

# Arts & Culture

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**“One hundred years is a great moment to look back into the past and see what we have accomplished, how we have served the community and how the museum has played an important part in our city. The museum has always brought the best art produced around the world to the people, allowing them to be exposed to and ignited by this wonderful work.”**

— Roxana Velásquez, Executive Director and CEO of San Diego Museum of Art



The San Diego Museum of Art opened a hundred years ago on Feb. 28, 1926. It's observing its centennial with many exhibitions and celebrations. BRITTANY CRUZ-FEJERAN / U-T

## SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART AT 100

# HONORING THE PAST, WITH BIG PLANS AHEAD

On Feb. 28, 1926, the Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego opened its doors. A century later, the Balboa Park museum is planning a major expansion.

By Pam Kragen  
UNION-TRIBUNE

A month or so before the Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego opened its doors on Feb. 28, 1926, inaugural director Reginald Poland arrived in town with a trove of precious international artworks to fill the new Balboa Park building's galleries.

Among the works donated and lent by galleries and private collectors for the opening exhibition were a 12th-century illuminated manuscript from Spain, an El Greco, a Velasquez, a Murrillo, some French Impressionist works and the local Spreckels family's collection of 104 bronze sculptures by Arthur Putnam. There was also the museum's most prized possession, its first acquisition, Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla's 1907 oil painting “Maria at La Granja.”

San Diego Evening Tribune visual art columnist Hazel Boyer Braun wrote in her Feb. 1, 1926, column that the opening of such a grand new arts institution in Southern California had triggered such a frenzy of generosity, it created “a wave of happiness which ends only in infinity.”

### A CENTURY OF ART

The Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego — which was renamed the San Diego Museum of Art in 1978 — celebrates its 100th birthday next month.

After starting out with a mix of mostly borrowed and donated items a century ago, the museum today boasts a world-renowned collection of more than 39,000 items, including many Spanish Old Masters and significant numbers of French, Indian, Asian



Roxana Velásquez, the Executive Director and CEO of the San Diego Museum of Art, is shown with a model of an early concept design for the museum's west wing, expected to break ground in 2027. K.C. ALFRED / U-T

and American works. Annual attendance now tops 550,000, about five times its visitor numbers in 2010.

To mark the diamond anniversary this year, the museum's staff is dedicating its galleries to exhibitions that celebrate its past, present and future.

Four exhibits scheduled from this month through September will showcase the history of the museum and important works in its collection. And an ongoing exhibit will give visitors a taste of what's to come.

Since 2023, the museum has been working toward building a new and larger west wing to replace the small and outdated wing that opened in 1966. This year, full details on the construc-

tion project's capital campaign will be announced, with a goal of breaking ground on construction in the second half of 2027.

The new west wing, being designed by the internationally renowned architecture firm Foster + Partners, would double the museum's existing gallery space, introduce state-of-the-art storage vaults for its collection and enhance the visitor experience with more restaurants, a new theater, digital art galleries and much more.

Roxana Velásquez, who has served as the museum's Executive Director and CEO since 2010, said that while the museum has transformed over the years its mission has always remained the same.

“One hundred years is a great moment to look back into the past and see what have we have accomplished, how we have served the community and how the museum has played an important part in our city,” Velásquez said. “The museum has always brought the best art produced around the world to the people, allowing them to be exposed to and ignited by this wonderful work.”

“Our centennial is not just a reflection on our remarkable history, but a bold declaration of our future. We are celebrating with world-class exhibitions and inclusive initiatives to ensure art remains accessible to everyone in

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An artist's rendering of Foster + Partners' design concept for the San Diego Museum of Art's new west wing at center left. It is expected to break ground in 2027. **FOSTER + PARTNERS**

## THIS YEAR'S EXHIBITIONS

Here is a deeper look at this year's exhibitions and how they will help tell the museum's past and future.

### SDMA 100 YEARS

January 24 through July 26

This exhibition of photographs, ephemera and historical film footage will highlight the key moments in the history of the museum. This includes how the museum started as an idea in 1915-16, its construction and opening in 1926, its conversion into a hospital during World War II, its modernization with a new west wing in the 1960s and '70s, blockbuster exhibits in the 1980s and '90s and plans for the future west wing. Museum visitors will be invited to share their own personal memories and photographs from the museum's past. Galleries 14 and 15, Mrs. Thomas J. Fleming Sr. Foyer.

### LOCAL VISIONS: REIMAGINING THE FACADE

January 24 through July 26

Bridging the past and present, this exhibit offered 10 local artists the opportunity to reimagine the museum's Spanish Colonial Revival facade from their own contemporary perspective. Featured artists will include San Diego artists Stefanie Bales, Hillary Dufour, Annie Holley, Mary Jhun, Lori Mitchell, Tim Novara and Susan Stone; Chula Vista artists John Chang and Wagner Humphreys; and Jamul artist Brandon Palma. Gallery 6, first floor.

### CAFES AND CABARETS: THE SPECTACULAR ART OF TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

April 4 through June 20

This exhibit will showcase one of the museum's most prized collections. In 1987, the Baldwin Foundation donated more than 100 paintings, drawings and prints from the collection of Baldwin M. Baldwin, a Toulouse-Lautrec connoisseur whose holdings of the artist's work were among the most comprehensive in the world and which were first shown at The San Diego Museum of Art in 1972. Fifty items from this collection will be exhibited in the "Cafes and Cabarets" show. Gallery 18, second floor.

### FORGING A LEGACY: 15 YEARS OF LANDMARK ACQUISITIONS

May 16 through Sept. 7

This exhibit will showcase some of the museum's major acquisitions since Velásquez arrived. Among the museum's most prominent recent purchases were the 2021 purchase of Jusepe de Ribera's 1615 work "Susanna and the Elders." Galleries 4-5, first floor

### A NEW VISION FOR THE NEXT CENTURY

Ongoing

This exhibition, which opened last August, features design concepts for the museum's new west wing project, designed by London's Foster + Partners. The exhibit includes artist's renderings and large-scale models of the project. Gallery 11, first floor.

### SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART BIRTHDAY FEST

**What:** To celebrate the museum's centennial, admission will be free all day, followed by hands-on art crafts, live entertainment and a booth fair on museum's front steps (from 4:30-7 p.m.).

**When:** 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Feb. 28

**Where:** San Diego Museum of Art, 1450 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego (also 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at MOPA@SDMA)

**Admission:** Free

**Phone:** 619-232-7931

**Online:** [sdmart.org/event/birthday-fest](https://sdmart.org/event/birthday-fest)



Queen Elizabeth II accepts a bouquet during her visit to the San Diego Museum of Art in 1983. **SDMA ARCHIVES**

## SDMA

San Diego."

To mark the 100th anniversary, a public birthday party will take place on Feb. 28 with free admission, live entertainment and more.

### TODAY AND TOMORROW

San Diego Museum of Art is best known for its Spanish artworks, but over the decades donations of large collections of French, East Asian and South Asian art have deepened its vast catalog. And when the museum merged in 2023 with the Museum of Photographic Arts, more than 10,000 photographic images joined the collection.

Velásquez, who came to San Diego in 2010 after running three prestigious museums in Mexico City, said her goal in San Diego has been to deepen and fill in the gaps of the existing collection. Not including the MOPA collection, she has acquired more than 6,000 pieces for the collection over the past 15 years.

"I've devoted lot of my tenure building strength in our collections by acquiring Old Masters at the highest level possible," she said. "It's not about budget, it's about finding the perfect piece."

Among the most high-profile deals she secured were the 2021 acquisition of Jusepe de Ribera's 1615 work "Susanna and the Elders," and the 2018 acquisitions of Lucas Cranach the Younger's 1540 "The Nymph of Spring" and John Singer Sargent's 1892 "Portrait

of John Alfred Parsons Millet."

Velásquez has also overseen the growth of the museum's touring art program, which has sent both individual artworks and complete exhibitions out into the world. The museum's 2023 exhibit of works by Georgia O'Keefe and Henry Moore has traveled to four other museums in the U.S. and Canada, and in 2025, pieces from the museum's collection were shown in Tokyo, Kyoto and Seoul.

Velásquez has also been at work expanding community outreach and deepening the museum's ties to San Diego's performing arts community. San Diego Ballet is in the midst of a one-year residency at the museum, and the museum regularly hosts concerts and other performances.

"We don't want to be just a museum of paintings and engravings," she said. "We want to be a space for performing arts."

Another outreach program is the MySDMA Partnership with San Diego Public Library, which was launched in October. This art and literacy program at the library's City Heights branch provides weekly, free hands-on art-making activities based on the museum's collection.

### THE NEW WEST WING

As the museum's collection and programs expand, it increasingly outgrows its buildings. Velásquez said there's only enough gallery space now to exhibit 10% to 12% of its collection. That's why the new west wing project is moving front and center

in the museum's priorities moving forward.

Velásquez said the museum's fundraising project for the new wing is on track with more than 25 percent of its goal already raised. Soon, the museum hopes to announce the project's lead naming donor.

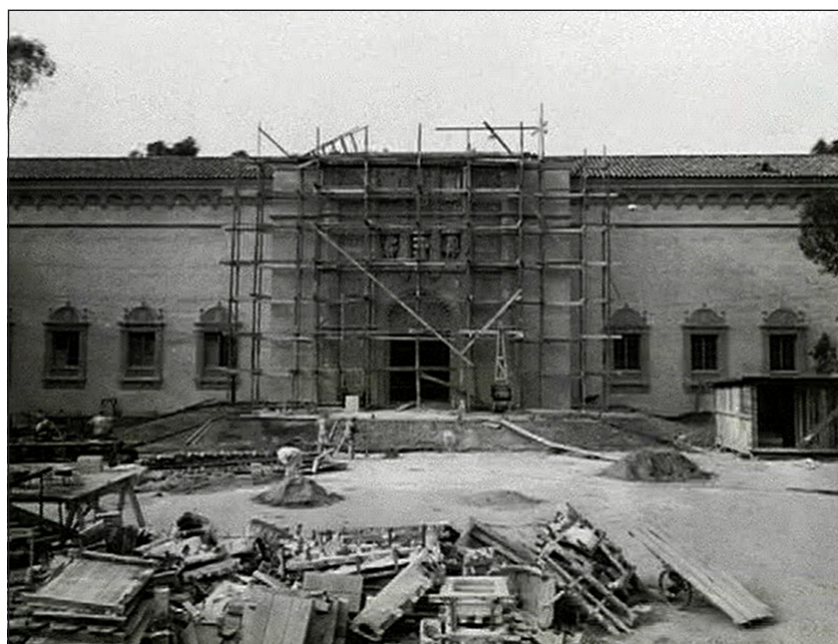
The proposed design of the new wing will maintain roughly the same height profile as the other museums along El Prado and will have shaded loggias wrapping around its two-story exterior, with two additional stories of gallery and archive space below ground — doubling the museum's exhibition space.

The design will retain the outdoor sculpture garden, but the garden would include a new free-to-all arts education center and reading room, and the tall steel fencing that now separates the garden from the public along El Prado and near the Old Globe theater campus would be removed.

The new wing would also include new dining options at different price points including a grab-and-go market and a more upscale rooftop restaurant that will overlook the park. The existing patio restaurant/bar Panama 66 will carry on in the new west wing plans. The museum is also hoping to replace the empty courtyard in front of the main building with a water feature and trees.

An ongoing exhibit of Foster + Partners' renderings and models for the new wing have been warmly received by museum visitors.

"We hear nothing but excitement," Velásquez said.



Construction under way in 1925 on the facade of the Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, which was renamed San Diego Museum of Art in 1978. **SDMA ARCHIVES**

## SDMA THROUGH THE YEARS

This year, San Diego Museum of Art celebrates its 100th anniversary with a free public party on Feb. 28. But its roots actually stretch back farther than that. Here's a timeline of the museum's history.

**1915-1916:** When the city of San Diego hosted the Panama-California International Exhibition in the newly constructed Balboa Park museum complex around Plaza de Panama, public response to an exhibit of art by California and San Diego artists was so positive, work begins on plans to build a permanent art museum.

**1924:** Civic leader Appleton Bridges funded the construction of a permanent museum on the plaza to house a municipal art collection. Designed by architect William Templeton Johnson, the new museum was inspired by the Spanish Colonial style used in the 1915 exhibition, but the exterior was supplemented with Spanish Renaissance motifs and life-size sculptures of Spanish Old Master painters Velásquez, Murillo and Zurbarán and coats of arms for San Diego, the United States and Spain.

**1925:** The San Diego Art Guild and Friends of Art groups merged to form the Fine Arts Society, which is appointed to manage the museum.

**1926:** On Feb. 28, the now-city-owned Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego opened its doors (it would be renamed in 1978), under the leadership of its first director Reginald Poland. During his tenure from 1925-1950, Poland builds the base of the museum's collection with the help of prominent local families including the Bridges, Huntingtons, Timkens, Spreckels and more.

**1942:** Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the fear of further attacks on cities along the Pacific coast led museum officials to ship much of its art collection to the Midwest for safekeeping.

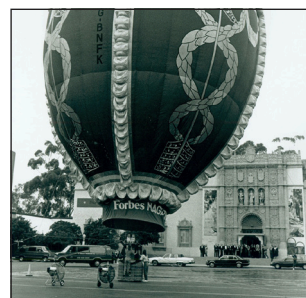
**1943-1947:** The U.S. Navy requisitioned the museum and turns it into a 423-bed hospital for wounded sailors and Marines returning from World War II. During these years, museum operations were relocated to a Mission Hills mansion owned by museum trustees Frank and May Marcy, where exhibits, classes, films and lectures were held.

**1955-1969:** Director Warren Beach's efforts to expand the museum's art collection exacerbated the growing need for exhibition space. In 1966, a new West Wing building was added, which doubled the museum's gallery space and includes the James S. Copley Auditorium. The museum also built the outdoor May S. Marcy Sculpture Court. Beach's successor, Henry Gardiner (1969-1979), continued to expand the museum's collection.

**1978:** The Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego is renamed the San Diego Museum of Art.

**1979-1999:** Under the leadership of Director Stephen Brezzo, the museum was the beneficiary of three major art donations, a collection of English and French works of art from Ambassador Maxwell Gluck and his wife in 1985; a collection of prints, posters, and paintings by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec given by the Baldwin M. Baldwin Foundation in 1988; and the 1,453-piece collection of Indian and South Asian art given by Edwin Binney III in 1990. During this era, Brezzo also expanded art programs for families and produced a number of blockbuster exhibits, including a display of Fabergé eggs, that raised the museum's national profile.

**2000-2001:** Under the leadership of Director Don Bacigalupi, the Museum Art School was relocated to the rebuilt House of Hospitality, the museum's rotunda was



A Fabergé Egg balloon is grounded in front of the San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park to promote its 1989 exhibition "Fabergé: The Imperial Eggs." **SDMA ARCHIVES**

restored to its 1926 luster and renovations were made to the galleries, gift shop and more.

**2004-2009:** New Director Derrick Cartwright expanded the museum's community outreach, bilingual initiative and publications programs. In 2008, the restoration of the building's facade was completed. And in 2009, the museum received a significant collection of African, Oceanic and Native American artworks from the Sana Art Foundation.

**2010:** Roxana Velásquez was hired as the museum's eighth executive director, becoming the first woman to lead the institution. Previously, she directed three major national museums in Mexico City. During her tenure, which continues to this day, she has dramatically expanded the museum's collections by more than 6,000 pieces.

**2016:** Art of the Open Air, an installation of seven large-scale sculptures from the permanent collection, was installed in Balboa Park's Plaza to Panama in an effort to bring the museum's art and awareness to the public.

**2023:** In March, San Diego Museum of Arts announces it has hired the world-renowned architecture firm Foster + Partners to design a new building to replace the existing west wing. Led by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Norman Foster, the company has built many landmark structures at museums around the world, including the Great Court at the British Museum in London.

On July 1, 2023, the San Diego Museum of Art merges with its neighbor, the Museum of Photographic Arts. MOPA's visitorship did not rebound following the COVID-19 pandemic, so its leaders decided the best way to preserve its 10,000-plus-piece collection was to fold it into the San Diego Museum of Arts collection. SDMA continues to maintain the MOPA collection and museum space, just across the Plaza de Panama.

**2024:** The museum unveiled an early concept proposal for its west wing redesign, which will double the museum's exhibit space, offer state-of-the-art, temperature-controlled vaults for art storage and will include multiple food service operations, including a rooftop restaurant. The museum hosted an exhibit of renderings and scale models to get feedback from the public about the design. Responses are overwhelmingly positive, particularly to the news that Panama 66, the popular restaurant and music presenter in the west wing sculpture garden, will stay.

**2025:** San Diego's Design Forward Alliance bestowed the west wing concept with its Signature Project Design Award for Museum Renovation. Also, the San Diego architecture firm Safdie Rabines Architects joined with Foster + Partners on the west wing plan.

**2026:** The museum marks its 100th anniversary with a free public party on Feb. 28. Early this year, the museum will also announce details of its capital campaign to build the new west wing, which is scheduled to break ground in the second half of 2027.

*Pam Kragen,  
Union-Tribune*

SOURCE: [SDMART.ORG/MISSION-HISTORY](https://sdmart.org/mission-history)