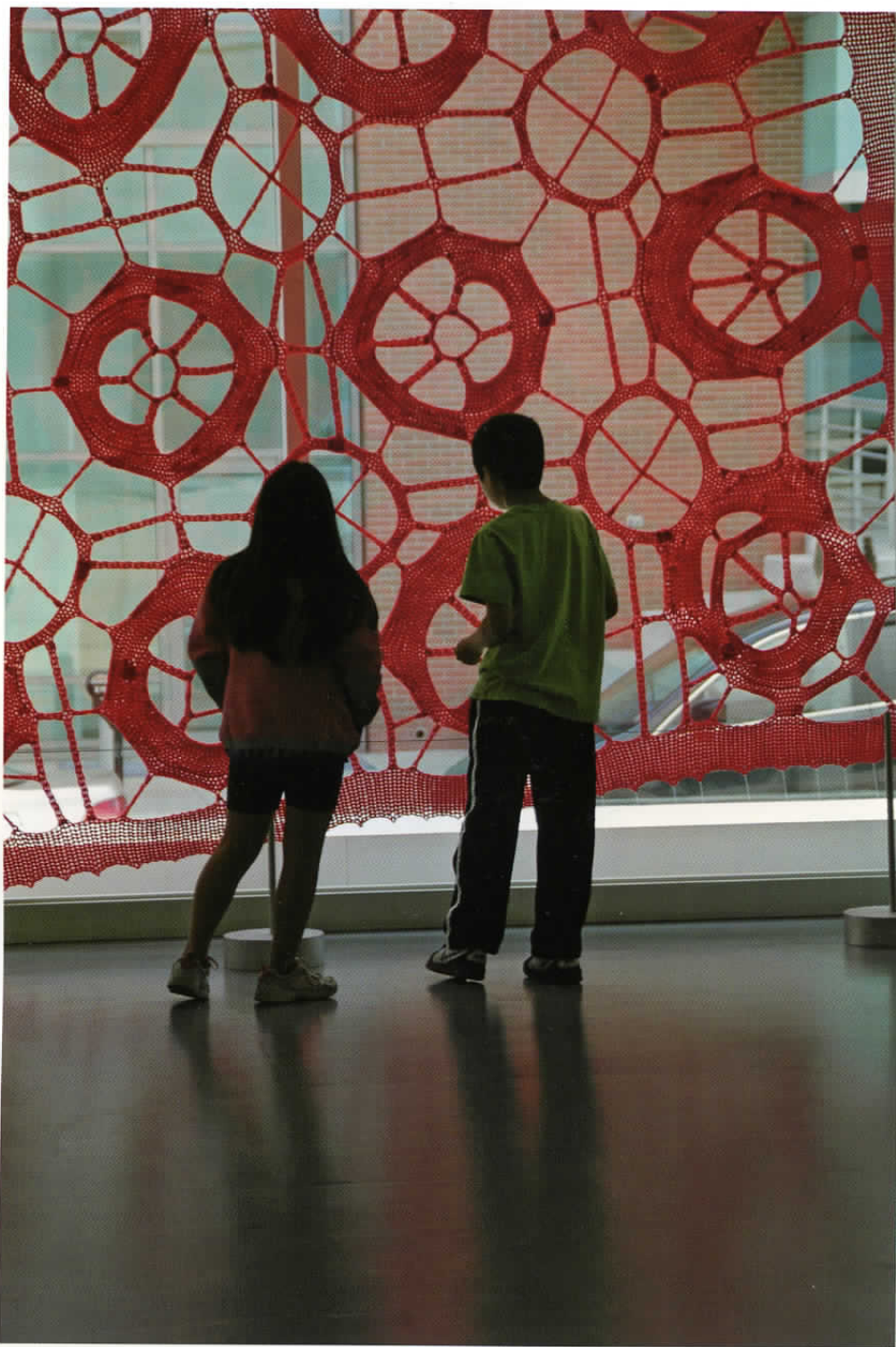


✦ A LOVE ✦  
FOR THE BEAUTIFUL

DISCOVERING AMERICA'S HIDDEN ART MUSEUMS



SUSAN JAQUES



Photography by Marc Wollman

*Inside the Racine Art Museum, Matt Eskuche, Agristocracy, August 2010–July 2011*



## CRAFTING A COLLECTION

# RACINE ART MUSEUM

*Racine, Wisconsin*

*“With its sophisticated architecture, deep collection and experienced leadership, the new Racine Art Museum is a must-visit for anyone interested in the future of contemporary craft.”*

—Glenn Adamson, *American Craft*

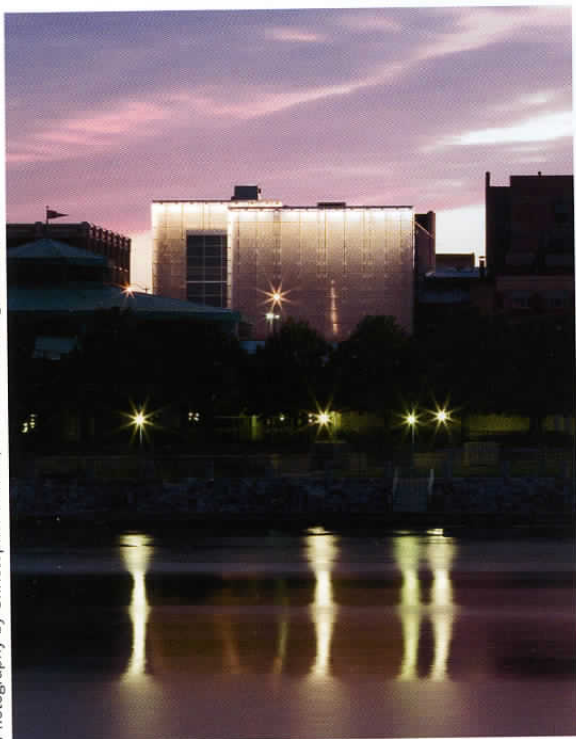
Architecture fans know Racine, Wisconsin, from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Wingspread and S. C. Johnson Building. There’s another great reason to visit this town on the west shore of Lake Michigan, seventy miles north of Chicago. The Racine Art Museum (RAM) elegantly houses one of the country’s most

significant collections of contemporary crafts. On average, forty-five thousand visitors a year—over half of Racine’s population—come to see the remarkable ceramics, glass, baskets, metalwork, and wood designs.

It’s unlikely you’ll see the same object twice. RAM’s galleries are reinstalled three times a year with artworks from the nearly eight thousand-object permanent collection. A ninety-foot swathe of windows along Fifth Street, lit at night, is a dramatic space for changing glass, ceramics, and metalwork. Smaller objects are showcased in handsome blond wood display cases. Wood and fiber objects, sensitive to light, are presented in a large windowless gallery. Upstairs, a soaring sky-lit gallery is used to exhibit paintings, sculpture, and furniture.

Opened in 2003, RAM’s building is a striking departure from its original location. In 1938 Jennie Wustum donated her thirteen-acre homestead and small trust fund to the city of Racine to found the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts in memory of her husband. Six decades later the rapidly expanding collection had outgrown its house museum. RAM’s dynamic director, Bruce Pepich, spearheaded a fundraising drive to renovate two downtown buildings—a turn-of-the-twentieth-century dry goods store and a bank robbed by gangster John Dillinger in the 1930s.

Photography by Christopher Barrett, Hedrich Blessing, Chicago, IL



Racine-born architect Bradley Lynch transformed the dark, gloomy structures into a serene, inviting space. To unite the buildings, Lynch wrapped the exterior with backlit frosted acrylic panels that create an ethereal glow at night. The eastern facade was replaced with glass, exposing Lake Michigan and flooding the thirty-foot atrium lobby with sunlight. Long rectilinear spaces and a palette of whites have created a quiet interior that lets the artwork shine. Over at the Wustum there are regional art exhibitions and studio art workshops.

RAM's approach is to collect artists in depth, tracing the development of their styles and ideas. Many of the artists in the collection are considered leaders in their categories, pushing the boundaries of their mediums. Visitors can expect to see mini-career surveys drawn from the collection along with exhibits featuring artworks from private collections. The collection has grown through generous gifts from a number of contemporary craft connoisseurs, most notably Karen Johnson Boyd.

Great-granddaughter of the founder of S. C. Johnson & Son, Boyd grew up in Racine and spent her teenage years at Wingspread, the hilltop house Frank Lloyd Wright built for her family (open to the public by reservation). Today the avid art collector and founder of the Perimeter Gallery lives in another Wright house in Racine. Her donations include an early gift of two hundred works that gave RAM a significant collection overnight.

RAM's largest collection is ceramics, representing a wide range of artists and styles. The Donna Moog Teapot Collection features over 250 remarkable pieces from the 1980s and 1990s. One of the highlights of the studio glass collection is Jon Kuhn's radiant glass *Pendulum Cluster* hanging from the ceiling of the two-story atrium. The prismlike pendants change color when seen from different angles, including the upstairs balcony. Other celebrated



*Karen Johnson Boyd in RAM's gallery*

Photography by Nicholson's of Racine

glass artists include Philip Myers, Dale Chihuly, William Morris, Ginny Ruffner, William Carlson, and Mark Peiser.

In terms of size and scope, RAM's nearly five hundred-piece contemporary basket collection ranks at the top of US museums. Artists like Ed Rossbach, Kay Sekimachi, Ferne Jacobs, and Dorothy Gill Barnes laid the foundation for successors John McQueen, Jane Sauer, Gyongy Laky, and John Garrett. The baskets incorporate an astonishing array of materials—everything from zippers, beads, and feathers to horsehair and salmon skin. In addition to baskets from Karen Johnson Boyd, Lloyd Cotsen, the former CEO of Neutrogena, donated another 150 contemporary baskets, mostly by American women artists.

RAM's works of art in wood include both furniture and turned vessels. One of the museum's masterworks is a serpentine mahogany desk with a white laminate top by Wendell Castle, known for his highly sculptural, organic forms. Renowned wood turners like Mark Lindquist, Bob Stocksdale, and the Moulthrop's highlight the natural characteristics of wood in varieties like Ashleaf Maple, Georgia Loblolly Pine, and Black Willow. In a testament to nature's role in their art, many wood turners sign the name of the wood alongside their own.



The museum's metal collection centers around American studio jewelry with works by artists like Arline Fisch, Lisa and Scott Cylinder, and Chunghi Choo. Also represented is jewelry by Earl Pardon, famous for combining rich colors in enameled metal surfaces and colored gemstones. Pardon is credited with helping to revive enameling and contributing to the popularity of American studio jewelry in the second half of the twentieth century.

A new addition to RAM's permanent collection is polymer—a synthetic modeling compound that's gaining recognition as an artistic medium. The museum owns a group of sophisticated polymer works, many of which combine the material with other contemporary craft disciplines. Among the highlights are a painterly polymer and wood credenza by J. M. Syron and Bonnie Bishoff and striking art jewelry by Elise Winters, Cynthia Toops, and Pier Voulkos.

**GETTING THERE** Address: The Racine Art Museum, 441 Main St.; the Wustum, 2519 Northwestern Ave., Racine, WI Phone: (262) 638-8300 Website: ramart.org Hours: Tuesday to Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Sunday noon to 5:00 p.m. Admission: Adults \$5, seniors, students, and young adults \$3, children under 12 free

## Not to Miss

### *Woven Feathers Bracelet*, Arline Fisch, 1970

American jeweler Arlene Fisch is famous for the use of fiber techniques in metal. She weaves, pleats, knits, and crochets metal to create remarkable pieces of wearable jewelry. Early in her career Fisch found inspiration in ancient pre-Columbian and Egyptian art. Her stunning pieces range from collars and full-length body pieces to brooches and bracelets—like this work in sterling and fine silver, macaw feathers, and Egyptian faience beads.



Racine Art Museum, Gift of Jane R. Gittings in honor of Irene Purcell, photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago, IL



Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago, IL

*Star Series*, Toshiko Takaezu, 1999–2000

The late Toshiko Takaezu donated this stunning installation of fourteen large-scale ceramic vessels to RAM. To create the masterwork, Hawaii-born Takaezu poured color on the top and sides of each piece, then brushed on dark color in a style reminiscent of Japanese painting. Each of the closed stoneware vessels contains a poem that can't be read unless the piece is shattered. With the individual elements ranging from forty-six to sixty-eight inches tall and twenty-five to forty inches in diameter, the installation is designed to walk through and around. The artist's favorite vessel in the series was *Unas*, named for an Egyptian pharaoh.

*Vessel*, David Ellsworth, 1987

Master technician David Ellsworth is a pioneer of freestyle turning—using the defects of wood like splits, rotten areas, and bark inclusions to create distinctive forms. Ellsworth also works with “green” or uncured wood, allowing the material to shrink and shape the surface as it dries. By using a blind turning technique and tools of his own design, Ellsworth's thin-walled pieces are surprisingly lightweight. This variegated Macassar ebony vessel is a good example of the artist's expressive works.



Racine Art Museum, Promised Gift of Jane and Arthur Mason, photography by Jon Bolton, Racine, WI