pontormo, Claude

Monet, and Anselm Kiefer. Three special exhibitions will also mark the reopening of the gallery: *Jasper Johns: From Plate to Print*; *Making a Mark: Four Contemporary Artists in Print*; and *Responding to Kahn: A Sculptural Conversation*. For more information visit: <http://artgallery.yale.edu>. @

Philip Eliasoph is a professor of art history at Fairfield University, CT., and an independent fine arts consultant. He was a Visiting Educator at Yale University Art Gallery in fall 1991.