

Boston College's new art museum in Brighton opens Monday

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By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

BRIGHTON - Born with the modest goal of capitalizing on faculty scholarship, Boston College's McMullen Museum of Art has presented exhibitions organized and driven by research for more than two decades. Now, in a dramatic shift, it joins forces with multiple Boston-area institutions to present one of the largest multi-venue exhibitions in recent years.

And it does so in a new home.

"Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections," takes over three museum spaces - the McMullen, the Gardner Museum and Harvard's Houghton Library - this month. For Boston College, it not only marks a significant collaboration, but the launching of a new complex at 2101 Commonwealth Ave. on its Brighton campus, a brilliant upgrade to the McMullen's previous home at Devlin Hall.

"This is an unusual thing for the whole city of Boston," says Nancy Netzer, McMullen's director and professor of art history at BC. "Since we opened in 1993 we've done loan exhibitions, driven by the interest of the faculty. The museum was really just a gallery before that, run by the fine arts department.

"This is not an effort to change that mission at all," she says, "but we outgrew the space. This exhibition, and the opening of the new museum, sort of came together. We've known about it for at least two years, and we were hoping it was going to work."

The new building - which includes a thorough renovation to the existing space, and a new glass-and-limestone addition - along with the new exhibition, which is really just one-third of the expansive showing of illuminated medieval and renaissance manuscripts throughout the city, come together in spectacular fashion.

Sitting on a bluff with views to the east of downtown Boston, the new McMullen - free to the public, and open seven days a week - also boasts stylish meeting and classroom facilities.

The original structure, a Roman Renaissance design, built in 1927 by Maginnis and Walsh as a residence for the Boston Catholic archbishop, has been outfitted with climate control and security measures that bring it up to current museum standards. A restored stained glass triptych by John La Farge (1835-1910) greets visitors at the new public entrance, which was designed by DiMella Shaffer.

“Upstairs, there are two floors of galleries, with moveable walls,” Netzer says. “We can do anything we want up there. And now we could do more than one exhibition at a time.”

Boston College has collected art since the 1800s, “but there’s no cohesive narrative,” Netzer says. “It’s a small permanent collection, a lot of landscapes, Renaissance and Baroque painting given to BC as a Catholic institution. And some La Farges - we are very interested in La Farge. We have some of his papers, and some papers related to his son, and we are hoping to make a center for his works some day.”

For now, the new building will show itself off, and “Beyond Words” will occupy the galleries through Dec. 11. A small but colorful selection of paintings from faculty member Andrew Tavarelli fills the new atrium staircase as well.

“In the future we’re also interested in collecting photography,” Netzer says. “But our mission is really quite different than other museums. We want to take advantage of our talented faculty, and put them in the service of interpreting the material culture of our world.”

McMullen Museum of Art, 2101 Commonwealth Ave., is open free to the public seven days a week. Visit www.bc.edu/artmuseum or call 617-552-8587.

Keith Powers is a freelance writer. Follow us on Twitter @WickedLocalArts or like our Wicked Local Arts Facebook page.

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