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1963

## The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

Norman A. Geske

*Director at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln*

Henry Russell Hitchcock

*Northampton, Massachusetts*

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***The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln***

***The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln***

This Building is the gift of  
Mary Frances Sheldon 1892-1950  
Adams Bromley Sheldon 1887-1957  
to the University of Nebraska  
Dedicated May 16, 1963  
Philip Johnson, Architect

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Special acknowledgement is due to two persons who have, in effect, created the character and quality of this publication, but who have not been previously associated with the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery. They are professor Henry Russell Hitchcock, whose perceptive essay places the building in a context which is both historical and aesthetic; and Ezra Stoller whose superb photographs have caught the building in a timeless focus. In addition, thanks are due to Philip Johnson for the captions to the photographs; to Mrs. Kopines and Mrs. Tait of the Gallery staff, once again to Kenneth Keller for editorial assistance and to Kaz Tada and Bob Thompson for additional photographs; and, of course, to Elaine Lustig for her design.

**Foreword** Universities have traditionally been centers of culture in their communities. A flourishing interest in the arts in our day makes it unusually appropriate for the University of Nebraska to display well its fine collection of contemporary American paintings, prints, and sculpture.

The generosity of the Sheldon family has provided the University with an outstanding facility for such display, a building planned and designed by one of America's great architects, a building which will not only house beautiful objects, but will stand itself as a monument to taste and to the artistic best in our civilization.

Clifford M. Hardin, *Chancellor*



Adams Bromley Sheldon 1887-1957



Mary Frances Sheldon 1892-1950

## **Introduction**

A number of years ago I had an opportunity to express myself in anticipation of the completion of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery. Planning was largely completed at that time and construction was well under way. My thoughts had adjusted themselves to the compromises which are inevitable in such a situation and I was encouraged to believe that all was well with the job at hand. Lest I be guilty of creating the impression that the story has another ending, let me say that the completed building has surpassed our expectations.

In the months of the first year following the Galleries' dedication we have been convinced over and over again of the rightness of Mr. Johnson's decisions in every part of the design. The anticipations of 1961 have turned into realities and although some of the hopes expressed are still short of realization the excitement of possibility is still in them. Let me rephrase these earlier thoughts, representing as they still do, the ideas which best fulfill the function of this remarkable building.

The Sheldon Art Gallery is not a large building. It is compactly planned to accommodate all the standard functions of administration, display, preparation, conservation, audio-visual education, and last but not least in this togetherness world, sociability. The building does not provide for an all out exhibition of the University's art collections. This is not the result of oversight, but of decisions taken with regard to the exact character and purpose of the institution as a whole. The gallery is a memorial to the donors. As such it is properly conceived as an important work of contemporary art in its own right. Independent of its contents it speaks for architecture as an art, but taken with them and with the functions intrinsic to the institution it speaks in another larger sense, which has but rarely reached expression in the art museums of our time.

This is the critical heart of the problem, the confrontation of the work of art and the observer. Take for granted, for example, that the object itself is good and beautiful in accordance with any known canon. Place this object in a lighted space of its own with no impingements from its neighbors, with no distractions from frame or label or wall color or texture, with mood prepared by location, sequence, distance. In such a situation the all important spark of contact between the object and the observer is given its maximum probability of occurrence. This is the transfer, the exchange, the linkage which is basic to everything a museum can do. This is the experience of art which can be separated from foot weariness, eye fatigue, the obligating burden of chronology, to stand alone simply as experience. It is in this sense that we are aware of an opportunity for a renewed definition of the museum of art, closer possibly by one fraction to the ideal of such things.

The Sheldon Art Gallery is a museum where there will always be a minimum to be seen, but such a minimum implies, first of all, that the museum select well the objects which make up its collections. Secondly, it implies that the installation must be done with the greatest care, although Philip Johnson's design makes any large failure here the simple fault of the personnel involved. In these galleries it would be possible—suitable even, that the paintings be hung in numbers no greater than four to a room, that in the series of galleries to be devoted to the

permanent collections a total of not more than thirty paintings could be on display at any one time. To make such a selection of pictures, requires a more analytical kind of choosing than is afforded by any chronological scheme. To justify such selectivity and to utilize a continuously expanding collection we have assumed a rotation schedule which will change the displays in these galleries at a rate of one gallery per month, thus affording a continuously changing presentation and a completely non-static view of the museum's possessions.

With one series of rooms so used for paintings and sculpture, one other for the graphic arts, one more for the crafts, our average visitor will have an ample opportunity for a change of pace without risk of satiation. One can see many possibilities in the selection and arrangement which could vary widely in point of view, all the way from congruence to contradiction.

In addition our program of temporary exhibitions is accommodated in a set of larger and more flexibly equipped rooms. Here we are able to explore a theme, a period, a school, or to indulge ourselves in a potpourri to stretch that same old average visitor's awareness beyond local limits. He may also attend a film or a concert, listen to a lecture, partake of some refreshment and with luck, he may go away stimulated, challenged, confirmed, and undefeated. Whether he realizes it or not our visitor is a major part of the design, as recipient, as participant, as the final complement to a remarkable building and the art objects which it contains.

Norman A. Geske, *Director*



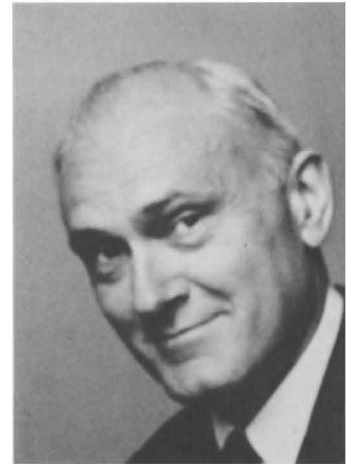
**Architect's Statement** Today the museum building stands as a community symbol like the church or courthouse of the last century. The architect must therefore create, inside and out, a symbolic structure which the community can refer to with some pride.

This symbolic function of the museum however sometimes runs counter to its function as a home for the fine arts. The problem for the architect is compounded. A tomb is simple, an office building is simpler. Each has only one function. The museum has two. The challenge in Lincoln was still more severe, because the beautiful State Capitol already existed as a symbol of pride.

The symbolic function of the Sheldon Gallery is fulfilled, I feel, not only by the "classical" exterior of travertine but mainly by the great hall which orients the visitor, as well as elevating his spirits. People enjoy pictures more after they have been "elevated" by big foyers. The home-for-pictures functions occur in separated areas grouped around the great hall. I was determined there would be *no* museum fatigue.

The Sheldon Gallery is the result of the happy collaboration of Mrs. Sheldon, the University, the museum director and myself, more than ably helped by a good contractor, a fine team of Nebraska architects, a great Italian marble quarry, and the overworked associates of our firm. My thanks to them.

Philip Johnson



***The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln***

*an essay by Henry Russell Hitchcock*

“Modern architecture aims to create, as did the early museums [of 1750–1850], backgrounds of intrinsic distinction harmonious with the objects exhibited and yet wholly in the style of our own day.” This sentence, which seems to express the intentions of the donor, the director, and the architect of the Sheldon Gallery, I wrote a generation ago. The occasion was the opening in 1954 of the Avery Memorial wing of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Of this structure, which was in scale a wholly new museum on whose design the brilliant director A. E. Austin, Jr., had worked more than usually closely with the architects Morris & O’Connor, I went on to say: “The galleries of the new Avery Memorial . . . provide, with all the functional complexity of the later museums [of the preceding generation], interior architecture worthy of comparison with the finest of a century ago.” As this sentence implies, the exterior of the Avery was—and is—disappointing. Fortunately this is not true of the Sheldon.

For the most part the galleries of the Avery were enclosed rooms of generous proportions, their walls covered with rich materials and with a minimum of architectural detail. One very long gallery only was provided with movable partitions. Moreover, a considerable proportion of the volume was given up to a glass-roofed central court rising the full three-story height of the building. Within a very few years the Museum of Modern Art in New York by Philip Goodwin and Edward Stone offered a very different sort of interior space. Alfred Barr, the Director, influenced by the conveniences he had experienced earlier in using for his museum activities one large open story in an office building, asked for and received from the architects a building whose several exhibition floors were undivided by permanent partitions. These have been, and still are, recurrently reorganized spatially by temporary partitions, not only for special exhibitions but also, with less frequent rearrangement naturally, for semi-permanent installations.

This sort of museum interior has since become accepted—in America certainly, if not internationally to the same extent—as the standard type, conforming to basic modern theories of open planning and flowing space, as also to what is easiest to produce with current building methods. The type received, on paper at least, its most classic expression in Mies van der Rohe’s project of 1942 for a “Museum for a Small City.” (As Mies’s executed Cullinan Hall at the Houston Museum is really no more than a covered sculpture court attached to an existing building, it does not represent very adequately his influential ideas in this field.) On the whole, however, this sort of museum design has been directors’ rather than architects’ museum architecture. If Mies has built no complete museum, other great architects of the older generation have: Le Corbusier, one in Tokyo and another in Ahmedabad, both designed and carried to completion in the 1950’s, and he is now charged with the commission to build a new Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris; Frank Lloyd Wright, the Guggenheim in New York, designed in 1943–46 and executed 1956–59. (Aalto’s modest new Museum of Central Finland in Jyväskylä is not in a class with these, and Gropius has built no museums.) It is well known, indeed notorious in the case of the Guggenheim, that these are architects’ architecture and that their directors have not found it easy to make use of them, particularly for temporary exhibitions. These two opposed types of

museum—from their most extreme expressions they may perhaps be called the Barr and the Wright types—provide the poles of mid-20th Century museum design: the museum as exhibition loft, and the museum as architectural monument.

Philip Johnson, the architect of the Sheldon Gallery, has built more museums than any of his elders in New York, in Utica, and in Fort Worth. He is now designing one for Bielefeld in Germany, and has just completed the first stage of a very extensive enlargement of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in three directions. His experience of museums began at the Museum of Modern Art thirty years ago where he installed many exhibitions as head of the architecture department. Thus his training was in the Barr type of museum and, in fact, he then worked in closest association with Alfred Barr. It is also well known, from Johnson's standard monograph on Mies and from his collaboration with Mies on the Seagram Building, that no younger architect has been closer to Mies than he. His admiration for Wright and for Le Corbusier, however, is hardly less, though he has never been so much influenced by them. His own personal work as an architect of museums may, in relation to the exaggeratedly contrasted terms of the last paragraph, seem to represent a *via media*. Middle paths, when consciously sought, often lead only to mediocrity; yet even those who are the most convinced supporters of Wright or of Barr would hardly claim that Johnson's museums have been mediocre: to most they have been much better than that, if to a few much worse.

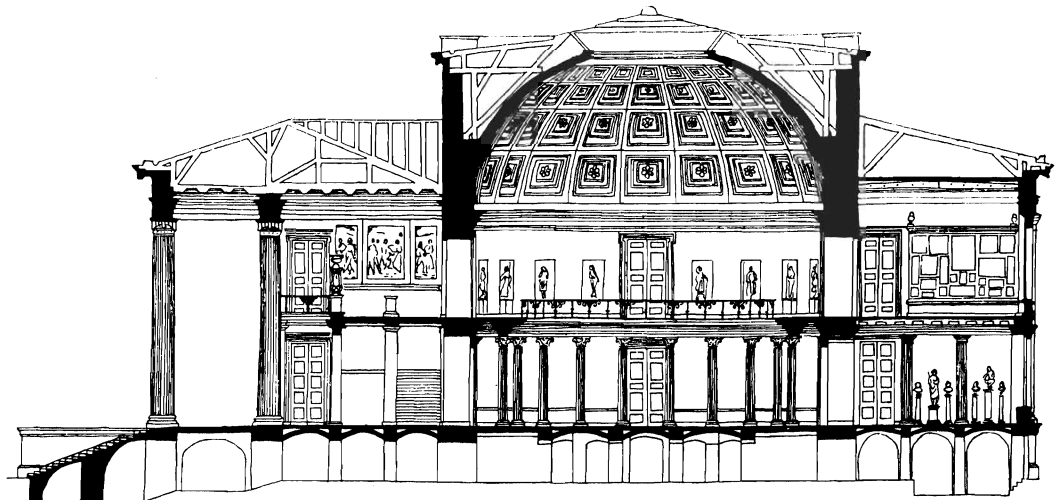
While Johnson—who is not one to hide his sources nor afraid of unfashionable doctrinal positions—derives the courage to design museums as he does from the so-different museums of Wright and Le Corbusier and Mies, he has (as often in his post-Miesian work of the last six or seven years in other fields) chosen earlier models on which to base his approach to museum design, even though in the development of his plans he has exploited to the full all the technical advances in museology of the last thirty years since the Avery Memorial was built in Hartford. The exhibition of 1934, from whose catalogue I quoted at the beginning of this Foreword, was devoted to the early museums of the period 1770–1850, from the Museo Pio-Clementino at the Vatican to the Neuere Pinakothek in Munich. It focussed especially, not on these particular examples by the rather obscure architects Simonetti and Voit respectively, but upon a group of others, erected in the middle years of that period by some of the greatest architects of the day: Sir John Soane's Dulwich Gallery outside London of 1811–14, K. F. Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin of 1824–28, and M. G. Bindesboll's Thorwaldsens Museum in Copenhagen of 1839–48.

The influence of Soane, not of his gallery so much as of his house and his bank interiors, played a part (as Johnson himself was the first to announce) in gradually freeing him a decade ago from his hitherto quite humble subservience to Mies. But it was through Mies that he came to know and love the work of Schinkel. For him, moreover, the Altes Museum has typified all that was finest in the early 19th-century German architect's work. Different as their expression is, the square galleried central space of his Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, so unusual a feature of American museum planning since the Avery Memorial,

was surely an echo of the Pantheon-like *pièce centrale* of the Altes Museum (Fig. 1). The sculpture gallery at the Sheldon is a variant of that at Utica. From the Altes Museum also comes the happy idea of retaining a monumental one-story expression for the exterior at the Sheldon, as already in Utica, yet permitting at the Sheldon a clear view of the staircase and the bridge at second-story gallery level between the pillars—if that is the word for them—that phrase the front. Unlike his Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, which he built between the Utica and the Lincoln commissions, or his Watson Center at Brown University there is at the Sheldon no open portico carried all the way across the front. It seems possible that here the echo is from Bindesboll's Museum, which Johnson and I first saw together in 1930; for there the tall openings across the front are doors in rectangular frames and there is no columnar portico at all (Fig. 2). It is, however, perhaps more in the spirit of the whole than in particular features that one is reminded of the Thorwaldsens Museum, even though its court is unroofed and the individual galleries mostly very small. The triple division of the front of the Sheldon, with the middle section open between two solid ends, is in fact quite Miesian.

The Altes Museum faced across the Schlossplatz in Berlin the many-storyed Baroque Schloss of Andreas Schlüter. It held its own by its simplicity, carefully studied proportions, and generous scale. At the Sheldon, although eventually it will face at the rear a new quadrangle surrounded by three other buildings, there is a similar problem of competition with larger, taller, and more complex neighbors that are already in existence. Fortunately, the true scale of the building, easy to misjudge in photographs because of the one-storyed external treatment and the refinement of the modelling of the "pillars" and consonant "pilasters," is made clear by the close relationship to the Art Building to the rear at the right (Fig. 3) whose three-storied are of normal rather than monumental height, while its skyline is level with that of the Sheldon.

To the architects of the early 19th century there were effectively but two choices as regards stylistic expression, since there were then but two basic structural



1 Section: Altes Museum, K. F. Schinkel, Berlin, 1824–28

methods of capping openings in a bearing masonry wall: the rectangular forms resulting from post-and-lintel construction and the half-round—or occasionally segmental—forms of arcuated construction. The use of steel leads today almost inevitably to rectangular expression. As to concrete, both American engineers and European architects such as Perret in the first half of this century stuck closely to post-and-lintel elements, preferring to express the rectangular wooden forms into which concrete was normally poured rather than the plastic and monolithic character of the concrete itself. In large-scale construction covering great spans, such as Freyssinet's hangars and Maillart's bridges, however, European engineers had begun to exploit curvilinear shapes, not without analogies to masonry vaulting, more than a generation ago. Now such forms are becoming common in the work of both engineers and architects even in America.

What Mr. Johnson has set out to do, over several years now, is to move away from post-and-lintel expression in concrete even in such relatively modest structures as the Amon Carter Museum and the Sheldon Gallery. Indeed the clearest expression of his intentions was provided at very small scale in the prefabricated elements of a garden fabrick built last year on his own grounds in Connecticut. In that the monolithic continuity of pier and half-arch is very evident (Fig. 4). In the Sheldon Gallery the elements of the concrete structure and even the wall planes between are clad with travertine that was, so to say, "prefabricated," i.e., cut to final predetermined shapes, in Italy. This is a surfacing, not a structural, material that can provide at relatively large scale as great a precision of definition for the underlying concrete elements, both flat and hollowed, as did direct prefabrication in the case of the small, unclad members of the New Canaan garden fabrick. That is the logical background of the extremely elegant and personal vocabulary of the exterior elevations and the two-story sculpture hall of the Sheldon Gallery.



2. Thorwaldsens Museum, M. G. Bindesboll, Copenhagen, 1839-48

If the *parti*, that is the general ordering of the composition, echoes the museums of the early 19th century—and quite consciously—there are also it seems to me fainter and more eclectic echoes that are too many and too various to have been conscious, even in the case of an architect as well informed historically as Mr. Johnson: Byzantine, or perhaps Islamic, in the pendentives of the ceiling of the sculpture hall; Late Gothic, or possibly Rococo, in the flattened freehand curves of the arches and the concavity of the sides of the diagonally projecting piers; and, finally, something Hellenic in the purity of the honey-colored oblong of the building seen against the sky and the reversed entasis of the vertical elements throughout. Indeed, under strong sunlight one can almost see the entire exterior as fluted like a Doric column, with flutes of enormous width, while the rather contrary effect of night-lighting on the exterior suggests a range of deep niches running across the length of the façades.

Most difficult to work out in Mr. Johnson's novel vocabulary of delicately sculptural elements were undoubtedly the edges: the flat band at the top is not a lintel but a fascia, indeed, almost a parapet or blocking course, for which the plainest solution proved the best; the shift from concavity to convexity at the corners was introduced so that the band at the top should not appear in diagonal views to overhang the hollow-chamfered verticals below. Subtle, perhaps over-subtle, this last device emphasizes by contrast the remarkable assurance and apparent directness with which the other aspects of the profiling were executed, so different from the Art Nouveau which some have seen as the inspiration. The Greeks, too, it should be remembered, had had difficulties with the corners of their temples at the capital and entablature level.

Hellenic again at the Sheldon is the crisp stylobate at the base of the walls, broken forward to provide rectangular bases for the pilasters, but omitted at the porticos and in the sculpture hall where the piers rise directly from the floor-plane; while from the street to the left the retaining wall of the long terrace provides a wider foundation plane over which the building seems almost to float.

I have stressed so far the monumental aspects of the Sheldon Gallery, those aspects that give it something of the abstract distinction of Mies van der Rohe's famous Barcelona Pavilion of 1929, although it has little in common with that visually beyond the generous podium on which it is set and the use—here on the exterior exclusively—of travertine. But unlike Mies' pavilion which in effect had no function except to be beautiful, the interiors in Lincoln provide with great efficiency for the needs of a college museum of modest size. Having myself once directed such a museum for six years, I am particularly struck with the forethought given to all the problems with which such a small institution must deal, problems hardly known to the ordinary visitor. Others, however, must describe the range of storage and working facilities to which almost the entire basement and much of the ground story are devoted. Nor, despite the fact that I have myself spoken in it and can testify to its excellent acoustics, need I speak of the auditorium, since lecture-halls, though now common in small as well as in large museums, are not peculiar to them but found in most college buildings. The heart of a museum and, as I have suggested earlier, the area concerning which there are today the sharpest differences of opinion consists of the exhibi-

tion spaces.

Here, in the second story the two halves of the plan are separated by the upper portion of the sculpture gallery, though joined by the bridge to which the open double staircase leads. Two “windows,” moreover, in the front galleries to left and right reduce the claustrophobic effect of totally enclosed rooms and permit handsome views from this height down into the sculpture hall as well as a long vista from end to end of the building, as do also the doorways opening from the bridge on the other side. The relatively large galleries to the right, if far more positively studied than usual in their proportions, offer some at least of the elastic possibilities of varied arrangement, with or without the use of temporary screen partitions, of the open loft-spaces favored by so many American museum directors. Parallel strips in the ceiling allow for great elasticity in the placing of spots and other lighting arrangements for different installations, yet avoid the chaotic and distracting overhead pattern that has generally been an unhappy concomitant of open planning in 20th-century museums. In these galleries, moreover, the walls are of painted canvas so that their colors can be readily changed by repainting to accord with different exhibitions.

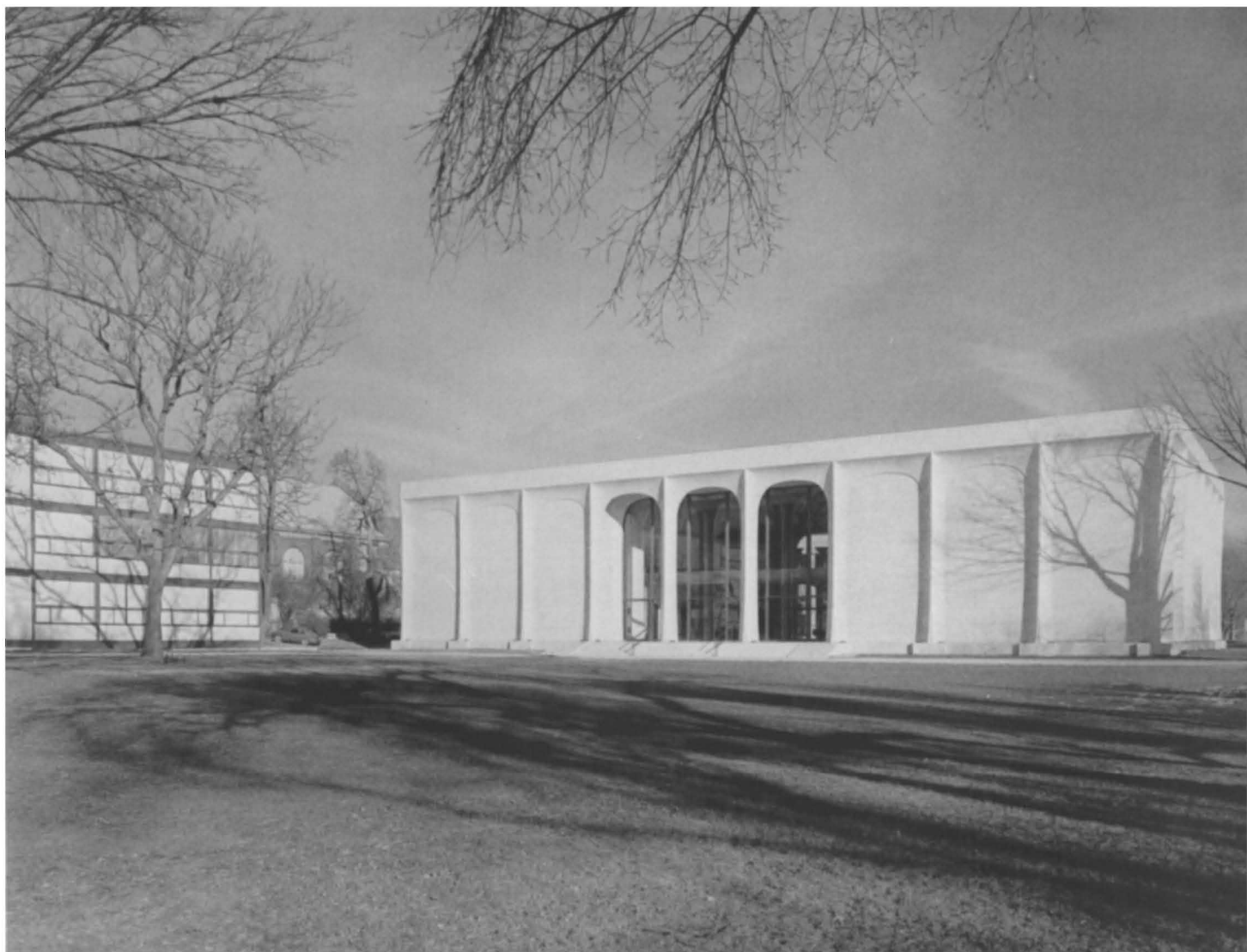
To the left on this second story, in the area where the permanent collection hangs, everything is fixed, with no provision for changes beyond occasional re-hanging. Since the painting collection is—and is expected to remain—very largely 20th-century American it does not seem an arbitrary assumption, as it might be if the collection were more varied in character, that a 20th-century American architect and a 20th-century American director should devise for it once and for all an appropriate permanent setting. Six galleries, four of identical size and two slightly shorter, are so arranged and so interrelated by doorways that, on the one hand, the visitor is offered a single path—or, at least, not more than one choice of path—in moving through them all, while, on the other hand, any one of them can be cut out from the circulation for re-hanging without making other galleries unapproachable. Technically this is most useful and desirable, but not easy to accomplish in a small building of confined oblong plan.

The galleries are identically equipped as regards wall covering, floor treatment, and lighting. Thus the many views that are obtainable—parts of as many as five of the six galleries can be seen at once from certain positions—have something of the unity of those in an open plan subdivided by screens but without the usual labyrinthine control of movement. Yet the openings between, though generous, are doorways not gaps in the walls; and each gallery exists as a formal, well-defined, rectangular space. Large pictures that require, or lend themselves, to viewing from a distance can be placed opposite doorways; small pictures are not lost, since certain hanging spaces in the corners beside the doorways are quite narrow. The background provided for the pictures is neutral, yet intrinsically handsome; for the off-white cotton carpeting has a rich texture that softens the light that evenly floods the walls. It is also a material that is unmarred by nail holes, so pictures can be hung without wires or other gadgetry.

The ceilings are particularly ingeniously handled. Their centers are dropped slightly to mask the continuous banks of lights; yet the dropped surface does not



3 The Gallery from the west



seem heavy as it is no darker, thanks to the downward tilting of the lighting, than the higher band at the edges. Finally the narrow dark strip just below the top of the walls, echoing the edges of the plain wooden door casings, further defines the lowered plane of the major portion of the ceilings as the upper limit of the space.

These are, of course, painting galleries although, as the gallery in front of the auditorium, similar to those on the second story but twice as large, makes evident, they could also be used, somewhat less effectively perhaps, for small sculpture. The great hall is primarily for large sculpture, though presumably a very few paintings of mural scale could be hung on the side walls. Happily it serves its primary purposes so well, as entrance foyer and center of circulation, and is intrinsically so handsome that the memorial sculptures by Brancusi, Lipchitz, and Noguchi—the latter two quite large—do not appear lost or irrelevant.

Thus we come back again to the Johnsonian conception of the museum as a permanent setting for works of art that it is itself a positive work of architectural art. The conception has many critics as the sharp reaction to Wright's Guggenheim made plain; yet the Guggenheim continues to draw visitors for its architecture as much as for its exhibitions. Fortunately the Sheldon is a far less idiosyncratic—if also, doubtless, less genial—work of architecture than the Guggenheim. Its architect, moreover, knows and understands museum problems from within as Wright never did. Himself a collector of 20th-century American painting, he could appreciate, as Wright did not apparently, what would be most effective for its display. But he could also provide the most positive work of architecture built in Lincoln—perhaps, indeed, in Nebraska—since Goodhue's Capitol. Nebraskans have not regretted later what was in its day a highly original and unconventional solution of housing a state government. I trust that the Sheldon Gallery, serving a less public purpose and very much less conspicuous in the city picture, may also continue to receive the admiration of posterity.

Henry-Russell Hitchcock

*Northampton, Massachusetts, December, 1963*

4 The Lake Pavilion, Philip Johnson, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1962



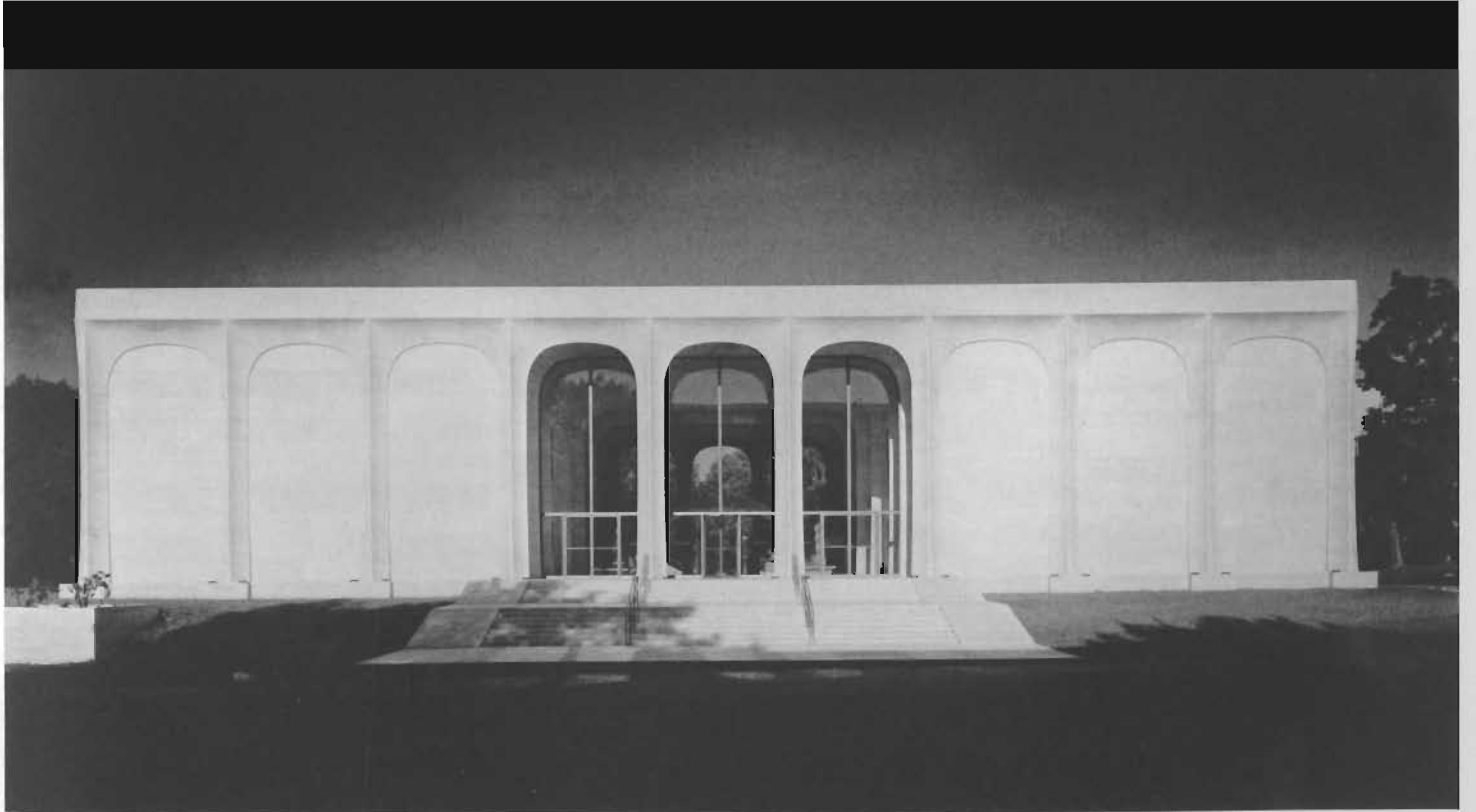
***The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln***

Ground Broken January 12, 1961  
Cornerstone Ceremony October 9, 1962  
Dedication May 16, 1963

*photographs by Ezra Stoller*

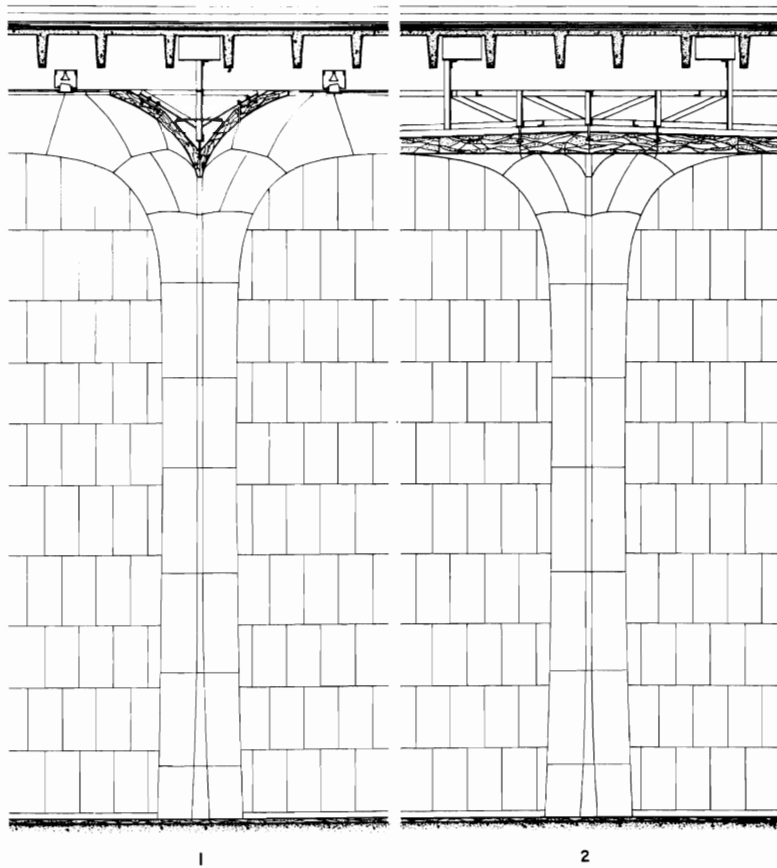
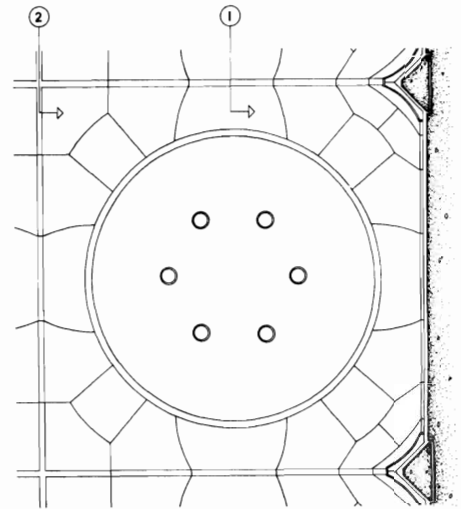






1 Reflected ceiling plan and section at center of arch

2 Reflected ceiling plan and section at rib crossing









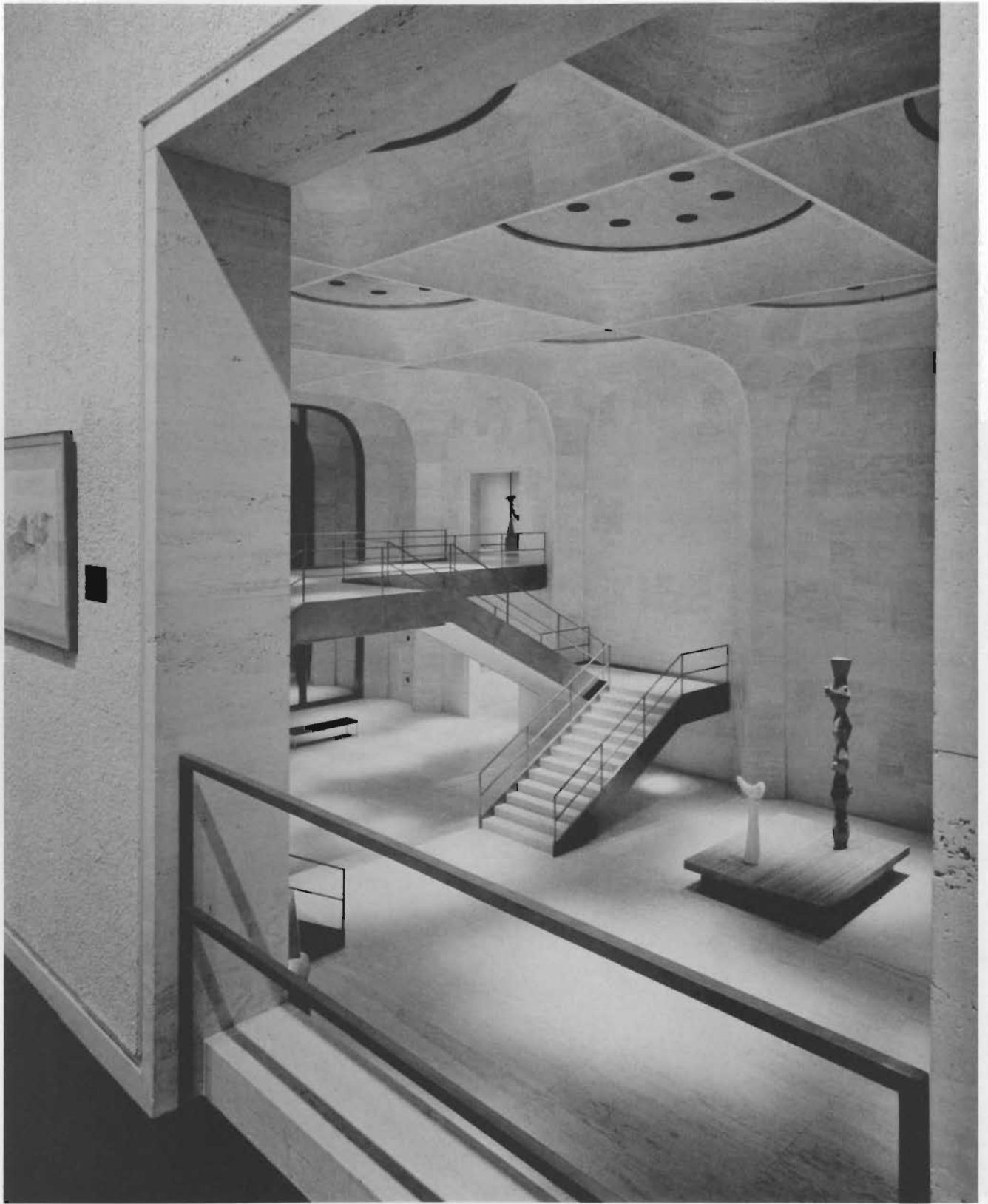




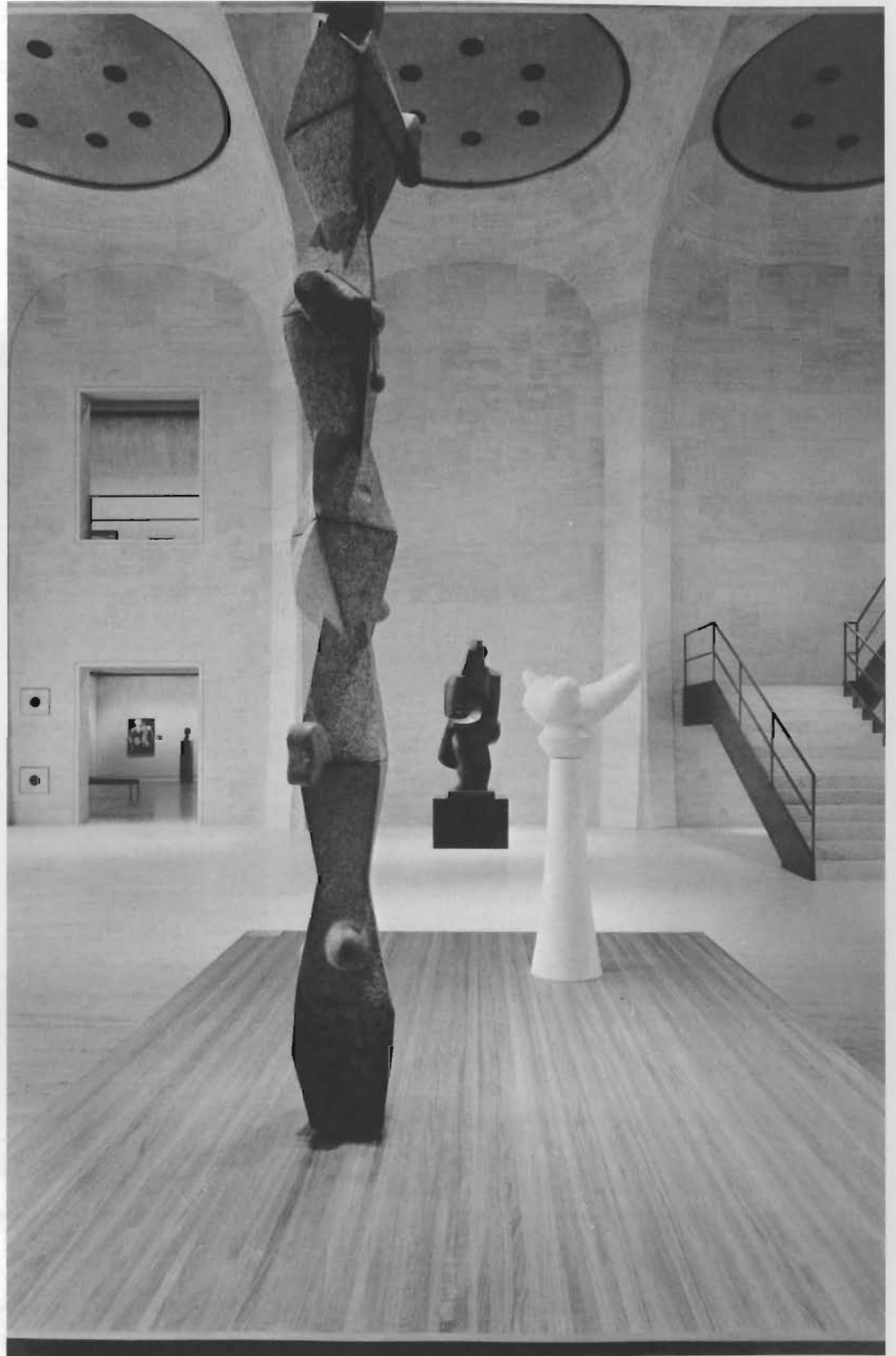




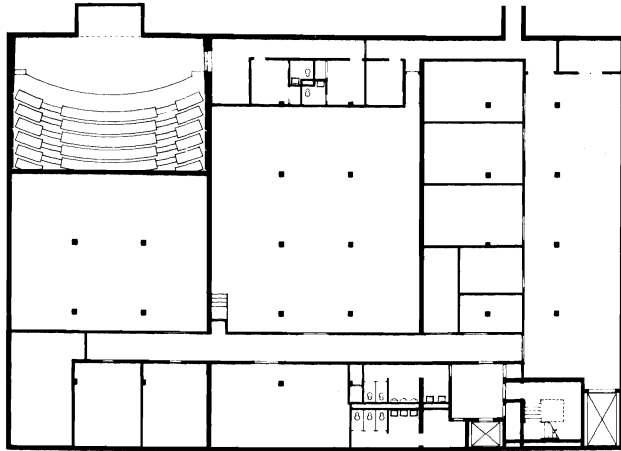




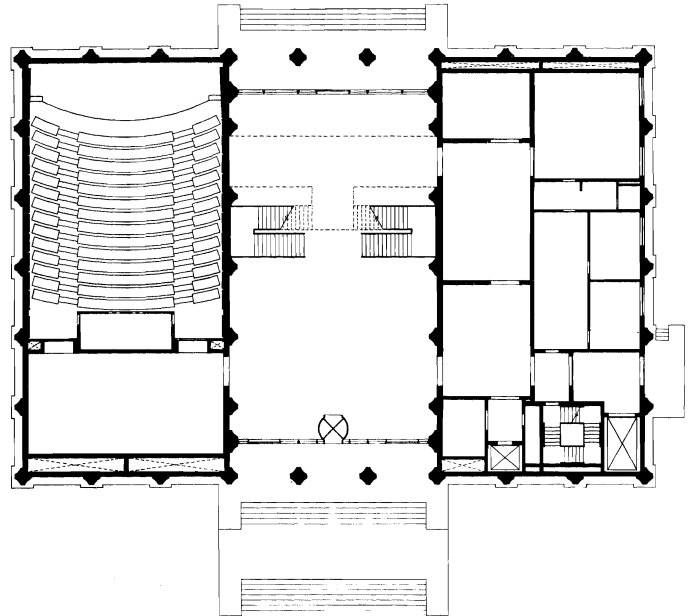




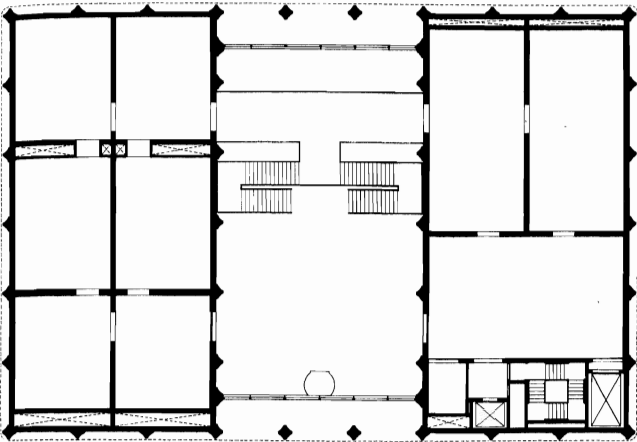
Basement



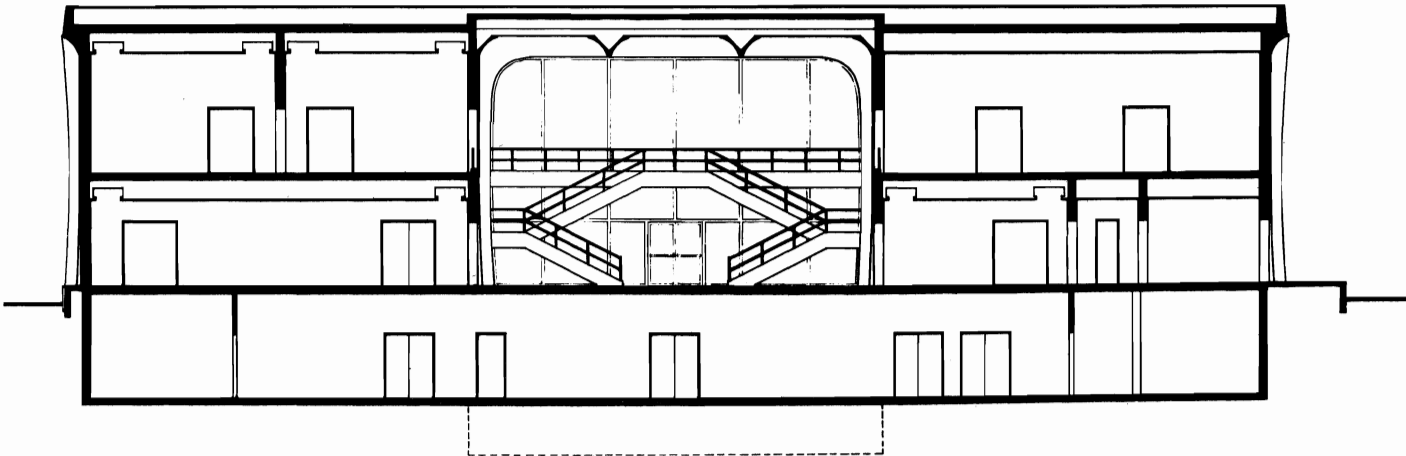
Ground floor



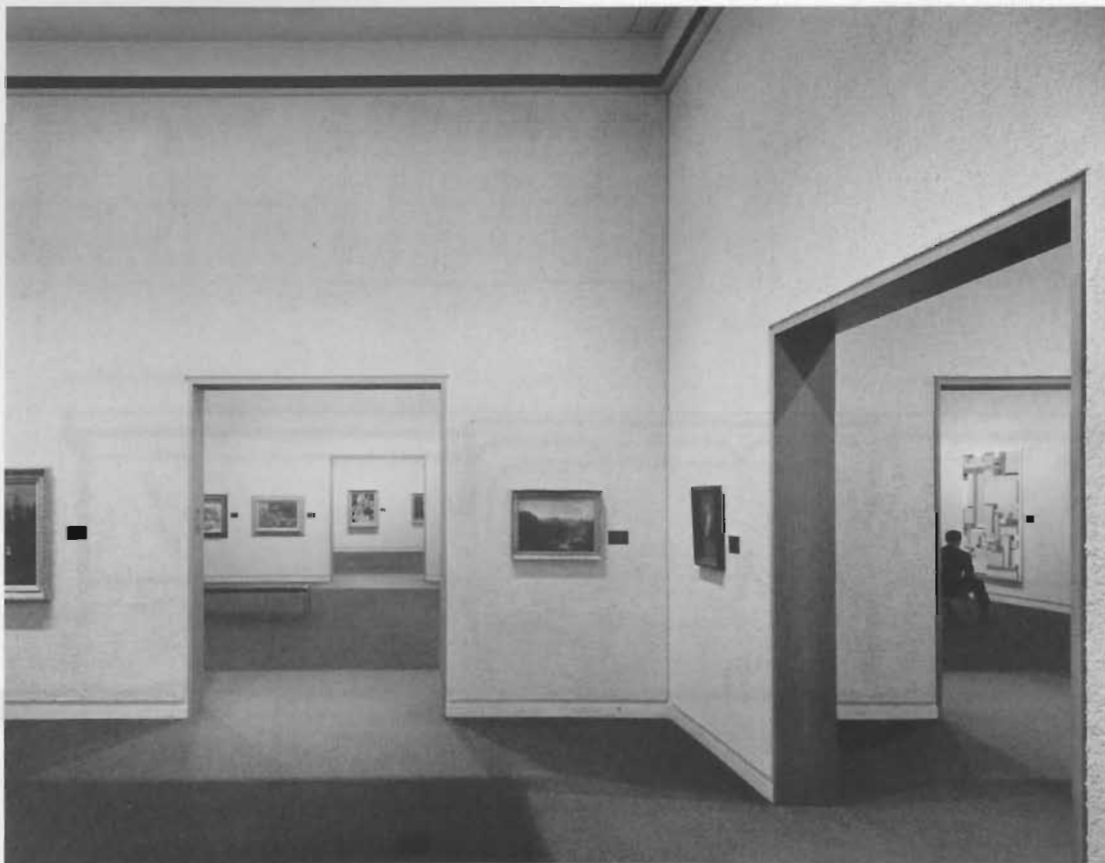
Second floor



Longitudinal section



Second floor: Permanent collection galleries







Second floor: Changing exhibition galleries



First floor gallery



Print storage

Print gallery looking into print study



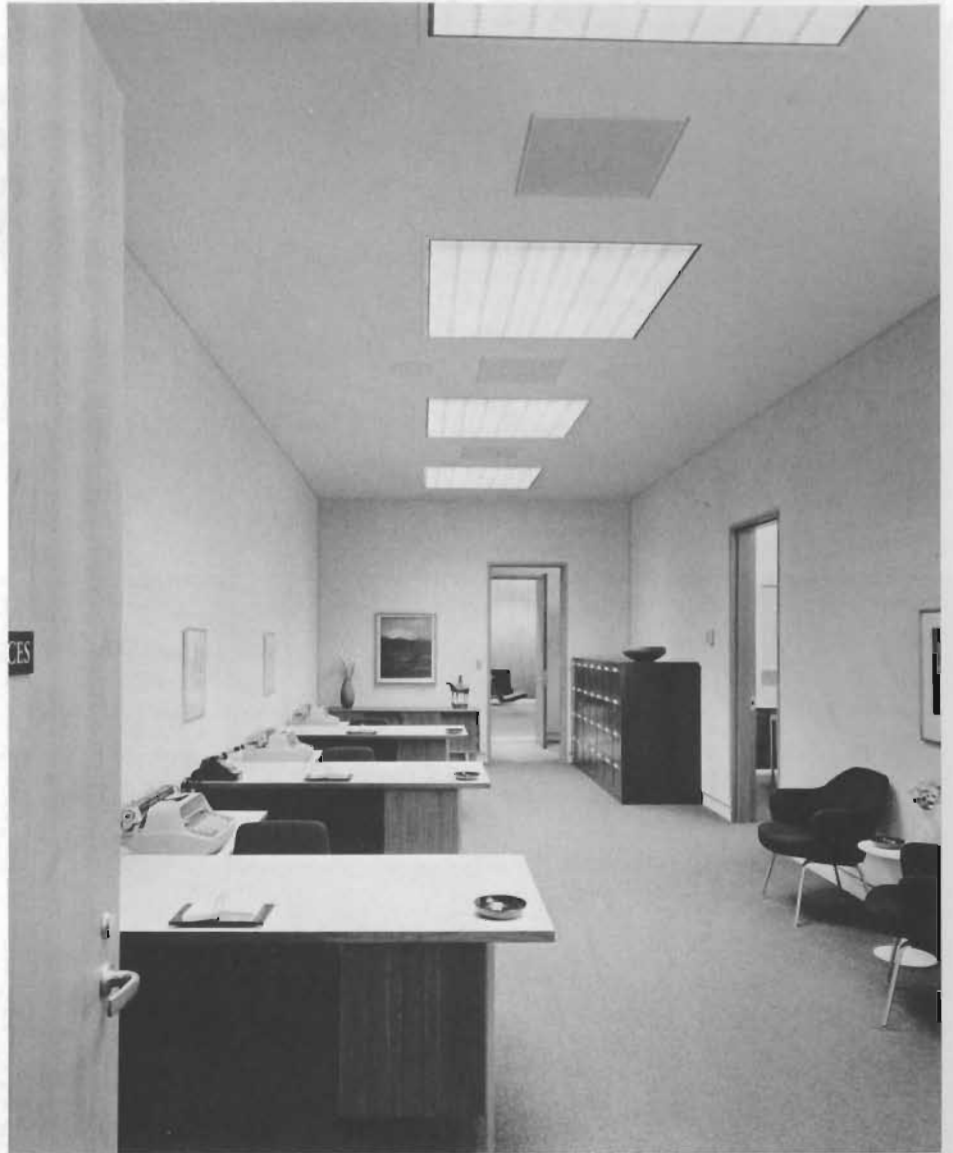


Nebraska Art Association Room



Art Shop





Offices

Auditorium



CREDITS

*Architects:* Philip Johnson Associates

*Structural engineers:* Leo Zetlin & Associates

*Mechanical engineers:* Jaros Baum & Bolles

*Supervising architects:* Hazen & Robinson

*Contractor:* Olson Construction Company