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A Work of Art

Tim Obermiller

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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A Work of Art

Construction of the rotunda started in May. Work began this fall to install the "Triple Helix" sculpture inside the rotunda. It serves as a centerpiece for the School of Art's new entryway.

The new School of Art rotunda captures attention and sparks the imagination.

**Story by TIM OBERMILLER
Photos by MARC FEATHERLY**

Although it has served as backdrop for decades of creative work by Illinois Wesleyan's faculty and students, the School of Art building, by itself, has never been seen as particularly inspiring.

That all changed this winter with the completion of a

2,400-square-foot glass rotunda that serves as the building's new entryway. Suspended in the center, a large glass-and-metal sculpture shimmers and pulsates in an ever-shifting tableau of light and color.

"People are just astounded," says Art Professor Sherri McElroy. "I sat in my office for an evening last week and as I peered out my window, I saw every single person stop and look at the light show and the sculpture," she says. "We used to be the dark corner of campus and now we are the beacon."

"Before it was just like every other building," says Riley Blindt '13, one of several art majors who helped with the sculpture's assembly last fall. "Now it's got something to intrigue anyone who is walking around the Quad."

The rotunda's rave reviews are welcomed by B. Charles "Chuck" Ames '50 and his wife, Joyce "Jay" Eichhorn Ames '49. Their gift funded the rotunda's construction. "There is so much creativity and beauty in the work of those in the School of Art," says Jay, "and we wanted the exterior of the building to reflect that. We want visitors to know, with one look, that this is the art building."





**Flo Armstrong '43 (above)
provided funding for the sculpture
with a gift made in her name and
that of her late husband, Vic.**

Trustee emeritus Flora Harris Armstrong '43 provided funds for the rotunda's 20-foot-high sculpture, which can be seen from every corner of the Quad. It was designed by Arizona artist Lyle London, whose work appears in numerous public and private collections throughout the world. CSO Architects and consultant R. Paul Bradley designed the surrounding rotunda.

Opened in 1973, the art building, part of the Alice Millar Center for the Arts, houses classrooms and studios for painting, printmaking, photography, ceramics, graphics and other artistic ambitions. It is also home to the University's Merwin and Wakeley art galleries.

In 1998, Chuck and Jay made a \$2-million scholarship commitment to the School of Art, which was renamed The Joyce Eichhorn Ames School of Art in her honor. They later provided a challenge-gift that led to construction of The Ames Library, which opened in 2002. At the launch of the University's *Transforming Lives: The Campaign for Illinois Wesleyan* in 2009, the couple provided \$25 million for the Wesleyan Fund and faculty endowments, the largest gift in University history.

Their latest *Transforming Lives* gift funded not just the new rotunda, but also renovations throughout the art building's first floor. An expanded lobby space outside the Merwin and Wakeley galleries will host gatherings, openings and artists' receptions. Four instructional areas were remodeled into three more spacious studios for students.

In explaining her desire to see the art building improved, Jay Ames recalls one of her own college experiences. She was one of a group of students invited every Friday afternoon to the home of Kenneth Loomis, then chairman of the School of Art. "Every picture, chair or pillow was in the right place, and every color blended. ... I wanted to study it so that I could try to have a house like that someday. That is what I have spent a good part

of my life doing: trying to make beautiful surroundings for my family and friends" — and, most lately, for the School of Art.

"We've been very lucky that we have the funds to do things that are our dreams," Jay reflects. "Some people would rather have a yacht. We would rather have something beautiful on that campus that we helped bring about."

The 'wow' factor

Though its purpose is to highlight the School of Arts, the new rotunda and its sculpture have something to fire every IWU students' imagination.

Biology majors can contemplate how the sculpture's three-dimensional spiral form is inspired by the helix-structure of the DNA molecule. Students of physics can marvel at the piece's special glass, which divides the light spectrum, transmitting one color while reflecting its opposite.



Artist Lyle London (left) relied on computer technology to complete the sculpture's complex design.

According to the artist who created it, the sculpture represents artistic expression made possible by breakthroughs in technology.

"I've gotten away from hand-crafting sculpture models and sculpture itself and more into the technology of computer-aided design," says artist Lyle London, who oversaw the sculpture's assembly this past fall. "This work for Illinois Wesleyan is the first really large piece that I will have created entirely on the computer."

The work is an abstraction, taking the form of three interwoven, tapering helices. Once the complex design was completed and approved, a team of workers at London's Tempe, Ariz., studio welded the stainless-steel frame and prepared the diachronic-coated glass. London says, "This piece has 2,000 man-hours in it — a lot of time, all skilled labor."

"It presents a real engineering challenge," says London, "not only to make but to put in position and keep in a suspended state in that rotunda." Hung by a one-eighth-inch, stainless-steel aircraft cable, the sculpture appears to float inside the rotunda.

Normally, London is asked to create sculptures to fit space that is already constructed. For this project, he says, both the rotunda and sculpture were designed to complement each other. For example, at London's request, low-iron glass in the rotunda windows was installed to provide better transparency and a more vivid viewing experience.

Lighting gives the sculpture an extra "wow" factor. By itself, the play of natural daytime light against the diachronic glass shifts color with the viewer's movements. At night, a computerized light system can be programmed to create "hundreds of different scenes, or color combinations, that can last up to an hour and constantly change," says London.

"We're really using stage light, so whatever you see in a rock concert, we can do on this sculpture. So it can go from way over the top — with shimmering, pulsating, chasing effects. Anything that you can bring to mind at a disco or a music concert setting can be programmed into these lights. But more subtle effects are possible, too — very slow color changes and very slow intensity changes in the illumination."



Riley Blindt '13 glues into place one of the sculpture's special reflective glass panels. Several art students assisted in the sculpture's assembly.

London is pleased that the light system can be reprogrammed by fine art and theatre arts students. "This presents an opportunity for them because the system holds potential to create way more than I will

ever do with the initial program. They can take it over and experiment with it. In that way, the sculpture itself will be in constant state of evolution."

For art student Riley Blindt and her classmates, the sculpture and surrounding rotunda provide not just daily inspiration, but a glimpse into the future as well.

"It's definitely making me think of all the different possibilities that I have for when I graduate, which is coming up soon," says Blindt.

"We stand out now," adds Blindt, a trace of pride in her smile. "Before it was easy to pass us by as the School of Art. The new entrance is now a way to draw people in and get them interested in what we're doing. And they'll want to come in and look at it and then come look at the galleries, too, because we have a lot of cool stuff going on in here."

To visit the School of Art's website, [click here](#).