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University of Florida President Calls Art Museum “Essential” to Higher Education

Last week, [The Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art](#) (Director: Rebecca M. Nagy) began construction on a new \$20 million, 25,000 square-foot Asian art wing. The groundbreaking was especially noteworthy for two reasons. First and most obviously, it was a bold step forward for the museum despite the uncertain economic times. Secondly, the Harn Museum is the art museum of the University of Florida, and the university is supporting the museum's expansion because it recognizes the importance of the arts to the education and future of its students—even at a time when other colleges and universities are considering closing or curtailing their campus art museums.

Following is what Dr. J. Bernard Machen, President of the University of Florida, had to say at the Harn's groundbreaking ceremony on Thursday, April 9:

Good afternoon!

I can't tell you how pleased I am to join all of you today. It is especially gratifying now, in these difficult times.

Like so many other institutions in this country, our university faces huge financial hardships. Some may fear that we will falter, but I think what's happening today suggests otherwise. Rather than crumble, we will build.

This groundbreaking begins an important addition to the Harn Museum. But, at the same time, it is an affirmation of faith in the University of Florida and its future.

We owe this very welcome occasion to David and Mary Ann Cofrin, whose amazing generosity makes possible the Asian Art Wing.

I am told David and Mary Ann first became interested in collecting Asian art on a trip to San Francisco – a trip that was organized by the Harn!

I am extraordinarily grateful to David and Mary Ann for their strong and unflinching support.

The Asian Art Wing will create new space for art conservation, photography, storage, a library and, of course, a beautiful new exhibit hall.

For the public, it will offer a superb showcase of the Harn's extensive Asian collection. For the university, it will have longer reach.

That is because, whether faculty and students are pursuing Asian studies, language, literature, poetry or design, they depend on the Harn.

As a university, we love to talk about our research laboratories and medical facilities. But, make no mistake: The Harn is an essential component, not just of our cultural offerings, but our scholarship, our status as a research university and our intellectual soul.

Holland Cotter authored an excellent piece a few weeks ago in the *New York Times*. He wrote, "University museums are unlike other museums. They are not intended to be powerhouse displays of masterworks, though some have their share of these.

They are, above all else, teaching instruments intended for hands-on use by students and scholars."

In an era when the world increasingly looks to China, and when Americans' lives are more and more affected by events in the east, the Asian Art Wing will be an absolutely essential tool in our quest to shed light on this shift.

So, today's groundbreaking is a strike against debilitating fiscal pessimism. And, it begins a building that will help make sense of the world's changing center of gravity.

But, in the final analysis, this project is not about being timely, but about being timeless. Museums, the Harn, the Asian Art Wing -- these are not meant simply to comment on the present.

Like a good piece of art, they reveal new context, give us new perspective, make us rethink what we take for granted -- powerful gifts, in any age.

As Marcel Proust said, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

Thank you!