

The Davis, reframed

Thursday Posted Sep 29, 2016 at 5:58 PM

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By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

WELLESLEY - Following a spate of museum renovations in the Boston area - in the past few decades the Museum of Fine Arts, the Peabody Essex, the Gardner, the Harvard Art Museums, the Worcester Art Museum and Boston College's McMullen have all been reconfigured - Wellesley College's Davis Museum was not to be left behind.

The intimate building, situated on campus, is showing off its new look this week. "the Davis. ReDiscovered" unveils a complete renovation of the museum's five floors, improving sight lines, updating climate controls to protect the artwork, and, most importantly, more than doubling the amount of objects on view.

With a collection holding more than 13,000 works of art, that's crucial. "Until now we only had space to show about 300 of them," said senior curator Claire Whitner, sitting down to talk in the midst of the tumultuous final stages of re-installation. "Now we should be able to show more than 600, not including our loan exhibitions.

"We had to evaluate the entire collection," she said, describing the process. "We printed out a list of every single object in the collection, and sat in a conference room to look at every one. We broke the collection down into smaller groups, and when we didn't have the expertise in-house we invited in experts to help us out."

It marked a huge change from the previous installations of the permanent collection. "Previously, we had organized the galleries thematically," Whitner said. "But thematic installations were not really telling the story of the museum.

“We are a museum that was built by women, and their families, to leave something behind for everyone to enjoy,” she said. “The African collection is a perfect example. It began in the 1950s, but only a handful of objects were ever on view. Now we have three full galleries.

“It wasn’t easy. While it was enjoyable to try to wrap our heads around what this collection was, and where it came from, there were many times when it just seemed overwhelming.”

Like many museums situated on college campuses, teaching about art is a primary goal at the Davis. “We do have an educational mission first and foremost,” Whitner said, “but it’s not just about the art itself. We want to show how this collection came to be. So much of the work came from alumnae and their families. Those were stories that needed to be told.”

The Davis now pivots around its central walkway, open five floors upward to the ceiling. “We never even had artwork in the stairwells,” she said. “It was kind of a dead spot, and the lighting was tricky. Now we have portraits of women in the stairwell on each floor, in different styles. From any place you look you can see them - kind of a way to project the female gaze.”

On any floor, you can look upward and downward at the collection, but also across to the opposite side of the galleries. This offers multiple ways to present complementary objects. Standing on the third floor, you can look over to a modern stained-glass window on the same level, but also see clearly down to a similar medieval work on the first level as well.

The famous “Floor from a Villa of Daphne,” a 5th century mosaic that was hanging on a wall, is now reset on the first level, situated on the floor as it should be. Visible from every level, it creates a central focus for visitors.

“In addition to lateral sight lines, we have vertical sight lines,” Whitner said. “You can also stand in the parapets and view several floors. This way we can take advantage of the unusual architecture of the building.”

“the Davis. ReDiscovered”

WHEN: reopens Sept. 28

WHERE: Wellesley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley

ADMISSION: Free

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