

The Buffalo News

Wednesday, December 10, 2008

Make us your homepage!

[Home](#) > [Burchfield Penney](#)



The new Burchfield Penney Art Center, a regional museum dedicated to Western New York artists, will open Saturday in its impressive new home on the Buffalo State College campus.

Bill Wippert / Buffalo news

Updated: 11/16/08 11:56 AM

Buffalo's new masterpiece

The new home of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center will welcome visitors starting Saturday, celebrating the region's wealth of art and culture

By Colin Dabkowski

News Arts Writer

Story tools:

Related Content

- **An extensive Web package includes interactive maps, 360-degree views of the main gallery, videos, slide shows and more.**

Related Stories

- **New Burchfield Penney grand opening is today**
- **Burchfield: A perfectionist**
- **A design full of surprises**
- **Small beginnings, big dreams**

- **Mission accomplished**

Share this story:



On Dec. 9, 1966, an ambitious Buffalo State College professor, Edna M. Lindemann, opened the doors to the brand new Charles Burchfield Center. The small center, headquartered in the former library of Buffalo State's Rockwell Hall, was Lindemann's labor of love, an institution dedicated exclusively to the art and legacy of the world-famous Buffalo painter Charles Ephraim Burchfield.

That was then. And while Burchfield still holds the uncontested position of Western New York's most important and widely collected artist, the center that bears his name has grown into much more than a sanctuary for his fantastical watercolors.

While remaining true to its namesake, the Burchfield-Penney Art Center — which opens to the public Saturday in a brand new building — is focused on the region, dedicated to a geographic swath of art-making that cuts across the eight counties of Western New York.

The Burchfield-Penney's new museum will enter the ranks of some two dozen large regional art museums in the United States. Unlike the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, its more broadly focused neighbor, the Burchfield-Penney's mission is to exhibit and promote the artists of Western New York. It's not nearly as sexy a mission as that of more worldly museums, but it is part of a national trend toward regionalism in art, tourism and culture in general.

"I think you have a distinct opportunity as a regional museum to reflect your culture and to add some new layers to understanding and perceptions of it," said Rick Gruber, director of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, an institution situated in a comparably sized city with its own internationally focused museum. While the New Orleans Museum of Art, like the Albright-Knox, exhibits artists with international reputations as well as the odd local artist, it's up to places like the Ogden and the Burchfield-Penney to interpret and reflect the history and ever-morphing makeup of their own backyards.

"This is part of the cultural history of the United States. If you live in the region, it's part of your cultural history," said James H. Duff, director of the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pa., a small but popular museum focusing on the work of the Wyeth family. "You should understand how your community came to be what it is today."

But how to overcome the notion held by many a Western New Yorker that regional art in the Burchfield-Penney, accomplished and intriguing though it may be, doesn't hold up against those Warhols, Rothkos and Pollocks across the street? It's a notion that many in the museum world, understandably enough, like to dismiss as irrelevant. But a look at the numbers shows otherwise. In the 2006-07 fiscal year, 137,203 people visited the Albright-Knox. In roughly the same time period, fewer than 30,000 visitors trudged up to the second floor of Rockwell Hall to check out the local artworks on view at the Burchfield-Penney.

For the center's director, Ted Pietrzak, the gradually evaporating stigma that surrounds the term "regional art" boils down to insecurity.

"I think it's part of human nature and it doesn't have to do just solely with art, but it has to do with how we think about the great things around us. And many times we need verification from a third party," Pietrzak said. "Some people find comfort that the artist is in a book. Some find comfort if the artist is selling in the six-figure category. Some find comfort that he/she is having an exhibition

in New York. All things that point to a level of career accomplishment, but sometimes those are transitory things. We can create fictions about certain things and ignore that we have, at home, terrific artists."

With the expansion of the citywide biennial (now triennial) exhibition "Beyond/In Western New York," launched in 2005 and spearheaded by Albright-Knox Director Louis Grachos, the area's top regional artists have received a kind of extreme image makeover. Though in its most recent incarnation, "Beyond/In" cast its net somewhat wider (Syracuse to Toronto to Cleveland), most of the artists were Western New Yorkers and the show drew record numbers of locals to 12 galleries around the city, including the former Burchfield-Penney.

"From my perspective, it's not about 'regional art,' " Grachos said. "It's about representing the talent that exists in the area. In this day in age, I think the regional stigma doesn't mean anything anymore. It's just about supporting good artists and good programs and good exhibitions. And I think the great thing about our community is that there's a real depth of talent across the board, and I think that's something that the Burchfield-Penney will reflect beautifully."

To that end, the new building's design includes a room dedicated to multimedia projects, wherein artists can experiment with complex installations that many of them haven't previously been able to produce in the city's myriad other art spaces.

For Brian Milbrand, a video, installation and performance artist who will participate in a number of projects associated with the center's opening, the center represents a greatly expanded opportunity for artists working in nontraditional media. After a tour through the building and its contemporary project space with the performance art and theater troupe Real Dream Cabaret, Milbrand was floored.

"It's so amazing," he said. "We usually are at Rust Belt [Books], where we have a lot of constraints on what we can do exactly, and I just felt like there were no constraints on that space at all. With three HD projectors and 16 speakers that you can plug in eight different channels to from any point on the wall, I felt like there was nothing I couldn't do in that room."

Pietrzak, after hashing out the myriad resources the center will supply for the regional art scene, pointed to the spirit of the artists themselves as the primary draw for Western New Yorkers.

Because of the center, Pietrzak said, "these artists become real people in our lives. That's a unique experience in itself, to have an artist as a friend, or to know that you can chat with an artist at an opening rather than admire his or her work through a book or a movie, or a video. These people are very real people and they have unique ways of looking at the world and I think they make for a far more interesting and dynamic community.

cdabkowski@buffnews.com

© 2008 The Buffalo News. The information you receive online from The Buffalo News is protected by the copyright laws of the United States.

The copyright laws prohibit any copying, redistributing, re-transmitting, or re-purposing of any copyright-protected material.