

## Report of the President and Director

**I** OFTEN USE THE word “intersection” to describe the Art Institute of Chicago. Not only are we located at the intersection of Michigan Avenue and Adams Street, but our site is also bounded by four popular intersections connecting it with Grant and Millennium parks. And our various buildings—Allerton, Morton, Gunsaulus, McKinlock, Rice, and the soon-to-be Modern Wing—meet at intersections, or gathering points of transition between one set of galleries and another, as between Asian and American art. In this physical sense, the Art Institute is a “village within a city,” or in keeping with the character of Chicago, a gathering of neighborhoods, each with its own distinctive cultural features and identity, meeting up against one another in a typically urban way.

But it's not just the physical characteristics of the museum and its setting that prompts me to use the word to describe the museum. It is also appropriate to our connections with the city's other cultural institutions. We are across the street from the Chicago Symphony, just down the street from the Cultural Center, across the park from the Harris Theater, and a stone's throw from the Lyric Opera, the theater district, and the home of the Poetry Foundation. And we have developed collaborative programming with each of them.

We have grouped these programs into “seasons.” Two years ago we collaborated with the Symphony and the Cultural Center and worked with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project to present a series of exhibitions, lectures, and concerts that explored the interrelatedness of cultures along the ancient and contemporary trade routes of Central Asia. This past year we worked with the Symphony and the Poetry Foundation to offer a season that explored the diversity of the American cultural experience: “American Perspectives.” In our case, this meant highlighting exhibitions on the art of Jasper Johns, Edward Hopper, Winslow Homer, Ed Ruscha, James Bishop, and Richard Misrach; presenting lectures by such prominent American literary figures as Helen Vendler, Marjorie Perloff, Arnold Rampersad, and Philip Fisher; conversations with playwright Edward Albee, saxophonist Branford Marsalis, pianist

Margaret Leng Tan, and composers Philip Glass and John Adams; and poetry readings by Edward Hirsch, Peter Sacks, Robert Pinsky, and Frank Bidart. Together, these and other programs emphasized the richness and diversity of artistic responses to life in the U.S.

In this respect, the Art Institute is a place where one experiences the intersection of the arts and the social, intellectual, and political issues and ideas that bear upon their making. Perhaps, in this respect, the single most poignant program of the season was a symposium exploring the historical references and making of Lyric Opera's production of "Doctor Atomic," John Adams's 2005 opera about nuclear scientist Robert Oppenheimer and the development of the atomic bomb. Organized in conjunction with the Lyric and the Chicago Humanities Festival, the symposium included the composer, the librettist and director Peter Sellers, scientists from the University of Chicago, a scientist who worked on the Manhattan Project, one of the coauthors of *American Prometheus*—the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Oppenheimer—and myself. The depth and liveliness of the presentations and conversation, and the size and engagement of the audience, represented our view of the Art Institute as an "intersection," where our visitors can come, meet each other, and explore the world of art under our roof and the place of that art in the larger context of history, the other arts, and ideas.

We are able to offer the world of art "under one roof" because we are an encyclopedic museum. And, as every year, we added significantly to these collections. The acquisitions are listed in full elsewhere in this report, and a few dozen of them are reproduced herein. I want to draw your attention to just five.

The *Jingoji sutra*, made of gold and silver pigments on indigo-dyed paper, dates from the twelfth century. It is from a famous set of 5,000 scriptures likely commissioned by Emperor Toba and completed by his son, Emperor Go-Shirakawa, at which time they were dedicated to the Jingoji temple in Kyoto. Beginning in the nineteenth century, some of the sutras were sold by the temple to pay for repairs and maintenance. The frontispiece of the sutra shows the Buddha preaching at Vulture Peak, the location at which he is said to have communicated his most well known teachings to a gathered assembly of thousands. The line drawings of the figures are made with confident strokes in gold pigment, ending with calligraphic precision. Gold and silver dust has been added to the landscape elements, lending an ethereal quality to the scene. The ruled lines of the text are drawn in silver and the Chinese characters themselves are brushed in gold. Of considerable importance to the acquisition is that it includes not only the sutra but also its textile wrapper and box, the former ornamented with mica and the latter with gilt-bronze figures in the shape of butterflies. Making luxurious copies of a sutra such as this was seen as an act of spiritual faith. Decorated sutras were some of the most extravagant commissions of their time.

Japanese artists also made *Hinoki*, a work authored by the American sculptor Charles Ray. In 1998, Ray was possessed by the idea of a sculpture of a felled tree. He searched the coastal woods of California and found an oak that had been downed decades earlier. With assistants, he cut up the tree and removed it to his Los Angeles studio, had silicone molds taken of the pieces, and constructed a fiberglass replica of the original. This reproduction was then sent to Japan, where six individuals working under master craftsman Yuboku Mukoyoshi used it as a model to carve the final sculpture over a four-year period, 2003–07. In addition to its quiet beauty and awesome scale, the magic of the work is its history of transformation, from life-size silicone mold to fiberglass cast to hand-carved tree. That the

sculpture's final state was crafted from Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) is also important, for this wood was the material of choice in traditional Japanese carvings of the Buddha made for both public temples and private, devotional purposes.

The carved wooden headdress for Gelede, made in the Ketu region of the Republic of Benin in the mid-twentieth century, was created for a Yoruba festival that honors the spiritual powers of female elders, ancestors, or deities, known collectively as “our mothers.” The superstructure of this headdress depicts hunters capturing a pangolin as a metaphor for the monumental struggle between civilization and nature and between human intelligence and animal force. The judicious addition of blue pigment enlivens the character of the figures and the drama of the scene depicted.

Eldzier Cortor was raised in Chicago and in the 1930s took classes at the School of the Art Institute, where he was introduced not only to the materials and discipline of oil painting but to the history of African art, which he saw first-hand at the Field Museum (our collection of African art was not developed at the time). In 1940 he won a Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship to visit the Gullah-speaking people of the Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. This encouraged his interest in his own, African ethnic origins. Painted in 1948, *The Room No. VI* is perhaps the finest example of Cortor's mature style. It depicts the nude figure of a black woman lying on an unmade bed, surrounded by three other figures, two of whom appear to be children. Cortor has acknowledged that his elongated figures recall the “cylindrical and lyrical quality” of African sculptures he saw in his art history classes. In addition, the cramped domestic setting suggests the difficult and impoverished circumstances of poor African Americans, whose destiny was always central to Cortor's work.

Since we extended the mandate of our Department of Architecture to include design, we have been building up that part of the collection with an eye to the best examples of avant-garde work. New York-based designer Ron Gilad's 2005 *Dear Ingo* is an amalgamation of sixteen individual task lamps brought together into a spiderlike chandelier arrangement. Its title betrays its dedication to the German lighting designer Ingo Maurer, and its wit and elegance are characteristic of the Israeli-born Gilad's “ready-made” inspired, functional products.

The range of just these five objects suggests the diversity and vitality of our collections, and the promise of museums like the Art Institute to preserve for the public representative examples of the world's artistic legacy for the promotion of inquiry into and tolerance of the world. These acquisitions are representative of the hundreds of others we made over the past year, and they are part of the reason why we have dedicated so much time and human and physical resources this past year to the expansion and renovation of the museum's galleries. As the 2008 fiscal year came to a close, we were in the final stages of renovating our current galleries, scheduled for completion in December 2008, and were just ten months away from opening our Modern Wing. All of these accomplishments—from our “American Perspectives” season to our acquisitions to our renovation and expansion—are in keeping with our obligation to refine and enlarge our mission as Chicago's encyclopedic art museum. We are grateful to all of our many donors who sustain our activities in this regard.

**James Cuno**

*President and Eloise W. Martin Director*



Eldzier Cortor (American, born 1916).  
*The Room No. VI*, 1948. Oil and gesso on  
 Masonite; 107.3 x 80 cm. Through prior  
 acquisition of Friends of American Art  
 and Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison;  
 through prior gift of the George F. Harding  
 Collection (2007.329).