

Delta Sources and Resources

Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts

501 E. Ninth Street

Little Rock Arkansas

by Sierra Tribbett-Collins

The Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts, located in Little Rock and better known colloquially as AMFA, serves as a testament to passion for the arts in the American South. The museum prides itself on its reputable permanent collection, which spans eight centuries of two-dimensional and three-dimensional art, and features both local artists and artists from across the globe. The gallery represents a significant arc of Western history, from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century. The temporary exhibitions are often equally impressive, exploring themes within certain art movements or in-depth looks at a featured artist's career. AMFA offers free admission to encourage residents to take advantage of its many amenities, including gallery tours, dining and shopping, art classes, and events such as concerts, lectures, and dance and film productions. They also offer annual memberships with core benefits such as store and restaurant discounts, early access to temporary exhibitions, and invitations to member-exclusive events.

Although the grand opening of the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts took place in the spring of 2023, the history and impact of the museum has existed long before then. The seed for the museum was first planted in 1914, when a group of intrepid women formed the Fine Arts Club with the incentive to bring the arts to Arkansas. Over twenty years later, in 1937, supporters and members of the club contributed to the creation of the Museum of Fine Arts in Little Rock's Mac-



The exterior of the museum's entrance.
Photograph by the author.

Arthur Park, the first museum dedicated to fine arts in the state of Arkansas. As the museum's art collection continued to grow, a statewide campaign was launched in 1959, led by future governor and first lady Winthrop and Jeannette Rockefeller. The campaign's goal was to enlarge the museum significantly, serving all of Arkansas and encouraging residents to get involved. A new building for the Arkansas Arts Center, in addition to the original building, was successfully opened in 1963, featuring temporary art exhibitions, sculpture courtyards, an art reference library, a community theater, and a school of fine and performing arts.

Over the next fifty years, the institution continued to grow in both scale and scope, undergo-

ing seven further expansions to accommodate its collection. In 2016, Little Rock residents voted overwhelmingly in favor to renovate the original MacArthur Park building; the \$70 million renovation would include new entrances and expanded facilities, as well as a reimagined modern architectural design. The project broke ground in 2019, and two years later rebranded the museum as the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts. On April 22, 2023, the Grand Opening took place with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and other special events, and doors were officially opened for guests in May of the same year.

Today, the museum thrives in its image of learning, inspiration, and creative expression.

Approaching the front entrance, visitors will notice the beautiful landscaping of the 11-acre campus, with both preserved original oak trees as well as the 250 native trees that were planted during the renovation. The outdoor architecture, which



Outdoor architecture and native plants.

Photograph by the author.

was designed to “make it feel like a museum in a park,” takes inspiration from the bluffs of Emerald Park in North Little Rock, the Ouachita Mountains, and the landscape of the Delta. The exterior of the museum is just as visually appealing, featuring a pleated roof and glass-enclosed spaces at each entrance. The north entrance retains the original art deco facade that was first introduced in the 1937 building. The exterior is sleek and linear, preserving the historic elements of the original building with the elegant additions of the renovated architecture.

Inside the building itself, the museum is bright and airy, with an open floor plan and two stories of

accessible galleries and classrooms. A particularly unique amenity in the structure is the Cultural Living Room, a large community space with lounge furniture, art books, and a coffee bar. The living room features floor-to-ceiling windows, with a view of the courtyard and the MacArthur Park neighborhood, and encourages visitors to take their time and enjoy the space comfortably. The museum also offers a reputable gift store with works from AMFA-selected artists, a 350-seat Performing Arts Theater, and the full-service Park Grill, a contemporary American fare restaurant that overlooks the grounds.

The galleries themselves feature both temporary and permanent collections. Visitors can currently peruse several temporary exhibitions this summer. Downstairs, in the Robyn and John Horn Gallery, visitors will first encounter the 65th annual Young Arkansas Artists exhibition. This collection features 52 artworks created by students from kindergarten through twelfth grade from communities across Arkansas and represents both the caliber of Arkansas's teachers and the power of art in the hands of young artists. Notable works include colorful oil paintings, acrylic self-portraits, clay model and ceramic structures, and charcoal still lifes. The range in the artists' ages and abilities serves as an



Inside the Cultural Living Room.
Photograph by the author.

inspirational reminder of the future of artistic expression.

Upstairs, in the Harriet and Warren Stephens Family Gallery, another temporary exhibition

explores the concept of time. *A Month of Sundays: Art and the Persistence of Time* borrows the Southern turn of phrase “a month of Sundays” to demonstrate the way we experience time in our lives and in the environment, and features over fifty modern and contemporary works through painting, drawing, sculpture, and video. Ron Kleeman’s 1979 screenprint *Gas Line*, from the portfolio *City-Scapes*, tells the story of long waits in line for a Hess Gas Station during the worldwide energy crisis at the time of the Iranian Revolution. Bruce Comer’s surreal and dreamy oil painting *About a-Quarter-to-Six* depicts a rural isolated train station with a clock marking 5:45. Malvin Gray Johnson’s *The Letter*, an oil painting of a woman in the slow act of composing a handwritten letter, blends Western and African artistic influences and captures an everyday moment of Black Americans in the Harlem Renaissance. The collection is diverse and visually captivating, although previous exhibitions have notably been more cohesive in their exploration of a theme or idea.

In the Berta and John Baird Gallery, a smaller and more focused temporary exhibition depicts the life of artist Will Barnet through *Will Barnet: Seasons of Life*. Barnet was at the center of major American movements, and swung profoundly between realism and abstraction during his career. His earlier works documented social realities of the Great Depression, while his later work developed into abstraction in the postwar New York art scene. Barnet then returned to realism in the 1960s, when he created the famous screenprint series *The Silent Seasons*: lithograph paintings in his distinctively flat style that feature a solitary woman and a bird next to a window amidst the changing seasons of spring, summer, fall, and winter. The collection is a celebration of the artist’s eighty-year career, and the tender, quiet depictions of family life for which Barnet was most known.

A controversial and perhaps more questionable exhibition in the Fine Arts Club New Media Gallery is British artist Mat Collishaw’s film *Aftermaths*. The seven-minute film portrays uncanny and grotesque sea creatures that mutate and swim through a dystopian world. Collishaw created these mutations through artificial intelligence, attempting to depict the paradox of the promise of new technology and its potential to destabilize and destroy our ecosystem. But the artist’s statement is unclear as to whether it condemns or celebrates the usage of AI, seemingly arguing that the decay the film represents is not a warning but rather an essential in adapting to a new world. The film is haunting, perhaps not inside the Cultural Living Room. Photograph by the author.

WILL BARNET

seasons of life



Will Barnett: Seasons of Life exhibit entrance.
Photograph by the author.

for the reasons Collishaw intended, and has opened many conversations amongst museum visitors. The temporary exhibitions both succeed and sometimes miss the mark in their exploration of a changing culture and conversation around contemporary art. Some collections will stand out more than others, but visitors are always encouraged to form their own opinions, to learn something new, and to recognize the talent and hard work of the museum curators. The permanent collection will continue to offer stunning historic and contemporary works featuring famous artists such as Rembrandt, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Georgia O'Keeffe, Diego Rivera, Andrew Wyeth, and more. Arkansas artists Carroll Cloar, John Miller Howard, and William Davis, as well as other notable artists from across the American South, are also a part of the permanent collection. The permanent collection is a true success story within the history and evolution of the museum. The Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts is the only museum in the state that collects works from both

national and international artists, and the dedication to the collections and to the Arkansas community does not go unnoticed.

AMFA is located in historic downtown Little Rock at 501 E. Ninth St. It is open from 10 to 5 on Tuesday, 10 to 8 on Wednesday through Friday, 10 to 5 on Saturday, and 12 to 5 on Sunday. The upcoming exhibitions, which will feature German expressionism in art and film as well as Soviet cinema following the 1917 Russian Revolution, will be open to the public this fall.

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