

Cornell

May | June 2011 \$6.00

Alumni Magazine

Museum Quality

With the Johnson
expansion nearly done,
Frank Robinson retires—
but he's not going far

After two decades at the helm of the Johnson Museum, Frank Robinson—director, cheerleader, and occasional Easter Bunny—retires. The good news is, he’s not going far.

By Beth Saulnier

Frank Robinson’s father was an eminent classics scholar, a professor of ancient Greek and Roman history at Brown who published some two dozen books in his field—works so authoritative, his son notes, the family is still receiving royalties more than forty-five years after his death. But the senior Robinson never craved the role of administrator; although he was offered high-level leadership positions over the years, including a college presidency, he always turned them down. “He died without really knowing the guts of an institution—the weeds,” Robinson says.

His son, on the other hand, revels in the details of running the Johnson Museum of Art, a position he has held for two decades. “I love dusting the cases, clearing the sidewalks,” he says, “getting to know electricians and plumbers and custodians, how good they are, how important. You can’t run a museum without guards in the galleries—who may hate the art they’re guarding but feel a responsibility to protect it.” By embracing the quotidian minutiae as well as the big picture, he says, “you really understand how an institution works, maybe how a society works.”

It’s a



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The Communion,
Gari Melchers, oil on board, 1888

'It was shown at a big exhibition in Paris, which A. D. White attended; in his diary he said the best work of art was *The Communion* by Gari Melchers, an American expatriate. Twenty-two years later the work was given to Cornell, and the artist was persuaded to come place it on campus. He put it in Goldwin Smith, and it was there until around twenty years ago. It's a beautiful example of the cult of the peasant in nineteenth-century art. It's a Dutch scene; Melchers had a summer home in the Netherlands. It's a very simple church, unlike what you might expect of a Roman Catholic church—a chair, a bench, real people.'

rary art, two viewing rooms for video installations, and a 150-seat lecture hall. "We've been talking about a new wing," he says, "but really it's a new museum."

Ask Robinson to identify his favorite works in the Johnson collection, and he'll start off by saying that there are so many wonderful things—but ultimately admit that some are particularly dear to him. Even after a lifetime in the art world, he marvels at the fact that a few steps from his office are more than thirty etchings pulled from their copper plates by Rembrandt himself nearly half a millennium ago. "From the plate he would take fifty or sixty impressions," Robinson says, admiring a self-portrait from 1639. "Many of them disappeared, decayed, or were destroyed, but here we have one of them in Ithaca, New York. It's unbelievable. It's staggering."

UP



Another of the director's most beloved pieces: Alberto Giacometti's *Walking Man II*. Given to the museum by the Uris family in 1976, the bronze encapsulates the horrors of World War II in a single tortured figure. For Robinson, the sculpture is not just a remarkable work of art; it's evidence of the University's commitment to the museum. In February 2010, he explains, another cast of *Walking Man* sold at auction in London for \$104 million. A reputable dealer called Robinson and offered to pay the same whopping sum for the Johnson's piece. "I said, after talking with people here, 'If we had \$104 million, we'd go out and buy something really great—like *Walking Man*,'" he recalls with a smile. "So the answer was no." A week or so later, the dealer repeated his offer in writing—directly to President Skorton. "Skorton, to his eternal blessed credit, consulted me," Robinson says, smile broadening as he gazes at the Giacometti masterwork. "He had the senior vice provost [John Siliciano '75] write back; he didn't write back himself, because that would dignify the offer. And he said, 'We really believe in art and we're not going to sell. No matter what it's worth, we're going to keep this.'" Yes, Robinson admits, an infusion of \$104 million "could have solved a lot of problems"—but selling an artistic treasure is no way for a museum to pay the bills.

It's a striking anecdote—particularly in an era where some institutions (most infamously, Brandeis), have sought to balance the budget by putting their art collections on the auction block. Depending on your point of view, turning down a quick \$104 million is either an act of artistic valor or the most quixotic fiscal foolishness. So all things considered, is Robinson comfortable sharing the tale with the public? Does he wish he'd stipulated it was off the record? "Go ahead and tell it," he says. "Everybody in this building knows that story. It's a wonderful story." ■



Bust of a Boy,
unknown Roman, marble, 140–145 AD

‘It’s a lovely work, imperial—from Rome itself, not just from the Roman Empire. It’s a child, and you can see the baby fat. Wonderful hair. The whole thing is a beautiful conception, a vision of youth. It’s in great condition, except for the nose. It has lost its nose, as they always do; it was almost certainly buried at some point. It’s a portrait, probably part of a series on an affluent family at the time of the Emperor Antoninus Pius.’

has since grown to 32,000. Current gallery space allows for the display of about 765 pieces, or 2.5 percent of the collection. “That’s another reason why we had to grow,” says Robinson, noting that the museum first started contemplating an expansion in the Nineties. “We were bursting at the seams.” Once construction is completed, the number will increase to 2,000. (About 20,000 items in the collection are works on paper that, for preservation reasons, can’t be displayed regularly.) “The greatest work of art we have is our building,” Robinson says. “It’s beautiful, and it embodies the two ideals of a museum. On the one hand, preservation and protection. There are these massive concrete walls; what could be more powerful? At the same time it’s public, and the whole point is to be open—and we have all that glass, the sculpture court, the skylights, wonderful views out long windows on all four sides. So the balance of openness and protection is wonderful.”

The building’s original plans—by the firm of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, with John Sullivan ’62, BArch ’63, as architect-in-charge—included an underground portion that would have stretched north into the adjacent gorge. At the

time, it was eliminated for financial reasons; today, environmental regulations would prohibit it. But the expansion now under way echoes that design, with a three-floor, above- and below-ground addition that will add some 16,000 square feet to the existing 61,000. “We want to keep the integrity and artistic unity of the old building intact,” Robinson says. “We’re trying to move forward but respect the past.” He notes that, fortuitously, all the principals behind the design four decades ago remain at the firm—including Pei himself, now ninety-four. “If we had waited five years,” he notes, “it couldn’t have been done.”

The additional space has allowed the museum to reconfigure its fifth floor—popular not only for its much-admired Asian collection, but its sweeping views. (During construction, the trustee meeting room on the sixth floor—which boasts some more-than-respectable views of its own—has been open to visitors; the fifth floor will reopen in time for Commencement and Reunion.) By relocating curatorial and storage areas, the amount of gallery space will increase by half—allowing, for example, Japanese screens to be displayed in pairs rather than singly. In a renovated room in the original building, an “open storage” area will put hundreds more objects on public view. (“Open storage is a big thing now,” Robinson says, noting that the Metropolitan Museum’s American Wing now has such a facility.) Other features of the expanded museum will include an outdoor Japanese garden, a photography center, designated space for contempo-

‘This is not an image on a screen or a picture in a book. This is what Rembrandt himself touched—the piece of paper that he pulled off the copper plate. It shows this guy who is from what we would call today the lower middle class; his father ran a mill that ground up maize. In the early 1630s he comes to Amsterdam and he’s tremendously successful, and he begins to compare himself to the great masters of the Renaissance a century earlier. Here he’s dressed up in clothing that is absolutely unusual for the seventeenth century but usual for the sixteenth. But there’s a reality to the man, the frizzy hair. In the midst of all that pretension, there is the reality of him as a human being.’



Rembrandt Leaning on a Stone Sill,
Rembrandt van Rijn, etching, 1639

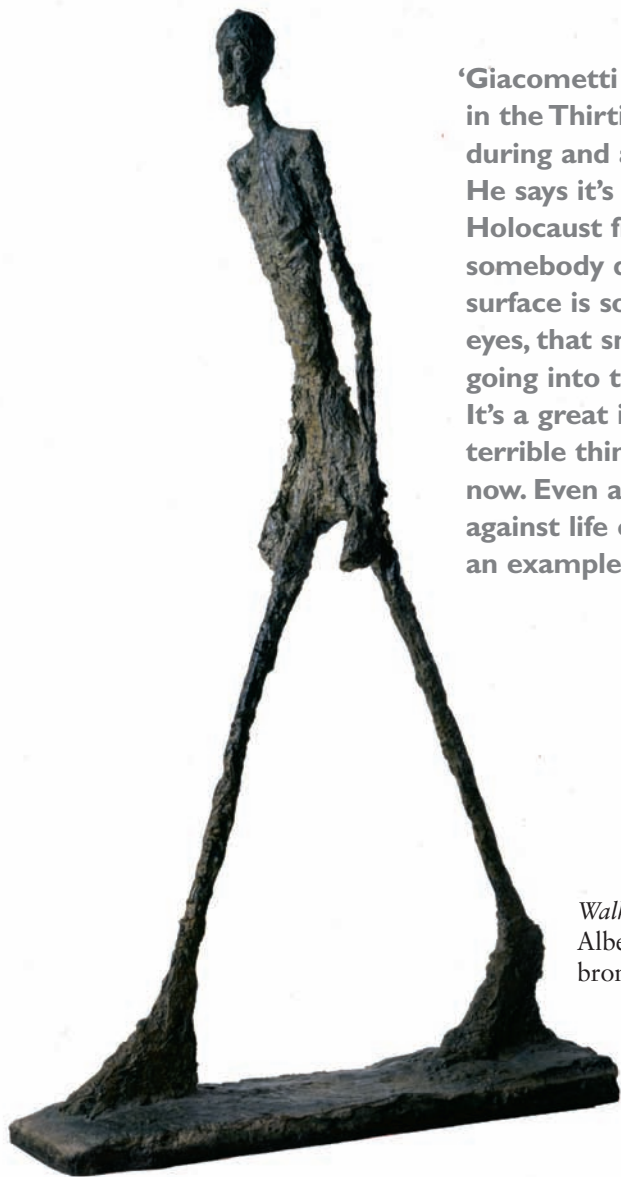
One minute, Robinson can expound on the first piece he ever bought on behalf of the University (*Houses, Roofs, Towers*, a 1920 oil painting by Squire Vickers); the next, he’s quoting the weekly rental cost (\$10,000) for the giant crane hefting portions of the museum’s new wing. As he walks through the building he greets every employee by name, from the woman pushing the cleaning cart to the receptionist in the lobby. When that fact is pointed out to him, he seems genuinely unimpressed with himself; of course he knows everyone who works for him. How could he not? “Nobody is unimportant,” Robinson says, then adds with his signature deadpan wit: “Show me somebody whose job is unimportant and I’ll get rid of that job, because we need the money.”

Since Robinson took the helm of the museum in 1992, he has been its public face and most ardent advocate—a tireless fundraiser and unabashed cheerleader whose favorite word seems to be “wonderful.” (That might come across as cloying—except that every time he says it, you get the feeling that he means it.) He is that rarest of creatures, a maven of high culture with precious few pretensions; the man who did his Harvard PhD thesis on seventeenth-century Dutch painter Gabriel Metsu has been known, on more than one occasion, to dress up in a bunny suit for Easter.

In short, it’s hard to imagine the Johnson Museum without

Frank Robinson. But at the end of June, after three and a half decades in museum administration, Robinson is retiring from his position as the Richard J. Schwartz Director. He says he’s content with the state in which he’s leaving the institution—on firm footing and with the expansion slated for completion in October. “It’s good to leave at your peak,” he says. “The place is stabilized financially. It has a new wing, wonderful staff, wonderful support from our Museum Advisory Council.” (There’s that word again.)

Why is Robinson leaving just a few months shy of its long-awaited expansion? Well, that wasn’t his original plan; construction was initially supposed to be finished before the end of this academic year, but the completion date was postponed and Robinson opted not to push back his retirement. And in fact, Robinson will remain on campus: in September he’s starting a part-time job as a fundraiser in the development office. He’ll also continue his regional museum tours and Cornell’s Adult University trips, including a May 2012 excursion to London. He says that he and his wife, Margaret—they’ve been married “forty-two years, poor woman,” and have one son, a former rock musician who’s now a Web designer—have no desire to decamp from Ithaca to warmer climes. “I really love the snow,” says Robinson, who previously taught art history at Dartmouth and Williams, which have plenty of it. “It’s strange, I know.”



'Giacometti was a Swiss who lived in Paris in the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties, so during and after the Second World War. He says it's *Walking Man*, not that it's a Holocaust figure; he doesn't need to. It's somebody devastated, withered away. The surface is so frightening, and those staring eyes, that small head, the very thick feet going into the base so he can barely walk. It's a great image of the devastation, of terrible things that happened, then and now. Even a great work of art that's against life can enhance life, and this is an example.'

Walking Man II,
Alberto Giacometti,
bronze, 1959–60

Piece of the Pei: The famed architect's firm returned to design the new wing.



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One of five museum directors in his family—including Margaret, former head of the Wellesley College museum—Robinson fell hard for the art world at thirteen, when his father took the family to Rome on a one-year teaching assignment. “It was a vulnerable age,” he says. “It was overwhelming to walk down one block and have three great churches. Rome is overflowing with art, with architecture, with the world of the imagination. I just fell in love with it. By the end of that year I knew I had to spend the rest of my life in art.”

His first museum directorship came in 1976, at Williams; from there he went to the Rhode Island School of Design, then to Cornell. “I love the variety,” he says of his job. “You’re there for everybody. One minute you’re talking to somebody about the leak in the roof, the next you’re talking to an architect about the new wing, the next you’re talking to a reporter, the next you’re talking to a curator about acquiring a Tang Dynasty bowl. In comes a kindergarten kid who’s learning about shapes and colors, and it’s wonderful. In the next gallery there’s a group of Alzheimer’s

patients and their caregivers, then in comes an engineering student who wants to know about contemporary art. Then you’re talking with a major donor with hair as white as mine, and she wants to help you buy a work or endow a position. You have this whole range of things.”

In addition to the art itself, Robinson revels in how a museum can act as a great equalizer. “Our society has exploded,” he says. “There’s so little common ground, so little glue, so few places where we all come together. Well, a museum is one of those places. In our case, close to 100,000 visitors a year come in and they’re rubbing shoulders independent of level of education, income, age, even independent of interests; some people come in just for the view.” And as a university museum, he says, the Johnson can help instill a love of art in the next generation. “Half of our visitors are Cornell students,” Robinson says. “They’re coming to look at the views, or on a date, or to show their parents around—but also they’re coming to look at the art. Somewhere inside them they know this is *their* museum. They can come on impulse, an extra hour at lunch time. It’s something for the rest of their lives, and that’s what we’re here for—to enhance people’s lives.”

When the Johnson opened in 1973, its I. M. Pei-designed glass-and-concrete structure housed 9,000 objects; that number