

Newly Expanded, Peabody Essex Museum Is “A Whole Window on the World”

by Jeanne Schinto

My first reaction to touring the new galleries at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, just before its public opening on September 28, 2019, was indignation. PEM has had all these treasures for decades, if not centuries, and I’m only just getting to see them now? My second reaction was panic. I’d better get busy looking. Between the old stuff and the new acquisitions displayed all around me, I would need an entire gap year to take in everything. My third reaction was that, seriously, a young person could spend a year here between high school and college just taking in the exhibits, and the time would be well spent. As Brian Kennedy, PEM’s Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Director and CEO, put it at the press preview, the museum in its new iteration offers “a whole window on the world.”

PEM’s precursor, the East India Marine Society, was founded in 1799 as a repository for “curiosities” collected and brought home by its membership.

PEM’s precursor, the East India Marine Society, was founded in 1799 as a repository for “curiosities” collected and brought home by its membership, whose requirement was experience as masters or supercargoes of Salem vessels that had navigated the Cape of Good Hope or Cape Horn. Given that beginning, PEM qualifies as the oldest continuously operating museum in the country. It also, arguably, has developed into one of the most significant museums north of New York City. Its East India Marine Hall, where, some readers will recall, the old Peabody Essex Museum Antiques Show used to be held, was the museum’s first building, completed in 1825. The last PEM expansion, completed in 2003, was the work of architect Moshe Safdie and Associates. Safdie added an 11,000-square-foot addition to one side of that original building. This time, PEM built out from the other side, adding 40,000 square feet more. Designed by Ennead Architects, this latest expansion, including three floors of gallery space and a soaring glass atrium, has increased PEM’s total size to 367,000 square feet, making it one of the country’s largest museums outside of a major metropolitan area.

Richard Olcott was Ennead’s design partner in charge. He has been responsible for two other significant museum expansions—at the Yale University Art Gallery (2011) and the Museum of the City of New York (2012). Known for, in his own words, “making things new out of things that are old,” he achieved this at PEM by, for example, making visible from the new atrium the exposed brick of the 19th-century building and by echoing the glass of the Safdie atrium in the new one.

Dramatic dashes of the old—imperial lion guardians (foo dogs) and a monumental Kuka’ilimoku, a Hawaiian temple image of the deity Ku—are seen at once upon entering the Ennead atrium. (Most visitors still pass through the former Safdie entrance to get there, but there is now a new entrance for schoolchildren and other large groups.) The rest unfolds in the floors above, where the galleries feature three broad categories: maritime history and art, Asian export art, and fashion and design.

The gallery devoted to maritime, a category that previously has been PEM’s stock in trade, celebrates the sea’s majesty as well as its peril in paintings (by Francis Silva, Robert Salmon, Fitz Henry Lane, James Buttersworth, and William Bradford), ship models, navigational instruments, scrimshaw, and figureheads—i.e., the old favorites. But it also does so in contemporary pieces, such as *Shipwrecked Armoire with Barnacles*, a 2012 construction made of foam core, paper, glue, acrylic paint, sand, and fabric by Valerie Hegarty (b. 1967). The gallery dedicated to Asian export art, another longtime staple of PEM, reminds us in displays of porcelain, China trade paintings, ship captain portraits, textiles, screens, wallpaper, and some



The new wing is on the right of the East India Marine Hall. The Safdie wing is on its left. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Aislinn Weidele of Ennead Architects.



Street view. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Aislinn Weidele of Ennead Architects.



Not to be forgotten, PEM’s Art and Nature Center, for children of all ages, is partially seen here through a window in the new atrium. Schinto photo.

contemporary artworks that globalism has been a “trend” for centuries. As for the gallery that combines fashion and design, that’s the unexpected one, and delightfully so, at least from my perspective.

“Juxtaposition” is a word many of us overused in college term-paper days, but there is no other way to express the pairings of, say, a circa 1812 Salem Light Infantry uniform worn by Private John Woodbridge Fenno with a camouflage-print dress by Japanese designer Junya Watanabe (b. 1961); an 1824-27 Unangax (Aleut) artist’s waterproof “gut” cape, made of sea lion intestines, with a 1970s bikini made of Tyvek; and a circa 1876 Chinese moon-gate bed with textiles from other periods and places. And then there is this quintet: an 1815-25 Samuel Field McIntire sofa, an 1845-50 headrest by a South African Zulu artist, an 1850-70 planter’s chair from India or Zanzibar, a 19th-century West Indian bench in the form of a crocodile or alligator, and a swirling, stainless steel chair by contemporary Chinese sculptor Shi Jianmin (b. 1962). It’s a display of seating that forces viewers not only to compare design elements but also to explore the idea of comfort and who among us wants, needs, or gets more or less of it.

Not to be upstaged by the new addition’s opening, the two older parts of the existing museum have been reinstalled as well in comparable mix-and-match fashion. In a gallery called Powerful Figures, for example, are a Japanese lacquered-wood figure of Buddhist monk Jizo Bosatsu from 1279, perhaps the oldest piece in the collection; a late 17th-century Chinese porcelain figure in a hat and blue-striped britches who has great presence despite his name, *Mr. Nobody*; and *Weight*, a 2012 sculpture by Alison Saar (b. 1956), consisting of a figure of an adolescent black girl on a swing suspended from a cotton scale balanced by a coal shuttle containing tools, chains, rope, boxing gloves, and other items symbolic of the girl’s enslavement and subsequent fight for freedom.

Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, PEM’s James B. and Mary Lou Hawkes Deputy Director, said that as the galleries were being planned and the staff “shopped across our entire collection” to make their choices, they were “encouraged to take some chances, think differently about our collections, and find human-

centered themes.” Brian Kennedy expressed to the press at the preview the hope that the “museum’s interpretive practice, which is based around innovation and experimentation, is very apparent.”

Those who visit the museum before January 5 will also be able to see the first major PEM show to open during Kennedy’s tenure, which began in July, just after his predecessor Dan Monroe’s retirement. It is the exclusive East Coast venue for *Hans Hofmann: The Nature of Abstraction*, organized by the University of California, Berkeley, Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Years ago, I remember PEM’s similarly large exhibition of a Salem native son, the realist, portraitist, and American Impressionist Frank Weston Benson (1862-1951). Certainly that was a show that “belonged” at PEM. My first thought was that Hofmann (1880-1966), a German-born Abstract Expressionist associated with New York City and Provincetown on Cape Cod, seemed out of place here. But on second thought, his presence makes perfect sense to me.

Nature, particularly the sea, inspired Hofmann, who lived, worked, and taught in Provincetown for 23 years. There is a wall photo in the exhibition and the same photo in the accompanying catalog showing him painting in the dunes. Indeed, some of his paintings are titled and considered to be landscapes, if not seascapes. But there’s no need to equivocate.

An experimental artist like Hofmann, who innovated, took risks, and inspired others to do the same, seems the right choice for an institution that, in Kennedy’s words “has always had to think like its founders, to think like mariners who traveled the world, who went to the farthest reaches of what in many cases was uncharted territory.”

There is even more reinvention in store for PEM in 2020. Its American art galleries in the Safdie wing are being reinstalled to include Native American art. The project is headed by Dean Lahikainen, PEM’s longtime Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of American Decorative Art, and for that reason alone, it promises to be yet another brilliant chapter in this museum’s ongoing history.

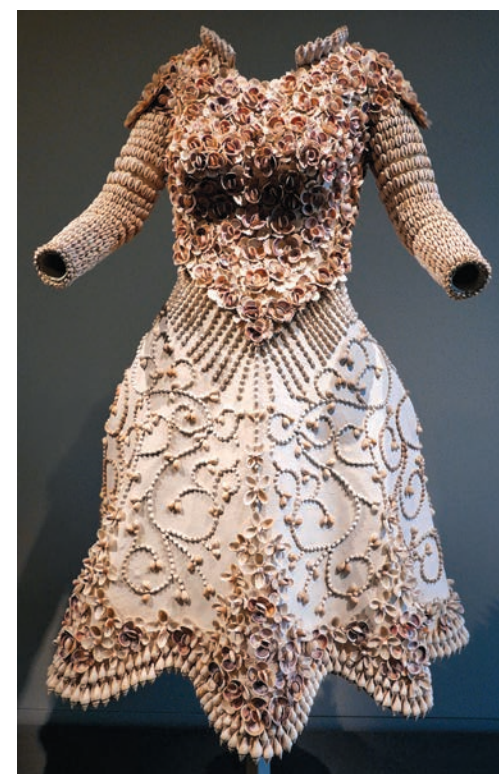
For more information, see the PEM website (www.pem.org).



Brian Kennedy, PEM's Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Director and CEO, is pictured addressing reporters at the press preview on September 25, 2019, three days before the new addition's official opening. Born in Dublin and with the accent to prove it, Kennedy has held senior leadership positions at art museums around the world, including posts in Ireland, Australia, and the United States. Kennedy's last position was at the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio, where he was president, director, and CEO. Noting that his tie bore a pattern of kangaroos, he harked back to his years down under, using the continent's indigenous marsupial as a symbol of moving forward. "Australians like to say that the kangaroo is the only animal incapable of going backwards. We mean to go forward with renewed energy and a renewed focus. It's a new chapter for a new PEM. We are embracing our past, we're bringing it into our present, to make this new future, and I think that's what will set us apart as an extraordinary museum." Schinto photo.



Among PEM's latest acquisitions is this circa 1750 two-headed equestrian figurehead. It is one of the oldest surviving figureheads in the world, and the only existing two-headed example known. Made by an unknown British artist, it once adorned a British ship. Originally a female rider was attached to each side. It is flanked on the left by an early 19th-century Maori war canoe's bow ornament and on the right by an early 20th-century canoe prow from Papua New Guinea. Another element of the grouping is aural: the sound of the sea comes from hidden speakers. Schinto photo.



Island Bride, Brian White (b. 1960), steel, seashell, composition marine epoxy, and paint, 68" x 34" x 29½", 2002. The design was inspired by sailor's valentines. Schinto photo.



Captain James Cook, Michele Felice Corné (1752-1845), oil on canvas, 1803. East India Marine Society Collection. Schinto photo.



In the background, that nearly life-size photographic image presents a viewer with a trompe l'oeil effect. It is showing some of the old East India Marine Society's collections on display. In the foreground, an 1805 ship's model of Salem vessel *Ulysses*, whose history includes East India Marine Society member Captain William Mugford's successful creation of a makeshift rudder from a spare topmast, spars, and cannon after the original rudder was lost in a gale. For the achievement he won a prize from the American Philosophical Society. Schinto photo.



Portrait of the Silk Merchant Eshing, Guan Zuolin, a.k.a. Spoilum, (active 1765-1810), oil on canvas, 1805. East India Marine Society Collection, gift of Thomas W. Ward. Schinto photo.



This octant, owned by Revolutionary War privateer Joseph Peabody, was made in the United Kingdom, circa 1778. The Maritime Art and History Gallery displays many other navigational instruments, including compasses, astrolabes, sextants, quadrants, and an 1803 mechanical log watch, made by British-born William Lovelace, of brass, wood, and glass. The log watch was the first navigational instrument to enter the collection; it happened the same year it was made. Schinto photo.



A view of the Maritime Art and History Gallery, prominently showing a model of the R.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth*, 1947-48. Gift of the Cunard Line Ltd. in 1970. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Kathy Tarantola.





View of the Fashion and Design Gallery. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Bob Packert.



Mask, Heiltsuk (Bella Bella) artist, wood, pigment, circa 1845. Gift of Mr. Edward A. Moseley. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Kathy Tarantola.



Ku (Kuka'ilimoku) in the new wing. He is 6½' tall and stands on a 5' tall contemporary plinth, making him all the more formidable. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Kathy Tarantola.



View of the Fashion and Design Gallery. Schinto photo.



Immanence by Yoan Capote (b. 1977) is a 2015 sculpture depicting the head of Fidel Castro. It is welded together from thousands of rusted door hinges that the artist acquired through a laborious process of exchange with Cuban residents. He traded new ones for old ones. The piece is installed in the East India Marine Hall, where the annual Peabody Essex Antiques Show used to take place. With its hinges and with the doors at its base, it is meant to have connotations of entering and exiting, closing and opening of borders and of minds. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Ken Sawyer.



An artist's depiction of a planter's chair is displayed nearby the actual example. Schinto photo.



Closeup of Ku. Schinto photo.



Fashion and Design Gallery, showing from center clockwise, a Samuel Field McIntire and Jonathan Peele Saunders sofa, a planter's chair, a Zulu headrest, a West Indian seat in the form of an alligator or crocodile, and a contemporary Chinese sculpture chair in stainless steel. Schinto photo.



Jonathan Peele Saunders and Samuel Field McIntire sofa, mahogany, 1815-20. Gift of Mrs. Robert Johnston. It's in the Fashion and Design Gallery in a surprising tableau. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Dennis Helmar.



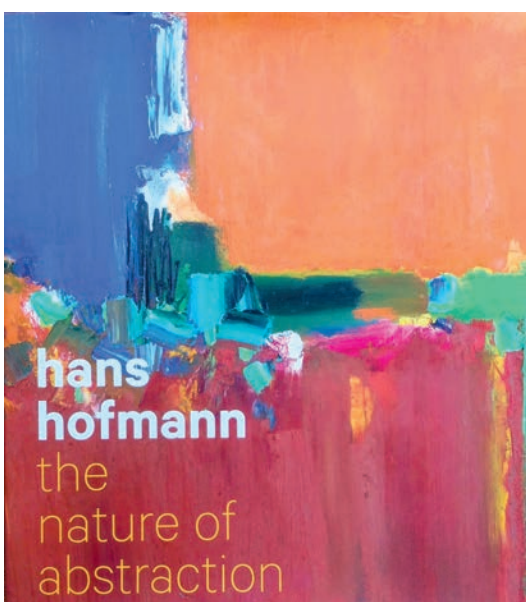
Bird's-eye view of another part of the new expansion, a 5000-square-foot garden designed by Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects. © Peabody Essex Museum. Photography by Bob Packert.



Imperial lion guardians (foo dogs), Chinese artist, 1850. ©Peabody Essex Museum.



A wall of ceramics in the Asian Export Art Gallery with chairs set up in front of it for contemplating. Schinto photo.



Catalog cover of *Hans Hofmann: The Nature of Abstraction* by Lucinda Barnes, with contributions by Ellen G. Landau and Michael Schreyach. The book accompanies the exhibition of the same name, on view at PEM through January 5. Schinto photo.



This circa 1876 moon-gate bed, made of 53 individually crafted parts, by an unknown artist in Ningbo, China, in satinwood, other Asian woods, and ivory, was exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. Beyond the virtuosity of its design and elaborate inlay, there is the fact that no nail or screw went into its making, only wooden pegs and four butterfly-shaped wedges. Schinto photo.



Shipwrecked Armoire with Barnacles was made by sculptor Valerie Hegarty (b. 1967) of foam core, paper, glue, acrylic paint, sand, and fabric in 2012. Schinto photo.

