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Colorful artwork hangs on a second-floor wall at the Burchfield Penney Art Center.

Charles Lewis / Buffalo News

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The new Burchfield Penney Art Center draws huge crowd on opening night

New Burchfield Penney grand opening is today

By Maki Becker

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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The first new museum to be built in Buffalo in over a century has opened its doors to the public.

The Burchfield Penney Art Center — a \$33 million museum devoted to showcasing the work of Western New York artists — celebrated its opening Friday night with a jam-packed, members-only preview. This morning, the museum on the grounds of Buffalo State College kicks off its grand opening with a 31- hour celebration.

Friday night, members and donors came by the hundreds — jamming traffic on Elmwood Avenue as if they were headed to a hockey game.

Many had kept tabs on the progress of the new art center over the two years of construction. Some had gnawing concerns about how the monolithic and gray swathlike building would fit in with the architectural landscape of the Buffalo State campus, as well as Albright-Knox Art Gallery across the street, with its funky juxtaposition of neoclassical and ultramodern compartments.

But the Burchfield members seemed awestruck as they stepped from the bitter cold night into the bright, inviting 84,000-square-foot structure composed of an array of gallery spaces leading from one room to the next.

“I think it’s a triumph, an absolute triumph for Buffalo — a brand-new museum with a whole new concept of what an art museum should look like inside,” said Peter Dow of Buffalo, as he admired one of the museum’s cavernous gallery rooms, with his wife, Mimi. “. . . I think it’s a defining moment for the arts in Western New York.”

Dr. Elaine Megna, who teaches at the Educational Opportunity Center, was highly impressed, as well.

“It reminds me of the Metropolitan,” she said, as in the world-famous Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

The art center got its start nearly 42 years ago when Buffalo State College professor Edna M. Lindemann opened a small gallery in the former library of the school’s Rockwell Hall. It was dedicated exclusively to displaying the works of Buffalo watercolorist Charles E. Burchfield.

The collection got a huge boost in 1991 and in 1994, when Lockport art collector Charles R. Penney donated a large number of works, including many Burchfields. Over the last few years, the art center has expanded to include the works of more Western New York artists.

David Derner, a Buffalo-based sculptor, said he is thrilled at the prospect of someday being able to show his work in the museum.

“As a Western New York artist myself, having a world-class museum with a mission to promote area artists — it really excites me to have someplace you can work toward and maybe have your work shown here.”

Many members also were happy to be celebrating the completion of a successful project in Buffalo — a refreshing change of pace compared with the long list of slow, even stalled, efforts, such as the new Peace Bridge, the development of the waterfront and the Statler Towers.

“We need it,” said retired dentist John Hurly, a member and donor to the new museum. “Timing is everything. You had good people at the right time, and they pushed on and succeeded.”

Onda Simmons, a volunteer at the Darwin Martin House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, said she believes tourists will be interested in the Burchfield Penney Art Center.

“We get thousands of people from all over the country and even outside of the country [visiting the Darwin Martin House],” she said. “Something like this that is very special will bring people to Buffalo.”

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