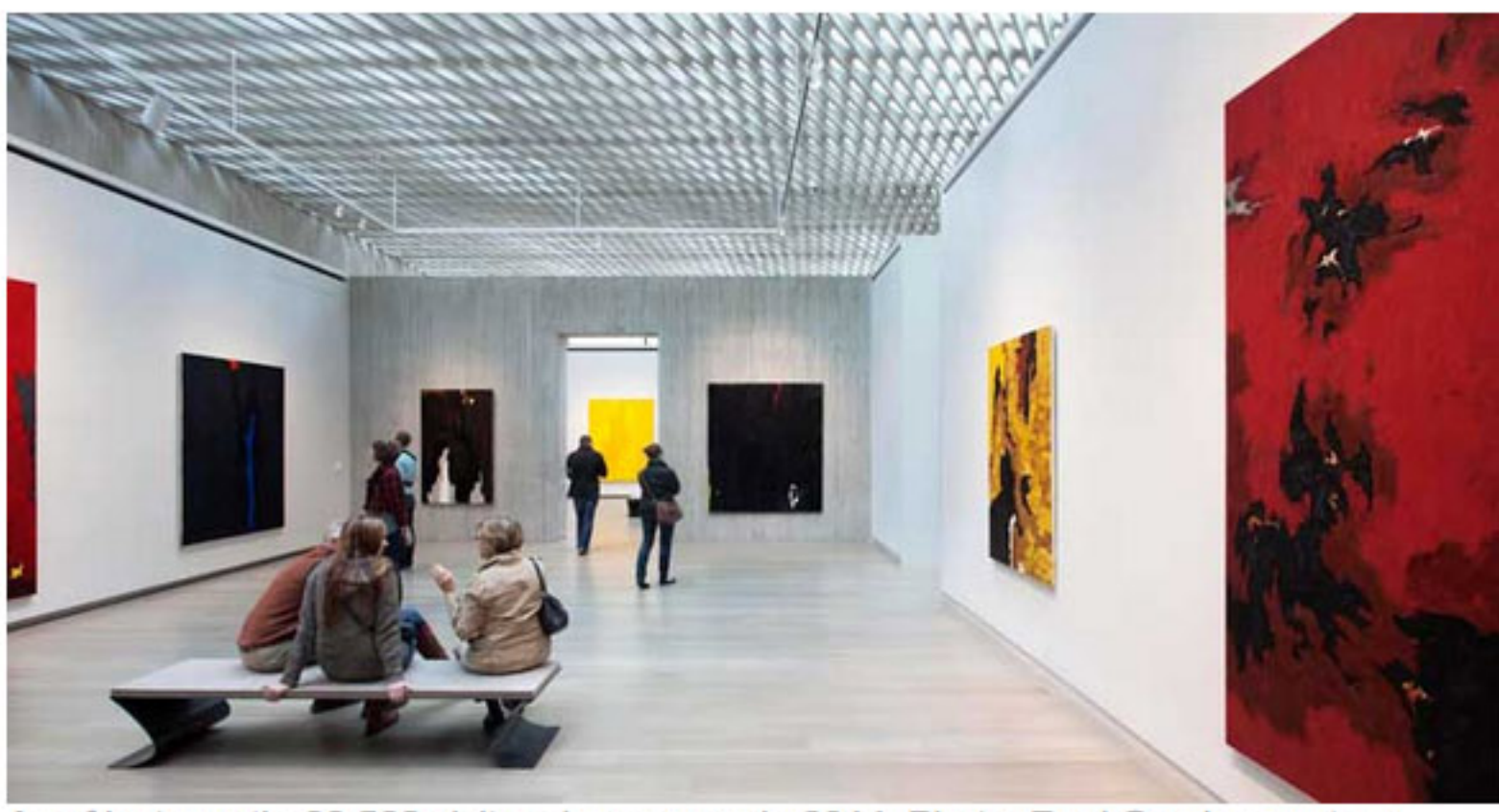


Openings **Exhibitions** **Museums** **USA**

Single artist museum finds surprise success in varied programming

Denver's Clyfford Still Museum has kept visitors coming back with ten special exhibitions in the three years since it opened

By Judith H. Dobrzynski. Web only
Published online: 07 October 2014



As of last month, 38,562 visitors have come in 2014. Photo: Raul Garcia, courtesy Clyfford Still Museum

With the opening of “The War Begins: Clyfford Still’s Paths to Abstraction” on 10 October, the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver unveils its tenth special exhibition in less than three years of operation. That pace has gotten the museum off to a surprisingly successful start, quieting some who doubted that Still, a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism but never a household name, could carry a single-artist museum, let alone one constrained by a will dictating that no work by any other artist could be ever be shown there.

Still, who died in 1980, shunned the art world for most of his career. He left some 825 paintings and 2,350 works on paper—most of them never shown—to any city that would build a museum dedicated to him alone (it could not even have a café or auditorium). Denver, which had no previous connection to the artist, agreed and in November 2011, the 28,500 sq. ft museum designed by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture opened.

As of last month, the museum has received 38,562 visitors in 2014—already close to the 40,000 the museum originally projected for an entire year and likely to surpass last year’s total of 42,685. In 2012, its first full year, the museum attracted 61,204 visitors.

“Denver has really embraced it,” says Christoph Heinrich, the director of the Denver Art Museum, which is next door. “People bring their visiting friends there.” Dean Sobel, the Still museum’s director, says that some 80% are first-time visitors; they come from “most of the 50 states and 20 foreign countries”. While many Denverites have yet to visit on their own—suffering, Sobel says, from the “Statue of Liberty phenomenon” named for New Yorkers who never go visit Lady Liberty because she’ll always be there—repeat trips by those who have been to the museum have been “strong from the get-go”.

The changing exhibitions have been one obvious key to success. In addition to two “inaugural” exhibitions that surveyed Still’s artistic career from 1925 through the late 1970s, the museum has also presented “Vincent/Clyfford”, featuring paintings and works on paper created during Still’s early years, when his subjects and palette echoed van Gogh’s (timed to coincide with the Denver Art Museum’s “Becoming van Gogh”); “Memory, Myth & Magic”, which exhibited Still’s works that allude to ancient cultures, artistic traditions and his memories; “The Art of Conservation: Understanding Clyfford Still”, which explained Still’s materials and working methods plus the ways conservators are striving to preserve his works; and “1959: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery Exhibition Recreated”, which mimicked one of the few museum exhibitions of his work in his lifetime.

“1959” occurred simultaneously with the DAM’s “Modern Masters: 20th-century Icons from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery”, which proved highly popular. Sobel curated both exhibitions, and the two museums collaborated on joint ticketing, programming and marketing. “1959” brought visitor numbers that matched those of the Still museum’s opening months.

However, Sobel says the changing exhibition pace “will slow down a bit”. Even though the collection is deep (about half the paintings, which were mostly shipped to Denver from art storage in Maryland, have not even been unrolled), Sobel said he wants to publish more works and explore new themes of scholarship, like the coming war years show, which highlights what the museum calls “the previously unknown dialogue between Still’s work in war industries and his early breakthrough into abstraction”. Sobel also plans to rotate parts of the permanent collection.

But there are special shows on the schedule: next year, one will focus deeply on two paintings and another will survey Still’s drawings, taking over the whole museum. “We’ll vary the pacing more,” Sobel says, “with a small show and then every two years something really big”.

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