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Smithsonian will reopen renovated Renwick Gallery Nov. 13

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The renovated Renwick Gallery will reopen Nov. 13. (Photo by Ron Blunt, courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum)

The Renwick Gallery – the first American building created to showcase art – will reopen in November with a major exhibition featuring nine contemporary artists, officials announced Tuesday.

Home of the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s craft and decorative arts collection, the Renwick Gallery closed two years ago for a \$30 million renovation to restore its interior and upgrade its infrastructure. Starting Nov. 13, it celebrates its return to the District’s cultural life with a series of public programs.

“There were earlier museums, but they were put into buildings constructed for other purposes,” Smithsonian American Art Museum Director Betsy Broun, who said the building was as important as the artwork it would display. “It was a totally new style, urban contemporary in feel. It was all about taking a stand, having great aspirations for the future.”

Located steps from the White House on the corner of 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, the National Historic Landmark was designed by architect James Renwick to display to the public the private art collection of William Wilson Corcoran. After being used by the Union Army during the Civil War, the building opened as the Corcoran Gallery in 1874.

“When it was first opened, William Corcoran stated the purpose of the building was to encourage American genius. Chipped in stone in block letters is ‘Dedicated to Art,’” Broun said. “We want to renovate that original mission, go back to encouraging American genius. We hope to do that with the ‘Wonder’ show.”

Nine contemporary artists – including Jennifer Angus, Chakaia Booker, Patrick Dougherty and Leo Villareal – have been commissioned to create site specific works that respond to the historic building’s galleries. Whether working with tires, or thread or marbles, the artists have a long commitment to “materiality and making things,” Broun said.

“They have a long history of working intensively with materials, making things that have a dazzling, physical impact,” she said.

The renovation is funded by federal grants and private donations. It will restore historical features of the building, including two second floor ceiling vault, and feature a dramatic carpet designed by French architect Odile Decq on the grand stair. But Broun touted the technological upgrades, including newly developed LED lighting that will increase the building’s efficiency.

“We put in everything new,” Broun said. “We’ll go from being one of the Smithsonian’s most greedy energy consumers to being one of its most efficient.” The merging of the modern and historic will be on view in the Octagon Room, a space designed by Corcoran for displaying his favorite sculpture, “Greek Slave” by Hiram Powers. The museum will feature a full-size, 3-D print of the work in its original placement.

“We’re experimenting with a number of different materials,” Broun said. The 3-D print will be made by scanning the original cast of the sculpture, which is in the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection. “Part of the goal (is) we’re a nation of makers, a can-do society, but we want to speak to the 21st century, to be of our own time. “

Following a ceremonial ribbon cutting Nov. 13, the Renwick will host an open house for the public to wander the galleries and meet its curators. That night, the museum’s popular DIY program “Handi-hour” returns, with craft beer, music and special guests for the professional crowd. A family festival is set for Nov. 14.

Broun said last year’s closing of the second home of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Beaux Arts structure now owned by the George Washington University, makes the reopening of this landmark even more significant.

“It’s all the more important for us to recall his legacy and his vision,” she said. “We are stepping up to be the place that remembers that history.”