

# Joslyn Art Museum



Sarah Joslyn decided to build a cultural center as a living memorial to her late husband and as a gift of gratitude to the people of Omaha. After she and George Joslin married in 1872, eventually they relocated to Des Moines where he began work at the Iowa Printing Company. The company's business was the supply of "ready-print" to small-town newspapers across the region. In those days, small local newspapers received commentary, serialized novels, special features, and advertisements already printed on one side of the paper. Space was left on the other for each editor to insert the paper's masthead as well as local news and advertising.

Before long George was made an offer to open a branch office of the company in Omaha in 1880 and the expanded company was reincorporated as the Western Newspaper Union. Somewhere around this time, George changed the spelling of his surname. According to family legend, he has some business cards printed up, and the printer mistakenly used a "y" instead of an "i." Liking the variant, he adopted it.

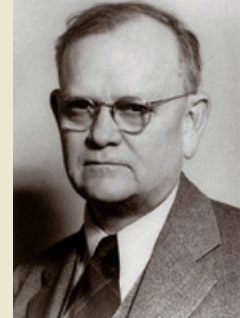
By the time of his death in 1916, it could reasonably be claimed that Western Newspaper Union, with George Joslyn as its president and majority stockholder, was one of the largest newspaper service organizations in the world. He repeatedly resisted efforts to persuade him to relocate his headquarters to Chicago on the sentimental grounds that it was Omaha that gave him his real start and so he "intended to stick by it to the last." Commonly held to be the richest man in the state, Joslyn's wealth was estimated at eight to ten million dollars.

Although the death of her husband caused Mrs. Joslyn to withdraw from Omaha's social life, she held fast to his idea that, as their wealth had derived from Omaha, it should, in some form, be returned to the city for the benefit of its citizens. In an interview with the Omaha World-Herald in 1928, she said that the couple had discussed, in desultory fashion, the notion of some sort of public gift, but as "[George] was so very busy with his business, and his illness came so suddenly, ... nothing like the memorial [had] occurred to him. It didn't to me, for some time after his death."

After rejecting numerous ideas for this gift, she returned to their shared love of the arts, particularly music, and decided that a concert hall, with all its connotations of uplift and recreation, would be the most appropriate memorial and, her mind made up, immediately called up John McDonald, her husband's favorite architect, to design a spacious performing arts center in his name.

## The Decorative Scheme

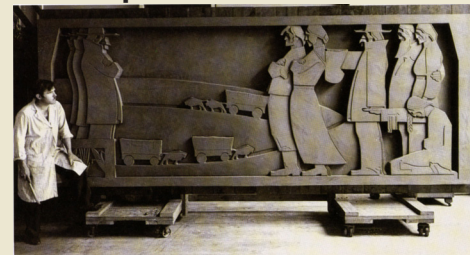
### The Poet and Philosopher King



Nebraska native Hartley Burr Alexander's diverse knowledge of world cultures, as well as his experience with the decorative scheme for the Nebraska State Capitol, were perfectly suited to develop a similar program for the Joslyn Memorial. He had to call upon considerable diplomatic skills to mediate between architect and artist in what became an increasingly strained relationship.

A man of wide interests, Alexander combined a love of poetry, philosophy, and anthropology, publishing extensively in the area of Native American culture. While at Scripps College in Claremont, CA he accepted the challenge of devising, at long distance and on short notice, a decorative program for the Joslyn Memorial. Alexander's deep interest in Native American mythology is evident in all of his writings.

### The Sculptor



The young Serb-born sculptor, John David Brcin [brr-CHIN], was a surprisingly bold choice as sole artist for the Memorial's sculptural program. He developed three distinct approaches to his medium: traditional portraiture, sleekly stylized statuary, and sharply cut bas-reliefs combining geometric and figurative elements.

The Joslyn commission, which occupied two years of his life and was the cause of equal amounts of elation and frustration, turned out to be the high point of Brcin's career. It established him as a notable representative of his era and, when the Memorial was completed, the critic of the Chicago Herald-Examiner declared: "Brcin's carvings are a new thing; they are full of dynamic thrust, a smooth sharp-edged symmetry which admirably interprets the spirit of an age governed by machinery."

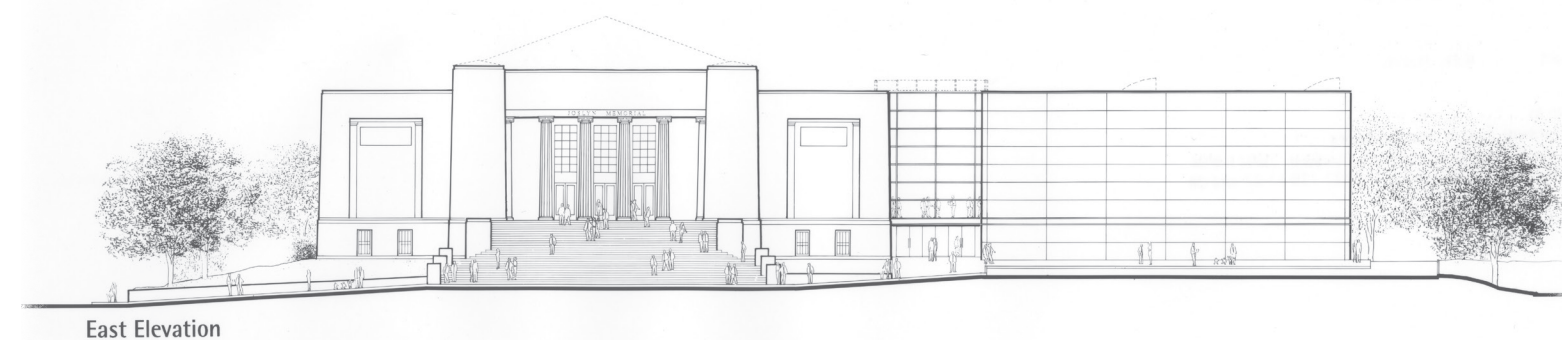
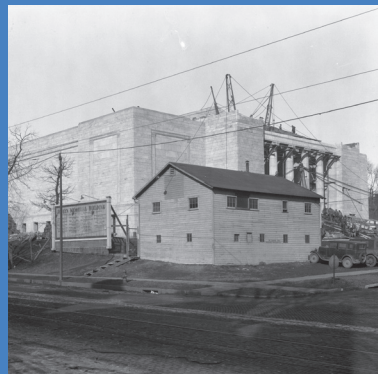
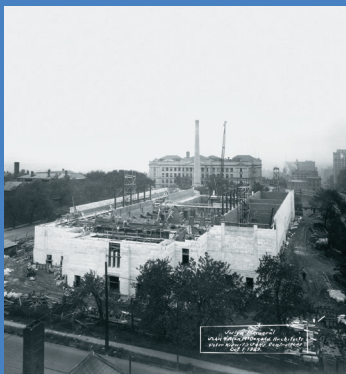
Brcin executed a clay model for approval, then he created a final plaster cast that was sent to Omaha and used as a template for the stone carvers, Edward and Gino Ratti, to cut the panel into the Georgia Pink marble of the exterior facades.

The final scheme combines the elements of both contributors but is, overall, closer to the spirit of Alexander than that of Brcin. The eight panels were divided equally between the Native American and European contributions. The two panels most closely associated with George Joslyn's life, *The Pioneer Press* (below left) and *Dissemination of Intelligence* flank the main entrance.



### The Builder

The company first established as Kiewit Brothers in 1884 by Andrew and Peter Kiewit, then renamed Peter Kiewit and Sons in 1912 when his sons Ralph and George joined the business. Finally it became Peter Kiewit Sons and with diligent work and attention to detail, their younger brother Peter escalated to the top. Along with the State Capitol tower and the Union Pacific terminal, the Joslyn Memorial was a major project early in the career of a man who was to transform a local construction firm into a company with an international presence.



East Elevation



Cross Section

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a history

# The Architects

The selection of the father-son team of John and Alan McDonald as the architects for Sarah's memorial building was no surprise; John McDonald had worked for the Joslyns on virtually every building they had involved themselves in and had counted George Joslyn among his personal friends.

John McDonald (1861–1956) came to Omaha, via Boston, around 1880. Here, he formed a partnership with David Ogilvy and the Ogilvy-McDonald company prospered in the city's boom economy. In 1890 Ogilvy moved to Oregon to open a branch office of the firm, but the partnership was dissolved the following year. Between 1891 and 1916, John McDonald maintained a flourishing practice and designed over thirty public and residential buildings. Alan (1891–1947) joined his father in 1918.



Alan McDonald (took the lead in the Memorial's design) & Mrs. Joslyn



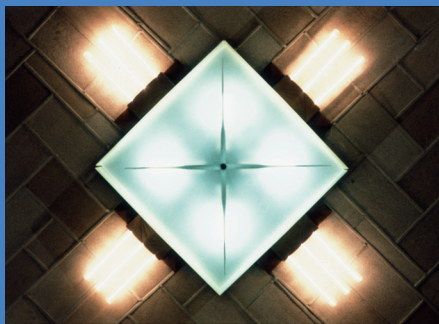
John McDonald (acted as business manager for the project) & Mrs. Joslyn

As was common for American architects at the turn of the century, the McDonalds worked in a variety of historically based styles, selecting whichever decorative scheme they or their patrons felt appropriate to the type of building: Scottish Baronial for their wealthiest client's home or Collegiate Gothic for Yates School. Left to themselves, they demonstrated a clear preference for the Colonial Revival patterns they both knew and loved from their separate sojourns in New England.

John McDonald designed two houses for the Joslyns; first was a straightforward, comfortable frame house. The second building, on which construction commenced in 1902, fully expressed the substantial position George Joslyn now occupied in the financial world and, much thought it irritated the proud owners, it is understandable why Lynhurst this magnificent thirty-two room mansion was dubbed "the Joslyn Castle" though George detested it being called a "castle."

### The Evolution of the Design

In a radical departure from the grand, domed structures held in common by most state capitol buildings across the nation, Bertram Goodhue design for Nebraska's capitol envisioned a tower rising out of a spreading base. Its stripped down and spare, with flattened, geometrical ornament, represented the American response to a variety of European tendencies in architecture and design that received it clearest manifestation in the 1925 Paris exhibition Exposition International de Arts Décoratifs et industriels Modernes (hence, the term "Art Deco"). Deriving from a variety of sources including Cubism and Constructivism, as well as machinery and industrial design, Art Deco is characterized by sharp-angled geometry, smooth surfaces, and shimmering color. The resulting style, monumental and familiar, but without the traditional finery of European culture, had immediate appeal to an audience looking for architecture appropriate to the "American Century." Influenced by the Goodhue's capitol, the McDonalds must have persuaded Mrs. Joslyn to make changes giving the Memorial its notable Art Deco character. Ground was broken on October 3, 1928 and Herschel Elarth, the McDonald's architectural draftsman, had his work cut out for him in the race to redesign as the building was constructed. Making extensive use of aluminum and fluorescent-tube lighting, these fixtures are among the most thoroughgoing Art Deco features of the building. Drawing little or no inspiration from ancient cultures, classical or native, the inventive light designs add a final, emphatically Moderne note.



# The Expansion



In 1987 Joslyn Memorial officially became Joslyn Art Museum with an art centric mission statement and the identification of the need for additional art exhibition space. Joslyn's Board of Governors appointed a committee to select an architect for the Museum's capital expansion. Sir Norman Foster (now Baron Foster of Thames Bank) won the commission with an approach to the project that combined visual deference to the original structure.

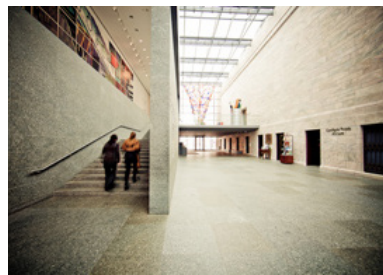
Clad in the same Georgia Pink marble from the original building, the Walter & Suzanne Scott Pavilion is a solid rectangular form, minimally articulated but similarly proportioned, and parallel — a shadow, as it were — to the original building, to which it is linked by a great glass atrium running almost the full length of the north facade.

This 1994 addition included seven additional galleries, with over 14,000 square feet of impressive space for art exhibitions. Featuring sweeping, vaulted

ceilings that reach 27 feet at some points, these galleries are illuminated by fluorescent lights as well as controllable natural lighting provided by two skylights, running from the east to west end of the galleries.

The new Pavilion also included state-of-the-art collection management facilities, office space, a kitchen for the Museum's food service operations, coatrooms, and restrooms. The 6,000-square-foot ConAgra Foods Atrium, located between and parallel to the two buildings and within the Scott Pavilion, reaches 45 feet high, 30 feet wide, and 200 feet long. Encased in glass, it serves as a magnificent link from the original building to the new marble structure. The floor of the atrium is opulent Verde Lavras granite. A 1,600-square-foot bridge, also finished in the gray-green stone, connects the main floor of the original building to the main floor of the Foster-designed addition and overlooks the expansive glass-enclosed space as well as the outdoor Peter Kiewit Foundation Sculpture Garden (opened 2009).

At the time of the expansion, an ambitious renovation occurred. The improved, and enlarged Joslyn Art Museum was complete in all essentials when it opened to the public on November 19, 1994. What started as a significant project to renew the Joslyn Memorial building as a serious art museum ended by restoring all aspects of the program originally deemed important by the Mrs. Joslyn: the visual Arts, music, and education.



# Interior Highlights

### The Interior

Alan McDonald described the interior as an attempt to "combine the spirit of the modern with the culture of the past. Therefore, there must be a transition between Brcin's sculptural modernism and our architectural modernism of the interior." The overall effect is one of considerable opulence. Ceiling heights and room proportions change dramatically from space to space, as do the colors and textures of the wall, ceiling and floor surfaces.

### The Lobby



Walls, ceiling, and pilasters of the lobby are Roman Travertine; the column capitals, panels, and column bases are of French and Belgian marble; the floor is of Badger Pink Tennessee marble and Vermont Green slate. The distinctive columns of black-and-gold marble are from the Italian island of Palmaria. The walls of the antechamber leading to the floral court are clad in Botticino marble from Italy, the bases are Dark Cedar and the floors Badger Pink marbles, both from Tennessee.

### The Fountain Court



This bright, top lit fountain court was intended as a contemplative space. Walls are Aquia, or George Washington, stone from Virginia; columns and door trim, Vert Antico marble from Greece; column capitals are Hauteville marble from France; steps are Dark Cedar marble; the floor is Moravian tile from Pennsylvania; the decorative panels on the fountain and walls are of faience tile made in Ohio. The thunderbird motif is seen in the tile work. Originally illuminated during the day by natural light, the skylight was covered over in 1980 and artificial lighting installed.

### The Concert Hall



Situated at the heart of the Memorial building, the concert hall embodied George Joslyn's love of music. The ten doors piercing the north and south walls were intended to be opened to permit music to waft into the galleries. The concert hall wall panels and trim continue the use of the St. Genevieve marbles encountered in the foyer; column shafts and the proscenium arch are Westfield Green marble from Massachusetts, and the column bases Belgian Black marble. The column capitals are paired, stage to entry doors, in marbles from France, Morocco, Italy, Germany, and Spain. Upper walls and the ceiling were covered with the same Akoustolith tile as the foyer ceiling.

### The Galleries



Running en suite along the north and south of the building, the galleries originally incorporated natural light through the ceiling. The walls are wainscoting of various marbles, and floors of tile, rubber tile and slate. The galleries were converted to artificial lighting in 1971.

### The Founder's Room



Designed to be a "luxurious setting for the reception of distinguished musicians, lecturers and dramatic artists" (per the 1936 guide), it was Mrs. Joslyn's place of retreat. Walnut inlaid with peroba wood was used to create the thunderbird design in the ceiling and the flame of life in the wainscoting. The floor is teak. The fireplace is made of the same Benou Jaune marble as that in the Joslyns' home; the clinging ivy motif of the stained glass windows refers to everlasting devotion.

### The Light Fixtures



Per the original guidebook "the lighting fixtures carry out the simple lines and details of the architecture and in every instance use electricity in a fluid manner." Walter Kantack, who executed the commission was a leading lighting designer of the period. The most striking feature of the lights in the concert hall is the large octagonal aluminum reflectors that create a subdued, indirect glow. With their unadorned metal surfaces and hublike centers, these fittings are the boldest and more "machine age" of the building's Moderne decorations.

### The Metalwork

Much of the metalwork had been ordered in the original classical language when the McDonalds decided on their Moderne design. They were able to modify the order, but much of the Beaux-Arts design remains scattered throughout the building. The lobby grill dramatically depicts the thunderbird motif and, with its bold verticals and diagonals, offers a considerable contrast to the classicizing window grills in the floral court.





**MEMORIAL BUILDING**

**JOHN MCDONALD (1861–1956) and ALAN MCDONALD (1891–1947)**

**WALTER AND SUZANNE SCOTT PAVILION**

**NORMAN FOSTER, BARON FOSTER OF THAMES BANK (b. 1935)**

***JOSLYN ART MUSEUM***

**1928–1931, 1993–1994**

The Museum was a gift to the people of Omaha from Sarah Joslyn in memory of her husband, George. The Museum's original 1931 building is one of the finest examples of Art Deco architecture in the nation. The Walter and Suzanne Scott Pavilion, a new wing, defers to the spirit of the original 1931 Memorial building design and takes its monumental simplicity several modernistic steps further.