Gallery Spotlight: Loyola University Museum of Art

Part of the Random Gallery Spotlight Series, in which galleries are selected in a lottery that includes 300 art venues.

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Walking into the Martin d’Arcy collection of LUMA feels like discovering a vault of actual buried treasure in Disneyworld. Not to mention that many of the pieces are literally made of gold, the museum itself is nestled ironically amid the consumerist Mecca of North Michigan avenue. Director Pamela E. Ambrose says that for many people, the museum offers a kind of “respite” from the pseudo-spiritual atmosphere of the surrounding shops. “During the holiday season, around 70,000 people walk through this park,” she says, “it’s definitely a sort of respite; you can come into this museum for an hour and feel refreshed...you can’t get out of the Art Institute of Chicago in less than two or three hours.”

This was the intention of Father Rowe when he first established the museum in 1969 as “a place for Loyola students to find some refreshment from their studies in a quiet place full of beautiful things,” says Ambrose. In 2005, the University decided that their rare, extensive collection of medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art should be seen by the outside community, and so they moved it from Loyola’s Lakeshore Campus to its current location at 820 North Michigan Avenue.

Along with the move came a new mission for the museum that extends far beyond the collection itself and even Christianity. Ambrose describes the museum’s vision as “an exploration of the spiritual in art of all faiths, cultures, time periods, and the diversity of Chicago and Loyola. We seek out art with spiritual content and intent, in order to illustrate the commonalities that faiths share as opposed to their differences,” she says. “It’s about what happens when a human being goes outside of the mundane experience to do something that improves the human condition.”

In fulfillment of these lofty aspirations, LUMA has hosted a broad range of exhibits ranging from Andy Warhol’s ‘Silver Clouds’ installation to “Back to the Future,” which featured three early modernist artists dealing with the origins of modernism as well as spiritual concerns. In September 2010, LUMA unveiled an exhibit focused on Pilgrimage and Faith in Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. “These exhibits don’t hit viewers over the head with religion,” says Ambrose, “you could say that all art is spiritual... we just try to get people to look at art in a new way.” LUMA hosts three to four such exhibitions per year in its temporary exhibition galleries.

Additionally, the Harlan J. Berk, Ltd. Works on Paper Gallery offers its own line-up of exhibitions that focus mostly on Illinois Artists. The Museum also houses Push Pin Gallery, which shows art made by children of Chicago, honoring them with an opening reception for each show and professionally hanging their work in the museum.

Whether your motivations are spiritual, visual, or treasure-oriented, Loyola University Museum of Art is a pilgrimage worth making.

LUMA is located at 820 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago. Visit http://www.luc.edu/luma/.