Yale Center for British Art to Complete Interior Conservation of its Landmark Building Designed by Louis I. Kahn

NEW HAVEN – The Yale Center for British Art will reopen to the public on May 11, 2016, after completing the third phase of a major building conservation project. Visitors to the renovated building will experience a stimulating new installation of the Center’s unparalleled collection of more than five centuries of British art, largely the gift of the institution’s founder, Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929).

The Long Gallery, located on the fourth floor, will be wholly reconfigured, restoring the original conception of the space as a teaching and study gallery, as formulated by the Center’s founding Director, Jules Prown, and as designed by Kahn. Over two hundred works will be installed from floor to ceiling across seven bays. Adjacent to this gallery, in a space that formerly served as an office, will be a new seminar room for faculty, students, and visiting scholars to engage in the close study of collection objects. In addition to the reinstallation of the collection, which explores the theme of “Britain in the World,” the reopening will also feature two special exhibitions.

The Center first opened to the public in April 1977, and this project marks the most complex and comprehensive interior conservation work undertaken to date, affecting the entire structure, including the basement and roof. The project features significant mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and telecommunications upgrades, as well as important improvements to accessibility, fire prevention systems, and patron amenities.

During the closure, construction crews have been busily restoring the galleries to pristine condition. Old linen and plywood were removed from the permanent walls, the former donated to the Yale School of Art and the latter given to the Hartford Area Habitat for Humanity. After insulation was removed from the exterior walls, the inside of the exterior stainless steel panels was revealed, allowing areas of corrosion to be treated and the interiors to be rebuilt. Two layers of mineral wool insulation were covered with galvanized steel, fire-rated plywood, and fresh Belgian linen. Worn synthetic carpet was replaced with new wool carpet, refinished wood trim was installed, and some travertine floor tiles were repaired or replaced. The existing moveable gallery partitions, known as “pogo” walls, were also dismantled, and will be replaced by new “pogo” panels based closely on a drawing produced by Kahn shortly before his death in March 1974.
Extensive renovations also have also been undertaken in the Lecture Hall, which is the only remaining space that has never been refurbished. New seats will be configured in the center of the room, flanked by new steps and railings along each side wall. Five seats for disabled patrons will be installed, each with a companion seat. Audio/visual and lighting upgrades will enable better broadcasting and performance capabilities, including integrated video conferencing. There will also be two new accessible public restrooms on the basement level, as well as a bank of new lockers for use by Center visitors.

As with past building conservation projects, the Center has benefited from the expertise and dedication of its partners in the Yale Office of Facilities; Knight Architecture LLC, New Haven; Peter Inskip + Peter Jenkins Architects, London; and Turner Construction Company; as well as the talents and hard work of numerous other collaborators.

PROJECT BACKGROUND
This project follows more than a decade of research on the history of the design, construction, and renovation of the Center’s landmark building, as well as the publication in 2011 of Louis Kahn and the Yale Center for British Art: A Conservation Plan by the Center in association with Yale University Press. Written by Peter Inskip and Stephen Gee, in association with Constance Clement, the Center’s Deputy Director, this book details the conservation plan and proposes a series of policies for the building’s care and maintenance in the years ahead. The first of its kind in the United States, the conservation plan addresses the evolution and appropriate upkeep of a modern building, rather than the preservation of an historic structure, by identifying the key features characterizing its cultural significance and determining those which should be protected and others that could be allowed to change.

The first phase of work to be guided by the conservation plan involved the rehabilitation of the Center’s exterior Lower Court and extensive repairs to the adjacent Lecture Hall Lobby in 2010–2013. This was followed by two additional projects addressing the building’s interior spaces: The second phase, in 2013, focused largely on behind-the-scenes renovations, including the replacement of carpeting and wall coverings; the renewal of the finish on white oak storage cabinets; the reconfiguration of offices to better accommodate the needs of staff; and the refurbishment of the departments of Prints & Drawings and Rare Books & Manuscripts, vitally increasing storage capacity for works on paper. The third phase, begun in 2015, concentrated primarily on enhancing the Center’s public spaces, while also addressing extensive building-wide mechanical and electrical upgrades, as well as improvements to safety and accessibility.

Images: Yale Center for British Art, photos by Richard Caspole.
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YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929), the collection reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. The Center’s Collections include more than 2,000 paintings and 200 sculptures, 20,000 drawings and watercolors, 30,000 prints and 35,000 rare books and manuscripts. More than 30,000 volumes supporting research in British art and related fields are available in the Center’s library. Visit the institution online at britishart.yale.edu.

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