

The Washington Post

At 100, the Phillips Collection doesn't seem to have aged



The Phillips house at 21st and Q streets NW, circa 1900. (Phillips Collection)

By **Sebastian Smee**

November 24, 2020 at 6:00 a.m. EST

The feeling of intimacy and aesthetic intensification you get from a visit to the Phillips Collection, which turns 100 next year, is unlike any other art-going experience in the District. Just thinking of it is somehow a tonic.

And that may not be by accident. Duncan Phillips transformed his family home into the museum after his father, a Pittsburgh window glass millionaire, died suddenly in 1917 and his older brother succumbed to the influenza epidemic the following year. Through the fog of his grief, Phillips, a published art critic, conceived the museum as a memorial — and indeed the first name it went by was the Phillips Memorial Art Gallery.

A century later, with the world in the grip of a viral crisis that is frequently compared to the 1918 flu pandemic, Dorothy Kosinski, the Phillips Collection's director since 2008, says she has been "stunned" to find herself thinking about the memorial aspect of the Phillips's founding in this unwanted new light.

“Phillips wrote so poignantly about throwing himself into this project to save himself from deep despair after his father died and then his brother perished in the pandemic. He talked about finding salvation and solace, a way out of such profound grief, through art. We always alluded to the genesis story, but we never felt it like we do today.”



Marjorie and Duncan Phillips, in about 1954, pose in front of Renoir's "Luncheon of the Boating Party" (1880–81). (Naomi Savage/Phillips Collection)

Kosinski calls the parallel between now and then “eerie,” describing it in her introduction to “Seeing Differently,” a catalogue accompanying next year’s centennial exhibition, as an invitation “to fully embrace the foundational ideas of the institution.”

Memorials usually try to dam the flow of time. But Phillips had something different in mind for his museum — something more generative and forward-thinking.

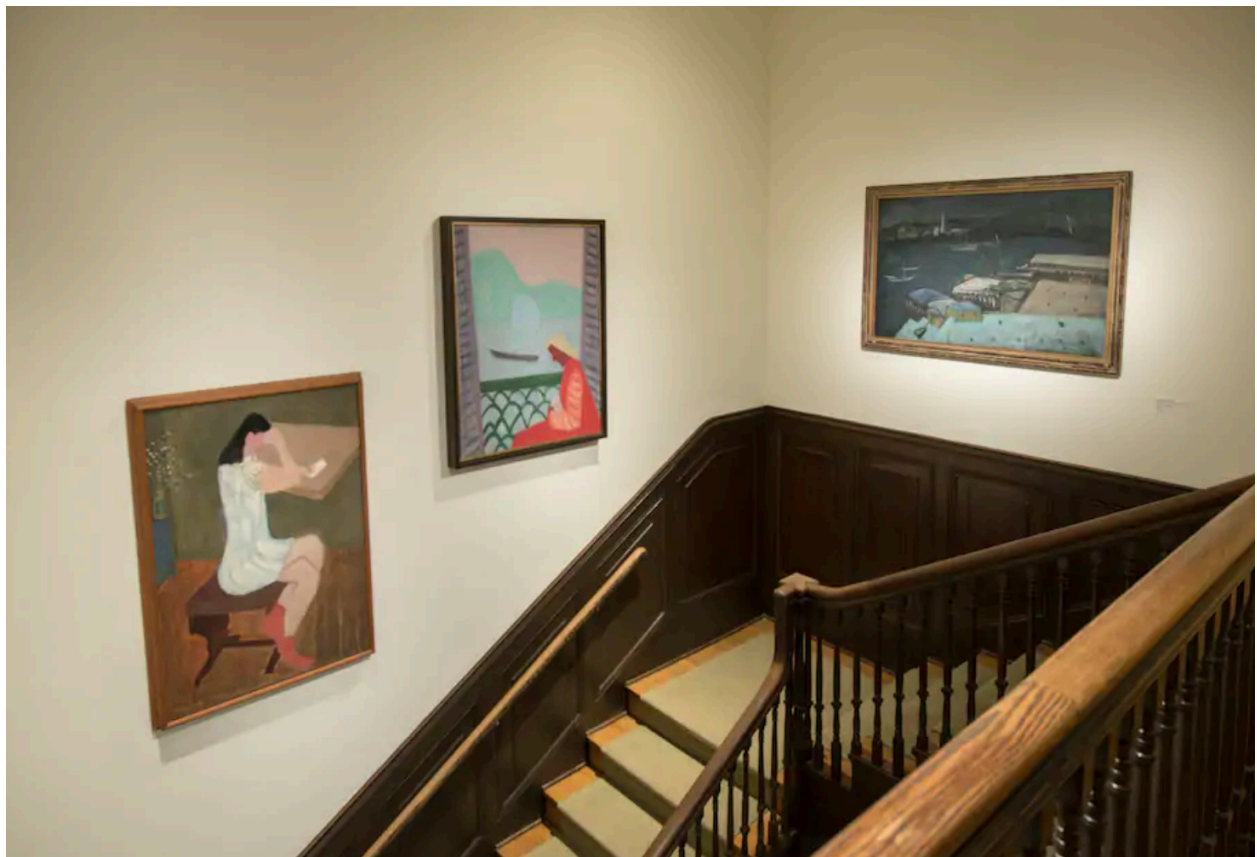
“He was an eloquent speaker and writer,” says Kosinski in a phone interview. “He framed many of his ideas through the lens of art as a beneficent force in the community. ‘To see beautifully as artists see,’ he said. Those aren’t the words of directors and curators. Those are words that come from heart and soul.”

The Phillips plans to mark its centennial not only with “Seeing Differently” (Feb. 20 through Sep. 12), an exhibition drawn from its own growing collection of 4,700 works, but also with a

major Jacob Lawrence exhibition, a juried invitation show for artists in the DMV, and solo shows devoted to African American artists David Driskell (a trustee emeritus who died from the coronavirus this year), Sanford Biggers, the late Alma Thomas and the Australian artist Marley Dawson.

It's common for major cities to have small museums (usually named for wealthy founders) standing in counterpoint to big public museums: New York has the Frick Collection as an antidote to the Metropolitan Museum, Los Angeles has the Norton Simon to answer the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Boston has the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum to complement its Museum of Fine Arts.

But in D.C., you feel the counterpoint between the coldly marbled gigantism of the National Gallery and the Phillips, on a leafy street just off Dupont Circle, with special intensity. Everything wonderful about the Phillips begins with the scale of the place and its relaxed, residential setting. Physically, the museum is only a short distance from the agoraphobia of the relentlessly edifying Mall. But psychologically and emotionally, it's in another universe.



Artworks at the Phillips Collection. (Lee Stalsworth/Phillips Collection)

Behind its affluent, conservative facade, the museum, which Phillips developed in tandem with his wife, Marjorie, has radical DNA. Unlike Henry Clay Frick and Isabella Stewart Gardner, who were only intermittently interested in modern art, Phillips was devoted to his living contemporaries from the outset.

He laid out his wishes for his museum in the year before his death. The contrast with Gardner and Frick, who wanted their house museums to stay unchanging, is striking: “It must be kept a vital living place for enjoyment,” he wrote, “and must be given . . . a sense of frequent rearrangement and of new acquisitions.”

“People think of the glorious Impressionist masterworks,” explains Kosinski. But “predominantly Duncan Phillips supported contemporary American modernists. He was making a rather radical case that American modernism was just as valid as European art.”

The first museum of modern art in the United States, the Phillips can claim also to have been the first American museum to purchase works by, among others, Charles Demuth (1924), Charles Burchfield and Georgia O’Keeffe (1926), Man Ray (1927), Milton Avery (1929), and Jacob Lawrence and Grandma Moses (1942).

That is a remarkable track record. But it’s just the beginning.



“Migration Series Panel 1” by Jacob Lawrence (between 1940 and 1941). Casein tempera on hardboard. The Phillips Collection acquired the painting, part of a series, in 1942. (Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society, New York)

When you look at what the Phillips achieved in the 1920s alone, it is astounding. It was the first U.S. museum to buy paintings by the French luminaries Pierre Bonnard (1925), Édouard Vuillard (1926) and Georges Braque (1927).

And the Phillips is not just about collecting. From the 1920s on, its exhibitions have blazed a trail. It was the first museum to mount solo exhibitions by Avery, John Marin and Sam Gilliam. It

was also the first U.S. museum to give solo exhibitions to the foreigners Bonnard, Marc Chagall and Chaïm Soutine, among others.

Conscious of this legacy, Kosinski, an experienced scholar and curator who has published books on Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Matisse and Jackson Pollock, has endeavored to accelerate the pace of evolution at the Phillips since taking over in 2008 — and especially since 2015. That was the year, she says, “when a desire to be more responsive to the communities in the city in which we live . . . became more of a rallying cry, especially from younger staff.”

The Phillips adopted goals around diversity and equity and changed the museum’s collecting strategy to prioritize a more diverse array of artists. To broaden the pipeline to staff positions, it committed to offering only paid internships and fellowships. And when, in 2018, Kosinski appointed Makeba Clay, the Phillips became the first U.S. art museum to have a chief diversity officer. Clay, said Kosinski, “has really transformed us from the inside out in terms of our cultural DNA.”

Kosinski has worked to expand the Phillips’s purview so that it is not focused just on American and European art. “We’ve made the story of modern and contemporary art more complex,” she said. The museum has been transformed by an ambitious exhibition about the global migrant crisis and by an absorbing account of the influence of modernism on African American artists. But Kosinski is adamant that the museum has not deviated from Phillips’s original vision. “I feel really strongly that we didn’t change our course. There are aspects of our history that we appreciate in a different way in the context of today.



“No Face (Crown Heights)” (2018) by Simone Leigh. Terracotta, graphite ink, salt-fired porcelain, epoxy. (Director’s Discretionary Fund)



"The Elder" (2002) by Joseph Holston. Oil on linen. (Gift of Joseph and Sharon Holston)

"Part of our history," she continues, "is that at a very early stage, Duncan Phillips was buying works from African American artists. He invited them into the museum. He showed their works on the walls." She cites as an example the 30 odd-numbered panels from Lawrence's "Migration Series," which Phillips purchased in 1942, the year after they were painted (the Museum of Modern Art acquired the even-numbered panels).

Lawrence's series, which is now seen as one of the genuine masterpieces of American modern art, has always, she says, "been fundamental to our identity and our educational outreach and [was] part of our ongoing work with the artist during his lifetime."

"We are not rewriting our past," concludes Kosinski. "We have every reason to be proud and energized by the fact that we had a very enlightened founder who cared deeply about social issues and believed deeply in the importance of art in our lives. But it is interesting how the lens of today makes us see it differently. We approach the past with a more critical eye and are responsive to the urgent issues of our times."