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The new Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art



The Toledo Museum of Art



The University of Toledo Art Building



El Greco
The Agony in the Garden
1590-95
Toledo Museum of Art

GLASS HOUSES

by Ben Davis

Sleek and low-to-the-ground, dominated by curving, transparent surfaces, gleaming like an expensive new sports car, the Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art, which debuted Aug. 27, 2006, is a striking symbol of cultural power. Intended to give pride of place to the institution's collection of art glass, the \$30-million building, designed by the Japanese firm Sanaa, is the result of the largest public fund-raising drive ever undertaken in the area. It has received rave reviews: "It is not architecture with a Big Message," *New York Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff pronounced. "It is about empathy for the human condition." (I too was relieved when "the human condition" was taken off the list of big issues to tackle.)

Some additional work is in order to put the meaning of this achievement in context, however. The Pavilion adds to the museum complex's already formidable contribution to the cultural life of Toledo. Its existing, neoclassical headquarters have a heroic profile, with a proud grill of Ionic columns and a sweep of steps resembling a modest version of the Metropolitan Museum's triumphal stair -- though the heroics feel a bit lonely here, facing an empty lawn and placid Monroe Street instead of a bustling Fifth Avenue. Nearby, there is a Frank Gehry-designed sister building, the requisite stack of curvy blocks, though this flashy structure houses mainly facilities for the University of Toledo.

The University recently became the biggest employer in Toledo, according to the Ohio Board of Regents, surpassing Jeep manufacturing in this once brawny industrial town, slowly waning since the Reagan years. Like nearby Detroit, Toledo is a manufacturing center in retreat, suffering population drain and waves of bankruptcy and reorganization at its major employers. In 2005, Toledo came onto the national radar for the first time in a while -- urban unrest in downtrodden north Toledo, in response to a rally of Neo-Nazis.

Among other things, the new Glass Pavilion is a symbol of the links between the arts community and Toledo's manufacturing, both spiritually and materially. The museum was founded and endowed by Edward Libbey, whose Libbey Glass Company -- now a part of Owens-Illinois, which has recently announced that it is evacuating downtown Toledo for the suburb of Perrysburg -- made the city the capital of industrial glass throughout the 20th century. Toledo is still called the "Glass City," even as globalization and the merger-madness of the '90s have eaten away at its central status.

Thus, the Toledo Museum of Art has a heft out of proportion with its setting in 2006. On a Friday afternoon, the free museum is only modestly populated, and the security guards greet visitors with a smile and a "hello" as they wander between rooms, gazing at a collection of treasures that aspires to anthological breadth.

There's *The Agony in the Garden* (1590-95) by El Greco (a native of the other Toledo), with a dazed-looking Christ caught at the center of a fateful vortex of clouds, between an angel and distantly



Jean-Honore Fragonard
Blind-Man's Buff
 1750
 Toledo Museum of Art



French cloister (1150-1400), located at
 the Toledo Museum of Art



Thomas Cole
The Architect's Dream
 1840
 Toledo Museum of Art

approaching Romans. Elsewhere, there are the more decadent pleasures of Fragonard's *Blind Man's Buff* (1750) -- the companion piece to the equally famous *The Swing* -- all Rococo pinks and dainty greens, featuring a blindfolded lady groping amorously through a garden. There's even a transplanted French medieval cloister (1150-1400), coolly lit and meditatively silent.

A favorite is Hudson River School great Thomas Cole's crazed oil-on-canvas *The Architect's Dream* (1840). Perched on a giant free-standing column, a tiny figure gazes upon a sweeping panorama of different mixed-up architectural wonders, from Greek and Roman temples and a Renaissance-style gazebo, to an Egyptian temple, the outline of a pyramid going into the sky and a soaring medieval church. The canvas as a whole is framed by images of two curtains draped on Corinthian columns, as if the viewer were gazing at a fantastic scene passing on a stage.

It is an appropriate centerpiece for this institution. The painting was commissioned from Cole by architect Ithiel Town in 1839 -- the building designs are inspired by pattern books Town gave the artist -- but Town rejected it, complaining that it was too extravagant. Cole saw the rejection as a symbol of the genius of the American painter shackled by provincial taste. The phantasmagoria, therefore, stands as a potent symbol of art out-of-joint with its setting.

The museum's curators are smart and in-step with global taste (of the institution's most recent acquisitions, Duane Hanson's *The Executive* (1971), a hyper-realist sculpture of a slouching, weary business traveler, discomforts the way that good avant-garde art can). On the other hand, the "88th Annual Toledo Area Artists Exhibition," on view in the Museum's spacious Canaday gallery through Sept. 3, 2006, paints an interesting picture of how this taste sits with its public.

The juried show of local artists (i.e. artists from northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan) offers up 116 entries in a variety of media, from Mary Ellen Graham's layered red, pink and lavender glass *Splash*, to Barbara Byram's colored pencil *Emily*, an image of dog pawprints in the sand beside the retreating foam of waves. It is, additionally, a selling show, with most works on offer for a few hundred bucks. Grand prize winner this year was Shawn Morin's *Table*, a mixed-media artwork/table, with a row of 12 blocks mounted along its top, each made of a different glossy material.

The *Toledo Blade* notes that this year's "Exhibition" is particularly conservative, though there are feisty exceptions (Susan Krueger's scrappy patchwork fabric eye chart spelling out the phrase "Katie Holmes Has a Rolex" -- that's something you can imagine at Rivington Arms!) Given the backdrop of the cosmopolitan collection, it is too easy to diagnose this as parochialism. If contemporary art in New York breathes a gravity-defying sense of individualism, and thus propagandizes the ability of art to jump out ahead of its audience, here there's a sense of art mired in the past. This reflects the reality of the spiritual present in a faded Toledo. It also reflects a different, more sober assessment of art's relation to society.

The height of "gravity-defying" artistic hubris in recent years has been the Bilbao Effect -- the phenomenon of "destination architecture," with cities focusing investment in showpiece cultural institutions as part of urban renewal schemes, trying to clone the rejuvenating effect that Frank Gehry's Guggenheim had on industrial Bilbao. However critics like Ouroussoff want to spin it, the glittering Glass Pavilion is riding the long wake of this phenomenon. Yet the Toledo Museum -- already as splendid a cultural centerpiece as any city could hope for (complete with its own Gehry sideshow) --



Duane Hanson
Executive
1971
Toledo Museum of Art



Mary Ellen Graham's *Splash*, from the
"88th Annual Toledo Area Artists
Exhibition"



Barbara Byram's *Emily*, from the "88th
Annual Toledo Area Artists Exhibition"



represents an instance of Bilbao in reverse, massive arts patronage in the absence of sustained economic boat-raising.

Such machinations have a deleterious effect on the arts themselves. The boom in museum construction in Rust Belt cities with declining industrial fortunes -- Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, St. Louis -- has come even as *A Portrait of the Visual Arts*, a study funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts released last year, reports that U.S. museums are actually losing visitors among the less-educated portions of the population. No wonder, then, that the feeling of a disempowered relation between art and its audience prevails -- like the figure in Cole's painting, the artists in the "Toledo Area Artists Exhibition" relate to the parade of art history as a spectacle that is fantastic but out of reach, not as a charge that they are leading.

The "Bilbao" formula has had wide success because it brings together a progressive-sounding rhetoric about civic investment with means that are appealing to the wealthy and the established. Today, with income disparity in the U.S. as high as it has been since right before the Depression, the lesson of Toledo is that, until investment in culture is wed to a more sane economic investment for all, the strategy is like an urbanist version of the Atkins Diet: It may produce quick, superficially pleasing results; it also starves you of needed nutrients, hurts your heart and makes you stink.

Until then, the cultural symbols produced are likely to have the unintentional significance of the Toledo Museum of Art's Glass Pavilion: a tribute to the greatest accomplishments in the field of glass, located in Ohio's "Glass City," with components fabricated in Shenzhen, China.

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Shawn Morin's *Table*, the grand prize winner from the "88th Annual Toledo Area Artists Exhibition"