

RAM's First 20 Years: A Visual History of the Art and Architecture

This exhibition is a visual summary of the art and architecture that has helped to shape the early chapters of Racine Art Museum, home of North America's largest contemporary craft collection. The exhibition blends objects from RAM's holdings with photographs of both the building designed by Brininstool + Lynch and the galleries filled with art.

Celebrating an anniversary often involves an assessment of where things are and where they could be relative to where they were. RAM is an institution focused on creativity and vision and the building reflects that. Looking back at what motivated design plans and architectural concepts provides background for considering future objectives.

Not only do the images and objects featured in this exhibition establish a framework for understanding a formative time for this dynamic institution, they recognize the symbiotic relationship between the architectural space and the art that inhabits it. Because Brininstool + Lynch—an award-winning architectural firm based in Chicago—designed RAM with the permanent collection in mind, the interior is meant to showcase the artwork. The theories behind the design strategy reinforce the connection:

“Using a structural economy, the design of the RAM project provides the best possible viewing conditions for RAM's collection. The existing building, a composite of different structural systems from prior renovations, has been completely reconfigured. Its interior uses transparency, translucency, opacity, and light to establish a continuing sense of anticipation as a visitor moves through the space. The museum is designed to allow access to an abundance of natural light and views to Lake Michigan, while controlling light in critical areas to protect the art from damage and provide optimal viewing. To signal the interior's transformation, a system of translucent panels held away from the building surface covers much of the exterior. Natural light causes the panels to be iridescent during the day, while lighting illuminates them in the evenings so that the exterior glows.”



(above)
Exterior view of RAM's inaugural Windows on Fifth exhibition, *Dale Chihuly Glass Baskets*
May 11, 2003–June 11, 2004
Photography: Christopher Barrett, Hedrich Blessing, Chicago, IL

(bottom left)
Therman Statom
Home, 1986
Glass and enamel paint
15 x 9 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches
Racine Art Museum,
the Karen Johnson Boyd Collection
Photography: Jon Bolton

Various custom features illustrate further how the building itself can frame both the artwork and the viewing experience:

- The viewing spot on the landing of the grand staircase allows visitors to see the main lobby while simultaneously allowing for people in the lobby to see those going upstairs.
- The notch in the main dividing wall in the large gallery upstairs echoes the notch on the staircase and, upon entering the space, hints at what is exhibited on the other side of the wall.
- The floor-to-ceiling glass “case” in the interior gallery on the first floor echoes the windows to the outside in the entrance gallery, but non-reflective glass creates a more intimate space for contemplation.

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Installation view from the exhibition
Collection Focus: Randall Darwall
 September 21, 2022–January 7, 2023
 Photography: Jon Bolton

While RAM’s collection has grown exponentially since the museum was first built, it is still rooted in the kind of work that encouraged the overall design. In addition, certain facets have been expanded, such as the rotating exhibition series that occurs in the Windows on Fifth gallery on the south side of the museum’s ground floor. While it was originally intended to focus on artists working with clay, metal, and glass, various exhibitions have included found objects, fibers, and natural materials.

RAM’s First 20 Years is also an homage to Brad Lynch, partner at Brininstool + Lynch and Racine native. Lynch, who passed away in 2022, took his first art classes at RAM’s Wustum Museum and incorporated his own experiences being raised in this community into his work on RAM. His desire to establish a space that would draw

people inside led to distinctive building features such as the acrylic panels on the exterior and a ground floor with storefront-like windows that make the interior contents visible from the street.

The exhibition is designed to expand over time to include an archive focused on RAM’s design and construction with a special emphasis on Brad Lynch’s involvement.

As described above, RAM’s collection of contemporary craft directly inspired the architectural vision for the building constructed in 2003. 20 years later, with the collection now ranking as the largest in North America, its role as a framework for the focus of the organization is further supported. Spotlighting RAM’s current holdings and broader motivations offers key points for understanding past, present, and future goals.

About the Collection

- RAM stewards the largest collection of contemporary craft in North America.
- Seeking work from artists who create meaningful artistic statements in craft media, RAM dispels any differentiation between fine art and craft and between the artist and the craftsperson.
- RAM bridges any perceived gaps between contemporary craft and fine art by exhibiting appropriate works in craft media with works on paper, such as prints and photography, paintings, and sculpture.
- The collection features artwork by nationally and internationally-recognized artists utilizing craft media, such as ceramic, fiber, glass, wood, metal, polymer, paper, and more.
- Hallmarks include noteworthy concentrations of teapots, baskets, polymer artworks, art to wear, artists’ books, artwork produced through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), art jewelry, and artist archives that reflect an artist’s career in-depth.
- Significantly, 41% of the artists in RAM’s collection are women.
- The entire collection—which includes works on paper, like prints, drawings, watercolor, and photography, and supporting works in other media—numbers over 11,000 works as of 2023.
- The museum will continue to acquire artwork that uses a variety of media to illustrate a broad range of viewpoints, backgrounds, heritage, and modes of expression.

About RAM

- RAM is committed to supporting diverse voices—whether that diversity reflects race, gender, heritage, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, social standing, or world perspective. RAM strives toward this on both operational and programmatic levels, including through its collection, exhibitions, and outreach programming.
- RAM provides a cultural destination that offers a space for exploration, education, and creative expression and that provides the opportunity to experience, understand, and learn about the value of contemporary craft as fine art.
- RAM plays a vital role in arts education through RAM’s Wustum Museum, where it offers community outreach, professional development programs for artists, and studio art classes and workshops taught by nationally-known artists working in craft media.
- Exhibitions and events at both campuses reflect the commitment to supporting diverse artists, voices, and audiences; urge inquiry, exploration, and empathy about the world in which we live; and encourage social gatherings.
- These organizations contribute to and encourage positive self-esteem, pride of place, and an embrace of the creative economy and the potential for Racine as well as the communities they engage.



Jack Earl
Carrot Finger, 1981
 Glazed white earthenware and china paint
 26 1/2 x 8 x 6 inches
 Racine Art Museum, the Karen Johnson Boyd
 Collection in Honor of William B. Boyd on the
 Occasion of their 25th Wedding Anniversary
 Photography: Jon Bolton