

SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART

HELEN FORESMAN SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART

2025–2030 STRATEGIC PLAN



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FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Spencer Museum of Art is dedicated to serving all students, researchers, and communities across the state of Kansas. Those who experience the Museum, both within our galleries and beyond our walls, exercise and strengthen their capacity for imagination and creative thinking, curiosity, and sensitivity to culture

This strategic plan is a snapshot of a dynamic organization that continues to build upon a distinguished history and remains attuned to artistic and social opportunities. The Spencer Museum is a place of encounters, where art and people intermingle, where students, scholars, and artists converge. In ways large and small, these interactions are catalysts for discovery and transformation, of the self and of our world. Through art, education, and research, the Museum works to improve the lives of people while stewarding works of cultural significance.

Saralyn Reece Hardy
Marilyn Stokstad Director
Spencer Museum of Art



INTRODUCTION

The Spencer Museum of Art infuses its rich collection of more than 48,000 works of art into the exceptional learning communities and research of the University of Kansas, K-12 classrooms, and the daily lives of individuals regionally, nationally, and internationally. Our 2025–2030 strategic plan reflects emerging opportunities at this unique moment in our institution’s history.

In 2016, we completed the Phase I renovation of 30,000 square feet of our facility and launched a major initiative to integrate arts research throughout the University. In 2022, we unveiled the Phase II renovation to the public along with the reinstallation of our collection galleries. The transformation of our facility introduced new technologies and expanded spaces for teaching, learning, and research. Within these spaces we are experimenting with deepening relationships with our communities and partners. With the hire of our first Curator for Public Practice in 2022, we continue our commitment to community partnerships and advocacy. The continued success of our Academic Programs, Arts Research Integration, and Public Practice builds on our long history of leading interdisciplinary research collaborations and positions us to further reaffirm the role of university art museums in scholarship, creative endeavors, and building a thriving community.

The Strategic Plan that follows pays heed to the rich history and present character of the Spencer Museum of Art. As a cultural resource for the University of Kansas, the city of Lawrence, the state of Kansas, and the region, the Spencer Museum has a responsibility to partner with and co-develop programs, collections, and initiatives that represent and serve these audiences. Over the coming years, the Spencer Museum of Art will dedicate resources toward fostering creative and critical thinking through engagement with art; acting as a catalyst for inquiry and discovery; stewarding a culturally diverse collection; and enhancing organizational adaptability.

Mission

The Spencer Museum of Art sustains a culturally diverse collection and encourages interdisciplinary exploration at the intersection of art, ideas, and experience. The Spencer strengthens, supports, and contributes to the academic research and teaching of the University of Kansas and is committed to collaborating with communities of learners across Kansas and beyond.

Vision

Stimulate creative thinking and spark new ideas through transformative arts experiences.



History

The Spencer Museum of Art is an institution dedicated to interdisciplinary teaching, learning, and research for audiences of all ages and backgrounds. The Museum's diverse collection, educational initiatives, and international research profile have deep roots and reflect a century of thoughtful cultivation by generations of curators, directors, students, and visitors.

A COMPREHENSIVE ART MUSEUM

The Spencer Museum's collection dates to a 1917 donation of art to KU by Sallie Casey Thayer, and also to the year 3,000 BCE, when the oldest object in the collection was created. The Museum's global collecting focus was established by Thayer's gift of more than 7,000 art objects from the Americas, Asia, and Europe. The Museum continues to acquire art from cultures worldwide. In 2009, the collection grew significantly through the transfer of approximately 9,000 items from the former KU Museum of Anthropology. The current collection includes more than 48,000 works that represent 5,000 years of human creativity across six continents. The Museum continues to grow its collection to be more representative of the diverse communities it serves and to increase understanding of human experiences.





A CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The University of Kansas is the state of Kansas's flagship university founded in 1865. Since the Museum's origins in 1917, the collection has enriched the university experience for KU students pursuing degrees in the arts. By the 1960s, the Museum was extending its resources to students in other fields under the leadership of Director Marilyn Stokstad. Her groundbreaking exhibitions and courses such as "Humanities in the Art Museum" introduced new ways of thinking about how art can enrich teaching across disciplines. By the early 2000s, dozens of KU faculty, staff, and students in many different schools and departments were incorporating the Museum's exhibitions and collection into their curriculum every year. This proliferation in campus engagement led to the establishment of an endowed department to sustain and expand this work. Now, more than 50 distinct KU units and departments engage with the Museum annually through customized viewing experiences in the Stephen H. Goddard Study Center and Ingrid & J.K. Lee Study Center, curricular-themed installations in the Jack & Lavon Brosseau Center for Learning, and guided and self-guided class visits to the galleries. The Museum's collection, facility, and staff continue to play a pivotal role in enhancing the student experience for KU undergraduate and graduate students across disciplines.



A CULTURAL RESOURCE FOR COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS

At the core of the Museum's founding, championed by Sallie Casey Thayer, was the belief that world-class works of art should be accessible to communities in the geographic center of the United States. The Museum continues to adhere to this ambition and works to reach people in the city of Lawrence, the state of Kansas, and the Midwest region. Thousands of K-12 students and their families visit the Museum every year, educators and artists participate in professional development led by Museum staff, and lifelong learners experience free educational programs that cover a range of topics. The Museum has partnered with the Lawrence School District for more than 50 years to provide all elementary students with meaningful art museum experiences. In 2021, the Museum launched its Partners in Education Across Kansas (PEAK) initiative to establish learning communities for K-12 teachers throughout Kansas. PEAK provides educators with tools to integrate art into their classroom teaching in ways that align with state educational standards.



A CATALYST FOR RESEARCH AND CREATIVE IDEAS

A priority for the Museum is facilitating discovery of new ideas and artistic production. While we continue long-standing collaborative programs—like our Murphy Lecture series founded in 1983 in partnership with the Kress Foundation Department of Art History and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art—we also develop new initiatives to reach scholars and artists. Rocket Grants—offered in partnership with Charlotte Street Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts—and our International Artist-in-Residence Program support the creation of new works of art and artistic research in our region. Similarly, our Arts Research Integration program (ARI) emerges from years of interdisciplinary collaborations and projects that embedded the arts and artists into research in the sciences and humanities. ARI works to elevate the national stature of KU as a leader for integrating the arts in research, and also aims to strengthen the research culture at KU and expand collaborations among disciplines and campuses. Our recent work has engaged fields such as physics, social history, ecological restoration, and emerging technologies.



AN EVOLVING SPACE FOR ART, IDEAS, AND PEOPLE

Just as the Museum's collections and programmatic initiatives continue to shift in response to changing audience needs and trends in higher education, our facility adapts in turn. Until 1977, the Museum was housed in Spooner Hall. By the mid-1970s, the Museum's collection and vision had surpassed the physical capacity of Spooner Hall. With the generous support of Helen Foresman Spencer, our current building was constructed in 1978 on the west side of the Kansas Union, adjacent to historic Marvin Grove. The Museum's 2016 renovation reimagined its spaces, expanding areas for teaching, learning, and research; welcoming visitors by bringing natural light into gathering spaces and galleries; and introducing new technologies throughout the Museum. The Museum completed Phase II of its building renovation in 2022, increasing accessibility, completing lighting and flooring renovations in the upper galleries, and adding the Ingrid & J.K. Lee Study Center. An enduring priority is to create an inclusive space where all people feel valued, included, and represented.

Strategic Plan 2025–2030

The Spencer Museum of Art is at a pivotal moment in its history, having just completed a second major facility renovation. With a focus on sharing art and ideas, we commit our resources to strategic directions that will ensure continued relevancy to our many communities into the future. Our path is shaped by guiding principles that reflect the values and mission of the Museum.

Guiding Principles



- Art at our Core
- Catalyst for Inquiry, Research, and Creativity
- Site for Inclusion & Dialogue



Guiding Principle 1

Art at our Core

- Explore art in ways that support teaching, learning, and programming and stimulate research and creative work
- Shape and develop our collection sustainably, responsibly, and respectfully to better reflect and respond to our global communities
- Preserve and share the works of art we steward, which are vital to the Museum and all that we do



Guiding Principle 2

Catalyst for Inquiry, Research, and Creativity

- Transform ways of seeing, thinking, and acting by generating and facilitating interdisciplinary collaborations and research
- Inspire and support artists at all levels, generate new creative work, and document artistic processes and works of art
- Foster individual and institutional innovation and creativity to produce new and expanded benefits for our communities



Guiding Principle 3

Site for Inclusion & Dialogue

- Amplify the capacity of art and artists to engage audiences with timely issues and human experiences
- Incorporate a broad range of voices, ideas, and experiences, including methods that challenge traditional museum practices
- Create an accessible environment that promotes individual lifelong learning



Strategic Directions

The Museum has identified several actionable goals for the next five years. These objectives correspond to four strategic directions:

- Activate Art
- Inspire Inquiry
- Stimulate Engagement
- Enhance Organizational Adaptability

Develop and steward the Spencer Museum's collection and works of art to ignite experiences.



Activate Art

Goals

- 1.** Responsibly steward and develop a collection, including supporting repatriation and artistic endeavors, that engage a diverse and changing world.
- 2.** Expand information about our collection and programs and how we share them and support audiences to exchange and generate new knowledge.
- 3.** Use works of art to proactively investigate a range of questions through exhibitions, programs, and digital initiatives.

Encourage and support a research environment open to collaboration and innovation.



Inspire Inquiry

Goals

- 1.** Generate understandings of artistic practice as research and nurture reciprocal relationships with diverse individual and institutional collaborators.
- 2.** Foster openness among Museum staff to create, critique, and adopt new ideas and methods.
- 3.** Model and advocate for interdisciplinary and artistic research and inquiries.
- 4.** Develop and utilize public platforms to broadly disseminate and exchange research and creative practice.

Co-create multifaceted opportunities for diverse community participation.



Stimulate Engagement

Goals

1. Co-develop robust content and socially relevant programs and exhibitions.
2. Expand inclusive opportunities for communities across Kansas and beyond to experience arts and cultural resources.
3. Sustain the Spencer Museum as an active partner through innovation, responsiveness, and strategic communications.

Strengthen internal systems and capacities toward achieving long-term sustainability in response to the changing landscape of museums and support for the arts.



Enhance Organizational Adaptability

Goals

- 1.** Cultivate a positive work environment that supports individual staff members and builds trust by increasing opportunities for professional growth, creative work, scholarship, and teambuilding.
- 2.** Develop an efficient and purposeful staffing structure and mechanisms to strengthen existing workflows and respond to emerging opportunities.
- 3.** Sustain a healthy financial foundation that promotes transparency, accountability, and flexibility, and navigates shifts in state and University support to private and grant support for the arts, research, and education.
- 4.** Secure funding for Phase III facility and staffing development to address collection storage and community-informed spaces.

Process

The first iteration of this Strategic Plan guided the Museum from January 1, 2018 through December 31, 2024. Revisions were made in 2024 to extend the plan through 2030. It was originally developed through an investigation of our internal practices, University and community partnerships, and current developments in museums and related fields. The plan was driven by a perspective of inquiry and led by a cross-departmental team, with guidance from independent consultant Marc Vogl. The team gathered valuable comments from the entire Museum staff, as well as partners and key stakeholders through interviews, surveys, and group discussions.